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STRATEGIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND FIRM PERFORMANCE – RESTORING THE ROLE OF TASK ENVIRONMENT

Summary: Despite the importance of task environment for firm performance, little is known about the mechanisms that enable firms to benefit from a specific environmental setting. I argue that firms adjust strategic entrepreneurship to the environment and use it as a mechanism to transform the advantages provided by the environment into above-average performance levels. Using data from 158 Polish SMEs, I found that environmental dynamism, hostility, and complexity positively affect strategic entrepreneurship. As well, I discuss the empirical findings with respect to their theoretical contribution and their practical implications.

Keywords: task environment; strategic entrepreneurship; firm performance; small and medium-sized enterprises.

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1. Introduction

This article contributes to reducing the scarcity of empirical research on the consequences of task environment for strategic entrepreneurship. The aim of this article is to discover the missing link in the task environment–strategic entrepreneurship relationship. To answer this question, I develop and test hypotheses on the contingent task environment–strategic entrepreneurship link using the data from 158 Polish SMEs. The empirical findings reveal that environmental dynamism, hostility, and complexity help firms to transform the advantages of strategic entrepreneurship into superior performance levels.

Specifically, I make three contributions to the literature. First, it provides empirical support for the notion that strategic entrepreneurship, like most ways of organizing, should not be regarded as a universal, one-fits-all solution. The study's findings help delineate boundary conditions for strategic entrepreneurship theory including environmental dimensions as crucial antecedents strategic entrepreneurship – an important precondition for any theory to move forward. Second, the study establishes that task environment plays a key role in the strategic entrepreneurship

effectiveness. I focus on the most appropriate dimensions of the environment: those that address how firms interact with customers, competitors, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Third, my approach uses a multidimensional conceptualization of the environment. After a comprehensive literature review, I identify three key dimensions of a firm's task environment: dynamism, hostility, and complexity. Although most previous studies have used a single dimension of the environment [e.g., Covin, Covin 1990], I can give more detailed information about which environmental dimensions influence strategic entrepreneurship and how they do it. The article therefore contributes to answering the question under what conditions does the presence of strategic entrepreneurship in firms generate competitive advantage. Arguably it is one of the most interesting questions in the field of strategic management today.

My article is organized as follows. First, I draw on prominent theoretical arguments and prior empirical evidence to derive hypotheses about the relationships among strategic entrepreneurship, firm performance and environmental dimensions. I then test my hypotheses using a correlation analyses. Subsequently, I present and discuss my empirical results with reference to their theoretical and practical implications, and finally point out limitations of my study and recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The proposition that organizations should align their strategy with their external environment is almost axiomatic in organizational research [Thompson 1967]. The firm's external environment represents all various factors that are taken into consideration in the decision-making process of organization. The constrained strategic choice perspective argues that an organization has the freedom to choose and implement its own strategies, but the success of these strategies is influenced by the external environment [Bluedorn, Johnson, Cortwright, Barringer 1994]. Consistent with this viewpoint, I suggest that an organization will enact entrepreneurship strategies that are likely to be successful in dynamic, hostile and complex environmental conditions.

Strategic entrepreneurship integrates opportunity-seeking with competitive advantage behaviour [Bratnicka, Dyduch 2014]. Kraus, Kauranen, Reschke [2011] utilize a configurational approach as a theoretical basis to identify six domains of strategic entrepreneurship. The building blocks of this configuration are the primary elements of the organization such as resources, strategy, organizational structure, entrepreneurial leadership, and environment. Strategic entrepreneurship is heavily affected by the dynamism and munificence of the environment – influencing strategy, structure, leadership, resources and capabilities. The configuration promotes strategic flexibility, creativity, and continuous innovation.

Hitt, Ireland, Sirmon and Trahms [2011] propose a more comprehensive input – process – output theoretical model of strategic entrepreneurship which is broader in

scope, multilevel, and more dynamic than was earlier conceptualized. The model incorporates environmental factors, organizational and individual resources into resource orchestration. Next, they turn to consequences of resource orchestration (structuring resource portfolio, bundling resource into capabilities, leveraging the capabilities for achieving competitive advantage for the firm) for creating the value of customers and competitive advantage. Specifically the focus is on creating wealth and other benefits for society, organizations and individuals. The assumption within the model is that the firm's external environment (munificence, dynamism, interconnectedness) affects its ability to explore and exploit opportunities as a foundation for competitive advantage. Therefore, I suppose that strategic entrepreneurship is positively associated with firm performance.

Importantly both strategic entrepreneurship models underlined the process applying resources and capabilities while exploring for opportunities in environmental context. Environment may lead not only to more efficient, but also more effective entrepreneurial strategic action. In their organizational studies researchers have approached the context construct with different foci [Muehlfeld, Sahib, Van Witteloostuin 2012].

They are delving with increased focus into the contextual factors that change the nature of the relationship between strategic entrepreneurship and various manifestations of firm performance [Zahra 1993]. Different measures that have been used in strategic management theory and corporate entrepreneurship theory to describe the task environment fall generally into three categories (see: [Rosenbusch, Rauch and Bausch 2013] for a detailed review): dynamism, hostility, and complexity. Dynamism in the environment is manifested by the rate of unpredictable (because of interconnections between environmental elements) and rapid environmental change included in customer tastes, product or service technologies, and modes of intensity of competition – and, thus, it heightens uncertainty for organizational members. Hostility in the environment is evidenced by the level of general lack of opportunities and resources available to firms from environment and competition for these resources (e.g., severe regulatory restrictions, shortness of labour or raw materials, decreasing markets) that influence the extent to which environment can hinder sustained organizational stability and growth. Complexity refers to the level of complex knowledge that understanding the environment requires. It specially reflects environmental differences that require different organizational practices. The higher the level of complexity, the greater information processing is required for understanding heterogeneity of environment.

I suppose that the advantages of strategic entrepreneurship may be influenced by environmental context in which the firm is embedded. Firms with a dynamic environment and considerable access to financial capital have relatively high performance [Wiklund, Shepherd 2005], foster the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance [Frank, Kessler 2010] and are positively associated with the growth of small and medium sized enterprises [Pett, Wolff 2009].

The relationship between creativity and firm-level innovation is moderated by environmental dynamism, being stronger in dynamic than in stable environments [Baron, Tang 2011]. Conversely, the dynamism of task environment has at the same time a direct negative and an indirect (through entrepreneurial orientation) effect on small business growth [Wiklund, Patzelt, Shepherd 2009].

Because strategic entrepreneurship emphasizes the exploration and exploitation of new products and processes, it is a legitimate response to a dynamic environment and it increases the chances of attaining competitive advantage and superior performance in such an environment. Rapid change and the unpredictability of future events provide ample opportunities for firms. Thus, a dynamic environment results in superior performance through the adoption of strategic entrepreneurship that causes that firms to focus on innovative strategies and flexibility of their resource base. Shortly, strategic entrepreneurship is positively related to environmental dynamism.

Zahra and Covin [1995] argue that corporate entrepreneurship is particularly effective among firms operating in hostile environment (as opposed to benign environment). The degree to which hostility is present in environment is positively associated with entrepreneurial behaviours [Kreiser, Anderson, Marino and Kuratko 2013]. However, hostile environment requires strategic discipline [Porter 1980] as wrong strategic decisions could even endanger the survival of a firm. In addition, firms operating in hostile environment face difficulties in acquiring resources needed to pursue strategic entrepreneurship. Therefore, to perform well in hostile environment, firms should implement a strategic orientation characterized by low risk taking and experimentation [Tang, Hull 2012]. The above theoretical arguments, as well as previous empirical evidence, suggest that strategic entrepreneurship is negatively related to environmental hostility.

Complexity is associated with small firm growth [Chaston, Sadler-Smith 2012]. Additionally, the level of environmental complexity is likely to affect the proactive strategic efforts [Oliver, Holzinger 2008]. Firms that fail to apply new knowledge and resources to different contexts and thereby leverage learning efforts are prone to underperformance. The diversity of customer needs, as well as the number of different market segments served by firms, create new opportunities for innovations. Firms with a high degree of strategic entrepreneurship will be better placed to explore and exploit these opportunities and, thus, to translate the advantages of complex environment into increased financial performance. Because strategic entrepreneurship is an adequate response to complex environment, I propose that strategic entrepreneurship is positively related to environmental complexity.

To recapitulate, it is clear from this prior research that organization environment is definitely a multidimensional construct. Together these arguments suggest the three-dimensionality of environment construct. This implies that dynamism, hostility and complexity are distinct dimensions of task environment. Thus, I predict the following:

Hypothesis 1. Strategic entrepreneurship is positively associated with firm performance.

Hypothesis 2. The positive effects of strategic entrepreneurship strengthen as environmental dynamism increases.

Hypothesis 3. The positive effects of strategic entrepreneurship weaken as environmental hostility increases.

Hypothesis 4. The positive effects of strategic entrepreneurship strengthen as environmental complexity increases.

3. Methods and results

To test my hypotheses, in 2011 and 2012 a field study of small and medium firms using mailed questionnaires were conducted (see: [Bratnicka 2012; Bratnicka, Kwiotkowska 2013] for details of sample and procedure, as well as firm performance, strategic entrepreneurship, and task environment measures). Data were collected from the members of top management teams who possessed adequate knowledge about their organization's strategic imperatives and decisions. The sample frame was confined to small and medium-sized companies located in Upper Silesia having up to 249 employees (the UE definition of small and medium-sized firms). This study focused primarily on single-business, to help ensure the respondents were not diverted by various organizational processes and environment. Data were collected by means of a postal survey.

I examine firm performance by asking respondents to compare the development of their own firm over the past three years relative to that of other important competitors. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this scale was .919. To measure strategic entrepreneurship, I used a five-item scale, which aggregates strategic renewal, sustained regeneration, domain redefinition, organizational rejuvenation and business model. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this scale was .863. A total of ten items captured task environment. Six items assessed the degree of dynamism. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this scale was .923. Two-items tapped the extent to which environment was hostile. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this scale was .802. Complexity was measured with two. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this scale was .798.

To test my hypotheses, I applied the correlation analysis using Pearson coefficient. I performed this procedure for all four hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 states that strategic entrepreneurship has a positive effect on firm performance. Since the direct effect of strategic entrepreneurship is positive and significant (.23; $p < .004$), Hypothesis 1 is supported. Such results are comparable to relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. Hypothesis 2 suggests that environmental dynamism is positively associated with strategic entrepreneurship. I found Hypothesis 2 was supported: environmental dynamism led to strategic entrepreneurship (.782; $p < .001$). For Hypothesis 3, the goal was to analyse negative relationship between

environmental hostility and strategic entrepreneurship. This Hypothesis was not supported because empirical evidence indicated that environmental hostility led to strategic entrepreneurship (.214; $p < .007$). Such a finding underlines Lumpkin and Dess [2001] supposition that entrepreneurship is most effective in hostile environment. The direct effect of environmental complexity is positive and significant (.264; $p < .001$) and supports Hypothesis 4. Thus, the three environmental conditions need to be considered as separated dimensions of the environment, despite contrary assertions that sometimes can be found in the literature. I suggest, thus, that the simultaneous consideration of dynamics, hostility and complexity is more appropriate for drawing conclusions about organization environment influence on organizational creativity than considering each individual environment dimension separately.

4. Conclusions

This article examines how firms can use strategic entrepreneurship to deal with opportunities associated with their external environment. Despite compelling theoretical arguments as to how and why firms adjust their strategic entrepreneurship to the requirements of the environment, to date empirical research has largely neglected these relationships. Thus, my results provide empirical evidence for a missing link in the literature, identifying strategic entrepreneurship as a key mechanism by which the task environment can influence firm's performance. Specifically, I have found that firms benefit from environmental dynamism, hostility, and complexity if they implement a high level of strategic entrepreneurship. The strong influence of several environmental dimensions on strategic entrepreneurship suggests that the environment also needs to be taken into account as an antecedent in a model of strategic entrepreneurship and firm performance.

Compared with previous work, this study has taken a very detailed look at the firm's task environment. Thus, it is not industry that matters per se. Rather, it seems that firms align their strategic entrepreneurship to different characteristics of the task environment and as a consequence reach higher performance levels not looking broadly at a single (more often favourable than unfavourable) aspect of the environment. Studying indirect links between environmental dimensions and strategic entrepreneurship has shed light on the mechanisms by which environmental dimensions enhance or decrease firm performance. Only those firms that apply the appropriate strategic entrepreneurship in a specific environment may be able to transform advantages provided by the environment into above-average performance levels.

In terms of managerial implications, the results suggest that investments in building dynamic capabilities (such as strategic entrepreneurship) are strategically justified in many task environments. As noted, dynamic capabilities reconfigure a firm's resource base, and managers need to pay attention to building and exploiting these capabilities in ways that generate a competitive advantage. Even though some

of the routines develop accidentally, others require managers' patient investments and foresight in deciding where and how to build these capabilities as well as how to deploy them to achieve a competitive advantage. Task environment could alter the fabric of the industry and cause the decay of the firm's resources or render them strategically irrelevant. Therefore, managers need to ensure the effectiveness of their firm's strategic entrepreneurship.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged, some of which suggest important avenues for future research. My study used cross-sectional designs to test the effects of environmental dimensions on strategic entrepreneurship and firm performance. It is widely recognized that more studies need to address the causal relationships between antecedents and consequences of strategic entrepreneurship [e.g., Rauch, Wiklund, Lumpkin, Frese 2009]. For example, it is possible that performance provides access to the resources necessary to pursue innovative opportunities [Zahra, Covin 1995]. It may take some time before environmental conditions affect strategic entrepreneurship and, in turn, firm performance. To tackle these issues, studies based on longitudinal data need to be conducted because it is likely that firms align their strategic entrepreneurship to the environment whereas the environment acts as a moderator to the strategic entrepreneurship – performance relationship at a later point in time. Such research is necessary because of the complex nature of the interrelationships among task environment, strategic orientation, other internal characteristics of firms, and their performance. I hope that future research will incorporate these time-lag and causality issues in their design. This reinforces the call for longitudinal studies as well as for research which can advance theory building in this area by considering strategic entrepreneurship as both an outcome and a predictor variable in mediation models.

In conclusion, the findings presented here suggest that strategic entrepreneurship has more complicated performance effects than previously assumed. I hope that the more nuanced approach developed here spurs further empirical research that helps us better understand the intricacies of the consequences of strategic entrepreneurship.

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PRZEDSIĘBIORCZOŚĆ STRATEGICZNA I EFEKTYWNOŚĆ PRZEDSIĘBIORSTWA – PRZYWRÓCENIE ROLI OTOCZENIA ZADANIOWEGO

Streszczenie: Pomimo ważności otoczenia zadaniowego dla efektywności przedsiębiorstwa, niewiele wiadomo o mechanizmach ułatwiających przedsiębiorstwom uzyskiwanie korzyści ze specyficznego umiejscowienia w otoczeniu. W opracowaniu przyjęto, że przedsiębiorstwa dostosowują przedsiębiorczość strategiczną do otoczenia zadaniowego oraz wykorzystują ten proces w celu przekształcenia możliwości stwarzanych przez otoczenie na ponadprzeciętną efektywność. Wykorzystując dane empiryczne pozyskane ze 158 polskich małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw, zaobserwowano, że dynamizm, wrogość i złożoność otoczenia pozytywnie wpływa na przedsiębiorczość strategiczną. Przedstawiono też implikacje uzyskanych wyników badawczych zarówno w odniesieniu do wkładu w rozwój teorii zarządzania strategicznego, jak i w aspekcie konsekwencji do praktyki zarządzania.

Słowa kluczowe: otoczenie zadaniowe, przedsiębiorczość strategiczna, efektywność przedsiębiorstwa, małe i średnie przedsiębiorstwa.