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STRATEGIC PLANNING AND STRATEGIC THINKING COMPETENCIES OF KAZAKHSTAN'S MANAGERS IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

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Abstract
The present study explores the impact of organizational and individual factors: length of managerial tenure, leader's gender, firm's age, and size, on the tax-payment dynamics among grain companies in Kazakhstan (N = 127) that relates to managers' strategic thinking orientation. The article aims at identifying what firm- and leader-level variables significantly correlate with an agricultural company's tax-payment increase. Tax-payment data for 2014-2024 were sourced from the Kazakh Grain Union website, while firm metadata (registration dates, headcounts, and managers' gender and tenure) were obtained from the Paragraph Information System. Each enterprise's compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of tax payments was computed, and a multiple regression with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors was estimated. Managerial tenure significantly predicted higher CAGR ($\beta = 0.113$, $p = 0.023$), however, firm age failed to support the hypothesized positive relationship, exhibiting only a marginally non-significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.095$, $p = 0.080$), whereas leaders' gender and workforce size did not influence the tax-payment dynamics. The model explained 6.6% of the variance in growth. The evidence suggests that retaining leaders in agribusiness for longer periods will bring larger financial returns due to their strategic focus on growth.

Keywords: *Agricultural Management, Strategic Thinking, Strategic Planning, Tax-Payment Growth, Managerial Tenure, Manager's Gender.*

JEL code: *M10.*

Introduction

Strategic planning and strategic thinking have long been viewed as vital for any company that wants to navigate uncertainty, use resources wisely, and stay ahead of rivals (Mintzberg, 1994; Shiferaw & Kero, 2024). In developed economies, countless studies link managers' thinking styles and a firm's internal routines to performance outcomes (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Perez, 2022). In post-Soviet settings, however, where rules of the game are still settling, the hard data are thin.

Kazakhstan, a heavyweight in global grain markets, offers a rare opportunity to see how these strategic skills play out. The Kazakh Grain Union (2025), which unites the country's biggest growers, processors, and traders, shapes industry standards, opens market doors, and negotiates with the state. Its members collectively generate a sizeable share of national output and exports, making them an ideal testing ground for theory and policy alike. Therefore, the object of the research is firms constituting the Grain Union of Kazakhstan. The subject of the research is managerial competencies of strategic thinking and strategic planning.

However, direct measurement of abstract managerial traits (e.g., cognitive flexibility, strategic orientation) requires intensive surveys or interviews, which are often infeasible at scale. To overcome this, we adopted proxy indicators – managerial tenure, firm age, company's size, and manager's gender and assessed their association with profitability growth, operationalized via tax-

payment compound annual growth rate (CAGR) over 2014–2024.

CAGR is calculated by comparing each firm's tax payment at the start and end of the period and determining the constant annual growth rate that would compound the starting amount into the ending amount over those years. CAGR denotes the single, steady rate at which taxes would have had to grow each year to get from the 2014 level to the 2024 level. We assembled annual tax data from the Kazakh Grain Union (2025) website and firm metadata from the Paragraph Information System (2025), yielding a final sample of 127 firms after data-quality screening.

The present study contribution is twofold. First, it pushes the big ideas of strategic-planning research into new territory by showing, with hard numbers, how social and demographic, and organizational factors connect to bottom-line results in a post-Soviet farm economy. Second, it offers a down-to-earth toolkit: by leaning on openly available facts – years in office, head-count bands, etc. – any analyst or policymaker can get a quick read on a firm's strategic posture without launching costly surveys. The paper unfolds conventionally: Section 2 sifts through the earlier studies, Section 3 walks through data and methods, Section 4 lays out what was identified and why it matters, and Section 5 closes with implications and next steps.

Literature review

Early conceptions of strategic planning focused on formalized, top-down processes for setting organizational objectives and allocating resources over extended time horizons (Ansoff, 1965). Over time, scholars recognized that rigid planning cycles often failed to capture emergent opportunities and threats in dynamic environments. Mintzberg (1994) argued that true strategic thinking transcends deliberate plans, involving iterative learning, pattern recognition, and creative insight. He contrasted the mechanistic, forecast-based approach of traditional planning with a more fluid, adaptive mindset.

Prahalad and Hamel (2006) introduced the concept of core competencies – unique bundles of skills and technologies that underlie competitive advantage. They emphasized that strategic thinking requires managers to identify, nurture, and leverage these competencies across business units and over time. Subsequent research by Liedtka (1998) distilled strategic thinking into teachable elements:

1. Systems perspective: viewing the organization and its environment holistically, recognizing interdependencies.
2. Intent focus: maintaining clarity of long-term vision while remaining flexible in tactics.
3. Thinking in time: balancing historical experience, present realities, and future possibilities.
4. Intelligent opportunism: seizing unexpected opportunities without losing sight of overarching goals.

Together, the aforementioned scholars shaped a view of strategic thinking as an ongoing cognitive-behavioral process marked by foresight, adaptability, and disciplined innovation (Bryson, 2018). In agricultural settings, characterized by seasonality, commodity price fluctuations, and regulatory shifts, such capabilities are critical to manage production cycles, invest in capital equipment, and navigate trade regimes (Porter, 1985).

Tax-payment growth (CAGR) is a dependent variable within the context of this study. Tax payment increase represents an indicator of the company's profitability growth (Shubita, 2024). While not a direct measure of cognition, sustained financial growth, captured by the compound annual growth rate of tax contributions, reflects successful strategic positioning, resource allocation, and market anticipation (Coad, 2009). Tax data are typically audited and publicly reported, making them a reliable proxy for firm performance. Direct measurement of cognitive and behavioral traits typically requires psychometric assessments or in-depth interviews – methods often impractical at scale, especially in geographically dispersed agribusiness sectors. Consequently, researchers leverage proxy variables – observable, objective measures statistically correlated with the latent competencies of interest.

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Managerial Tenure

Longer-serving managers accumulate firm-specific knowledge, stakeholder trust, and strategic consistency, leading to higher CAGR in tax payments (Finkelstein et al., 2009). In middle–income economies, studies showed that greater tenure security and political stability enhance overall firm performance, underscoring tenure as a strategic asset in volatile contexts (Boamah et al., 2023). Length of service signals organizational trust, exposure to firm-specific processes, and continuity in strategy execution (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991). The recent research in New Zealand based on listed firms' data for 2000-2020 demonstrated controversial results: the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) tenure positively impacts the firm's value growth under dynamic competition in the market, but in stable market with low contest activities, CEO tenure appeared to be inconsiderable (Chikunda et al., 2025). Nguyen et al. (2017) obtained similar results about the positive effect of a top manager's tenure on the firm growth rate in stable environments, and a negative effect under intensively changing conditions. Considering the grain industry as relatively stable, we hypothesize that the CEO tenure has a positive impact on the firm's tax payment increase.

H1: Longer managerial tenure positively correlates with higher tax-payment CAGR.

Manager's Gender

Prior research in Kazakhstan revealed the positive effect of gender diversity in executive boards in large companies on more transparency of earnings management (Orazalin, 2020) and women managers' orientation for incremental innovations and change, while men managers' focus on disruptive innovations and more radical change (Lipovka et al., 2021). The recent study of 617 Vietnamese firms defined the positive relationship between the female top manager and a firm's performance in terms of accounting and market indicators (Nguyen et al., 2024). However, the research in the Caribbean countries justified an opposite conclusion – women-led firms in the service industry were 18% less productive compared to their competitors run by men; the productivity in this study was measured as total annual sales per employee (Lo Bue & Martínez-Zarzoso, 2024). Additionally, Lo Bue & Martínez-Zarzoso (2024) defined no gender differences among manufacturing firms and declared that companies headed by women faced financial, political, and infrastructure challenges more often than men executives. We therefore hypothesize that women and men exhibit variations in tax-CAGR trajectories:

H2: Manager's gender has a significant relationship with the firm's tax-payment dynamics.

Firm Size (Number of Employees)

Larger workforces require more complex coordination, formalized procedures, and hierarchical decision making, all of which reflect managerial scope and capacity for long-term planning (Barney, 1991). Human capital resources enable dedicated strategy, risk management, and operational resilience.

Firms with larger workforces possess greater resource capacity and formalized strategic processes, enabling superior growth performance. The earlier study in the U.S. showed an industry-specific link between the company's profit and the size, since in some economic sectors this relationship matters and in others does not (Becker-Blease et al., 2010). Evidence from Asia-Pacific markets showed a robust positive correlation between firm size and profitability, with larger firms benefiting from economies of scale and reduced revenue volatility (Yadav et al., 2022). The study among 112 Turkish publicly listed companies concluded on the positive effect of the firm size measured by the number of employees, sales volume, and quantity of assets on the enterprise profitability (Isik et al., 2017). Considering the preceding studies review, we have formulated the following hypothesis:

H3: Larger firms by employee headcount exhibit higher tax-payment CAGR.

Firm Age

The previous academic works on the effect of a firm's age on the company's profitability growth are multifaceted. Some of the evidence in favor of the positive effect of the firm's older age (Akben-Selcuk, 2016; Ilaboya & Ohiokha, 2016), others revealed the opposite results (Coad, 2009) and the third defined zero difference (Al Nawaiseh, 2020). Akben-Selcuk (2016) in his study of the impact of the enterprise's age on its profitability growth identified that the older firms the better financial results they performed in Turkey. Ilaboya & Ohiokha (2016) revealed that the older firm age positively correlated with the firms' dynamic profitability based on 201 observations of companies listed on the Stock Exchange Market in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the research in Jordan declared no influence of firm age and firm size on its profitability growth (Al Nawaiseh, 2020).

Conversely, the continuous growth in size with time, and particularly in employee headcount, may trigger lower profitability due to the increasing costs. The long-term growth then is often followed by stagnation, and the factor of age should be considered in a complex of other variables, such as size and environment, that provides a more comprehensive view on the issue (Mansikkamäki, 2023). Younger firms, unencumbered by legacy processes and organizational inertia, display more agile, higher-growth trajectories, resulting in more considerable profitability (Federico & Capelleras, 2015), whereas older firms may experience slower growth with time (Coad, 2009). Following the summary of the earlier findings, we postulate:

H4: Older firms' tax-payment CAGR is slower compared to younger ones.

The designated hypotheses guided our empirical model, which linked proxy variables to observed financial growth, thus offering indirect but robust evidence on the role of strategic-planning competencies in Kazakhstan's agribusiness sector. By combining the declared proxies, it is possible to approximate the multifaceted nature of strategic competencies without requiring resource-intensive primary data collection. Prior studies in manufacturing, family-firm efficiency, and service industries have successfully employed similar proxy frameworks to link leadership characteristics to performance outcomes (Baležentis & Kriščiukaitienė, 2012).

The conducted literature review suggests that the inclusion of comprehensive measures can bring more reliable results in exploring the predictors of the firm's profitability reflected in its tax payment dynamics. While strategic thinking is inherently multifaceted and hard to measure directly, a carefully chosen set of observable proxies – manager tenure, firm age, workforce size, and leader's gender – offers a practical lens for evaluating its impact on firm performance, especially in data-constrained agricultural contexts like Kazakhstan.

Research methods

We assembled our dataset from two credible public data sources. First, the Kazakh Grain Union (2025), the country's principal industry association representing leading grain producers, processors, and traders, publishes audited annual financial disclosures. From its website, we extracted total tax-payment figures for the period 2014–2024 for all 186 member firms. Second, to ground the analysis, we pulled tax figures for every Grain Union member straight from the union's website. Corporate-registry details – when each company was founded, when the current chief executive took charge, head-count brackets, and the manager's gender – were borrowed from the Paragraph Information System (2025), Kazakhstan's authoritative legal database.

After dropping firms with missing 2014 or 2024 taxes or fuzzy hire dates, we ended up with a clean panel of 127 enterprises that is sufficient to run the numbers with confidence.

Variable Construction:

- CAGR of Tax Payments:

$$\mathbf{CAGRi} = \left(\frac{\mathbf{Taxi,2024}}{\mathbf{Taxi,2014}}\right) \quad - \mathbf{1},$$

Expressed in percentage points.

- Managerial tenure: 2024 minus the year the current manager was appointed.
- Firm age: 2024 minus the firm's registration year.

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• Firm size: average of reported headcount intervals (e.g., "151-200" recorded as 175).

• Manager's gender: coded 1 = male, 0 = female.

Firms with zero or missing tax in 2014 or 2024 were dropped to avoid division by zero. Numeric variables were coerced and inspected for anomalies; genuine outliers remained in the sample to preserve ecological validity. We computed descriptive statistics to ensure variable distributions were plausible and free of data-entry errors.

We estimated the following multiple linear regression model:

$$\mathbf{CAGRi} = \boldsymbol{\beta 0} + \boldsymbol{\beta 1 Agei} + \boldsymbol{\beta 2 Genderi} + \boldsymbol{\beta 3 Tenurei} + \boldsymbol{\beta 4 Employeesi} + \boldsymbol{\varepsilon i},$$

Using HC3 heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC) standard errors (White, 1980) to correct for potential variance heterogeneity. We judged significance at the 5% level. Model fit was evaluated via R^2, adjusted R^2, and F-statistic.

Research results and discussion

First, we analyzed the descriptive statistics of the basic profile of the 127 companies (Table 1). On average, today's general managers have been in the job just under twelve years (SD = 9.5). The firms themselves are a little older–roughly 17 years on average–though the spread is wide, from three-year-old newcomers to enterprises founded more than three decades ago.

Table 1. Key descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Managerial tenure (years)	11.84	9.50	3.00	33.00
Firm age (years)	16.61	8.60	3.00	33.00
Firm size (employee count)	64.15	93.42	3	751
Gender (male – 1, female - 0)	0.88	0.32	0.00	1.00
Tax CAGR (%)	3.04	4.31	0.00	19.79

Subsequent to the data analysis in Table 1, headcounts vary even more: a handful of micro-operations employ fewer than ten people, while one outlier tops 750; the mean settles around 93. Annual tax-payment growth (our stand-in for financial expansion) averages 3 percent, but again, the variation is hefty (SD = 4.3). Finally, the leadership landscape is still male-dominated: about four out of five CEOs are men.

The hypotheses were tested through multiple-regression estimates - HC3 standard errors (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of regression computation results

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	t-value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	4.118251	1.347970	3.055	0.00276 **
Firm age	-0.095439	0.054058	-1.765	0.07998
Manager's gender	-1.341920	1.179462	-1.138	0.25746
Managerial tenure	0.112605	0.049022	2.297	0.02332 *
Firm size (employee count)	0.005511	0.004102	1.343	0.18163
Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1				
Residual standard error: 4.228 on 122 degrees of freedom				
Multiple R-squared: 0.06564, Adjusted R-squared: 0.035				
F-statistic: 2.143 on 4 and 122 DF, p-value: 0.07957				

When we dropped these variables into a single regression, the picture that emerged was clear enough, even if the statistics were moderate compared with the textbook significance levels. Subsequent to the analysis of the data in Table 2, the model's R^2 is only 0.066, meaning we capture about 6% of what drives tax-payment growth; the F-test flirts with the 5% cut-off ($F[4, 122] = 2.143$, $p = 0.080$). The results revealed that *H1* was supported, whereas *H2*, *H3*, and *H4* were rejected.

Managerial Tenure

The findings evidence in favor of the influence of managerial tenure on Tax CAGR. Each additional year a manager stays on post is associated with a 0.11-percentage-point increase in annual tax growth ($p = 0.023$). The logic feels intuitive – long-standing leaders know their fields, stakeholders, suppliers, and regulators, and they can stick with multi-season investment bets that a short-timer might abandon (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991).

Firm Age

By contrast, the age of the firm leans negative ($\beta = -0.095$), but just misses traditional significance ($p = 0.080$). Although this pattern echoes the "liability of senescence" described by Coad (2009), where established firms sometimes lag in innovation or adaptation, in Kazakhstan's agricultural sector, where ancestral land leases, rigid crop rotations and entrenched supplier networks persist, this effect should be viewed as only provisionally supported rather than definitive.

Firm Size (Number of Employees)

Although Hypothesis 3 anticipated that larger firms would exhibit superior tax-payment growth, the employees variable is positive but non-significant (0.00551, $p = 0.182$). Therefore, sheer head-count doesn't guarantee faster growth, echoing long-standing warnings that bloat can cancel out scale economies (Barney, 1991; Isik et al., 2017). Mid-sized enterprises that combine enough hands-on deck with nimble decision loops may have the real edge, though it requires more empirical support and richer data.

Manager's Gender

The coefficient on "male vs. female CEO" is negative (-1.342) but not significant ($p = 0.257$). Prior studies found gender-based differences in managing innovations (Lipovka et al., 2021) and earnings management (Orazalin, 2020), but in this agribusiness context, performance appears independent of executives' gender. This result lines up with a growing stream of evidence that, when an entire sector faces the same weather shocks, price swings, and logistics headaches, leadership performance tends to level out across demographic lines (Mansikkamäki, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2017). Additionally, gender constraints in policies, infrastructure, and access to finance might impact the firm's revenue and further research results that were observed in the previous study of Lo Bue & Martínez-Zarzoso (2024).

The gained results extended strategic thinking and strategic planning theory (Mintzberg, 1994; Shiferaw & Kero, 2024) to the Central Asian agribusiness context. The positive tenure effect echoes leadership continuity studies in manufacturing and services (Boamah et al., 2023; Finkelstein et al., 2009) but represents one of the first empirical validations in Kazakhstan's grain sector. Why do our headcount and gender coefficients look so tame when international studies sometimes paint a sharper picture (Isik et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2022)? The likely answer is context and industry. Grain production here is relatively homogeneous: most firms grow, store, and ship the same bulk commodities under the same policy umbrella, utilizing similar Soviet-legacy infrastructure. In that setting, extra staff or a different demographic mix in the top chair may not move the needle as much as access to rail cars or weather insurance.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. The first is proxy limits: our stand-in variables can't capture the fine-grained mindsets and routines that factual strategic thinking involves. The second limitation relates to the tax-payment growth variable that assumes an indirect indicator of a firm's profitability increase that requires additional

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measurements (sales growth, return on assets, return on equity) in the future for a more sophisticated picture. The last limitation assumes model reach since the low R2 (6.6%) indicates that many relevant factors such as capital investments, market diversification, weather shocks, and policy changes might remain unobserved.

Conclusion

The present research showed a significant impact of the length of managerial tenure on positive dynamics of the grain firms' tax payments, which are associated with the company's profitability growth. Therefore, adding a single year to a manager's tenure and the firm's annual tax growth edges up by about 0.11 percentage points. Familiarity with local soils, rail timetables, and ministry paperwork turns out to be good in finance.

The marginally significant negative impact of older firms on the tax payment growth might be engendered by more bureaucratic structures lacking adaptability to new technologies due to their rigid systems and a deficit of flexibility. Since the firm's age did not demonstrate a significant impact on the company's tax payment increase, we suggest more focus on employing and developing experienced managers who could bring more profit to the firm.

Larger firm size does not mean an automatic increase in the firm's tax-payment growth that might be caused by higher additional costs. A swollen payroll does not automatically translate into higher returns. What counts is how well those employees are organized and how clearly their efforts align with a shared strategy.

Leadership style trumps a manager's profile. Whether the director is a woman or a man simply doesn't move the growth needle in this dataset, since in different industries, managers' experience matters more compared to their gender. In Kazakhstan's grain belt, seasonal rhythms and commodity markets appear to neutralize any gender-related management differences noted elsewhere.

Proxies explain the examined issues only partially. Our model captured just 6.6% of the variation in growth, hinting at the many hidden factors such as capital upgrades, crop mixes, logistics bottlenecks, and shifting policies that also shape performance. Even so, public records alone let us flag where leadership continuity matters most and where other levers deserve attention. Looking ahead, richer studies that blend large-scale data with on-the-ground interviews and surveys could reveal how strategic thinking actually plays out in daily decisions. Such insight will help the sector cultivate leaders capable of steering Kazakhstani agribusiness through the volatility that almost certainly lies ahead.

To act on these findings, grain firms should lock in leadership know-how by pairing veteran CEOs with succession protégés and by codifying key routines in concise "field playbooks." Streamlining bloated organisational charts and mixing tech-savvy recruits with seasoned agronomists can lift efficiency without sacrificing stability. On the policy side, concessional loans or equipment subsidies could be tied to proven executive continuity, while state-backed courses in strategy and risk management would ready mid-career managers for top roles. Better sector data—covering yields, transport costs, and exports, plus targeted logistics upgrades and lighter compliance for young, innovative firms, would further amplify growth across Kazakhstan's grain industry.

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