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## REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF THE PhD THESIS TOPIC

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CV in appendix 1

1. TITLE OF THE PROPOSED TOPIC
1.1. Croatian
-
1.2. English
CEO-TMT Ambidexterity Alignment and Firm Performance: The Moderating Role of Behavioral Integration
1.3. Area/field
Strategic management, Organizational ambidexterity, Upper Echelons Theory, Behavioral Integration

2. PROPOSED OR POTENTIAL SUPERVISOR(S)		
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Title, first and last name	Institution, country	E-mail
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<i>Minimal general criteria for supervisor selection:</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has to hold a PhD degree and be awarded a scientific rank,</li> <li>• has to have at least two years of postdoctoral experience,</li> </ul>		

- *has to have a lead (co-lead or partner) position in a national or international project, or in some other way be able to ensure support for scientific research,*
- *has to satisfy the minimal criteria of excellence.*

*If the supervisor is not an employee of the University of Rijeka, a co-supervisor from the University's constituent unit implementing the postgraduate study programme is assigned to the PhD candidate.*

### 3. TOPIC OUTLINE

#### 3.1. Summary in Croatian

*(no more than 4000 characters with spaces)*

Ova disertacija istražuje kako usklađenost između CEO-a i top management tima (TMT) u njihovim ambideksterim orijentacijama utječe na uspješnost poduzeća. Središnji konstrukt je CEO-TMT ambideksterina usklađenost koju definiramo kao stupanj u kojem CEO i TMT dijele kompatibilne orijentacije prema balansiranju eksploatacije (unaprjeđenje postojećih sposobnosti) i eksploracije (razvoj novih sposobnosti). Umjesto promatranja karakteristika rukovoditelja kao neovisnih prediktora, što je dominantan pristup u istraživanjima Teorija vrhovnog menadžmenta, ova disertacija postavlja usklađenost kao ključnu jedinicu analize. Kada CEO i TMT dijele usklađene orijentacije, učinkovitije koordiniraju aktivnosti, koherentnije raspoređuju resurse, šalju dosljedne strateške signale kroz organizaciju i smanjuju razinu konflikata. Sve to rezultira snažnijom organizacijskom ambideksterijom i boljim poslovnim rezultatima poduzeća.

Tri teorijska stupa su temelj ovog istraživanja. Teorija vrhovnog menadžmenta (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) predstavlja glavni okvir: organizacijski ishodi odražavaju karakteristike, kognicije i vrijednosti vrhovnih menadžera, no većina dosadašnjih istraživanja analizirala je karakteristike CEO-a i TMT-a odvojeno - zanemarujući mogućnost da njihova usklađenost može biti važnija od individualnih karakteristika svake strane. Istraživanja organizacijske ambideksternosti (March, 1991; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996) pokazuju da poduzeća moraju istodobno provoditi eksploataciju i eksploraciju kako bi dugoročno opstala te da upravljanje tom temeljnom napetošću zahtijeva namjernu koordinaciju na razini vrhovnog menadžmenta. Teorija vrhovnog menadžmenta pruža i relacijsku logiku za razumijevanje usklađenosti: Hambrick (1994) ističe da je sučelje između CEO-a i TMT-a ključno za dinamiku vrhovnog menadžmenta, a kada dijele kompatibilne strateške orijentacije, koordinacija se poboljšava i konflikti smanjuju (Carmeli i Schaubroeck, 2006). Neusklađenost generira suprotstavljene prioritete i troši resurse na interne pregovore. Bihevioralna integracija (Hambrick, 1994; Simsek et al., 2005) konceptualizira se kao moderirajući uvjet koji određuje hoće li se usklađenost učinkovito pretvoriti u koordinirano strateško djelovanje ili ostati neiskorišten potencijal.

Metodologija obuhvaća kvantitativni dizajn, 150–250 hrvatskih poduzeća, stratificirani slučajni uzorak prema industrijama i veličini poduzeća. Ambideksternost se mjeri prema Mom et al. (2009); bihevioralna integracija prema Simsek et al. (2005); uspješnost poduzeća kroz EBITDA maržu, ROCE i ROE. Višerazinska analiza omogućit će istraživanje različitih dimenzija: individualnu i timsku razinu ambideksterije; analiza se provodi pomoću programa R.

Disertacija uvodi CEO-TMT ambideksterinu usklađenost kao originalni konstrukt unutar Teorije vrhovnog menadžmenta, povezuje individualnu i timsku razinu u istraživanjima ambideksternosti te primjenjuje logiku usklađenosti pojedinca i okruženja u strateškom menadžmentu. Praktično, istraživanje ističe bihevioralnu integraciju kao mehanizam za jačanje koristi usklađenosti na razini rukovoditelja.

#### 3.2. Summary in English

*(no more than 4000 characters with spaces)*

This dissertation examines how alignment between the CEO and the top management team (TMT) in their ambidextrous orientations affects firm performance. The central construct is *CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit* defined as the degree of CEOs and TMTs shared alignment regarding balancing exploitation (refining existing capabilities) and exploration (developing new ones). The dominant approach in Upper Echelons research treats executive characteristics as independent predictors. This dissertation repositions executive level alignment itself as the key unit of interest. When CEO and TMT share aligned orientations, they coordinate more effectively, allocate resources coherently, send consistent strategic signals throughout the organization and reduce executive-level friction. As a final result the whole organization is more ambidextrous and firm performance improves.

Three theoretical pillars underpin the research. Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) provides the primary explanatory lens: organizational outcomes reflect the characteristics, cognitions and values of top managers, yet most prior research has examined CEO and TMT characteristics in isolation - overlooking the possibility that their alignment may matter more than either party's individual attributes. Organizational ambidexterity research (March, 1991; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996) establishes that firms must simultaneously pursue exploitation and exploration to survive long-term and that managing this fundamental tension requires deliberate coordination at the top management level. Upper Echelons Theory further provides the relational logic for why alignment matters: Hambrick (1994) argued that the CEO-TMT interface is central to top management dynamics and when CEO and TMT share compatible strategic orientations, coordination improves, trust increases and friction decreases (Carmeli and Schaubroeck, 2006). Misalignment generates conflicting priorities and wastes resources on internal negotiation. Behavioral integration (Hambrick, 1994; Simsek et al., 2005) is conceptualized as the moderating condition that determines whether alignment is effectively translated into coordinated strategic action or remains unrealized potential.

Methodology includes quantitative cross-sectional design, 150–250 Croatian firms, stratified random sampling across industries and firm sizes. Ambidexterity is measured via Mom et al. (2009); behavioral integration via Simsek et al. (2005); firm performance via EBITDA margin, ROCE, and ROE. A multilevel analysis will support the research of various dimensions of individual and team ambidexterity; analysis will be done in application R.

The dissertation introduces CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit as an original Upper Echelons construct, bridges individual and team levels in ambidexterity research and repositions CEO-TMT alignment as a relational construct grounded entirely within Upper Echelons Theory. Practically, it offers guidance in behavioral integration implementation as a lever for improving executive alignment benefits.

### 3.3. Introduction and overview of previous research (suggested length: 7000 characters with spaces)

Strategic fit - the alignment between organizational strategy, structure, and environment - is critical to organizational performance (Miles and Snow, 1978; Venkatraman, 1989). The competitive advantage is grounded in balancing external market demands with own internal capabilities. But how this balance is achieved, by whom and through what models is still not clearly defined (Teece, 2007; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013).

This dissertation will explore the CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit and its impact on firm performance. Building on Organizational ambidexterity research and Upper Echelons Theory I have developed a model in which CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit predicts firm performance, moderated by behavioral integration and contingent on environmental factors.

#### **Theoretical Foundations and previous research**

Three theoretical pillars ground this research: Upper Echelons Theory as the primary explanatory lens, organizational ambidexterity to specify the alignment construct and behavioral integration as the central process mechanism.

#### **1. Upper Echelons Theory**

Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) states that organizational outcomes come from the characteristics, cognitions and values of top managers. Strategic choices are shaped by managers' bounded rationality and selective attention (Simon, 1947) and cognitive frames influence how they interpret situations and evaluate options. Early research used demographic proxies as indirect signal of psychological orientations but more recent work has shifted toward direct measurement of psychological and behavioral constructs (Hambrick, 2007).

A critical but underexplored area concerns the CEO-TMT interface. The CEO holds formal highest authority but depends on the TMT for information, expertise and execution (Hambrick, 1994). Most Upper Echelons research treats CEO and TMT characteristics as independent predictors rather than examining their alignment which is a significant gap this research addresses. The degree of managerial discretion moderates these effects: in high-discretion environments, CEO characteristics exert stronger influence; in constrained environments, external forces dominate (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987).

Recent studies found that CEO-TMT cognitive complementarity moderates the relationship between digital innovation strategy and firm value (Cao & Wu, 2025). This confirms that aligned CEO and TMT orientations shape organizational outcomes.

## 2. Organizational Ambidexterity

Organizational ambidexterity is the simultaneous pursuit of exploitation or refining existing capabilities and exploration or searching for new opportunities (March, 1991; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). Both are essential for long-term firm's survival but compete for scarce resources. Exploitation generates reliable returns but risks competency traps and exploration generate uncertain returns but risks failure traps. Exploitation is usually more favored due to its more immediate payoffs.

Early research proposed structural ambidexterity where separate units for exploration or exploitation are integrated at the executive level. Additionally contextual ambidexterity emerged focusing on simultaneous pursuit of both which results in organizational balancing (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Individual-level research showed managers vary in personal ambidexterity, shaped by formal mechanisms and coordination behaviors (Mom, Van Den Bosch & Volberda, 2009). Although personal capabilities of executives were reviewed, limited research deals with the CEO-TMT interface.

CEOs and TMT members must coordinate their ambidexterity to achieve organizational-level outcomes (Smith & Tushman, 2005) - a research gap in this area motivated the proposal for an original construct:

**CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit** - the degree to which CEOs and TMTs share compatible ambidextrous orientations toward balancing exploitation and exploration. Grounded in Upper Echelons Theory and ambidexterity research, it shifts focus from isolated executive characteristics to alignment within the upper echelons.

## 3. Behavioral Integration

Behavioral integration refers to the degree to which TMT members genuinely engage in collaborative interaction: open information exchange, joint decision-making and collective behavior (Hambrick, 1994; Simsek et al., 2005). Hambrick (1994) recognized that while shared strategic orientation between CEO and TMT improves coordination, excessive similarity can reduce cognitive diversity and invite groupthink (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001). Behavioral integration opens the conversation and supports constructive tension even when orientations are aligned. It determines whether the benefits of TMT diversity are realized or not. Lubatkin et al. (2006) showed it mediates the relationship between TMT characteristics and organizational ambidexterity; Carmeli & Halevi (2009) demonstrated that innovation is positively affected by TMT diversity. Recent research shows it can simultaneously enhance both decision speed and quality (Shepherd et al., 2023).

Additional studies find that CEO empowering leadership strengthens behavioral integration within the TMT, which in turn improves firm performance (Carmeli et al., 2011). This supports the view that behavioral integration as a process mechanism connects CEO behavior to organizational outcomes.

This dissertation positions behavioral integration as a moderating condition. When high, even moderate CEO-TMT misalignments can be constructively managed through dialogue. When low, small misalignments may escalate into strategic fragmentation. Crucially, alignment provides a shared strategic orientation, while behavioral integration enables its translation into coordinated action which together creates a synergistic effect on the team's capacity to manage ambidexterity. This draws on information processing theory (Galbraith, 1974): behavioral integration reflects the team's capacity to exchange and integrate diverse information, shaping whether alignment leads to effective coordination or mere conformity.

Recent studies confirm that behavioral integration has cross-level effects on team ambidextrous innovation (Xia et al., 2024). This work explains that behavioral integration moderates how CEO-TMT alignment translates into firm-level ambidexterity and end-results, here in the form of innovation.

### 3.4. Research aim and research hypotheses (suggested length: 7000 characters with spaces)

#### Research Aim

This dissertation investigates whether alignment between the CEO and the top management team (TMT) in their ambidextrous orientations - the shared capacity to balance exploitation and exploration - drives firm performance. The main research question is: *Does CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit predict firm performance and under what conditions does this relationship strengthen or weaken?*

CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit is the alignment between the CEO's behavioral ambidexterity and the collective behavioral ambidexterity of TMT. It is an original contribution and a central construct introduced in this dissertation. When CEO and TMT share compatible orientations toward balancing short-term efficiency with long-term adaptation, they coordinate more effectively, send consistent strategic signals across the organization, allocate resources coherently, and reduce executive-level friction. The result is stronger organizational ambidexterity and ultimately, better firm performance.

The four possible configurations of CEO and TMT ambidexterity levels in this construct can be organized into a 2x2 matrix in Table 1.

	TMT Low Ambidexterity	TMT High Ambidexterity
CEO High Ambidexterity	<b>H/L - CEO-Led Misfit:</b> CEO pulls forward, TMT resists; strategic execution gap; below-average financial performance	<b>H/H - Ideal Fit (Both High):</b> Full cognitive alignment; maximum strategic ambidexterity; peak financial performance
CEO Low Ambidexterity	<b>L/L - Aligned Underperformance (Both Low):</b> Internally consistent but cognitively limited; moderate-to-poor financial performance	<b>L/H - TMT-Led Misfit:</b> TMT pushes forward, CEO constrains; strategic bottleneck; below-average financial performance

Table 1: CEO-TMT Ambidexterity Fit Configuration Matrix

The matrix in Table 1 identifies four theoretically distinct states: ideal fit (both high), CEO-led misfit (CEO high, TMT low), TMT-led misfit (CEO low, TMT high) and aligned underperformance (both low). The dissertation focuses conceptually on the distinction between the two congruence configurations: high-high ambidextrous fit (H-H AF) and low-low ambidextrous fit (L-L AF).

Recent studies demonstrate that high CEO power concentration limits the benefits of TMT diversity (Wesemann et al., 2024). This shows additionally the negative effects of CEO-TMT misalignment, especially in the CEO-led misfit configuration (upper left in table 1).

Georgakakis, Greve & Ruigrok (2017) demonstrated that the performance effects of TMT composition depend on the quality of the CEO-TMT interface - specifically CEO-TMT social similarity, CEO experience variety and shared experience - directly supporting the argument that it is not TMT characteristics alone, but their compatibility with the CEO, that drives organizational outcomes.

Based on Upper Echelons Theory, CEOs and TMTs exert decisive influence over strategic direction, resource allocation and environmental interpretation. Alignment at the top therefore cascades through the organization, shaping execution capacity and financial outcomes over time. Financial performance is the direct organizational outcome of executive alignment in strategy development and execution.

**Conceptual Model**

The conceptual model integrates Upper Echelons Theory and organizational ambidexterity research around a central path and two moderating conditions, operating across three levels of analysis: individual (CEO), team (TMT, behavioral integration) and organizational (firm performance).

**The central path: CEO-TMT ambidexterity fit -> firm performance.** The core proposition is that congruence (H-H AF) between CEO and TMT ambidexterity predicts firm performance. Grounded in Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 1994), the argument is that when CEO and TMT share compatible strategic orientations, coordination improves and strategic execution strengthens.

**First moderator: environmental dynamism.** The fit-performance relationship will most probably be stronger in more dynamic environments – here will the ability to balance exploitation and exploration become more critical for survival and growth. In stable environments, ambidexterity fit may matter less as competitive pressures are lower.

**Second moderator: behavioral integration.** Behavioral integration – as the degree of TMT collaborative behavior – opens information exchange and joint decision-making as an internal process moderator. It amplifies the performance benefits of alignment: when behavioral integration is high, a shared ambidextrous orientation (H-H AF) is fully activated through coordinated execution. Second, it buffers the performance costs of misalignment (L-L AF): intensive information exchange and joint decision-making can partially compensate for cognitive misalignment, though it cannot fully substitute for shared orientation.

The four combinations of congruence level and behavioral integration show distinct predicted performance outcomes:

	Low Behavioral Integration	High Behavioral Integration
High Congruence (H/H)	<i>Moderate Performance:</i> Shared cognitive orientation exists but lacks the interaction processes to fully leverage it; potential is unrealized	<b>Peak Performance:</b> Shared ambidextrous orientation is fully activated by high-quality interaction processes; maximum strategic coordination and financial outcomes
Low Congruence (L/L)	<b>Worst Performance:</b> Neither cognitive alignment nor interaction quality supports ambidextrous strategy; strategic limitations compounded by process deficits	<i>Partial Recovery:</i> High behavioral integration partially compensates for cognitive misalignment through intensive information exchange and joint decision-making, but cannot fully substitute for shared orientation

Table 2: CEO-TMT Ambidexterity Congruence × Behavioral Integration

The key prediction is that behavioral integration has its greatest positive effect when congruence is high (H-H AF) and its greatest compensating effect when congruence is low (L-L AF).

The full structure of the conceptual model including the four hypotheses and their cross-level relationships is shown in Figure 1 below.

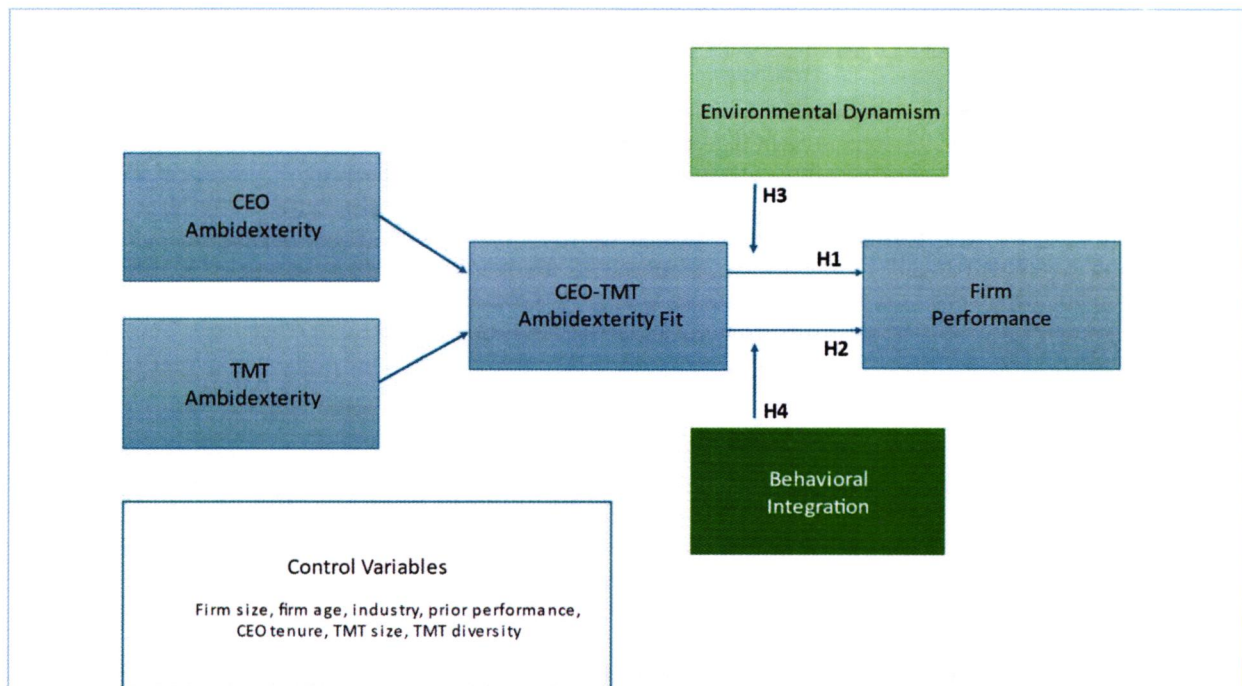


Figure 1: Conceptual Model: CEO-TMT Ambidexterity Fit and Firm Performance

The central path runs from CEO–TMT ambidexterity fit to firm performance (H1, H2), moderated by environmental dynamism (H3) and behavioral integration (H4), across individual, team and organizational levels.

The model includes control variables firm size, firm age, industry, prior performance, CEO tenure, TMT tenure, TMT size and TMT diversity, to isolate the effect of alignment from confounding organizational and executive characteristics.

### Hypotheses

**H1:** Firm performance is higher when CEO ambidexterity and TMT ambidexterity are congruent (aligned) than when they are incongruent (misaligned).

**H2:** Firm performance is higher when both CEO ambidexterity and TMT ambidexterity are high (high congruence) than when both are low (low congruence).

**H3:** Environmental dynamism strengthens the relationship between CEO–TMT ambidexterity fit and firm performance.

**H4:** Behavioral integration shapes the relationship between CEO–TMT ambidexterity fit and firm performance: high behavioral integration amplifies the positive effects of fit and mitigates the negative effects of misfit.

### 3.5. Materials, methodology and research plan (suggested length: 6500 characters with spaces)

#### Research Design and Sample

The research will explain how individual-level ambidexterity (CEO, TMT members) crosses levels to predict an organizational-level outcome (ROE, ROCE, EBITDA). Therefore, quantitative cross-sectional research design is most appropriate as data collected from CEOs and TMT members in firms requires a multilevel research approach. The constructs lay on following multiple levels: at the individual level (CEO ambidexterity), the team level (TMT ambidexterity and behavioral integration) and the organizational level (firm financial performance).

The population are medium-to-large firms in Croatia: medium-sized firms defined as 50–249 employees with annual revenues of €10–50 million and large firms as 250+ employees exceeding €50 million in revenue.

The sampling frame is constructed from the Croatian Chamber of Economy (HGK) registry and the Orbis database, targeting approximately 2,500 firms that meet four screening criteria: (1)  $\geq 50$  employees, (2)  $\geq 3$  years of operation, (3) an identifiable CEO and TMT of at least three members and (4) available financial data.

Random sampling ensures representativeness across industries and firm sizes. Power analysis via Monte Carlo simulation indicates that  $N=200$  firms provides .80 power to detect medium effect sizes ( $f^2=.15$ ) in moderated polynomial regression with 11 predictors at  $\alpha=.05$ . To achieve 200 complete cases, initial contact will be made with 2,500 firms (assuming 10% participation agreement), targeting a final sample of 150–250 firms.

### Data Collection Procedures

Participating firms are recruited through a five-step approach: (1) endorsement letters from the Croatian Chamber of Economy to enhance legitimacy, (2) personalized email invitations to CEOs explaining research purpose and confidentiality measures, (3) telephone follow-ups to non-respondents, (4) incentives in the form of customized benchmarking reports comparing each firm's ambidexterity and performance to anonymized industry peers and (5) flexible survey administration modes: online, paper or telephone-assisted. Surveys are administered online (Qualtrics) in Croatian and English, with separate questionnaires for CEOs and TMT members.

TMT members are defined as executives reporting directly to the CEO who lead key business areas such as finance, operations, sales, marketing, R&D and HR; prior studies suggest TMTs typically consist of 3 to 12 members.

Archival financial data for all participating firms is sourced from the Croatian Financial Agency (FINA) database, covering multiple years surrounding the survey period to establish temporal precedence between executive alignment and subsequent organizational outcomes.

### Measures

CEO Ambidexterity is measured using Mom, Van Den Bosch and Volberda's (2009) validated 12-item scale: six items for exploitative activities (e.g. "Activities of which a lot of experience has been accumulated") and six for explorative activities (e.g. "Activities requiring you to learn new skills or knowledge"). Respondents rate based on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = continuously). CEO ambidexterity is the product of exploitation and exploration scores.

TMT Ambidexterity uses the same 12-item scale applied to all TMT members individually. Individual scores are the exploitation-exploration product.

Behavioral Integration is measured using Simsek et al.'s (2005) 9-item scale across three dimensions: collaborative behavior, information exchange and joint decision-making (e.g. "The top management team as a whole participates in all major decisions"). Rated on a 7-point agreement scale and averaged across all TMT members.

Firm Performance is captured through three objective financial metrics from audited statements:

Metric	Formula	What it captures
EBITDA margin	$\text{EBITDA} \div \text{total revenue}$	Operational efficiency
ROCE	$\text{Operating income} \div \text{capital employed}$	Asset utilization
ROE	$\text{Net income} \div \text{shareholders' equity}$	Shareholder value creation

Performance will have a time lag to establish temporal precedence between executive alignment and financial outcomes.

Environmental Dynamism is measured with a 5-item scale adapted from Jansen, Van Den Bosch and Volberda (2006), assessing rate and unpredictability of change in customer preferences, competitor actions and technology. Scores are averaged across all respondents within each firm.

Control variables include firm size (log of employees), firm age, industry dummies, prior performance (EBITDA margin at t-1), CEO tenure, TMT average tenure, TMT size and TMT functional diversity (Blau's index). Analyses are conducted in R using the RSA package (Schönbrodt & Humberg, 2023).

### 3.6. Expected scientific contribution of the proposed research (suggested length: 500 characters with spaces)

#### Theoretical Contribution

- Introduces CEO–TMT ambidexterity fit as an original relational Upper Echelons construct, shifting focus from isolated executive attributes to alignment as a driver of organizational adaptability and performance.
- Extends Upper Echelons Theory by focusing on CEO–TMT interdependence and explaining the process through which alignment results into outcomes.
- Bridges individual and organizational levels in ambidexterity research, clarifying how executive individual ambidexterity aggregates to firm-level outcomes.

#### Practical Contribution

- Offers guidance for firm's on using behavioral integration to improve CEO-TMT alignment and strategic coordination.

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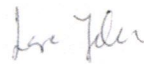
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3.8. Total cost estimate of the proposed research  
(in EUR)

2,950 EUR

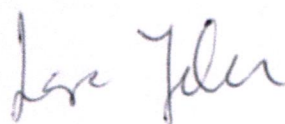
3.9. Proposed research funding sources

Type of funding	Project name	Project leader	Signature
National funding	-	-	
International funding	„ProSPERO- Piloting the Portfolio of the Center for Business Excellence" (uniri-iz-25-269), funded by European Union – NextGenerationEU via the Croatian National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026, in conjunction with the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Economics and Business Programme Financing.	Prof.dr.sc. Lara Jelenc	
Other project types	-	-	
Self-funding	-		

3.10. Ethics committee meeting at which the research proposal was approved  
(if applicable)

#### CONSENT OF THE PROPOSED SUPERVISOR WITH TOPIC APPROVAL REQUEST

I hereby declare that I agree with the proposed PhD thesis topic.



Signature  
(Prof.dr.sc. Lara Jelenc)