



# Achieving strategic agility through business model innovation. The case of telecom industry.

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**Abstract.** *As we are part of a dynamic world oriented towards change and flexibility, the society becomes more eager to be connected and updated to the latest news. Within this context, the purpose of the current paper is to focus on the tactics the companies use in order to achieve strategic agility in the telecom industry. The study aims to seek and analyzes which are the reasons which support the telecom industry to remain innovative and competitive on the market Therefore in order to align to the exponential trend of the market for innovation, we should have an overview picture of internal capabilities of the organization like human resource, technological advances or innovation. Further on, the literature review strengthens the significance companies place on decisions which keep alive their sustainability. Many studies claim that in order to deliver top results, an organization must be aware and fully exploit its major drivers of success. The paper will bridge the literature review with a real-case analysis. We will use a survey based on a sample of companies operating with the telecom market which will be shared at different levels of the business from stakeholders to top management. The results are meant to lead to a set of findings which influence the companies in being agile on the market. The outcome might serve as a reference point for the ones interested to set up a company within this industry or who are conducting research on this subject.*

**Keywords:** telecom, strategic agility, innovation, business models, value.

## **Introduction**

Strategic agility represents a way of challenging a company to boost its innovation and competitive level on the market. World-wide business areas are addressing it in shaping their company's strategy and highlighting the values held by their company. Being an innovator driver on the market is fundamental according to Alpkan and Gemici (2016) for being agile within the business environment. It leads other players to become followers of your concept and business model. At the moment, the telecom industry is a foundation for global communication, connecting the society both personally and professionally. As indicated by Paunescu and Badea (2014) the social network together with social capital are extremely important in assuring that one organization of the business environment owns competitive market information and key resources to deliver best solutions.

The current paper aims to research on what strategic agility stands for in the case of telecom industry, how it is reached and which are its challenges. Asimakopoulos and Whalley (2017) highlight that in order to perform, one has to identify the major drivers of the industry and exploit them at their full potential. Tseng and Lin (2011) consider that agile companies are making use of different key drivers. These refer to internal capabilities of a company such as technology, personnel, innovation and processes.

The telecom industry is an enabler for the business environment to extend and keep the path of global expansion. In the context of continuous demand for faster and higher quality communication services, the telecom market encountered a series of challenges. These have influenced the telecom industry to constantly find ways of being agile and keep

up the trend of innovation. Sustainability is a sensitive issue for businesses (Hadad, 2015) and according to Paunescu (2009) to secure sustainability within an industry, an organization should monitor its results and processes. The telecom industry had encountered two main milestones in its development, namely internet and mobile devices. These two innovations have contributed to the way the telecom industry addresses to its customers in terms of offerings. In the acceptance of Paunescu (2014) the social innovation, impacting a large scale of users becomes more popular and complex, as it covers a need of the society, in our case communication. Therefore, the evolution of the telecom' strategy embraced innovation turning telecom into an innovative business model.

Aligned with the accelerated need of fast services, the telecom players had to shape their business approach to remain competitive. According to Constantinescu and Nistorescu (2012) one should consider the integration of barriers and challenges of the market when shaping its strategic direction. In our case, we should take into account the factors which influence the achievement of strategic agility within telecom. This idea is supported by Fartash et al. (2017) who claim that in order to reach strategic agility, a company must adapt to unpredictable changes of the business environment. As per Paunescu and Badea (2014) any decision can impact a business in a positive or negative way, therefore the decision makers should prioritize their choices.

Another significant point towards achieving strategic agility links to a set-up of value creation. To be more specific, Alpkhan and Gemici (2016) claim that strategic agility and value have to be integrated. A company must adopt a strategy only if it mirrored by a value-added outcome, which goes hand in hand with the company's vision. Navio-Marco et al. (2016) found out that value creation within telecom can be classified as either short-term or long-term. The result of their research highlights the fact that in building an agile strategy, the telecom companies must note that the long-term impact has a higher significance than the short-term results. Therefore, one of the elements in achieving strategic agility for telecom is to consider value creation action in a sustainable perspective. Bratianu and Bolisani (2015) strengthen as well in their study that having a strategic approach leads to value creation, value being generated by achieving well established goals defined with the support of strategic planning.

In this respect, the study provides empirical qualitative and quantitative proof about different ways of reaching strategic agility in the telecom industry. The paper is structured in three main parts. In the inception phase, we address the challenges in shaping an agile strategy, following the factors influencing the agility of a company with a focus on the telecom industry. Further on, we explain how the research methodology is conducted from the sample to the research methods of analysis. The third part is dedicated to results and discussions, involving the views of the sample companies linked with the theoretical concepts previously approached. The paper closes with a section of conclusion which briefs the outcome of the research.

## **Literature review**

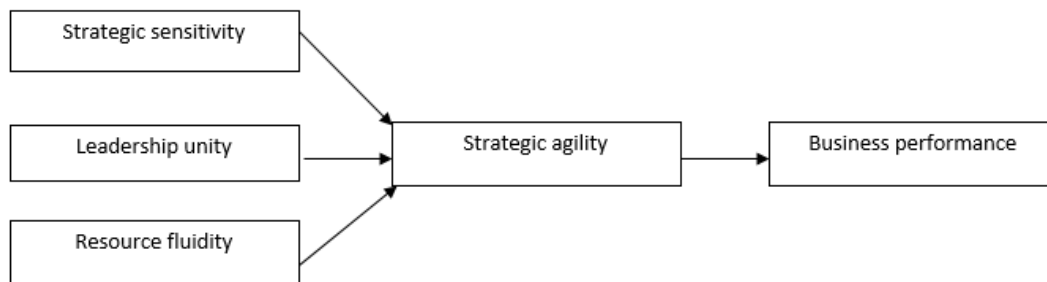
### ***What is strategic agility?***

Strategic agility represents a versatile concept which can be applied in various fields of the business. As indicated by Queiroz et al. (2017) strategic agility can be defined as the ability of a company to source and react in an agile manner to threats and opportunities of the

environment. Battistella et al. (2017) consider strategic agility as an incentive of a company on adjusting its business model to the unpredictable changes of the business environment. Further on, Tseng and Lin (2011) describe strategic agility as a way of delivering an increased level of value.

One of the main motivations in achieving strategic agility refers to the impact the concept has on the performance of the company. As indicated by various authors, performance represents the key reasons why any company would be interested to achieve the highest level of agility on the market. Bratianu and Bolisani (2015) consider the business environment a battlefield, where the performance of the parties depends on strategic thinking. The authors explain that strategic thinking is a key tool to win and defend the competition, delivering superior results.

The strategic agility as per Doz and Kosonen (2010) has three dimensions: strategic sensitivity, leadership unity and resource fluidity. The first indicator, strategic sensitivity enables a company to anticipate future coming opportunities, having a deep level of awareness to balance between current capabilities and the transformation of these ones. Leadership unity refers to the power of the top management to shift in a bold risk manner the strategy of the company, being a risk taker backed-up by intuition sourced from professional experience. On the other hand, resource fluidity is linked to the ability of a company to reassigning new roles for the current company's resource. This dimension points out the flexibility shade embedded within a strategy, confirming the previous assumption of strategic agility as an adaptive tool (Hendar et al., 2017). To have a brief overview of the previous detailed concepts, we have designed a schematic representation, as per below:



**Figure 1. Strategic agility scheme**

Source: Author's own representation.

The connection between strategic agility and the performance of a company has been as well addressed by Shin et al. (2015). They have identified four additional influencing factors in terms of strategic agility, namely technology, innovation, organizational learning and internal business adjustment. The authors' outcome pointed out that having a high level of significance of the four factors is shaping the strategic agility of a company, resulting in an improved performance. Same point of view is supported by

Bento and Ferreira (2010) as well. The authors claim that strategic agility impacts directly the performance of the business, both from a financial and non-financial perspective.

The literature review has also identified a series of attributes which might help us to better define strategic agility. Sherehiy et al. (2007) name flexibility, speed, and integration while Felipe et al. (2015) add innovation as a key characteristic for strategic agility. Paunescu (2009) confirms the significance of innovation as a feature of the strategic mindset. The author highlights that in a long-term perspective, an organization should continuously innovate and at the same time assess the organization's sustainability.

### ***Strategic agility in telecom***

The telecom industry followed different stages of evolution, currently facing a saturation phase. If in the past the telecom market was mainly targeting fixed phone subscribers, nowadays the telecom industry encompasses and delivers to high demanding customers, oriented towards speed and quality services. In order for telecom as a business model to remain attractive and competitive on the market, the telecom industry players had to adapt to the rhythm of change, mainly driven by the technological advances. Temraz (2010) highlights in his research paper the scarcity of new customers within the telecom industry, pointing out the fact that the difficulty in expanding market share. The maturity of the market leads according to the author to focus more on strategic agility as a way of doing business.

The telecom business model started as a premium exclusive service, when having a phone was quite a luxury, to a global affordable one, where any individual can own a smartphone. The current paper aims to argue on how the business model within telecom kept its competitive status while facing the fast-changing global demands. According to Doz and Kosonen (2010), a business model can either be objective or subjective. The objective business model refers to the contract relationship a company has with its partners, while the subjective one is considering the way a company is positioned with respect to its environment.

Strategy as a basic concept embodies the feature of foreseeing its outcome. Related to strategic agility in telecom, anticipation represents a key driver of excellence. Therefore, strategic agility is developed under the mindset of forecasting the impact of making a decision. To be more specific, as confirmed by Zhang et al. (2015) anticipation for a company means being able to predict a future outcome- value creation for its market. In telecom anticipation as a way of strategic agility applies to different layers of the business: from the supply-chain managed by the company to the direct interaction with the customer and what his needs and wants are. Bratianu (2015) and Hadad (2017) uphold that having a strategic thinking represents a competitive advantage to secure the future position on the market of a company. Strategic thinking supports the development of new business opportunities and boosts value within the organization.

Further on, strategic agility can also arise from movements within the industry. Through mergers, acquisition, divestiture, or joint venture in telecom one can get a competitive advantage. Moving within the industry means exploiting new opportunities, mixing capabilities which might lead to innovation. Another benefit of this type of strategic agility option is the diversification of the portfolio. Ulset (2007) analyzes the telecom industry as an agile one due to the numerous changes on the organization's structure in terms of strategic alliances. Navio-Marco et al. (2016) conducted an econometric analysis

on telecom companies' mergers and acquisitions from telecom between 1995 till 2010. The authors proved that this approach can be perceived as a strategic agility measure leading to value creation. Consequently, the literature review proves that even in mature markets as the telecom currently is, there is still room for improvement in order to increase the performance of a company. Many times, not only internal resources are enough, an organization should be open to embrace new ways of doing business even from the competition, by having a short-term alliance or by acquiring them. Even if it is a risky strategy, being bold in collaborating with the competition might open the path to new opportunities.

Another way of reaching strategic agility refers to portfolio expansion and diversification. If at first the telecom operators within the industry were focused only on core business activities, currently they are shifting their perspective. According to Lelah (2015) the telecom customers are interested to have more than telephone communication from their telecom provider. They are looking for integrated associated services that can be offered by a telecom supplier. As a consequence, a type of strategic agility in telecom embeds variety in its offerings towards customers. The portfolio might expand from telephone services to television, media, internet access and wireless services. The idea of diversifying an existing portfolio in telecom is also supported by Bauer et.al (2015). At the moment they claim that the telecom industry makes use of diversification also in terms of roles for the customers: communicator, technical and informative. The technical side might arise from the need of installing internet offering, while the informative one might be accessed whenever issues appear and the customers need guidance in using telecom offerings.

In an industry such as telecom, technology plays a vital role in being able to apply the strategic agility concept. To keep up with the dynamism of the industry, the telecom players must research and adopt the latest technological advances. Ghezzi et.al (2014) highlight that technology and telecom go hand in hand, being interrelated. As per the authors, technology represents an enabler in new strategy implantation, even a driver for building differentiation on the telecom market. To facilitate the development of new technological offerings, telecom companies have used investment in research and development as an incentive towards strategic agility. Zhang and Tang (2017) strengthen the idea of research and development as a key characteristic in technological innovation for telecom. The authors name the internal research and development activities as being heterogenic. Therefore, we could state that strategic agility in the telecom industry is sourced from exploiting internal capabilities of the company, leveraging on the research and development department.

## **Methodology**

Previous research related to strategic agility regarding the telecom industry is quite limited. The aim of the current research is to identify what strategic agility means for a large company and how it is reached. Also, the study has as purpose identifying the benefits and constraint concerning the journey of finding and implementing the concepts of strategic agility. Relating to the studied literature review, we would like to set the objectives of the current research paper: 1. Identify what strategic agility stands for within a telecom

company; 2. Find out how strategic agility is achieved; 3. bridging the literature review with the findings of the real-case research analysis.

The sample population targeted top telecom companies which have operations in Romania. The respondents were sourced using well-known databases as listafirme.ro or risco.ro. The companies have been contacted via e-mail, making use of their official website available information with the request of cascading the material to other interested parties within their organizations. The response rate was around 70 per cent, the sample being very responsive to the survey.

The survey has been sent to top 10 telecom companies in Romania, to different layers of the business from stakeholders to top decision makers, working in various departments of the company. The link of the survey has been shared with the respondents during November 2017, using Google Docs as a technological tool to fasten the rate of response. The sample size included 10 telecom companies, represented by their stakeholders. The sample outcome is: 53 completed surveys, out of which 52 have been valid. The departments in which the respondents work as part of the telecom industry are: financial, legal, quality, audit, IT, HR.

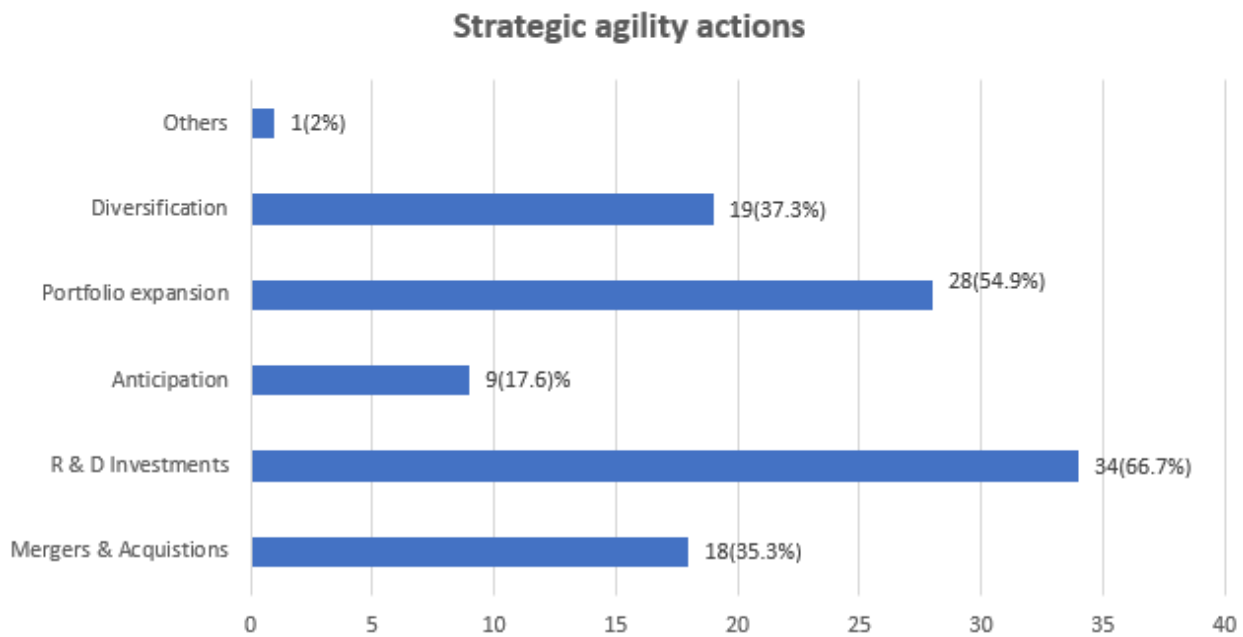
Using the literature review as a foundation we have developed a set of questions to serve as a framework of the literature review for the targeted respondents. To increase the response rate, we have used multiple choice questions, checkbox and five-point Likert scale. We have noted 5 gradual levels of significance as follows: 1- not important at all to 5- extremely important.

## Results and discussions

Analyzing the outcome of the questionnaire we can comment on the input generated by the respondents, in our case, telecom companies having opened offices in Romania. Asked if their company is using strategic agility, over 90 per cent of the respondents answered positively. The major share of affirmative answers confirms the fact that strategic agility is a popular concept embraced in the telecom industry as most of the players are aware of it. Further on, backed up by the literature review, we have asked the respondents to measure the degree of importance for a set of factors influencing strategic agility. The factors are: value creation, innovation, flexibility, and speed. Having a Likert scale ranging exponentially from 1 to 5 in terms of importance, value creation and innovation are considered to be extremely important. These confirm Navio-Marco et al. (2016) opinion about the impact of value creation within the telecom area. On the other hand, flexibility and speed are indicated to be very important. Consequently, the concepts promoted by Sherehiy et al. (2007) are confirmed as well.

Another topic approached in the survey refers to the actions taken by the telecom players to implement strategic agility within their company. As suggested by the literature review we have listed top five actions to test their level of significance in the telecom industry. These actions are presented in figure 2 below: Mergers & Acquisitions, Research and Development investments, Anticipation, Portfolio expansion and diversification. The respondents have used check-boxes to select their opinion. Among these ones, research and development has been rated as having 66.7 per cent. It proves the fact that, the strategic agility in terms of the telecom industry relies heavily on understanding who your market is and where it is heading to. The next action preferred by the sample is rated with

54.9 per cent, represented by portfolio expansion. The third action rated refers to mergers and acquisitions, in our case 35.3 per cent of the sample consider this action to be significant.



**Figure 2. Strategic agility actions within telecom**

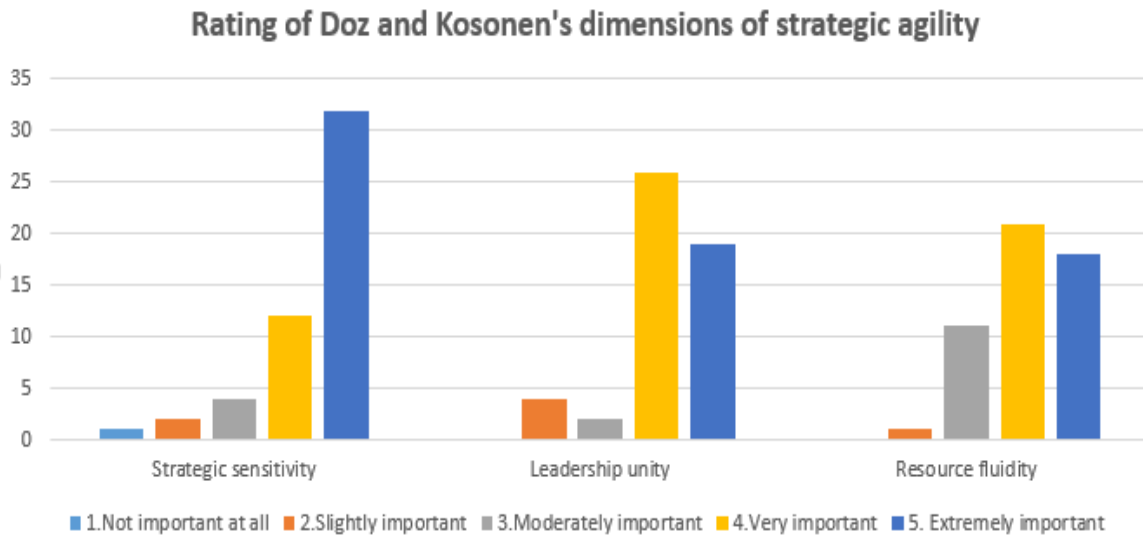
Source: Author's own research.

As stated previously, Doz and Kosonen (2010) propose as features of a business model orientated towards strategic agility three dimensions. The survey aims to rank and to find out how the telecom companies prioritize these dimensions. As a result which can be followed in Figure 3, strategic sensitivity is considered to be extremely important. It means that the analyzed sample indicated that the telecom companies rely on their internal capabilities and their feasibility on the market. For this dimension, Doz and Kosonen (2010) claim that anticipation is one of its features. Analyzing the results of the survey, we can state that for the telecom industry as indicated by figure 2 as well anticipation is chosen by almost 18 per cent of the sample as a key action for reaching strategic agility.

Leadership unity is perceived as a very important dimension. This score confirms that the influence of the leadership is highly valued by the sample of respondents. This outcome might relate to the fact that leadership is a driver for courageous decisions in the industry. The leadership unity indicator can also be correlated with the fact that the sample has ranked in the survey as extremely important by 38 of the respondents. In telecom, an industry driven by technology these strategic agility dimension is vital to achieve top performance. Leadership unity as a driver of bold decisions of the top management is confirmed also by the high share scored by research and development as an action to reach strategic agility as proved by figure 2.

As proved in figure 3, the third indicator, resource fluidity confirms the adaptability feature of strategic agility as a concept. In telecom, professionals consider resource fluidity as being very important, confirming the idea that a company must adapt its resource to the demand of the market. These results match with the high scores indicated previously for figure 2. A third of the respondents which are part of the telecom business see as top action for strategic agility mergers and acquisitions, while over 50 per cent portfolio expansion.

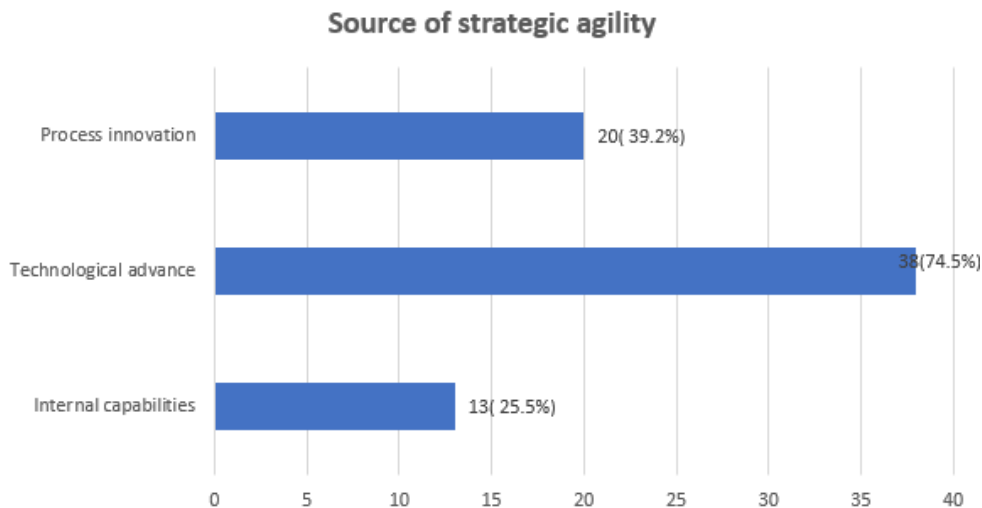
These measures prove volatility and openness for the telecom industry towards the third dimension of the authors.



**Figure 3. Rating of Doz and Kosonen's dimensions of strategic agility**

Source: Author's own research.

Another topic approached in the research with the support of the questionnaire refers to the source of strategic agility as represented in the below figure 4. Taking into account the literature review as well, the respondents had three options to choose from: internal capabilities, technological advances, and process innovation. Analyzing the selected choices, technological advances have a major share, over 70 per cent of the respondents have selected this characteristic as being the top significant one. The next indicator chosen by the respondents is process innovation, around 40 per cent telecom employees consider that it is the heart of strategic agility. Moreover, Iqbal et al. (2013) found that in telecom industry innovation is encouraged through employee participation. The less rated option is represented by the internal capabilities of the company. 26 per cent of the sample has chosen this option as a trigger for strategic agility in telecom.



**Figure 4. Source of strategic agility**

Source: Author's own research.



The outcome of the survey points out a direction of the telecom industry. To deliver at its best, to achieve strategic agility, telecom companies are focusing on technological advances. The business environment pressures them to offer the best products and services. To do so, they must constantly align their strategy relating to the latest technological features. As previously stated, this opinion is correlated with one of the top actions undertaken by telecom companies. To be more specific, research and development has been rated to be the main action taken in achieving strategic agility. Additionally, the fact that process innovation ranks second in the preference of the respondents can be correlated as well with the rating innovation has received as a contributing factor to strategic agility. Over 50 per cent of the respondents consider that innovation is an extremely important factor which impacts the telecom industry in terms of agility.

The last section of the survey consisted of understanding better the sample who has filled-in the requested data. As aimed at the beginning of the research, we have managed to involve stakeholders at different levels of the organizations from entry to medium-senior positions. Their professional experience varies from 2 to 18 years of experience, being part of different departments: procurement, legal, human resources, sales, quality, audit, IT, sourcing, and data analysis. The variety of the sample highlights the idea that the concept of strategic agility is shared with the entire organization at different layers. The engagement of the stakeholders in implementing a corporate set-up contributes to achieving a superior level of strategic agility.

The survey represents a bridge between the literature review and the real-life cases faced within the telecom industry. As aimed at the beginning of the research, we have pointed out some key findings in terms of strategic agility, connecting them gradually with the responses of the literature review. We refer to both features of the concept and actions taken to achieve its best. The source of strategic agility has proven to be as well a broad issue, involving internal capabilities, technological advances, and process innovation.

The analysis provides direction of building a model in terms of strategic agility for telecom. The data gathered in this context points towards a business framework which is defined by technology, flexibility, and adaptability. As top players in the industry confirm the use of these tactics, the way of implementation represents the link to reaching strategic agility. Additionally, as we are living in a highly dynamic society, the speed of implementation is a challenging topic. The faster a company manages to implement correctly its strategy, the faster they will manage to get leverage on the market. The paper managed to go step-by-step through the top three objectives set at the beginning of the research: having a stronger understanding about strategic agility in telecom, discover how it is implemented and connecting it with the scientific literature review.

## **Conclusion**

In a dynamic business environment strategic agility represents a path towards sustainability and innovation. Leveraging the competition with new strategic tactics and setting new trends within the telecom industry constitutes an opportunity to evolve and deliver value for the society and business network.

The current research paper has pointed out the significance of strategic agility and how it impacts different business area, engaging the entire organization to achieve it. Its main outcome is definitely orientated towards value and delivering best performance. This

combination represents a driver towards business sustainability and innovation. Further on, the research indicates the direction of the telecom business which is a pillar in communication for the global society. However we consider that the paper encompasses research limitation as well. The approached areas of discussion should only be regarded as a review of the scientific literature, mentioning also the limitation of the analyzed sample. These cannot be aspect of generalization, the results being subject only to the above specific mentioned sample.

The paper aims to tackle key aspects of the concept of strategic agility, following up various studies of the scientific literature review. Therefore the results of the paper have a theoretical aspect and might serve as a tool of deeper understanding of strategic agility and its connection with the telecom industry. Additionally, it points out the continuous factors that must be takes into account when deciding for a certain direction. Beyond scientific contribution, the paper can serve as a source of guidance in the development of a business plan for either start-ups or already established companies searching for a new flavor in their business orientation.

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