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THE NETWORKING BEHAVIOURS OF WOMEN IN SMALL BUSINESS

ABSTRACT

Small business ownership gives women the autonomy, control and flexibility they require to balance employment and family responsibilities, helping them escape gender discriminations that still exists within many business environments. Many of these business women need social and business networks that support the creation and growth of their businesses. The purpose of this paper is to review relevant literature, and develop an understanding of factors that impinge on the networking behaviour of businesswomen. The paper argues that there is a relationship between networking behaviour and various business motivational factors, educational background, industry sector, industry experience and family responsibilities. These are some of the most common factors affecting women's businesses as identified by the literature.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Small Business Owners, Network, Networking behaviour, Small Business.

INTRODUCTION

Small businesses are the backbone of any economy (Moutray, 2009) and this is certainly true when it comes to the Australian economy, where small firms encompass 96 percent of all private sector businesses (ABS, 2008). Businesses are not secluded entities and grow from links to others. Small business owners (SBOs) especially need social and business networks that support the creation and growth of their businesses (Brereton & Jones, 2002). A network is defined as the linkage between defined groups of connected people (Wharton & Brunetto, 2007).

Networking is important for SBOs as it can increase small business success (Sorenson et al., 2008; Watson, 2007). Conversely for many women SBOs, a lack of networking and limited access to high profile social and business contacts, can have negative implications for their capacity to grow, and further develop their businesses (Hossain et al., 2009; Still & Walker, 2006). Research conducted by Baptist et al. (2006) lists lack of capital and financial skills, lack of management skills, lack of experience and inability to plan and research as the main contributing factors for poor business performance. Women SBOs are even further disadvantaged than their male counterparts, often due to social-cultural factors and family responsibilities. Many women SBOs do not gain formalised training (Patton & Marlow, 2002) and are discouraged from participating in networking programs, due to their domestic responsibilities. Social isolation and the undervaluing of women's roles, lack of industry experience, and stereotyping are the most common networking barriers faced by women (Kwong, Thompson, Evans, & Brooksbank, 2009; McClelland et al., 2005; Winn, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the potential impact of factors that impinge on the networking behaviour of women SBOs. The following factors are examined: motivation for starting and running the business, relevant industry experience, industry sector, educational background, and family responsibilities (Stanger et al., 2002; Winn, 2005). Relevant literature identifies these factors as the most common factors impacting women's businesses. Based on a review of the literature this paper argues that there is a relationship between these factors and the networking behaviour of women SBOs.

NETWORKS AND NETWORKING

Businesses build networks that continually change, with business owners systematically analysing the number and types of individuals within their networks, and the time spent networking (Greve & Salaff, 2003). Networks in general are based on social and business relationships, with family and friends as well as customers, vendors, suppliers and creditors. Progressively, SBOs expand their networks to include people with whom a business relationship will be mutually beneficial, such as bankers, accountants, lawyers, government agencies and consultants. These networks can impact on the ability of individuals to create, develop and grow their business. SBOs with extensive ethnic, social and business networks may be able to attract more capital and overall business, and are therefore more likely to be successful than those with limited networks (Brereton & Jones, 2002; Granovetter, 1992, 2005).

Erwee et al. (1999) describe five stages of network formation and maintenance. These included: relationship searching process; relationship starting process; relationship building process; relationship maintenance process; and relationship termination process. Carter and Shaw (2006) built on Erwee et al.'s (1999) work by suggesting that there are four key components to networks. These include: the actors or individuals within the network; links or the relationship between the individuals within the network; the flow or the exchange that occurred between the actors within the network; and the mechanism or the mode of interaction used by the actors. Additionally, each of these four components has various dimensions. For example, the actors may be categorized according to their age, gender, nationality, ethnicity or educational level or background. Dimension of links or the relationship between the actors can be categorized based on reciprocity, formality, intensity, motive, complexity and origin of the relationship between actors. Similarly, the type of flow between actors can be categorized based on the affect or the exchange of friendship, the exchange of power, the exchange of information, and the exchange of goods between the actors. Likewise, mechanism of interaction or how actors communicate or interact with each other can be categorized as: telephone conversations, email, documents, or face to face meetings. In the same way, the overall network may also be seen to vary along a number of dimensions: such as size, diversity, density, openness and stability (Carter & Shaw, 2006).

Networking can be one-off interactions or those based on regular interactions between business owners and the 'actors'. The latter are referred to as contacts, which may be based on social relationships. Such activities are described as the building blocks of network ties. 'Ties' rather than 'contacts' are the basis of networking and the owner's set of relationships can be grouped into: strong ties, weak ties, and those which are insignificant such as meeting complete strangers (Granovetter, 1973, 1992, 2005). Strong ties often include family members and close friends. They are based on trust and involve a considerable amount of time and emotional investment. Weak ties are more superficial and involve much less emotional investment for both parties. Such ties include: customers, clients, suppliers and casual contacts made during a business career. Contacts with strangers represent interactions undertaken primarily for operational and perfunctory reasons. They are usually of short duration and involve little in the way of emotional attachment (Brereton & Jones, 2002; Granovetter, 1973, 1992, 2005).

The value of networking as a business activity, whether it be planned or accidental is that because business is a dynamic entity it needs to continuously generate new ideas, customers and/or products, in order to survive. The overlay to any type of networking is that SBOs are

human beings, and as such need continuous social interaction, on a number of levels. Therefore one way of keeping this supply going is by business networking.

Effective networking is one of the easiest ways to promote a business (Granovetter, 1973, 1992, 2005; McClelland et al., 2005; Stanger et al., 2002). It is an essential part of being a business owner, and one of the best ways to find new clients, new business opportunities, and potential suppliers and business alliances (Brereton & Jones, 2002; McClelland et al., 2005; Stanger, et al., 2002). Many researchers such as Conway et al. (2001), Greve and Salaff (2003), Nijkamp (2003), Wiklund et al. (2009) have concluded that networks assist small firms in their acquisition of information and advice; assist business owners to supplement internal resources; are crucial for businesses and their ability to compete in competitive markets, and can lead to development of innovative products. Other researchers such as Carter and Shaw (2006) maintain that extensive, diverse, and complex business networks are more likely to provide business owners with opportunities, to increase their chance of solving problems, ultimately giving them a better chance for business success.

Networking is an effective method to obtain new customers, technology, suppliers, physical resources, financial resources and managerial and psychological support (McClelland et al., 2005; Stanger, et al., 2002). Given the importance of networking to all business owners, it would seem logical that women SBOs would embrace networking as a way to assist their businesses.

NETWORKING BY WOMEN SBOs

Since the early 1980s, there has been an increase in the number of women SBOs (de Bruin, et al., 2006). Employment and achieving financial security are two of the most important factors in helping women achieve economic independence, and thus directly impact every aspect of their lives (Queensland Government Office for Women, 2006). However, the glass ceiling continues to be an issue for many Australian women in the workforce (Baird & Williamson, 2010; Schleiger, 2010) as they face multiple barriers when seeking employment or promotions within their organisations. Many have to choose between family responsibilities and highly demanding careers, and endure limited opportunities for advancement in large organisations (Murray & Syed, 2010; Patterson & Mavin, 2009; Samson & Daft, 2009). Women often develop a small business as means of achieving financial independence and job satisfaction, while still balancing employment and family responsibilities (Carter & Shaw, 2006; Walker et al., 2008).

In the Australian context, even though in recent times the number of self-employed women has increased at a faster rate than men, men have a higher rate of entrepreneurial activity (ABS, 2008). The major reason for this is that women SBOs often face different types of obstacles, including: lack of business education and training (Coleman, 2007; Dann S. et al., 2006; Gatewood Wake et al., 2004); limited access to finance and expansion capital (Angove, 2008; Baycan-Levent et al., 2006; Coleman, 2007); legitimacy from various stakeholders such as financial institutions (Cornet & Constantinidis, 2008; Hussain, Matlay, Scott, & Whittam, 2011; Orban, 2001); lack of human capital (Coleman, 2007; Morris, Miyasaki, Watters, & Coombes, 2006); and time restraints imposed by family responsibilities (Baycan-Levent et al., 2006; Carter & Shaw, 2006; Jamali, 2009; Walker et al., 2008). Other researchers have identified: different network structures and usage patterns (Manolova et al., 2007; Sorenson et al., 2008; Tonge, 2007); women owners' choice of industry (Cornet &

Constantinidis, 2008; Roomi et al., 2009); and growth aspirations and motivations (Dann S. et al., 2006; Walker et al., 2008) as some of the major obstacles facing women SBOs.

Many Australian women who start their own business are aged over 30 years, and have family responsibilities (ABS, 2008; Still & Walker, 2006). Like most women in developed countries, they are passionate and committed to their own businesses, but some want to stay small to help balance their business and family responsibilities. Some women SBOs own businesses to make a difference and want a better quality of life for themselves and their families, whereas many own and manage their own business because they have been motivated by others (Coad, 2007; Kirkwood, 2009; Patterson, 2007; Robichaud et al., 2010).

Studies conducted in Australia and overseas have found significant differences between business men and women (Carter & Shaw, 2006; Coleman, 2007; Dann S. et al., 2006; Tan, 2008; Wang et al., 2006). Overall, women's businesses tend to be smaller and grow less quickly than those owned by their male counterparts (Du Rietz & Henrekson, 2000; Menzies, Diochon, & Gasse, 2004). This may be a result of the distinct difficulties women face in starting and growing their business (Baycan-Levent et al., 2006; Carter & Shaw, 2006). Another reason why women's businesses do not perform as well as men's in terms of sales, number of employees and profits is due to the women's network structure and their networking activities. Women SBOs often do not have high profile actors in their network, which means they are less likely to have access to those in power. Also, women are more likely than males to exchange information with other women. This gender bias can work against these women, failing to provide them with access to important and unique information and resources (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Weiler & Bernasek, 2001)

There are also gender differences in the networking behaviours of men and women SBOs (Klyver & Terjesen, 2007; Robson et al., 2008; Sorenson et al., 2008). For example women only networks are seen as an important feature for many business women (Dawson et al., 2011; Hanson & Blake, 2009). Overall, only a small portion of business women join formal networks in search of business opportunities, because such formal networks are not based on trusting relationships formed over a period of time (Wharton & Brunetto, 2007). Research does indicate that women SBOs are more likely to use informal family network contacts (Dawson et al., 2011; Robson et al., 2008), and government supported programs do not appear to positively change women's trusting behaviours (Wharton & Brunetto, 2007).

Women tend to have more homogenous networks (Renzulli et al., 2000), with lower proportions of men in their networks in the early stages of their business, but similar levels at later stages (Klyver & Terjesen, 2007). Still and Walker (2006), found that women SBOs in Australia rely greatly on their accountants for professional advice during the start up phase of their business. They tend to add lawyers to their network during the operational phase. During both of these phases, only a few government sources are utilised, while close friends, family and colleagues are the prominent source of advice and support (Still & Walker, 2006). Most women SBOs entering male dominated industries are younger and less experienced than their men counterparts, which may limit their abilities to network effectively (Baycan-Levent et al., 2006; Coleman, 2007). The gender bias also works against most businesswomen; as they are underrepresented in key industries, such as finance and banking, which are important for business success (Still & Timms, 2000). Finally, some women may conclude that being a woman can prevent them from participating in male dominated networks, and hence impose self restriction on their networks, due to their own actions, views

and decisions to network (Gamna & Kleiner, 2001). This may be because they do not feel comfortable in male-dominated networks, and prefer communicating with other women, or may be the result of a sense of exclusion from male dominated networks, or because they have a specific requirement such as developing management skills (Dawson et al., 2011).

Network relationships are established through trust and relationship development between businesses and their advisors and as the level of trust increases, the relationship strengthens, increasing the likelihood of trustworthy behaviour (Howorth & Moro, 2006). The aim of using such a network and assistance is to gain knowledge and resources and to exploit valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable assets, increasing the business's chances to survive and grow (Chrisman & McMullan, 2000). Governments can influence female participation in small business ownership and networking by creating and supporting a fair and non-discriminatory business environment, for business women to become involved in. For example, the USA has a high rate of women entrepreneurship or women that are self employed, mainly due to the government's support for affirmative action, which is aimed at creating a non-bias business environment (Carter & Shaw, 2006; Neergaard et al., 2005). Furthermore, through improving access to external finance by creating government incentives for banks to lend to and invest in SMEs (Talavera et al., 2010), providing funds, resources, and guidance through government agencies, tailored to the specific needs of SMEs (Richard, 2008). Government supported networking and mentoring programs (Pandey, 2011; Richard, 2008), and business ownership training opportunities to support the development of small and medium businesses (Tambunan, 2009).

The following sections reviews the factors, as identified by the literature, that potentially impact women SBOs' networks, exploring the links between each factor and networking behaviour of women SBOs.

MOTIVATION TO START A BUSINESS

There are numerous factors that influence and shape an individual's intention to start a business. Business owners often are not motivated by a single factor but rather by multiple factors (Kirkwood, 2009). Wang et al. (2006, p.5) state that: "*motivations for being in business are complex and often, small business ownership is inextricably tied up with the personal lives of business operators and their families*". Women and men seem to have relatively similar types of motivation for starting a business (Humbert & Drew, 2010), but women tend to place less emphasis on financial success as a motivation, and more on non-financial factors such as work life balance, (Baycan-Levent et al., 2006; McClelland et al., 2005). Women are pulled into business in a similar way to men. However, the push factors women experience, are largely related to their families, and the ability to balance work and family responsibilities (Stanger et al., 2002; Walker & Webster, 2007). Women with families often chose a type of business that gives them the flexibility to balance multiple commitments, while giving them financial security. Therefore, some women may consider in advance of starting the business, the likely difficulties of integrating their family and the business, and assess the possible impact on their families (Kirkwood, 2009).

Although the literature highlights the impact of various motivational factors such as: financial gain, fulfilment, independence, quality of life and family responsibilities with business success and the business activities of businesswomen, it does not specifically explain the influence of these factors on the networking behaviour of these women. However, given that

networking is a key business activity, it seems likely that there is a link between these factors and the networking behaviour of businesswomen. Therefore

Proposition 1: There is a direct link between the type of motivation to start a business and the networking behaviour of business women.

The first proposition argues that it is reasonable to assume that one's motivational factors for going into business relate to their perception of success, which in turn affects their approach to business activities including networking.

INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

While there is no clear cut approach to determine the success or failure of a business, there are several factors that are considered to be closely linked with small business success. These include: prior industry experience, financial and management skills, and networking. Industry experience is considered to be one of the key factors for business success (Delmar & Shane, 2006; Mort & Weerawardena, 2006; van Gelderen, Thurik, & Bosma, 2005).

Industry experience can help SBOs identify business opportunities within their industry that can be exploited, and help in the perception and valuation of new business ideas (Mort & Weerawardena, 2006; van Gelderen et al., 2005). Strong industry experience increases business survival during the initial start up stage, and overcome liabilities of newness. Industry experience provides information about: industry rules and norms; advantages and disadvantages of various products and services; customer demands; customer, supplier and distributor networks, and employment practices. This gives SBOs an advantage in being able to rapidly identify and develop a market entry strategy, and to focus on relevant steps to achieve a positive outcome (Delmar & Shane, 2006; Mort & Weerawardena, 2006; van Gelderen et al., 2005).

The extant literature suggests that overall men are more successful in gathering industry and business experience and knowledge before starting their own business (Coleman, 2007; Fairlie & Robb, 2009; Stanger, 2004). In general, men who become SBOs are likely to have had better opportunities in gaining management and business experience in their previous employment, which they can then use to operate their business. This often puts women at a disadvantage. Whereas women may have had some industry experience and general work experience, they may very well not have had managerial experience in the industry (Winn, 2005).

Women starting their new businesses tend to cluster in the services sector, creating businesses which they may have a personal interest in, or in which they have developed some personal (rather than professional) skills. According to Still and Walker (2006, p, 303) *"the women in this study entered self-employment because they were "passionate" about an idea, product or service, and were not just motivated by income and status"*.

Several authors (Bennett & Dann, 2000; McClelland et al., 2005; Ucbasaran et al., 2003; Winn, 2005) have identified the influence of industry experience on the networking behaviour of SBOs, and the reasons why women are more likely to be disadvantaged by a lack of relevant industry experience. However, the direct impact of industry experience on the networking behaviour of women SBOs has not been clearly demonstrated. Hence

Proposition 2: Women with industry experience are more active and proficient at networking than those who do not have industry experience.

The second proposition argues that throughout their lives and involvements in work or relevant industry, SBOs expand their networks and pick up social and business contacts (Renzulli et al., 2000; Rouse & Kitching, 2006). Hence, it is reasonable to argue that industry experience can increase the number of actors within a SBO's network, and enable SBOs to become more active, proficient and effective at networking.

INDUSTRY SECTOR

Traditionally there has always been a high concentration of women in the services, retail or wholesale industries (Bennett & Dann, 2000; Still & Walker, 2003; Ucbasaran et al., 2003). There are many reasons why so many women business owners operate in these industries. Most services and retail businesses allow women to operate from home, or balance family and work responsibilities (McClelland et al., 2005; Still & Walker, 2003; Winn, 2005). Furthermore, given that these industries are labour intensive, means that the capital investment costs for setting up and running of the business will be relatively low. Business owners can chose the extent or size of the business, and can decide to expand the business by working longer hours, or they may decide to employ additional staff or outsource parts of the business. Another option is to keep the business small so they can manage their various domestic commitments (Stanger, 2004). As the nature of service and retail enterprises equates to low profit margins, women that chose to start businesses in these industries are likely to experience slow growth. This may impede their overall business plans (Carter & Shaw, 2006; Roomi et al., 2009).

Many studies have identified a direct link between genders, the industry sector and business operations including networking. For example, Sappleton (2009) found women who operate in traditionally female sectors have the highest levels of social capital, while those working in traditionally male sectors have lower levels of social capital. Even though the previous research (McClelland et al., 2005; Stanger, 2004; Still & Walker, 2003; Winn, 2005) identified a direct link between gender and the nature of the business or the industry itself, and a direct link between the industry and business operation, it does not explain the impact of the industry on the networking behaviour of women SBOs. However, given that networking is part of business operation, it seems reasonable to assume that the nature of the business and choice of industry can determine how the business owners network, and does influence the networking behaviour of business owners. Hence

Proposition 3: Industry sector impacts the networking behaviour of business owners.

This third proposition argues that women SBOs in certain types of industries, such as manufacturing, will network differently to those in other types of industries, such service type industries. For example, it is reasonable to assume those in female dominated industries are more likely to take part in women only networks, whereas those in male dominated industries are more likely to take part in mixed network functions.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Controversially education is deemed to be less important to business success than experience (Stanger et al., 2002) but can help business owners in terms of encouragement and networking (Stanger, 2004). Formal education can impact a business owner's ability to

manage, plan and operate their business, which in turn are associated with business survival and business success (Brereton & Jones, 2002). Studies undertaken in Australia and other western countries such as UK and USA conclude, that most middle class urban women business owners from European backgrounds have either completed formal education, or come from a family background of business or professional activity (Dann et al., 2006; McClelland et al., 2005; Stanger, 2004; Still & Walker, 2006). However, even though women SBOs often have higher levels of education than their male counterparts, they are more likely to lack finance, marketing and management skills. Furthermore, the education levels of these women may not be industry related or directly related to the business activities (Carter & Shaw, 2006; Roomi et al., 2009; Still & Walker, 2006).

Although the literature suggests that there is no direct link between formal education and business success, it fails to explain the influence of formal education on the networking behaviour of business owners (Stanger et al., 2002). Therefore, a logical question is, are business owners with a formal educational background better at networking than those without any formal education? Brereton and Jones (2002) argue that formal education such as an MBA does contribute to the networking ability of the owners. Given that there is limited research on educational levels and networking behaviour of business owners/managers, one cannot confidently conclude that formal educational does have an impact on the networking behaviour of business owned managers. Hence

Proposition 4: Women with relevant formal educational levels better understand the importance of networking and network effectively.

This fourth proposition builds on Brereton and Jones (2002) study, and argues that it is reasonable to assume women with relevant business training, develop a better understanding and appreciation of networking, and the importance of having the right networks.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

The demographic characteristics of the owners, such as marital status, and number of dependents, can have a significant impact on their networking behaviour. Marriage and parenthood are life events that can affect business ownership and networking (Renzulli et al., 2000; Rouse & Kitching, 2006). As stated by Renzulli et al. (2000), *“The presence of a spouse indicates that a respondent has a social tie to at least one other person and thus is not a social isolate. A tie to a spouse can, in turn, link respondents to others who can provide information and possible resources”* (Renzulli et al., 2000, p. 529).

Marriage and parenthood tends to impact men and women differently. For many women SBOs, business earnings decreased with an increase in marriage, family size, and hours of housework (Hundley, 2000). Both Australian and overseas studies have shown that regardless of ethnicity or the level of involvement in business activities, women are more likely than men to perform domestic duties, and have child care and family responsibilities. Indeed, both international and Australian research suggests that to alleviate family responsibilities is one of the major motivational factors for women to start their own business (Anderson et al., 2007; Dann et al., 2006; Erwee et al., 1999). This often leads to women having to combine their work duties and home responsibilities, limiting the scope of the business, and the time available to engage in business activities (Dhaliwal et al., 2009; Stanger et al., 2002). Furthermore, many businesswomen find it difficult to separate personal life and their work (Dhaliwal et al., 2009; Kim & Ling, 2001; Lee J. , 2005; Rogers, 2005; Winn, 2005). For

women SBOs, family responsibilities and domestic duties may have a negative impact on their business operation, including their networking activities, thus reducing the chances of business growth, and the ability of the business owner to achieve their financial goals (Carter & Shaw, 2006; Constant, 2009; Humbert & Drew, 2010; Kim & Ling, 2001). Hence

Proposition 5: Family responsibilities have a direct impact on the networking behaviour of business women.

The final proposition in this paper argues that given family and domestic responsibilities limits women SBO's time to engage in networking.

CONCLUSION

Whereas much previous research has looked at the start-up motivation of women, and gender differences in the networking behaviours of men and women SBOs, few studies have considered motivational factors, educational background, industry experience, family responsibilities and industry sector, as possible factors impacting and influencing the networking behaviours of women SBOs.

The paper serves as a first step in understanding how and why business women network and what factors influence their networking behaviour. Future research is needed to explore the intensity of the behaviour and the variables that may affect can be tested via five propositions. Even though there are some inconsistencies within the existing research about the networking behaviour of women SBOs (Aldrich et al., 1994; Ibarra, 1997; Moulton, 2000) this paper suggests that there is a relationship between business activities including networking, and various business motivational factors, educational background, industry experience, the industry itself and family responsibilities.

One thing that is clear is that as the rate of women's participation in small business ownership increases, more women will gain business experience, build their own networks and establish credibility with the other members within the networks such as suppliers, customers and financial institutions. The importance of this research is that if small business is to continue as the engine room of the economy, then women, who enter business ownership, need to be given as many opportunities, whether organically or contrived, as their male counterparts. This is because women are in fact 'better bets' in terms of survival and so they are then more likely to develop and grow their business. If this happens, over time women owned businesses will start to employ more people and will therefore become significant economic contributors.

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