TRANSGENERATIONAL LEARNING IN ENTREPRENEURIAL FAMILY BUSINESSES (SUMMARY)

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Principal Topic

This study explores how family business members learn between and across generations. It draws on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concepts of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation to explore the relationship between family members and learning. This study shows learning in the family business context is about continuity but the process of learning in which family engage, is uneven, non-linear and unpredictable. To learn about continuity, family members participate in multiple ways, gradually over time. In this study gradual participation to build legitimacy is revealed as a multi-generational learning phenomenon. It involves multiple forms of co-participation influenced by family members from the past, present and future.

Method

Guided by the research question how do family members learn about entrepreneurship between and across generations in family business?, empirical material from 18 respondents from entrepreneurial family businesses in Canada, are examined using an interpretive and inductive approach. Through this approach we focus on understanding interactions associated with learning which take place within the family business context.

Results and Implications

This study shows how the patterns and nature of participation in the family business define possibilities for learning. Learning for continuity is a complex social process taking place in everyday situated practice and through patterns of co-participation between family members. Family members become part of the family business through participating in its everyday practice. Social context provides the structure and meaning for shared practice (Wenger, 1998). New family members become acquainted with the business through peripheral activities and learn through observing others. As their knowledge, experience and participation increases, so does their legitimacy with new family members gradually becoming more essential to the continuity of the family business. This study contributes to understanding how learning takes place in family business through complex patterns of participation in everyday practice, which lead to forms of legitimacy in which learning is implicated.

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