

Entrepreneurial management and employee-driven innovative work practices

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Abstract

In this study we will investigate the continuities and disruptions between entrepreneurial management and employee-driven innovative work practices in small family businesses within the manufacturing sector. The paper contributes to research on innovative behaviour of employees in particular by extending the focus to small, manufacturing companies. Second, we understand the leadership and management practices of the entrepreneur to bear not only positive but potentially negative consequences on the employee innovative behaviour. Here we rely on the notion of 'dark side of entrepreneurship' from Kets de Vries (1985). The paper relies on 'practice approach' by focusing on practices as the empirical object of the study, on one hand, and by understanding practices as constituting the social reality, on the other. The paper is based on a case study in two Finnish, small- or medium-sized manufacturing companies. Interviews and observations were carried out in both firms. Our findings highlight that first *the small size of the firms as the context* for these companies is highly influential in terms of understanding the innovative behaviour of employees in the companies. In this context the role of any individual employee is paramount for the smooth and uninterrupted production within the company. In this context the broad job descriptions require all employees to volunteer for rush hour duties and for helping in the practical running of things. The informal and flat organisation contributes to the meetings taking place and decisions taken 'on the go'. Second, despite the flatness of the organisation it also becomes clear that the *entrepreneur has the ultimate say* in all matters. In the meetings any difficult question is ended with the decision to ask the CEO. There are no practices to involve employees or some of those practices have been abolished to allow for 'smooth' decision-making. The employees do not necessarily question this practice but resort to their own 'bubble'. In future studies more insight understanding needs to be developed of the organisational practices and the interrelationship between the entrepreneurial management and employees in order to provide a better ground for understand innovative behaviour in the small firms. In this paper we combined the focus on small size and the entrepreneurial management but our study also suggests that the manufacturing context is one important element that merits further attention. Finally, our study sheds some light into the question how and under what conditions the entrepreneurial management can indeed represent the dark side of entrepreneurship but further studies are needed to develop this notion further.

Introduction

Innovation is a key for growth and competitiveness in small firms (Freel, 2005; Wolff & Pett 2006). Innovation has been extensively studied in the small firm context but mainly as an attribute of the organization or through the abilities the entrepreneur/entrepreneurial team. Currently, innovation studies focus on the role of employees in generating and contributing to

the innovations. However, little studies have been made on the interplay between leadership and innovation (de Jong & Den Hartog 2007).

Large firms or even small expert firms cannot be really compared to small manufacturing firms due to the differences in contextual arrangements of work (flexible work vs. shift work) and in nature of work (expert work vs. manual work). Florén (2006) argues that previous studies focusing on management practices in small firms have not paid attention to the context, they assume that the managers have a freedom of choice and that they rely on deductive, rather than inductive analyses. Florén (2006) suggests that future studies should investigate the dialectic relationship between the manager and the context in which they work. Hence, we believe it is important to study also small manufacturing firms in this respect and provide contextualised new knowledge of employee innovative behaviour in these firms – as facilitated or hindered by the management/CEO work practices.

Based on previous literature it is possible to assume two divergent realities in small, entrepreneur-led family businesses. On one hand these flat and informal organisations may leave a lot of room for employee initiative and activity. On the other hand, the strong entrepreneurial management may crowd out employee activity.

In this study we will investigate the continuities and disruptions between entrepreneurial management and employee-driven innovative work practices in small family businesses within the manufacturing sector.

Practice research

The study relies on the concept of ‘practice’ in business research (e.g. Whittington, 2006; Eriksson et al., 2008; Laine and Vaara, 2010). A key argument in this debate is that ‘what practitioners do in practice’ cannot be understood with the main stream management and organization theories, which do not acknowledge practitioners as experts of their own work (Salaman and Storey, 2002), nor pay attention to organizational work as ‘practice’ (Dougherty, 2006).

The concept of practice is quite ambiguous. As Nicolini (2009) and Corradi et al. (2010) have pointed out, there are several different dimensions of practices that the researchers have been focusing on depending on the theoretical tradition they are relying on and – of course – the topics of interest. Briefly, practice can be seen either as an ‘empirical object’, where interest is on the activities of the practitioners, or as ‘a way of seeing’, which acknowledges that macro level phenomena are created and recreated through the practices of individuals (Corradi et al. 2010). Situatedness and embeddedness of human rationality and knowing as well as relevance of material and non-human environment are elements that commonly characterise practice theories. For our paper, we define practice according to Reckwitz (2002, 250) as “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood”.

Dark side of entrepreneurial management?

Within entrepreneurship and small business research, there has been a limited attention to what entrepreneurs and small business managers actually do. Florén (2006) provides an overview of five studies investigating owner-managers' work. One of the few studies is a study from O'Gorman et al (2005) which investigated the work of owner-managers in small, growth-oriented manufacturing firms. The main conclusion from the studies is that the work is characterized by brevity and fragmentation: their work typically involves a lot of unscheduled meetings and other 'interruptions'. The small business managers are 'jacks-of-all-trades', ie. their work involves both operational and strategic activities. They also spend a lot of time communicating with their employees. Interestingly it was found out that the majority of time is spent with few supervisors and secretaries and not with the first-line employees. Hence, the assumed closeness of the CEO and employees was questioned. (O'Gorman et al, 2005; Florén, 2006.)

Owner-managers have simultaneously many roles. They are entrepreneurs, managers and leaders at the same time. Professional abilities are combined with the need to be able to operate in complex and insecure situation, the ability to identify and solve problems, abilities to learn and to work in and manage networks. In small firms it is difficult to distinguish between the entrepreneur and the firm (Cope and Watts, 2000). The roles of the owner-managers as entrepreneurs, leaders and managers are separable but partly overlapping (de Jong & Den Hartog 2007), which may cause some mismatch between the role expectations and the management practices (Wincent et al., 2008). Kets de Vries pointed towards the potential of dark side in entrepreneurship already in 1985. What he suggested was that the traits and behaviours of entrepreneurs that allow them to succeed in their businesses can prove to be detrimental in their roles as a managers or co-workers. (Kets de Vries, 1985) However, this view has not gained much interest and focus within the entrepreneurship research. The few studies that exist indeed empirically demonstrate that the attitudes displayed by many entrepreneurs constitute an abuse of entrepreneurial power, which may lead directly to the failure of the firm (Beaver and Jennings, 2005). On the other hand, the owner-managers' role as a manager strives the organisation towards predictability, but his/her leadership skills are needed mostly to accomplish incremental or sudden changes in the firm (Kotter, 1990).

In their study among knowledge-intensive service companies de Jong and Den Hartog (2007) identified 13 leader behaviours among managers that are connected to innovative behaviour, some of them related to idea generation phase and some to application phase, some to both. In the end they concluded that it seems like almost impossible for a leader *not* to affect the employees' innovative behaviour. Some of the studied behaviour constructs were explicitly aimed to influence individual behaviour, like providing visions on the preferred types of innovation or intellectual stimulation. Some of the behaviour patterns were quite general leader behaviours, like ensuring sufficient autonomy, offering consultation or recognising employees' initiatives. Tolerance for failures and sufficient resource allocation were also regarded very important enablers of employee innovativeness.

Innovative behaviour of employees

Innovation refers most commonly to commercialized invention like a new technology, product or process. Our concept is wider. By innovation we understand both radical and incremental renewal of the products and services, processes and work practices alike (Wolff & Pett, 2006). Innovative behaviour of employees has been mostly studied in large firms and public sector organisations (Morianio et al., 2011) or in expert services (de Jong & Den Hartog, 2007). Our aim is to widen the view and to study the innovation practices of employees in small and medium sized manufacturing companies.

Innovative behaviour of employees has been defined in various ways. Some definitions stress the personality characteristics, some the social aspects, some the initiation phase of innovation, and some the implementation (see e.g. de Jong & Den Hartog, 2007). The innovative behaviour of employees has been described as an activity involving problem finding, conceptualization and solving as well as implementation of the solutions (Basadur 2004). When innovative behaviour includes both initiation and implementation phases of innovation, it comes very near of the behaviour of a corporate entrepreneur. Therefore, both the corporate entrepreneurial processes and the innovation processes can be seen as outcomes of continuous interplay between the management and employees (Heinonen & Toivonen 2008).

The specific concept of employee driven innovation (EDI) has been used intensively in Nordic action research literature over last couple of years. The concept entails the notion of incremental organisational renewal and acknowledges the importance of active employees, emphasises the work practices, work life quality and learning at work. EDI is defined as a new idea created by employees which results in a new, shared, and sustainable routine (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2010; Hoeve & Niewenhuis 2006; Feldman & Pentland 2003). According to Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2010, 157–158) EDI must meet three criteria: (a) “it must create value for the organization”, (b) “it must improve work organizing”, and (c) “it must improve work life quality for employees”.

Methodology

Having chosen the case method (Yin, 1989), the selection of cases was of critical importance (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Depending on the logic and purpose, there are various strategies guiding the selection process; whether the researchers target cases with unique or typical characteristics, with little or great variation, whether the cases are selected on an event or theoretical basis, or if there is a sequential selection process, or a combination of the above (Neergard, 2007). For the purposes of this research, we selected two small or medium-sized manufacturing firms. They are similar in the sense that they both have been and are innovative in terms of their products or processes. Both are located in South-West Finland and are family businesses.

In this study we understand entrepreneurial management and employee work as practices. The research materials include interviews and observation materials in the two organisations. For the first case six interviews were conducted, three meetings observed and some document

materials studied. For the second case also six employees were interviewed and some observations on the work place were done. In addition the research materials include also some informal discussions with the staff.

In the analysis our focus is on the practices and the kind of realities they produce. To study practices, the following issues are of interest:

- routinized ways of operating in the organization,
- assumptions and ideas, for example, assumptions why certain things are done the way they are,
- (unwritten) rules of the game that form the basis for the activities,
- language applied to describe the activities,
- knowledge and skills that are appreciated (or not appreciated),
- emotions and 'bodiliness' and
- physical space and conditions for the activity.

In the analysis we identify and focus on practices that support or impede innovative behaviour of employees in the case organisations.

Results

Case descriptions

The study was carried out as a case study in two innovative small family businesses in the Turku region between summer 2012 and summer 2013. The companies can be characterised as innovative, since both of them have been able to develop their products proactively, survive and grow in the environment of intense competition during last decades.

The first case is a food production company that is managed by the owner-manager. The company is over 70 years old. It has approximately 80 employees. Around 50 of the employees work in the production, 20 in wrapping department and 10 in sales/office. The production work is done in three shifts around the clock.

The second case is from a manufacturer of medical devices managed by a hired CEO. It is also a family business with the incumbent acting as the Chairman of the Board and his daughter and son-in-law actively working in the firm. The company has around 30 employees. There are two production lines for different kind of products and approximately 10 employees work for each line, and the rest of employees in the sales/office.

Both the size of the company and the logic of operations are relevant when striving to understand the practices that take place and their relation to innovative behaviour in small, manufacturing firms. Characteristics like shift work, division of work tasks, role of trade unions and number of employees are issues of relevance in this respect. For example, working in shifts causes some extra challenges in the sharing of information and building commitment to the work community. Also the strong role of the trade unions in food sector reduces the possibilities for local bargaining and adds one new relevant factor to the context – a stakeholder that needs to be taken into account. Therefore, both the institutional factors and

the company level issues need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the practices observed in the workplaces.

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Cross-case analysis

Based on the findings we identified some practices that are similar in both cases despite them operating in highly different industries. The first set of interconnected practices is linked to the ***small size of the firms*** and hence by definition to the small number of employees in them.

Jacks-of-all-trades: All hands are needed for hands on work

The small number of employees indicates that all hands are needed for hands-on work. Even employees with designated special responsibilities that are reflected in their job titles are needed or have been accustomed to complete very hands-on routines. A marketing manager will personally fill in envelopes with marketing materials and attach the address labels. A person responsible for customer care self-identifies to be one of the customer care team, also responsible for helping out in the delivery and shipping out of goods. Hence, it is not surprising that the persons express some frustration of the conflicting demands they face. They understand to have other duties and tasks beyond the hands-on routines but find it difficult to find or take time to these tasks. This is also connected to the fast decision-making processes that are possible and may also form an important part of the competitiveness of the firm.

It is not only managers in these firms that need to be jacks-of-all-trades but the same applies to the employees, too.

“So, I work as a forewoman here now, and I work there on the factory floor when ever needed and almost where ever needed. Rosters, pekkaset [special kind of days off], then I check the raw-materials... order... What else? We’ll do almost anything when necessary.” - - - “Then production planning... that I do once a week.” (Case 1, forewoman 1)

In a small company the employees are involved in many things simultaneously. On the one hand it makes the work interesting and challenging, but on the other hand, it causes stress and lack of time in development and renewal issues, since there is no time allocated for those things.

“...we here, together we design the packings and products... first the products and then the packings, and supervise that it all gets done. So we are involved in many things. In a way it makes the work richer, but on the other hand it also creates pressures that our meeting practices should be ok in order to secure the flow of information. So, it would not be like... so that things would get documented somewhere...” - - - “...there are always things that remain unnoticed, when people have so fast pace.” (Case 1, sales director)

Keeping the balls rolling

It becomes also very clear that the firm (case 2) is a small manufacturing company. It is necessary and a priority to keep the production going on. Consequently, the maintenance person has a very long list of tasks and duties which need to be constantly prioritized, what is most urgent. For a few years he was alone in his position, and while his job also includes visits to implement and maintain equipment with the customers, this was difficult as then he was not on-site for the immediate requests there. The busy and on-the-call type of work practice of the maintenance person becomes very clear also during the interview: the interview is interrupted by a phone call but also a person physically entering the interview room and being very firm that the interview should be interrupted or kept very short that he could go and do his tasks. The maintenance person is not too alarmed of the demand, though, suggesting that this is very common. The interviewer is more aware of the (time) pressure and does not hold the interviewee for too long. Now a new person has been hired in the company that should make things a bit easier.

At the same time there is a pressure to grow, and also many development projects are started and need to be completed. This is one hand considered positive but on the other hand it creates pressure and stress.

‘Agility rules’: decisions are taken and improvements are implemented on the go

In both companies many decisions are made on the fly, not in formal meetings even if such structures exist. For example, in our second case organisation, the employees can also leave their initiatives and suggestions in a box. This box is then opened and discussed in a joint meeting. People are also knowledgeable of the potential rewards: chocolate or other small reward for smaller improvements with no or limited financial value, a bigger monetary reward for improvements with high monetary value (important cost savings or profits). In practice, not many initiatives are left in the box. The flat organization and low decision-making hierarchies allow the improvements to be implemented on the go. Often the improvements are small and incremental, and hence the employees feel that they are not ‘worthy’ to be written down and would feel embarrassed to do so. Since the managers are close to the operation, it is natural to implement them as they come about. Hence, the pros are to do with the speed and agility. For example, the improvements can be taken into practice very quickly and the process is very flexible.

Meetings – including management team meetings – are organized informally, decisions are made but the decisions are not written down in memos or documented in other ways.

Consequently, the cons of agility and flexibility have to do with the flow of information. When issues are discussed and agreed on the corridors or if the decisions are not documented in any way there may be people, who are left out or will not become informed of the decisions. Also when the improvements are not acknowledged formally, it is difficult to reward the employees for them, and thus to signal that this is an important activity within the organization.

To summarise, the first of practices seems to result mainly from the small firm context and the accepted and routinized way of working in them. This is not to say that the management has no opportunities of interfering with these practices or that the organisation could not change anything.

The second set of practices that we identify is more closely linked to *entrepreneurial management practices*, and the ways these practices may indeed be detrimental to the employee innovative behaviour.

CEO ruling the game

The CEO makes most of the ‘important’ decisions, but he does not participate e.g. the weekly joint meetings of sales, production and wrapping department. Within the meetings, the most difficult issues remain unsolved since the CEO has the ultimate say in these matters as the following extracts from the discussions in the meeting suggest:

“We have a contradiction here. On the one hand we want a light texture, but on the other they [the buns] should be dense in order to fit into the package!” (Case 1, foreman 2) - - - “I will ask Ben [the CEO]” (Case 1, sales director)

“There has been talk about the change of the package.” - - - “Now we could get the change for free...” (Case 1, wrapping representative) - - - “We’ll need the decision from the back room [from the CEO].” (Case 1, sales director)

Simon tells that there have been problems in Saturday deliveries. The products that have been ordered on Friday are not able make it to Saturday delivery. Ed suggests that there would be a time limit for Saturday orders. For example, Thursday evening. Paul suggests that that one could add a piece of information to the sales in case one is able to make the order also on Friday. Would that be possible? he asks. Ed answers: “Ask Ben [the CEO].”

Despite this need to have the CEO’s approval or decision to these issues, approaching the CEO seems to be easier to some than the others. For example, the sales director has a close working relationship to the CEO and therefore many issues raised in the meetings go to the CEO through him. Similarly to the review by Florén (2006) our findings suggest that the owner-manager/CEO mainly engages and negotiates with another senior manager in the firm, not all the employees – even if he regularly visits the operational site located downstairs from the office.

In case organisation 2 the situation is different. There the hired CEO has been actively delegating tasks to middle management. This new policy has had twofold consequences. On one hand the middle managers have accepted these new tasks and challenges with joy, but since all the old workload is still there, the feelings of stress and frustration have started to emerge.

Weekly meetings

The weekly meetings or order-production meetings don't deal with product innovation issues in the case organisation 1. They are decided in product development meetings. It is a bit unclear, when or with whom those are held. One interviewee told that those are not held anymore, but another interviewee told that those still take place. Perhaps the unawareness of the situation can be explained by the fact that nowadays only the CEO, sales people and the product developer [Marcus] take part in these meetings. Previously also people from the production department participated. The product development is heavily based on the sales and customer demand, not so much on production. That seems to be a deliberate strategic choice. The CEO is fairly pessimistic about the willingness or ability of the employees to take initiative. Need for agile decision-making is taken as the main reason for not engaging the employees, which is considered to take too much time.

The materials for the meetings are available on the common network location. The files are accessible for all, but there seems to be some problems in the willingness or abilities to use the repository. For example, in the meeting that we observed, only two out of eight participants had the documents with them in the meeting. Is there a mismatch between the practices of the production and the practices of the meetings that cause problems in adapting the practices of the meetings?

There is a To-Do-List that is updated and followed in every weekly meeting. Deadlines are given to all tasks. However, it seems that those are not followed very strictly. The tasks may be moved from previous To-Do-List to the next based on a comment like 'no-one has had time to fix that yet'. A positive finding is that for every task there is a person responsible and a deadline, less good is that it is not respected.

Some are here to think and others to implement

In the world of expert organisations it might be difficult to suggest that the employees are not an important source of new ideas. In these small manufacturing firms it seems that another kind of logic prevails and is accepted. As suggested above, the management may not expect the employees to be an engine for ideas. Equally, the employees do not necessarily perceive that innovation is a duty or right for them all. Or at least they acknowledge that some key persons have a more important and pronounced role in this respect. They are people with the direct access with the customers or suppliers and hence they work as the funnel between them and the organization. Often they represent ownership/family, and hence the ultimate decision-making power in family firms. Nevertheless, the positive aspects of the family firm – such as the long-term decision-making horizon – are also recognized by the employees.

This management culture is not considered very positive in terms of promoting innovation/spirit of innovation, on the contrary. Some people find it depressing but others find refuge by living in their own 'bubble'. It is sometimes even easier *not* to engage in innovation activities.

To summarise it is important to understand the conditions and causes of different management practices on employee innovativeness. Parallel study of our two case organisations – both having very similar but also very different management practices – increases our understanding of the dialectic relationship between the manager and the context in which they work.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper contributes to generating new knowledge and understanding of the continuities and disruptions between two spheres: strong entrepreneurial management practice and employee-driven innovative work practices. While in previous literature both are presented as important elements in innovation, it is less clear how and under which conditions they can co-exist. Furthermore we add understanding of employee innovative behaviour in small manufacturing firms that are highly different from, for example, expert organisations. We identified two sets of practices that are linked to the employee innovative behaviour: one dealing with the context (firm size) and one dealing with entrepreneurial management and its potentially detrimental and possibly unintended consequences on employee entrepreneurial behaviour.

We have identified some leadership practices that prevent or reduce the employee-driven innovations. Those were lack of time resources, autonomy, and direct feedback on initiatives (including rewards) or encouragement. On the other hand small firm context offers opportunities for learning many skills and enables the employees to understand the processes of the organisation more holistically than in large organisations.

There are some differences in the leadership practices between the CEOs of our case organisations. The roles of entrepreneur and manager are perhaps more prevalent in the actions of the CEO of case 1, whereas the leadership features are striving the actions of the CEO of the case 2. One explanation for this difference may be that the CEO of case 1 is an owner-manager and the CEO of case 2 has no share of ownership in the company. The slight reluctance of the CEO of the first case organisation to engage the employees in innovation practices can be also partly explained by the fact that there was a long strike in the spring 2010, which has caused some - still remaining - mistrust between employers and the employees. Therefore, the atmosphere in the factory is not the best possible for empowering of the employees by the owners or initiative taking by the employees.

The aim of this paper was to introduce some preliminary findings of our case studies. The research journey continues and in the future papers, we will deepen our understanding on the issues introduced here. Also many practices specific to manufacturing companies were identified both due to the logic of production and the material work environment, and those will be studied in more detail in later papers. For future research it might also be interesting

to take a critical view on the concept of EDI, and analyse to what extend and how widely the participation in innovation practices is beneficial both for the employees and the companies.

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