

Ambitions, Goals and Actions: A Qualitative study of entrepreneurial orientation of Indian SME Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: Research has shown impact of Entrepreneurial Orientation on the venture performance. Pro-activeness being an important trait in Entrepreneurial Orientation is demonstrated in the actions and inactions of entrepreneurs. The present qualitative study of eight Indian SME (small and medium enterprise) cases examines how pro-activeness is translated in the strategic intents behind activities of highly successful entrepreneurs and how the activities of passive entrepreneurs are devoid of clear strategic intents. The research attempts to link entrepreneurial ambitions to entrepreneurial orientation and further to activities the entrepreneurs indulge in at certain time points of their enterprise evolution.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Orientation, Strategic Intent, pro-activeness, entrepreneurial activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although overall research in the field of entrepreneurship has been lesser than other branches of management, Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) has received considerable attention of the researchers and a cumulative body of knowledge has developed on the subject. EO is a set of behavioural inclinations towards risk-taking, innovativeness, pro-activeness, competitive aggressiveness and autonomy (Hughes and Morgan, 2007) and is known to positively impact the organizational performance (Andreas Rauch et al., 2009). There has been significant research on entrepreneurial traits and tendencies since early 1960s. Competencies like innovation, creativity, risk taking tendency, pro-activeness, achievement motivation, determination, internal locus of control etc have been identified by many researchers as key traits of successful entrepreneurs with McClelland (1987) listing 42 competencies of a typical entrepreneur. However, the degree of entrepreneurship is not determined plainly by innate attributes and traits of psychological characters of the entrepreneurs but by the decisions and actions driven by their entrepreneurial traits (Heavey et al., 2009). Life time ambitions lead to entrepreneurial goals which in turn help chalk out periodical task-list for an entrepreneur. Each of his tasks has a strategic intent behind it and successful completion of the tasks culminates in achievement of the strategic intent. A proactive entrepreneur would generally have a precise roadmap drawn for his career and would pursue the same with clarity and determination. Understanding how and why specific actions and decisions are taken by entrepreneurs in the light of strategic intents is as important for an entrepreneurship educator as the impact of EO on organizational performance.

1.1 Objectives of the research

The present study aims to find how entrepreneurial traits of successful entrepreneurs are reflected in the activities they engage in at different stages of their enterprise evolution. The findings would help entrepreneurship educators relate entrepreneurial traits to specific actions and underlying strategic intents at certain time points.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

EO implies an opportunity-seeking orientation to explore the market for possible gains (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2011). It directs the entrepreneurial process (Covin and Slevin, 1991) through actions and decisions of an entrepreneur (Heavey et al., 2009) and helps organization achieve strategic positioning (Pearce et al., 2010). EO is demonstrated through premeditated actions and deliberate inactions of the entrepreneurs in different situations. Pro-activeness is an important component of EO that prompts positive actions to exploit the opportunities and is reflected in entrepreneur's readiness and willingness to take decisions and act thereon (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Proactive entrepreneurs move fast, believe in first-mover advantage (Montgomery and Lieberman, 1988), take initiative in anticipating and pursuing new opportunities and do not hesitate treading in unknown territories (Venkatraman, 1989; Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). They take positive steps by indulging in specific activities driven by strategic intents. Passive entrepreneurs on the other hand are slow in the process of opportunity identification and even when they identify it, they remain slow or indifferent in its pursuit (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Organizational strategic intent is the way an enterprise channels its resources into a focused and unified goal (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Daft et al., 2010). For an entrepreneur, strategic intent is the key driving force behind everything he does or decides not to do. It is the criterion on which he allocates his most important resource, namely the time and effort. Sufficient body of knowledge exists on what comprises of EO and how it impacts the organizational performance. The relationship between EO and organizational performance was studied by many researchers. Using meta-analysis of sample data of 51 such studies (N=14,259), Andreas Rauch et al (2009) found that EO had positive impact on firm performance, although the magnitude of such relationship varied from case to case. Most entrepreneurship research having been focused on enterprise rather than entrepreneur, strategic intent has also been defined in the context of an enterprise as strategic direction and destiny to be pursued by the company (Landrum, 2008). The research on entrepreneurship would be incomplete if we ignore the key figure behind the organization that is the entrepreneur himself. More than anything else, it is several small tasks of an entrepreneur that lead to achievement of organizational goals. It is therefore necessary to understand how his baby steps are dictated by immediate objectives, how his objectives germinate from his intentions and how intentions relate to the organizational goals. In other words, a clear linkage between the EO, strategic intents and entrepreneurial actions has not been established yet. The present research is an attempt to do so by using selected cases of successful and not so successful entrepreneurs.

2.1 Priorities of an enterprise

Selection of appropriate marketing strategy has been a challenge for entrepreneurs. Focused market strategy was recommended by Hosmer (1957), Cohn and Lindberg (1972), Broom and Longenecker (1979) while generalized and aggressive strategy was recommended by Biggadike (1979), Miller et al. (1985), Cooper et al. (1986), MacMillan et al. (1987). However, Porter (1980) suggested three alternate marketing strategies of low cost, differentiation and focus. Tom Wesson et al. (2001) justified a contingency approach on the grounds that circumstances of each case vary. He emphasized the importance of market approach and thereby customer acquisition in initial stage of every enterprise. Michael M. Gielnik et al. (2012) found that staying focused was important not only in the initial stage but at each stage of an enterprise. Growth being the ultimate aim of an entrepreneur, he would focus on different things at varying time points keeping the growth objective in mind.

2.2 Activities of an entrepreneur

Farmer (1978) and Van de Ven et al. (1984) studied the activities consuming an entrepreneur's time. Farmer (1978) concluded that entrepreneurs spent more time in general management, conducting meetings, dealing with customers etc as they grew and curtailed time devoted to workers or staff. Van de Ven et al. (1984) observed that entrepreneurs in growing firm spent more time communicating with external agencies like bankers, investors and customers but reduced time devotion to product development, monitoring workers and attending to paper work etc. However, their research did not explore the reasons why entrepreneurs spent time on particular activity. In other words, the objectives or strategic intent behind devotion or non-devotion of time on a particular activity was not studied. Eileen Fischer et al. (1997) looked at importance given by the entrepreneurs to organizational performance while devoting time to various activities and found that entrepreneurs and managers had different patterns of time devotion like present minded, multi-taskers, selective engagement with fast employees or customers etc. The study also found time devotion of some entrepreneurs and managers being decided by the systems and processes they laid for the organization. Arnold Cooper et al. (1997) found time devotion of entrepreneurs to be driven by their individual background. Technically qualified entrepreneurs spent

more time on maintenance, production and customers while administrative entrepreneurs focused on finance, planning, records etc. The decision to spend their time was driven by their comfort level with the task rather than the firm objectives. The research did not find if the time devotion was driven by any objective or intent and whether such objectives or intents remained constant. Moren Levesque et al. (2005) observed that the time devotion of entrepreneurs varied by their individual risk aversion, their hourly wage rate and importance of enterprise for them. In a structured observation, Susan Mueller et al. (2012) studied the work load, activities, actions and time devotion of some start-up and growth entrepreneurs. Finding some similarities and many differences between the activities of entrepreneurs in both categories, the researchers concluded that all entrepreneurs spent considerable time in communication.

2.3 Research gap

There is little understanding of why entrepreneurs choose to spend time and effort on certain activities, whether their objectives remain constant over a period of time and whether the activities of successful entrepreneurs are different from not so successful entrepreneurs.

2.4 Research questions

Following research questions emerge from review of the present literature:

- a) How do entrepreneurs devote their time and effort and why?
- b) Are patterns of activities of successful entrepreneurs different from those of not so successful entrepreneurs?
- c) Do strategic intents of entrepreneurs change with time?

2.5 Proposition

Importance of customer focused marketing strategy has been emphasized by the past research. Therefore customer acquisition and retention is a priority for every entrepreneur. However, some entrepreneurs do this more aggressively and consistently than others. Once acquired, successful entrepreneurs work hard to retain the customer. As they efficiently replicate the cycle of customer acquisition and retention, they start growing volumes and spend their resources on debottlenecking, improving operational efficiency and capacity growth. Once their enterprise reaches a critical mass, they start looking outside the enterprise by networking, opportunity hunting and indulging in lateral growth related activities. Such observed behaviour of several entrepreneurs during researcher's 30 years of industry experience and 7 years of business consulting experience, led to the following proposition:

1. Entrepreneurs have strategic intents of customer acquisition, customer retention, volume growth and lateral growth
2. Successful entrepreneurs indulge in certain specific activities with strategic intents;
3. Strategic intents of successful entrepreneurs are dynamic and different from those of not so successful entrepreneurs.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Type of research

The research involved enquiring about the activities an entrepreneur engaged in, the objectives behind such a decision, the circumstances then existing and the context in which he took such decisions. Only a case study would have helped develop a perspective of the entrepreneur's decision to indulge or not to indulge in a certain activity. The key questions in the research being of 'how' and 'why', case study method of research was used (Yin, 2014). To enhance validity of findings, multiple cases were taken up (Herriott and Firestone, 1983). The study covered 8 cases, comprising of 4 successful, 3 unsuccessful and one failed entrepreneur.

3.2 Test of validity

Yin (2014) recommended identification of type of changes to be studied and establishing appropriateness of measures to be used for the purpose in order to enhance validity of the construct. He also suggested using multiples lines of enquiry and establishing a chain of evidence. Keeping objectives of the study in mind, detailed protocol comprising of structured questionnaire, field procedures and data analysis methods was laid down and followed. Lines of enquiry comprised of in-depth interviews, scrutiny of available documents and data that came up during interview, subsequent tour of the

enterprise to put the answers of the respondent regarding organizational performance in perspective, corroborating the data with information available on respondents' website and if applicable, reviewing the data in light of statutory returns filed by the respondent with Ministry of Corporate Affairs. Qualitative studies are often criticized for inability to generalize the findings. However, the case studies, if done correctly, can demonstrate theoretical generalization rather than statistical generalization found in quantitative studies or surveys (Yin, 2014). The present study relied on pattern matching and argument building to compare the findings with proposition, identifying the literal replications and explaining divergent yet theoretically replicating findings.

3.3 Stages of enterprise evolution

Greiner (1972) proposed five stage growth model of enterprise consisting of creativity, direction, delegation, coordination and collaboration. However, such a model is more relevant in large enterprises. The present study was restricted to small and medium enterprise where entrepreneur has a bigger role to play and the effect of his action or inaction is clearly visible in the firm performance. Quinn and Cameron (1983) suggested four stages of a firm's life cycle. Ian Hunter (1995) found five stages of new venture creation. The present study however doesn't aim to find activities of an entrepreneur throughout firm's existence but at certain crucial time points like first year of business, the year of stability and the year of perceived growth, if any. Since the study was of an entrepreneur rather than the enterprise, time points that SME entrepreneurs could understand easily and relate with developments in their enterprise were taken up for study. Yet another reason for taking up such time points was that events in the first year, stability year and growth year often happen to be turning points in career of the entrepreneurs and they remember activities and events of these time points more vividly than any other time point.

3.4 Unit of analysis

Eight cases were taken up for study. These included 4 successful, 3 less successful and one failed entrepreneur. Successful entrepreneurs comprised of two from manufacturing sector and one each from trading and service sector. Similarly, not so successful entrepreneurs included one each from manufacturing, trading and service sectors. The failed entrepreneur was from trading sector. Logic behind such a selection of the cases was different from one used for sampling in a survey. While respondents in a survey sample have exactly identical attributes, the cases selected in the present study had diverse background with entrepreneurs in each engaging in different activities. The idea was to build patterns of their time and effort devotion in the context of their respective organization and compare the same with the proposition to find literal replications or theoretical replications.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Hamel & Prahalad, (1989) call firm's obsession to win at all levels a strategic intent. The strategic intent, as they suggested, is not just unfettered ambition to win but an active process compelling the organization to focus on winning. How an organization is made to focus on essence of winning is reflected in the actions and chosen inactions of the entrepreneur. As path to organizational growth begins with customer acquisition, the entrepreneurs do everything that leads to or is a prerequisite of customer acquisition. Having acquired a customer, satisfying him and retaining him for long term benefit becomes another priority for an entrepreneur. Proactive entrepreneurs continue the process of acquiring and retaining one customer after another until they utilize all their capacity to service them effectively. They remove bottlenecks and add capacity whenever and wherever they can. Once they reach a critical mass by exhausting their present resources, they start exploring new markets, new products, new networks and new opportunities. Such behaviour of the entrepreneurs is reflective of strategic intent as they actively channelize their resources to achieve a unified goal of winning (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Daft et al., 2010).

The indepth interviews with the respondents were set up by prior appointment and they were asked to identify the first year of their operations, the year of stability and the year of perceived growth. They were then asked about total number of hours devoted to their enterprise at each time point. Lists of key activities they engaged in at each time point were prepared and their objectives behind choosing certain activities were noted. The first level data of activities was then grouped in second level categories of four strategic intents namely customer acquisition, customer retention, volume growth, and lateral growth. It was observed that successful entrepreneurs proactively chose activities with specific strategic intent at each time point. During first year of his operations, the successful entrepreneurs in manufacturing sector devoted more time and efforts on activities like product development, reading technical literature to stay updated with

advancements in the field, end-use related discussions with potential customers and stabilizing manufacturing facilities. The entrepreneur in service sector was found busy creating customized service offerings, enhancing the scope and quality of his services, meeting new customers to convince them about his capabilities etc. The successful trader devoted more time attending to each walk-in customer personally and building a dossier of customers by gathering information about their tastes and preferences, identifying new products to match customer enquiries, training his staff about new product attributes and promotional offers and refreshing his store display on weekly basis. Proactive engagement in such activities by these successful entrepreneurs showed a clear strategic intent of customer acquisition. The entrepreneur of not so successful manufacturing enterprise on the other hand actively engaged in networking, browsing competitor products in the market, procuring raw material and other inputs, reconciling material consumption and checking books of accounts. The trader focused on finding products with higher margin but neither proactively expanded his customer base nor attempted to get insights in their tastes and preferences although he attended to walk-in customers and enquired about their profession etc out of curiosity. The trader who had failed in business devoted most of his time answering or dodging his creditors of earlier failed businesses, defending himself against demands from tax authorities and fighting legal cases. He responded to current business enquiries from few customers and coordinated sourcing and despatch of products. The not so successful entrepreneurs did not have a clear strategic intent of customer acquisition in the first year of their operation. When asked about reasons of taking up certain activities, they answered that they considered these to be important and hence took these up. They either had no clear or focused strategic intent or stated ambiguous and overlapping objectives.

Discussions on the stability year showed that successful manufacturers devoted significant energy coordinating production, monitoring customer order execution, sourcing of inputs, improving machine efficiency, discussing technical matters with the team, communicating with customers to get product reviews and fresh orders etc. Their actions demonstrated underlying strategic intent of customer retention. Similarly, the entrepreneur in service sector focused on coordinating resources to deliver quality and timely service to clients, setting up customer meetings for service feedback, working with team to enhance user value of the service and strengthening the service delivery system. He also had clear intention of retaining his customers by focusing on these activities. Successful trader was found devoting time to walk-in customers, meeting market intermediaries, refining product portfolio to match customer expectations, monitoring his inventory, receivables and team of sales / accounting staff. He was doing all of these to retain his customers and provide them cost effective solutions. Not so successful entrepreneurs on the other hand were devoting sizeable portion of their efforts to customer acquisition during 3 to 4 years after setting up their enterprise as they could not build a strong portfolio of regular customers in the initial years. Their passive behaviour and lack of understanding of strategic intent was demonstrated by continued struggle to acquire customers. Failed trader was found deeply involved in facing past creditors and tax authorities, struggling to manage his cash flow on daily basis, following up with suppliers, coordinating export shipment logistics and attending to staff matters. He lacked initiative and responded to few isolated trade enquiries. He couldn't buy his products efficiently due to poor credibility in the market and lack of proactive approach to improve his finances. While he was short of funds to run his operations smoothly, he had blocked sizeable funds in unproductive properties.

Study of activities entrepreneurs focused on during their growth year showed that successful manufacturers concentrated on installing new machines, introducing new products, discussing growth plans with established customers, visiting trade fairs to identify new business opportunities, networking with peers, competitors and industry leaders and actively participating in industry association to grow in stature. Successful trader was busy negotiating product dealership of new brands to grow his product portfolio, promoting his business through trade intermediaries by offering them incentives including free overseas trips in return for their support in growth of his business, partnering with key intermediaries to achieve bulk business with them and travelling across the globe to look for new developments, identify novelty products and additional suppliers. Successful entrepreneur in service sector focused on opening additional branches and venturing into related diversification by adding different services, some of which included trading of related materials, in his portfolio. He networked extensively with other business associates to acquire more customers through them. Since he was in the business of training undergraduate students in professional skills, he partnered with several institutions of higher education and some potential employers to open career avenues for his student clients. He spent lot of time identifying and growing such business partners. He also organized events to promote his business and appointed franchisees at small towns and outskirts of big cities to expand his reach. The activities of successful entrepreneurs thus demonstrated underlying strategic intent of volume growth and lateral growth. Not so successful entrepreneurs were found busy with

accounting and banking matters including approval of vouchers and signing of cheques, taking round of their shop floor, reading daily production and quality reports, reviewing sales and despatches, sorting out labour or staff matters, holding long conversations with suppliers and attending to other administrative, tax and legal matters. The activities they indulged in did not show any clear strategic intent. They acted passively and attended to things as these popped up or were brought to them by their employees. Failed trader did not see any growth phase and shut down his business in 3 years.

Although successful entrepreneurs have a unified goal of winning, for them victory is more a journey than destination. Their strategic intents of customer acquisition, customer retention, volume growth and lateral growth are time specific and appear to be a sub set of a premeditated strategy to achieve the highest possible growth.

5. CONCLUSION

Behavioural traits are the catalysts that help entrepreneur achieve desired objectives through planned actions or inactions. Traits can't be seen in isolation but are reflected in what people do or avoid doing. Each action or deliberate inaction of an entrepreneur has an intention and intentions of successful entrepreneurs are more strategic than others. The study is an attempt to help entrepreneurship educators translate entrepreneurial orientation into the actions entrepreneurs take and also help them guide aspiring entrepreneurs on what they should do, when and why. Entrepreneurship Trainers may find it easier to suggest a task list with underlying intents demonstrating entrepreneurial orientation. Similarly, aspiring and present entrepreneurs should find it easier to chalk out time specific task lists in sync with their growth objectives.

6. LIMITATIONS

The study covered entrepreneurs mostly in SME sector. Smaller the enterprise greater the impact of entrepreneur's individual behaviour on the organizational performance. As the organizations grow in size and operations, these tend to be governed by systems and processes and are often driven by the collective behaviour of senior officers handling various functions although entrepreneur continues to have some impact on the overall performance. The study doesn't reflect behaviour of entrepreneurs in such large enterprises. Another limitation of this study is that it covered first generation entrepreneurs in order to understand how they acted in the first year and the year of stability. Such behaviour would be different from an entrepreneur who inherits, acquires or joins an existing enterprise. The activities such entrepreneurs indulge in and the strategic intents behind their activities need to be studied separately.

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