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Behavioral Switching as the Microfoundation of Organizational Ambidexterity

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Abstract

Organizational ambidexterity depends not only on whether exploration and exploitation coexist, but also on how people move between the behaviors through which those orientations are enacted. Existing research has clarified structural, contextual, temporal, and cognitive foundations of ambidexterity, yet the transition between exploration-dominant and exploitation-dominant action remains insufficiently specified at the behavioral level. This Original Propositional Model Article introduces behavioral switching as a proposed within-person transition in dominant enacted orientation. The article distinguishes switching from static balance, simultaneous blending, task interruption, role transition, and cognitive flexibility. It proposes that a switching episode begins with recognition of a switch demand and develops through disengagement from the current mode, attention reallocation, role and identity reconciliation, and target-mode enactment. The model further treats switch appropriateness, latency, completeness, and recovery cost as proposed dimensions of switch quality. Organizational climate, authority, formalization, resources, workload, and coordination are positioned as conditional influences rather than universal enablers. The principal implication is that organizational ambidexterity cannot be explained adequately by aggregate behavioral scores alone; the temporal process and conditions of behavioral transition also require examination. The model remains conceptually plausible rather than empirically validated. Testing requires episode-sensitive, intensive longitudinal, multimethod, and multilevel research capable of separating behavioral switching from stable traits, job design, assigned task variety, simultaneous behavior, and organizational reallocation. The contribution is a falsifiable behavioral microfoundation that connects individual transition processes with higher-level ambidexterity without assuming automatic aggregation or uniformly beneficial consequences.

Keywords: Exploration and exploitation, Defining behavioral switching, Attention reallocation, Identity tension and role conflict, Measurement and empirical testing, Behavioral

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Introduction

Organizational ambidexterity is commonly described as the capacity to pursue exploration and exploitation while avoiding the rigidity of exclusive commitment to either orientation. Yet this organizational formulation leaves a behavioral question unresolved: what must individuals actually do when work requires movement from experimentation, variation, and search toward refinement, implementation, and efficiency, or in the reverse direction? Multilevel theory indicates that firm practices can shape individual exploratory and exploitative behavior and that higher-level ambidexterity depends partly on how such behavior is coordinated and aggregated [1].

Research at the individual level has strengthened the behavioral basis of the field by treating exploration and exploitation as distinguishable activities rather than as purely organizational attributes. Repeated-measures evidence further suggests that their joint pattern is associated with innovative performance, although association does not reveal how a person exits one mode and enters another [2]. A high score on both dimensions may represent frequent movement, simultaneous blending,



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stable role differentiation, or a measurement artifact. These possibilities are theoretically different and cannot be resolved by a composite ambidexterity score.

Role-transition research comes closer to the missing process by showing that movement among exploratory and exploitative role demands affects individual ambidexterity and depends on how roles are coordinated [3]. Even so, role transition is broader than behavioral switching. A person may change roles without altering the dominant orientation of action, or may switch behavioral orientation while remaining in the same formal role. The behavioral transition itself therefore warrants a more precise construct, a temporal sequence, and explicit criteria for distinguishing initiation, completion, and failure.

The temporal problem also matters because ambidexterity is not necessarily a stable optimum. Longitudinal organizational evidence indicates that the value of exploration–exploitation arrangements depends on dynamic adjustment and environmental conditions rather than static balance alone [4]. That insight cannot simply be transferred from firms to persons, but it supports a central premise of this article: the path, timing, and context of transition may be as consequential as the observed behavioral mix.

Competing demands are also interpreted rather than mechanically enacted. Paradox research shows that cognitive framing helps explain why individuals respond differently to contradictory demands [5]. Building on these foundations, this article develops an original, non-empirical propositional model of behavioral switching. It defines the proposed construct, identifies attention reallocation and role or identity reconciliation as candidate processes, specifies contextual boundaries, and formulates relationships for empirical testing. The contribution is not a validated causal model or universal prescription; it is an evidence-bounded framework for making the transition process theoretically visible.

Conceptual foundations of exploration and exploitation

Exploration concerns search, experimentation, variation, and engagement with less certain possibilities. Exploitation concerns refinement, implementation, efficiency, and the use of established knowledge. They are analytically distinguishable orientations, but their organizational coexistence can be arranged in several ways. Meta-analytic evidence shows that structural and contextual approaches to ambidexterity have contingent relationships with organizational conditions and outcomes [6]. Accordingly, neither coexistence nor balance should be assumed to require frequent within-person switching. Structural arrangements separate exploratory and exploitative activities across units, roles, or periods, whereas contextual arrangements ask actors to allocate effort between both orientations within a shared setting. Comparative research further shows that organizations may combine these approaches in hybrid forms shaped by environmental demands [7]. This equifinality matters for the proposed model: behavioral switching is one potential microfoundation of ambidexterity, not the only route through which an organization can accommodate both orientations.

At the frontline, persistent tensions are managed through configurations of differentiation, integration, and situated behavioral responses rather than through a single isolated practice [8]. Individual action is therefore embedded in structures that determine which cues are visible, which behaviors are legitimate, and whether coordination resources are available. A switch may be unnecessary when specialization absorbs the tension, impossible when authority is absent, or counterproductive when simultaneous coordination is required.

Structural, contextual, and hybrid arrangements are not interchangeable solutions; their usefulness depends on environmental demands, organizational configuration, and frontline enactment [6–8]. The proposed behavioral account consequently distinguishes organizational provision from individual enactment. Exploration and exploitation may coexist at the firm level even when no single employee moves between them, while an employee may switch repeatedly without producing organizational ambidexterity. The level of analysis, temporal window, and coordination mechanism must therefore be specified before behavioral evidence is interpreted as an organizational capability.

Defining behavioral switching

Evidence on imposed switches shows that a demand to change orientation does not guarantee that the individual will initiate, complete, or sustain the requested behavioral transition [9]. This distinction separates the switch cue from the switch response. A managerial instruction, task-phase change, performance signal, or emerging problem may make a transition salient, but the actor may resist, delay, reinterpret, partially enact, or reverse it. Behavioral switching should therefore be studied as an episode with possible noncompletion rather than as an automatic consequence of organizational intention.

A practice perspective likewise shows that individual ambidexterity is enacted through situated ways of handling contradictory demands [10]. This view redirects attention from possessing a generalized capability toward observable action. Nevertheless, paradoxical practice is not identical to switching. Some practices integrate demands concurrently, some compartmentalize them, and some preserve one orientation while symbolically acknowledging the other. The proposed construct applies only when the dominant enacted orientation changes over a temporally identifiable interval.

Cross-level evidence further supports measuring employee exploration and exploitation as distinguishable activities with different antecedents and consequences [11]. Such differentiation is necessary but insufficient. Two separate scores establish that both orientations occur; they do not establish their order, the cue that prompted movement, the time required to disengage,

or whether the target mode became behaviorally dominant. Static or retrospective measures can therefore obscure the process the present article seeks to explain.

Behavioral switching is proposed here as a temporally bounded, within-person transition from an exploration-dominant pattern of enacted work behavior to an exploitation-dominant pattern, or in the reverse direction. The transition includes recognition of a switch demand, disengagement from the current mode, reallocation of attention, reconciliation of role or identity implications, and enactment of the target mode. This definition distinguishes switching from task interruption, formal role change, cognitive flexibility, simultaneous blending, and organizational resource reallocation. The stages and their ordering remain proposed and require empirical validation.

Attention reallocation

A change in behavioral orientation requires more than the appearance of a new task. Work-interruption research shows that suspending activity can redirect attention, create resumption demands, and impose recovery costs [12]. Behavioral switching may include similar processes, especially when exploration and exploitation rely on different information, performance criteria, and time horizons. However, interruption and switching are not synonyms: an interruption may leave the underlying orientation unchanged, whereas switching requires target-mode enactment.

Attention is also situated rather than purely internal. The attention-based view emphasizes that issues, actors, structures, and interactions shape what receives notice and action [13]. In a switching episode, organizational routines, reporting systems, managerial cues, peer expectations, and available time may therefore influence whether the actor disengages from the current mode and activates the target orientation. This interpretation places attention within a work system without reducing behavior to organizational structure.

Attention rules can adapt to performance information and influence which problems or opportunities receive search effort [14]. At the individual level, an analogous process may help explain why the same switch cue produces immediate reorientation for one actor but delay or persistence for another. This cross-level extension is plausible, but it remains an inference: organizational attention rules do not directly demonstrate momentary individual reallocation.

The proposed model therefore treats attention reallocation as necessary but potentially insufficient. An actor may recognize a cue and redirect attention yet fail to switch because the target behavior conflicts with role expectations, identity commitments, authority, or resources. **Table 1** organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for behavioral switching as the microfoundation of organizational ambidexterity.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Behavioral Switching as the Microfoundation of Organizational Ambidexterity.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Exploration	Search, experimentation, and variation	Novel possibilities	Not general creativity	Target behavioral mode	Measures vary	No inherent superiority
Exploitation	Refinement, implementation, and efficiency	Reliable execution	Not merely routine work	Target behavioral mode	Context dependent	No inherent inferiority
Individual ambidexterity	Engagement in both orientations	Behavioral coexistence	Portfolio, not transition	Background construct	Aggregation remains unclear	Does not prove switching
Switch demand	Cue requesting orientation change	Transition initiation	Demand, not completion	Proposed trigger	Cue interpretation varies	Formal requests may lack authority
Behavioral switching	Within-person change in dominant orientation	Missing transition process	Not balance or blending	Proposed focal construct	Sequence is unvalidated	Requires observable transition
Attention reallocation	Disengagement and target-focused redirection	Target-mode activation	Not any distraction	Proposed process	Mediation remains untested	May be insufficient
Identity tension	Incompatibility with self-meaning	Resistance or cost	Not simple task difficulty	Proposed moderator	Direction may vary	Tension may help or hinder
Role conflict	Incompatible behavioral expectations	Incomplete enactment	Not role variety alone	Proposed moderator	Context sensitive	Authority and resources matter
Switch quality	Appropriateness, latency, completeness, and recovery cost	Episode evaluation	Not switch frequency	Proposed outcome profile	Requires validation	No thresholds established
Cross-level aggregation	Coordination of individual episodes	Organizational contribution	Not automatic summation	Proposed conditional pathway	Mechanisms remain uncertain	Individual switching is insufficient

Note: Evidence-supported definitions and relationships are cited. Entries labelled proposed constitute original synthesis and do not represent validated dimensions, causal mechanisms, or organizational effects.

Identity tension and role conflict

A behavioral switch changes not only what an individual does but also which expectations, values, and competencies become salient. Qualitative evidence from a global organization indicates that an ambidexterity mandate can generate experienced tension and cognitive dissonance, with members interpreting and responding to the demand differently [15]. Thus, formal expectations to explore and exploit should not be treated as behaviorally equivalent to acceptance of both orientations. A person may understand the required transition yet question its legitimacy, feasibility, or consistency with professional self-understanding.

The capacity to accommodate contradiction also depends on power. Paradox-management practices may disempower actors when they are expected to reconcile incompatible demands without sufficient authority, voice, or control over resources [16]. This distinction separates formal permission from substantive power. An employee may nominally possess autonomy while remaining unable to alter deadlines, evaluation criteria, interdependent workflows, or access to information. Under those conditions, apparent resistance may reflect constrained agency rather than rigidity or deficient adaptability.

Role conflict supplies a related but distinct pathway. Evidence from employees managing dueling sales and service orientations shows that competing expectations can carry adverse as well as beneficial implications [17]. The findings cannot be transferred directly to all exploration–exploitation settings, but they demonstrate why dual demands should not be presumed to produce integration. Switching may be delayed, incomplete, or costly when the target orientation threatens valued role commitments or exposes the actor to incompatible performance criteria.

Identity tension and role conflict should not be collapsed. Identity tension concerns the meaning of the target behavior for who the actor understands herself or himself to be; role conflict concerns incompatible expectations attached to positions, relationships, or evaluation systems. Either can occur without the other. Their separation permits tests of whether resistance reflects self-incongruence, incompatible accountability, insufficient authority, or a combination of these conditions.

Experienced dual demands may stimulate integrative responses, but they may also produce dissonance, disempowerment, or strain when authority, resources, and role expectations are misaligned [15–17]. The proposed model therefore treats identity compatibility and role clarity as conditional influences on switch completion and recovery cost. Tension is not assigned a fixed effect: it may focus attention, provoke reinterpretation, encourage compartmentalization, or generate withdrawal. These alternatives require episode-level evidence rather than retrospective assumptions about an employee's general ambidexterity.

Proposed behavioral-switching model

Cognitive flexibility and information search provide plausible resources for reorientation. Evidence at the executive level links cognitive flexibility with information search and organizational ambidexterity [18]. That finding supports the relevance of adaptable cognitive processing, but it does not establish an employee-level mechanism. In the proposed model, flexibility affects the range of interpretations and actions available after a switch cue; it does not guarantee that a switch is appropriate, authorized, or completed.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for behavioral-switching model, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

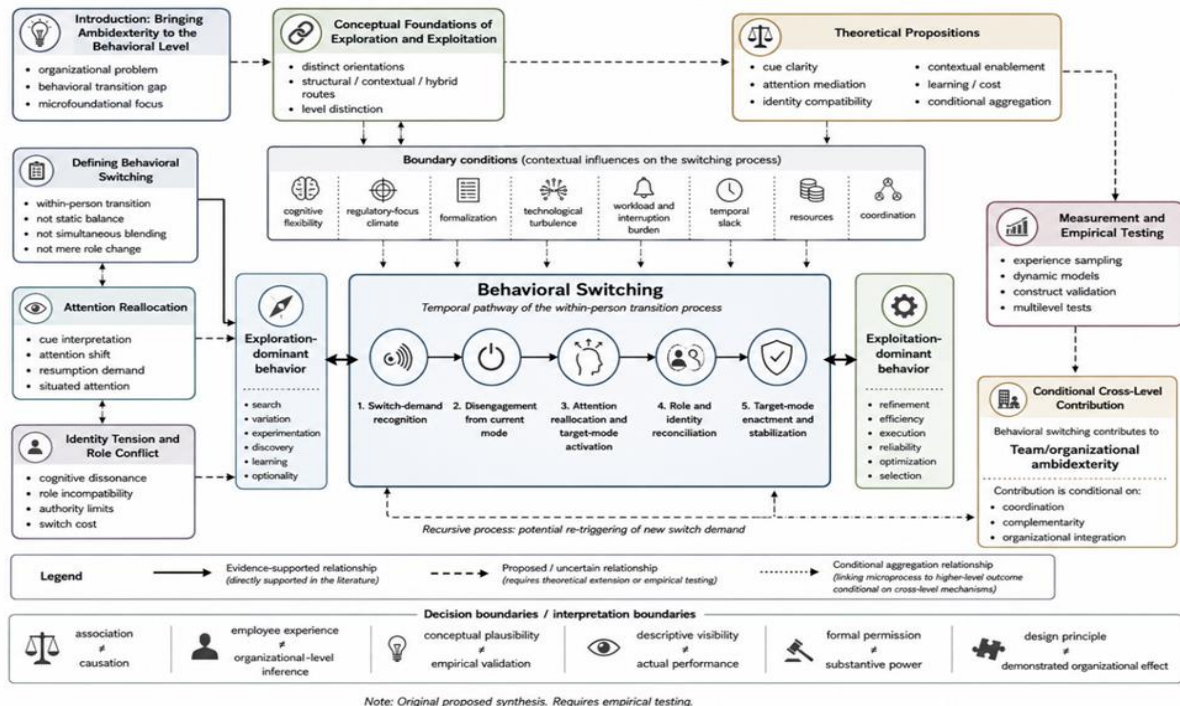


Figure 1. Behavioral-Switching Model

The model begins when an actor recognizes a cue as requiring movement between exploration-dominant and exploitation-dominant behavior. Proposed phases then comprise disengagement from the current mode, attention reallocation and target-mode activation, role and identity reconciliation, and target-mode enactment with stabilization. These phases are analytically ordered, but they may overlap, recur, or fail. The model therefore accommodates resistance, partial switches, reversals, and blended behavior rather than assuming a smooth linear transition.

Direction is also consequential. Moving from exploration to exploitation may require narrowing alternatives, selecting criteria, and committing to implementation; movement toward exploration may require relaxing established rules, reopening assumptions, and tolerating uncertainty. The model does not presume symmetry between these directions. Switch latency, identity implications, information requirements, and recovery demands may differ even for the same actor and task domain. Context surrounds rather than merely follows the process. Multilevel evidence indicates that regulatory-focus climate and organizational structure interact in shaping employee ambidexterity [19]. Formalization also conditions the relationship between technological turbulence and individual ambidexterity, although its direction and usefulness depend on context [20]. In the model, climate, structure, and formalization influence cue clarity, behavioral legitimacy, coordination, and resource access. They are not treated as universal enablers or constraints.

Digitization research identifies multiple organizational configurations associated with ambidexterity, reinforcing equifinality rather than a single technological route [21]. Technology may improve cue visibility, information access, or coordination, yet technological capability is distinct from legitimate authority and effective enactment. The original model consequently defines switch quality through proposed dimensions of appropriateness, latency, completeness, and recovery cost. A feedback path links completed or failed episodes with later attention rules and readiness, while a conditional cross-level path connects coordinated individual episodes to higher-level ambidexterity. Neither path has been validated.

Theoretical propositions

Organizational resources shape whether actors can enact both orientations. Evidence indicates that human-resource practices may contribute differently to exploration and exploitation [22]. Information systems may also matter through employee-level value creation rather than through technological availability alone [23]. In conflicting-goal settings, responses reflect both individual interpretation and organizational arrangements [24]. These findings support the antecedents of the model, but not its complete temporal sequence.

Figure 2 presents the original conceptual synthesis for mechanisms, boundary conditions, and organizational consequences, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

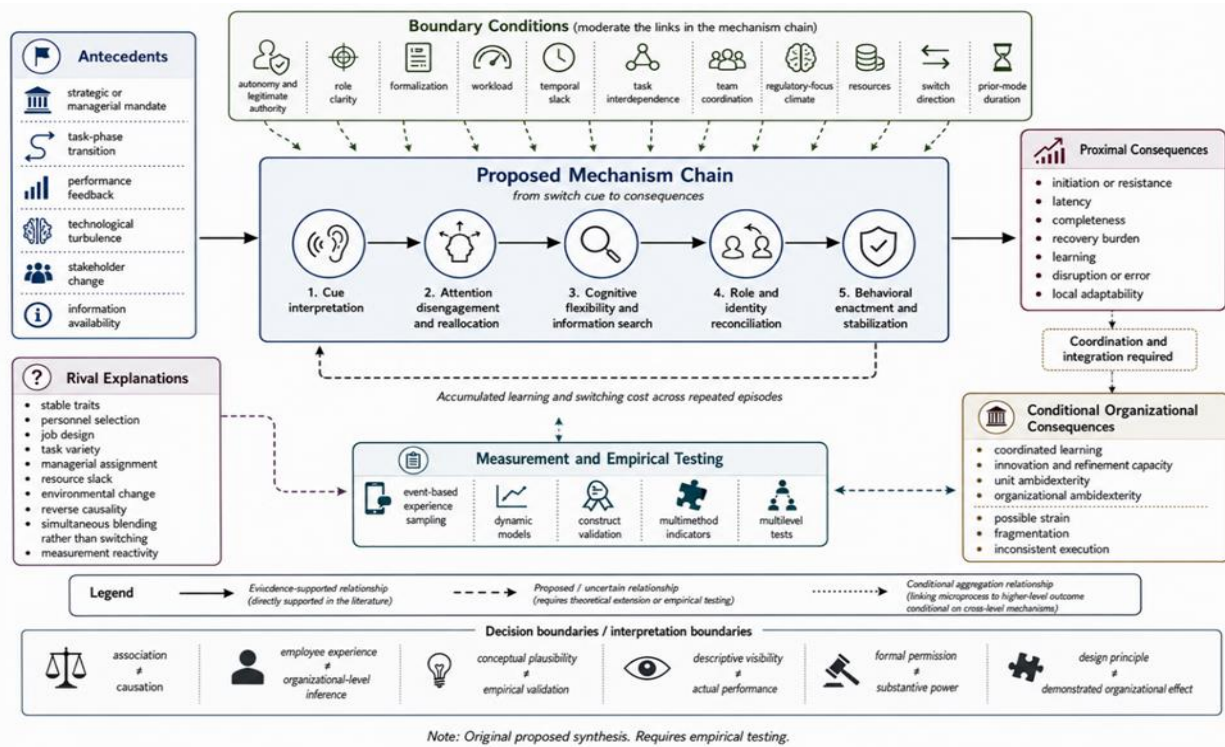


Figure 2. Mechanisms, Boundary Conditions, and Organizational Consequences

The following propositions state relationships to be tested and potentially rejected.

Proposition 1. Greater clarity of a legitimate switch cue is proposed to increase switch initiation, conditional on behavioral authority and opportunity.

Proposition 2. Attention disengagement and reallocation are proposed to transmit part of the relationship between recognized switch demand and target-mode enactment.

Proposition 3. Compatibility between the target mode and role or identity interpretation is proposed to increase switch completeness and reduce recovery cost.

Proposition 4. Autonomy, authority, resources, coordination, and enabling formalization are proposed to strengthen the translation of switching capability into enacted switching.

Proposition 5. Repeated switching is proposed to generate both learning and accumulated cost; frequency should therefore have no uniformly positive consequence.

Proposition 6. Appropriateness, latency, completeness, and recovery cost are proposed to explain proximal consequences more precisely than switch frequency alone.

Proposition 7. Individual switching is proposed to contribute to team or organizational ambidexterity only when episodes are complementary, coordinated, and connected to organizational priorities.

The propositions deliberately separate initiation, process, quality, and aggregation. Evidence could support an early link while rejecting a later one: clear cues might initiate movement without improving completion, or complete individual switches might fail to produce coordinated organizational outcomes. This modularity prevents the model from being protected by a single broad claim and makes null, reversed, nonlinear, and context-dependent findings theoretically informative.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in behavioral switching as the microfoundation of organizational ambidexterity.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Behavioral Switching as the Microfoundation of Organizational Ambidexterity.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Cue to initiation	Mandate, task transition, feedback	Cue interpretation	Authority and cue clarity	Proposed initiation or resistance	Compliance, urgency, prior experience	Event-level temporal observation
Demand to enactment	Recognized switch demand	Proposed attention reallocation	Workload and temporal slack	Proposed latency and completion	Task difficulty or distraction	Dense repeated measures

Flexibility to reorientation	Cognitive flexibility	Information search	Role expertise and resources	Proposed target-mode activation	General ability or selection	Multisource longitudinal test
Identity fit to completion	Target-mode demand	Proposed reconciliation	Role clarity and authority	Proposed completeness and lower cost	Affect, incentives, workload	Discriminant and mediation tests
Context to enactment	Climate, structure, formalization	Opportunity and legitimacy	Environmental turbulence	Proposed enablement or constraint	Leadership or workforce composition	Cross-level longitudinal design
Information to capacity	Digitization and data access	Employee value creation	Skill and coordination	Proposed cue and action quality	Resource slack or strategy	Comparative multimethod study
Repeated episodes	Prior switching	Proposed learning and accumulated cost	Frequency and recovery time	Adaptation, strain, or error	Experience or job design	Within-person nonlinear modelling
Micro-to-macro pathway	Coordinated individual episodes	Integration and complementarity	Interdependence and structure	Proposed higher-level ambidexterity	Structural separation or unit specialization	Multilevel temporal aggregation

Note: Expected consequences and uncited process links are proposed. Evidence supports component relationships or boundary conditions, not the full causal chain.

Measurement and empirical testing

Behavioral switching requires measurement close to the episode. Experience-sampling guidance emphasizes that sampling schedules, compliance, respondent burden, and separation of within-person from between-person variance affect the credibility of repeated-measures research [25]. Event-triggered reports could record the cue, prior mode, intended target mode, perceived authority, identity or role tension, and immediate behavioral response. Fixed-time surveys could supplement event reports, but they risk missing brief switches or reconstructing sequences retrospectively.

Dynamic structural equation modelling can estimate autoregressive and lagged within-person relationships while representing differences among individuals [26]. Such models could test whether attention reallocation precedes target-mode enactment and whether prior switching predicts later readiness or recovery. Nevertheless, lagged association does not establish causality. Appropriate observation spacing, sufficient within-person occasions, stationarity assumptions, omitted time-varying causes, and reciprocal relationships remain consequential.

Construct development must precede confident hypothesis testing. Validation requires an explicit domain definition, representative content, examination of dimensional structure, and tests of external and discriminant relations [27]. A behavioral-switching measure should demonstrate that it is distinguishable from individual ambidexterity, task switching, role transition, cognitive flexibility, adaptability, and interruption frequency. Proposed switch-quality dimensions may prove correlated, multidimensional, context specific, or empirically untenable.

A rigorous programme would combine event reports with behavioral observations, work artefacts, digital traces, supervisor or peer assessments, and contextual data. Traces should not be assumed to reveal exploration or exploitation transparently; information search, revision, communication, and task closure can have different meanings across occupations. Field experiments might manipulate cue clarity or temporal separation, while qualitative process studies could examine failed, resisted, and reversed episodes. Multilevel longitudinal designs are required before individual switching can be linked to coordinated team or organizational ambidexterity.

Episode identification also requires defensible start and end rules. Researchers could triangulate self-reported cues with observable changes in goals, information sources, task sequences, or evaluation criteria. Sensitivity analyses should test whether conclusions change under narrower or broader episode boundaries. Evidence of target-mode activity without prior-mode disengagement may indicate blending rather than switching, while reported intention without behavioral change should be classified as an uncompleted response.

Discussion

The model shifts the explanatory focus from the amount of exploration and exploitation to the process through which an actor changes dominant behavioral orientation. This shift adds temporal resolution to microfoundational reasoning and makes unsuccessful transitions theoretically visible. It also prevents high individual-ambidexterity scores from being interpreted automatically as evidence of efficient, appropriate, or frequent switching. An actor may perform both orientations through stable segmentation, blending, or distributed teamwork.

Transition form may itself matter. Organizational evidence distinguishes incremental movement from discontinuous jumps and associates these paths with different consequences [28]. At the individual level, abrupt switches may offer rapid responsiveness while increasing disruption, whereas gradual transitions may preserve continuity while delaying adaptation.

These possibilities remain analogies requiring direct observation; firm-level transition findings cannot determine employee-level effects.

Work design is an important rival explanation. A broad evidence base shows that job characteristics shape cognition, learning opportunities, and adaptability [29]. Apparent switching capability may therefore reflect autonomy, task complexity, slack, expertise, or supportive coordination rather than a distinct individual capacity. Conversely, poor switching may arise from fragmented work, excessive interruptions, incompatible metrics, or insufficient authority rather than from unwillingness to explore or exploit.

Aggregation is equally conditional. Qualitative multilevel research shows that ambidexterity penetrates organizational levels through differentiated actors, practices, and coordination [30]. Consequences attributed to ambidexterity depend on how transitions unfold, how work is designed, and whether enacted behaviors penetrate and coordinate across organizational levels [28–30]. Individual switching is thus neither necessary nor sufficient for organizational ambidexterity. The model's value lies in specifying a testable pathway and its failure conditions, not in prescribing more switching.

This boundary also changes the practical question. Rather than asking employees to become more ambidextrous in general, research should examine whether a particular transition is necessary, legitimate, sufficiently resourced, and coordinated with others' work. Future research should compare switching with specialization, simultaneity, and structural separation, and should identify when repeated transitions produce learning, strain, inconsistency, or no consequential organizational change.

Conclusion

Behavioral switching offers a proposed microfoundation for explaining how exploration and exploitation may be connected through temporally situated individual action. The article defines switching as a change in dominant enacted orientation and distinguishes it from static balance, simultaneous blending, interruption, role transition, cognitive flexibility, and organizational reallocation. Its central model links switch-demand recognition with disengagement, attention reallocation, role and identity reconciliation, and target-mode enactment, while treating context and authority as conditional influences.

The contribution remains propositional. The phases may overlap, recur, or fail; the proposed quality dimensions may require revision; and individual episodes may not aggregate into higher-level ambidexterity. Stable traits, job design, task allocation, resources, technology, environmental change, and measurement artefacts provide credible alternative explanations. Empirical evaluation therefore requires episode-sensitive, multimethod, intensive longitudinal, and multilevel designs.

By making behavioral transition rather than behavioral coexistence the focal problem, the model opens a research programme concerned with when switching occurs, how it unfolds, what it costs, and when it contributes to coordinated organizational adaptation. Its usefulness depends on whether future evidence can distinguish, refine, or reject the proposed construct and relationships.

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