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## **WORKING PAPER**

### **Learning mode of small business owners**

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## **Learning mode of small business owners.**

### **Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to explore the learning mode of small business owners, from a theoretical stance, and based on empirical evidence. We distinguish between the required learning mode, the actual learning mode and the supported learning mode. Data were collected using the focus group method in a very heterogeneous sample of Belgian small business owners. The results indicate several gaps between the required, actual and supported learning modes, of which many are due to unawareness of learning needs and lack of reflective learning among small business owners. The data also indicate among others that solutions to fill learning gaps proposed in the literature are not applicable to all owners, e.g. not all owners are able to learn through networks.

Keywords: Belgium, learning capability, learning mode, learning gaps, learning process, learning support, reflective learning, research paper, small business owners, focus groups

## **Learning mode of small and medium sized business owners in Belgium.**

### **Introduction**

Life long learning and knowledge management are challenges for all business leaders in our current knowledge-intensive economy. This is even more the case for ambitious small business owners (Cope, 2005; Sexton, Upton, Wacholtz, & McDougall, 1997). First, small businesses are often managed by only one person, who is the key person collecting, processing and applying information and knowledge. The small businesses' learning process equals to a great extent the learning process of the owner. Knowledge management in small business is mainly about managing the owners' knowledge and his learning process. Second, small business owners need to be very innovative to survive in sectors dominated by medium and large business. Consequently, the business owners' ability to learn and to collect and process knowledge at a fast pace is extremely important for the survival of small businesses.

There is a body of literature explaining individual learning processes and organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990). However, small business owners have different learning modes than managers and employees. Their different personality, and the differences in access and learning possibilities for small business owners require a unique way of learning (Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005; Stewart, Watson, Carland, & Carland, 1998). Small business owners take a great risk by having their incomes, savings and jobs depending on the success of their business. In addition to the financial risks, they take great social and psychological risks because failure can result in psychological problems and break-downs of social networks (Littunen, 2000; Stewart et al., 1998). Knowing that many small businesses do not survive -about 30 percent cease within the first five years in Belgium (UNIZO, 2006)-, this

is a huge risk. The potential higher income and the independent nature of business owners are the main drivers to take this risk (Hisrich, 1990). Environmental conditions, such as labour market situations, and family are two other important drivers. Small business owners are, compared to managers and employees, active in a different environment with clearly different risks, and they have a greater preference for independence, also in their learning process. Entrepreneurs have also a different cognitive style (Perry, 1989) and have a different personality resulting in a different learning style (Rae & Carswell, 2000). Specifically in regard to personality, they have a stronger internal locus of control, need for self-development, and achievement motivation (Perry, 1989; Stewart et al., 1998). The higher sense of control on the environment together with the higher risks they are facing result in higher learning needs (Littunen, 2000). In addition, the lack of partners and managers in small businesses requires that small business owners acquire knowledge on a very broad range of topics, from market and product knowledge to strategic and managerial knowledge (Littunen, 2000). Thus, small business owners have a higher learning need and a different learning style than managers and employees.

There is consensus that this unique learning mode is more experiential, however, there is not an integrated theoretical framework explaining small business owners' learning mode, and empirical research on the learning processes of small business owners is still insufficient (Politis, 2005). Furthermore, existing studies focus on particular categories of owners or on entrepreneurs only (e.g.; gazelles, Sexton et al., 1997), particular aspects of learning (e.g.; critical incidents, Cope & Watts, 2000), or lack empirical study (e.g.; Cope, 2005, Politis, 2005). Lack of insight into the way small business owners learn makes it hard for governments and training institutes to develop optimal learning support initiatives to increase small business owners' learning.

In this study, we aim to assess the learning mode of small business owners. In particular, we are interested in when and how small business owners learn and collect knowledge. We distinguish between their actual learning mode and the learning mode required for their business success. In addition, we study to what extent training initiatives are supporting this learning mode. In particular, are the support initiatives adapted to the small business owners' needs, and are these able to bring small business owners' learning from the actual to the required learning mode. Our study contributes to the existing literature on entrepreneurial learning by: adding insight into different aspects of small business learning mode, and comparing the actual, required and supported learning mode based on a qualitative research strategy that generates rich contextual data. Empirical data is thus collected using focus groups composed of small business owners in a broad range of different sectors, allowing us to obtain a maximum heterogeneity in our sample. Small business owners are individuals that establish and manage a business primary to obtain an income; while entrepreneurs also establish and manage a business but to create value, to innovate and to make the business grow as well (Carland, Hoy, Boulton, & Carland, 1984). We focus on dynamic small business owners who also aim at increasing the value of their business. Hence, our study is not focussing on self-employed aiming at maximum stability, and also not limited to growth oriented entrepreneurs only. The larger and fast-growing entrepreneurial organizations (also called gazelles) are not included in our study because these larger organization might have different learning needs and learning possibilities than the small business owners (Sexton, 1997).

The paper continues first with explaining the specificity of small business owners and their learning. Next, an overview of the most relevant literature on learning modes of small business

owners is provided. The next part outlines our research method, followed by the results. The last parts discuss the findings and bring this paper to a conclusion.

## **Learning mode**

The learning literature includes a large number of individual learning theories all focussing on some aspects of the individual learning process. These aspects are: content (what), style or process (how), channel (where and by what means) and period (when) – see also similar categories in the review of Cope (2005). Combinations of these four learning aspects result in particular ways of learning, here indicated as learning modes. In the following paragraphs, we describe the small business owners' learning mode based on the literature.

### *Content.*

Cope (2005) indicates that, apart from the study of Sexton et. al (1997), little is known on the particular knowledge that small business owners need to gather. There are two main types of learning content, skills (e.g.; ability to detect opportunities, leadership, motivating) and information (product and market information). Small business owners need to learn more skills and more product and market knowledge than managers because of their risk position and lack of managerial support from within the company. Required skills are self-knowledge, detecting business opportunities, managing relationships and networks, and general management skills (Cope, 2005). Small business owners tend to look for information that is directly applicable, very relevant for the current needs and adapted to their particular context (Sexton et al., 1997).

Hence, they are less interested in general information or knowledge that extent their view and knowledge base. They also hardly take effort to acquire skills, although creativity, coping with high risks and learning to learn are essential skills for small business owners (Garavan & O'Conneide, 1994).

The entrepreneurship literature does not reach consensus on whether typical entrepreneurship skills, such as risk taking, can be taught (Garavan & O'Conneide, 1994). From a personality traits perspective entrepreneurial skills are based on personality characteristics and cannot be taught (Deakins & Freel, 1998). Some even argue that when such skills are taught, this might destroy the intuitive skills (Garavan & O'Conneide, 1994). However, most do agree that a risk-loving attitude is a basic condition, but that how to handle risks is something that can be taught (Garavan & O'Conneide, 1994). Prejudices against skill teaching are causing insufficient learning. Especially a lack of the skills 'developing self-knowledge', and 'learning to learn' affect the ability to learn. These skills allow owners to recognise their own learning needs and to map their own learning process and to detect learning abilities and gaps which are crucial in the entrepreneurial learning process (Rae & Carswell, 2000).

#### *Process.*

The process of learning can be approached by the well-known learning styles of Kolb (1984). These styles are very useful and very frequently used to indicate how people absorb and process knowledge and information. Hence, although the styles are criticized for not providing insight on what and how learning occurs (Rae & Carswell, 2000) and for focussing only on individual learning (Deakins & Freel, 1998), we still opt for these styles because of the lack of

a valuable and widely accepted alternative in the literature that pictures the learning process. Kolb identifies two learning dimensions (i.e.; active experimenting versus reflective observing and abstract conceptualising versus practical experiencing), resulting in four learning styles: reflector (i.e.; preference for reflective observing and real experiencing), theorist (i.e.; preference for abstract conceptualizing and reflective observing, and less interested in action), pragmatist (i.e.; preference for abstract conceptualizing and active experimenting), and activist (i.e.; preference for real experiencing and active experimenting, hands-on). The four styles form one learning cycle because people tend to go sequentially from experiencing, reflecting, and thinking to action. Entrepreneurs and small business owners are, however, mostly interested in the activist parts of the learning cycle because they prefer experimenting and practical experiencing as learning style and take less time for reflecting and thinking (Politis, 2005). Small business owners are learning in an experimental way by experiencing and by making mistakes (Sullivan, 2000).

A recent article of Politis (2005) suggests that entrepreneurial learning is a process in which the entrepreneurs' experiences are transformed either through exploration (experimenting, innovation) or exploitation (learning from experience, implementing existing knowledge) paralleling the exploration-exploitation trade-off in organizational learning (Levinthal & March, 1993; March, 1991). Owners' characteristics and prior experiences are determining whether they are learning more or less through respectively exploration or exploitation; and, hence, whether more or less opportunities are exploited. However, we should not limit owners' learning process to a process of 'doing without thinking' (Cope & Watts, 2000). Cope (2005) explains that the literature overemphasizes experience and experiential learning for the reason that not all owners have the ability to learn from experiences, and learning cannot take place without reflection. Over-reliance in learning from experience without critical reflection can



even lead to false learning whereby lessons from past experiences are incorrectly applied to new situations (Huber, 1991).

### *Channel.*

Learning channels range from traditional courses and training programs to informal counselling (Cope & Watts, 2000). The personal network of entrepreneurs is mostly not considered in learning theories, although it is an important learning channel (Piazza-Georgi, 2002; Rulke, Zaheer, & Anderson, 2000). Small business owners' social environment influences the owners' learning possibilities (Cope, 2005). Piazza-Georgi (2002) explains that entrepreneurs are extensively using their networks and social capital to complete their higher learning requirements. Although not all dynamic small business owners can be considered as entrepreneurs, many of them are active networking and are skilled with the ability to explore and develop opportunities by using their network. Active networking is often an absolute necessity because of the lack of advisors within the own company. The social network is important to learn from experiences because it helps in the learning process through reflection on the experiences. This reflection is, however, a highly emotional process (Cope, 2005), and the network can also be a source of conflict and disappointment. Nevertheless, it is a very, if not the most, important source of learning for small business owners. As mentioned, owners tend to focus on the action part of the learning process, and hence, have difficulty with learning from theory or from instructors (Garavan & O'Connell, 1994); but they are benefited with someone that assists them in taking lessons from their own experiences.

### *Period.*

Finally, there is the learning period. Small business owners need life-long learning. However, small business owners learn especially well when a critical incident occurs or when there is an urgent learning need (a problem or crisis) (Sullivan, 2000). Hence, they prefer 'just-in-time' learning and are not planning their learning process. Consequently, their learning process is discontinuous with major leaps and it is mostly reactive occurring when problems (often financial) arise. However, discontinuous events can result in a higher level learning resulting in critical self-reflection and in more intense learning compared to incremental knowledge accumulation (Cope, 2003). This is the kind of learning identified as double-loop learning (Argyres & Schön, 1978). Cope (2005), however, argues that incidental and routinized learning are completing each other and that both can result in high-level learning. Another consequence of the 'just-in-time' learning is that many starting small business owners are unprepared for their tasks and have insufficient prior experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, the learning period depends on the stage in which the owner and his business are situated (Churchill & Lewis, 1983). Learning needs vary depending on whether the business is in a start-up or more mature phase. Thus, learning by small business owners parallels, or even leaps the developing process of their businesses. Transferring from one stage to another can result in business crises with a high learning need. However, preventing the crises requires proactive learning (Cope & Watts, 2000).

Summarised, we can state that small business owners' learning mode is characterised by reactive incident based learning, mostly aimed at collecting practical useful information, through experimenting and experiencing. The literature also indicates that small business owners tend to learn insufficient skills, and learn by using their social network (broadly

interpreted including partner, family, professional networks, spouse, etc). Furthermore, the theoretical optimal learning mode should consist of: more learning (especially learning skills), a combination of learning based on experiences with learning through experimenting and critical incidents, each time with conscious reflecting on the learning, in which professional networks and mentors can assist, and a proactive continuous learning process with particular attention for pre-start-up learning (Cope, 2005).

## **Research method**

The aim of the research reported here is to explore the learning mode of small business owners and in particular to detect the gaps among the required, actual, and supported learning mode. We opted for a focus group method because this is well-suited for in-depth exploratory research providing rich data without the need for a large sample (Khan, 1991; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Moreover, our respondents might have difficulty in articulating their learning processes because they are not used to reflect on this process (Cope & Watts, 2000). The interaction in the focus groups is a means to overcome this difficulty. During the focus groups, respondents can reflect on their learning process and through this interaction with the other respondents, more information is revealed than would be the case in individual interviews or questionnaires.

Our sample consists of small business owners active in all sectors of industry and with 0 to 10 employees. The business tenure ranges from 1 year to more than 20 years. The age of the owners varied from 26 to 60 years. This resulted in a sample with maximum heterogeneity which was required to avoid the risk of sample bias, for instance due to different learning modes in particular sectors, among younger owners, smaller business etc. The respondents

were selected from databases of different institutions providing services to small business owners. Selection criteria were size of the business and uniqueness in the sample. Heterogeneity was more important than obtaining a representative sample of the small business population in Belgium.

There were 9 focus groups, with a total of 51 respondents, organized at different locations in Belgium. Each of the four aspects of the learning mode was discussed in the focus groups. We also asked respondents to reflect on critical incidents to recall specific learning needs and learning moments (Cope & Watts, 2000). In addition, we asked who or what had helped them through the crisis and if this was an important learning moment. Finally, at the end of the sessions, respondents were asked to reflect on the existing learning support tools.

The aim and topic of the focus groups were explained at the beginning of each section. Background information was collected by a brief questionnaire. This background information included: personal and business identity, age of the respondent and the business, gender, sector, location, education and professional experiences, way of procurement of the business, reasons for becoming a small business owner, family active in the business, main phases in their personal and in their business' life, and participation in training and networks for small business owners. A brief list with the major learning channels, training initiatives and networks was provided in the questionnaire and respondents were asked to indicate whether they made use of it.

## **Results**

### *Content.*

Respondents mentioned in relation to the content aspect of their actual learning mode that their learning efforts are mainly concerned with the market, product, and accountancy issues. These kinds of learning contents seem to be easy fulfilled, although some respondents (eight) argued that they lacked the time to collect this knowledge or to follow courses. Learning needs related to managerial skills are less recognised and not considered as important or urgent. Awareness of skill learning was very low but that did not mean that there was no need for such learning. During the focus group discussions, a few respondents (five) recognised that they lacked leadership skills and management skills in general. Hence, gradually during the discussions, respondents realized the lack of skill learning. However, many respondents found that specific entrepreneurial skills, such as opportunity recognition, and learning-skills are ‘natural’ skills that you have or do not have, and not as something you intentionally learn. Furthermore, several (five) respondents claimed to have no real learning needs, although for every respondent specific learning shortages came across during the sessions. Recognizing learning needs or being aware that they go through a learning process seemed to be difficult.

The Belgian government takes a number of initiatives to support small business owners in their task as owners, ranging from direct financial support (such as the reimbursement of halve of the course fees), financial support to institutions supporting owners, to directly providing advice.

The latter is often related to administrative and regulatory issues the owners have to comply with. Support initiatives are mainly oriented to help small business owners getting the necessary information, although the direct financial support can apply to skill learning as well. There are a large number of private and public institutions and companies organizing courses, and other kinds of training initiatives for small business owners. However, 'learning to learn' gets little attention. The initiatives are numerous but badly known by the respondents. Respondents mentioned the lack of certain initiatives, courses or information while it existed and for which information was available through the internet. The latter was badly known and hardly used as well. Hence, there was not only an awareness problem of ones own learning needs but also of the existing learning support.

#### *Process.*

Small business owners learn mostly through experience as indicated in the literature. Some of the more adventurous small business owners were also learning through experimenting, however, this was not the norm. Exploitation was thus much more important than exploration. As expected, the small business owners are not 'thinkers' in their learning style. Purposeful reflection is also rather exceptional because they claim to have no time for reflection, and their unawareness of their learning needs and learning process prevents reflection.

Training courses and several learning initiatives are oriented to reflection (i.e. reflecting on ones own experiences or learning through reflecting on exemplary experiences) and thinking (i.e. learning theories and models). Respondents claimed that in traditional courses the 'theorist' learning style gets too much attention compared to the reflection learning style. The

experimenting and behaviour phase of the learning process, in which knowledge is put in practice, is a phase that small business owners have to carry out themselves. However, respondents mentioned the difficulty of applying the theory in their own business and the need for more support in this.

### *Channels.*

Concerning the channel aspect of the actual learning mode, traditional teaching was criticised. Undergraduate, graduate, and adult courses are not mentioned as important learning channels that have helped them in the current professional challenges. There was no difference in educational background and the current learning channels used. Only six respondents believe that traditional training can fulfil their learning needs. Respondents refer to wasted time during uninteresting presentations to motivate their aversion for courses and even learning in general. However, even the ones who do follow courses are dissatisfied with the attended courses and different aspects of these courses, such as prices, timing, length of the courses, content, and teaching styles. Contrary to the general and severe critics on courses, three respondents claimed that they have learned knowledge that was crucial for the survival of their business in those traditional courses. Furthermore, attending courses had some interesting side effect. Owners are sole riders in their own company with doubts about their decisions. Courses can provide them with the confident necessary to go on, and interaction with other attendants was helpful to get small business owners out of their isolation. The courses for small business owners are numerous and there exist institutes supported by government that organizes courses on administrative and general management issues for small business owners. Sector unions and several other small business owners unions organize meetings and lectures on a broad range of topics that should interest business owners. However, organizers of these lectures and courses

mention that these only reach a small part of the owners, the part that is aware of the importance of continuous learning.

All kinds of networks were mentioned as being crucial in the small business owners' learning processes. The respondents could be divided in networkers and non-networkers. A few (three) respondents felt that networking did not fit with their introvert personality or was a waste of time. Others (eleven respondents) could be classified as real networkers, enjoying networking and using networks as their main learning source. However, the kinds of networks vary of lot, depending on the particular businesses. In some cases, customers are important in the network, while in other cases colleagues with similar business are forming a network. The latter is only possible in highly segmented markets or with a very low level of competition. In markets with extreme high competition, networking is avoided because it might be a way through which crucial business knowledge can be leaking out of the company. Hence, networking is for some respondents crucial and eleven of the 51 respondents build successful business on their networking abilities. However, it is not a universal characteristic of small business owners. There exist initiatives sponsored by government and there are private sector initiatives to build networks among small business owners. Again only a small part of the small business owners is interested in such initiatives and makes heavily use of it. It depends a lot on the owners' personality whether these initiatives are effective. Women owners seem to feel less comfortable in the existing networks, except in the networks especially for female small business owners.

Much more universal among our respondents is the use of a trustee in the learning process. Almost every respondent mentioned one or a few people that they trust and who served as their advisors, and also as their mentor that helped them with problem-solving and learning in crisis. Such mentors can be a member of the family, partners, financial advisors, the business'



accountant, or a colleague small business owner. Small business owners with a business partner, husband/wife or parents in the business indicate these partners as major sources for information and learning. A few people mentioned the risk of relying too much on mentors, especially when those mentors are also doing business with the owners. Only one respondent had a completely independent and professional career coach. Everyone agreed that a personal independent mentor would be of great value in their learning process, but they were all convinced that the chance to find such mentor was rare. The Plato networks in Belgium for instance are combinations of networks and mentorship because a business owner of a large firm mentors several ambitious owners of small firms. However, the number of small business owners who can each year engage in this initiative is limited. Furthermore, the mentorship is not intensive and limited in time (two years). There exist other initiatives but they are all very limited in period and number of people that can be reached. Therefore family remains important in the role of mentorship. Lack of available professional and independent mentors has also urged small business owners to rely on their accountants as mentors, however, often with bad experiences as a consequence.

Remarkable is that written information, such as books, magazines, internet, and sector specific literature is hardly used and hardly known. Lack of time is the general excuse. Especially the fact that it requires some effort to filter out the relevant information is a reason for not using this medium. The many information websites provided by government institutions and several other independent bodies are very badly known. A one stop for all information related to small business issues, including information on courses, networks, supporting institutions, etc., might help to make existing information (that is now already sufficient in quantity and content) also accessible.

Interesting is that several (ten) respondents recognise their limitations as owner-managers but do not recognise a need to fill the gaps. These respondents claim that problems exceeding their possibilities can be solved by consultants. Furthermore, consultants are expensive and because of this they are hired too late. Moreover, consultants take no role in the owners' learning process because they solve the problems instead of coaching the owners to solve problems themselves.

In addition, some of the more mature respondents (over the age of 45) had the opinion that asking assistance in the business, and in the learning process, or following courses is for people who have problems in managing their businesses, hence, for failing business owners. This negative image withheld people from taking proactive learning steps.

#### *Period.*

The most crucial learning experiences often occurred during previous job experiences shortly preceding the start-up of the business. This was the case for 21 of the 51 respondents. Respondents without this learning opportunity started their business without taking any steps to complete this learning gap. In general, learning was clearly reactive and mostly passive. Only one fifth of the respondents were more reactive but even these respondents still indicated that their learning was not yet pro-active enough. The major learning events were related to business crises and difficult periods. Such periods and crises were: the start-up, hiring the first employee(s), critical financial crises and strong growth. As mentioned, the 'actors' learning style is most important, however, in combination with critical incident learning this has the major disadvantage that the crisis can endanger the existence of the business. Crises were

important learning moments but the respondents would have liked the crisis to be avoided through proactive learning. Furthermore, three respondents did also acknowledge that they did not learn at the moment of the crises because they were so busy trying to survive, and because there was nobody assisting in reflecting on lessons to be learned from the crises. It often took many years before the respondents start to take lessons from the incident and some do not even recall the incidents as learning events, with the high risk that similar mistakes are repeated.

Lifelong learning through actively seeking mentorship or following courses did not occur because incidental learning dominated. There is also a mental barrier for the more mature owners to follow courses or asking advice after a certain age of the owner or the business. Those more mature owners felt that their environment expected them to be experienced enough by now. A similar barrier also existed for owners with a university degree. They have difficulty to acknowledge their lack of practical business knowledge and skills.

Learning is clearly reactive and often too late. This is due to low awareness of learning and lack of a mentor pointing them at their learning needs. The start-up phase is a critical moment for learning but later critical moments are important as well. Hence, we cannot state that learning occurs in particular phases of the business life cycle but happened at any time, however, always after problems arose or incidents happened. Many of the support initiatives, both the private ones and the governmental ones, are oriented to start-ups or crucial steps in the growth of the business and not to life-long learning.

## **Discussion**

The literature indicates the high learning needs of small business owners, the need for reflective learning and continuous pro-active learning. However, research also indicated that in practice the small business owners do not learn enough, learn too reactive, discontinuous and miss reflection on their experiences to reach high levels of learning. Our study confirms that small business owners learn an insufficient amount, especially skills that are necessary to run their business, and there is not enough 'learning to learn'. There are several stereotypical reasons for insufficient learning of small business owners such as lack of time, overconfidence in families' advice and personal experiences, and too expensive or inaccessible learning facilities for small business owners. However, the gap between actual learning and required learning is mainly based on two reasons. First, the independent way of working of small business owners requires that they are able to detect their own learning needs, a skill that not all business owners have. This is also related to their low level of reflective learning. Second, they do not find their way to the many learning facilities that are developed for small business owners (De Faoite, Henry, Johnston, & van der Sijde, 2004). Small business learning needs and learning facilities are often mismatched because learning facilities are not adapted to the required learning mode (De Faoite et al., 2004; Matlay, 2004; Wee, 2004). Hence, there are discrepancies among the actual learning mode, the required learning mode and the learning facilities that exist.

The respondents are not fully satisfied with their personal learning. They like to have more time to learn more and would like to learn more proactive. They are convinced that better courses, mentorship and consultancy should help them in this. Hence, they recognise some of the gaps but not the need for more reflective learning and continuous learning. Although small business owners learn a lot through their own day-to-day experiences and experiences based on critical

incidents; mentors, networks and even traditional courses are very helpful in turning experiences into learning moments. Respondents making no use of any of the learning channels report less learning events.

The range of supporting initiatives is very broad, and in fact any kind of learning is supported. However, the majority of initiatives do not fully fit with the actual and required learning mode of small business owners. Initiatives are for instance not oriented towards developing learning skills. A criticism to existing initiatives is also that there are already so many initiatives but it costs too much time and effort (mainly administrative) to find out and to make use of these initiatives. A central learning support point would help. In addition, respondents were heavily complaining about the huge administrative burden and continuously changing regulations and found the advice and support of governmental institutions insufficient to reduce the administrative burden. Governments' attempts to increase support and to simplify the regulatory environment of small business owners and the economic environment in general seemed not to have changed the respondents' opinion. They thought that it did not get better; on the contrary, it seems to get even worse in certain sectors of industry. Hence, any support initiatives from the government were received critically, something that has to be taken into account when interpreting our data.

A solution to the reactive, often too late, and especially non learning is personal mentors. This ideal one-to-one personalized kind of help is an expensive solution. The initiatives existing at the moment in Belgium (such as the godfathers) are limited in time and available to a limited number of small business owners. However, governments can extent the possibilities, start new initiatives and make sure this kind of help is available in the crucial start-up years. The work of

Sullivan (2000) proves that mentors are not only more effective than traditional up-front training programs but also more cost-efficient.

Many critics to the learning support initiatives are also not grounded. Learning is such non-issue in the owners daily practices that they are unaware of the existing support, do not take time to find out what is existing, do not try-out the support offered, and do not express their learning needs to their communities of interest. Furthermore, there are different types of small business owners from a learning preference perspective. Some are in favour of networking; others are cautious to talk about their business and learning needs with anybody and therefore ask for impersonal general available advice and information. Hence, a large plurality in the learning support possibilities is preferred matching the plurality in small business owners' personality.

Small business owners are under great time pressure and any waste of time due to inefficiencies in learning attempts is considered unforgivable. This attitude and the fact that learning is just not a top of mind issue results in a very passive learning attitude. Learning needs are not recognised and learning is limited to a minimum occurring more by accident during daily practices. The unintended and accidental character of small business owner's learning is thus confirmed (Murphy & Young, 1995). Respondents that are aware of their learning needs, often the ones who just faced a business crisis, are more active learning and in general succeed in accomplishing their learning needs. Hence, difficulties and lack of learning is mainly due to lack of recognising learning needs and having insight in ones own learning process.

The learning experiences are mainly happening in other businesses than the own business for the respondents with previous work experience in the same sector of industry. This confirms Politis (2005) entrepreneurial framework in which prior career experiences take an important place in the entrepreneurs learning capabilities. The respondents in our sample also mainly focussed on collecting more specialized knowledge and knowledge that helps them to overcome traditional obstacles of small business, and not on how to explore more opportunities. Hence, in our sample exploitation of knowledge dominates over knowledge exploration (Politis, 2005). Experience is thus used to improve working and not to change the business significantly.

Our data reveals no differences in learning modes in the different stages of the life-cycle of the businesses (Cope & Watts, 2000), except for the start-up phase where there was a high learning need, which was a critical phase for most of the respondents a critical phase. Cope and Watts (2000) explain that given the fact that small business owners learn through incidents but reactive after the incident already happened, mentors are the best support those owners can get. This is confirmed in our study. However, Cope and Watts (2000) also warn for the practical difficulties of organizing such support and the need for personal experiencing. Our data indicated that some owners think there is no alternative for learning through personal experiencing. However, our data also revealed that the owners have difficulty to see similarities among different critical incidents and, therefore, they do not learn enough from their unfortunate experiences, unless they consciously reflect on the event. A mentor or other trustee is then needed to make small business owners go through this reflective learning process.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we explored the learning mode of small business owners based on a brief literature review and qualitative empirical data. The paper integrates the literature on different aspects of learning modes, namely content, process, channel and period, in relation to small business owners' learning, resulting in a global picture on small business owners' learning. We investigated these four aspects for the required learning mode, the actual learning mode and the supported learning mode. Our data indicated that there are gaps between the required, actual and supported learning modes, of which many are due to the unawareness of learning needs and lack of reflective learning among small business owners. 'Learning to learn' is an important skill that is often missing among small business owners. This confirms the existing literature. However, the literature is too general and ignores the fact that not all solutions to fill learning gaps are applicable to all owners, e.g. not all owners are able to learn through networks.

Our paper thus indicates that small business owners do not learn enough and not in a timely manner. Initiatives to increase their learning can only be effective if these can increase the awareness of the required learning, increase reflective thinking and increase owners' learning ability. The latter would lead to the necessary life-long and double-loop learning. Initiatives based on mentorship seem to be the most effective way to obtain this learning.

The practical implications of our paper are situated in the insight provided on different aspects of the learning mode of small business owners and revealing shortcoming in the current learning and learning support initiatives. This is relevant for anyone who is involved in supporting the learning capability of small business owners. The fact that we have a very



heterogeneous sample avoids bias and sector specific conclusions. Hence, our findings are concerning all kinds of small business owner.

However, there are limitations in our study due to this heterogeneous sample. The sample size is small, especially when such large heterogeneity is involved. Our conclusions are thus merely exploratory and further larger scale research is required. In addition, our results indicate that there are different types of owners and that certain initiatives are only effective for some types of owners. However, we did not quantify or measured owner's personality to build categories of owners fitting with the different initiatives.

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