



# Improvisation, a key tool in business organizations

Just as jazz musicians improvise their performances and get a great result, companies can give a fundamental place to actions that were not planned. Of course, they must know how to do so. This is the conclusion of a research that provides clues on how to act without having “rehearsed.”

By Mauricio Veloza Posada  
Pictures 123RF

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic showed that no government or company in the world was prepared to face a global crisis with absolutely unpredictable effects.

There was no company, no matter how organized and structured it was, that could have foreseen the consequences of such an event or the decisions that it would be called upon to make in such an unexpected scenario.

If they would have had the aim, perhaps Professors Mauricio Sanabria and Didier Moreno, from the Business and Management Research Group, in the line of research in organizational studies of the School of Business Administration of the Universidad del Rosario, would not have found a better example to illustrate the fundamental role that improvisation occupies in the structure of organizations.

What could motivate a couple of researchers to study a phenomenon like improvisation, which is generally seen as a negative element in organizations?

“Basically, the fact that the vast majority of companies are constantly improvising. A businessman we interviewed for our research, questioning the role of formal planning methods, told us the following: “We can design 50 scenarios and we get 51 ...”. Every day, companies face situations that they have not been able to foresee because changes and their consequences are often uncertain and unexpected situations of various kinds arise. To face them, managers, through their decisions, must respond and face what is happening. In those moments, it is necessary to act according to the circumstances and adapt to them without having previously planned the next step. That is improvising,” says Sanabria.

The research, entitled *A contribution to understanding emerging strategies in organizations through the concept of improvisation and the musical metaphor* consulted the opinion of various businessmen from different types of organizations to know the extent to which strategies executed in their organizations are deliberated and planned and the extent to which these strategies affect organizations at the end of the year.

“What we found in the research is that there is a complement between deliberated strategies and emergent ones, that is, those that we build step by step while we trace our own trajectory. The second thing is that improvisation is always present in the context of organizations, unlike what is usually thought. The third point is that when you improvise, you do

not do so much in the “what” (the ends) but in the “how” (the means), that is, in the path that one has planned to achieve the objectives,” explains Professor Mauricio Sanabria.

In the literature review carried out by the researchers, they found two approaches to the notion of strategy that stand out. On the one hand, there is the classical gaze, which links it to the idea of a deliberated plan; on the other, the critical gaze, which brings it closer to a phenomenon whose definition is given in the day-to-day life of the organization, in the activities carried out on a daily basis.

In the first case, one speaks of deliberated strategies. In the second, one considers emerging strategies. Now, in the tradition of organizational studies, the study and development of the former have been privileged, but not the latter.

Therefore, this work contributes to the increase of the current level of understanding regarding emerging strategies in organizations through the concept of improvisation. To do this, they used an innovative resource for this type of research: The metaphor of musical improvisation.

“In music, particularly in jazz, improvisation plays a fundamental role. When we studied this, we realized that improvising is not simply ‘jumping into the water’ but that to be able to do so, it is necessary to be very well prepared, just as the great performers of this genre are. From there, we draw the conclusion that managers, like musicians, must prepare very well in what they do so that when the time to improvise comes, they are able to do it in the best way,” affirms the researcher.

### The research question

In this context, the research question that gave life to this work is as follows: What place can improvisation occupy in the formation of emerging strategies, those that are not deliberated or put in the initial score of an organization?

Based on the results of the work carried out, it was identified that in reality, improvisation occupies a central place in the development of this type of strategies, which complements and coexists with deliberated strategies in the organizational environment.

Further, improvisation is inevitable in this medium, and it has a greater intensity in the “how” of the strategy (its implementation) than in the “what” (its formulation). Finally, it is not born out of nowhere, but it implies preparation, both in the musical and in the organizational world. In other words, to be able to improvise properly, it is important to be prepared.

## Research contributions to organizational studies

This research manages to give important contributions to three types of actors that make up the field of organizational and administrative studies:



**Managers:** So that they better understand the role that improvisation plays in organizational strategy, so they can properly weigh it and assess the need to prepare well to be able to carry it out in the organizations under their charge (in particular, considering what is related to the “how” of strategy rather than the “what”).

These were the main contributions of the work carried out regarding the field of organizational strategy, in particular, the current level of understanding in relation to emerging strategies and the role they occupy in companies.

Another interesting piece of research data was the recurrence of the financial issue in the development of the organizational strategy. “Money is usually a reflection of everything that organizations do. They improvise more in how, that is, in the way in which they reduce costs, increase profits, and look for new markets so that their objective is fulfilled,” says Sanabria.

In this regard, the analysis indicated that when companies work with a concept of shared value, with which they try to solve social problems, they earn money and have a greater chance of success at the end of the year; that is, when money becomes a means and not an end in itself.

“The basic approach is no matter how well you plan in a very sensible way, in practice, you will always be improvising. From a financial point of view, having a fund for reserves or contingencies is very useful when improvising. Whoever has more resources and is better prepared will have more possibilities to improvise,” he says.

Returning to the example of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which universities have had to rethink their teaching systems and use more digital platforms, the researcher highlights the

**Educators:** So that those who focus their efforts on teaching processes and procedures, pre-established in the multiple existing methodologies for the definition of organizational strategy, also consider learning goals related to dynamic capacities as relevant as strategic improvisation in their courses. In the same way, the different aspects that this implies for the training of managers.



**Researchers:** To continue developing concepts such as situational awareness and carry out more arduous work on emerging strategies, improvisation, and the explanatory use of metaphors as a valuable resource to contribute to the construction of theory.



work and investments made by the Universidad del Rosario, which knew how to improvise and meet the demands of students and professors through a virtual strategy, which it had been implementing for some time.

“We must train our students not for certainty but uncertainty. And that is difficult. Prepare for the unexpected that is going to happen, that is part of what we must do,” he states.

### Do emerging models work?

Professor Sanabria mentions that it is important to have a mindset willing to get the most out of improvisation since it does not appear spontaneously. “Our economy today is fundamentally a service-centered, highly digital and interconnected economy, where improvisation is the order of the day. This requires greater preparation and an attitude of good disposition and openness.”

The analysis shows that new digital ventures show that improvisation pays off. “What one sees more and more is that these large companies in the digital world, in practice, many times arise more from emerging processes than deliberated ones and become unicorn companies, as was the case with Google, which was born from considering a doctoral thesis,” says Sanabria.

These new ventures have emerged thanks to what we know as the Third Industrial Revolution, characterized by digi-

→ Professor Mauricio Sanabria, from the School of Business Administration of the Universidad del Rosario, highlights that the Fourth Industrial Revolution has made traditional businesses turn toward what we call digital transformation, where profound changes are experienced based on new technologies.



tal technology. From the use of the personal computer and the commercial Internet, the world began to interconnect through technology and to give room, over the years, to these new companies such as Amazon, Facebook, YouTube, or Uber.

“The Fourth Industrial Revolution, which we have been witnessing for almost twenty years, has made traditional businesses turn toward what we call digital transformation, where profound changes are experienced based on new technologies. Additionally, our economies are much more supported today in services than in the production of goods,” he assures.

However, Sanabria considers that although these start-ups (technological ventures) start with business models in which improvisation is at the forefront, with the passage of time they adopt organizational models in which planning occupies an essential place, and a specific “score” is followed to give direction to the company and, in particular, to respond to the interests of investors.

“These companies initially emerge from emerging models and thus ‘jump into the water’ without much clarity of where they are going.

When they discover what their business is, ‘what is Google’ exactly, for example, and they have investors and other groups that keeping their interest in consideration, they demand things not to be so improvised, so they begin to develop deliberated strategies, which set the course of the company and its sustainability,” he concludes. ■