
Exploring Owner-Managers Perspectives to Develop A Conceptual Learning Framework

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Abstract: This study explores the learning experiences of owner-managers of micro-enterprises. The literature suggests that owner-managers of micro-enterprises have a positive attitude to learning but will not engage with a learning or training agenda that fails to recognise their needs and constraints. An inductive interpretative approach explored owner-managers experiences of learning in the context of operating a micro-enterprise. There is no separation between the owner and the business, as they are often one and the same. Semi structured one-to-one interviews gathered data from owner-managers, and an initial conceptual learning framework developed which reflects owner-managers preferences. Findings indicate that events in an owner-managers business life triggers a decision to learn, and reflect aspects of not knowing how to do specific tasks. There appears to be an increasing focus on searching and learning on the internet, and a preference for self-initiated learning. The study highlights the importance of understanding how owner-managers learn and are likely to be of interest to UK universities and those delivering training to owner-managers particular in regard to the design of teaching and learning strategies.

Keywords: Owner-managers, micro-enterprises, learning, universities, training, inductive

Introduction

Universities in the UK are increasingly required to engage with local businesses to promote government initiatives to stimulate growth (Witty 2013). The Witty (2013) and Lord Young's (2013) report both advocate that business schools should play a key role in the growth of the UK economy. The most recent government initiative from the two reports is the Small Business Charter (2014), and in particular The Growth Voucher Programme (GVP).

However, the packages of support outlined in Lord Young's (2013) report and The Small Business Charter (2014) programme tend to focus on the development of capability and skills at the expense of the wider benefits of life-long learning. Furthermore, numerous businesses will benefit from this programme, but many others remain excluded for a number of reasons including access to, and delivery of the programme. This study offers an alternative argument suggesting that owner-managers of micro-enterprises access learning in different ways and this may not be fully understood by policy makers and business schools when introducing initiatives such as GVP.

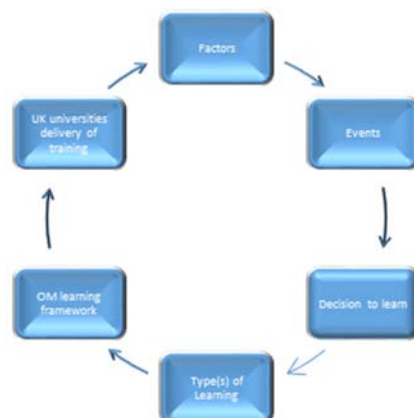
However, from the mid-1990s to 2005 defining a micro-enterprise was difficult. This changed in 2005 when the European Commission facilitated a wide-ranging consultation resulting in the following definition (European Commission 2005) which was embraced for this study.

A micro enterprise employs fewer than 10 persons and its annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total should not exceed EUR 2 million (European Commission 2005). Micro enterprises include entrepreneurs, sole-traders, and the self-employed (Botham and Mason 2007).

Owner-managers of micro-enterprises were selected as a sample to study for three reasons. Firstly, the author works closely with them in a university environment, secondly, they make an important contribution to economic growth (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2010, Young 2013) and finally because this sector is under-researched (Evans, Hodgkinson et al. 2006). Furthermore, little is known about why owner-managers choose to engage with learning at any particular time (Chilvers 2008). In addition, there is a shortage of research that explores what the trigger(s) to learning are, or what type of learning is sought and engaged with (Neshamba 2004).

This paper reviews existing literature; investigates the factors that affect an owner-managers daily business; discovers the events in an owner-managers business that could trigger a learning episode, and then considers how they then make a decision to learn. An inductive approach explores owner-managers perceptions of learning. A discussion of the findings will conclude with a proposed conceptual learning framework which reflects how owner-managers prefer to learn. The framework is designed for consideration by those who deliver training/learning to owner-managers such as the GVP, and to promote further academic discussion as the larger study evolves. Figure 1 below expresses the iterative process of the study.

Figure 1: Interactive process



Literature Review

Revisiting the skills agenda

The Dearing report (1997) set out a twenty year vision for higher education, and outlined the purpose of education as life-enhancing: it contributes to the whole quality of life. It highlighted that the role of higher education is to develop people, society and the economy. A later policy

report (Leitch 2006) moved away from the concept of the learning society towards a focus on skill development for global economic competitiveness.

Skill development tends to concentrate on education and formal training as the main components (Ashton 2000, Ahlgren, Engel 2011) and has shaped educational policy for over 30 years. Yet there is little empirical evidence to prove that these strategies work, therefore it is questionable why they continue to shape UK education policy. Holborrow (2012) also argues that the focus on the skills agenda cannot deliver large numbers of high value jobs, and may lead to false expectations amongst UK citizens. Likewise there are concerns regarding the focus on the achievement of qualifications which has led to employer disengagement (CIPD 2010) and may have caused barriers to learning (Lange, Ottens et al. 2000).

Saunders et al (2011) go further suggesting that the skills agenda is a little tired and it is time to move towards a different learning agenda. This study therefore explores owner-managers perceptions of learning with the aim of creating a conceptual framework that is more likely to address their learning preferences.

The role of business schools

The skills agenda continues unabated with pressures upon universities to develop the nation's wider economic and social goals. However, it is ironic that even though there has been an expansion of business schools in the past fifty years (approximately 130) there appears to be an inverse correlation between the prevalence of business schools and the success of the national economy (Clarke 2008). It is therefore questionable whether government led programmes such as the GVP delivered through business schools are appropriate channels of learning for all micro-enterprises. Only five business schools are currently delivering the GVP (The Association of Business Schools 2015). It is therefore important to consider whether the majority of business schools in the UK are set – up, or resourced to deliver the GVP, or whether owner-managers want to learn in this way.

Indeed, micro-enterprises who apply for the GVP are screened (The Small Business Charter. 2015) and businesses have a fifty percent chance of being selected for the random control group research project. These conditions exclude some micro-enterprises who may have wanted to engage with the scheme but are automatically de-selected. This also has the potential to create or increase barriers to learning.

Barriers to learning

Barriers to learning include the perception that business schools are not a useful source of help to micro-enterprises (Young.D, 2013). Other barriers include the need for owner-managers to have some influence over how they learn (Lange, Ottens et al. 2000, Lewis-Fitzgerald 2005, Chilvers 2008, The Chartered Institute of Marketing 2009) because control over of their learning is a key feature for them (Usher, Bryant et al. 2000, Wielenga-Meijer, Taris et al. 2011, Andringa, van den Bosch, Kirsten A et al. 2013). Owner-managers also prefer inclusive and contextualised learning that works specifically for them (Rogers 2003, Merriam, Caffarella 1999). These barriers are likely to impact on how owner-managers access learning. Other barriers may be the result of deeply ingrained assumptions, past behaviours, personal constructs and life's experiences (Senge 1990, Schön 1973).

However, Fuller et al (2008) reject the concept of identifiable barriers suggesting that non-participation in learning is related to an individual's interlaced personal history. On reflection one could say that both arguments are valid, and that they are one and the same thing, just described differently.

Despite the barriers to learning owner-managers are reported to display a high level of interest in the potential benefits of learning (BERR 2007) but there is little research to underpin this statement. Nonetheless, it is important to explore how owner-managers develop their skills and knowledge in the context of operating their business because there is very little literature in this area (Evans, Hodkinson et al. 2006, Evans, Waite et al. 2011).

This study therefore offers an entirely different perspective focusing on exploring how owner-managers go about their learning since the appetite for learning has been established (Findlay, Findlay et al. 2012). This research contributes to the body of knowledge by providing evidence relating to how owner-managers perceive learning, and how they engage with it. These insights will be offered to UK business schools for discussion, and has the potential to inform the development of future teaching and learning strategies.

Methodology

An inductive approach was employed to develop a theory from the data (Glaser, Strauss 1967) versus testing an existing theory. Since grounded theory is an iterative process the analysis will remain open to emergent possibilities throughout the larger study (Hutchison, Johnston et al. 2010) leading to the prospect of theoretical density. This interpretative study recognises the relevance of human subjectivity and how owner-managers make sense of their constructed world (Collins 2010, Schwandt 1998) in contrast to a positivist approach which suggests that human beings, and their actions can be studied scientifically. A scientific study was unlikely to have provided the rich in-depth insights from owner-managers which informed the conceptual framework.

Furthermore, an interpretative approach also takes into account the background situations and context in which learning takes place, and which may affect an owner-managers decision-making. Other approaches such as positivism are less likely to consider these contextual elements (Guba, Lincoln 1994). The study recognises that individuals have their unique interpretations of their learning experiences, and will also have different mental constructions of the world in which they operate (Dawson 1994, Charmaz 2009). Decision-making is therefore likely to be guided by an organised and hierarchical set of personal mental constructs which are carried from situation to situation (Jankowicz 2004, Nystedt 1983). Owner-managers responses were also unlikely to give black and white answers that can be measured in a quantitative tangible way. Therefore a qualitative approach was more likely to facilitate a deeper insight into how owner-managers construct their world of learning.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview schedule guided the discussions with semantic differential questions. Further probing open questions were asked to gain more depth and breadth, and are reported in the findings using the owner-managers language (Francella 2003). One-to-one interviews asked five owner-managers about their perceptions of learning (Bryman, 2004). A further fifteen owner-managers will be interviewed over the next two years. A sample of fifteen to twenty five participants is reported to generate sufficient data in order to be considered as a reliable sample (Fassin, Van Rossem et al. 2011).

Sampling Frame

A purposive sampling approach was employed because owner-managers of micro-enterprises were specifically relevant to the research questions. There is a recognised risk that purposive sampling does not allow generalisation to a population as a whole, but may be generalisable

within this specific group of people (Bryman 2004). The participants came from a range of private sector businesses, located in the county of Hampshire (UK), because there are a larger than average number of start-ups in the region (Barclays Bank plc 2004), it included men and women which were sourced using the social media site LinkedIn.

Results

The demographics of the participants are presented below.

Table 1: Owner-managers demographics

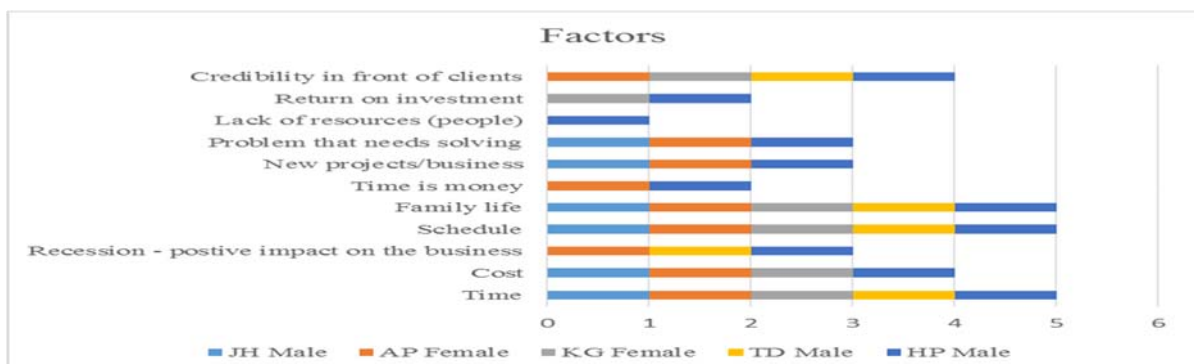
	Gender	Age of business	Type of Business
Interview 1 – JH	Male	1 year	Entrepreneur
Interview 2 – AP	Female	11 years	Technical Communications
Interview 3 - KG	Female	6 years	Fitness School
Interview 4 - TD	Male	7 years	Marketing Agency
Interview 5 – HP	Male	6 years	Home and Garden Services

Factors that affect an owner-managers business

Key factors that emerged from the data included restrictions on time, cost, personal schedules and family life. Time emerged as important factor for all participants in that learning has to fit in with their working schedules, and family life. All owner-managers commented that ‘there aren’t enough hours in the week’. Four of the five owner-managers mentioned cost as an inhibitor to learning. Courses for example needed to be cost efficient, or free. The factors of time and cost reflect previous research in this area (Crouse, Doyle et al. 2011). Eighty percent of the participants mentioned that accredited, externally certified learning was important because their customers perceived the owner-managers as more credible.

The recession had positive impacts for three owner-managers because of the necessity to look for work in different industries which broadened their range of skills, and unlocked new markets and business opportunities. These new opportunities resulted in owner-managers needing to learn new skills in order to complete the work. Owner-managers also needed to learn how to solve their customer’s problems and therefore influenced what they learnt. Two of the owner-managers mentioned that they look for a return on the investment in learning through new, or repeat business. Figure 2 summarises the factors that affect an owner-managers decision to learn.

Fig 2: Factors



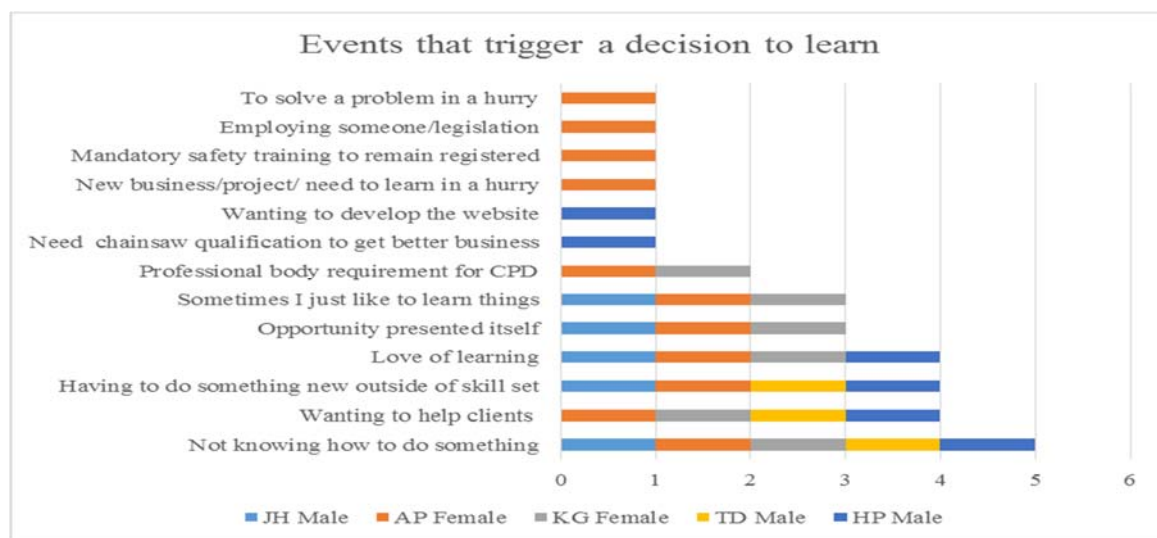
Events that trigger a decision to learn

All respondents identified that the key trigger to learn was the realisation of ‘not knowing how to’ do a specific task that was new to them. This led to owner-managers needing or wanting to learn something new outside of their existing skill-set. Owner-managers made reference to new business opportunities in new industries, and the opportunity to solve their client’s business problems.

Another trigger is the concept of liking, or loving to learn, and that they enjoy teaching themselves new skills, along with taking advantage of unexpected learning opportunities without any intentionality, or planning. These responses reflect the concept of learning as often not specified, or planned, as Eraut (2000, 2011) points out but sometimes occurs naturally. This data aligns with previous work which suggests that owner-managers often display a high level of interest in the potential benefits of learning (BERR 2007), and seek to develop their skills and knowledge (Snape et al., 2005).

There is a recognition that to grow the business further qualifications will be required to enhance the types of jobs that can be quoted for. There is a perception by owner-managers that their clients are looking for credibility, and that professional qualifications are an indicator of credibility. Furthermore, requirements from professional bodies to engage in continual professional development also trigger a decision to learn. Figure 3 below summarises the data collection.

Fig 3: Events



How learning occurs

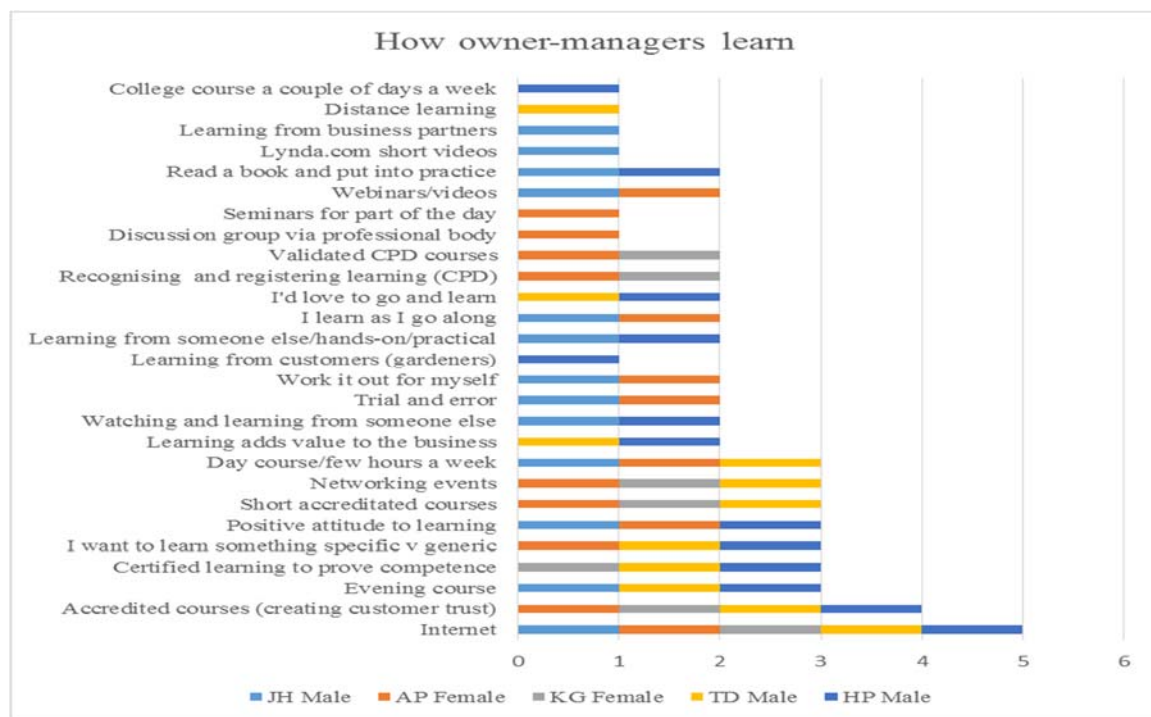
The internet is utilised by all owner-managers to search for and compare courses and is used as a learning tool. Owner-managers consider the timing of the courses - day-time, evening, distance learning, physical location, on-line, and whether lessons needed to be attended. Owner-managers teach themselves on the internet, usually for free, or at a low cost, and in the evenings when the business day has finished. This enables them to have influence over their learning and therefore reduces the barriers to learning (Chilvers 2008). On-line courses are an effective method of learning because they are often short mini courses, tutorials, webinars or discussion forums taking thirty minutes to an hour. The courses preferred usually offer qualifications, or accreditation which is important to eighty percent of owner-managers because they are perceived to create customer trust.

Attending formal accredited courses at a location away from the business are also considered to be a useful method of learning because of the opportunity to ask questions and receive support, versus distance learning. These short courses need to be delivered in a day, or a few hours, and need to offer own-managers something specific to their business, versus generic content.

In addition there are also elements of learning through networking because a group member will often suggest other specialist groups to help resolve problems and suggest learning opportunities. Owner-managers generally expressed a positive attitude to learning, or a love of learning, and take a proactive approach to it.

The findings in Figure 4 below indicate that the internet is actively used as a learning tool by all owner-managers followed by short accredited courses to create trust with a customer, either on-line, or taught in a physical space.

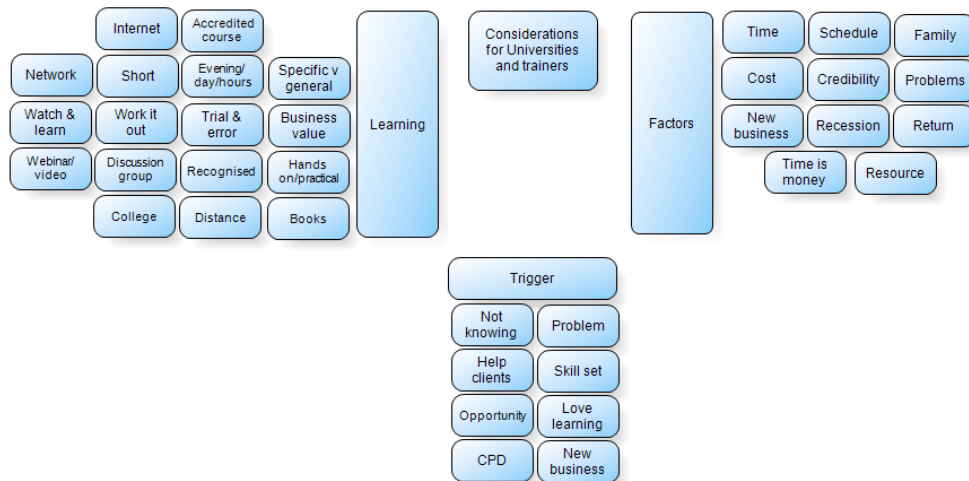
Fig 4: How owner-managers learn



Conceptual framework

Figure 5 shows a proposed conceptual framework was constructed from the data collection and which representing owner-managers perspectives on learning. Universities and trainers delivering learning to owner-managers of micro-enterprises are likely to find this framework helpful when designing learning and teaching strategies.

Fig 5: A conceptual learning framework for owner-managers of micro-enterprises



Conclusion

The study provides new insights into the perceptions of owner-managers of micro-enterprises and the way in which they learn. Interpreting their responses suggests that learning is more likely to be aligned to the wider benefits of learning (Dearing 1997) and the examples given by owner-managers tend to reflect the concept of learning throughout their lifetime (Senge 1990) in addition to skill development for specific purposes.

There is no evidence that owner-managers are disengaged from learning – indeed quite the opposite has been reported. The barriers to learning discussed in the literature review appear to be lowered considerably because owner-managers have some influence and control over how they learn (Chilvers, 2008). Owner-managers appear to display a high level of interest in the benefits of learning (BERR 2007) and confirms early work that there is an appetite for learning (Findlay, Findlay et. al. 2012). Overall, it is likely that there are specific factors and triggers that influence a learning event which was previously unknown.

However, the initial study is not a statistically reliable valid sample to base such conclusions on and it is expected that the continuing larger study will provide sufficient data to develop the conceptual learning framework. Further data is also likely to discover trends which could inform the learning and teaching strategies of UK universities and others who deliver learning to owner-managers.

The application of the research in the context of a different learning agenda includes the potential for: reducing the barriers to learning from an owner-managers perspective as outlined in the literature review; creating an inclusive approach to government and business school led GVP's if owner-managers are to engage with them; recognising the learning that takes place by owner-managers in the UK but goes unrecognised; owner managers collaborating with universities to create opportunities that reflect their preferences for learning because collaboration has the potential to reduce the barriers to learning. Perhaps, as Saunders et al (2011) point out it is time to move towards a different learning agenda that reflects owner-managers preferences for learning.

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