IN PURSUIT OF LEGITIMACY: THE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF AN INSTRUMENT (SUMMARY)

Whitney Peake
University of North Texas, whitney.peake@unt.edu

Phillip Davis
University of North Texas

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Principal Topic

Prior researchers argue that entrepreneurs seek legitimacy throughout the entire entrepreneurial process (Tornikoski and Newbert, 2007; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). As such, entrepreneurship researchers have taken a strategic stance on legitimacy-seeking, suggesting that entrepreneurs can craft stories or highlight milestones or achievements to influence the legitimacy judgments of stakeholders. Based on the work of past researchers, Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) propose four types of legitimacy they anticipate to impact firm growth: cognitive, sociopolitical regulatory, sociopolitical normative, and industry. In this paper we attempt to create and validate an instrument related to these four types of legitimacy to explore whether the proposed legitimizing activities represent the categories of legitimacy that researchers have suggested.

Method

A survey instrument was developed with items related to the types of activities entrepreneurship researchers have indicated would represent each type of legitimacy. Students were assigned entrepreneur interviews as part of an entrepreneurship class project during Spring 2012, through which they administered the survey. We obtained 148 usable surveys through these assignments. Entrepreneurs were asked basic demographic questions, questions surrounding their perceptions of legitimacy, obstacles they experienced in start-up, and were asked to rate legitimizing activities they perceived to influence their transition to start-up on a 7-point Likert Scale (among least important to among most important). Principal components analysis was employed to analyze the instrument data.

Results and Implications

Results indicate that clear categories of legitimacy do emerge from the analysis. Industry and cognitive legitimacy are among the most distinctly delineated types for start-up. However, two sub-categories of cognitive legitimacy emerged, which appear to represent functions of planning for and promotion of the venture. Our findings indicate that the planning portion of cognitive legitimacy may be perceived among the most important in moving from intentions to start-up. Given the validity and reliability of the instrument, it is anticipated that it can be used by researchers to further test the conceptually based categorizations of legitimacy proposed in the literature. Further, educators and small business development specialists can use this information in shepherding their students and clients towards the highest impact endeavors.

CONTACT: Whitney Peake; whitney.peake@unt.edu; (T): 940-565-3345; (F): 940-565-4394; Department of Management, University of North Texas, 1155 Union Circle #305429 Denton, TX 76203.