

## Maturing Business and IT Alignment Capability; the Practitioner's View

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### Abstract

*Aligning IT and business needs is still one of the most important concerns for senior management. The message of Business and IT Alignment (BIA) is logical and undisputed, but implementation is apparently difficult. Luftman and Kempaiah [11] conclude that business and IT alignment needs a tool that can provide an assessment of an organization's level of alignment and a roadmap on how to improve alignment. A broadly used framework for assessing business and IT alignment maturity is Luftman's Strategic Alignment Maturity (SAM) model [10].*

*The paper presents a survey study into the perceived contribution of the different variables and sub-variables of the SAM model. We found that the perceived contribution of the variables are not equally spread and suggest a modification of the model.*

### 1. Introduction

The necessity and desirability of aligning business needs and information technology (IT) capabilities has been examined in numerous articles [15, 16, 2, 17, 8] and its importance is well recognized [4]. The annual survey of concerns for senior management executives by the Society for Information Management ([www.simnet.org](http://www.simnet.org)), however, continues to show 'IT and Business alignment' as a top concern for (business and) IT managers [20]. After assessing the business and IT alignment maturity in 197 organizations, Luftman and Kempaiah conclude that alignment is elusive for three main reasons [11]. Firstly because many organizations view business and IT alignment as a responsibility of IT executives, rather than as a joint concern for both business and IT. Secondly because the solution to the alignment issue is multidimensional. Industry advocated solutions like IT architecture, Governance, ITIL, Cobit and Portfolio management

provide support on certain aspects of alignment, but are not 'silver bullets'. Thirdly, business and IT alignment is missing "a tool that can provide both a descriptive assessment and a prescriptive roadmap on how to improve" [11].

The alignment maturity study reported by Luftman and Kempaiah [11], is based on the Strategic Alignment Maturity (SAM) assessment framework developed in Luftman's earlier work [10]. This framework has been applied in several studies on business and IT alignment (among others [3], [5], [6], [18] and [19]).

The SAM model consists of 6 variables and 38 sub-variables. In the assessment, all variables and sub-variables are given equal weight, indicating equal importance. But the question arises whether this implicit assumption is correct? Do all variables contribute equally to alignment? Or do some elements from the SAM model contribute more than others? And, if so, how much do they contribute? The relevance of these questions are evident. Adding relative weights to the variables would refine Luftman's model and contribute to a better understanding of how alignment can be influenced and achieved.

A first way to investigate the relative weights of the variables is to explore the perceived contribution to alignment that these variables make. This paper reports a study into the perceived contribution to alignment that IT and business professionals experience or expect from the different variables and sub-variables in their work on growing alignment in their respective organizations. The aim of the study is to provide new insights on the application of SAM and thereby enhancing an organization's ability to improve alignment.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section will provide a brief introduction into the concepts of business and IT alignment and Luftman's SAM model.

Following this, we will explain the research design and provide insight into the respondents of the study. The second part of the paper will present the results of the study and some recommendations on the further development of the SAM model.

## 2. Business and IT alignment

Business and IT Alignment (BIA) can be defined as “Business & IT Alignment is the degree to which the IT applications, infrastructure and organization, the business strategy and processes enables and shapes, as well as the process to realize this.” [18]. An influential conceptualization of BIA is that of Henderson and Venkatraman [7]. Their widespread framework of alignment, known as the Strategic Alignment Model, describes BIA along two dimensions. The dimension of strategic fit differentiates between external focus, directed towards the business environment, and internal focus, directed towards administrative structures. The other dimension of functional integration separates business and IT. Altogether, the model defines four domains that need to be harmonized in order to achieve alignment. Each of these domains has its constituent components: scope, competencies, governance, infrastructure, processes and skills.

Despite of the apparent importance of aligning IT and business, the majority of publications is rather vague in terms of how to practice alignment [13]. Luftman’s SAM for measuring and developing alignment [10] is an exception to this, because it provides both a descriptive assessment tool as a prescriptive insight in how to achieve a higher level of alignment.

## 3. Alignment maturity assessment

Based on the components of the strategic alignment model and his research on the enablers and inhibitors of BIA [9], Luftman developed SAM as a tool to assess the business and IT alignment maturity or capability of an organization. In SAM, six criteria are used to determine the maturity of the alignment of IT and business [10]. These criteria are described in Table 1. The criteria are further detailed in 38 sub-criteria. In the concept of BIA maturity, the level of maturity indicates an organization’s capability to align IT and business needs. As in many maturity models, SAM involves five levels of maturity:

1. Initial / Ad Hoc Process
2. Committed Process
3. Established Focused Process
4. Improved / Managed Process
5. Optimized Process

In this study we explored the perceived contribution of the SAM variables and sub-variables in the eyes of business and IT professionals. In the original description of the SAM model, Luftman states that “The relative importance of each of the attributes within the criteria may differ among organizations.” [10]. Later publications, however, fail to recognize specific relative weights of variables and sub-variables and assign, implicitly, equal weights.

## 4. Research design

Considering that there is an interest in the relative weight that can be assigned to the variables and sub-variables of alignment, it stands to reason that quantitative research is an appropriate way to do a first exploration of these weights. Issues of a more qualitative nature, such as *why* certain variables make

**Table 1. BIA maturity variables.**

<i>BIA maturity variable</i>	<i>Description</i>
Communication	How well does the technical and business staff understand each other? Do they connect easily and frequently? Does the company communicate effectively with consultants, vendors and partners? Does it disseminate organizational learning internally?
Value measurement	How well does the company measure its own performance and the value of its projects? After projects are completed, do they evaluate what went right and what went wrong? Do they improve the internal processes so that the next project will be better?
Governance	Do the projects that are undertaken flow from an understanding of the business strategy? Do they support that strategy? Does the organization have transparency and accountability for outcomes of IT projects.
Partnership	To what extent have business and IT departments forged true partnerships based on mutual trust and sharing risks and rewards?
Scope & Architecture	To what extent has technology evolved to become more than just business support? How has it helped the business to grow, compete and profit?
Skills	Does the staff have the skills needed to be effective? How well does the technical staff understand business drivers and speak the language of the business? How well does the business staff understand relevant technology concepts?

more, less or the same contribution, can be the topic of future research. Therefore the study was designed as a computerized self-administered questionnaire [1]. The questionnaire consisted of 9 general descriptive question (5 about the respondent's background, 4 about the respondents work environment) and 7 questions about the relative contribution to alignment that the respondents assign to the variables and sub-variables of Luftman's SAM framework. Appendix A shows the design of the questionnaire. The questions about the contribution to alignment were designed as a 'constant sum' question in which the respondents had to distribute a total of 100 points to the different variables, relative to the contribution they assigned to the respective variables. The question was asked once for the relative contribution of the 6 main variables of SAM and 6 times for the relative contribution of the sub-variables of each main variable.

The study was conducted in November 2009 to January 2010. The questionnaire was brought to the attention of randomly selected IT and business professionals of several professional network groups on the LinkedIn social network.

#### 4. Respondents

The questionnaire was completed by 110 European professionals. Table 2 shows the descriptive characteristics of the respondents.

**Table 2. Respondents descriptives.**

Questions describing the respondent	Values	Response [%]
1 Gender	[Male]	81.8
	[Female]	18.2
2 Age group	[<25]	8.2
	[25-34]	16.4
	[35-44]	34.5
	[45-54]	28.2
	[55-64]	8.2
	[>64] years	0
3 Work experience	[<2]	7.6
	[3-5]	10.5
	[6-10]	5.7
	[11-15]	19.0
	[16-20]	22.9
	[>20] years	34.3
4 Highest education	[Vocational training]	2.7
	[Higher vocational training]	5.5
	[Undergraduate degree]	55.5
	[Master's degree]	27.3
	[PhD]	4.5
	[Other]	4.5

5 Position	Business domain	
	[- General Management]	3.5
	[- Commercial Management]	2.1
	[- Financial Management]	4.9
	[- Project Management non-IT]	5.7
	[- Other non-IT]	5.5
	IT/IS domain	
	[- Information Manager]	7.1
	[- Functional Administrator]	3.5
	[- IT/IS Manager]	11.3
	[- System Administrator]	7.1
	[- Service Level Manager]	4.3
	[- IT Service Desk]	1.4
	[- IT Project Manager]	16.9
	[- Software Developer]	2.8
	[- Account Manager IT]	2.1
[- Other IT/IS]	21.2	

Based on the age distribution and average work experience (>15 years), the group of respondent can be classified as experienced and quite senior. Their professional opinion should therefore be of some value. Regarding the positions of the respondents, it is not surprising that the positions in the IT field are strongly represented (78.3%). However, still 21.7% of respondents worked in other business functions or general management.

Table 3 shows the descriptive characteristics of the work environment of the respondents.

**Table 3. Work environment descriptives.**

Questions describing the work environment	Values	Response [%]
6 # of employees in the organization	[<10]	16.3
	[11-50]	6.3
	[51-250]	20.1
	[251-500]	7.3
	[>500]	50.0
7 Industry sector	[Agriculture]	0.9
	[Industry]	10.0
	[Energy]	10.9
	[Building & Construction]	2.7
	[Wholesale & Retail]	3.6
	[Logistic Services]	15.5
	[Financial Services]	32.7
	[Inf & Comm Services]	42.8
	[Facility Services]	4.5
	[HR Services]	3.6
	[Consulting]	19.1
8 International activities?	[Public Administration]	27.3
	[Education]	17.3
	[Healthcare]	14.5
	[Other]	12.7
	[yes]	65.7
	[no]	34.3

9	External Service Provider?	[yes] [no]	60.6 39.4
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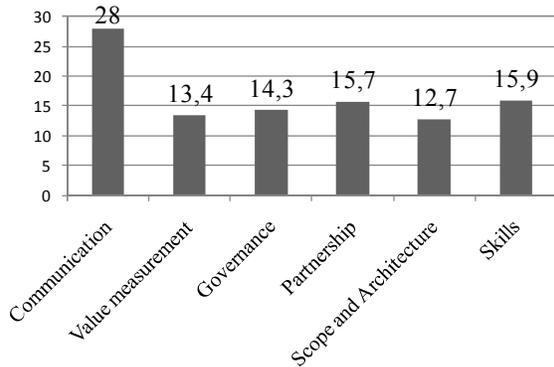
From table 3 it becomes clear that the study represented both small and medium sized organizations and large organizations in more or less equal proportion. The industries of the respondents showed a broad representation, with the professional services industries (information and communication, consulting and financial services) strongly represented.

## 5. Results

### Overall

Figure 1 shows the overall perceived weight of the variables. Clearly ‘Communication’ is perceived as having the highest contribution to alignment. In fact, almost double as the contribution experienced from the other variables.

**Figure 1. Perceived contributions of the main SAM variables.**



This result suggests that organizations should pay even more attention to building efficient and effective communication structures between business and IT, than suggested by the Luftman model.

### Communications

Figure 2 shows the perceived contribution of the sub-variables of the variable *Communication*.

**Figure 2. Perceived contributions of the Communication sub-variables.**

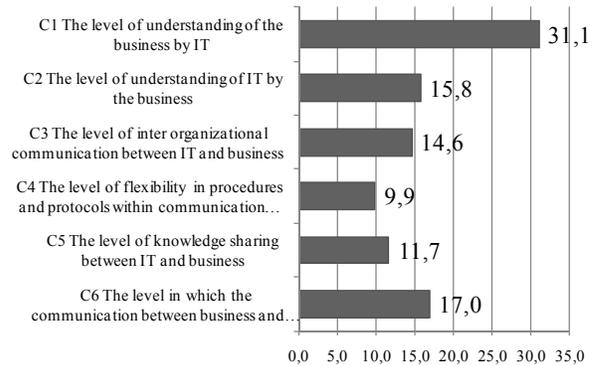
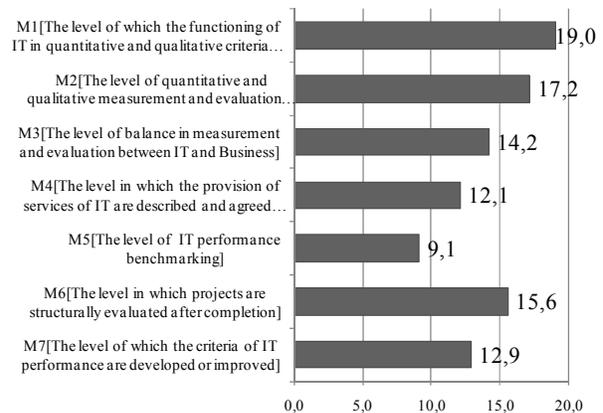


Figure 2 shows that all sub-variables of *Communication* are considered to have a substantial contribution the level alignment. However, the sub-variable understanding of business by IT is considered to have a considerably larger contribution than the other sub-variables.

### Value measurement

Figure 3 shows the perceived contribution of the sub-variables of *Value measurement*. The perceived contributions of the different sub-variables do not differ a lot. However, the low score of IT performance benchmarking is remarkable, considering the popularity of benchmarking in recent years.

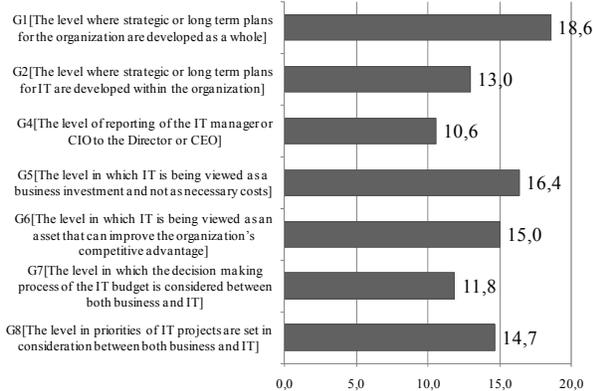
**Figure 3. Perceived contributions of the Value measurement sub-variables.**



### Governance

Figure 4 shows the perceived contribution of the sub-variables of the variable *Governance*.

**Figure 4. Perceived contributions of the Governance sub-variables.**

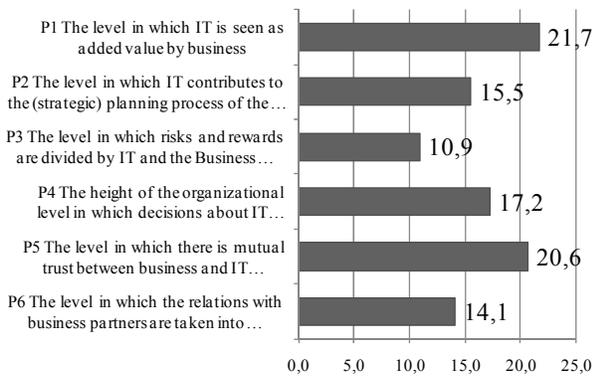


Again, the contribution of the different sub-variables is not considered to be substantially different. The lowest scoring sub-variable is the line of reporting of the IT manager. Again, this should be surprising, since Luftman emphasizes that the biggest improvement in alignment has been the introduction of the Chief Information Officer [12] and that his reporting line is an important aspect of alignment maturity [10].

*Partnership*

The perceived contribution of the sub-variables of the variable *Partnership* are presented in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Perceived contributions of the Partnership sub-variables.**

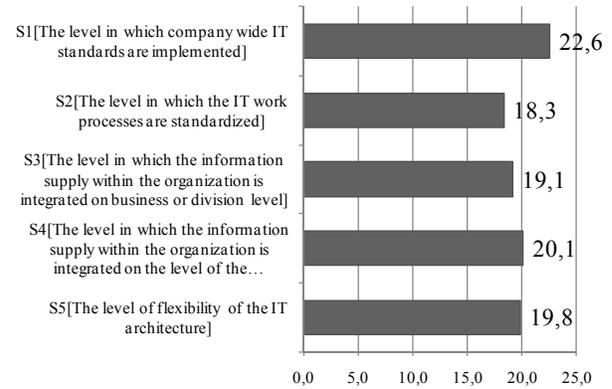


Not surprisingly, the perception of IT as an added value to the business and the mutual trust between business and IT are considered as contributing most to alignment. The sharing of risks and rewards is considered as contributing considerably less.

*Scope and Architecture*

Figure 6 shows the perceived contribution of the sub-variables of the variable *Scope and Architecture*. It shows that all sub-variables are considered to have a more or less equal contribution to alignment.

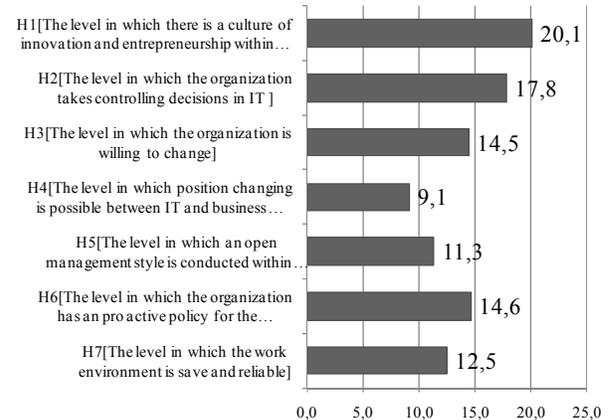
**Figure 6. Perceived contributions of the Scope and Architecture sub-variables.**



*Skills*

Figure 7 shows the perceived contribution of the sub-variables of the variable *Skills*. The lowest contribution to alignment is expected from the career crossover possibilities between business and IT. This is confirmed by the study of Poels [14] on effective and non-effective alignment interventions. The highest contribution to alignment is considered to come from a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in the organization, that allows for personal initiative and experimentation.

**Figure 7. Perceived contributions of the Skills sub-variables.**



**6. Contribution coefficients**

Multiplying the perceived contribution of the main variables with the contributions assigned to the sub-variables results in the ‘contribution coefficients’ of the different sub-variables. These contribution coefficients indicating the percentage of contribution of the individual sub-variables to the overall alignment maturity of the organization. Table 4 shows the contribution coefficients, resulting from our study, compared to the ‘original’ coefficients in SAM. The difference between the two is shown as an absolute number and as a percentage of the original contribution coefficients.

**Table 4. Contribution coefficients.**

Variable	Contribution		Difference SAM-Weighted	
	Original in SAM	Weighted	Absolute	%
<i>Communication</i>				
C1[The level of understanding of the business by IT ]	0.0278	0.0870	+0.059	213
C2[The level of understanding of IT by the business]	0.0278	0.0441	+0.016	59
C3[The level of inter organizational communication between IT and business]	0.0278	0.0409	+0.013	47
C4[The level of flexibility in procedures and protocols within communication between Business and IT]	0.0278	0.0278	0	0
C5[The level of knowledge sharing between IT and business]	0.0278	0.0327	+0.004	18
C6[The level in which the communication between business and IT is not only limited to IT developments, but also concerns the developments within the business and her environment]	0.0278	0.0475	+0.019	71
<i>Value Measurement</i>				
M1[The level of which the functioning of IT in quantitative and qualitative criteria are measured and evaluated]	0.0238	0.0255	-0.002	7
M2[The level of quantitative and qualitative measurement and evaluation within the organization]	0.0238	0.0230	-0.001	-3
M3[The level of balance in measurement and evaluation between IT and Business]	0.0238	0.0190	-0.005	-20

M4[The level in which the provision of services of IT are described and agreed upon]	0.0238	0.0162	-0.008	-32
M5[The level of IT performance benchmarking]	0.0238	0.0122	-0.012	-49
M6[The level in which projects are structurally evaluated after completion]	0.0238	0.0209	0.003	-12
M7[The level of which the criteria of IT performance are developed or improved]	0.0238	0.0173	-0.006	-27
<i>Governance</i>				
G1[The level where strategic or long term plans for the organization are developed as a whole]	0.0238	0.0265	-0.003	11
G2[The level where strategic or long term plans for IT are developed within the organization]	0.0238	0.0186	-0.005	-22
G4[The level of reporting of the IT manager or CIO to the Director or CEO]	0.0238	0.0151	-0.009	-37
G5[The level in which IT is being viewed as a business investment and not as necessary costs]	0.0238	0.0234	-0.000	-2
G6[The level in which IT is being viewed as an asset that can improve the organization’s competitive advantage]	0.0238	0.0215	-0.002	-10
G7[The level in which the decision making process of the IT budget is considered between both business and IT]	0.0238	0.0169	-0.007	-29
G8[The level in priorities of IT projects are set in consideration between both business and IT]	0.0238	0.0210	-0.003	-12
<i>Partnership</i>				
P1[The level in which IT is seen as added value by business]	0.0278	0.0340	-0.006	22
P2[The level in which IT contributes to the (strategic) planning process of the business]	0.0278	0.0244	-0.003	-12
P3[The level in which risks and rewards are divided by IT and the Business when achieving goals]	0.0278	0.0171	-0.011	-38
P4[The height of the organizational level in which decisions about IT budgets and projects are made]	0.0278	0.0270	-0.001	-3

P5[The level in which there is mutual trust between business and IT departments within the organisation ]	0.0278	0.0324	-0.005	17
P6[The level in which the relations with business partners are taken into account in IT planning]	0.0278	0.0221	-0.006	-20
<i>Scope and Architecture</i>				
S1[The level in which company wide IT standards are implemented]	0.0333	0.0286	-0.005	-14
S2[The level in which the IT work processes are standardized]	0.0333	0.0233	-0.010	-30
S3[The level in which the information supply within the organization is integrated on business or division level]	0.0333	0.0243	-0.009	-27
S4[The level in which the information supply within the organization is integrated on the level of the organization as a whole]	0.0333	0.0256	-0.008	-23
S5[The level of flexibility of the IT architecture]	0.0333	0.0252	-0.008	-24
<i>Skills</i>				
H1[The level in which there is a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship within the organization]	0.0238	0.0320	-0.008	34
H2[The level in which the organization takes controlling decisions in IT ]	0.0238	0.0284	-0.005	19
H3[The level in which the organization is willing to change]	0.0238	0.0230	-0.001	-3
H4[The level in which position changing is possible between IT and business functions]	0.0238	0.0145	-0.009	-39
H5[The level in which an open management style is conducted within the organization]	0.0238	0.0180	-0.006	-25
H6[The level in which the organization has an pro active policy for the development of her employees]	0.0238	0.0233	-0.001	-2
H7[The level in which the work environment is save and reliable]	0.0238	0.0199	-0.004	-16

From the overview in table 4 it becomes clear that the professionals in our study perceive the contribution of the different variables in SAM quite different from the original, un-weighted, model. Some sub-variables, such as “C1: The level of understanding of the business by IT”, gain weight up to +213%, while some others, such as “M5: The level of IT

performance benchmarking”, are considered less influential, up to -49%.

Based on the contribution coefficients it can also be determined that the five sub-variables that contribute the most to alignment account for 25% of the organization’s overall alignment maturity. These five sub-variables are:

- C1 [The level of understanding of the business by IT]
- C6 [The level in which the communication between business and IT is not only limited to IT developments, but also concerns the developments within the business and her environment]
- C2 [The level of understanding of IT by the business]
- C3 [The level of inter organizational communication between IT and business]
- P1 [The level in which IT is seen as added value by business]

**7. Conclusions and limitations**

Luftman’s Strategic Alignment Maturity model provides practitioners and academics with a practical tool to assess and develop an organization’s capability to align IT to business requirements and opportunities. In our study we explored the professional opinion of IT and business professionals regarding the contribution of the different variables and sub-variables of the SAM model to alignment. The study reveals that some variables contribute more to alignment than others. We found, for instance, that the professionals in our study assign the highest contribution to the variable *Communication*, followed (at some distance) by the variables *Partnership* and *Skills*.

One important implication of these findings is that the somewhat implicitly assigned and generally equal contribution coefficients of the different variables and sub-variables in SAM may be different from the comparative contributions that these variables make in practice. Therefore it is justified to suggest a refinement of SAM towards a model in which the relative contributions of each variable and sub-variable are accounted for.

A limitation of our study is the sample size. For a validation of the contribution coefficients, further research and a larger sample size could be required.

Another limitation is the geographical scope of our study. As indicated by Silvius et al. [19], SAM scores are influenced by national cultures. For this reason it should be expected that the contribution coefficients are influenced by national cultures as well. A multi-national study would be required to test this hypothesis.

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**Appendix A. Questionnaire design.**

<i>Questions describing the respondent</i>		<i>Type of question</i>	<i>Values</i>
1	Gender	Single select	[Male] [Female]
2	Age group	Single select	[<25] [25-34] [35-44] [45-54] [55-64] [>64] years
3	Work experience	Single select	[<2] [3-5] [6-10] [11-15] [16-20] [>20] years
4	Highest education	Single select	[Vocational training] [Higher vocational training] [Undergraduate degree] [Master's degree] [PhD] [Other]
5	Position	Single select	Business domain [ - General Management] [ - Commercial Management] [ - Financial Management] [ - Project Management non-IT] [ - Other non-IT] IT/IS domain [ - Information Manager] [ - Functional Administrator] [ - IT/IS Manager] [ - System Administrator] [ - Service Level Manager] [ - IT Service Desk] [ - IT Project Manager] [ - Software Developer] [ - Account Manager IT] [ - Other IT/IS]
<i>Questions describing the work environment</i>		<i>Type of question</i>	<i>Values</i>
6	# of employees in the organization	Single select	[<10] [11-50] [51-250] [251-500] [>500]

7	Industry sector	Multiple select	[Agriculture] [Industry] [Energy] [Building & Construction] [Wholesale & Retail] [Logistic Services] [Financial Services] [Information & Communication Services] [Facility Services] [HR Services] [Consulting] [Public Administration] [Education] [Healthcare] [Other]
8	International activities?	Single select	[yes] [no]
9	External Service Provider?	Single select	[yes] [no]
<i>Questions describing the relative weight of the different alignment variables and sub-variables</i>		<i>Type of question</i>	<i>Variables</i>
10	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity main variables	Constant sum	[Communication] [Value measurement] [Governance] [Partnership] [Scope and Architecture] [Skills]
11	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity sub-variables within Communications	Constant sum	C1[The level of understanding of the business by IT ] C2[The level of understanding of IT by the business] C3[The level of inter organizational communication between IT and business] C4[The level of flexibility in procedures and protocols within communication between Business and IT] C5[The level of knowledge sharing between IT and business] C6[The level in which the communication between business and IT is not only limited to IT developments, but also concerns the developments within the business and her environment]

12	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity sub-variables within Value measurement	Constant sum	<p>M1[The level of which the functioning of IT in quantitative and qualitative criteria are measured and evaluated]</p> <p>M2[The level of quantitative and qualitative measurement and evaluation within the organization]</p> <p>M3[The level of balance in measurement and evaluation between IT and Business]</p> <p>M4[The level in which the provision of services of IT are described and agreed upon]</p> <p>M5[The level of IT performance benchmarking]</p> <p>M6[The level in which projects are structurally evaluated after completion]</p> <p>M7[The level of which the criteria of IT performance are developed or improved]</p>				<p>P4[The height of the organizational level in which decisions about IT budgets and projects are made]</p> <p>P5[The level in which there is mutual trust between business and IT departments within the organization ]</p> <p>P6[The level in which the relations with business partners are taken into account in IT planning]</p>
13	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity sub-variables within Governance	Constant sum	<p>G1[The level where strategic or long term plans for the organization are developed as a whole]</p> <p>G2[The level where strategic or long term plans for IT are developed within the organization]</p> <p>G4[The level of reporting of the IT manager or CIO to the Director or CEO]</p> <p>G5[The level in which IT is being viewed as a business investment and not as necessary costs]</p> <p>G6[The level in which IT is being viewed as an asset that can improve the organization's competitive advantage]</p> <p>G7[The level in which the decision making process of the IT budget is considered between both business and IT]</p> <p>G8[The level in priorities of IT projects are set in consideration between both business and IT]</p>	15	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity sub-variables within Scope and Architecture	Constant sum	<p>S1[The level in which companywide IT standards are implemented]</p> <p>S2[The level in which the IT work processes are standardized]</p> <p>S3[The level in which the information supply within the organization is integrated on business or division level]</p> <p>S4[The level in which the information supply within the organization is integrated on the level of the organization as a whole]</p> <p>S5[The level of flexibility of the IT architecture]</p>
14	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity sub-variables within Partnership	Constant sum	<p>P1[The level in which IT is seen as added value by business]</p> <p>P2[The level in which IT contributes to the (strategic) planning process of the business]</p> <p>P3[The level in which risks and rewards are divided by IT and the Business when achieving goals]</p>	16	Assign relative weights to the alignment maturity sub-variables within Skills	Constant sum	<p>H1[The level in which there is a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship within the organization]</p> <p>H2[The level in which the organization takes controlling decisions in IT ]</p> <p>H3[The level in which the organization is willing to change]</p> <p>H4[The level in which position changing is possible between IT and business functions]</p> <p>H5[The level in which an open management style is conducted within the organization]</p> <p>H6[The level in which the organization has an pro active policy for the development of her employees]</p> <p>H7[The level in which the work environment is safe and reliable]</p>