

## ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with fewer than 250 employees are the category of firm which accounts for the majority of businesses worldwide. In spite of their strategically important role as “engines of economic growth”, scant research has been devoted thus far to the underlying owner-manager learning processes in SMEs. In the literature on learning, little distinction is made between micro, small and medium-sized businesses in terms of company size or ownership structure. The literature also provides few reference points for the question of how owner-managers learn in start-ups and small family firms as their businesses develop. The investigation of both types of owner-managers in small firms enriches the research context.

The research main aim is to explore the learning of founding owner-managers<sup>1</sup> (‘founders’) and initial successor owner-managers (‘successors’) in small family firms in greater depth, focusing on both *content* and *process* which lead to the growth of start-ups and small family firms, taking into account the development of Human Capital (HC). The social and contextual integration of owner-managers into the business environment is also considered. The research interest and emphasis are directed at analysing the learning of owner-managers on the basis of their understanding and interpretation of critical events during the development of the firm within its business and social environment. In order to capture these learning processes of the individual owner-managers, a phenomenological research paradigm is adopted.

To fulfil the research aim, extensive literature research was carried out on the themes of entrepreneurial learning, learning at the workplace, Intellectual Capital (IC) and HC as well as the development of small and family firms. In order to explore these themes in the context of entrepreneurial development in the Rhine Valley, the research topic was extended to include regional business and training development in this geographical area (with its bordering countries Austria, Liechtenstein and

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<sup>1</sup> The term owner-manager is used in this thesis for both types of owner-managers, i.e. founders and successors, in small firms.

Switzerland). The research sample with a multiple-case study design encompasses six owner-managers, founders and initial successors of technology-based small firms with fewer than 50 employees in the Rhine Valley region. The empirical data collection was based on a pilot interview phase with the owner-managers, followed by two interview phases in autumn 2008 and spring 2010 as part of a longitudinal study. The iterative data analysis integrates several systematic approaches to code, analyse and compare these six case study firms to identify the learning approaches of the owner-managers.

The key findings obtained are described with the aid of the developed “Hexagon Framework”<sup>2</sup>. This model visualises the dynamics of continuous learning for owner-managers, founders and successors in small firms. The knowledge contribution of the thesis lies in the identification and analysis of the different learning trajectories of the owner-managers, who either founded a start-up or took over a firm as initial successor. The findings make a significant contribution towards an enhanced understanding of the dynamics of continuous learning processes for owner-managers in small firms during development phases. In addition, the developed framework of the owner-manager learning continuum contributes to entrepreneurial learning theory.

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<sup>2</sup> The hexagon framework is introduced in subsection 5.7.5