WEARING MANY HATS: THE FORCES IMPACTING ROLE IDENTITY CHANGES OVER TIME (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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Principal Topic

Entrepreneurs wear many hats. These hats reflect the many roles and responsibilities entrepreneurs must take on throughout the course of their ventures. Recent research demonstrates that these hats (role identities) are not only critical to the personal development of individuals but also to the development of their respective ventures (Cardon et al., 2009; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010). However, research is largely silent on understanding how entrepreneurs balance multiple, within-work role identities and what triggers these identity changes over time (Leavitt et al., 2012: 1330). If (1) entrepreneurs necessarily assume many roles in order to start, develop, and grow their new ventures (Mathias & Williams, 2012), and (2) roles reflect distinct sets of goals, cognitions, and expected behaviors (Stets & Burke, 2000), then we might expect significantly different behaviors over the course of entrepreneurs’ work lives. In other words, we do not fully know what hats entrepreneurs wear throughout the course of their ventures or how and why they switch between them over time. Therefore, this study explores what venture-related role identities entrepreneurs assume and how and why they change over time.

Methods and Key Propositions

Given the relative paucity of research examining entrepreneurs’ multiple within-work role identities (cf. Leavitt et al., 2012) and the need for richer descriptions of how role transitions occur over time (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), I selected a qualitative approach to study how entrepreneurial role identities change over time. Specifically, this inductive study employs several qualitative techniques, including (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) identity protocols, (3) calendar assessments, and (4) supplementary data gathering, which were conducted with 40 participant entrepreneurs.

Results and Implications

Role identities represent a fundamental, and increasingly multi-faceted, element of the modern work world (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011). Although entrepreneurship scholars have begun to acknowledge the importance of role identity (Cardon et al., 2012; Farmer et al., 2011), scholars have not yet explored the complex set of role identities entrepreneurs must assume within their ventures. Our results unveil the driving forces behind why entrepreneurs choose to adopt and/or exit certain role identities, what hats entrepreneurs assume over the course of their ventures, and how they balance between them. In so doing, this study improves our academic and practical understanding of how and why entrepreneurs and their respective ventures change over time.

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