



# Revisiting organizational self-assessment: towards a dynamic conceptualization

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## Résumé :

Afin de répondre aux changements dans leur environnement, bon nombre d'organisations sont en quête de méthodes et d'outils d'auto-évaluation de leurs pratiques managériales (« organizational self-assessment » (OSA)). Un « OSA » se conçoit généralement comme une analyse compréhensive des activités d'une organisation visant à identifier ses forces et planifier des objectifs stratégiques à moyen et long terme. Dans leur grande majorité, les études existantes sur les OSA se sont développées sur base d'une conception très statique des organisations, en s'intéressant peu aux processus d'implémentation de ces dispositifs d'auto-évaluation dans les contextes organisationnels. Cette contribution illustre que la formulation et l'implémentation de tels dispositifs est *de facto* plus problématique et controversée que ce qui est suggéré dans la littérature. Pour souligner la nature dynamique de l'OSA comme pratique stratégique, la contribution met à l'épreuve cinq assomptions conceptuelles sous-tendant les études classiques sur l'OSA. En illustrant que l'OSA est nécessairement un processus politique et interprétativiste, la contribution souligne l'importance de développer des approches processuelles de dispositifs d'auto-évaluation organisationnelle qui portent une attention explicite au conflit, à la négociation, à l'ambiguïté et à l'informalité.

**Mots-clés :** auto-évaluation, diagnostic organisationnel, amélioration de la performance, OSA, approches processuelles



# **Revisiting organizational self-assessment: towards a dynamic conceptualization**

## **INTRODUCTION**

To be effective in the 21st century, firms require flexibility and the ability to transform rapidly in the face of turbulent change (Vitale et al., 2008). Varying demographics, globalization, and the advent of technology have triggered a renewed focus on how organizations manage strategy, monitor activities and respond to change in their business environment (Saeed and Wang, 2013; Coleman, 2018). In this regard, managers' understanding of the state of their organization is often said to be a prerequisite to meet current and upcoming challenges. While it is not possible to foretell the future, organizations can anticipate changes, i.e., become resilient (Ates and Bititci, 2011), through the use of formal control mechanisms.

Formal control mechanisms can be used to strengthen managers' abilities to speedily identify the weaknesses of their organizations and act accordingly to achieve adjustment to external changes and improve overall performance (Saeed and Wang, 2013). Such a quest for performance improvement must be sought for among hidden and often intangible factors that organizational self-assessment (OSA) may help to bring into evidence (Conti, 2001), under the challenging condition that the assessment takes place while keeping an open eye to the external environment (Williams et al., 2006). OSA has traditionally been conceived as a comprehensive review of an organization's activities – having only the interest and goals of the organization itself in mind and using little external help –, allowing the organization to discern clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made; and culminates in planned improvement actions that are monitored for progress (EFQM, 1999; Conti, 2001). OSA can be used to support managerial processes to substantially improve organizations' management and derive strategies and action plans for improvement. OSA has been identified as most useful when managers discern an efficiency problem and intend to take appropriate action (Ford and Evans, 2001; 2002). Studies suggest that OSA has consistently been prevalent in companies of various sizes and economic sectors; a large number of organizations have conducted or are planning to conduct OSA projects (Link and Scott, 2001; Ford and Evans, 2006; Tari, 2008). Deploying OSA has been described as a catalyst for business improvement, a way for



leveraging organizational performance, which positively affects the key results of the organization (Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; Ford and Evans, 2006; Radnor and Barnes, 2007; Calvo-Mora et al., 2015; Johansson et al., 2019).

While scholars have paid increasing attention to OSA in the last decades, we argue that most existing studies rely on a fairly static and deterministic view of organizations and have given little consideration to OSA as an emergent change process (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), involving power relations and divergent interpretations (Carter et al., 2008). The literature on OSA – anchored in the business excellence and quality management fields (Yang et al., 2001; Ahmed et al., 2003; Arumugam et al., 2009; Liu and Ko, 2018) – is often built on the premise that self-assessment (SA) projects share the common objective of improving organizational processes on the basis of opportunities identified in the course of the assessment process (Mohrman and Cummings, 1989; Brown and Van der Wile, 1996; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Ford and Evans, 2006; Calvo-Mora et al., 2015). The literature on OSA is generally rather deterministic as OSA studies rely on a mechanistic vision of the organization, which is mostly focused on control regulation and traditionally built around the four phases of the Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) improvement cycle (Svensson and Klefsjö, 2000; Eriksson and Garvare, 2005). In addition, OSA is often assumed to be an attractive opportunity for managers seeking to operationalize an organizational performance improvement, which remains questionable. Despite the potential benefits, practical accounts suggest that the extent to which OSA projects actually produce improvements is unclear. It is not unusual that organizations derive little benefit from conducting OSA and achieve only few of the improvements initially suggested (Conti, 2001; Eriksson and Garvare, 2005; Ford and Evans, 2006). For these reasons, we suggest revisiting the premises of OSA with the aim of offering an alternative to its current conceptualization.

This paper is based on a critical literature review on OSA that examines how it has been addressed in past research. By doing so, we highlight some of the shortcomings of OSA as a concept and proceed to offer an integrative and processual conceptualization. This review is structured as follows. First, we define key concepts to the understanding of OSA, namely: management control, management control tools, organizational diagnostic tools, and OSA. We then clarify how past research has investigated this notion, mostly in a linear and deterministic way that we consider unsatisfactory. On this basis, we challenge five main assumptions of traditional research on OSA: the delineation of OSA; the characterization of the “self”; the tangibility of the processed information; the deployment strategy and the foreseen



organizational impacts. Finally, we offer an integrative framework of OSA and conclude by providing suggestions for further research as well as implications for practitioners.

## 1. DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS: ORGANIZATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT

Since the 1980s to the early 2000s, OSA theory has been established through the traditional logic of the quality assurance checklist used to assess the conformity of the organizational quality system (Conti, 2007) and more globally as a technique of continuous improvement (Tari, 2008). OSA has become very popular and has been widely used in the Total Quality Management and Business Excellence area with the purported aim of increasing firms' efficiency and performance (Taylor, 1995; Conti, 1997; Van der Wiele et al., 1996; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Van der Wiele *et al.*, 2000; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Conti, 2001; Ahmed *et al.*, 2003; Williams *et al.*, 2006; Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2015). Two major models – Malcolm Baldrige and the European Quality Award – were originally developed to stimulate Western companies to improve their quality so that they could compete more efficiently (Williams *et al.*, 2006; Sozuer, 2011). OSA has since then been redefined several times, even though most of these definitions are based on the one provided by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) (1994; 1999). This definition perceives OSA as a review of an organization's activities based on the use of a model, allowing any organization to discern its strengths and weaknesses upon which improvements can be made.

In the 2000s, OSA research was primarily focused on award assessments for scoring and ranking. OSAs were thus brought in by quality awards and were mostly related to the internal audit type, aimed at estimating levels of excellence. As Dale argued, “*self-assessment uses one of the models underpinning an award to pinpoint improvement opportunities and identify new ways in which to encourage the organization down the road of organizational excellence*” (2003: 485). A first category of authors (Van der Wiele *et al.*, 2000; Yang *et al.*, 2001; Williams *et al.*, 2006) focus solely on OSA in the form of an award race, offering the company a way to obtain information on their degree of excellence. While also considering OSA as a lever to stimulate improvement actions, these authors paid little attention to its potential in terms of diagnosis. A second category of authors (Tari and Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2012; Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2015; Liu and Ko, 2018) decided to include the notion of diagnosis within OSA and to emphasize how firms continued to conceive OSA in terms of scoring for awards achievement.



The diagnosis function of OSA in itself has received little attention, except from a third group of authors (Conti, 2001; Ford and Evans, 2006) who considered diagnosis as a promising alternative way to self-audits. Diagnosis self-assessment aimed at self-critical analysis emerged in the literature when Conti (2001) addressed his research question, i.e. “*why most companies do not get the most out of their SA?*” Conti’s central argument when pointing out the shortcomings of self-audits lies in the fact that the latter focus on scoring, instead of searching for causes as a self-critical analysis would allow it. When focusing on ranking, managers and consultants are “*unable to release the hidden power of such [SA] tools*” (Conti, 2001: 2). This third group of authors considers that OSA as awards aiming at estimating levels of excellence is of little efficiency for decision-making and improvement actions. In this view, self-audits would possess a higher degree of diagnostic power. By contrast, outcomes of award-inspired SA would mostly consist of application reports aimed at highlighting strengths, whereas the benefit of using diagnostic SA lies in its potential to identify weak spots and opportunities for improvement, and to assess progress (Conti, 2001). Yet, interestingly, diagnostic SA did not gain much traction in the academic literature.

To conclude, much of the academic literature on OSA pertains to a slightly outdated research field that does not appear to have evolved significantly since the seminal papers of Van der Wiele *et al.* (1996) and Ritchie and Dale (2000), with the exception of the somewhat disruptive paper of Conti (2001). So far, research on OSA has predominantly remained focused on business excellence models and comparison of their criteria; on the study of quality awards models and their relationship to performance; on the development of OSA tools based on quality awards criteria and on OSA practices, benefits and limitations (Tari and Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2012). OSA has mostly remained the subject of studies that have paid little attention to promising avenues for theorizing OSA as a political, interpretative and dynamic process of self-critical diagnosis.

## **2. RETHINKING PRIOR CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT**

In the last two decades, growing attention was paid to the study of quality awards and excellence models for TQM, which contributed to disseminate a specific conceptualization of OSA aimed at searching for conformity. While award-based SAs remain the dominant evaluation logic in OSA, this paper intends to examine the diagnosis component of OSA as a



self-critical analysis. So far, most authors have ignored the diagnostic component of OSA. Consequently, we aim to offer an alternative conceptualization of OSA as a self-critical diagnosis process that could potentially overcome the shortcomings of SA audit mentioned by Conti (2001). To this end, we aim to analyze the theoretical premises on which OSA has been built so far and, on this basis, to offer an alternative and integrative conceptualization of OSA as a socially constructed and political process.

We conducted an exploratory search following a three-step approach. First, we performed a literature search over the Google Scholar database of indexed scientific publications to review literature discussing OSA. We used the following key-words: “*self-assessment*” AND “*diagnostic*” OR “*diagnosis*” AND “*organizational performance*” AND “*continuous improvement*”. Second, to restrict the number of sources found, we refined the search to English-written scientific papers published between 1996 and 2020. Such temporal delimitation made it possible to include the seminal papers of Van der Wiele et al. (1996) and Ritchie and Dale (2000), and to work backwards in time and observe how this research field has evolved over the last 25 years. Third, we selected the most relevant and prevalent papers which largely impacted the field of OSA, by ranking papers on the number of citations and the research impact. Based on the content of the selected papers, we raised five questions regarding how OSA has been conceptualized in the literature so far:

1. How is organizational self-assessment defined?
2. What does the “self” entail?
3. What is the tangibility of the processed information?
4. What does the deployment strategy consist in?
5. How are organizational impacts foreseen?

On this basis, we argue that existing research on OSA has systematically been grounded into a set of five assumptions related to the questions that we raised, of which the implications have not always been acknowledged by the authors. In the following section, we expand upon the five identified assumptions by explaining how each of them has so far led researchers to use OSA in ways that we consider incomplete or unsatisfying. Taking these shortcomings into account, we offer an alternative conceptualization that we believe is necessary to address gaps and issues within OSA field. The value-added of such an approach is to confront the way authors have to date studied this field of research, to emphasize its subsequent limitations, and to propose a more recent and dynamic conceptualization of OSA.





	How is organizational self-assessment defined?	What does the “self” entail?	What is the tangibility of the processed information ?	What does the deployment strategy consist in?	How are organizational impacts foreseen?
<b>European Foundation for Quality Management (1994, 1999)</b>	<i>Self-assessment is a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organization’s activities and results against a model of business excellence. The self-assessment process allows the organization to discern clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made and culminates in planned improvement actions which are monitored for progress.</i>				
	Process; Review	-	Organizational activities as clearly identifiable	Gathering and assessing data, developing plans, monitoring progress	Improvement actions
<b>Teo and Dale (1997)</b>	<i>Self-assessment is a method for reviewing the activities and performance of an organization.</i>				
	Methodology; Process	-	Current conditions of the organization in terms of strengths and areas for improvement	Planning, developing awareness, implementation, review	Continuous improvement; Business Performance; Quality Awareness
<b>Zink and Schmidt (1998), Zink and Voss (1998)</b>	<i>Self-assessment is considered as a management tool deployed throughout the companies to enhance overall business performance rather than solely the quality of products and services. Such a tool is useful to systematically monitor and control a company’s continuous improvement process.</i>				
	Management tool	-	Organization as systematically monitored and control	From planning to execution	Overall business performance; Process Continuous Improvement
<b>Van der Wiele et al. (2000)</b>	<i>Self-assessment is clearly defined as a management issue aimed at increasing quality awareness, driving the quality improvement activities, and improving business performance. Overall, self-assessment have several characteristics including data gathering and scoring, discussing strengths and weaknesses, developing all improvement plan, and linking it to the business plan.</i>				
	Process; Mechanism; Instrument	-	Organizational activities and current performance	Based on EFQM	Quality improvement; Business performance improvement
<b>Conti (2001)</b>	<i>Self-assessment is one of the most promising instrument for performance improvement, aimed at checking competitive effectiveness. The assessment is governed by the organization, having only the interest and goals of the organization itself in mind.</i>				
	Instrument; Management tool	SA is governed by the organization itself	Only the interest and goals of the organization itself when searching for causes of weaknesses and performance gaps	Need of integrating OSA into the corporate PDCA cycle	While some organizations derive little benefits, OSA initially has impacts in terms of improving performance and input to improvement plan



<b>Ford and Evans (2001, 2002, 2006)</b>	<i>Self-assessment means a holistic evaluation of an organization's performance management processes against the criteria, using little external assistance, with the objective of identifying key strengths and opportunities for improvement.</i>				
	Organizational evaluation	Using little or no external assistance	Holistic view of organizational processes	Preparation, data collection, analysis and reporting	Problems diagnosis; better agreement on the organization's strengths; improvement opportunities and better planning
<b>Dale (2003)</b>	<i>Self-assessment uses one of the models underpinning an award to pinpoint improvement opportunities and identify new ways in which to encourage the organization down the road of organizational excellence.</i>				
	Process	-	Taking a good hard and honest look at the organization to identify its shortcomings	Based on EFQM	Effective methodology to assess progress, using appropriate diagnostics, and identify opportunities for improvement
<b>Eriksson (2003), Eriksson and Garvare (2005)</b>	<i>Self-assessment is a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organization's activities and results referenced against a model of business excellence which does not necessarily involve external examiners. Self-assessment procedure has four phases, similar to the four phases of the improvement cycle.</i>				
	Process; Methodology	Owner of OSA is the organization, without necessarily involving external examiners	Organizational activities as clearly identifiable	SA procedure corresponds to the phases of the PDCA improvement cycle	Greater focus on improvement work and processes; Committed leadership and employee participation
<b>Tari (2008), Tari and Heras-Saizarbitoria (2012)</b>	<i>While standardized quality models and academic models are tools for self-assessment, self-assessment is a methodology for continuous improvement that an organization can develop both in a total quality management (TQM) context or as an independent strategy.</i>				
	Process; Methodology	-	Organizations strengths and areas for improvement	Based on EFQM	Help to structure continuous improvement planning

**Table 1. Deconstructing the literature on OSA: sample from the data analysis table**





## 2.1 HOW IS ORGANIZATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT DEFINED?

A first observation issued from Table 1 is that OSA has so far been labeled in various ways according to the authors who have taken an interest in it (Table 1). OSA has been indistinctively depicted as a process (European Foundation for Quality Management, 1994, 1999, 2003; Van der Wiele et al., 2000; Dale, 2003; Eriksson and Garvare, 2005; Tari and Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2012); a methodology (Teo and Dale, 1997; Dale, 2003); an organizational evaluation (Ford and Evans, 2001; 2002); an instrument (Conti, 2001) or even as a strategic management tool (Zink and Schmidt, 1998; Zink and Voss, 1998; Conti, 2001). Surprisingly, the variety of labels and terms being used to designate OSA has not yet been addressed by researchers, although it could be expected that such diversity may result in unwelcome confusion.

It is common to view OSA as a “tool” or a set of “instruments” that provide tangible outputs to assist with the analysis of the achieved results and the identification of priorities for future improvements (Hillman, 1994). Naturally, there are several tools available to organizations for undertaking self-assessments, which vary in complexity, rigor, and resources. However, defining OSA as a specific management tool conceals the unavoidable social interactions and controversies that occur as the tool is put in use. Similarly, while it is true that OSA involves specific methodologies – that include model selection, groundwork preparation, assessment conduct and action-taking (EFQM, 2003) – acting as if OSA is nothing more than the methodology itself does not account for the organizational mechanisms through which the methodology is put in practice.

Instead, we argue that speaking of OSA as a process involving specific tools and methodologies allows for a more dynamic and open conception, in which movement, events, politics and temporal evolution may be rightfully accounted for (Langley, 2007). OSA is necessarily of processual nature as it unfolds over time and through managerial activities as well as organizational interactions. As a process associated to an evolving phenomena and constituted by varied and fluctuating activities, OSA is expected to unfold, develop, and change over time (Langley et al., 2013).

**Proposition 1:** OSA consists of a self-critical diagnosis process, based upon management tools and methodologies, that unfolds over time through managerial activity.



## 2.2 WHAT DOES THE “SELF” ENTAIL?

A second assumption relates to what the “self” of OSA entails. It is somewhat curious to note that few authors have paid attention to this question (see Table 1). Only Conti has suggested that the “self” implies that *“the assessment is governed by the organization, having only the interest and goals of the organization itself in mind, specifically for performance improvement”* (2001: 1). To be clear, the prefix “self” does not imply that the assessment is conducted solely by organizational members and that mobilizing external competence is excluded. On the contrary, external eyes are always useful in spotting one’s own defects, more specially the chronic ones (Conti, 2001). However, the OSA literature has always assumed that the process was directed by the organization itself, simultaneously considered as a subject and an object. This conceptualization of the “self”, formulated by Conti and popularized in further research (e.g. Ford and Evans, 2002; Erkişon and Garvare, 2005), raises the following issue: it is hardly possible for an organization to assess itself as the organization is not an actor *per se*. Rather, assessing the organization is necessarily a task carried out by specific and identifiable actors who are likely to have their own objectives and agendas in mind.

It is now widely acknowledged in organizational theory that actors are “strategic” or political beings, in the sense that they act to achieve individual and collective objectives (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980). In this perspective, behaviors result from opportunistic intentions of organizational members to achieve certain goals. If we assumed organizations to be sets of independent actors who pursue their own objectives, it is somewhat illusory to believe that organizations have *“interests and goals of their own”*, as Conti (2001) claimed. Individuals may be unable and/or unwilling to leave aside their own interests and objectives in order to act with a unique and transcending organizational goal in mind (Jemine et al., 2020). Rather, it is more realistic to consider that actors form coalitions and establish alliances depending on their individual and common interests (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980). In this vein, OSA processes involve political games, negotiations and opportunities with which organizational actors can “play” to protect or expand their margin of action (Friedberg, 1993). OSA processes are likely to be distorted and diverted, the oppositions between actors constantly redirecting their use and purpose (Chiapello and Gilbert, 2013; Jemine et al., 2020). With regard to these considerations, the prefix “self” can thus hardly refer to an entity with a presumably unique organizational purpose.



**Proposition 2:** The “self” of OSA entails a multiplicity of political and opportunistic actors who are likely to make use of the process to serve their own interests and goals.

### 2.3 WHAT IS THE TANGIBILITY OF THE PROCESSED INFORMATION?

The third assumption pertains to the way the tangibility of the processed information within OSA processes is addressed by the authors. For the most part, authors specifically characterize OSA as a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organization's activities, helpful to discern its strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement (Table 1). These definitions consider that the processed information – organizational activities, strengths, weaknesses - are clearly identifiable. OSA is described as relying on physically demonstrable and discernible characteristics or attributes of organizations. Within such considerations, the processed information is thought to be composed of raw, objective facts and data that are accessible, measurable, and empirically verifiable (Watzlawick, 1990).

Yet, the literature on OSA has largely neglected the fact that an organization and its activities are not an objective and harmonious reality, but rather constitute a polyphonic system juggling with multiple subjective realities (Rhodes, 2001). As socially constructed realities, organizations are made up of second-order realities, which means that the reality organizational members know is interpreted and constructed according to their own thought patterns, rather than given and objective (Weick, 1995; Ford, 1999). It follows that the information fueling OSA processes are unlikely to be indisputable facts or tangible data but observers' interpretations that include their opinions, judgments and assessments instead. (Ford, 1999; Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). Organizations are socially constructed systems of shared meanings constituted by multiple and simultaneous narratives that may interweave and harmonize but can also contest and clash (Rhodes, 2001). It implies that the regular and holistic review of an organization's activities and the clear identification of its strengths and weaknesses do not pertain to an objective reality as authors interested in OSA have often pretended (Conti, 2001; Dale, 2003; Eriksson and Garvare, 2005). It is, therefore, hardly conceivable to “*take a good hard and honest look at the organization*”, as Dale (2003: 486) claimed. By reflecting on individual differences, OSA appears to be a complex process enabling the construction of an organization's reflection throughout a sum of subjectivities.

**Proposition 3:** Conceiving the processed information within OSA process as a sum of socially constructed subjectivities rather than as a tangible reality raises awareness on the inevitability of data reinterpretation by organizational actors.



## 2.4 WHAT DOES THE DEPLOYMENT STRATEGY CONSIST IN?

The fourth assumption present in prior research is the tendency to present OSA as a set of “miracle tools”, largely based on the PDCA cycle (Table 1). Using the term “miracle tools”, we imply that OSA is made up of relatively straightforward steps including gathering data regarding organization’s strengths and weaknesses; assessing the data collected and pinpointing the gaps; developing plans and actions arising from the assessment to pick up the pace of the improvement process; and monitoring the progress and effectiveness of the plan of action (Conti, 2001; Dale, 2003; Klefsjö and Eriksson, 2004, Tari and Heras Saizarbitoria, 2012).

This tendency to view OSA as a set of chronological steps that naturally follow each other can be found in many studies (Table 1). For instance, EFQM (2003) detailed the steps of OSA and identified the key processes which need to be considered by organizations undertaking self-assessment. These steps involve (1) developing commitment to OSA and reach agreement on the motivation for undertaking self-assessment; (2) deciding the self-assessment method(s) to be used; (3) establishing the team who is about to perform the OSA and initiate data collection; (4) once data has been collected, reaching agreement on strengths and areas for improvement; (5) establishing an action plan by reviewing areas to address and establishing milestones (6) implementing the action plan by setting up improvement teams and providing appropriate resources. In such a perspective, OSA processes are viewed as unfolding in a specific way that leads to the development of codified practices and leaves little room to iterations, trials and errors.

Traditional approaches to OSA have thus built on a planning-centered approach structured around organized and generic steps. Such a vision of the decision-making process may appear particularly linear and idealistic with regard to the literature on organizational change (Graetz and Smith, 2010; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2018). Planning approach assumes that the decision-maker is able to deploy a sequential process of which he remains in control and in which the different steps to follow are broken down into standardized process. In this regard, it is assumed that all the parties involved in OSA processes fundamentally share the same values and objectives. Once these objectives are incorporated into the plan, they are not discussed again and remain unchanged from formulation to implementation and control (Pichault, 2013). In this view, OSA is deployed throughout a mechanistic vision of the organization (Morgan,



1997) from which iteration is completely absent. As a result, once managers decide to initiate OSA processes, they imagine to have no limits to their actions since the whole organization is expected to mechanically and instantaneously follow the planned actions (Dechamp *et al.*, 2006).

At the opposite end of this rational approach lies an iterative approach to organizations, which so far has often been disregarded in OSA studies. Within such a perspective, the deployment strategy of OSA is more problematic than most studies present it. Strategizing and organizing are neither linear nor sequential activities treating change as a single, momentary disturbance that must be stabilized and controlled, but are actually anchored within iterative and reciprocal actions (Graetz and Smith, 2010). Such a conception has important implications for the way the deployment strategy is analyzed in organizations. Instead of considering the latter as an “objective” and structured sequential process, the iterative approach highlights the influences likely to be exercised at each stage: during the processes of setting objectives, planning, selecting, executing and evaluating. Notably, managers involved in the process can exert power in the way they mobilize the tools that are constitutive of OSA processes (Jemine, 2019). As stated by Rosenbaum *et al.* (2018: 291), “*the iterative process entailed evaluation of the action, assessing initial learning outcomes, laying the foundations for further planning, and finally the remodeling of the plans themselves, in what can clearly be identified as a fluid, non-static process*”. Underlining the significance of OSA as an iterative process may help to avoid the pitfall of designing the deployment strategy as unchanged from its initial and linear formulation which would solely remain to be implemented and controlled.

**Proposition 4:** OSA is an open-ended and iterative process that cannot be understood as a mere sequence of steps to follow.

## 2.5 HOW ARE ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS FORESEEN?

Throughout the paper, it has been demonstrated that OSA does not only allow to obtain information on the degree of excellence that an organization reaches in its key activities and its results, but also provides information to identify weak spots, learn and improve (Conti, 2001; Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2015). In this regard, the fifth and last assumption pertains to the foreseen organizational impacts, commonly labeled as the expected benefits and reasons to involve in OSA process (*Table 1*). In the literature, OSA has been described as a way to assess organizational operations and to take decisions leading to organizational change that ultimately should strengthen the company’s competitiveness (Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Van der



Wiele *et al.*, 2000; Ford and Evans, 2001, 2002). Overall, OSA processes are helpful for organizations' members to develop shared understandings about their environment and determine whether change is required. Identified problems can be trivial, only requiring a quick fix, or can be more complex, demanding elaborated rectification (Saeed and Wang, 2013). Change resulting from OSA activities are mostly viewed as an operational exercise (Ford and Evans, 2001) that pertains to everyday interactions. Burke and Litwin (1982) named such changes as transactional, in the sense that these changes are altered via relatively short-term reciprocity among people and groups: structure, management practices, policies, procedures, tasks, and skills. Such transactional changes aim at changing organizational infrastructures, namely the organization's processes for achieving results (Ford and Evans, 2001).

In a fairly deterministic way, OSA is therefore often viewed as a catalyst for organizational change, and attractive to managers seeking to drive their decision making and operationalize an efficiency improvement (Ford and Evans, 2001). In practice, Van der Wiele and Brown (1999), Ritchie and Dale (2000) and Dale (2003) identified immediate benefits when conducting OSA process – find opportunities for improvement, direct improvement process, drive continuous improvement, encourage employee involvement, provide visibility in direction, develops a common approach across the company – and long term benefits – keep costs down, improve business results, balance short and long term investment, provide a disciplined approach to business planning. Being regarded as “*one of the most promising instruments*” (Conti, 2001: 1) for activities improvement and organizational change, OSA is then assumed to be an objective, external force having relatively straightforward impacts on organizations.

However, Ford and Evans (2006), who devoted considerable attention to the diagnosis component of OSA, still observed that many organizations realized little tangible benefit from their process while executing picture-perfect evaluations using widely accepted assessment tools and following their guidelines. Hence, according to them, the problem appears to lie in what occurs after the diagnosis is conducted and how the organization follows up on the reported findings. In this alignment, we go one step further and plead for considering the foreseen impacts of OSA as likely to be moderated by human actors, their actual use and the organizational contexts. In this regard, the work of Orlikowski (1992) on the interactions between technology and organizations is particularly enlightening to grasp this observation, even though OSA is conceived here as a process rather than a technology. While providing insight into the benefits of OSA adoption, past researches largely ignore the action of humans





in developing, appropriating and changing the process. As a consequence, those works appear to provide an incomplete account of OSA and its interaction with organizations. While it assumes structural and physical properties, OSA processes are socially constructed by actors through the different meanings they attach to it and the various features they emphasize and use. Once introduced in organizations, it is likely that organizational members will redefine and modify the meaning, properties, and applications (Orlikowski, 2000) of OSA, therefore altering its use and impacts on the organization.

**Proposition 5:** One has to account for the actual use of the process and decision-making actions to better seize OSA organizational impacts.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Based on a review of the existing literature, we identified several limitations regarding the way OSA has so far been investigated in the management literature. First, OSA studies have offered multiple definitions which, albeit relatively aligned to each other, do not overlap harmoniously and convey confusion about what OSAs are. Second, the “self” constituting the core of the investigated notion has often been used to designate a unique organizational purpose of which the very existence is rarely ever demonstrated. In this view, OSA is a process conducted by an abstract entity, “the organization”, expected to have only its own goals and interests in mind, which leads to conceal political games and the individual strategies of the actors involved in the assessment exercise. Third, authors specifically characterize OSA as a systematic and regular review of an organization’s activities that is helpful to discern clearly its strengths and areas for improvement. The processed information – organizational activities, strengths, weaknesses – is viewed as tangible and clearly identifiable, rather than constructed and ever-changing. Fourth, OSA processes have traditionally been depicted as a sequence of generic steps - based on an idealized vision of the decision-making process – and have been described in a particularly linear and rational manner, in line with the old-fashioned mechanistic view of the organization. Fifth, OSA has been investigated as a promising way for achieving activities improvement and organizational change. However, it has been demonstrated that OSA does not systematically achieve the expected benefits as yet praised by the majority of academic literature. Table 2 summarizes the shortcomings outlined throughout this paper as well as propositions to enhance existing knowledge on OSA.



	<b>Traditional view of OSA</b>	<b>Dynamic view of OSA</b>
<b>OSA delineation</b>	Divergent denominations : process, methodology, organizational activity, instrument, management tool	OSA as a self-critical diagnosis process based on the use of management tool(s) which unfolds over time through interactions
<b>Characterization of the “self”</b>	Single “self” as an entity with a unique organizational purpose	Multiplicity of “selves” characterized by individual goals and divergent objectives
<b>Tangibility of the processed information</b>	Organization perceived as an objective and tangible reality	Organization as a sum of socially constructed subjectivities
<b>Deployment strategy</b>	Planning and linear approach	Political and iterative approach
<b>Foreseen impacts</b>	Deterministic view : OSA is an external force mechanically impacting the organization	The impacts depend on the uses that are made of the OSA process, subject to appropriation, development and change

**Table 2. Towards a dynamic conceptualization of OSA**

This paper raises major research implication for scholars interested in OSA. Further investigation should consider conducting empirical research that would theorize OSA as a tool-supported process to gain insight into OSA as a complex phenomenon. In this respect, we plead for developing more processual research on OSA – on the basis of our reconceptualization as a political, interpretative and iterative process – that would account for empirical and longitudinal (Langley, 2013) case studies. Such empirical research on the subject has several methodological implications, meaning that the investigation of OSA would include many organizational members, instead of selecting a low number of participants (Eriksson and Garvare, 2005) or organizational leaders only (Ford *et al.*, 2004). We prompt scholars to embrace an approach in which a multiplicity of actors is met over time. In addition, further study would benefit considering “informal aspects” as the process unfolds (with its actors both being influenced and influencing the process itself, its perception and interpretation, its pitfalls, its challenges, its unexpected outcomes, etc.). Such research perspectives will provide more faithful accounts and a better understanding of the dynamics of OSA processes, and may contribute to pinpoint areas for improvement regarding how this notion has so far been explored.

We argue that the conceptual framework developed in the paper may also inspire practitioners involved in OSA processes. First, managers should keep in mind that organizational members are likely to have competing interests and to be ready to negotiate for improving their position in the organization (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980). Second, the



information that is processed as part of the OSA is never neutral nor objective. We therefore raise managers' awareness on the importance to avoid considering the collected information as objective and unequivocal data when diagnosing organizational activities, and to keep in mind that this information is socially constructed. Third, the strategic impacts of the process do not only depend on the diagnosis itself but on the follow-up actions that managers intend to prioritize and implement. To that regard, deploying an OSA process should not be viewed as an end in itself; instead, the OSA is best understood as an argumentative resource that can legitimate a given strategic change in the organization.

## CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at revisiting the theoretical premises of OSA by offering an alternative view to its current conceptualization. OSA has up to now been thought in a very rational fashion, traditionally conceived as a comprehensive analysis of an organization's activities, allowing firms to discern their strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvements. By reviewing the most significant studies that have been carried out on OSA and focusing on the processual aspect, we identified five assumptions underlying traditional research on OSA. We challenged these assumptions in the light of organizational theory and offered research propositions improving and extending existing knowledge on OSA as a research object. On the basis of the propositions, we offered an alternative conceptualization to OSA, redefined as a political and dynamic process based on the use of management tool(s) in the course of which a multiplicity of organizational members, with their own objectives and agenda, mobilize and produce socially constructed information whose expected outcomes largely rely upon organizational members' enactment, appropriation, development and change of the process itself. To conclude, we consider OSA as a complex process allowing organizations to engage in a diagnostic and follow-up process. Hence, the paper aimed at advancing the research field of strategic management control in general and OSA in particular by providing an original framework to further operationalize OSA processes dynamically and longitudinally.

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