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Government Business Programs and Regional Business Knowledge Transmission by Professional Business Advisors

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ABSTRACT

Based on research seeking to understand mechanisms affecting the provision of small business advisory services in a Regional (non-metropolitan) Australian setting, by what are called Professional Business Advisors (PBAs), an emergent theme identifies government business programs and initiatives as significant conduits for regional business knowledge transmission. However, those programs and initiatives are also perceived to impose substantial constraints for PBAs providing services in regional communities. The identified constraining factors include issues of financial viability for PBAs, ineligibility of many regional small businesses to access government funded initiatives, capriciousness of government programs, and clash between technology utilisation and infrastructure reliability in some non-metropolitan regional areas. Regional Australian PBAs service a heterogeneous collection of businesses across large geographic areas. Yet, the potential influence that these PBAs have in the process of knowledge transmission is severely constrained by current government programs aimed both at start-up regional businesses and those pursuing organisational growth. Such constraints raise concerns that have regional policy implications.

INTRODUCTION

There is a long-held belief that knowledge is a critical, strategically important, resource for businesses (Grant, 1996; Nag and Gioia, 2012), however, the inherent limitations associated with small business management expertise (Hall, 1992) emphasise the need for small business owner/ managers to continuously improve their managerial skills (Laitinen and Chong, 1999) and education (Peterson, Kozmetsky and Ridgway, 1983). This study adopts the premise that appropriate professional external business advisors may address the limited management knowledge of small businesses helping them develop a sustainable competitive advantage (Chrisman, 1999; Chrisman and McMullan, 2004), these small business advisors are seen as being “able to provide knowledge resources for firms with limited access” (Łobacz, Głodek, Stawasz and Niedzielski, 2016, p. 120). The focus of this study is on those professionals whose actions are directed towards providing general business advice to small businesses as directed by the needs of their clientele. For the purposes of this paper the external advisors who are the focus of this study will be denoted as Professional Business Advisors (PBAs).

Due to resource limitations associated with business size, SMEs may seek advice from external individuals or organisations when needed (Smallbone, North and Leigh, 1993). Because small business size hinders the knowledge movement normally associated with larger corporate

environments, small businesses overcome organisational knowledge isolation by supplementing their knowledge through the use of external advisors (Gibb, 1993; Kent, Dennis and Tanton, 2003). A range of small business benefits are associated with the use of PBAs including the procurement of specialised knowledge and skills (Chrisman, McMullan and Hall, 2005; Viljamaa, 2011), access to financial information related to taxation (Holmes and Smith, 1997), operational planning and systems reviews (Carey, Simnett and Tanewski, 2005), future trends and fresh ideas (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki and Nummela, 2004), innovation strategy (Bessant and Rush, 1995), or simply as the source of valuable industry contacts (Chrisman and McMullan, 2000).

In Australia the overwhelming majority of businesses in almost every industry are classified as small, with a significant number of small businesses located in Regional (non-metropolitan) locations in each state (Nicholls and Orsmond, 2015). For many Regional economies, small businesses are regarded as the main wealth creators (Lowe and Henson, 2005), with their support for local communities being crucial to the economic and social viability of the region in which they operate (Hettihewa and Wright, 2018; Robbins and Murphy, 2005). Bearing in mind the importance of small businesses to Regional communities, any failure in helping businesses overcome their difficulties may potentially impact on the overall region's economic performance (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry [ACCI], 2004). This presents challenges because Australian small businesses are considered prone to high failure rates (Ahmad and Seet, 2009; Watson, 2003) and substantial annual churn (ABS, 2013). The propensity for small business churn can be exacerbated by location remoteness, the influence of resource access limitations considered a significant barrier for non-metropolitan small businesses (Henderson, 2002). Considering the comment by Hettihewa and Wright (2018, p. 114) that Regional small businesses (SBs) "tend to have attributes, behaviour, and needs that differ significantly from urban-SBs", this paper identifies that the use of Regional PBAs may address the potential knowledge isolation experienced by Regional small businesses.

Whilst seeking to understand the mechanisms that affect the provision of small business advisory services, by PBAs, in a Regional Australian setting, an emergent theme identifies government business programs and initiatives as significant conduits for regional business knowledge transmission. This finding supports the premise by Hulpke and Byrnes (1994) that governments in many countries encourage the creation and continuance of small businesses through the support of business assistance programs. Also, Holmes and Smith (1997) identify that the Australian Federal government has introduced programs intended to improve SME's efficiencies and their utilisation of PBAs through the provision of subsidised access to such advisors.

Whilst in most countries, including Australia, governments seek to address the significant resource gap in small businesses through the provision of advisory services or subsidised assistance (Sawang, Parker and Hine, 2016), this study asks how such programs and initiatives are perceived by professionals providing knowledge services, in a Regional Australian context. Do PBAs consider government business programs and initiatives as important mechanisms for knowledge transmission, and if so, how effective are such programs and initiatives in addressing Regional knowledge isolation?

The following literature review identifies key contributions that illustrate both the importance of PBA services for Regional Australian small businesses and the recognised importance of government funded programs for supporting small business economic development within those regions. This is followed in this paper by the study's methodology and findings. Coming up with an answer to the research question and its policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bessant and Rush (1995) comment that most governments now support innovation at a Regional level in some way, however Everett and Watson (1998) identify that governments are faced with the dilemma of how to allocate funds for providing this support. Whilst Everett and Watson (1998, p. 371) comment that if the primary reason for small business failure is internal, then government policy should be targeted towards individual businesses; but if the primary reason for failure is external, then funds should be allocated towards “changing the economic environment in which small business operates”. From this perspective, government policy needs to be directed at both the individual business and the economy if the intention is to reduce the overall rate of small business failure (Everett and Watson, 1998).

Assistance provided by government for small business is usually motivated by ‘external’ economic concerns; mainly the stimulation of economic development and increased employment through improved small business operations (Breen and Bergin-Seers, 2002). Yet, a significant amount of literature is related to government policy addressing ‘internal’ small business issues, for example: Barrett, Billington and Neeson (2004) discuss the government program delivering hands-on assistance to 30 small businesses in the Latrobe Valley; Holmes and Smith (1997) identify the impact of subsidised business advice through the Australian Federal Government National Industry Extension Scheme (NIES); Sear and Agar (1996) conduct a survey of PBAs engaged in the British government developed SME information and advice service called Business Link; Robson and Bennett (2010) also investigated British government policy associated with Business Link. There are many more along these lines.

When addressing the internal small business failure issue, Peterson (1988) identifies three public policy models implemented by governments. The first is denoted as the ‘laissez-faire approach’ in which governments are not concerned with high failure rates but rather allow the process of start-up, survival, growth or decline to happen naturally. The second approach is the ‘limited-environmental policy approach’ in which government involvement is considered appropriate but should be limited to fostering a good economic climate for small business growth and development. The third is the ‘strategic interventionist approach’ in which the government is perceived as the protector and advocate of small business interests and as such needs to provide direct aid in the form of financial aid and advisory services. Along this third approach, Howard and Hine (1997) identify three forms of government small business assistance: (i) establishment of a small business advisory department which provides advisory services inclusive of market opportunities, referrals for professional services and regulatory requirements; (ii) provision of business training or financial support, for example the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) in Australia that provides support for unemployed who wish to start-up a business; and (iii) the business incubator which can provide subsidised rent, administrative support, business advice and other development support. PBAs can be engaged to deliver any aspect of the above three assistance (Howard and Hine, 1997).

This paper focuses on mechanisms adopted by governments in using PBAs to provide small business advisory services. In this context, Gnyawali and Fogel (1994, p. 57) suggest the main role for government small business policy is “to increase opportunities, to develop the motivation of potential entrepreneurs to go into business, and to enhance potential entrepreneurs' ability to start a business”. Further, they suggest that before policy is developed that governments need to identify “the extent of the opportunity, propensity to enterprise, and ability to enterprise” and then formulate policies that address the weakest areas (Gnyawali and Fogel, 1994, p. 58). Small business government support can be labelled in terms of being soft or hard schemes: soft schemes focus on the provision of education, business advice and business opportunity awareness; hard schemes focus on the provision of direct financial assistance

(Rotger, Gørtz and Storey, 2012). Thus, specifically governments' use of PBAs is associated with soft schemes.

The provision of government soft schemes, specifically PBA knowledge services, is dynamic and interactive, meaning the transference of knowledge is an activity that benefits from collaborative one-on-one interactions (Feldman, 1994). The importance of one-on-one interactions underscores the belief that external business advisors are an important source of information for developing small business knowledge (Chrisman, 1999; Robinson Jr, 1982). Chrisman and McMullan (2004) present evidence that PBA assistance has a causal link with small business survival, they identify that survival rates were significantly higher for businesses who received government supported business advisory services, 64%, compared with the 47% US national average of all businesses, which also includes businesses who received business advice (Chrisman and McMullan, 2004).

When investigating business consultants, Holmes and Smith (1997, p. 59) identify that consultants consider one major benefit of government supported small business programs is "that SMEs gain an understanding of the benefits of accessing consultants, and may be less reluctant to seek out the help of consultants when problems arise in the future". Ehrich and Billett (2004) suggest that government programs aimed at helping small business learning should find ways to develop localised support for such programs. From a small business perspective, Barrett *et al.* (2004) identify that small businesses received a number of benefits when participating in a small business assistance program in the Latrobe Valley, they included gaining confidence, an increase in staff numbers, and business continuation.

Robson Shaw and Bennett (1999) identify that government support schemes with specialised objectives, tight structures, and a focus on addressing gaps in the market work better, and Storey (2000, p. 314) asserts that governments need "to do less and better, rather than more and worse" when providing services for small business development. Research has indicated that businesses want governments to create an appropriate macroeconomic environment in which businesses can succeed (Storey, 2000). This aligns with Hettihewa and Wright (2018) who claim that government policies directed towards strengthening Regional small businesses need to improve the socio-economic viability of the region.

There appears to be a global concern about governments spending public funds on small business support initiatives, this is reflected in comments by Chrisman and Katrishen (1994) who explain that the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) program in the US can be justified from a public policy perspective, when there is continuing evidence that the assistance provided through the program delivers more revenue through taxes than the operating costs of the program. However, there appears to be limited research into the policy effectiveness of programs intended to stimulate small business and entrepreneurial activities, with findings inconclusive (Mazzarol and Clark, 2016; Rigby and Ramlogan, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on PBAs who service small businesses operating within both inner Regional and outer Regional locations within the State of Victoria: Inner Regional describing minor accessibility limitations to services within the region (ABS, 2004a); Outer Regional describing moderate limitations to services (ABS, 2004b). The focus on both inner and outer localities is founded on the belief that Regional towns act as service hubs beyond metropolitan centres (Baum, O'Connor and Stimson, 2005; Doherty, Rissman and Browning, 2013). Such selected towns have a Regional Development Victoria office and subsequently are considered to be a central location for Regional businesses to access advisory services. The four Inner Regional

locations involved in this study are Ballarat, Bendigo, Warrnambool and Shepparton. The two Outer Regional locations in this study are Horsham and Swan Hill.

A qualitative approach was used which included two primary data collection approaches, in-depth interviews and focus groups. These conversational methods allowed the researcher to generate empirical data about the social world by asking individuals and groups to discuss their respective experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). To identify appropriate PBAs within each location, the study adopted reputational case sampling, allowing the researcher to use local small business experts in each region to identify PBAs that small businesses might be directed towards when seeking information, knowledge, or advice (Roulston, 2010). In each region, local business experts were approached to identify appropriate interview participants. These experts included individuals who worked for Regional Development Victoria (RDV), the Industry Capability Network (ICN), the Small Business Mentoring Service (SBMS), AusIndustry, the Australian Industry Group, local council economic development offices, the Ai Group, community business networks and local chambers of commerce. It should be noted that the focus group participants were selected from individuals identified as business experts in each region; some of whom, not all, had provided recommendations of appropriate interview participants.

A total of 29 face-to-face interviews were conducted across six different regions. This included five in Ballarat, five in Bendigo, five in Shepparton, five in Horsham, six in Warrnambool and three in Swan Hill. Across the six Regional Australian locations there were seven different PBA professions who participated in this research. Participants were identified as being business advisors, consultants, coaches, mentors, legal specialists, accountants, and financial counsellors. Consultants were the dominant profession contributing to this research with nine participants, followed by advisors with six participants, mentors had five, accountants four, counsellors, and coaches had two each, and there was one legal specialist.

At the completion of the individual interviews with PBAs, this study purposively selected a group of Regional Victorian small business experts to engage in focused discussion about the emergent themes. One focus group, in each of the six regions, was conducted with participants from local government economic development departments, local RDV offices, local Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) who provide business mentoring programs, local commerce associations, and other local business networks.

The data analysis of both interviews and focus groups was managed through NVivo, the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (CAQDAS), with participant comments coded to thematic nodes and then categorised into broader concepts. One thematic node identified all comments related to government funded small business advisory support and identified both the importance of government initiatives for small business advisory services and also a range of constraining attributes which may hinder the knowledge transmission process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Six positive aspects of government funded support for small businesses emerged in this study: (i) the provision of funding for programs, (ii) support provided from various levels of government, (iii) the provision of crisis counselling for some businesses in financial distress, (iv) mentoring services for SMBs and start-ups, (v) skill development through business workshops, and (vi) networking opportunities. Each is set out below.

This study identified that government expenditure on small business initiatives was evident in each region included in this study, and that this money is considered important to ensure that

small businesses in Regional locations have access to needed support. The importance of this expenditure is evident in Hettihewa and Wright (2018) who suggest that government efforts to address the depopulation and decline of some regions should focus on Regional small business policy.

Support for Victorian Regional small business was identified across various levels of government, with collaboration and knowledge sharing crossing different government departments, government funded institutions, and local professional associations. This was evident in the cooperative engagement between Focus Group participants, who came from different government departments, government subsidised institutions, business networks and local business associations. This finding aligns with Barrett *et al.* (2004, p. 192) who comment that a positive aspect of a small business assistance program in the Latrobe Valley was that it reinforced strong working relationships between various levels of government and their agencies, which were evident in “communication, cooperation and coordination between agencies”.

Across all region’s crisis counselling services were provided for businesses in financial distress, these services provided through the ‘Rural Financial Counselling Service’. This service enables Regional farm-related businesses to sort through financial issues, understand their financial position, and have information required to make critical business decisions. When describing their role one participant explained that:

My role as a rural financial counsellor is not to tell people what to do, but it's effectively to sit down and help them understand where they're at financially, list options that they may have available to them, including options that we may not be aware of, and to help the client be able to make a decision as to what they want to do (HOA2).

Mentoring services for SMBs, and start-ups, was also available in all regions via the government provided ‘Small Business Bus’ and Regional members of the ‘Small Business Mentoring Service’. The Swan Hill focus group emphasised the importance of the bus to the region, stating that “When they do go, they are booked solid” (PHSH). However, they also raised concerns around the frequency of the service to more remote communities, commenting that the bus only visited Swan Hill once a year. A comment was made that “If the Small Business bus was to be a really useful resource in Regional areas, there’d be 20 of them and we’d have one in Mildura and one in Swan Hill every month” (PHSH).

All regions provided business workshops and networking opportunities for small businesses to develop skills or to expand their networks within their communities. However, the validity of these services was questioned by a few focus group participants because they considered them to be frequently poorly attended, for instance a comment from the Shepparton focus group was “workshops are always difficult to attract people to...” (MCSP). It was also noted in a few areas that smaller satellite regions had better attendance than the bigger towns, for example “Out of the five shires that we cover in the Wimmera, Horsham's probably the least proactive when we do workshops” (RHHO). Another issue of participation was that businesses that need the help tend not to use the service, this was expressed in the Horsham workshop: “we know that those small businesses who are proactive are going to the workshops. ...and they're often the ones that don't necessarily need it. Those that do need the help don't attend...” (WMHO). It was suggested that government workshops are perceived negatively and thus poor attendance is an outcome, this was reflected in a comment from the Bendigo focus group: “the perception would be that there might be more merit and value from the privately run workshop to the government run workshop, although the presenter may be the same or of a similar calibre” (PJBE).

Whilst acknowledging the positive contributions that government funded small business initiatives provide to PBA knowledge transmission across Regional areas, it was also identified

that PBAs perceived government initiatives as presenting significant constraints. These constraints are: (i) the requirement for knowledge needs to fit government mandated boxes; (ii) issues of financial viability for PBAs; (iii) the ineligibility of many regional small businesses to access government funded initiatives; (iv) the unpredictability of government programs; (v) moving allocation of funds to different Regional locations; and (vi) a clash between technology utilisation and infrastructure reliability in some non-metropolitan Regional areas. These constraints are set out below.

One constraining aspect for PBA knowledge transmission was the need to adhere to highly regulated government requirements. The PBA may have time constraints imposed on the client engagement, this could include the number of free sessions available before costs are incurred, a limited time allocated for free service, or the frequency by which these services are available in any region. PBAs may also have role constraints imposed on what services they are permitted to provide, such as terms and conditions specifying that mentors are not allowed to go beyond that role, or that counsellors are not allowed to provide advice. Additionally, travel conditions may be imposed on the PBA which directly impacts on their ability to appropriately service more remote small businesses in Regional Australia. One participant commented on how the travel reimbursement policy impacts on their ability to mentor small businesses who are more remote; "...under the way that I get reimbursed for travelling, I'm not supposed to do more than a 50k round trip. I am discouraged from doing more than 50k... I'm actually supposed to ask the client to reimburse me for travelling". This finding reflects similar comments by Barrett *et al.* (2004, p. 184) about the difficulty to provide advisory services in accordance with government program requirements, they state that "Adhering to the program budget, including travel costs and time allocated for each business, was a constraint". For some PBAs who had previously participated in government funded advisory initiatives this was a characteristic that hindered any further participation. One PBA commented that: "Government programs I generally find are - excuse the phrase - a waste of f*##ing time and money. They are run by bureaucrats who have got no concept of business and you've got to fit their boxes" (BAA4).

Barrett *et al.* (2004) describe one requirement of PBAs involved in government funded programs is to overcome small business scepticism and to recruit businesses into the program. It was noted that the process to recruit businesses took longer than anticipated because not all the businesses were either willing or able to participate. This aligned with the responses of a few PBAs in this study who commented that one constraining factor was financial. They stated that revenue from government programs did not make commercial sense for them, it required additional work to locate suitable clients and the level of remuneration was much lower than providing fee-for-service. When discussing this issue one PBA commented that: "my own view is I'd rather not rely on that for business because the type of business we get out of it's not really the business we want" (WAA6).

Another issue raised was program selection participation criteria based on business size or turnover, which designate many small businesses ineligible to access government funded initiatives. When describing a particular government program for the development of business plans, a member of the Shepparton focus group said: "...you've got to be a turnover of \$500,000 and be export focused basically so that cuts out a whole lot of those smaller..." (PCSP). Similarly, in Ballarat it was commented that: "...our business advisors, the way that the eligibility's structured is more focused at the established businesses, the ones that have traded for at least three years, have a turnover of \$1.5 million plus" (DEBA).

One significant constraining factor was the perceived unpredictability of government programs. Some PBAs commented that they could not trust government funded initiatives because the rules can change at any time. Sudden changes to programs, or initiatives, requiring PBAs to

adjust and potentially absorb the financial implications. When explaining a previous government funded drought program for regional businesses, one PBA said:

...only when each farmer had completed all four sessions that we got paid, and suddenly when we were about halfway through, the Feds said, "It's all over in three weeks. You've got to have it finished." So how it didn't kill us, I don't know. So we got out of it and after that we said, "They can stick it."

The focus groups tended to describe this issue as the changeability of government programs, rather than the unpredictability. However, it was still considered an issue, in the Bendigo focus group it was described as affecting Regional small businesses in general:

One of the things that I think frustrates small business is the politicisation and the change of government, change of name, change of program, change of processes, change of systems ...there can be no guarantee of process or systems or individuals that provide ongoing support to business, it's just an ad hoc political bloody toy for Canberra and Spring Street at the moment (GLBE).

Another aspect of PBA risk connected with the unpredictable nature of government programs, was the dynamic way funding for programs migrate from region to region, often attributed to the emergence of Regional crisis. The types of crisis discussed in this study included fire, drought and large organisational closures. A number of focus groups identified this issue and one example was:

...we've seen recently, probably over the last four or five years say with the demise of Ford a lot of emphasis both federally and state going into Geelong. So, everybody kind of dives into there, the money kind of gets thrown into those areas because they don't want to see people out of work. But then more recently you've had Hazelwood closing down so it's kind of the focus from what I can see has shifted from say Geelong out to the Latrobe Valley (ABBA).

This shifting of government funds from region to region also means that the need for PBAs to deliver knowledge-based initiatives moves, and opportunities for PBAs to transmit knowledge through government programs move. These knowledge transmission opportunities are fluid and follow the government money. Which potentially means that some Regional areas do not receive appropriate funds for small business initiatives because they are not considered a critical concern for the government.

It appears there have been policy changes shifting small business advisory services from face to face PBA knowledge transmission to self-help online systems. It was said in the Ballarat focus group that, "A lot of the smaller micro business support has moved into the more digital space and online, the free tools and templates, the information made available for people to access" (DEBA). Whilst the shifting of government small business programs into the online environment enables small businesses to access a lot of information for free, it does not ensure that small businesses know where to find that information, as was reflected in the following statement: "In most cases most businesses do not know what is available to them. It's the known unknowns. You don't know what you need until sometimes it's too late" (SBBA). This also raises the issue identified by Hettihewa and Wright (2018) that Regional small businesses are reluctant to embrace the adoption of technology in their business. The shift towards technology solutions also does not take into consideration the infrastructure issues some regions face, as raised in Swan Hill: "...the north-west of Victoria has got the worst connectivity of any region in Victoria and one of the worst in Australia. It's poor infrastructure, it's huge distances in comparison to other areas" (PHSH). Finally, the shift to impersonal online methods for knowledge transmission does not fulfil the important relational role that many PBAs believe is critical for successful knowledge transference to occur.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Regional Australian PBAs service a heterogeneous collection of businesses across large geographic areas. Yet, the potential influence that these PBAs have in the process of knowledge transmission is severely constrained by current government programs aimed both at start-up Regional businesses and those pursuing organisational growth. Such constraints as set out in this paper raise concerns that have Regional policy implications.

From the positive attributes of appropriate government expenditure on small business support programs, such programs are perceived as valuable within Regional communities and that ongoing expenditure should be encouraged. However, governments need to address the constraining aspects identified in this paper. Notably, unpredictability of government programs, moving allocation of funds to different Regional locations reflecting political swings, shift away from face-to-face small business programs to self-help online systems, and subsequent issues of financial viability for PBAs. Government policy needs to address these issues, otherwise what emerges from this paper is significant reluctance by PBAs to engage with such programs. This will result in reducing greatly the pool of knowledge that can be accessed for its transmission to small businesses in Regional locations, making such programs less effective because of the resulting knowledge deficit from the missing PBAs.

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