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THE ROLE OF BEHAVIORAL NUDGES IN ENHANCING CEO DECISION-MAKING FOR INNOVATION

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of CEO influence on innovation and the potential of behavioural nudging techniques. It aims to develop a theoretical framework that applies principles from Nudge Theory and Upper Echelons Theory to enhance decision-making processes at the executive level, thereby fostering organisational innovation. The proposed framework identifies key decision points in the innovation process, where nudges such as default options, social norms, and framing effects can be effectively deployed to mitigate cognitive biases and promote innovation-focused choices. The study also addresses potential challenges, including ethical considerations and context-specific limitations,

providing a comprehensive perspective on the application of nudges at the C-suite level. The academic contribution lies in bridging behavioural economics and innovation management, offering an evidence-based approach to improving strategic decisions. From an economic perspective, the framework elucidates how optimized decision-making processes can enhance competitiveness and drive innovation outcomes. Finally, the paper discusses practical implications for organisations and delineates directions for future empirical research, including longitudinal studies and real-world applications, to validate the proposed framework.

Keywords:

Nudges, CEO, Decision-Making, Innovation, Strategic Management

1. Introduction

Innovation capacity among German firms has stagnated in recent years (ZEW, 2024). Key contributing factors include a shortage of skilled labour, high regulatory burdens, and subdued economic expectations (Hottenrott et al., 2024). Yet innovation is widely regarded as a central driver of competitiveness and growth (Denton, 1999; Thomas & Ely, 1996). A decline in innovation dynamics therefore poses a threat to the long-term viability of organisations. At the core of strategic innovation decisions stands the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Research has shown that CEOs significantly shape the direction of innovation (Back & Bausch, 2019). However, such decisions are often made under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, and complexity. In such contexts, decision-makers have been observed to make errors in judgement, either due to the limitations of rational thought (Simon, 1955), or because losses are given greater psychological weight than equivalent gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Behavioural economic approaches, such as nudging, offer promising interventions. By deliberately designing decision architectures, it is possible to foster better-quality decisions without restricting freedom of choice (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Although nudges are already well established in public policy and consumer behaviour, their application in corporate leadership remains underexplored. Initial concepts, such as Digital Nudge Design, illustrate how behavioural insights can be translated into executive decision-making contexts (Mirsch et al., 2018; Rieder et al., 2020). This paper investigates how nudges can be purposefully employed to enhance innovation-related decisions at the CEO level. Drawing on relevant literature, it develops a conceptual framework that links different types of nudges with executive decision-making logics. The aim is to provide new impetus for behaviourally informed innovation governance.

This study follows a conceptual research approach in line with Jaakkola (2020) and aims to develop a theoretical model. The objective is to explain the influence of behavioural nudges on strategic innovation decisions at the top management level. In addition, elements of theory adaptation and synthesis are employed to transfer behavioural economic and strategic approaches into a context that has so far received limited scholarly attention. Comparable methodological approaches can be found in Sailer (2017), Gehlert (2020), and Witzel (2020), all of whom combine theory development with interdisciplinary integration or context-specific application. Oppong and Larney (2023) as well as Loock and Hinnen (2015) also demonstrate how behavioural economic models can be successfully applied to new domains. The study proceeds in three steps:

(1) A systematic literature review using established academic databases serves to assess the state of research on nudging, CEO decision-making, and innovation (2) Based on this, core propositions are formulated, and a typology is developed that links different decision-making styles with appropriate nudging strategies. (3) Finally, a theoretical model is proposed that outlines central mechanisms of action and identifies specific intervention points for influencing CEO decision-making behaviour. The structure of this methodological approach is illustrated in the following figure.

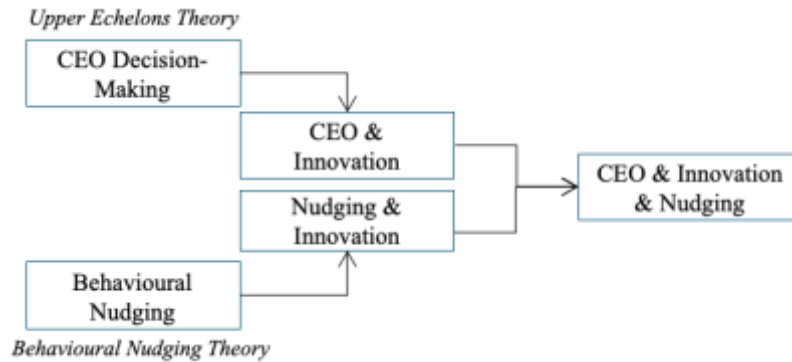


Figure 1 *Methodological model of the study*

2. Theoretical Background

Behaviour under conditions of uncertainty is shaped by cognitive biases, making targeted interventions in decision-making processes necessary. Decision-making can be understood as the selection between alternatives (Rowe et al., 1984), based on the processing of information (Krumboltz et al., 1982; Weiss, 1983). Rowe and Mason (1987) divide the decision process into five phases: stimulus, response, reflection, implementation, and evaluation. In addition, Driver et al. (1993) differentiate between five styles of decision-making: decisive, flexible, integrative, hierarchical, and systematic. These ultimately lead to a management style that consistently shapes organisational decisions (Albaum & Herche, 1999).

In addition to situational factors, structural characteristics of decision-makers also influence this process. The Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) posits that organisational outcomes, including innovation, are significantly influenced by the demographic and psychological characteristics of top executives. Studies by Hambrick et al. (1989) and Crossland & Hambrick (2011) confirm this relationship, particularly about CEOs. The personality, values, and experiences of these actors have measurable effects on their decision-making and organisational performance. CEOs are increasingly viewed as a distinct leadership category, differing from other managerial roles (Kaplan, 2017).

Behavioural economic approaches intervene precisely at this intersection of individual and decision. The concept of nudges, as initially theorized by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), pertains to the implementation of deliberate, non-coercive modifications to the decision architecture, with the objective of influencing behaviour in a predictable manner, without imposing restrictions on choice. Nudges are particularly effective under conditions of bounded rationality, such as uncertainty, time pressure, or information asymmetry (Simon, 1955). They leverage psychological mechanisms such as status quo bias, loss aversion, or framing effects (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and build upon cognitive decision heuristics. Typical nudge elements include default options, social norm cues, and feedback systems (Johnson et al., 2012). These are further supported by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which explains behavioural intention through the interplay of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Together, these theoretical frameworks enable the design of decision environments that provide effective impulses in complex, dynamic, and risk-laden contexts. This may assist top management, and particularly CEOs, in enhancing the quality of their decisions despite time and complexity constraints, and in cultivating innovation-related decisions.

CEOs are widely regarded as central strategic decision-makers whose actions are shaped by both individual characteristics and external contextual factors (Arendt et al., 2005; Dess & Beard, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989). Numerous studies highlight the influence of personality traits, age, gender, income, and cognitive biases on decision-making behaviour and organisational performance (Nadkarni & Herrmann, 2010, 2014; Colbert et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016; Akstinaite, 2023). The Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) forms the theoretical foundation for much of

this research, providing empirical evidence on the relationship between CEO profiles and innovation (Mai et al., 2022; Aabo et al., 2024; Kiss et al., 2022; Gal et al., 2019). Despite this, the specific role of the CEO in innovation processes remains underexplored. Moreover, only a limited number of studies examine the relationship between CEO decision-making and broader organisational outcomes (e.g. Sperber et al., 2017; Miller & Toulouse, 1985; Sadler-Smith, 2004).

Concurrently, the notion of decision architecture has garnered mounting attention within the domain of management research. Behavioural nudges, defined as interventions that preserve full freedom of choice, are being increasingly applied in organisational contexts (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Ebert et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2024). These nudges are designed to improve efficiency, promote health, or encourage sustainable behaviour. Initial studies report positive effects on organisational learning and openness to change (Stryja & Satzger, 2019; Galpin, 2022; Klieber et al., 2020), particularly under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity.

However, empirical research on nudging at the C-level remains scarce. The extant literature on this subject has focused primarily on employees and middle management (Lorbach, 2021; Krisam, 2022), although CEOs, who often face high levels of decision uncertainty, may particularly benefit from cognitive relief through nudges (Rawitzer, 2024). Digital Nudge Design offers promising new approaches to shaping strategic decision-making contexts (Mirsch et al., 2018; Rieder et al., 2020).

Recent research has begun to explore the interconnections between decision-making behaviour, nudging, and innovation. Kruse et al. (2023) show that heuristic behaviour among CEOs is associated with accelerated innovation dynamics. Nudges that specifically alter informational structures may amplify this effect (Thaler & Sunstein, 2003). A field experiment by Manthei et al. (2023) demonstrates that regular performance feedback, combined with the use of key performance indicators, can enhance profitability, whereas performance-based pay alone has no significant effect. In addition, Tikotsky et al. (2020) report high levels of acceptance for nudging among small business owners, particularly for governance-to-business (G2B) interventions.

Despite the growing body of evidence, there is still no systematic, theory-based model that integrates nudging into decision architectures at the CEO level. The extent to which international findings can be transferred to countries with more collectivist governance structures, such as Germany,

remains unclear (Becht & Mayer, 2002; Barca, 2001; La Porta et al., 1999). This paper addresses this research gap by developing a conceptual model aimed at promoting innovation- related behaviour in top management through behavioural economic principles.

3. Conceptual Model Development

The development of effective decision architectures at the top management level requires a deep understanding of individual, organisational, and contextual factors. This tripartite structure follows established concepts in management and decision science, which explain complex decision- making situations through the interaction of internal and external influences (see Milliken, 1987; Simon, 1955). Based on a systematic review of the literature, five key propositions are identified that form the theoretical foundation of the behavioural economic decision-making model:

1. Strategic decisions made by CEOs are significantly shaped by individual characteristics such as personality, experience, and risk tolerance, as well as by situational factors.
2. Behaviourally informed nudges can improve the quality of such decisions by addressing cognitive biases without compromising the autonomy of decision-makers.
3. The individual attributes of CEOs have a measurable impact on an organisation's capacity to innovate.
4. Nudges can help to overcome common barriers in innovation processes by reducing information overload, reframing risk perceptions, and activating social comparison mechanisms.
5. Combining nudging with heuristic decision support can reduce uncertainty and increase the likelihood of implementing growth-oriented but risk-laden projects.

To differentiate the effects of nudges, the model integrates an empirically grounded CEO typology developed by Sarkar et al. (2017), which outlines three robust decision-making patterns. These types of individuals can be categorised as follows: forward-looking, plan-oriented pragmatists; myopic, process-oriented decision-makers; and mindfully adaptive responders. The differences between these types of individuals are evident in their approaches to planning, risk perception, and openness to new steering mechanisms. Within the model, these CEO types serve as moderating variables, as their cognitive decision-making styles systematically influence both the direction and strength of nudge effects.

Table 1 CEO decision types based on Sarkar et al. (2017)

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Characteristics	<i>Forward-Looking and Plan-Oriented Pragmatist</i>	<i>Mindfully Managing the Unexpected</i>	<i>Myopic and Process-Oriented Pragmatist</i>
Approach to planning	Structured, long-term planning	Rejects rigid planning, prefers adaptability	Formalised, operational planning
Primary focus	Risk anticipation, strategy integration	People, learning, improvisation	Efficiency, process continuity
Leadership style	Strategic, pragmatic	Empowering, supportive	Hierarchical, control-focused
Crisis response	Preparation and structure	Flexibility, “thinking the unthinkable”	Operational control and routine
Openness to unconventional tools	Moderate if aligned with strategic goals	High open to adaptive behavioural tools	Low prefers reliability and predictability

The model assumes that cognitive biases operate on three levels. At the individual level, common cognitive errors such as loss aversion, status quo bias, and overconfidence occur. These lead CEOs to overvalue established strategies, underestimate risks, and neglect alternative paths to innovation (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Renz et al., 2023). Suitable interventions at this level include salience nudges, which highlight decision-relevant information (Mertens et al., 2022), and default nudges, which pre-select advantageous options and thus reduce cognitive effort (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Additional interventions include feedback nudges, which provide information on past decisions or performance (Jachimowicz & McNerney, 2015), as well as framing nudges, which present options as either losses or gains to address loss aversion directly (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). The effectiveness of these nudges depends on the CEO's cognitive type: planners respond strongly to salient cues, myopic types prefer defaults, and mindful responders adaptively use feedback and framing. Hypothesis H1 is therefore: Nudges reduce individual cognitive biases and increase the approval rate of innovation initiatives, moderated by CEO type.

At the organisational level, biases such as groupthink, the sunk cost fallacy, and escalation of commitment are prevalent, particularly in homogeneous leadership teams with strong cohesion (Janis, 1982; Staw, 1976). Effective nudges in this context include structured decision processes and peer benchmark nudges, which introduce comparative data to reduce social distortions (Sleesman et al., 2018). In addition, exit-option nudges can signal that terminating a project is a legitimate decision (Arkes & Blumer, 1985), while pre-mortem nudges encourage anticipating potential failures in advance, thereby helping to avoid systemic errors (Klein, 2007). The impact of these nudges again varies by decision-making style: responders are particularly receptive to benchmarks, myopic types to defaults, planners to structured processes and exit strategies. This leads to Hypothesis H2: Nudges reduce organisational biases and shorten innovation cycles, depending on the CEO profile.

At the contextual level, strategic decision-making is shaped by regulatory uncertainty, institutional inertia, and framing effects stemming from external expectations (Milliken, 1987). In such contexts, information nudges have been demonstrated to facilitate the clarification and enhancement of regulatory requirements, thereby engendering greater transparency (Cohen & Jabotinsky, 2020). Concurrently, regulatory defaults (Böcker, 2021) function as a means of providing orientation without the imposition of formal pressure. The reframing of nudges, whereby regulation is presented as an opportunity rather than a constraint, and the utilization of scenario-based nudges, which depict strategic options in narrative form, have been identified as mechanisms capable of mitigating strategic uncertainty (Chatziathanasiou, 2024). As before, the CEO type plays a key moderating role: myopic types respond to regulatory defaults, responders are influenced by reframing, and planners integrate information nudges into strategic planning. Hypothesis H3 is therefore: Information, scenario-based, and default nudges reduce the impact of regulatory uncertainty and improve strategic alignment.

Taken together, these effects result in an integrated causal pathway, as illustrated in Figure 2. Individual characteristics, organisational dynamics, and external conditions generate cognitive distortions that impair decision quality. Behavioural nudges counteract these patterns by making contextual information more salient, reducing cognitive costs, or redefining reference points. The CEO typology functions as an amplifier or attenuator of these mechanisms, thereby reinforcing innovation-oriented decision outcomes.

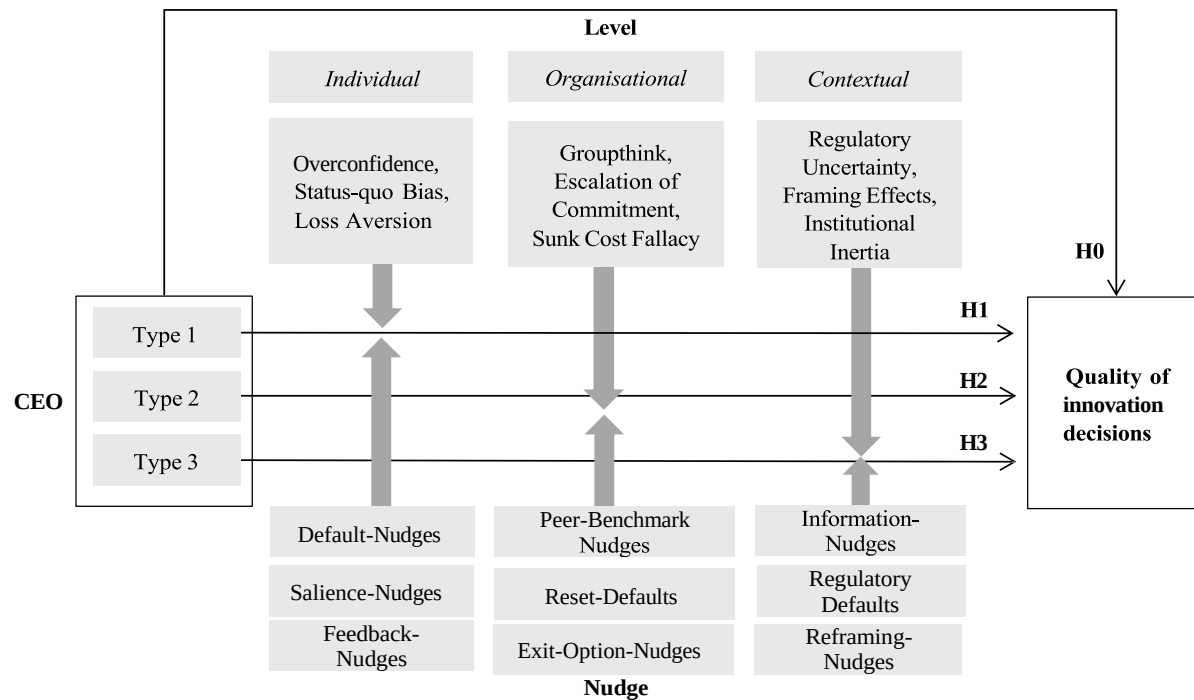


Figure 2 *Conceptual model for nudging CEO innovation*

4. Discussion

This paper combines Thaler and Sunstein's nudge theory with Hambrick and Mason's upper echelons theory to create a conceptual model that reinterprets top management's innovation decisions based on behavioural economics. By modelling cognitive biases as the mechanisms through which individual characteristics, organisational structures and contextual conditions influence strategic innovation output, the paper addresses a central research gap in behavioural strategy literature. Until now, this literature has predominantly been characterised by rational economic assumptions.

The developed model is characterised by a multi-level theoretical structure. At the individual level, biases such as overconfidence, status quo bias, and loss aversion are identified. These biases can be influenced by salience and default nudges (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Jachimowicz et al., 2019; Mertens et al., 2022). At the organisational level, structured decision-making processes and peer benchmarks mitigate phenomena such as groupthink and escalation of commitment (Janis, 1982; Staw, 1976; Sleesman et al., 2018).

A key feature of the model is its integration of an empirically based CEO typology, which maps different cognitive decision-making styles and acts as a moderating variable (Sarkar et al., 2017). This differentiation allows nudge formats to be derived more precisely in terms of their individual effectiveness. For instance, CEOs who adopt a planning-oriented approach to decision-making demonstrate a greater affinity for structured decision-making architecture. Conversely, individuals who are process-oriented and short-sighted respond more strongly to standardised default settings, while those who are mindful primarily engage with social comparison processes.

Furthermore, the model has practical implications for managing innovation decisions within the framework of internal corporate governance. It shows that supervisory bodies can influence risky innovation projects by shaping the decision-making environment, rather than changing formal decision-making rights. However, it should be noted that the scope for action of the CEO varies depending on institutional anchoring. In collective corporate governance systems with a balanced distribution of power, such as those prevalent in Germany, strategic decisions are often made in committees. This reduces the direct influence of individual nudges and increases the relevance of collective decision-making architectures (Crossland and Hambrick, 2011).

Another research question concerns the sustainability of behavioural economic interventions. While numerous studies have documented the short-term effects of such interventions, it remains unclear whether stable learning or habituation processes are established through repeated exposure. The feedback concept in this model suggests that successful innovation decisions can lead to long-term changes in cognitive schemata at CEO level. This represents a suitable starting point for longitudinal studies.

Lastly, the discussion highlights the growing importance of digital decision-making systems, which utilise artificial intelligence to provide context-adaptive nudges. However, these systems are also changing the attribution of responsibility and the understanding of control. These developments give rise to novel theoretical and empirical questions that ought to be addressed through interdisciplinary approaches. To illustrate this point, consider the context of technology acceptance, ethical responsibility, and strategic decision-making behaviour.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

The objective of this paper is to examine how behavioural economic nudges can be designed to improve strategic innovation decisions at the executive level. The resulting model provides a differentiated framework that links individual, organisational, and contextual biases with empirically validated intervention formats. The incorporation of CEO typologies as moderating mechanisms facilitates the development of decision architectures that are both psychologically grounded and context sensitive. This enables the implementation of adaptive behavioural interventions that are aligned with the distinct leadership styles exhibited by executive leaders and the specific constraints imposed by innovation. The model advances behavioural governance theory by offering a structured understanding of how cognitive distortions affect top-level innovation decisions and how they can be mitigated through targeted nudge strategies. Furthermore, it establishes the foundations for practical applications by offering design principles that consider both leadership profiles and organisational dynamics. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the CEO's influence on innovation is only partially isolable due to structural constraints such as routines, culture, and stakeholder expectations. Secondly, the potential endogeneity of the system, particularly the existence of feedback loops between innovation outcomes and executive power, may result in an overestimation of the impact of CEOs. Thirdly, the implementation of nudging gives rise to normative concerns, namely that covert changes in the architecture of decision-making may provoke psychological reactance, accusations of paternalism, or a reduction in effectiveness over time. These limitations underscore the necessity for empirical testing and refinement across a range of organisational settings.

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