

## Formulating a convincing rationale for a research study

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## **Abstract**

Explaining the purpose of a research study and providing a compelling rationale is an important part of any research project, enabling the work to be set in the context of both existing evidence (and theory) and its practical applications. This necessitates formulating a clear research question and deriving specific research objectives, thereby justifying and contextualising the study. In this research note we consider the characteristics of good research questions and research objectives and the role of theory in developing these. We conclude with a summary and a checklist to help ensure the rationale for a research study is convincing.

Keywords: rationale; research question; research objective; theory

## **Introduction**

Research is about systematically obtaining and analysing data to increase our knowledge about a topic in which we are interested. In undertaking research, we are trying to answer a question or address a problem, this often being referred to as ‘meeting the research aim’ or ‘addressing the research objectives’.

However, research problems, questions, aims or objectives need to be stated clearly and justified in order to overcome ‘so what?’ or ‘why bother?’ questions. In other words, we need to state the purpose of the research and provide a clear rationale as to why this purpose is important, in relation to both existing knowledge (including theory) and, often, with regard to the implications for practice.

The purpose of this research note is to offer clear guidance regarding how to formulate a research question and research objectives and provide a convincing rationale for a research study. Research methods texts (for example Gray, 2009; Robson, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012) consistently argue that a clear research question and/or research objectives supported by a convincing rationale that is justified by the academic literature is an essential building block for high quality research. We therefore commence by outlining and explaining the characteristics of good research questions. Next, we consider how to refine a research question into precise research objectives. We then explore the use of theory in

developing and providing a convincing rationale for both research questions and research objectives, concluding our note with a summary and checklist.

### **The characteristics of good research questions**

Having a good understanding of what it is we are going to research is vital at the beginning of the research process and formulating a clear research question is instrumental to this endeavour. Without this, and even though we may have some explicit ideas about our research, planning and conducting the study is challenging. Not specifying the research at the outset of our study as a question we wish to answer, or a series of objectives to be met, will make the entire research process fraught. The research question and research objectives provide direction regarding the data we need to collect (to answer it!) and the precise focus of the conclusions based on our study's findings.

Formulating a research question is an intellectually challenging and time-consuming undertaking (Saunders & Lewis, 1997). The wording of the question is crucial, as we need to ensure that the answer we find through our research will provide new knowledge about a topic or look at a theme from a different angle, and, for readers of this journal, be of interest to those concerned with the theory and the practice of coaching. As such, we can characterise a suitable (coaching) research question as one that is grounded in what we already know (from relevant literature in coaching) and also appears likely to provide new insights into the topic being investigated.

In the context of 'insights', we can distinguish between two basic types of questions: descriptive and explanatory. Descriptive research questions typically start with 'What', 'When', 'Where', 'Who' or 'How' (e.g. 'What percentage of coachees report that coaching helped them with a problem they experienced?'). Although relatively easy to answer, on their own these rarely provide new insights into theory. Explanatory (sometimes termed evaluative) questions on the other hand usually start with 'Why' (e.g. 'Why did 65% of coachees report that coaching helped them with a problem they experienced?'). Not surprisingly, these require prior knowledge of what is occurring – for example, the fact that 65% of coachees had reported that coaching helped them with a problem they experienced. They are also more challenging to answer since they require the researcher to provide an

explanation regarding why something happened and relate this to what is already known, providing theoretical insights.

In reality, our research questions more often than not start with ‘What’ or ‘How’ to find out precisely what is occurring. They then go beyond description, by also seeking evaluative answers. Questions such as ‘How effective is the coaching process at helping coachees to solve a problem they experience and what are the reasons for this?’ or ‘To what extent is the coaching process effective at helping coachees solve a problem and why?’ require not only description, but also explanation. Such descriptive-explanatory questions can, like explanatory questions, provide a firm base for research.

We have asserted that some research questions may require descriptive answers and offer few insights – yet, unless we phrase explanatory questions carefully, we may be faced with questions that are not specific enough to be suitably addressed within our research study. An example of an insufficiently specific question might be: ‘In what ways do coachees report that coaching helped them with problems they experienced and why?’. Such a question is extremely wide ranging and likely to generate long lists of ways, which may or may not be directly related to the coaching process (maybe the decision alone to seek out coaching triggered a thought process about the solution for the problem). This is likely to make it difficult to establish what is actually occurring from within the myriad of interrelationships between potentially relevant ways and problems.

In terms of timing, whilst a research question is usually decided at the very beginning of a study, it will invariably be amended and refined as the research progresses and more becomes known, particularly from reviewing academic literature (Saunders & Rojon, 2011). Some (e.g. McNiff & Whitehead, 2000) argue this is less likely the case for practitioner-led action research, since determining the research question(s) may be part of a ‘progressive illumination’ process. However, it is important to note that for such studies the research question, often expressed in a series of research objectives, usually forms a key part of the research contract between the practitioner-researcher and the organisation (Saunders, 2011). This means subsequent amendments may be difficult!

### **Formulating research objectives**

In order to formulate research objectives, we have found it helpful to start with just one research question, which may be specified by employing the ‘Russian doll principle’ (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002). In a similar way to the Russian doll being disassembled to eventually reveal a minuscule doll, this entails disassembling or removing the various layers of the initial research question to arrive at its core. Subsequently, our overall research question may form the basis for determining more precise investigative questions or research objectives that we need to meet in order to answer our overall research question (Saunders et al., 2012).

In comparison to a research question, research objectives are more specific, giving a clear indication of the research purpose and direction and providing additional information over the research question. Whilst a research question indicates the topic or issue of the study, research objectives operationalise the question, in other words they state precisely what needs to be researched. Research objectives are therefore instrumental in enabling the research question to evolve into an actual study.

To operationalise our research question and formulate research objectives that are fit-for-purpose, we need to ensure these are i) transparent (i.e. comprehensible and unambiguous), ii) specific (i.e. the precise research purpose and how it will be achieved is apparent), iii) relevant (i.e. clearly linking to the study as a whole), iv) interconnected (i.e. representing a coherent entity), v) answerable (their planned outcome is attainable) and vi) measurable (i.e. specifying when the outcome will be achieved) (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Formulating research objectives will usually necessitate more rigorous thinking compared to writing a research question as the former are more precise and provide additional information over the latter (Table 1).

*\*\*Insert Table 1 about here\*\**

## **Using theory**

Theory plays an integral role in the development of a research question and research objectives. To illustrate this, we draw on Whetten (1989), who identified four components of theory, namely ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘why’ and a fourth group of ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’.

The first of these components is concerned with the variables or concepts that the theory considers. A theory used in coaching such as goal setting theory (e.g. Locke & Latham, 2002) examines goals as a concept, in other words something an individual or group is intending to achieve. This theory sees goals as important for the regulation of human behaviour, indicating that the action of setting goals can be a powerful leverage for individuals' progress.

The second element is concerned with how these variables or concepts are related. If we consider goal setting theory in the context of coaching research, a research question might examine the relationships between the use of goal setting theory in coaching and the success of the coaching process. It is clear from this that theory is concerned with causality, in other words with cause and effect. We are interested in understanding whether and how the setting of goals impacts on the success of the coaching process.

The third component considers why these variables or concepts are related; in other words the reasons for the relationships between the variables or concepts. Thus, whilst 'what' and 'how' can be understood as descriptive components, the 'why' is explanatory (Whetten, 1989). The distinction between 'how' and 'why' may become more apparent by considering our example: Previous research findings may suggest that goal setting can be an effective tool for coaching, mainly in the early stages of the coaching process. As such, other researchers have already examined the 'how', observing there is a relationship between the two variables of goal setting and coaching success. Yet, we still need to answer the 'why' question – 'why is there an apparent relationship between goal setting and coaching success?' and also 'why is the relationship more apparent at the early stages of the coaching process?' We therefore use existing theory to support our use of logical reasoning when suggesting possible reasons (suggesting answers to 'why'). Within this we base our argument on our knowledge from previous research about the 'what' and 'how' ('reasoning'). We therefore use previous research to both identify what is already known and where there are gaps in our knowledge, thereby informing and justifying our research objectives (Saunders & Rojon, 2011). Drawing on our logical reasoning, we may develop a theoretical model to predict new outcomes following a manipulation of its variables or concepts. In our example, our theoretical model may predict that success in the coaching process following goal setting will translate into improved workplace outcomes, such as higher job satisfaction or increased job performance.

It is important to recognise, however, that the existing theory we use will invariably be based on research that is both context and time-bound. This is what the fourth group of Whetten's elements addresses: who does this theory apply to; where does this theory apply; when does this theory apply? Referring again to our example, we may have realised that much previous research was undertaken with senior executives, rather than middle managers. Furthermore, we may have recognised that whilst the conclusions are applicable to Western European cultures, we can be less certain of their relevance to other cultures. These 'gaps' in theory can be used to refine the focus of our research as well as justify our research question and objectives, emphasising why our research findings are likely to be valuable.

Thus far, we have highlighted how theory and related literature may present us with ideas for a study (Lewin, 1945; Van de Ven, 1989). Yet, besides this, good theory may also suggest important areas for future research. In this way, we may be able to derive a research question and a set of variables or concepts from theory and use these to examine the extent to which and the reasons why they may be related in the context of our own research (Saunders & Rojon, 2011).

## **Summary**

Research questions need to be phrased to allow theoretical explanations to be developed (even if these are limited). A research question such as 'How satisfied are employees with the introduction of coaching as a tool for personal development?' will not lead to a theoretical explanation, but rather a descriptive outcome. Rephrased as 'What are the implications of introducing coaching as a development tool for employee productivity and why?', it encourages the researcher to examine relationships and their potential source, providing theoretical explanations.

Being able to provide meaningful explanations requires answers to 'why' (i.e. explanatory) questions in addition to 'what' (i.e. descriptive) questions. Data from opinion surveys, for example, may allow the researcher to derive clear conclusions only if respondents have been asked about their beliefs as well as the reasons for holding such beliefs (Mackenzie, 2000a; 2000b). Take the following survey extract: 'To what extent are you satisfied with the range of opportunities for personal development provided by your company.' This question is likely to require respondents to answer using a satisfaction scale with scale points such as 'very

satisfied', 'reasonably satisfied', 'slightly satisfied' and 'not at all satisfied'. Whilst the data gathered from this question may be useful for analytical purposes, for example to indicate the level of satisfaction at an organisational or departmental level, it is not possible to draw conclusions or recommendations from it, since we cannot provide a rationale for the level of satisfaction.

Having formulated your research question and objectives, it is important to ensure that these represent a convincing rationale for your study. To support researchers in this, we conclude by offering the following questions as a summary checklist:

- (1) Does your research study add value through one of the following options:
  - a) it addresses a new topic
  - b) it promises new insights into a topic by examining it from a different angle
  - c) it replicates research to corroborate earlier findings?
- (2) Is your research study of interest to those concerned with the theory and the practice of coaching?
- (3) Does your research question provide a clear link to relevant theory and related literature?
- (4) Does your research question require an answer that necessitates evaluation?
- (5) Do your research objectives state clearly how the topic being investigated will be operationalised, in other words do they address the 'how' of your study?
- (6) Are your research objectives fit-for-purpose, in other words meet the criteria of being transparent, specific, relevant, interconnected, answerable and measurable?
- (7) Have you used logical reasoning to explain and justify your research objectives?
- (8) Will you be able to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations from data that are gathered to meet your research objectives?



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*Table 1.* Deriving research objectives from research questions.

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Research objective</b>
1. Why have organisations introduced coaching programmes for senior managers?	1. To identify organisations' objectives for coaching programmes targeted at senior managers.
2. How can the effectiveness of coaching programmes for senior managers be measured?	2. To establish suitable effectiveness criteria for coaching programmes aimed at senior managers.
3. Have coaching programmes for senior managers been effective?	3. To describe the extent to which the effectiveness criteria for coaching programmes for senior managers have been met in published studies.
4. How can the effectiveness of coaching programmes targeted at senior managers be explained?	4a. To determine the factors associated with the effectiveness criteria for senior managers' coaching programmes being met.
	4b. To assess whether some of those factors are more influential than other factors.
5. Can the explanation be generalised?	5. To develop an explanatory theory that associates certain factors with the effectiveness of coaching programmes targeted at senior employees.



# **Adoption of E-Commerce by SMEs in the UK**

## *Towards a Stage Model*

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Research has shown that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are rapidly adopting the Internet and e-commerce. However, there is little systematic research into how such companies are adopting this new technology. This study addresses the research gap by seeking to understand how SMEs in the UK are adopting e-commerce, through an exploration of their level and sequence of adoption. The research, which was carried out by means of a mailed questionnaire, found four distinct clusters of adoption. These formed a set of sequential stages, through which firms appear to pass during the adoption of e-commerce. The firms in the first cluster are currently developing their first e-commerce services; the second adoption cluster are using e-mail to communicate with customers, suppliers and employees. Those at the third level of adoption have information-based websites operating and are developing on-line ordering facilities. The most advanced adopters have on-line ordering in operation and are developing on-line payment capabilities. The association of the adoption stage currently reached by a firm with contextual variables both at an industry and an organizational level is investigated and discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** adoption; e-commerce; SMEs; stage model

## **Introduction**

Electronic commerce is one of the most discussed topics in business today. It is already leading to the reshaping of customer and supplier relationships, the streamlining of business processes and, in some cases, even the restructuring of whole industries. Forecasts have estimated that the total value of e-commerce around the world will exceed US\$400bn by 2002 (IDC, 2000). Much of the media coverage of e-commerce concentrates on 'born to the web' companies such as Amazon.com or eBay.com, or its adoption by large, traditional 'bricks and mortar' companies. However, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are also increasingly making use of the Internet. Research by Oftel (2000) has found

that 49% of SMEs in the UK are connected to the Internet and a further 20% intend to be connected in the near future. Despite this rapid take-up of the Internet by smaller companies, there is little systematic research into how such companies are adopting this new technology beyond these raw statistics on connectivity.

This study addresses this gap in current research by seeking to understand how SMEs are adopting e-commerce through an exploration of their level and sequence of adoption. Drawing on previous studies, it is proposed that SMEs are likely to adopt e-commerce in a set of sequential steps or stages. At each stage they will develop certain e-commerce services from which they will gain experience and hence dissipate uncertainty and risk, which will be of benefit when they proceed to develop further services.

This study will be of value to SMEs considering e-commerce and those at the early stages of adoption, since it delineates the route travelled by other similar firms. It will also be of value to those that supply services and solutions to these SMEs, since it will provide evidence on which such advice and products can be based.

The article commences with a description of existing literature in this domain and presents two research propositions that guide this study. The methodology adopted is then described and the findings are presented and discussed.

## **E-Commerce Adoption by SMEs: Existing Literature**

Due to the relative youth of e-commerce, there are not yet widely agreed definitions of what is meant by this term. Kalakota and Whinston (1997) define e-commerce as 'the buying and selling of information, products and services via computer networks' (p. 3), the computer networks primarily being the Internet. Others (The Cabinet Office, 1999) use the term to encompass not only the buying and selling described above but also the use of Internet technologies, such as email and intranets, to exchange or share information either within the firm itself or with external stakeholders. It is this latter, wider definition of e-commerce that is used in this study.

It has been observed that e-commerce is not a simple innovation; rather it is a cluster of separate innovations (Prescott and Conger, 1995; Van Slyke, 1997; White et al., 1998). Companies can choose which of these innovations they make use of and in what sequence. This view is supported by the limited number of studies that have been undertaken to date on the use of electronic commerce in the specific context of SMEs, which include Hamill and Gregory (1997), Webb and Sayer (1998), Dutta and Evrard (1999) and Poon and Swatman (1999). These studies identify a wide range of business activities for which SMEs are using e-commerce, summarized in Table 1, reinforcing the observation that e-commerce is a cluster of separate innovations.

In further considering the adoption of e-commerce by SMEs, we are guided by the views of authors such as Frank (1988), Dosi (1988) and Reid and Smith (2000), who regard small firms as organizations that gain experience and knowledge in a sequence of steps or stages. Achievement of the first stage of a project

# WOMEN LEADERS— CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES, AND OTHER INSIGHTS FROM THE TOP

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The reasons for the persistent lag of women as leaders are complex. Attrition is an issue for women for many reasons, including traditional gender roles that may affect how women are perceived and the choices they have available (or they make), a lack of role models, the undervaluing of women's traditional communication and leadership styles, and organizational culture. Within medicine (clinical environments) and academic medicine (medical school and clinical environments), it is clear that the lack of women in leadership positions is more than a pipeline or a labyrinth problem. We undertook this case study to better understand the current challenges experienced by women aspiring to leadership positions in medicine and academic medicine. What types of challenges do women face as they move up in an academic or medical environment? And which challenges impact more than others in attaining leadership roles in these organizations: race and ethnicity, differences in leadership style and skills, mentorship and network, life experiences and family responsibilities, organizational culture, or gender? Our study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the leadership experiences of eight successful women in the fields of medicine and academic medicine. The emerging insights from these leaders may be useful for women from diverse backgrounds aspiring to be senior leaders in the future.

## Introduction

Many have recognized that the advancement of women to leadership positions continues to lag well behind that of male counterparts. Reports and studies done over the years document this phenomenon in all areas of industry, including government, higher education, business corporations, medicine, and academic medicine. Their conclusions have revealed that although we have near parity in the workforce, particularly at the beginning of career stages, women have not yet reached parity at the senior and leadership levels (Bystydzienski & Bird, 2006; Dannels et al., 2009; Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006; National Research Council [NRC], 2007; West & Curtis, 2006).

The reasons for the persistent lag of women as leaders are complex. Attrition is an issue for women for many reasons including traditional gender roles that may affect how women are perceived and the choices they have available (or they make), a lack of role models, the undervaluing of women's traditional communication and leadership styles, and organizational culture (Dannels et al., 2009). Many metaphors have been used to describe this phenomenon. Most recently, the trajectory of women to leadership roles has been compared to a "leaky pipeline" or a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006).

Within medicine (clinical environments) and academic medicine (medical school and clinical environments), it is clear that the lack of women in leadership positions is more than a pipeline or a labyrinth problem. For example, since 2003, medical school admissions for men and women have been virtually equal (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2009). Currently, only 18% of full professors are women and only 13% of department chairs are women. In 2008, 14 schools reported no women with a direct reporting relationship to the dean, up 40% compared to prior year (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2009). The evidenced scarcity of women in leadership positions in medicine and academic medicine is even more obvious in light of the mounting evidence of the business case for gender diversity (Catalyst, 2004; European Commission, 2006). In a study done by Dannels et al. (2009) of medical school deans, they found that the deans perceived gender inequity in "(1) lack of appropriate representation of women in senior positions, (2) a condescending attitude

toward women on the part of some faculty continues to exist, (3) time alone is insufficient for women to move into leadership positions, and (4) time alone is insufficient to improve the institutional environment for women" (p. 75).

To add to the complexity, a new generation of students and faculty, both male and female, will seek to achieve a work-life balance that may impact their career choices and decisions to accept a leadership role. The recognized paucity of women in formal leadership positions and the benefits of a diversified workforce call for studies that examine the qualities and characteristics needed for successful women leaders.

We undertook this case study to better understand the current challenges experienced by women aspiring to leadership positions in medicine and academic medicine. What types of challenges do women face as they move up in an academic or medical environment? And which challenges impact more than others in attaining leadership roles in these organizations: race and ethnicity, differences in leadership style and skills, mentorship and network, life experiences and family responsibilities; organizational culture, or gender? The study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the leadership experiences of eight successful women in the fields of medicine and academic medicine. The emerging insights from these leaders may be useful for women from diverse backgrounds aspiring to be senior leaders in the future.

## Methods

This work was reviewed by Lehigh Valley Health Network's Institutional Review Board and deemed to be a quality improvement study. We selected a case study approach (Stake, 1995) as a framework in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the experience of the women leaders in our sample. We sought to identify the core elements and attributes of the leadership journey for women in medicine and academic medicine.

Semistructured depth interviews were used. The interview guide was developed collaboratively by members of the study team, which included a female doctoral-level anthropologist, two physicians (one male and one female), and two female master's degree-level executives. Thirteen questions were asked that included topics such as (a) the influence of race, ethnicity, and/or



# Considering business start-up in recession time

Business start-up  
in recession time

## The role of risk perception and economic context in shaping the entrepreneurial intent

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine under-researched psychological and environmental factors related to entrepreneurial motivation and intention. This helps us to explore the links between risk perception (risk as opportunity and risk as threat), economic context (in a recession), entrepreneurial motivation (personal attitudes and perceived behavioral control) and intention for new venture creation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A sample of 619 individuals from two European countries, Spain and Great Britain, is studied. A range of control variables have been considered, including demographics, human/social capital and country effects. Structural equation modeling is used to analyze the relationships among the model constructs.

**Findings** – The structural model broadly holds and adequately fits the data. Entrepreneurial risk perception is strongly linked with entrepreneurial motivation. Entrepreneurial motivation, in turn, is strongly linked with entrepreneurial intention. It suggests, therefore, an indirect effect of risk perception on intentions. Economic context is also linked with risk perception and entrepreneurial intentions.

**Research limitations/implications** – Results from this exploratory study suggest a role of risk perception in establishing the entrepreneurial intention of individuals. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to this element in entrepreneurship education programs. Similarly, perceptions about the economic (recessionary) environment and its relationship with risk perception also have to be taken into account, with the purpose of letting students understand the possibilities that are present in a recessionary situation.

**Originality/value** – This is the first time that perceptions about risk and the economic context are tested within the theory of planned behavior.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurial intention, Theory of planned behavior, Recession, Economic context, Entrepreneurial motivation, Entrepreneurial risk perception

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

In Europe and the rest of the World, there has been an increasing drive to enhance the number and sustainability of graduate entrepreneurs in order to assist with economic growth, innovation and prosperity (Henry *et al.*, 2003; ISBA Consortium, 2004; Liñán *et al.*, 2008). This agenda, at least in Europe, has been supported by the European Commission to create a more “entrepreneurial mindset” in terms of awakening and stimulating entrepreneurial cognition (e.g. motivation, intention) that underpin new venture creation (Liñán *et al.*, 2008). Despite years of research on the entrepreneurial



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process, our knowledge is still very limited, especially regarding the role of psychological factors and external environment. In the past, there have been debates regarding whether the focus should be on internal psychological variables (e.g. risk-taking, ambition) or external environment ones (e.g. macro-environmental conditions like favorable economic environment and financial support) (Taormina and Lao, 2007). Relatively few empirical studies have jointly examined both psychological factors and environmental context for their relative influence on new venture creation. Recently, researchers have highlighted the value in examining both of these types of factors to take into account the person and the context (Mitchell *et al.*, 2007; Taormina and Lao, 2007).

The main aim of this exploratory research is to focus on specific psychological and environmental context factors that have been under-researched, but are related to entrepreneurial motivation and intention in order to more deeply understand the process of new venture creation. The main variables in this research include the psychological variable of entrepreneurial risk perception (considering the upside and the downside), and the external environment (incorporating a recessionary economic climate). The relative importance of these variables for entrepreneurial intention is examined, in the context of theory and literature, especially the theory of planned behavior (TPB).

This paper hopes to make two main theoretical contributions to the literature. First, a model of entrepreneurial intention is proposed, which includes important psychological and environmental predictors (e.g. risk and recessionary economic environment) of entrepreneurial intention. This helps examine the relative importance of predictors as well as direct and indirect effects. As far as the authors are aware there is no such model of entrepreneurial intention, hence it contributes to existing knowledge.

Second, the focus of this research is not just the entrepreneurial intention, but also entrepreneurial motivation. In other words, it seeks to understand how some of the variables of interest (entrepreneurial risk perception) not only act as predictors of entrepreneurial intention, but also predictors of underlying motivational constructs. In particular, it focusses on the TPB's most important motivational constructs of personal attitude and perceived behavioral control. This allows a better understanding of the factors that are related to these important motivational variables.

This paper has implications for educators, decision makers and researchers as it will shed light on important psychological and environmental predictors of entrepreneurial motivation and intention. In other words, it will contribute to a better understanding of the relative importance of these factors and the "seed beds" or motivation to pursue an entrepreneurial career (Veciana *et al.*, 2005), and to understand what helps some individuals to start-up their own business, but not others. It will also allow for a test of a model that helps to explain entrepreneurial intention. This has implications for helping entrepreneurship education and training.

The paper is structured around the following four main sections: a literature review presenting a theoretical framework drawing on previous research to underpin the model and hypotheses; a methodology section to summarize the sample and measures employed; a results section reporting the findings from the structural equation model (SEM); and a final discussion section to reflect on and conclude the paper.

## Theory and background

### *Entrepreneurial intention and the TPB*

Entrepreneurial intention is a key element to understanding the process of new-firm creation (Bird, 1988). It has been defined as a conscious awareness and conviction by an individual that they intend to set up a new business venture and plan to do so in the



# What really happens to small and medium-sized enterprises in a global economic recession? UK evidence on sales and job dynamics

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## Abstract

This article uses UK data to consider how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)<sup>1</sup> coped during the recent financial crisis. This is important, as SMEs are major contributors to job creation, but are vulnerable to falling demand. It finds that 4 in 10 SMEs experienced a fall in employment during the recession, and 5 in 10 experienced a fall in sales. Within 12 months of the recession, three-quarters of entrepreneurs had a desire to grow. This suggests that while the immediate effects of recession are severe, entrepreneurs recover quite quickly. Importantly, the analysis found that recessionary growth is hugely concentrated among entrepreneurs with the highest human capital.

## Keywords

financial crisis, job dynamics, sales dynamics, smaller firms

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## Introduction

There has been limited attention from the academic community in examining its [the Great Recession of 2008] effect on entrepreneurial activity and the sustainability of the small business sector.  
(Saradakis, 2012: 733)

The recent financial crisis, which began in September 2008, contributed to a fall of 6.4 percent in UK gross domestic product (GDP) in the subsequent six quarters and as such met the official definition of a recession. This represents the loss of three years of trend-level economic growth for the UK economy. At a time when larger businesses shed vast numbers of employees and unemployment rose by 674,000, policymakers increasingly looked to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to provide new employment opportunities and help drag the economy out of recession (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013), the implicit assumption being that: (a) SMEs are more flexible and resilient (Bednarzik, 2000; Binks and Jennings, 1986; Smallbone et al., 2012a, 2012b); (b) SMEs are more labour-intensive (Cowling, 2003; Robbins et al., 2000); and (c) that periods of disequilibrium create new opportunities for entrepreneurs (Parker et al., 2012; Schumpeter, 1942).

Yet even if we generally believe that SME's in the economy are more dynamic and opportunistic than large firms, SMEs are not immune to large contractions in the demand for goods and services. However, within the SME sector there is evidence that periods of disequilibrium and economic instability are also precisely the times when the some entrepreneurs are able to take advantage of new opportunities, as large firms and the public sector withdraw from markets (Acs and Storey, 2004; Grilli, 2011). This has been termed an entrepreneurial quality effect, that is separating the wheat from the chaff (Kitson, 1995). This occurs because in periods of economic growth more people are willing to pursue an entrepreneurial career path, but the marginal quality of the last entrepreneur declines. In recessions, however, low quality, marginal entrepreneurs exit the market.

It is the intention of this article to use a unique longitudinal dataset for the UK which spans the period leading up to the financial crisis in September 2008 and through the subsequent recession, in order to address four key questions.

RQ1: How many SMEs have still managed to grow in the current recession?

RQ2: Has the SME business sector been able to maintain its employment levels during the current recession?

RQ3: What types of entrepreneurs and SMEs have shown the capability to grow and create jobs during the current recession (i.e. is there an entrepreneurial human capital (EHC) effect)?

RQ4: Can SMEs provide the future growth that will create new employment opportunities as the economy emerges from recession?

In doing so, we hope to add to our understanding of what really happens to the SME sector during a severe economic downturn. This will enable us to speculate about the potential contribution of SMEs to future economic growth. This is of great importance, given the onus placed on the SMEs by politicians to provide new jobs and economic prosperity in the future. The results of this study also make a contribution to the future theoretical development of entrepreneurial growth models in periods of economic disequilibrium and turbulence.

The value-added of this article is fourfold. First, it uses a unique and contemporary dataset covering a full and severe, economic recession cycle. Second, it has multiple measures of actual growth and an additional future growth orientation variable. Previous empirical studies of growth have tended to use single performance measures. Delmar (1997), in an analysis of 55 growth studies, found that only 18.2 percent used more than one measure, and Unger et al. (2011), in a recent analysis of 70 growth studies, finding that the use of multiple growth measures had increased only marginally to 21.4 percent. Third, the dataset contains a rich set of entrepreneur and business-level characteristics, which allows us to broaden the theoretical and empirical scope of the analysis. Fourthly, the analysis is also able to test explicitly whether general relationships (for example, between EHC and growth) hold during a severe recessionary environment, or whether these relationships lose their effect.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews some of the key literature relating to the measurement of growth and its determinants. It also formulates the hypotheses. Following this, the data are presented and the key variables to be used in the analysis are discussed. The results of the empirical analyses are then presented, followed by exploration of the significance and relevance of the results of the study; with implications drawn for policymakers and practitioners. Finally, concluding remarks are provided.

## Literature review and hypotheses

### *Small business growth: measurements and determinants*

The growth literature has put too little emphasis on the measurement of growth (Delmar, 1997). Only recently has growth been treated as a multidimensional, heterogeneous and complex construct (Achtenhagen et al., 2010; Leitch and Neergard, 2010). This article uses multiple indicators to measure small business growth: namely, changes in employment and sales. The reasons for choosing employment and sales as growth measures are threefold. First, it is widely argued that small businesses make a positive contribution to economies mainly through employment and productivity (Acs and Storey, 2004; Audretsch et al., 2008; Cowling, 2006), making employment and sales two natural candidates and mostly used variables for growth measures (Achtenhagen et al., 2010; Delmar, 1997; Unger et al., 2011; Weinzimmer et al., 1998). Second, recent reviews of the small business growth literature found that previous studies tended to use single performance measures, and this approach often leads to results that are not comparable with each other (Achtenhagen et al., 2010; Delmar, 1997; Weinzimmer et al., 1998). Delmar suggests the use of multiple growth measures as they might 'best represent the theoretical concept of growth' (1997: 203). Third, as suggested in Achtenhagen et al. (2010), current entrepreneurship studies tend to 'simplify' growth outcomes to easily observable measures such as employee numbers, and ignore 'the multidimensionality and complexity of growth processes' (2010: 309), thus creating a gap between the growth defined and measured by academics or policymakers, and what is meaningful and relevant to entrepreneurs. However, this appears not to be so much of a concern in the present study, as when they were asked the question in the Annual Small Business Survey (ASBS), on which this research is based, more than four out of five entrepreneurs regard increasing turnover as means to achieve their longer-term growth plans. This means that the practical and policy implications derived from the empirical analyses in this article are meaningful and relevant to practitioners and policymakers.

After justifying the choice of growth measures, this article then draws on studies that have adopted a multivariate approach to examining the determinants of growth, from which the main hypotheses to be tested are developed, using multivariate regression analysis. Compared to large

# Identifying critical HR practices impacting employee perception and commitment during organizational change

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Prior research in the area of organizational change highlights the critical role played by HR practices during organizational change as it may require altering employee behavior to support the change direction. Human resource (HR) function is considered to be well positioned to influence employee behavior by institutionalizing HR practices that support change. Further there is a significant body of literature that suggests that employee behavior is significantly influenced by the perceptions of HR practices during change. HR practices which create positive employee perceptions increase employee commitment to change. The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework that identifies critical HR practices that support organizational change and examines their impact on employee perception and commitment to change.

**Design/methodology/approach** – First, an extensive literature review on organizational change at macro level has been done to identify critical practices desired from key organizational members during organizational change. Second, a case for importance of HR function as a key organizational member during change is presented. Further literature on effectiveness of HR practices adopted by HR professionals during organizational change is examined to find out the gap areas. Third, literature on employee perception and commitment to change is examined to find out possible linkages to HR practices during organizational change. Finally, eight propositions are presented to build an integrated conceptual framework identifying critical HR practices during organizational change and their impact on employee perception and commitment to change.

**Findings** – The study suggests that HR practices undertaken in the area of culture, leadership, cross functional integration, training, communication and technology if introduced and implemented will positively influence employee perception reducing resistance and increasing commitment to change. Therefore assessing employee perception about critical HR practices at different stages of change initiation, implementation and consolidation can enable understanding about employee commitment to change. This would also help HR professionals understand how effective the HR practices implemented during change have been.

**Originality/value** – This framework can be used by the researchers and practitioners to study, guide, frame and model empirical research into the area of studying critical HR practices during organizational change. So far literature provides a generic view of desired organizational practices during change. Moreover there are few studies available on employee perception about HR practices implemented during organizational change and its impact on employee commitment to change. The framework presented in this paper would help explore the effectiveness of specific HR practices implemented during change by evaluating its impact on employee perception and commitment to change.

**Keywords** Change management, Organizational change, Change-related HR practices, HR practices during organizational change, Role of human resources during organizational change, Strategic HR

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



## Introduction

Since the advent of globalization the business environment has undergone drastic changes both in terms of complexity and dynamism. Organizations are grappling with changes in market conditions, workforce demographics and diversity, technological innovations, increased focus on customer and quality, shortage of talent and economical changes (Noe, 2002). Thus it is essential for organizations to continuously modify their business strategy, policies and practices and align with the changing demands of business environment, achieve long-term sustainability and overall organizational effectiveness. In other words organizations are forced to make and manage change effectively on a continuous basis (Bridges and Mitchell, 2000; Kanter, 1985). Despite the growing need of organizations to manage change effectively 70 percent of the change efforts fail (Beer and Nohria, 2000) and this rate has been consistent over the years. One of the most commonly cited reasons of failure of change implementation is inadequately addressing people-related issues (Spiker and Lesser, 1995; Kotter, 1995). The importance of employees, their psychological responses and their behavior during organizational change has been acknowledged widely post 1990s (Tetenbaum, 1998), however, practicing managers fail to pay enough emphasis on these issues (Becker and Gerhart, 1996). This view is also echoed by others who have carried out empirical research in this area. For example Shum *et al.* (2008) did a study on implementation of a project on customer relationship management (CRM) in three banks in New Zealand and found that organizations focus on technological issues and neglect people-related issues.

Ulrich (1997) opined that since any change management activity is centered on people, human resource (HR) professionals can play a significant role during organizational change. This view has gained importance particularly in the last decade. A vast number of researchers have said that HR professionals can enhance employee's capability to manage change and facilitate effective change management (Kalyani and Sahoo, 2011; Fitz-enz and Davison, 2002; Ulrich, 1997). This is mainly because managing change involves managing employee behavior and prior research suggests there is a strong association between HR practices and employee behavior (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011). Prior research also highlights that HR practices have a positive effect on employees' attitudes and contribution to enhanced firm performance (MacDuffie, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994, 1998; Ichniowski *et al.*, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Delery and Doty, 1996; Youndt *et al.*, 1996; Huselid and Becker, 1996; Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Delaney and Huselid, 1996). Since managing employee attitude toward change such that there is more readiness and less resistance remains a primary agenda for any change effort, this study proposes that HR professionals can add value by implementing HR practices which positively influence employee attitudes toward change. Previous research in the area of critical HR practices during change implementation is scarce. Researchers have presented a more generic view stating that HR should provide leadership and develop necessary capabilities within the organization during organizational change (Ulrich, 1997; Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). Similarly Brockbank (1999) said that HR should become strategically proactive by fostering innovation and creativity, facilitate merger and acquisition and lead in creating linkages between market requirements and internal capabilities during change. Tiong (2005) said that during organizational change human potential could be maximized through communication, supervisor and peer support, employee empowerment, active execution, training and educating employees to cope with stress and create more buy in.

Role of HRs during mergers and acquisition has also been highlighted by many researchers. For example Aguilera and Dencker (2004) felt that human side was much neglected during M&A and brought a framework to evaluate the interlinkages between HR strategies. Similarly Dauber (2012) emphasize the importance of culture during mergers and acquisition. Antila (2006) highlight importance of HR during M&A as it essentially involves many people related issues.

Therefore, identifying specific HR practices that are particularly effective during organizational change and how these impacted employee perception and commitment to change becomes a relevant area of investigation. This paper first highlights how and why over the years HR function has emerged as an important organizational function to facilitate change. It then highlights the significant change management practices drawn from macro change literature and links it to HR practices. It further examines the linkages between HR practices initiated during organizational change and employee perception and commitment to change. The paper finally presents a conceptual framework based on propositions which can become the base of empirical research in future.

### Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to review literature in the field of HR practices impacting employee perception and commitment during organizational change. The sample of journals was drawn from the ABDC List which comprises 2,767 different journal titles, divided into four categories of quality, A\*: 6.9 percent; A: 20.8 percent; B: 28.4 percent; and C: 43.9 percent journals such that it could be regarded as “certified knowledge.” Certified knowledge describes knowledge that has been submitted to the critical review of fellow researchers and has succeeded in gaining their approval (Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). Keywords such as “Organizational Change,” “Change Management,” “Role of Human Resources during organizational change,” “HR practices during organizational change,” “change related HR practices,” “HR as change agent,” “perception and commitment,” “employee perception about HR practices,” “HR practices and organizational performance” were used. The studies conducted were identified through online database of ProQuest published in English language. Papers published from 1998 to 2013 were considered for this review. At the same time to avoid the risk of excluding important and meaningful contributions in the field of HR practices during organizational change and employee perception and commitment, we analyzed and included frequently cited work (journals, books, magazines) found in the above selected papers. These did not appear in our search using above mentioned keywords yet were found meaningful and therefore included in this study. Papers, which did not include the terms “organizational change” or “human resources” in their text, were automatically excluded from this review as they were considered irrelevant for this review. Book reviews, interviews and article summaries were excluded in the review. We also did not include smaller, less cited, less known or very new journals in this study. A total of 133 journals were considered for this review.

#### 1.1 Emergence of HR function as a change enabler

HR function has been a function in transition since almost last six decades largely because the nature of organizations has moved from industrial to knowledge based entities. This transition within the HR function over last many decades coupled with changing business environment has led to change in the roles, responsibilities,

## Employee organizational commitment in the Australian public sector

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This study provides an insight into the association between specific cultural, organizational and demographic factors with the level of employee organizational commitment (EOC) from a sample of 500 Australian public sector organizations. The level of EOC is found to vary across management levels, while different cultural and organizational factors were associated with the EOC of managers at different levels in the organizational hierarchy. While there was no difference in the level of EOC to that reported in the private sector, there were specific factors found to be associated with EOC which are unique to the public sector. Such findings indicate that future researchers examining the association between organizational and cultural factors with EOC must consider the sector in which the organization operates. In addition, given the importance of EOC in improving organizational performance, the findings provide guidance to the management of Australian public sector organizations in how to enhance their employees' level of EOC.

**Keywords:** employee organizational commitment (EOC); organizational culture; perceived organizational support and job satisfaction; public sector

### Introduction

Employee organizational commitment (EOC) is referred to by Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian (1974) with respect to the willingness of an employee to extend effort for the benefit of their organization, their willingness to keep working for the organization and their identification with the organization's goals and values. While many studies have focused on EOC, the majority have examined the level of EOC in private sector organizations (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Hackett, Peter and Hausdorf 1994; Gellatly 1995; Ko, Price and Mueller 1997; Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe 2004; Stallworth 2004; Pool and Pool 2007; Su, Baird and Blair 2009), with relatively few studies examining EOC in a public sector context (Balfour and Wechsler 1990; Zeffane 1994; Iverson and Buttigieg 1999). The few prior studies examining EOC in public sector organizations have found that the level of EOC is lower than in private sector organizations (Rainey, Traut and Blunt 1986; Balfour and Wechsler 1990; Zeffane 1994).

This study attempts to address this dearth by examining EOC in the Australian public sector. This sector has undergone significant changes since the introduction of the National Competition Policy in 1993 (Hilmer, Rayner and Taperall 1993) with public sector organizations adopting a more commercial orientation, and becoming more focused on efficiency, effectiveness and accountability (Hood 1991). In pursuing such objectives, it is important that employees are motivated to achieve organizational goals with Pool and

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Pool (2007) claiming that EOC promotes motivation and job satisfaction in the workplace. Public sector organizations should also focus on EOC due to the associated benefits such as improved job performance (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Aheame 1998; Ketchand and Strawser 2001; Riketta 2002), lower employee turnover (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Ketchand and Strawser 1998; Stallworth 2004), less resistance to change (Lau and Woodman 1995; Iverson 1996; Yousef 2000; Nikolaou and Vakola 2005) and improved productivity and overall organizational performance (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Chow 1994).

Accordingly, the study aims to observe the level of EOC in the public sector and compare it with that reported in the private sector. Studies examining the level of EOC within public sector organizations are important in light of the stereotype typically associated with the public sector whereby employees are depicted as lazy, non-committed and inefficient. The findings will enable us to investigate whether this stereotype is still applicable given that the public sector has attempted to increase their competitiveness, productivity and efficiency by enticing employees through flexible working arrangements and improved benefits. The findings will also provide an insight into whether human resource management practices in the public sector have been successful in increasing employees' commitment to their organization to the same level as experienced by employees in the private sector. In addition, given the importance of EOC, this study will also contribute to the contingency-based studies examining the factors that affect the level of EOC (Bateman and Strasser 1984; Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Nystrom 1993; Iverson and Buttigieg 1999; McKinnon Harrison, Chow and Wu 2003; McMurray, Scott and Pace 2004; Su et al. 2009). The majority of these studies have been carried out in the private sector with little insight provided into the factors that influence EOC in the public sector. Accordingly, the second objective of this study is to examine the association between specific cultural and organizational factors with the level of EOC in the public sector. The study includes the same factors examined by Su et al. (2009) in the private sector, with the aim being to examine whether these associations with EOC are similar to or differ from those reported in the private sector. Specifically, the study examines the association between four cultural factors (teamwork, respect for people, outcome orientation and innovation) and five organizational factors (organizational size, training, link to rewards, perceived organizational support and job satisfaction) with the level of EOC in the public sector.

Su et al. (2009) also examined the association between specific demographic factors (gender, age, education, salary, duration of employment and position level) with the level of EOC and found that the level of EOC differed based on managerial position level. They subsequently found that different cultural and organizational factors were associated with the EOC of managers at different levels in the organizational hierarchy. Similarly, it is important for the managers of public sector organizations to improve their knowledge on how to enhance the EOC of employees at different management levels. Therefore, the third objective is to examine the influence of demographic factors on the level of EOC in the public sector.

The study is organized as follows. The 'EOC in the public sector' section reviews the literature on EOC in the public sector. This is followed by a discussion of the association between the four cultural and five organizational factors with the level of EOC. An overview of the survey method used to gather data is then provided as well as details concerning the measurement of each of the variables. The results are then presented, followed by the conclusions, limitations and future directions for research.