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Case Study

Escoffier’s Recipe For A Target Operating Model

Guidance

1. This case-study enables in-depth exploration of the components of one of history’s most successful target operating models.
2. It is recommended that you read the case-study from end-to-end first for overall context.
3. Then re-read from a thematic viewpoint. Slide 11 of this case-study sets out reflection points and challenge questions.
4. This case-study is not designed for viewing on a small screen. A monitor size of at least 19 inches is advised for comfortable viewing.

Author:
Damian Fessey
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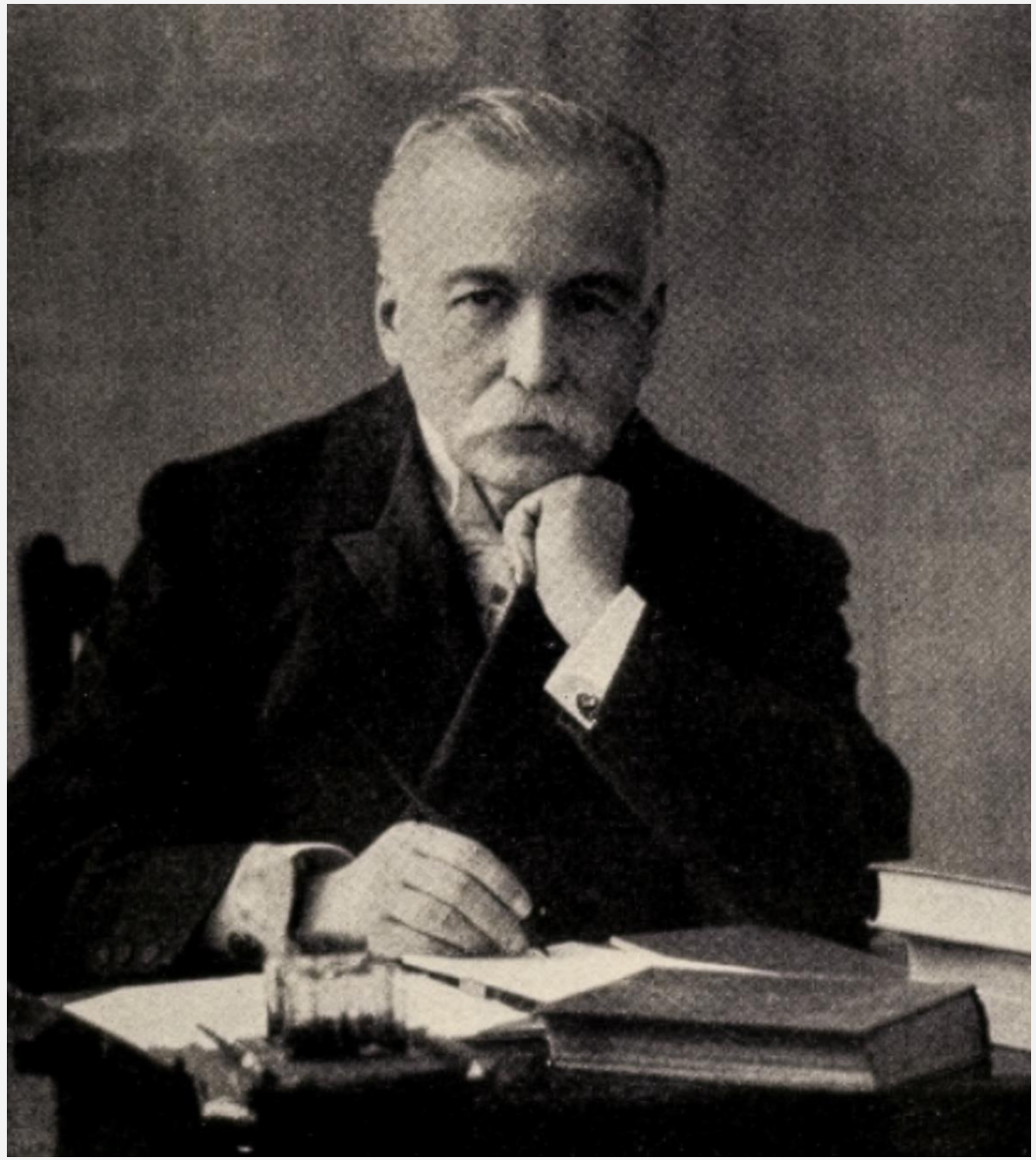
Introduction

Whenever the term 'target operating model' is mentioned, most seasoned execs are able to recite the 'people-process-technology' mantra, but do we ***really*** *understand what a target operating model* ***is****, what it* ***does****, and how to* ***design****,* ***implement*** *and* ***leverage*** *it well?*

Whilst the concept of a target operating model is most commonly applied in the present-day context of digital transformations, one of history's most widespread and enduring target operating models was invented decades before the advent of microchips or even the use of the term 'target operating model' in a boardroom or business school. To this day it remains the bedrock of the global $800Bn restaurant industry, and yet its origins lie in the experiences of a single Frenchman, struggling to establish himself in the culinary world in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

This operating model, commonly referred to as the brigade de cuisine, is notable for two reasons. The first is the extent to which it has travelled, not just across the globe, but also through time, originating over 130 years ago. The second is its proven ability to address two of the most difficult (and seemingly mutually exclusive) aspects of operations; perfection and speed.

The man who invented the brigade de cuisine, Georges Auguste Escoffier, was popularised as the 'chef of kings and the king of chefs', but arguably his finest recipe was not the Peach Melba or the Bombe Napoléon, but a recipe for a target operating model that recognises the multiple facets, complexities and subtleties that extend far beyond the simple 'people-process-technology' mantra.



The Pressure Cooker

To what extent are highly effective target operating models the product of an external catalyst - such as changing market conditions?

The demise (in some cases, literally) of much of the European aristocracy from the late 1700s had a number of societal impacts, but one of the more subtle changes occurred in the world of the culinary arts. The aristocracy's position as the main consumer of fine dining gave way to an emerging middle class, which presented a much larger demographic with one vitally different characteristic: Although affluent, this middle class still had to work and was therefore relatively time poor. Consequently, it could afford the menu, but not the former aristocratic dining experience spanning several hours in the preparation and delivery. Meals would have to be prepared and served in a much shorter timeframe. For the emerging middle-class demographic.

However, the culinary world seemingly did not recognise the emerging need for faster food. Chefs soldiered on, preparing the same menus in the same kitchens under the same conditions, with the same gastronomic expectations. Fundamentally, their operating model had not adapted to the changing market.

As a result, professional kitchens evolved into quite combative environments: Individual chefs continued to cook whole meals, battling (sometimes literally) with each other for workspace, ingredients, utensils, pots, pans, hobs and ovens. Drinking, smoking, swearing and shouting were all commonplace daily behaviours. Societally, the position of chef was accorded a very low status. Fatal occurrences of food poisoning were not uncommon, often the result of cross-contamination of ingredients in unhygienic, cramped and dimly lit kitchens.

Enter Escoffier

The incubation period for the brigade de cuisine was not only very long, it was also a product of multiple extreme circumstances ranging from early career success to a major European war.

Georges Auguste Escoffier was born in Villeneuve-Loubet, a small village outside Nice, France, in 1846. Although he showed early promise as an artist, he was taken out of school at the age of 12 to begin an apprenticeship in the kitchen of his uncle's restaurant. He demonstrated an aptitude not only for cooking, but also for the management of kitchen operations, and at the age of 19 was recruited to Le Petit Moulin Rouge in Paris.

Unfortunately, the role was short-lived as Escoffier was called up that year for military duty in the Franco-Prussian war, where he served as a chef. Following his capture at the siege of Metz, he was permitted to continue his culinary career even as a prisoner of war and was well-treated - in contrast to many of his comrades.

Following the end of the war and demobilisation, he returned initially to France and continued his career, from where, in partnership with the famed hotelier César Ritz, he then alternated between the Grand Hôtel in Monaco during winter and the Grand Hôtel National in Lucerne in the summertime.

By the time his biggest career break occurred in 1890, he had already amassed 32 years of professional experience in environments as diverse as the front line of a European War and some of the most celebrated restaurants in the world.

The Turning Point

"For all D'Oyly's innovative offerings, characteristic dynamism and illustrious early visitors, the hotel suffered a wobbly start. After his three big parties, the fun was over for a while. As he relied on his friends to fill up the bedrooms, the Bar and Restaurant, he could hardly sleep for anxiety, fearing himself to be on the brink of ruin."

Williams, Olivia. "The Secret Life of the Savoy: and the D'Oyly Carte family."

For the Ritz and Escoffier partnership, opportunity came knocking in 1890, in the form of Richard D'Oyly Carte and his recently launched hotel, The Savoy, in London. The initial launch had failed to capture the public imagination, and D'Oyly Carte, in imminent danger of losing his investment, doubled down by hiring the celebrated duo to manage the turnaround of the hotel. The centrepiece of its recovery was to be its transformation into the gastronomic epicentre of the world. For Escoffier, the former army chef, this was about to become his most challenging mission ever.

The challenge came with a proportionately-sized mandate: Escoffier was to have a completely free hand in all aspects of the dining experience: His remit covered everything from the design of the kitchens to the front-of-house operations. For the first time in his career, he could implement his ideas without limits or compromise.

Escoffier's strategy would draw on the full breadth of his preceding 32 years of professional experience. A wide and varied menu that allowed diners to give full rein to their individual preferences would mean a higher probability of rave reviews. It would also allow diners to manage their allergies and intolerances better – a factor that had historically contributed to the perceived risk of food poisoning.

Multiple courses would ensure that The Savoy's reputation was built on the totality of the dining experience rather than on individual dishes, and enabled diners to experience a range of savoury and sweet dishes which would appeal to their full range of taste buds.

Prompt (but not rushed) service would eliminate the long wait typically associated with a dining experience. Serving individual diners their courses simultaneously (which was not a given in 1890) would better enable them to experience, comment on and even (literally) share their dining with each other. All of these elements would be combined into a consistently high standard that would effectively guarantee the quality of the experience on every visit. And as a final differentiator, a high standard of hygiene would eliminate the longstanding spectre of food-poisoning.

So, Escoffier had both a very clear mission and a very clear strategy to achieve it. However, there was one very obvious problem: An operating model that had not fundamentally changed since the days of the European aristocracy simply could not support his strategy. The key to success lay not in fabulous recipes or opulent dining rooms, but in fundamentally changing the way the restaurant kitchen would operate.

Re-engineering the Restaurant Kitchen

"Great attention should be bestowed upon the cooking process, a few seconds more or less than the required time being sufficient to spoil the eggs."

Escoffier, Auguste;
Le Guide Culinaire

Using specific dishes as the focal point, Escoffier examined different ways to achieve delivery in accordance with his vision. For example, he worked out that Eggs a la Meyerbeer could be cooked in a third of the time **and** to perfection **if**, rather than tasking a single chef with the dish (as was then the norm), the work was simultaneously shared between specialists; one to bake the eggs in butter, one to grill the kidneys and one to make the truffle sauce.

Each component of the recipe was consequently done to a consistently higher standard, and it was a better working arrangement for the chefs as they were more likely to succeed if afforded the opportunity to concentrate on perfection without the need for multi-tasking. Fundamentally, Escoffier had found the answers to the need for perfection under tight time pressures; specialism and teamwork.

He set about formalising this approach into a structure which he termed the 'brigade de cuisine' (in reference to his former military service). The brigade was headed by a Chef de cuisine (an executive chef) in charge of staffing and menu planning, supported by a Sous chef (the second-in-command), whose responsibilities specifically included the maintenance of hygiene standards, staff training and the quality of food and drink; both the taste and the presentation. The final element of the coordinating layer was the Aboyeur (expediter, or 'barker') whose role was to accept the orders from the waiters, assign tasks to the individual stations and check each plate prior to it leaving the kitchen.

Key to Escoffier's organisation was the redesign of the physical kitchen space. Not only was The Savoy's new kitchen considerably larger than most, it was also subdivided into stations where different types of food preparation would be carried out by specialists in various forms of cooking.

The use of stations contributed significantly to Escoffier's hygiene drive as (for example) cooked and uncooked meats were never handled at the same stations. Specialisms ranged from frying (which was done by a Friturier) to sauces (provided by the aptly named Saucier).

Stations could be substantial in size and therefore have several specialists, so within each station there would be a senior chef (Chef de partie), supported by a deputy (Demi-chef) overseeing the line cooks (Commis) – the Chefs de partie of the future, to be trained under the watchful eye of the Sous chef.

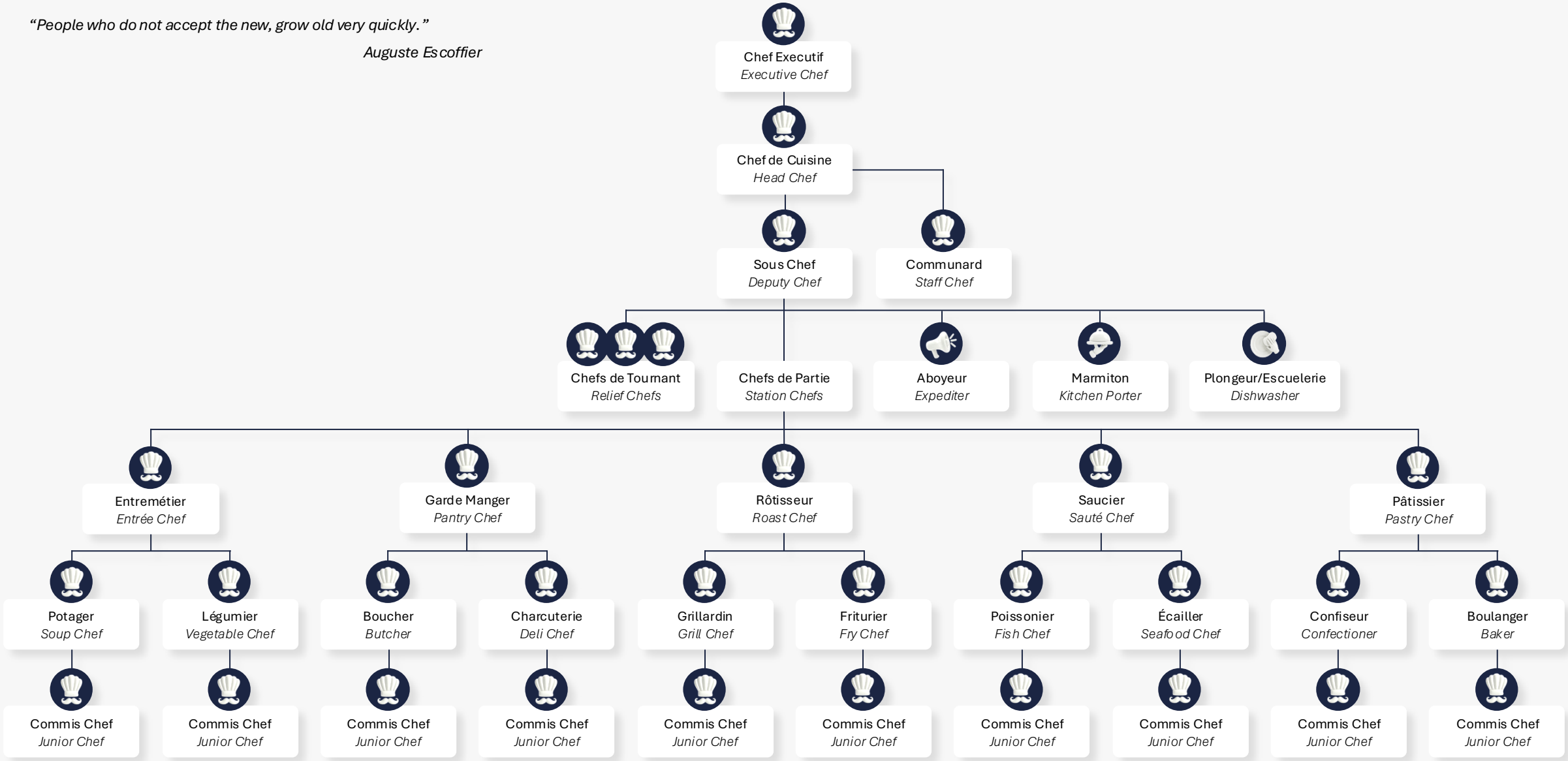
The scalability of the brigade worked both ways: In a larger kitchen, frying, grilling and roasting were dedicated roles, but these could be combined into a single role in a smaller kitchen without sacrificing task focus and specialism.

In the event that a particular dish proved popular, the Chefs de partie could also call upon Tournants – relief chefs who had been trained to work at any station within the brigade: Scalability, redundancy and career progression were all built directly into the target operating model, ready and waiting to be invoked instantly should the need arise.

The Brigade de Cuisine

"People who do not accept the new, grow old very quickly."

Auguste Escoffier



Culture and Behaviours

“Here you are expected to be polite. Any other behaviour is contrary to our practice…”

Auguste Escoffier

Escoffier’s organisational design also included a supporting cast of Plongeurs (dish washers) and Marmitons (porters), and the option to have sub-specialisms if warranted by the scale of the kitchen operation: For example, the role of Pâtissier (pastry chef) in a larger kitchen could be further subdivided into specialisms such as Glacier (producing ice-creams and sorbets), and even a Décorateur for intricate finish work such as icing.

The final member of the brigade was the only one who had no direct involvement with the front of house dining experience. The job of the Communard was to cook meals for the kitchen staff – a solution to the age-old problem of chefs not having time to cook for themselves during a long shift. It served as a clear demonstration that the linkages between staff welfare and performance, and the quality of the resulting customer experience were properly reflected in the brigade de cuisine.

For each role, there was not only a clearly defined work area and a management hierarchy to direct the work, but also a set of skills (codified by Escoffier himself) that staff were expected to master: Escoffier was particularly careful not to confuse recipes with skills and techniques. The focus on skills and techniques was supported by a strong commitment to training. Escoffier himself trained over 2,000 chefs in his career; a major factor in the subsequent propagation of the brigade de cuisine across the world.

Escoffier’s expectations extended well beyond skills and competencies. His experience of more combative kitchens and the traumas of the Franco-Prussian War led him to place great emphasis on a calm working environment. Staff were not permitted to smoke (on grounds of both hygiene and to avoid tainting the aromas of the meals) and were not allowed to drink alcohol – partly to avoid unruly behaviour but also to safeguard productivity, concentration and safety.

Escoffier even consulted a local doctor and concocted a lemon barley drink (which proved popular) to ensure that staff remained properly hydrated throughout their shifts in the unavoidably hot kitchens.

Uniforms were another target of his innovation: The brilliant white chef’s jacket ensured that any hygiene issues were immediately evident, and the chef’s hat (the ‘toque’) was a ledge against the risk of the proverbial hair ending up in the soup.

One of Escoffier’s ambitions was to elevate the social status of the culinary profession, so he also required his staff to be professionally attired outside of work: “Every cook is an ambassador for his or her profession and must be properly dressed on their free time.”

Instances of poor behaviour (which in his view included shouting and swearing) were rare in Escoffier’s kitchens, but where they did occur, his response simply was to say to the person concerned, "Here you are expected to be polite. Any other behaviour is contrary to our practice..."

Simple Sophistication

"Above all, keep it simple."
Auguste Escoffier

Although Escoffier was undoubtedly an innovator of recipes – across his career he invented over 5,000 – he believed passionately that cooking processes were capable of being rationalised and simplified by modularisation – and that this was essential for the scale of operations required at The Savoy.

Whilst the design of the brigade de cuisine was undoubtedly more complex than the simple structure it replaced, it had a remarkable effect on Escoffier's processes – his recipes: The ingredients remained the same, but the timing aspects of the method – a complex choreography when performed by a single chef – were largely irrelevant under the more specialised brigade system as the timing and coordination came not from the method itself, but from the Aboyeur. He had successfully traded complexity of organisational design for simplicity of processes.

He also introduced modularisation in the form of the cinq sauces mères (the 'five mother sauces'); which served as a base from which almost any other sauces could be made simply by customising with a few additional ingredients; the perfect solution to the age-old culinary question of how to produce sophisticated recipes simply. Escoffier codified much of his efforts in Le Guide Culinaire – still a widely read text in culinary schools today.

His experience of kitchen combat in his earlier career also led him to introduce the concept of 'mis en place' ('everything in place'); the notion that prior to even starting the cooking process, the chef should read the recipe and then gather together and prepare all of the ingredients required, and have all of the utensils, cookware and any other essential items immediately to hand.

Nothing was allowed to distract the chef during the time-sensitive process of cooking where the difference between 'perfectly-seared' and 'burnt' could be a matter of vital seconds. Mis en place also reduced physical movement in the kitchens, and therefore the potential for accidents, as well as contention for ingredients and utensils between chefs.

Even in 1890, technology played its part. His labour-saving gadgetry inventions included a hand-cranked mill for converting stale loaves into perfectly-sized breadcrumbs (essential for evenly-cooked gratin dishes) and he even invented a device for removing the stones from olives, which made the high-volume production of olive recipes, such as tapenades, feasible. These devices removed much of the tedium of preparation, which proved very popular with the kitchen staff, demonstrating that quality, efficiency and job satisfaction could be not just mutually compatible, but mutually supportive.

Escoffier's wartime role as an army chef to the French officer corps had given him unique insights into the logistics of sourcing quality ingredients in the field. Accordingly, he was very attentive to supply chains. For ingredients that needed to be fresh, he was an early advocate of farm-to-kitchen, long before the phrase was popularised. For ingredients where convenience was key, he forged alliances with the food industry directly resulting in innovations such as tinned tomatoes and the humble, but very useful stock cube.

The Legacy

The consumption of food is one of the most basic of human needs. Escoffier elevated it to a scalable, transportable art form, still enjoyed across the world over a century later.

He achieved this, not through his famous recipes, or even through the reputation of The Savoy Grill, but via his target operating model; the brigade de cuisine.

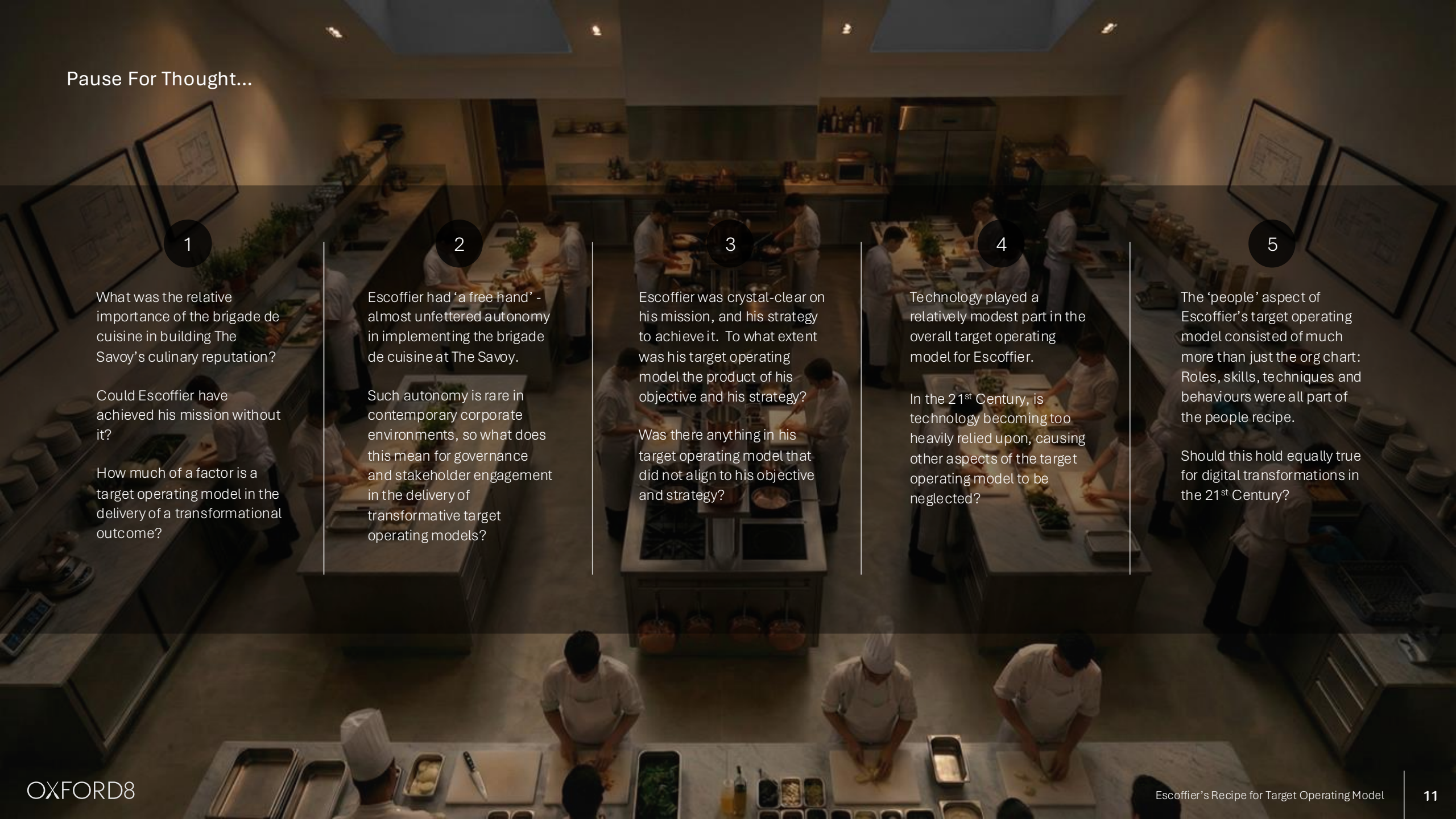
Escoffier's tenure at The Savoy continued for eight years until a fall-out with the hotel owners amid contentious allegations of accounting discrepancies, malpractice and side-interests leading to the departure of both Escoffier and Ritz, much to the dismay of the staff, which resulted in the infamous 'Savoy Kitchen Revolt.' During his tenure, Escoffier had comprehensively achieved his mission of staking The Savoy's claim on the global culinary title. It had become known internationally for exceptional cuisine, service and surroundings and was the premier destination for celebrities, royalty and the business elite.

In the years that followed, Escoffier projected the operating model way beyond the physical perimeters of that time: Using the emerging innovations of the telephone and air mail, Escoffier was able to leverage the brigade de cuisine to stage simultaneous dining events across the world. The Gourmet League staged its world-first Epicurean Dinner in 1912, hosted in 27 cities across Europe, serving an identical (and secret) menu at the same time via the brigade de cuisine to 4,000 diners. The tradition continues today.

However, viewed purely through the lens of a highly successful restaurant, Escoffier's accomplishments are impressive, but not ground-breaking. The restaurant industry, even in 1890 was fast-moving and somewhat fickle: The next great chef and the next venue 'to be seen in' were always around the corner – sometimes literally – in London.

In the years that followed Escoffier's tenure at The Savoy came two world wars and population movement (aided by air travel) the like of which the world had never previously experienced. As populations moved, they brought their cuisine with them, and the fashion-conscious world of dining was subjected to an ever-broadening ranges of genres, recipes, methods, ingredients, devices and styles. Just as with the digital landscape in the 21st Century, the restaurant industry has experienced - and continues to experience - a constant state of flux.

Throughout this period, the brigade de cuisine has remained the default for high-end restaurants around the world, complete with its roles, its techniques and even its behaviours. Escoffier's original recipe for the target operating model is still – literally – what's cooking in the kitchen.



Pause For Thought...

1

What was the relative importance of the brigade de cuisine in building The Savoy's culinary reputation?

Could Escoffier have achieved his mission without it?

How much of a factor is a target operating model in the delivery of a transformational outcome?

2

Escoffier had 'a free hand' - almost unfettered autonomy in implementing the brigade de cuisine at The Savoy.

Such autonomy is rare in contemporary corporate environments, so what does this mean for governance and stakeholder engagement in the delivery of transformative target operating models?

3

Escoffier was crystal-clear on his mission, and his strategy to achieve it. To what extent was his target operating model the product of his objective and his strategy?

Was there anything in his target operating model that did not align to his objective and strategy?

4

Technology played a relatively modest part in the overall target operating model for Escoffier.

In the 21st Century, is technology becoming too heavily relied upon, causing other aspects of the target operating model to be neglected?

5

The 'people' aspect of Escoffier's target operating model consisted of much more than just the org chart: Roles, skills, techniques and behaviours were all part of the people recipe.

Should this hold equally true for digital transformations in the 21st Century?

Sources

This case study has been compiled by the author, drawing on the following sources:

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- *Exhibition panels of the Musée Escoffier de l'Art Culinaire, Villeneuve-Loubet, France, authored by Bénédict Beaugé, Culinary Writer, and Emma Simanski, Deputy Curator.*

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