A Research Review of SOAR

The purpose of this article is to highlight basic and applied research that has taken SOAR beyond its original purpose of strategic thinking and planning applications. We begin with a brief review of SOAR and then highlight eight doctoral dissertations that have been conducted to advance the theory and practice of SOAR. The growing empirical studies on SOAR address both the basic and applied dimensions of research. While the purpose of basic research is to acquire knowledge for its own sake, the purpose of applied research is to help people more effectively control the environment (Patton, 2002).

What is SOAR?

SOAR is a “positive approach to strategic thinking and planning that allows an organization to construct its future through collaboration, shared understanding, and a commitment to action” (Stavros and Hinrichs, 2009, p. 3). SOAR stands for strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results. The SOAR framework provides a flexible approach to strategic thinking, planning and leading that invites the whole system into a strategic planning or strategy process by including all those with a stake in the success of the organization’s future. These stakeholders can be internal (i.e. employees) or external (i.e. customers, suppliers and communities). Utilizing a whole-system perspective provides a more complete picture of how an organization best serves its customers and what its future can become by considering many different stakeholders’ perspectives.

SOAR begins with a strategic inquiry using an appreciative intent through a discussion regarding the strengths and opportunities available to the organization. SOAR reframes weaknesses and threats that arise during the strategic dialogue,
and then proceeds to identify the strategic core of what the organization aspires to become, along with grounding those aspirations into measurable future results (Stavros & Sutherland, 2003). SOAR features a disciplined approach to helping an organization identify its strengths with an eye on what works best for implementing possible opportunities for growth. SOAR is essentially recognized as a strengths-based framework with a whole-system (stakeholder) approach to strategic thinking and planning (see Figure 1).

![SOAR Framework](www.soar-strategy.com)

SOAR seeks to identify, hone and build on the organization’s strengths as the foundation for strategic growth, allowing for an approach to the future from a position of strengths and opportunities. SOAR also represents stakeholder aspirations for the most desirable future. Finally, SOAR calls for the evaluation of aspirations in terms of results – measurable and meaningful goals built on the strengths of the Balanced Scorecard from Kaplan and Norton (2006), which measures not just financial performance, but also marketing, operations and learning, and growth opportunities (Stavros, 2013).

**Empirical studies: understanding and measuring SOAR**

Since the creation of the SOAR framework in late 1999, the application of SOAR has offered a wide range of options to organizations that have adopted it to support their strategic conversations and strategic plans. The use of SOAR as a strategic thinking, planning and leading framework that creates positive momentum and sustainable change is growing both within the practitioner and scholar communities. There are several instances of SOAR functioning as one factor of many in a complex system that has produced significant benefits and results.

In contrast to the hundreds of case studies on the practical applications and benefits of applying SOAR that have been reported in the November 2003, August 2007 and August 2008 issues of the *AI Practitioner – The International Journal*
of Appreciative Inquiry, empirical research that involves exploring, measuring and understanding SOAR using qualitative and quantitative methodology is just starting to emerge. In the next section, we share some of the positive outcomes from five primarily qualitative studies and three primarily quantitatively focused studies completed since 2009 that explored and measured SOAR for both basic and applied purposes for individuals, teams and organizations.

**Qualitative research: understanding and exploring SOAR**

**SOAR and strategic capacity** Malone’s (2010) dissertation, “An Appreciative Exploration of Strategic Capacity and the Impact of the SOAR Framework in Building Strategy Capacity”, explored the application of the SOAR framework to gain a comprehensive understanding of strategic capacity. The study found the SOAR framework to be “a versatile, simple, and powerful framework that can be utilized in a multitude of ways for applications such as strategic planning, leadership development, coaching, conflict resolution, and continuous improvement among others” (p. 261). The study demonstrated that the SOAR framework can be utilized in both large and small groups to support strategy generation and implementation planning, as well as being easy to use and generative in nature.\(^1\)

**SOAR and AI for strategic planning** More’s (2011) dissertation, “The Effect of Appreciative Inquiry as Organization Development Intervention on Organizational Planning and Service Quality Improvement in St. Francis School (ICSE)”, used AI and the SOAR framework in a one-day group session with 65 members representing stakeholders of a private school in India. The school’s stakeholders were optimistic about transforming the school as an exemplar center of high-quality academic learning, and the strategic planning session using SOAR presented an unparalleled opportunity for the school management to interact freely with parents, teachers and the staff to understand each stakeholder’s actual needs and expectations.\(^2\)

**SOAR and strategic thinking** Swafford (2013) explored the application of SOAR through the lived experiences of California-based association management and non-profit executives in the dissertation, “Applied Experiences of the SOAR Framework by Association Management and Foundation Executives”. He conducted 21 interviews to understand whether or not association management executives working in California-based professional societies, trade associations and foundations changed their thought processes or behaviors as a result of attending a SOAR professional development program. Interview data showed many of the executives found the SOAR-based interview questions engendered a positive-based approach that helped to move the system forward.\(^3\)

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SOAR and organizational collective motivation Hitchcock’s (2014) doctoral research, “An Exploration of Organizational Collective Motivation and the Influence of SOAR Framework on Organizational Collective Motivation”, set out to understand if and how SOAR builds organizational collective motivation (OCM). Hitchcock conducted 16 in-depth interviews and obtained quantitative survey data on SOAR using the SOAR Profile (Cole and Stavros, 2014). Results of this study found SOAR builds OCM elements within the categories of commitment and beliefs during organizational transformation by emphasizing the whole system of the organization, focusing on strengths of the organization, developing collective aspirations, and committing to organizational goals that develop collective efficacy and cohesion.4

SOAR and executive coaching Newman (2011) used SOAR in a mixed-methods dissertation, “Executive and Professional Coaching Provided by Internal Coaches: Analysis of Strengths and Impact on Clients”. The results of her study showed that SOAR can be applied to individual and team coaching. In the coaching process, SOAR allowed for the identification of strengths, recognition of accomplishments and creation of possibilities. Newman’s research was later expanded with Gina Hinrichs to investigate SOAR as a coaching protocol to develop strong competency in cultural adaptability (Hinrichs and Newman, 2013).5

Quantitative Research: Examining and Testing SOAR

SOAR and trust-building Sprangel’s (2009) dissertation, “A Study of the Direct and Meditational Effects of the SOAR Framework, Trust, and Environmental Management Systems on Chemical Management Services Supplier Performance at HAAS TCM Group”, was one of the first empirical studies using a quantitative measurement of SOAR. In Sprangel’s study, 71 global chemical management services (CMS) program managers and customers completed a survey to measure four constructs: supplier performance, SOAR, trust and EMS/CMS. Study results supported a combined framework in which the elements of SOAR built trust and pro-environmental behaviors to train suppliers to develop collaborative relationships with customers and improve supplier performance (Sprangel, Stavros and Cole, 2011).6

SOAR and flow Glovis (2012) used the same measure of SOAR as Sprangel to examine SOAR as a mediator of the relationship between flow and project success among a sample of 122 SAP professionals. “A Mixed Methods Study in the Expression of Flow, SOAR, and Motivation: Developing Individual Transcendence within the Delivery of Complex Systems Integration Projects” is the first known empirical analysis of flow in an SAP project environment. The study investigated the role of SOAR in mediating the effect of flow on project success. Results of the

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study imply that the principles of SOAR present a structural framework that aligns individual and organizational needs in a positive constellation to encourage optimal individual, project and organizational performance.\

**SOAR and emotional intelligence** Building on the previous dissertations in which SOAR was measured quantitatively, Cox (2014) used the SOAR Profile to evaluate the relationships among emotional intelligence (EI), SOAR and collaboration in the dissertation, “An Evaluation of the Relationship among Emotional Intelligence, SOAR, and Collaboration: Implications for Teams”. Study results found SOAR functioned as a mediating variable, suggesting that a framework for strategy based on the strengths and aspirations of team members may explain how EI impacts team-based collaboration. When individuals are working in a team context, especially when collaboration is the desired outcome, team members competent in SOAR will be able to maximize the impact EI has on collaboration.\

**Conclusion**

Appreciative Inquiry has been foundational to the research and practice of SOAR. Beginning as AI Newsletter in May 1998, The AI Practitioner has published hundreds of stories that document AI experiences and applications around the world. The AI Practitioner also published dozens of stories of SOAR in two issues devoted to its framework, and even in last month’s special issue on AI and higher education we read two more stories about the application of SOAR.

Although SOAR is considered a relatively new concept in the practitioner–scholar research agenda, basic and applied research using SOAR is increasing. The focus of this article has been on the significance of SOAR research in terms of the theory and practice of SOAR, and based on our search for SOAR research, we reviewed eight empirical studies that involved SOAR. We are very thankful to those who contribute to researching the theory and practical efficacy of SOAR. Given the generative nature of Appreciative Inquiry, the potential research of SOAR continues to soar.

**References**


7 For more information on this study, please contact Dr. Michael Glovis, SAP Program Manager, SAP America, Inc, email: Michaelglovis@hotmail.com.

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