Active Non-Employee Owners: Informal Impact on Family-Owned SMEs

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Families are an integral part of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). Often family members are heavily involved with the operations of an SME, yet hold no formal role or title in the organization. The owner and CEO's spouse, children, or other relatives could hold disproportionate influence over decisions without any formal responsibilities. These active non-employee owners could have an impact on the organization culture or influence over employees. This paper looks at active non-employee owners' in SMEs and the emotional impact they have on non-family employees in hopes to explore in future research their organizational impact.

Keywords: Family-Owned Business, Family Small-To-Medium Sized Enterprises, Non-Family Employees, Small and Medium Size Enterprises, Conflict, Emotion

INTRODUCTION

Academic literature is rich with details of how family impacts small firms. Strong trusting relationships, heightened sense of emotion, and long hours of contact all impact the organizational behavior of small and medium sized firms when family is involved (Astrachan, Klein & Smyrnios, 2002; Astrachan & Shanker, 2003; Davis & Stern, 1988; Gersick, Davis, Hampton & Lansberg, 1997; Haynes & Haynes, 1999; Hollander & Elman, 1988; Kets de Vries, 1996; Levinson, 1971; Marshack, 1994; Sharma, 2004; Smyrnios, Tanewski & Romano, 1998; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). However, most studies have focused on family members who are direct employees of the company (e.g. father and son businesses) or active non-employee owners committed to the firm (e.g. spouses) in the context of observing specific firm outcomes such as success, growth and operations (Astrachan et al., 2002; Astrachan & Shanker, 2003; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006).

However, in many family-owned small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), a family member of the owner and CEO may not be an official employee of the company, but hold huge influence over the decision-making and thus over other non-family employees. (For the purposes of this paper, the individual who is both the owner and CEO of the family firm is referred to as "owner.") The literature has focused on family members' impact on the family-operated firm, but few have investigated the impact of family members as active non-employee owners on the other employees of the firm (who are not part of the family). For the purpose of this paper, "active non-employee owners" will interchange with the acronym "ANEOs". Incorporating the research around family members as ANEOs and the impact to family-owned SMEs, this paper will examine the emotional impact they have on other employees of the firm through several propositions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Members as Active Non-Employee Owners

Family-operated SMEs involve family members who share the ownership of the firm and the major decision making (File & Prince, 1996; Kets de Vries, 1996; Hollander & Elman, 1988; Mustafa, Caspersz, Ramos, & Siew, 2018; Ram, 2001). Moreover, these family members actively support the firm through monetary means (e.g. becoming a stakeholder by investing capital and personal assets) and labor (e.g. offering their services and time) even though they may not be formally employed by the firm (Anderson, Jack, & Dodd, 2005). For example, a common relationship that exists in family firms is that of spouses, where one of them is the owner and the other an active non-employee (Gersick et al., 1997; Foley & Powell, 1997; Ram, 2001; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). The owner's spouse is economically bound to the performance of the firm and works at the family firm to "help out" even though s/he is not a formal employee (Van Auken & Werbel, 2006).

Active non-employee owners can have varying degrees of influence over the business. Family operated firms are unique since the family is an integral part of the firm (and its operations) due to their direct influence (Davis & Stern, 1988; Gersick et al., 1997; Kets de Vries, 1996; Mustafa et al., 2018; Neckebrouck, Schulze, & Zellweger, 2018; Smyrnios et al., 1998)—especially since the familial relationships can influence the "firm's structure, strategy; conduct, and success" (Smyrnios et al., 1998, p. 49). The actual influence ANEOs possess can vary depending on the level of involvement. Some studies have discussed the involvement of family in firms through classification schemes. For instance, Astrachan and Shanker developed three distinctions of family firms to cover a range of family member involvement (2003). Their broadest definition of family firms entails any type of participation (formal or informal) from family members, where family members possess control over the firm's strategic direction. The second, midpoint definition, involves the owner of the family firm and the family members who will one day own the firm. Under this definition, both the family members and owner are involved with the daily activities of the firm. The third and most narrow definition of family firms includes generations of a family having an impact on a firm through their influence. Additionally, Astrachan, Klein, and Smyrnios looked at family members' influence on the "success, failure, strategy and operations" of the firms (2002, p. 45). Moreover, they found family members could have a varying impact on the organization in regards to power (in terms of ownership, involvement and authority in the firm), experience (family members commitment through the number and range of generations involved in the firm), and culture (values of both the family members and the firm) (Astrachan et al., 2002; Sharma, 2004). Taken together, the aforementioned research recognize that ANEOs can have a real impact on the firm contingent on their level of involvement.

Since active non-employee owners have an influence on the owner and the family-owned SME, the relationship between the family and non-family employees is essential to understand. Because SMEs are smaller and more intimate, the impact of family relationships is greater—especially with ANEOs (Anderson et al., 2005; Ram, 2001). Monder Ram states that "family ties and the invocation of family culture exert a significant influence on social relations in small firms" (2001, p. 396). The influence and impact of the non-employee family owners extends to include non-family employees in the family-operated SMEs.

Academic research has explored the relationships and perspectives of non-family member employees in family operated SMEs (Baines & Wheelcock, 1998; Beehr, Drexler, & Faulkner, 1997; Kets de Vries, 1996; Ram, 2001). In particular, Moder Ram found in his qualitative study of a small family consulting firm, that non-family employees were expected to be as loyal and devoted to the firm as the owners (2001). Moreover, he found that some employees felt tension when assembling project teams as they felt "under pressure" to include the "boss's wife" (Ram, 2001, p. 408). In Baines and Wheelock's quantitative and qualitative work, they found that conflicts can arise between non-family employees and the owners as the owners try to create and develop working relationships (1998).

Emotion in Management for Employees in Family SMEs

Alan Carsrud describes family firms as one where the "ownership and policy making are dominated by members of an 'emotional kinship group' whether members of that group recognize the fact or not" (1994, p. 34). Family-operated SMEs are strongly influenced by active non-employee family owners because of their emotional bond to the owner (Anderson et al., 2005; Carsrud, 1994). The dual roles of work and family member for the owner may also influence the variations of emotion management that the owner displays towards their family member (Wharton & Erickson, 1993). For instance, certain emotional norms acceptable for the role of family member may not be acceptable for the role as work members. As a result, the owner may not be self-aware of his/her feelings, treatment and attitude towards his/her family members at work, thus inadvertently displaying preferential treatment in front of other non-family employees.

Moreover, the employees of family-operated SMEs may have to manage their emotions when it comes to family members that are ANEOs and their influence over the firm. Arlie Hochschild defines emotion work (and management) as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (1983, p. 7). Academic literature concerning emotion work discusses the increase in expectations on employees to keep their emotions under control at the workplace (Ajzen, 2001; Brief & Weiss, 2002; Hochschild, 1983; Muchinsky, 2000; Stearns & Stearns, 1986; Wharton & Erickson, 1993). With non-family employees of family operated SMEs, they may find they are ambivalent in their emotions towards ANEOs. Thus, these employees may find themselves restraining their own emotional response to ANEOs by treating them in a professional manner even though there is no formal authority.

Commitment and Active Non-Employee Owners

Academic research has explored the commitment of family members as non-employee owners (Foley & Powell, 1997; Poza & Messer, 2001; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). Since ANEOs are economically connected to the firm, they inherently become a major stakeholder in the firm—which enables them to have an influence (whether it is direct or indirect) (Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). Miller and LeBreton-Miller state, "family owners often have a deep emotional investment in their companies as their family's fortune, personal satisfaction, and even public reputation are tied to the business" (2006, p. 75). As a result, "the family constitutes the core of the business with family members bounded by strong emotional bonds and a sense of loyalty and responsibility for the firm" (Powell & Eddleston, 2017, p. 617).

The dynamics of family commitment are intensified by the unique relationships of marital couples who own their family business together. In an article by Howard Van Auken and James Werbel, they found that spousal commitment in a family-operated firm partially affects firm performance, and therefore, the survival of the firm (2006). They state that business owners' spouses who are committed in the firm tend to work towards shared goals which in turn can increase business performance. Another study found the spouses of CEOs from family firms assumed the function as "ambassador of goodwill" for both employees and customers by maintaining and promoting the firms' norms and values (Poza & Messer, 2001, p. 30). Moreover, a study by Kathy J. Marshack looked at married couples who work together in family business. She found that although spouses did not take on leadership roles within the firm, they were an essential factor for the day-to-day operations of the firm and family (1994).

Active non-employee owners also play a function in the firm through their commitment: direct financing, labor and support of the vision, concept, and direction of the firm (Miller & LeBreton-Miller, 2006; Ram, 2001). Therefore, the greater their commitment (both financial and vision) to the firm, the greater their influence would be present in the firm (Ram, 2001). As a result, employees may find they are managing their internal ambivalent feelings towards the ANEO by conforming to the informal authority of the ANEO (Ajzen, 2001; Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, employees may find they are emotionally uncertain in how to treat the ANEOs when these family members have such great influence but no formal authority within the firm. In sum, this paper suggests:

Proposition 1-1: *The greater the commitment of the family members as active non-employee owners' to the firm's goals and values, the greater the emotional impact these family members will have on non-family member employees.*

Proposition 1-2: *The greater the financial commitment of the family members as active non-employee owners, the greater the emotional impact these family members will have on non-family member employees.*

Conflict and Active Non-Employee Owners

Ibrahim and Soufani believe the reason why family firms are unique—their dual identity as social-family and business systems—is also the primary cause of conflict (2003). In an article by Sharon Foley and Gary Powell, they defined work-family conflict for marriage/business partners as "conflict that arises when the individuals who make up a partnership disagree over the allocation of time that each gives to work and family roles" (1997, p. 38-39). Thus, the potential for the ANEO to be in conflict with the owner of the family-operated SME is always present. The amount of time spent together at work and at home, combined with how much they have "at stake" (economically and emotionally) can lead to greater conflict not only with each other, but also with non-family employees (Ibrahim & Soufani, 2003; Miller & LeBreton-Miller, 2006; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006).

The status of ANEOs allows them to behave in ways that are not typical of a regular employee of a family-operated SME (Schulze et al., 2001). For instance, the status of family allows these members to "be honest without fear of adverse consequences to their careers" (Miller & LeBreton-Miller, 2006, p. 80; Bubolz, 2001). The opportunity for conflict increases when the ANEOs are not strongly committed to firm and its goals. One study found that spouses of the owner of family firms who were weakly committed tended to produce additional problems and stress for the business owner through increased family conflicts (Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). The conflict between family members can also extend to include non-family employees (Davis & Stern, 1981).

Conflicts may also arise if the active non-employee owner asks employees to perform assignments that are in disagreement with those of other employees or the owner (Gomez-Mejia, Nunez-Nickel, & Gutierrez, 2001). Employees may feel uncertain about whose "orders" to implement and to ignore. Moreover, employees may find themselves in a position when their advice and contributions may be in disagreement with the ANEO and the owner of the firm has to make the decision to choose. In Ram's qualitative study, he observed that the decisions of employees (who were qualified to be in the positions they were in,) could be challenged by the spouse of the owner into not being achieved (2001). As a result, some of the employees at times felt as "an outsider" in ambivalent positions within the firm (Ram, 2001, p. 410).

Active non-employee owners in conflict with the owner can have an impact on the emotional state of employees. Conflict between the owner and his/her spouse or other family member will create an emotional atmosphere in the firm, because emotions are inherent in any family conflict (even about business issues) (Anderson et al., 2005; Carsrud, 1994). Moreover, employees may be managing their internal ambivalent feelings towards the ANEO by conforming to the informal authority of the ANEO (Ajzen, 2001; Hochschild, 1983). As a result, non-family employees may encounter emotions that are confusing as they are unsure in how to react to the ANEO. Therefore, the greater the conflict between the ANEO with the owner of the firm, the greater the ANEO's emotional impact on the firm.

Proposition 2: *The greater the family members as active non-employee owners are in conflict with the owner and CEO of the firm, the greater the emotional impact on non-family member employees.*

Family Status of Active Non-Employee Owners

Traditionally, familial relationships are "shaped by gender, generation and status" (Ram, 2001, p. 414). The family status of the ANEO is generally influenced by two factors: the ancestral relationship (e.g., siblings) and the strength of the particular relationship with the owner of the firm (e.g. spouses).

They develop this kind of special and status through their unique social interaction (Li, Xin, & Pillutla, 2002) and influence (Basly, 2007). As a result, a family entity can be perceived by the status of their role (Pitchayadol, Hoonsopon, & Chandrachai, 2018; Yogev & Brett, 1985). As an example, research has found that the owner's children, even those who serve on the board of the family firm, tend to be more compliant and submissive to the CEO (Gersick et al., 1997; Lansberg, 1989). Children of the owner also tend to feel entitled to work at the family firm and receive special opportunities even if they do not possess the proper qualifications (Lansberg, 1989). As a result, there is an intertwining and mutual relationship among the family and business systems (Sharma, 2004). Ultimately, family members (of family owned businesses) represent both family and corporate identities (Pitchayadol et al., 2018).

Moreover, the owner may have certain unwarranted conceptions about the ability of the ANEO to make decisions regarding the direction of the firm because of their status within the family (Lansberg, 1989). This may partially be explained by the owner trusting the family member since "emotion enters into the relationship between the parties ... leading to the formation of attachments ... and entails a greater level of faith in the intentions of the other party" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 394). However, serious problems can develop when the ANEO may not truly be qualified to make certain important decisions. Therefore, family status may cause "biased judgments about the appropriateness of executive decisions" (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2001, p. 84).

Family status can also impact the emotions of non-family employees. For example, research has raised concerns regarding favoritism when hiring and promoting family over non-family employees. In these situations, non-family employees experienced limited advancement opportunities (Volpin, 2002), while the firm experienced compromising standards as well as issues with retaining talented employees (Chrisman, Devaraj, & Patel, 2017; Neckebrouck et al., 2018). A higher family status of the ANEO may also exacerbate actions that cause conflict with non-family members, such as being offered faster advancement and greater responsibility within the family firm (Beehr et al., 1997). Therefore, this paper suggests that higher status family members (e.g., a child) are more likely to obtain special benefits that can create conflict and generate an emotional response from other employees.

Proposition 3: *The greater the status of family members as active non-employee owners, the greater the emotional impact on non-family member employees.*

Work Creation and Active Non-Employee Owners

There may be situations when the non-employee owners create supplementary work for non-family member employees. Miller and Le Breton-Miller suggest that there is a downside of having a family member and owner with "enough ownership for unchallenged control" since these members can "begin to abuse its power by taking resources out of the business" (2006, p.75). This in turn, affects the family-operated SME and causes non-family employees to be emotionally confused on how to react.

For example, a qualitative study found that the non-family director of a small family consulting firm was expected to include the owner's spouse in certain projects even though she did not possess the necessary skills (Ram, 2001). The director found he was compelled to adjust to the situation by "re-working" her material, a task he claimed he would not do for any other employee. Moreover, the director had an ambivalent attitude towards the complex situation that was "compounded by his membership of a directorate that was seen to lack the competence that he was trying to encourage in other consultants" (Ram, 2001, p. 410). This situation not only created superfluous work for the director, but confusion for the other employees in regards to job expectations and capabilities.

Clearly, the impact of the active non-employee owner creation of work affects the non-family employees. Especially, since there is no formal authority ascribed to the ANEO to do so. It can also be difficult for family firms to monitor and discipline family members (Schulze et al., 2001), which then create situations of perceived inequities in the supervision of family and nonfamily employees (Lubatkin, Durand, & Ling, 2007). Moreover, the non-family employees may find they are managing their ambivalent feelings to create a public conformity to the job requirements of the work role and to the organizational norm (Ajzen, 2001; Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, the more the ANEO is involved in creating additional tasks for the other employees, the more likely the non-family employees will be emotionally affected.

Proposition 4: *The more a family member as active non-employee owner is involved in creating work at the firm, the greater the emotional impact in other non-family member employees will encounter.*

DISCUSSION

This paper contributes to the academic literature of family owned SMEs, specifically pertaining to active non-employee owners. The literature recognizes that a porous boundary between work and family can exist (Powell & Eddleston, 2017). Moreover, that the domains of the family and business overlap and in turn allows the founder to communicate business needs to family members formally and informally through interactions at work and at family social functions (Eddleston, 2008; Powell & Eddleston, 2017). However, few academics have studied these family members as ANEOs, as well as their influence and effect on the firm.

This paper addresses the research gap of how ANEOs influence the non-family member employees within an organization. Specifically, the emotional impact these family members have on other non-family employees of the firm is explored through several propositions. In considering the unique situation of ANEOs, their impact on the other employees of the firm has been re-conceptualized.

After reading this paper, academics and practitioners should look differently at these family members and their role within the family owned SMEs. The propositions presented here may have practical implications with how family business operate but also how the owners manage themselves and other employees. It suggests that an ongoing discussion could benefit non-family employees' tenure at the company, as well as the overall success of the family business.

The purpose of this paper is to not only present these propositions, but also eventually test them for future research. These propositions need to be tested as part of an overall research agenda on active non-employee owners. By transforming the propositions suggested in this paper into testable hypotheses, the hope is to initiate a discussion that will contribute to the existing base of knowledge about how family-operated SMEs can affect non-family employees.

In particular, in-depth case studies on family operated SMEs would yield a profound perspective into the factors that determine the influence ANEOs generate and the emotional impact their presence has on non-family employees. It would be advantageous to understand the view of the ANEOs' impact through the perspectives of the non-family employees, CEO, and family members. These key individuals would be observed through qualitative methods, as well as interviews about their perceived roles, positive impact, and negative impact. Such an agenda would not only provide a rich foundation of investigation, it will also help better understand the factors that influence family owned SMEs, as well as the relationships that exist within the firm.

The limitations in design of the present paper lead to a number of opportunities for further research. Specifically, cultural differences were not explored in the paper. However, they may exist in regards to the family and the influence on non-family employees in family-operated SMEs. From a global perspective, countries may have different norms when it comes to family. For example, in Latin American countries, the norm for families is to be close-knit with strong expectations of loyalty to the family (and even extended family). However, in the United States, the norms of "family reciprocity and interdependence are weaker" and there is a greater emphasis on being individualistic (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2001, p. 93). Moreover, it would be beneficial to consider the national cultural differences in a particular country that may affect the impact of ANEOs and non-family employees in family-operated SMEs. For example, the United States is a country comprised of several different nationalities that have their own cultural values and norms. Therefore, additional research should explore how non-family employees emotional manage when working within a family-firm with strong cultural norms.

Future research should also investigate gender issues, which may also have a large impact on ANEOs and non-family employees. Several studies have already discussed the issues surrounding gender and family firms (Anderson et al., 2005; Baines & Wheelock, 1998; Bubolz, 2001; Haynes & Haynes, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1996; Marshack, 1994; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006; Ram, 2001; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). The research tends to look at an owner/CEO being one gender while the ANEO being another and the interactions that may result (e.g. conflicts) and the effect on the performance of the firm (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006; Ram, 2001; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). However, it would be of great interest to investigate the interactions and emotional influence between genders—when the ANEOs' gender differs than the non-family employees involved in the firm. Although this study is not free from limitation, the hope is that the limitations of this study will direct future inquiry as well.

In conclusion, this paper aims to stimulate the conversation around active non-employee owners. The propositions proposed in the paper contribute to the overall investigation of family-owned small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) and suggest opportunities for future research. Ultimately, more attention should be given to understand how important ANEOs in SMEs are, as well as their emotional impact on non-family employees. Through greater understanding, firms can improve their effectiveness in managing the role and presence of ANEOs, which in turn can lead to better interactions with both the CEO/owner and non-family employees of the firm.

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