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SUMMARY

THE SELF-REGULATORY FOUNDATIONS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL AMBIDEXTERITY

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Principal Topic

Entrepreneurs must exploit existing opportunities while continuing to explore and innovate. That is, they must be ambidextrous (O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2007). In this paper, I investigate the role of social cognitive self-regulation in entrepreneurial ambidexterity. I draw on Regulatory Focus Theory which describes two related self-regulatory orientations called promotion focus and prevention focus (Higgins, 1998). Promotion focus describes where growth and the need for advancement motivate people to seek gains. In contrast, prevention focus describes where security and the need for safety motivate people to avoid losses. A major finding of this study is that the interaction of both promotion focus and prevention focus appears to play a significant role in stimulating entrepreneurial ambidexterity.

Method

Data were gathered as part of a larger study into entrepreneurial decision-making. I selected 30 founder entrepreneurs representing a range of industries, growth stages and personal backgrounds, all based in Australia. I conducted semi-structured interviews with these 30 entrepreneurs about their decision making and used the same interview protocols throughout. All 30 participants also completed a survey known as the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire, which is a reliable measure of a person’s chronic regulatory orientation. The resulting measures of promotion focus and prevention focus were added together to derive each person’s overall self-regulatory strength. Following the principles of mixed methods analysis, results of the interview and survey analysis were then combined to identify patterns of ambidextrous thought and behaviour in relation to promotion focus, prevention focus and overall regulatory orientation.

Results and Implications

Results suggest that exploration-related thought and behavior are stronger when an entrepreneur possesses dominant promotion focus, while exploitation-related thought and behavior are stronger when the entrepreneur possesses dominant prevention focus. Further analysis of the data suggests that ambidextrous thought and behavior is strongest when overall regulatory orientation is also strong, that is, when an entrepreneur possesses strong promotion focus as well as strong prevention focus. Future research into these topics should increase understanding of ambidexterity among entrepreneurs, as well as the general mechanisms of their self-regulatory development. This may result in new educational and management techniques that can strengthen entrepreneurial ambidexterity, having practical implications for founder tenure and the management of firm growth.

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