

Investigating Knowledge Transfer Methods and Practices in a Small Family-Run Business

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Abstract

Knowledge transfer is an essential part of growth in any environment. Small family-run businesses have a unique advantage in their abilities to transfer knowledge. A lot of literature that has explored knowledge transfer in small family-run businesses is directed to the contribution of knowledge transfer in the succession process. In this research study, research was carried out to find out how and why knowledge is transferred within a small family-run business. A qualitative study was conducted using one-on-one interviews with predecessors, successors and non-family employees working in a small family-run business. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their knowledge transfer methods and practices in the business.

The aim of this research was to identify the extent of knowledge transfer in a small family-run business by analyzing the transfer practices within the business as well as how they are unique from non-family-run businesses. The results from the case study in this research revealed that apprenticeships, mentorships, and learning-by-doing are common practices in small family-run businesses. It was also revealed that the process of knowledge transfer begins early in the successor's life and can continue for many years after that. Therefore, knowledge transfer is dependent on the receiver and it is not simply an act of replicating what has been transferred but also building on the transferred knowledge with experiences that are unique to the individual.

Keywords

knowledge transfer, organizational learning, small family-run business

Introduction

Knowledge has been recognized as a resource that contributes to the innovativeness and to the competitive advantage of an organization (Gumbo, 2015). A positive relationship has been discovered between an organization's ability to transfer knowledge and organizational performance (Krylova, Vera & Crossan, 2016). Knowledge transfer within an organization is not easy because knowledge is embedded within the routines, operating procedures and technology of an organization. These are all sources of tacit knowledge that are able to give the organization a competitive advantage (Chen & Lovvorn, 2011). The transfer of business knowledge and skills is a fundamental part of the succession process in a family-run business (Konopski, Jack & Hamilton, 2015).

Knowledge transfer is different in small family-run businesses as opposed to non-family-run businesses because in a small family-run business daily operations are more interactive and less mechanical (Trevinyo-Rodriguez & Tapies, 2010). Other differences are the trustworthiness in the source, time and availability of participants as well as the desire of the receiver is higher than in a non-family-run business (Trevinyo-Rodriguez & Tapies, 2010). For family-run businesses to perform well over time successors, need to be integrated into the small family-run business and the transfer of knowledge from predecessors needs to take place (Chirico, 2008). The most imperative aspect that a family-run business needs to address is the succession process. Literature of knowledge transfer within small family-run businesses has extensively been presented in terms of the importance of knowledge transfer for the success of the succession process in a family-run business (Trevinyo_Rodriguez & Tapies, 2010, Chirico, 2008, Boyd, Royer, Pei & Zhang, 2015, Bracci & Vagnoni, 2011, Varamaki, Pihkala & Routamaa, 2003, Letonja, & Duh, 2016 and Csizmadia, Mako & Heidrich, 2016).

However, these studies are focused on the succession process, and not on how distinctive and entrenched knowledge transfer is within small family-run businesses. This research study was focused on analyzing knowledge transfer within a small family-run business. The need for knowledge transfer in any organization has been established and predecessors need to transfer knowledge, ownership and management responsibilities to avoid failure of the business in the long term (Trevinyo_Rodriguez & Tapies, 2010). In analyzing knowledge transfer practices in a small family-run business, the objectives of this research are:

- to investigate how a small family-run business perceives knowledge transfer

- to investigate the tools and techniques that a small family-run business uses to transfer knowledge
- to determine what risks are associated with the ineffective transfer of knowledge within a small family-run business.

The purpose behind these objectives are to discover the limitations and freedoms of knowledge transfer in small family-run businesses, to identify how similar organizations could implement similar strategies as well as to highlight the importance of effective knowledge transfer. Interviews were conducted on a small family-run business and the results of the interviews were discussed with the use of related literature on the topic.

Literature Review

It is a widely known fact that knowledge is a possible source for competitive advantage for organizations (Chirico, 2008 & Varamaki, Pihkala & Routamaa, 2003). The topic of knowledge transfer in family-run businesses has been explored from various angles in the last ten years but this area of research is still insufficient. Small family-run businesses have become a recent interest in academia (Varamaki, Pihkala & Routamaa, 2003 & Chirico, 2008). Chirico, 2008 is one of the earlier explorers of the topic and as time goes on variations of the topic have started to come out. Trevinyo-Rodriguez & Tapies wrote a paper on effective knowledge transfer in family businesses with the aim of building a knowledge transfer framework for family-run businesses. Letonja, & Duh, 2016 presented a paper on how knowledge transfer can contribute to innovativeness in a family business.

Csizmadia, Mako & Heidrich, 2016 link their research on knowledge transfer in family businesses with succession, a path that many authors choose to take including Boyd, Royer, Pei & Zhang, 2015. Lastly, Gumbo, 2015 did a study in Botswana on sustainability in family businesses through knowledge transfer. The interest in analyzing small family-run businesses is that they are different from larger organizations, which have always been represented in academia. Small family-run businesses are distinctive in that their limited resources and capabilities are significant barriers as Tam & Gray, 2016 highlighted in their study about organizational learning in Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The interest in this research was described well by Trevinyo-Rodrigues & Tapies, 2010 in the differences in knowledge

transfer in small family-run businesses versus non-family-run businesses, which include organizations transferring knowledge through computers and systems.

Knowledge Transfer

Chirico, 2008 gives light to the fact that for value to be created through knowledge, knowledge needs to be “created, shared, and transferred” over time. Knowledge transfer is defined as “a process of exchange of explicit or tacit knowledge between two agents, during which one agent purposefully receives and uses the knowledge provided by another” (Kumar & Ganesh, 2009). Knowledge transfer is not a replication but rather an interpretation of existing knowledge into a different context (Kumar & Pa, 2009) The process of knowledge transfer consists of elements such as the source, the receiver, the context, what is being done and the type of knowledge which are all characteristics that affect the transfer of knowledge (Strach & Everette, 2006).

Knowledge transfer holds a fundamental position in society as it is an essential part of learning which is part of development (Strach & Everette, 2006). Often the terms knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing are used interchangeably (Kumar & Pa, 2009), but this paper is focused on knowledge transfer and not knowledge sharing. There are three types of knowledge transfer that are recognised, these are individual, intra-organisational and inter-organisational knowledge transfer (Kavediya, 2017). This research will mainly be focused on the intra-organizational knowledge transfer, as the research aims to identify the extent of knowledge transfer within a small family-run business.

Knowledge Transfer in a small family-run business

A family-run business is defined as any business where the ownership and control of majority of the business lies with family members (Kavediya, 2017). Distinctive qualities that family-run businesses may have are less trained managers because of a preference of putting a family member in a managerial position (Larraz, Gene & Pulidio, 2017). Unlike larger organizations, it is slightly more difficult for smaller organizations to manage their knowledge stock as they fall short of the resources required to do so (Durst & Edvardsson, 2012). Knowledge transfer in a family-run business serves the business goals and strengthens ties between family members. The ability for family-run businesses to perform well over time

involves successors being brought into the business and knowledge being transferred from predecessors to successors, with new knowledge that is more current and relevant today being added by successors to ensure sustainability (Chirico, 2008 and Letonja, & Duh, 2016).

The uniqueness that family-run businesses possess can be called bonding ties which provide stability and an exchange between individuals that is more efficient (Schmidts & Shepard, 2015). Bonding ties, which are a fundamental part of tacit knowledge transfer, are present in family-run businesses in the form of embedded norms and values. A common problem in family-run businesses is their failure after the second generation and this can be attributed to the lack of willingness or the lack of capacity to create, share and transfer knowledge from generation to generation (Chirico, 2008). Letonja, & Duh, 2016 refers to “progressive transfer of knowledge”, which occurs through the active and early involvement of the successors. Durst & Edvardsson, 2012) believe that small organizations employ unstructured methods for organizational knowledge and managers tend to prevent knowledge from leaving the business thereby blocking knowledge sharing.

Ways of transferring knowledge

Traditional apprenticeships are known to be an essential means of skills training in African countries (Apunda, De Klerk & Ogina, 2017). Apunda, De Klerk & Ogina’s, 2017 paper on technical knowledge states that traditional apprenticeships are advantageous in emerging countries as they are an efficient and affordable means to transfer knowledge. Due to the lack of resources within the organization, apprenticeships offer flexibility for the trainee who may not have a formal education and is also a means of training more youth than formal training institutions. Duh, 2014 mentions that mentoring, apprenticeships, learning-by-doing, on-the-job training and training courses within organizations are ways for knowledge to be transferred in family-run businesses.

Organizational learning

Kumar & Pa, 2009 established that a direct outcome of knowledge transfer is organizational learning. Organizational learning is how business operations and processes improve through better knowledge and understanding in an organization and has strong relations to collective learning (Alonso & Austin, 2017). Retained knowledge in an organization that is later reused

strategically in the organization becomes a major source of growth and sustainability for the organization (Tam & Gray, 2016). Alternative views of organizational learning is the focus on best practices as a driver of learning and as a part of the strategy for the organization as well as a way of managing knowledge and creative solutions (Tam & Gray, 2016). Learning in a family-run business occurs for all generations but is different from regular organizations due to its informal nature and how it is related to the socialization process (Csizmadia, Mako & Heidrich, 2016). Socialization is a part of the SECI model developed by Ikujiro Nonaka, also known as the knowledge conversion cycle (Frost, 2012). Socialization is a tacit exchange of knowledge, where knowledge is shared or transferred through practice, imitation, observation and guidance (Frost, 2012). The outcome of learning is knowledge and understanding knowledge transfer requires an understanding of individual learning (Trevinyo-Rodriguez & Tapies, 2010).

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted for this research study because qualitative research is effective for studying the “participants meaning and the relationships between them” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). A qualitative study is also effective for studying the views and opinions of participants. This is appropriate when studying a small family-run business (Chirico, 2008) and for when trying to gain an understanding about the processes involved. In addition, inductive reasoning was used as conclusions were reached about knowledge transfer in a small family-run business in this cross-sectional study. This research was an exploratory case study, where a single case study was used.

Sampling

The participants of this study were recruited with the help of the small family-run business, Dinsons Fine Furniture (DFF) that was chosen for this research study. DFF is a small furniture manufacturing business. Purposive sampling was used as the data required was from a specific population of participants. The participants comprised of predecessors, successors and non-family employees working at DFF. Participants were selected according to a set criterion, which was as follows:

Inclusion criteria

- All participants must be working at DFF which is a small family-run business

- Predecessors and successors need to be members of the family that runs the business.
- Successors need to be related to the predecessors through blood, marriage or adoption.
- For non-family participants, participants need to have worked at DFF for a minimum of five years.

Exclusion criteria

- Predecessors and successors that have not worked at DFF before.
- Predecessors that are not in a position of training successors to inherit the business.
- Successors that are not in a position of inheriting the business, or being in a managerial position.

Data collection

This research study is a qualitative study. The method used to collect data was interviews. Schmidts & Shepard, 2015 suggest that when analyzing an in-depth case study, interviews should be conducted with several people in an organization who will represent a diverse perspective. Therefore, we decided to undertake one-on-one interviews with three predecessors, four successors and four non-family employees at DFF. Interviews were conducted at the premises of DFF. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder, which was later transcribed. Participants were asked open-ended questions.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded on a voice recorder. The voice recordings were then transcribed because transcribing is an essential step for informed data analysis. A top-down thematic analysis was done whereby themes, patterns and answers related to the research question and objectives were specifically searched for. The transcripts were then analyzed to find these themes, patterns and answers. Part of inductive reasoning requires that themes emerging from the analysis be compared to existing literature to enhance the validity and generalizability of the case study research (Letonja, & Duh, 2016). Although past and future practices and methods of knowledge transfer were asked about, the research was based on the current views of knowledge transfer therefore, a single case study analysis was conducted.

Results

From the one-on-one interviews with the participants, the following results were obtained:

Interviews with predecessors

The first question that the predecessors were asked was about their role in the business and how long have they been working in the business. Predecessor A is a project manager and has been working in the business for 32 years. Predecessor B is in charge of the upholstery department and has been working in the business for over 30 years. Predecessor C is a buyer and is one of the founders of the business. From this, it is clear that all predecessors have been in the business for over thirty years.

When asked about the required skills and education needed to run the business, Predecessor A said that it varies according to the type of job they do. While Predecessor B specifically mentioned business, communication and technical skills and then added that skills in making furniture are also required. Predecessor C said that the business and predecessors are not able to teach the successors everything they need to know; hence, the need for them to acquire knowledge at a formal training institution is necessary.

Related to this question was the question of whether the technical knowledge required could be learned on the job. To this Predecessor A made reference to the fact that previously in the country, education for the type of jobs in the business was available, but is not available anymore. The result of this is that the business has become the place where individuals in the business obtain knowledge. The predecessors were then asked what the appropriate age was for knowledge transfer to begin with a successor. Predecessor A replied as soon as possible, and Predecessor B concurs with this answer by replying as soon as the potential successor walks into the business. Predecessor C on the other hand replied as soon as the potential successor leaves high school. The next question that the predecessors were asked was if predecessors were willing to teach non-family employees about the day-to-day operations of the business. All predecessors replied that they have trained non-family employees in the factory.

Another question that the predecessors were asked was how the predecessors came to learn what they know from the previous generation. This question was irrelevant to Predecessor C as Predecessor C is a founding member of the business. Predecessor B responded to have theoretically learnt the business skills from the previous generation, and the previous generation used a hands-on approach, as they taught the current predecessors how to make furniture as well as about the daily business operations. The predecessors answered similarly to how they intend on transferring knowledge to the younger generation, replying that successors need to be shown what to do and how things must be done. Successors must be taught practically and hands-on. The last question that the predecessors were asked was what the potential risks were of ineffective knowledge transfer, to which Predecessor B specifically answered that ineffective knowledge transfer is not an option as that will mean that the predecessor is not playing their role in the business. Predecessor C also mentioned that ineffective knowledge transfer is bad for business because mistakes will be made in the production of the furniture.

Interviews with successors

The first question that the successors were asked was what role they played in the business and how long have they been working in the business. Successor A supervises upholstery, Successor B is in charge of the cabinet shop, Successor C and Successor D are part of management. All successors have been working in the business between ten and fifteen years. The successors were then asked if they think they know enough to be able to run the business one day. All participants replied yes to this question. Successor B and C replied that this is because they currently have a hand in multiple sections of the business and that they are already managing the business. Successor A added that this could only be done with the help of other colleagues (the other successors). When asked what type of skills and education is required to run DFF, Successor A replied that the skills required were dependent on the section that the individual is working in and this is the same for the education required. Successor A and B replied that business skills were a requirement and Successor D responded that skills are more important than education and that a basic high school qualification would be enough in terms of education.

The next question the successors were asked was what methods were used to transfer knowledge to them. Successor C responded to have went through an apprenticeship, while Successor D responded to have learnt on the job. Successor B answered “by showing me over and over again until I got it”. When asked what method of knowledge transfer they responded best to, Successor A responded that learning from a predecessor was the best method while Successor B said being shown what to do is the best method. The next question was about what kinds of external knowledge being obtained and Successor A replied that he went for an upholstery course. Successor C said he went to a technical woodworking college while Successor B has not obtained any external knowledge. With regards to the question about how involved the successors are in the daily operations of the business, all participants responded to be fully involved. The final question that was asked was what the perceived appropriate age for knowledge transfer was. Three out of the four participants responded that it is appropriate when the potential successor is willing to learn and there is no set age. The other participant responded that sixteen was the appropriate age.

Interviews with non-family member employees

The first question asked was what is their role and how long have they been working in the business. Non-family employee A, who cuts and stitches in the upholstery department has been working in the business for fifteen years and Non-family employee B is a driver and has been working in the business for seven years. Non-family employee C is a general worker, who has been working in the business for seven years and Non-family employee D has been working for the business for 36 years and works in upholstery as well. When asked about the knowledge transfer processes, Non-family employee D spoke about how successors have been taught by predecessors about how to treat customers as well as how to interact with them. Non-family employee A, emphasized that he has a passion for the job he does in the upholstery department. However, majority of the non-family employees do not like the job that they are doing.

Non-family employees were then asked about the type of knowledge and skills needed for them to fulfill their roles in the business. As a general worker, not many skills are needed; the job is learnt easily by imitating others. It is hands on. Non-family employee A, attended school in Cape Town for cutting and stitching. Non-family employee B got a license from a

driving school and experience from another organization that he was previously working at. Non-family employee D obtained knowledge internally, from working in the business for a very long time. Therefore, only two of the participants interviewed received a formal education and the other one obtained their knowledge in the business. Non-family member D mentioned one of the challenges experienced in transferring knowledge to non-family employees, was that after having obtained the necessary knowledge to do the job non-family employees leave to start their own businesses. The non-family employees were also asked where they would like to see themselves in the future. Non-family employee A, was comfortable and happy with the current job. Non-family employee B and C are considering opening their own businesses in future because there are no promotions in the business.

Findings

The data from the interviews were analysed by using thematic analysis and the findings were as follows:

Knowledge transfer begins in the early years of a successor's life

Knowledge transfer is a gradual process that begins in the early years of a successor's life. The process of knowledge transfer is a long process, where one predecessor even admitted that it is a process that is done slowly and gradually. The successors that were interviewed have been working in the business for nine, ten, seventeen and twenty years. They all admitted that integration into the business starts at an early age. Literature revealed that the transfer of tacit knowledge from predecessors begins early in the potential successor's life cycle in the business (Letonja, & Duh, 2016). Part of the reason for the early transfer of knowledge is because of the dynamic nature of learning, which involves assimilation of knowledge, repetition and a willingness to learn, this process takes time (Trevinyo-Rodriguez & Tapias)]. When asked about what the appropriate age was to start transferring knowledge, four participants answered that it was as soon as the receiver walked into the doors of the business. From the same question, three participants stressed that for the process to happen or start there has to be some willingness on the side of the receiver. Which correlates to one of the factors mentioned as a barrier to knowledge transfer – a lack of willingness to learn (Csizmadia, Mako & Heidrich, 2016).

Therefore, for effective knowledge transfer, the transfer of knowledge to successors should begin at an early age (Trevinyo-Rodriguez & Tapias). Successor A and Successor D went straight into the business straight out of high school and Successor B and C went on to obtain a tertiary qualification before joining the business on a full-time basis. From this discussion, it is evident that early transfer and a willingness to learn are two important factors in the success of knowledge transfer in a family-run business. Non-family employee D mentioned to witnessing successors entering the business at an early age and being taught business skills such as interacting with customers by predecessors.

Effective knowledge transfer can be achieved through apprenticeships, mentorships and learning-by-doing

A general answer to the way knowledge is transferred and the way it works best is through practical methods. All participants gave this answer. Predecessor A used words such as “hands-on” and “leading by example”. Practical knowledge is knowledge that is concerned with action and it has to do with leading or motivating into action (Lumer, 2010). When asked about what methods were used to transfer knowledge, Successor B answered, “he taught me by showing me over and over again until I got it.” Other successors gave a similar answer showing a pattern in the way knowledge has been transferred through the past three generations. Predecessor B also provided a similar answer in terms of how knowledge was transferred from a previous generation. This type of transfer of knowledge is aligned with traditional apprenticeships that Larraz, Gene & Pulidio, 2017 spoke about in their research. Traditional apprenticeships allow workers or trainees to gain trade-specific skills by working and learning with and alongside experienced craftsperson’s (Larraz, Gene & Pulidio, 2017). Apprenticeships work best in industry environments that are not characterized by rapid change, because when markets change rapidly this type of training is insufficient (Durst & Edvardsson, 2012) . Mentoring is recognized by Duh, 2014 as an effective way of transferring critical skills such as managerial and technical skills. Non-family employee D answered to have observed the way in which knowledge is transferred among predecessors and successors, saying that predecessors guide successors by showing them how things are done. The next generation in a family business can learn how to run the family business directly from the predecessors in a learning-by-doing process (Duh, 2014).

As a small furniture manufacturing business, a lot of the knowledge being transferred is tacit knowledge and it is transferred through apprenticeships. On the other hand, knowledge that is purely explicit is best transferred through manuals and procedures in family-run business (Durst & Edvardsson, 2012). It must be noted in the case of DFF, no participant interviewed mentioned the transfer of explicit knowledge within the business. All participants spoke of learning directly from another person. A problem with non-family employees within the business is that there are no personal ties. Non-family employee D brought insight to the fact that training non-family employees has been a challenge because as soon as they learn the required skills, they leave the business to go start their own business, which is discouraging. Non-family employees also expressed grievances to the absence of promotions within the business for non-family employees.

External knowledge contributes to organizational learning in a family-run business

Although there may not be much explicit knowledge transfer within the business, the explicit knowledge transfer in this case occurs usually through an external education. Predecessor C specifically mentioned that the knowledge they transfer as predecessors is insufficient and that they encourage the successors to acquire external knowledge. Two successors began to work for the business right after they completed high school and the other two went to colleges first before coming to work for the business full-time. With three out of four participants, having acquired external knowledge in the form of a formal education it can be concluded that this is an essential part for knowledge development in such organization. Experience and formal training develop the knowledge that is embedded within individuals which consists of skills, abilities and learning capacity (Boyd, Royer, Pei & Zhang, 2015). Predecessor C also went on to mention how they acquire external knowledge, then come back and teach this knowledge to others in the organization. This type of practice is what organizational learning is based on. Internalization, a part of the knowledge conversion cycle, can best describe this. Internalization involves conversion of knowledge that is being transferred from explicit to tacit, where explicit sources are studied and learned then internalized where it is changed into tacit knowledge (Frost, 2012).

Conclusion

Knowledge transfer in a family-run business is a gradual process that can take many years. Knowledge transfer in family-run businesses is also not one-directional, successors may obtain external knowledge and transfer this knowledge to other members in the business. This is the basis for organizational learning. Part of knowledge transfer is learning. Predecessors transfer experiential knowledge that they possess to successors. Successors take the knowledge transferred and combine this transferred knowledge with new knowledge that may be acquired externally. Knowledge transfer is usually done through the socialization process and ineffective knowledge transfer may cause the business to fail.

The uniqueness of family-run businesses can be seen in knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer is a natural part of the growth and sustainability of any business. Intangibles that relate to the traditions and family value systems are the differentiator in knowledge transfer within family-run businesses and non-family-run businesses. Knowledge barriers may cause unsuccessful or ineffective knowledge transfer. These knowledge barriers may be lack of absorptive capacity or a lack of willingness to receive knowledge. Therefore, knowledge transfer is essential, especially in family-run businesses, to ensure a smooth succession between generations.

Limitations

The first limitation for this research study include the use of one case study. The problem with using a single case study is the trustworthiness and capacity of a single case to offer insight beyond the particulars. The second limitation is that the types of knowledge and the way that knowledge is transferred is different in different industries. The case study used in this research was a furniture manufacturing business; therefore, the findings of this research may only be able to serve organizations in similar industries. The third limitation is the size of the organization. Small businesses operate differently from larger organizations; therefore the findings of this research may only be able to represent small organizations. The last limitation was that this case study did not reveal any information about the transfer of explicit knowledge. This in turn limits findings about the transfer of explicit knowledge.

Further research

Further research can be built on any one of the limitations in this study. Firstly, further research can be done by using more than one case study and then comparing the knowledge transfer practices between those case studies. Secondly, further research can also be done on investigating knowledge sharing practices in small family-run businesses in different industries. Thirdly, further research can be done on both small and big family-run businesses. Lastly, further research can also explore how explicit knowledge is transferred in small family-run businesses.

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