

MULTIPLE GOALS IN ORGANIZATIONS: THE ROLE OF TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

A canonical insight in strategic management is that many organizations face multiple goals. Previous empirical and theoretical work has primarily focused on understanding the effect of multiple goals on organizations, including how they can be effectively managed. In this article, we encourage a shift of attention away from possible solutions and instead toward zeroing in on the underpinning problem. The core premise of this article is that multiple goals are characterized by unique temporal dimensions: duration, tempo, acceleration, and timing. We maintain that misalignment between these temporal dimensions creates tensions in pursuing them, rather than the goals per se. We suggest how synchronicity (alignment) or asynchronicity (misalignment) of duration, tempo, acceleration, and timing across two goals affects an organization's ability to perform and balance multiple goals. This article presents an innovative perspective that promises to advance our understanding of the phenomenon of multiple goals in organizations by focusing on the precise sources of the varying difficulty in managing multiple goals and helps explain under what conditions organizations are likely to fail to deal with them. This perspective opens up important frontiers regarding theoretical and empirical advancements in research on multiple goals.

Keywords: multiple goals; temporal dimensions; time; strategy.

INTRODUCTION

A canonical insight in the strategic management literature is that organizations typically grapple with the pursuit of multiple goals (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Simon, 1958). These goals take on a variety of different forms (Aguilera *et al.*, 2024). They can range from standardization vs. flexibility in microfinance (Canales, 2014), global integration vs. local responsiveness in multinational enterprises (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017), exploration vs. exploitation in organizational learning (March, 1991), replication vs. innovation in knowledge transfer (D’Adderio, 2014), internal vs. external fit of practices (Fortwengel, 2017), market vs. regulatory demands in telecommunications (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013), safety vs. profitability in the airline industry (Gaba and Greve, 2019), or costs vs. green energy use in business sustainability (Slawinski and Bansal, 2015). Conflicts over these goals can have dramatic consequences for an organization, such as paralysis or even breakup (Pache and Santos, 2010). These conflicts occur not least because “goals reflect core values and beliefs and are evaluated based on a logic of appropriateness, making them hard to challenge or modify” (Besharov and Smith, 2014, p. 367).

Correspondingly, a key research interest in strategic management pertains to the effect of multiple goals on organizations and how organizations can successfully manage multiple goals (Ethiraj and Levinthal, 2009; Gaba and Greve, 2019). Here, a dominant research stream reveals firms’ particular practices or governance choices for managing multiple goals successfully (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2016). Along similar lines, research has explored how hybrid organizations can combine the pursuit of social and economic goals (Smith and Besharov, 2019) and how multiple institutional logics can be balanced effectively (Smets *et al.*, 2015). Equally, a large body of research has also attempted to investigate why organizations ‘fail’ to manage multiple goals, such as failing to capitalize

on new opportunities (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000), experiencing ‘mission drift’ (Grimes *et al.*, 2019), or more broadly suffer performance consequences (Obloj and Sengul, 2020).

Overall, we are left with contrasting findings whereby multiple goals sometimes pose a critical and even survival-threatening challenge to organizations, while in other instances, organizations successfully deal with them or even have multiple goals at the core of their organizational identity, as is the case with hybrid organizations (Pache and Santos, 2013). To help us advance our understanding of these conflicting findings and unpack the conditions under which multiple goals pose a problem, we address the following research problem: *Why and how do multiple goals pose a problem to an organization?*

We propose introducing a temporal explanation to help solve this question. From this perspective, it is not the goals per se that create unique management challenges, but rather the underpinning temporal dimensions that propel them forward, which can be misaligned. We suggest that, depending on whether the temporal dimensions of the different goals are synchronous or asynchronous, organizations will struggle or even fail to manage multiple goals under certain conditions.

We discuss how multiple goals can differ in terms of their duration, tempo, acceleration, and timing (Grzymala-Busse, 2011). These time-related concepts have received a particularly sophisticated treatment in the neighboring discipline of political science, where they have been marshalled to think about causal inference (Grzymala-Busse, 2011). We leverage them to submit that asynchronicity or synchronicity in the relationship between the temporal dimensions of multiple goals describe the presence or absence of temporal fit (Ancona *et al.*, 2001), and they affect the ability of organizations to balance and perform on the multiple goals. We thus seek to offer an explanatory link

between multiple goals, a phenomenon that many organizations face, and their effect on success (e.g., balancing, performing) or failure (e.g., drift, collapse).

This article makes several contributions toward advancing our theorized understanding of multiple goals in organizations, a canonical problem of strategic management (Cyert and March, 1963; March, 1991). First, drawing on insights from neighboring disciplines (Schoemaker, 2024), specifically, political science (Grzymala-Busse, 2011), it challenges the notion that multiple goals are problematic *per se*. While prior research has looked at the effect of goal characteristics, such as specificity, measurability, and novelty, on the difficulty of balancing multiple goals (Kotlar *et al.*, 2018), we submit that these features are not only an inherent quality of the goals but may also be driven by their temporal dimensions. For example, a goal may be abstract when an organization has held it for only a short period, but it becomes more specific as time passes. Thus, this article advances the notion that multiple goals can be more manageable when they exhibit aligned temporal dimensions that exert synchronous pressures. This qualifier helps explain the contradictory findings in the empirical world, whereby the same multiple goals sometimes present critical challenges and are sometimes managed successfully. More broadly, it puts the interdependency of multiple goals into scholarly focus.

Second, we also expand the outcome of multiple-goal performance into the outcomes of ‘balance between two goals’ and ‘overall performance on two goals.’ This differentiated view on the outcome further nuances some of the different findings in prior literature. That is, when we think of multiple goals posing a problem for an organization, they may not pose a problem for all outcomes of interest. Based on the synchronicity or asynchronicity between their temporal dimensions, they may pose a higher problem for

one type of organizational outcome (such as balancing two performance metrics) than for another (such as achieving high overall performance across both goals). As we propose, in some cases, the asynchronicity of two goals is worse for the balance of performance between two goals than for the overall performance across two goals. Studies that treat performance as only one type of outcome (either balance or overall performance) may miss this nuance.

Third, this article advances a more fine-grained understanding of the precise tensions involved in multiple goals by mapping the underpinning mechanisms of the tensions experienced by organizations. This mapping provides a richer account of multiple goals in terms of the concrete shape and underpinning mechanisms of conflicting goals, which now emerge as multi-dimensional, involving different dimensions of temporality. Specifically, we outline how initial conditions in terms of asynchronicity or synchronicity of temporal dimensions translate into organizational outcomes via exemplary theoretical mechanisms. Notably, our perspective also helps us shift attention from a static view of goals only as outcomes and instead explores nonlinear dynamics in the relationship between multiple goals and organizations, focusing on a process-based view. That is, two goals that are challenging to balance at one point may not be challenging at another time, based on the extent to which their temporal elements align over time. This article also offers clear insights for organizations on how to make their goals more manageable. For example, if organizations build the capacity for multiple goals simultaneously from the beginning, managing them will be easier in the long term.

TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF MULTIPLE GOALS

Prior literature in strategic management has examined the role of time and temporality, though mainly in terms of how firms position themselves vis-à-vis given temporal realities (Blagoev *et al.*, 2024). This emphasis is perhaps not surprising, given that strategy and management scholars have a special interest in understanding how managers and organizations actively shape temporality (Bansal *et al.*, 2025). For example, a key idea in the literature is that firms should seek to achieve an optimal entrainment between their activities and strategies, on the one hand, and externally given conditions, on the other hand. Concretely, prior research has looked at the conditions under which fast or slow decision-making leads to better performance (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Hawk and Pacheco-de-Almeida, 2018), including relative attractiveness to partners (Hawk *et al.*, 2024), and it has examined when fast or slow market entry is preferable (Boyd and Bresser, 2008). As such, the dominant approach in the existing literature views the role of time and temporality at the interface between temporal reality and the firm, and the overarching insight is that there is a contingency logic in the optimal choice establishing fit. In this article, we shift our attention to the question of fit vs. misfit at the level of multiple goals rather than the relationship between temporal realities and the focal firm's activities.

That time and temporality are essential in the context of multiple goals is already inherent in the practical challenge it describes: the simultaneous occurrence of multiple goals. The four temporal dimensions that Grzymala-Busse (2011) articulates form the analytical building blocks of temporality—"how long events take (duration), how quickly they change (tempo), whether they speed up or slow down (acceleration), and when they occur (timing)" (Grzymala-Busse, 2011, p. 1268). One central idea of Grzymala-Busse (2011) was to sensitize scholars to think more carefully about temporal dimensions and

their generative effects; for example, that rapid tempo does not tell us much about the magnitude of a change. We add to these insights the idea that the existence of asynchronous multiple goals creates challenges for the focal organization that classic multiple goals literature has not fully unraveled. The four temporal dimensions are crucial to consider separately because they affect the pursuit of multiple goals through distinct mechanisms and processes.

Goal Duration

According to Grzymala-Busse (2011, p. 1277) “[d]uration measures how much time elapses between the start and end of an action or event.” In an organization, goals may have a pre-defined end date, but they likely do not. Therefore, in an organizational setting, by duration, we mean the time between when the goal was introduced and the current time, i.e., the duration for which an organization has held a goal. If the duration of two goals is the same, we would characterize that as synchronous duration; if it is different, we would describe it as asynchronous duration. For example, it is possible that an organization has held the goal of exploiting current capabilities for a long time, but that the goal of exploring new market opportunities is added at a later point after existing products have reached maturity or existing markets have been penetrated. The relevant event is the introduction of a goal, and the duration is the time between that event and the current time. Offering a perspective that draws attention to the historical background of presently existing multiple goals, as opposed to taking an ahistorical perspective, can yield important insights into the precise nature of the challenges associated with multiple goals (Argyres *et al.*, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the role of goal duration in the context of multiple goals.

---INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE---

Goal Tempo

Tempo “is the frequency of the ‘subevents’ in a larger event, or between events in a process” (Grzymala-Busse, 2011, p. 1282; quotation marks in original). Applied to the context of multiple goals, tempo thus captures the frequency with which subevents occur that affect the perception of how much time organizational members ‘have.’ A critical subevent that affects this perception is the frequency with which the goal is reported. For some goals, such as exploitation, financial value creation, and quantity of products sold, change may be reported internally with a high frequency (such as monthly); for others, such as exploration, social impact, and quality of products sold, reporting may be much less frequent (such as annually). As in the case of duration, the tempo of two goals can be the same (synchronous) or different (asynchronous). The tempo affects the perception of urgency related to a goal. Figure 2 below illustrates the role of tempo in multiple goals.

---INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE---

Goal Acceleration

Acceleration is “a measure of the change in the rate of change” (Grzymala-Busse, 2011, p. 1286). In the case of a goal, we define acceleration as an event that changes the tempo of a goal (i.e., the frequency of subevents in a larger event). Acceleration in goals acknowledges the non-linearity in the tempo of different goals. Some goals may become more urgent at specific time periods compared to their past pace. As before, the acceleration of two goals may be synchronous or asynchronous; that is, two goals may accelerate or decelerate simultaneously (synchronous), or one may accelerate while the other does not, or vice versa (asynchronous). Goals may accelerate or decelerate for both internal and external reasons. For example, a gap between realized and desired performance may

accelerate the frequency of a goal (tempo). Similarly, public activism may create external pressures that increase the tempo of a goal. Members of an organization facing multiple goals will perceive and experience variance in acceleration in terms of contrasting patterns of events. Figure 3 below illustrates the role of acceleration in the context of multiple goals.

---INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE---

Goal Timing

Timing “consists of the placement of a given event on a timeline” (Grzymala-Busse, 2011, p. 1288). Regarding goals, we define timing as the time between a series of critical events in a goal’s life and its pursuit at a given time. The critical events provide a timeline against which the goal can be pursued at a specific time. The timing of a goal’s pursuit before the occurrence of the event would be different from its timing today. The timing affects features such as the legitimacy of a goal and how easy or difficult it may be to pursue based on the availability of an ecosystem that supports it. For example, the 2019 declaration by the Business Roundtable (some of the largest corporations in the US) that formally changed the purpose of an organization from creating value for shareholders to creating value for all stakeholders¹ was a critical event in the life of sustainability goals, which affected their legitimacy among businesses. We submit that goal timing is crucial because it influences the initial position of a goal within an organization’s broader set of goals. Another point to note is that timing is distinct from duration. Duration refers to the age of a goal within the internal life of the organization. In contrast, timing refers to the age of a goal concerning the external, macro-environmental context. Timing, too, can be synchronous and

¹ <https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans> (last accessed: 29 November 2024).

asynchronous. Figure 4 below illustrates the conceptualization of timing in the context of multiple goals.

---INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE---

THEORIZING THE EFFECT OF TEMPORAL FIT OR MISFIT

The synchronicity or asynchronicity of temporal elements in goals affects an organization's performance in achieving them. In mapping the relationship between temporal dimensions of multiple goals, the fit or misfit between them, the underpinning mechanism, and the outcome, we draw on prior work on goal performance. When considering multiple-goal performance, previous research has primarily focused on two dimensions of performance (as seen in ambidexterity, see Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013): the level of balance between the performance of the goals, and the overall performance of the two goals. We consider both as they emphasize different dimensions of performance. Balance reflects the gap (or lack thereof) between the performance of two goals and is often measured as $\text{Balance} = (A - B)$, where A = performance of Goal A and B = performance of Goal B. The smaller this gap is, the more balanced the performance between the two goals. However, an organization may have poor performance on two goals yet have an outstanding balance between them, implying that this measure alone does not provide a complete picture of multiple-goal performance. The second measure, therefore, attempts to capture overall performance in terms of two goals, typically measured as the product of the performance of the two goals, i.e., $\text{Performance} = A * B$. In this conceptualization, if an organization performs poorly on both goals, the product of the performance will be lower than if it performs well on one goal but poorly on another. This measure will record performance as

high even for low levels of balance between goal performance. The two dimensions provide a more comprehensive understanding of performance across two goals.

It is worth noting that the temporal dimensions will also affect the outcomes related to pursuing a single goal. Still, in this article, our focus is on how their fit/misfit, which we call synchronicity/asynchronicity, affects the pursuit of multiple goals in terms of influencing an organization's ability to manage or balance two goals. We summarize these proposed relationships in Table 1 and elaborate on them below.

---INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE---

The Effect of (A)Synchronicity in Goal Duration

The duration of two goals can be synchronous if an organization has held them for a short time-period, and if an organization has held both for an extended time-period. When the duration of two goals is synchronous and short (at the beginning of the life of the goals within an organization), the learning cost of the goals can be relatively high as organizational members attempt to build capabilities on new goals. This high learning cost would imply that overall performance on both goals (measured as the product of the performance of both goals) may be low as organizational members build the capability and learning needed to perform well on them. However, the 'balance' in performance is likely to be high because the learning costs are similar for both goals.

However, if the duration of the goals is synchronous and long, organizational members will have had sufficient time to collect information and build capabilities for pursuing them. In this case, again, the balance between the performance of the two goals will be high (because of the alignment in how much time organizational members have had

to learn about the two goals). Still, the overall performance will also be high (because they would have had enough time to learn about both goals).

Compared to that, the asynchronous duration of the goal implies that the organization has had time to learn and develop capabilities on one goal before taking on another goal. But for this very reason, asynchronous goals can be more challenging to balance than synchronous goals. Because an organization has already developed capability on one goal, it will find it easier to perform on that goal and may also gravitate toward it because of status quo bias and myopic learning (Levinthal and March, 1993; Levitt and March, 1988). Thus, balancing performance for asynchronous goals will be harder to achieve. This difference may or may not persist depending on the organization's systems to ensure that attention and focus are not disproportionately diverted to the goal with the higher duration. At the same time, overall performance on the two goals is likely to be intermediate because the organization has a high capability for at least one goal, which it can perform well on as it learns to do the other goal. Therefore, overall performance (measured as the product of performance on two goals) will be higher than in the case where goal duration is short and synchronous but lower than in the case where goal duration is long and synchronous.

We submit that the causal links between synchronicity and asynchronicity, on the one hand, and organizational performance, on the other, are established through learning and capability development. One of the main features underlying the effects of goal duration is the path-dependent nature of learning trajectories (Levinthal and March, 1993; Sydow *et al.*, 2009). Differences in duration can set in motion trajectories that might be very difficult to reconcile later on in the process (Schreyögg and Kliesch-Eberl, 2007). The

asynchronous duration of multiple goals can thus help explain the struggle of many profit-oriented organizations to embrace and effectively implement social goals later on.

The Effect of (A)Synchronicity in Goal Tempo

Tempo, too, can be either synchronous or asynchronous for multiple goals. If the tempo is synchronous, it implies that the frequency of subevents in a larger event is the same for the multiple goals. For example, the reporting frequency may be either synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the financial and social performance goals. If the goal tempo is synchronous and fast, i.e., both goals have a high reporting frequency, we can expect the balance between performance to be high because pressures exerted by reporting cycles will be similar for each. However, overall performance on the goals may be intermediate because the sense of urgency that short reporting cycles create may not leave organizational members with sufficient time to plan or invest in longer-term capability improvements in either goal, which could have improved performance. On the other hand, if the goal tempo is synchronous and slow, i.e., the reporting frequency of both goals is low, we would expect higher overall performance because a low reporting frequency may allow organizational members to better divide time and resources between the two goals effectively without the pressure of frequent deadlines, and to discover potential synergies between them.

Finally, asynchronous tempo, where one goal has a high tempo and the other goal has a low tempo, implies that the reporting frequency is higher for the goal with the higher tempo. In this case, balance in performance is likely to suffer, as organizational members are likely to disproportionately attend to the goal with a higher tempo than the one with a lower tempo. Overall performance is likely to be intermediate, leading to relatively greater prioritization of—and thus higher performance on—the goal with the higher tempo.

We submit that the causal links in this case are generated through how resources are allocated between the two goals, which is affected by the perception of how much time organizational members believe they have to attend to a goal (Joseph *et al.*, 2024). Because resources are scarce, asynchronicity in the tempo can present allocation and redeployment challenges (Ao *et al.*, 2025), leading to disproportionate allocation to the goal exhibiting a higher tempo, and subordinating the demands imposed by the goal with the slower tempo.

The Effect of (A)Synchronicity in Goal Acceleration

Synchronicity in goal acceleration refers to a situation where both goals experience acceleration in their tempo simultaneously. In contrast, asynchronicity in goal acceleration represents a situation where one goal experiences an increase or decrease in the tempo, but the other goal experiences no change. For example, the reporting frequency of Goal A may be annual, and Goal B may be bi-annual. Increasing these reporting frequencies to bi-annual and quarterly would represent a synchronous acceleration. Alternatively, an increase in the reporting frequency of Goal B to quarterly with no change in the reporting frequency of Goal A would represent a situation of asynchronous acceleration.

If both goals experience acceleration in their tempo simultaneously, the organization may struggle to pursue them concurrently. This challenge occurs because implementing change in an organization takes time and effort. Inertial forces within the organization make it difficult to adapt its resources, capabilities, and routines (Kelly and Amburgey, 1991; Leonard-Barton, 1992). Thus, experiencing change simultaneously in both goals may be even more challenging for an organization to adapt to than in one goal.

If both goals experience an acceleration in their tempo, then the organization will need to adapt its routines and practices related to both goals simultaneously. While these

adaptation processes unfold, performance on each goal (and therefore, the overall performance) may suffer as organizational members feel a reduction in the ‘time they have,’ and try to adjust their behavior to fit the faster subevent speed. Alternatively, if both goals experience a deceleration (i.e., negative acceleration) in their tempo, organizational members may find they ‘have more time’ to adjust and develop new routines to accommodate the change. Therefore, overall performance is likely to be higher compared to if the acceleration increases for both goals. However, in both cases, when both goals experience an acceleration or a deceleration, the balance in performance is likely to be high because changes in practices are required similarly for both goals. Finally, if only one goal accelerates while the other remains unchanged, the balance in performance of the two goals is likely to be low, as the organizational members will disproportionately divert resources to the changing goal. The overall performance of the two goals will be low or intermediate, depending on how quickly the organization adapts to the change.

The mechanism through which goal acceleration affects balance and overall performance on goals is the adaptive processes that an organization undertakes. We submit that goal acceleration forces organizations to change their practices and systems, which creates challenges due to inertial forces. When both goals accelerate, the adaptation required will be higher than when only one goal accelerates or when both decelerate.

The Effect of (A)Synchronicity in Goal Timing

Goal timing can also be synchronous or asynchronous. As the age of a goal relative to critical events in the environment, a goal’s timing can be conceived of as being mature or young. A goal situated within a timeline of events that gives it greater legitimacy may be considered a mature goal. In contrast, while a goal located in a timeline of events where

critical events have not yet afforded it legitimacy may be regarded as a young goal. Younger goals may be more challenging to pursue than mature goals, as they may lack an ecosystem that supports them. Goals, like other organizational phenomena, are imprinted on the environment in which organizations operate (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). A mature goal has become a part of the natural external environment of the organization, making it easier to pursue as the environmental ecosystem is embedded with the ‘experience’ and ‘resources’ required to achieve it. If the timing of two goals is synchronous and mature, an organization will find pursuing them less challenging. Therefore, the balance and overall performance on the goals are likely to be relatively high. Both goals will have legitimacy in the broader environment in which the organization operates, supported by an ecosystem that the organization can draw upon.

Alternatively, if the timing of the two goals is synchronous but young, an organization will find it more challenging to pursue them as there may be limited legitimacy and supporting ecosystem for their pursuit. While the performance of the two goals may still be balanced when the two goals are young (because of comparable external environmental conditions), their overall performance will be low as the organization will lack a supportive environment for their pursuit. Finally, when goal timing is asynchronous, that is, if one goal is mature and another is young, the organization will experience greater challenges in pursuing the younger goal than the mature one. For example, there is yet no standardized way of measuring ESG (environmental, social, governance) performance, making it relatively difficult to pursue this goal compared to the mature goal of financial performance, not least because of its ambiguity, a function of its relatively young age. In this case, the overall performance will be intermediate because the performance on the

mature goal will be higher than the performance on the younger goal. However, the balance between the two goals will be low. One problem with young goals is that they are not only relatively ambiguous but also tend to be precarious. One example is the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which have come under increasing pressure in recent times. More mature goals, such as firm profitability and shareholder return, tend to be less ambiguous and more stable.

Theorizing the Role of Temporal Dimensions of Multiple Goals

Building on seminal (Ancona *et al.*, 2001; Bloch, 1991 [1962]; Zerubavel, 1981) and more recent work on the possible fit or misfit of different temporalities (Blagoev and Schreyögg, 2025; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015), our theorization focuses on the synchronicity or asynchronicity of temporal dimensions of multiple goals. Rather than focusing on the presence or absence of fit between temporal reality and a focal firm, as much of prior literature has done, we shift attention to the multiple goals and theorize the relative temporal fit between them. Considering the temporal tensions between multiple goals and the possible interdependencies they introduce enriches our understanding of the precise form and implications of multiple goals for organizations. While it may be the case that asynchronicity creates significant problems for an organization and can result in outcomes such as mission drift (Grimes *et al.*, 2019), synchronicity may suggest that organizations can reconcile or interlace multiple goals more easily. However, our theorization paints a slightly more complex picture. For example, in some cases, asynchronicity of goals' temporal dimensions can be preferable, such as in the case of goal acceleration, where an organization may not want both goals to accelerate simultaneously. In addition, while synchronicity of temporal dimensions can be preferable for some

outcomes (such as balance in performance), it can be detrimental to other organizational outcomes (such as overall performance) under some conditions.

More broadly, asynchronicity and synchronicity constitute alternative initial conditions in processes involving multiple goals and their relationship with different outcomes. Temporal tensions between multiple goals thus build a bridge between the theorization articulated in this article and the dominant focus in the literature on practical activities and managerial design solutions in response to multiple goals (Blagoev *et al.*, 2024; Joseph and Sengul, 2025).

Tensions between multiple goals can change over time. For example, it is conceivable that at *time 1*, multiple goals exhibit synchronicity but that during *time 2*, asynchronicity evolves as the goals develop contrasting acceleration, perhaps as a function of shifts in the stakeholder landscape (Barney, 2018; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, it is possible that while there is asynchronicity between the temporal dimensions of goals at *time 1*, this can change to relative synchronicity in *time 2* as the goal duration of the younger goal increases sufficiently that both goals become mature. While this possibility is slightly beyond the scope of this article, a perspective that considers the possible nonlinearity of multiple goals promises to significantly advance our understanding of multiple goals as a process phenomenon. Before outlining the theoretical and methodological implications and research frontiers of the temporal mechanisms-based understanding of multiple goals as developed in this article, we discuss three possible moderators.

ORGANIZATION-LEVEL MODERATORS

Our theorization shows that a firm has the greatest balance between the two goals when its temporal dimensions are synchronous. The overall performance is also the greatest when the temporal dimensions are synchronous, but only for specific levels of each temporal dimension. Asynchronicity in the temporal dimensions of goals creates the least balance between the goals, but typically intermediate levels of overall performance. Therefore, if the organization's overall aim is to achieve the greatest balance between the performance of its goals, it should strive for synchronicity between its temporal elements. If the goal is to achieve the greatest overall performance, organizations need to understand the tensions that temporal forces create and develop supporting systems to overcome them. The effect of each temporal dimension has been discussed, keeping all other factors constant.

To this theorization, we introduce three organization-level moderators: a possible variance across organizations in the hierarchy of their multiple goals, the frame employed vis-à-vis multiple goals, and the nature of the multiple goals of an organization. By hierarchy, we mean that all multiple goals do not have the same priority from an organization's perspective (Ethiraj and Levinthal, 2009). For example, many publicly listed companies will prioritize profit over sustainability. As a result, there may be cases where balance is not the organization's objective, and they will be able to weather heightened levels of tempo and acceleration in response to sustainability demands, at least for a specific time. As such, we suggest that an organization will be more resilient toward asynchronicity if there is a strong hierarchical order between the multiple goals involved.

As a second moderator, we introduce the idea that organizations can have varying frames concerning multiple goals. In particular, we theorize that the role of asynchronicity

vs. synchronicity will vary depending on whether an organization employs ‘ego-moving frames’ or ‘time-moving frames’ (Crilly, 2017). In the context of multiple goals, ego-moving frames describe a position where the organization ‘moves toward multiple goals,’ as in hybrid organizations that actively and purposely embrace multiple goals. In contrast, time-moving frames describe a position whereby the multiple goals ‘move toward the organization,’ as can be the case when serious safety issues arise (Gaba and Greve, 2019) or the organization faces boycotts or public pressure. Importantly, the differentiation between ego-moving frames and time-moving frames (Crilly, 2017) introduces time-sensitive moderators, which complement and enrich our theorizing effort centered on the role of time and temporality.

Finally, the nature of the multiple goals in question can vary. Goals can vary in many different ways, including their level of difficulty, novelty, the degree to which paths toward their achievement are known, specificity/explicitness, expectancy, and ambiguity (Kotlar *et al.*, 2018). For example, goal expectancy, the belief that effort will result in desired outcomes, has been found to affect the likelihood of its prioritization depending on the expectancy of other goals (Unsworth *et al.*, 2014). While we submit that many of these characteristics are influenced by the temporal dimensions of these goals and are not only objectively held features of the goals themselves, how the firm defines them can be considered a third significant moderator that can influence the implications of multiple goals for an organization.

DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FRONTIERS

In this article, we offer process theorizing involving “temporally embedded interactive contingencies that might drive events and activities in different directions” (Cloutier and Langley, 2020, p. 5) by zeroing in on the temporal mechanisms underlying multiple goals and propelling forward competing demands from internal or external stakeholders placed on a particular focal organization. While most research assumes and essentially takes for granted the existence of tensions between multiple goals (Slawinski and Bansal, 2015), the perspective developed in this article problematizes this widespread general starting point. Our temporal dimensions lens paves the way to tackle a set of theoretical and empirical frontiers in research on multiple goals.

Theoretical Frontiers

Davis and Marquis (2005, p. 336; emphases in original) claim that “mechanism-based theorizing can aspire to *explain* but not *predict*.” We suggest that comparing the temporal dimensions underpinning multiple goals allows for explaining why an organization experiences difficulty dealing with multiple goals or why it does not. In this article, we propose mechanism-based theorizing to better understand the challenges organizations face as they grapple with various kinds of multiple goals.

We suggest that past research on multiple goals has likely been too focused on differentiating particular kinds of multiple goals from one another. As a result, the shared commonalities across different types of multiple goals have moved to the background at the expense of developing a more coherent understanding of the antecedents, manifestations, and implications of multiple goals in organizational life. To help remedy this problem, we develop the argument that a focus on the underpinning temporal concepts

can help us see important commonalities, and it offers a pathway to a richer appreciation of multiple goals as a more general phenomenon in organizational life. While goals take on different forms, such as institutional complexity (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011) or paradoxical relationships (Smith and Lewis, 2011), we posit that the four underpinning temporal dimensions—duration, tempo, acceleration, timing—can be applied to a multitude of different multiple goals, and thus contribute to a productive scholarly debate across various ‘camps’ of multiple goals scholars.

Meanwhile, focusing on the temporal dimensions and mechanisms behind multiple goals should not cause us to overlook the individuals within organizations who are grappling with multiple goals (Shipp and Jansen, 2021). Anderson and colleagues (2006, p. 103) establish that “[o]rganizational explanations are typically rife with mechanisms, but they are often implicit,” and they “encourage organizational scholars to make these mechanisms explicit.” Indeed, we maintain that focusing on mechanisms and making them explicit promises to help theorize multiple goals and their effects. In Table 1, we list a set of exemplary mechanisms that generate effects and establish causal links between either asynchronicity or synchronicity as initial conditions and goal performance as key outcomes. At the same time, Weber (2006, p. 120) expresses concern that mechanism-based theorizing can lead to a “reductionist, machinelike view of organizations.” To circumvent this danger, and in addition to the moderators discussed earlier, we introduce two key agentic aspects that mediate the influence of temporal dimensions of multiple goals: the perception (Ancona *et al.*, 2001; Berger and Luckmann, 1967) and enactment (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski and Yates, 2002) of multiple goals by organizational members (Shipp and Jansen, 2021). The perception of multiple goals mediates the manifestation of

multiple goals in daily organizational life. The observation that mechanisms are still enacted draws attention to the possibility that their precise effect is not pre-determined, as small variations over goal activation may occur across various micro-level instances of enacting a goal.

Zeroing in on dimensions of temporality holds considerable promise to further our understanding of a set of related phenomena of interest to strategy scholars, such as the processes and direction of organizational change (Heracleous *et al.*, 2023; Plowman *et al.*, 2007). Unlike previous theories, these change dynamics would not be triggered by changes in external factors but rather by the outcome of the multiple goals at play. The evolution of multiple goals in terms of temporality and underpinning mechanisms can be a useful analytical lens to be applied across levels, including the sub-organizational level (Binder, 2007; Blagoev *et al.*, 2024). A multi-level analysis could also provide important insights into potential variance in the perception and enactment of multiple goals across organizational levels, thereby offering a richer and more complete picture of the complex effects of multiple goals in organizational life.

One key research frontier pertains to how differences in temporal dimensions can be explained, i.e., why do some goals have higher or lower duration, tempo, acceleration, or timing? Relatively recent work has established an intriguing link between language and organizational behavior (Liang *et al.*, 2018). Can differences in language also help explain why some goals feature higher tempo and acceleration, for example, thus possibly exerting a more decisive influence than other goals? An alternative or perhaps complementary explanation could be the power, legitimacy, and urgency of various stakeholders (Mitchell

et al., 1997), which are crucial to an organization and influence its direction (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

The lens articulated in this article promises to offer new insights into several process phenomena in organizational life. For example, while mission drift has been identified as an essential process (Grimes *et al.*, 2019), the underpinning reasons for it to occur and the mechanisms driving forward mission drift are still not fully understood. The theorization developed in this article suggests that mission drift could result from one goal developing accelerating demands, leading to asynchronicity and, ultimately, drift toward this goal. Overall, the temporal lens developed in this article provides a conceptual framework to help us address remaining theoretical blind spots in research on multiple organizational goals.

Empirical Frontiers

There are critical empirical questions about the precise carriers of different temporal dimensions. In other words, how does an organization ‘feel’ varying temporal dimensions of the multiple goals it is facing? Here, transmission channels such as (digital) media and internal activists could be important (Girschik, 2020; Heucher *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, as we theorize, temporal dimensions can change over time, sometimes due to environmental changes and at other times due to changes in strategy. For example, it is conceivable that safety is a goal (Gaba and Greve, 2019) that exhibited considerable acceleration for Boeing during the height of the crisis with its 737 MAX airplanes (Pasztor *et al.*, 2019). However, once these issues were (largely) resolved, safety and profitability probably constitute more stable goals again (Gaba and Greve, 2019), and they may (eventually) fall back into their pre-crisis hierarchical order. Notably, a temporal and

mechanisms-based perspective on multiple goals allows us to uncover how members of the organization feel, experience, and see multiple goals (Rerup and Spencer, 2024; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). For example, they perceive the difference from when the push and pull of one goal was stronger or weaker as a function of its varying tempo and acceleration. This possibility opens up the investigation of the nonlinearity of multiple goals as an important frontier.

More broadly, the theorizing developed in this article has important implications for research on multiple goals. First, rather than conceiving of multiple goals as a given and focusing merely on possible effects or organizational responses, such as the idea that organizations can pay sequential attention to goals (Cyert and March, 1963), the perspective developed here suggests a shift of focus toward the multiple goals themselves. This promises to generate several important insights. For example, it is conceivable that multiple goals change their push or pull on an organization as a function of their underlying dimension of temporality. Notably, the literature on nonlinear mechanisms and processes suggests that this push or pull can vary dramatically over time, including becoming stronger or weaker with time. As a corollary, multiple goals can shift dramatically, and the nature of their relationship to one another can vary significantly, with potentially substantial effects on organizations. This understanding extends beyond the dominant view on time and temporality, which tends to focus on different views or perceptions of time (Kim *et al.*, 2019; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015) and instead focuses on the temporal mechanisms that drive forward multiple goals. This perspective adds richness to our understanding of how multiple goals change over time by offering insight into how this

change can result from the underpinning dynamics within and between goals in terms of their temporal mechanisms.

Tailored research designs are necessary to advance our knowledge in this broader realm. Rather than the dominant focus on the organization as a unit of analysis and how it successfully or unsuccessfully deals with multiple goals, the attention needs to shift to the underlying goals, which means that empirical research will need to look ‘within’ the organization. For example, to better understand the precise nature of different institutional logics, research needs to focus on the stakeholder groups representing a particular logic, such as social welfare or commercial logic (Ramus *et al.*, 2021). Overall, a shift in perspective, away from the managerial responses to multiple goals and toward the goals and their underpinning mechanisms, opens up new and exciting lines of inquiry.

A crucial question is how to measure the various temporal dimensions within empirical studies. This measurement appears challenging in terms of tempo and the possible acceleration of multiple goals. Here, content analysis of critical text, as part of a longitudinal and comparative research design, could offer useful insights (Duriau *et al.*, 2007). These critical texts may include memos, transcripts of calls, and other communication with key stakeholders, as well as direct communication from stakeholders such as letters or social media posts (Toubiana and Zietsma, 2017). Text and discourse can indeed offer deep insights into how multiple goals manifest as ‘events,’ which can serve as an important unit of analysis to unpack the emergence and dynamics of multiple goals and how they are interpreted by organizations and their decision-makers (Isabella, 1990). Linking these findings, for example, regarding the tempo and acceleration of multiple goals to organizational responses and outcomes would make for a particularly intriguing research

project that would paint a fuller picture of the antecedents, materializations, and implications of multiple goals in organizational life.

CONCLUSION

This article revisits the established stream of strategic management literature concerning multiple goals. Leveraging insights from organization theory and political science research, we propose that four underpinning temporal dimensions of goals—duration, tempo, acceleration, and timing—can be applied to a wide variety of multiple goals, and thus contribute to a productive scholarly debate across various ‘camps’ of multiple goals scholars. The key thought-provoking idea is that it is not only the goals per se, as a function of their conflicting logics, which can pose problems, but also whether the temporal dimensions of goals are synchronous or asynchronous. This idea, as developed in this article, promises to stimulate a stream of research complementing the canonical and highly relevant literature on multiple goals within organizations.

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TABLE AND FIGURES

Table 1: Proposed Main Effects of Temporal Dimensions of Multiple Goals on Organizational Outcomes.

Temporal dimension	Synchronicity/asynchronicity	Theoretical mechanism	Level of balance between two goals	Level of overall performance
<i>Duration</i>	Synch—short-short	Learning and capability development	High	Low
	Synch—long-long		High	High
	Asynch—short-long		Low	Intermediate
<i>Tempo</i>	Synch—slow-slow	Resource allocation decisions	High	High
	Synch—fast-fast		High	Intermediate
	Asynch—slow-fast		Low	Intermediate
<i>Acceleration</i>	Synch—both decrease	Adaptation in the face of inertial forces	High	Intermediate
	Synch—both increase		High	Low
	Asynch—increase-no change		Low	Low/Intermediate
<i>Timing</i>	Synch—mature-mature	External legitimacy and supporting ecosystem	High	High
	Synch—young-young		High	Low
	Asynch—mature-young		Low	Intermediate

Figure 1: Duration of Two Goals.

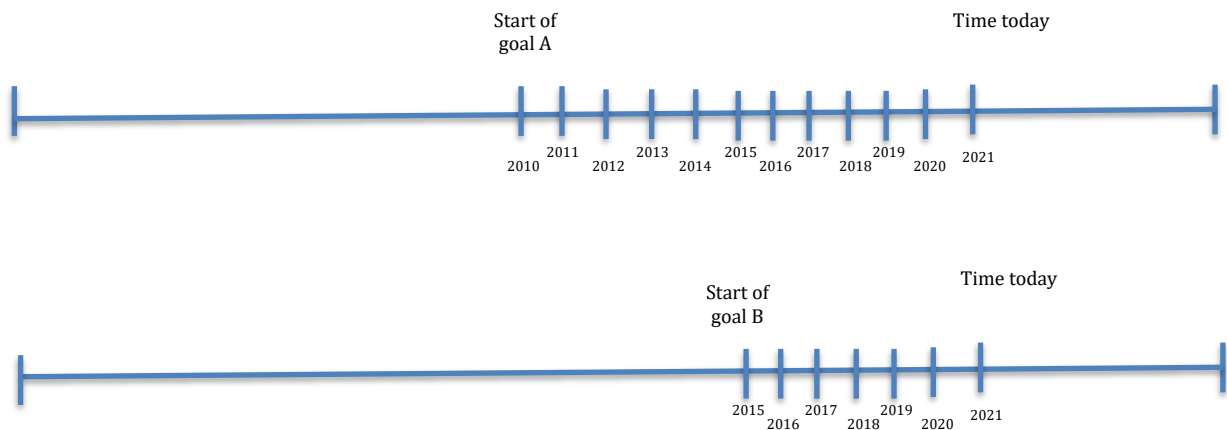


Figure 2: Tempo of Goal A (Half-Yearly Tempo) and Goal B (Annual Tempo).

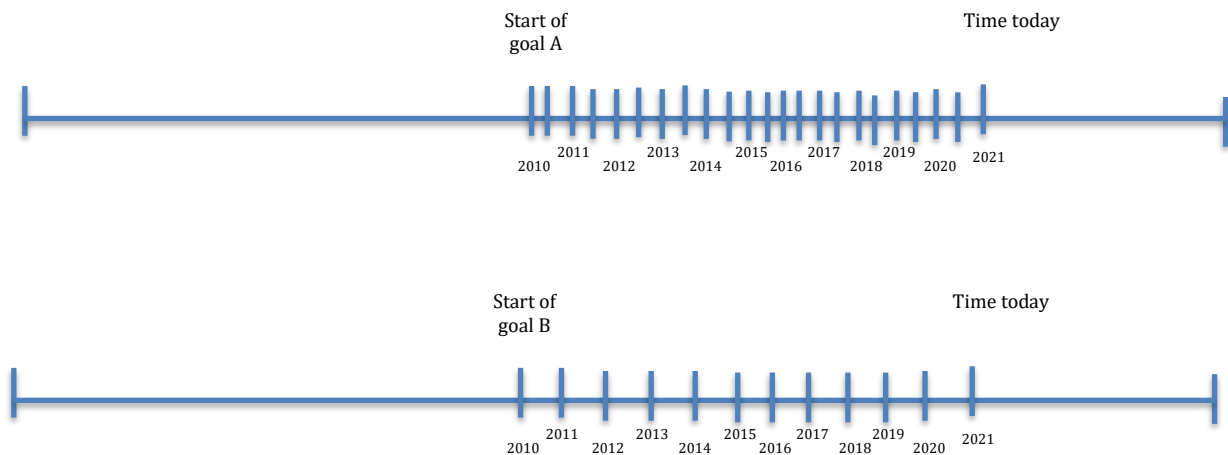


Figure 3: Acceleration of Two Goals, Goal A (No Change in Tempo) and Goal B (Acceleration in Tempo).

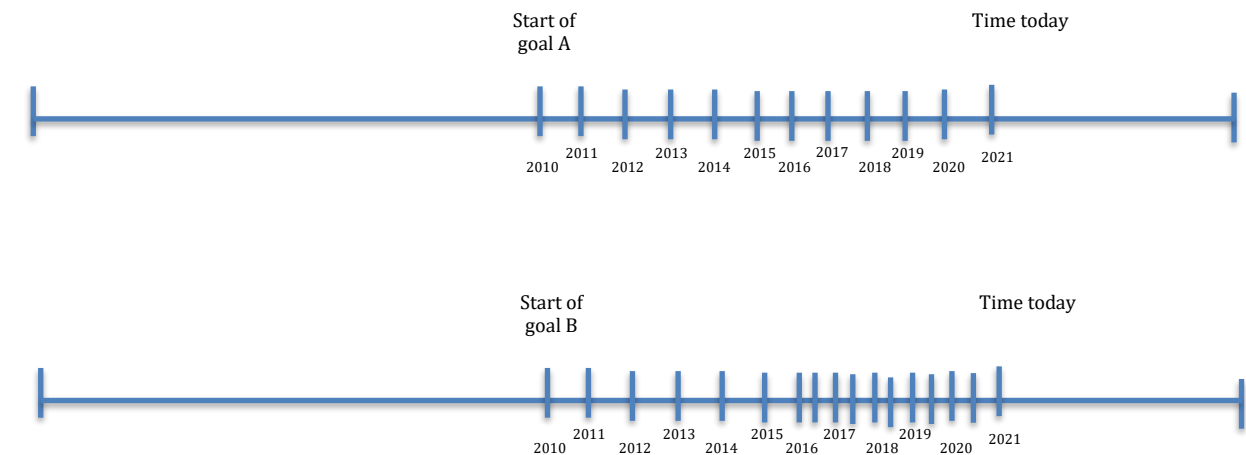


Figure 4: Goal Timing of Two Goals in Relation to Critical Events.

