

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND COMPETENCIES NEEDS FOR SMALL BUSINESS MANAGERS: A DESCRIPTIVE QUALITATIVE SURVEY

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Received September 2003; accepted November 2003.

ABSTRACT

As small business owners require to fulfill a wide range of management responsibilities, these responsibilities may lead to the identification of perceived learning needs by small business managers (SBMs). The purpose of this study is to identify and understand how SBMs acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in their businesses.

This study invited 14 participants who attended the small business training course offered by the Institution for Small Business Medium Enterprise Development and Chachoengsao Chamber of Commerce in June 2003. The participants were the business owners, managers, and the business owners' sons or daughters. They are divided into 3 categories, i.e., wholesale/retail business, service organizations, and manufacturing firms. The data collected method is in the form of qualitative research by using in-depth interview, observation, and document review. The trustworthiness of this study was conducted by providing triangulation method and peer review. The theme from this study has transferability to explain the behavior and situation of other Thai SBMs, especially the people who be in the same field of the participants.

In this investigation, it can be concluded that the knowledge, skills, and competencies needs for SBMs are personal relationship and communication skills, management skills, and technological and production management skills. The personal relationship skills are the set of skills related to the relationship of SBMs and other people. It included the ability to recruit, retain, motivate, assess, train, communicate and develop their subordinates, clients and suppliers. The management skills related to the planning, organizing, directing and controlling business competencies. The technological and production management skills indicate the knowledge that related to technological innovation and production improvement.

The SBMs participate in continuous education because of both internal and external forces. The internal forces are the forces that emerge from the SBMs themselves and organization itself to improve their management, while the external forces are driven by the outside factors, such as the franchiser, the competitors, government regulation, and the business environmental changes.

Keywords : Knowledge, skills, competencies, small business.

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INTRODUCTION

All business processes attempt to achieve goals. Any obstacle or undesirable event that occurs at any level within the organization poses a delay in goal achievement. The problems are usually due to the lack of adequate resources and managerial expertise, which together create a risky environment in which small business managers must operate.

Nowadays, small businesses are found in a variety of environments and generally have a limited number of employees. It can be as few as one. The characteristics of small business in this study are defined as the business that has less than 50 workers and contains fixed assets of less than 50 million Bahts. SBMs may have significance to total responsibility for management of their businesses including planning, organizing, directing and controlling the organization (Boone and Kurtz, 1990). It is anticipated that these responsibilities result in frequent work related changes for the SBMs that may result in the SBM's engagement in educational activities with a variety of educational services providers. SBMs may believe that it is their participation in educational activities that may give them the knowledge or information they need to be successful.

The educational encounter experienced by learners is influenced by a complex relationship among a combination of factors. The educational activity may take place in a variety of setting and involves learners that have a diverse and multifaceted orientation to learning (Galbraith, 1991). To determine how SBMs acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in their professions, this study identified and described the SBMs educational activities and determined what influenced their engagement in those activities. An element that was considered was the relationship among the factors that were important

in the selection of education activities and providers. The research problem addressed in this study was how do SBMs acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in their business.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to describe and explain how SBMs acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in their businesses. The objectives of this study are:

1. to identify the knowledge, skills, and competencies which are important to SBMs in their businesses;
2. to determine reason that SBMs give for seeking further education; and
3. to determine what kinds of educational programs would best satisfy the business continuing education needs of small business managers and where/when and by whom these programs should be conducted.

Research questions

1. What kinds of knowledge, skills, and competencies are important to the SBMs' success?
2. What are the reasons SBMs give for seeking further education?
3. What kinds of educational programs would best satisfy the business continuing education needs of small business managers and where/when and who should conduct these programs?

Significance of the study

This study increases the knowledge base in the field of adult education. It builds and generates ideas that can assist in explaining how SBMs

respond to their learning situation. It contributes to existing solutions regarding selection of educational service providers. Moreover, the study provides information that can be applied by educational service providers for developing and presenting educational programs for SBMs.

Definitions

Small business: the type of business that has employees less than 50 persons (defined by The Office of Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion) and contains fixed assets not more than 50 million Bahts (defined by SME Bank and The Small Industry Credit Corporate).

Small business managers (SBMs): the small business owners and managers who have responsibility for (or have authority to approve) planning, organizing, directing, and controlling the business (Boone and Kurtz, 1990.)

Skill and competency: the ability to do something well.

Knowledge: the fact, information, understanding, and skills that a person has acquired through experience or education.

Significant concerning adult learning and continuing education

For almost everyone, continued learning is virtually inseparable from life itself. It extends from such basic accomplishments as learning to walk and talk, through an astonishing variety of physical, aesthetic, social, linguistic and conceptual achievements, to encompass virtually everything that humans have been able to imagine, to explain and to do.

This sort of learning is unconscious and universal. It occurs over a lifetime and much of it is both unbidden and incidental arising out of the normal processes of living. Not everyone is

equipped to undertake all possible learning, and not all experiences are educative, but it is important to acknowledge at the outset that learning is as much a normal human activity as breathing.

Some years ago, it was widely considered to be sufficient to provide such educational opportunities only in the early stages of life. Today, however, both these assumptions have been overturned. The rate of social, technical, economic and other change is so great, at least in advanced western industrialized countries, that few people will hold the same job throughout their lifetime. Thus SBMs must continuously learning new things. A large proportion of what we actually learn is acquired through the deliberate and intentional efforts of learners themselves, consciously planned, self-imaged and generally in proportion to their motivation, their ability and the opportunities available to them (Candy, 1991).

Many adults turn to education as part of their solution to the problems and opportunities they encounter throughout their lives. This creates a continuous need for education that may be related to change that occurs in their personal and family lives, as well as changes in such external environments as business, technology, registration and the like. Adults engage in educational activities for three primary purposes: problem resolution, interest and social action (Knowles, 1984). Of those, the most frequent motivation for adults to participate is problem solving.

Adults tend to think that knowledge and information acquisition may be instrumental in helping them deal with situations that require adaptation and change. Learning is often seen as a way to become more effective in responding to, or exerting influence in life situations. The ability to resolve problems enhances the adult's independence and increases their capacity for self-direction. They also desire that others see them that way (Knowles, 1984).

The nature and needs for SMBs related to continuing education

Two goals of most business education are to prepare people for career success and to increase their capacity for future learning. SBMs are forced to participate in continuous learning by internal and external influences.

Cross (1981)'s Chain-of-Response Model refers to an individual's life transition that may involve teachable moments. When SBMs request for making decisions, they engage in searching more information. Cross's model is an approach to explain the interplay of personal and society forces in a person's decision of whether to participate in adult learning activities. These processes involve the determining both internal and external factors (Cross, 1981).

Cross's theory starts with the individual and moves toward external conditions. She states that people in educational activities changes self-perceptions and attitude about education. The model's variables are:

1. Self-evaluation in which the ideas immersed from Boshier (cited in Cross (1981)'s congruence model to examine the relationship between an individual's self-concept and key elements of the educational environment. The model states that the people are likely to participate in education when the discrepancy between a person's self concept and key elements in the educational environment are positive. If the person has low esteem and experience in high incongruent, he is less likely to do more education.
2. Attitude about education in which learner's owns part experience and the other related personal experience.
3. Expectation to meet goals is the concept

immersed from Vroom's Expectancy-Valence Theory (Bartol et al., 1998).

Expectancy theory suggested that individuals develop complex formulations with specific probabilities and valence rating for outcome. The theory argues that people consider their main issue before expanding the effort necessary to perform at a given level.

$$\text{Expectancy theory} = \text{EP} * \text{PO} * \text{Valence} = \text{Motivation}$$

EP (Effort-Performance Expectancy): our assessment of the probability that one effort will lead to the required performance level.

PO (Performance-Outcome Expectancy): our assessment of the probability that the successful performance will lead to certain outcomes.

Valence: our assessment of the anticipated value of various outcomes or rewards.

For education, the expectancy portion of the model is in two parts: (a) the expectation of personal success in the educational endeavor, and (b) the successful will have positive results.

For example, participants in adult education may lead to a larger benefit or it may mean being able to spend less time with family.

4. Life transitions: the periods of change calling for adjustment to new phases of human life cycle.
5. Opportunities: accurate information that links motivated learners to appropriate opportunities.
6. Barriers: the Force Field Analysis Model by Harry Miller (Cross, 1981) determines the influence of positive and negative forces that drive people to participate in learning. Those forces are situational, psychosocial, institutional and informational. Situational barriers relate to one's social and physical environment; for instance, cost and lack of time, lack

of transportation, lack of child care and distance to learning. Institutional barriers are excessive enrollment fees, inconvenience locations, schedules that are not compatible with full-time employment and other policies and practices that frustrate and confuse. Informational barriers can be simply understood as the failure of the educational service providers to communicate unclear programs. Psychosocial barriers are the negative beliefs, values, attitudes or perceptions about the programs.

sophisticated. The social climate is also favorable for small business and as a result, small business is placing demands upon the educational systems for relevant assistance. It is predicted that meeting the educational demands of small business will continue to receive much attention. Lankard (1991) outlined the need of work-site training to a changing economy and a change from an easily understood to a sophisticated technology in the workplace. The new environment requires more skills and competencies and then increases the demand for the modern workplace that generates the need for continuing learning. Scott (1995) reported on a

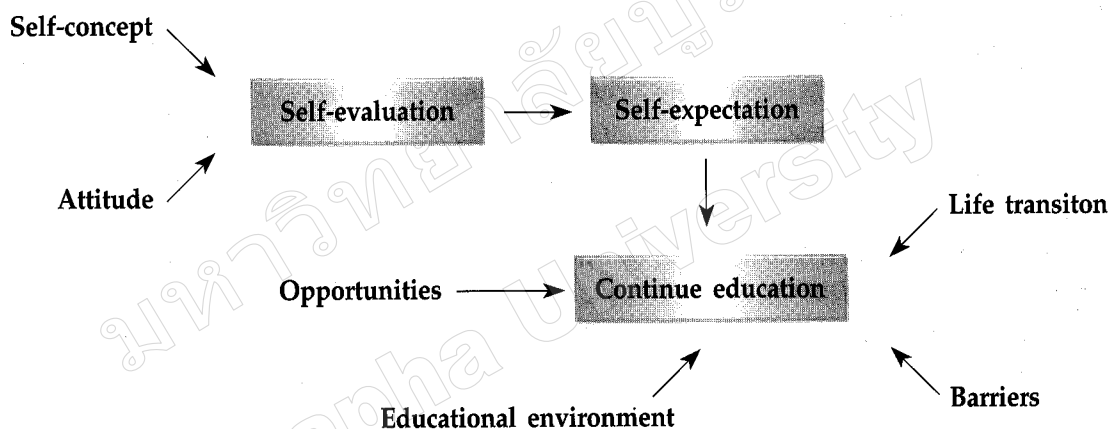


Figure 1. Model of forces that influence SBMs to do further education.

Even the growth and expansion of small business is said to be related directly to managerial expertise. Companies that remain small do so mainly as a result of the lack of entrepreneurial competency. This ability can be increased through education, external advisors, and consultants or by adding expert personnel to the firm. Luschsinger and Luschsinger (1997) determined that in general, educational programs for small business managers should become more action oriented and require involvement by the participants. These trends reflect the changing environment in which small business exists. The environment is becoming extremely

survey of educational needs of small businesses that from 761 companies (21% response rate), 59% of the firms indicated that further education and training were necessary.

SBMS involves the use of the knowledge acquired in many different business school courses, such as accounting, financial analysis, marketing, information systems, leadership, and general management. The ability to integrate the functional knowledge of business into a holistic activity requires exercising the skills of analysis and synthesis. Business school courses, particularly those in finance and accounting, have done an exceptional

job of training people how to measure and avoid financial risk in work organizations. Frequently, behavioral science courses reinforce this risk-averse value by discouraging personal and interpersonal risk taking. The remaining objective of SBMs courses is to educate people, particularly corporate managers, on how to encourage and embrace the desire to innovate within their subordinates. As with the objectives of reducing risk aversion and support for entrepreneurship, creating a positive attitude towards changes involves more emotional learning than cognitive learning (Zimmerer and Schrborough, 1998). Nowadays, students as well as policy-makers and others increasingly view universities as repositories of special expertise to meet particular learning needs and goals. Small business owners are primarily interested in learning particular subjects, or even parts of subjects, to meet immediate personal or professional interests (Block and Stumpf, 1992).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose and objective of this study were achieved through application of qualitative research techniques. A case study supported analysis of how does each respondent acquire the knowledge to run his/her business.

Selection of research subjects

Purposeful 14 SBMs who attended a small business training project offered by the Institution for Small Business Medium Enterprise Development and Chachoengsao Chamber of Commerce in June 2003 were invited to participate in this study. Twenty-five out of 33 SBMs expressed their interest to join this study. However, 11 of 25 were excluded because of the lack of managerial. Finally, 4 wholesalers/retailers, 4 service organizers and 6 manufacturing managers were included in this study.

Collection of data

Data collection included in-depth interviews of the SBMs, observation by the researcher, and document review. Standardized open-ended interview questions were used as a guide in the interview process.

Recording of data

All of the general interviews were taped and transcribed. In order to record observations, the researcher used a book for taking notes to record participants' manners and surrounding environment.

Analysis of data

Data presentation and analysis for this study was primarily descriptive. Individual case studies were prepared, followed by a cross-case comparative analysis. In a qualitative study, analysis data is an on-going simultaneous and inductive process.

Maintaining rigor

To establish the trustworthiness of a study, and to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability by the proposed techniques as the triangulation (interview, observation, and document review) of data of sources, methods and investigators to establish credibility. To make sure that the finding are transferable between the researcher and those being studied, thick description is necessary. Rather than reliability, the study seeks dependability that the results will be subject to change and instability. The naturalistic researcher looks to conformability rather than objectively in establishing the value of the data. Both dependability and conformability are established through an auditing of the research process by the peer review.

RESULTS

The fourteen SBMs who participated in this study included 6 males and 8 females. There are 8 independent businesses, 2 franchisees, 1 partnership, and 3 corporate firms. The age of SBMs ranges from 27-53 years old. The educational level ranges from high school to university graduate.

The important skills for business success include personal relationship skills and communication skills with the ability to develop a team environment and coordinated understanding of business operations by talking with, listening to, and observing employees. For instance, Case 8, an insurance company, emphasizes on maximize employee performance by motivating her team. She said, "Management challenge is to provide conditions to nurture and support individual motivation to work toward organizational goals". Management skills related to the ability in planning, organizing, directing, and controlling business. For example, Case 11, a Thai dessert shop, mentioned that "The financial management is important. I need daily money circulating skills". Technological skills are the ability to operate computers, business machine, and repair/maintenance of equipment. Case 11 changed from production by manual method to use high technology equipment.

The influenced activities drive small business owners to continue learning consist of internal and external forces. Internal forces are the attitude and activities in organization and management process changes. For instance, Case 9 said, "I have got to learn how to make the thing happen". Case 14 also supported that "You may go to school for something, but you don't really learn how to do your job until you have been on it". External forces are the competition, government regulations, the change in technology, and the

change in economic activities. For example, Case 10, a Thai coffee shop, pointed out that "I like to taste my competitors' coffee to learn their products' quality".

The programs that would best satisfy SBMs can be divided into informal and formal educational programs. The informal education usually occurs in informal setting; for example, talking to experience persons, discusses via telephone, reading, watching, and searching information on Internet. For instance, Case 1, a bookshop, by talking constantly with his employees, customers and suppliers. Case 3, a tire shop, by talking to his friends to get ideas about management. Formal education is the education forms with established agendas and can be taught by various methods by educational institution both governmental and private. As Case 4, mobile phone shop, valued formal education by saying, "I know the value that I get from after training. I understand the way to improve myself. I receive knowledge about marketing, business planning, and managing from the course".

DISCUSSION

1. The kind of knowledge, skills and competencies are important to the SBMs' success are concerned with self-directed learning. The self-directed learning activities that were oriented to resolving problems in order that they could achieve their business goals. SBMs' learning process is not a linear process. They favor informal, verbal discussions with experienced persons. Generally, the learner's circumstances, and previous experience and knowledge with the content to be learned may influence how learners learn on their own.

In order to manage business with success, SBMs require different skills for each type of business. The study found that there are three

important skills. First, personal relationship and communication skills, management skills, and technological and production management skills. The personal relationship and communication skills are related to their highly developed ability to communicate with their employees, customers, business peers and others with whom they come in contact. The management skills most frequently referred to by the SBMs as necessary to manage their businesses. SBMs tend to engage in short-term planning in their dynamic environment that they do not plan for the long-range one because they believe that the business situation always changes.

Lastly, technological and production skills, the SBMs indicated the knowledge and skills that related to technology, such as the skills to operate computer, equipment and machines and the skills to repair/maintenance. In determining production process, SBMs need production knowledge to improve their capacity and productivity. Many manufacturing companies use innovative technology and equipment to develop performance.

2. The reasons that SBMs give for seeking further education are as follows.

A. Internal forces

Internal forces are the drives that emerge from the SBMs themselves and the organizational activities. Adult learners are motivated and curious. People attend seminars wanting to take away information and skills that will help them do their jobs more effectively. SBMs already have much knowledge and experience. SBMs need to be reassured that they have the intelligence and experience to solve problems. Then they also need problem-solving skills. They become empowered when they analyze information and come up with possible answers.

The organizational activities also force the SBMs to continue learning. For instance, Case

13, a printing company, needs the knowledge about the printing process artwork and language. Case 1, a bookshop, does the continuous learning because he wants business skills about how to increase opportunity for making profit and negotiate with customers.

B. External forces

Change related to technology that impacted their abilities to facilitate management. Change in technology can affect small businesses as a result of the businesses' incorporation of the new technology in their operations. Same as change in economic, it forces the SBMs to participate in learning activities.

Small businesses are required to operate in compliance with various governmental statutes, ordinances, rules and regulations (Houle, 1981). For example, in some cases regulatory agencies may require certain types of businesses that must be operated by individuals who have specific licenses, and may include a mandate for continuing professional education.

A primary focus of a business is its customers. The customers have certain demands and expectations that may influence the behavior of the business. "Demanding customers in competitive market place drive a firm toward more value-creating solutions" (Liedtka et al., 1997).

Business suppliers can affect the business in several ways including requirements for payment on delivery, inventory and acceptance policies, return policies and marketing assistance. As a customer of the suppliers, a small business may in turn demand modification of the policies and practices of its suppliers and may influence the range of products and services that are offered by the suppliers (Arbuthnot et al., 1993).

Small businesses that are directly affiliated with other businesses (Myer and Allen, 1994). For example, franchise system may be

required to perform several activities in support of those relationships. The affiliates may require that the small business provide certain reports and submit to inspections and be involved in continuing professional educational programs.

Business also faces with competition. The SBMs have to find the way to complete their competitors and satisfy the needs of customers (Johnson and Kuehn, 1987).

3. The educational programs that satisfy the business educational program.

SBMs turn to education as part of their solution to the problems and opportunities they encounter throughout their lives. This creates a continuous need for education that may be related to change that occurs in their personal life, organization as well as changes in such external environments as business, technology, registration, and the like.

There are two forms of educational activities that SBMs seeking for which are informal and formal education. The informal education generally contacted by the SBMs. The educational activities were frequently verbal and occurred in informal settings. The primary learning activities involve talking with knowledgeable individuals. The SBMs have a high regard for experience. The credibility of their informal contacts is related to the level of their experience in business. And there are also other sources of informal learning, which are the Internet, books, and television.

The second form is the formal learning. When the SBMs are engaged in formal learning situations, they prefer the educational provider to present new information only when it is meaningful and practical to learners. Use real-world examples, and to apply the knowledge directly to the learners' context. SBMs already have much knowledge and experience. They need to be reassured that they

have the intelligence and experience to solve problems.

When the course provider designs the course for SBMs formal education, the course providers have to realize that they are diverse and unique. SBMs learn differently based on their backgrounds and characteristics. Then the course provider should be knowledgeable about the learners and design programs to meet their needs.

SBMs do report significant use of universities and training institutions as a source of formal learning programs. They do not seek knowledge for its own sake. SBMs are not likely to participate in programs that they view as too theoretical and abstract. A well-designed course should enable students to research a career area and analyze the social, political, technological and personal effects upon it. SBMs request for the development of their knowledge of generic skills and their application in study and work situation. Especially with growing need for lifelong learning, it is becoming even more important for learners to be able to manage their own learning.

The time and location of formal educational institution are important. SBMs examine the schedule and the range of course before they decide to participate. Too long course is the barrier to SBMs to join the program. As mentioned in the Force Field Analysis Model by Harry Miller (Cross, 1981), the influence of positive and negative forces that drive people to participate in learning are related to: cost and lack of time, lack of transportation, lack of childcare and distance to learning.

Excessive enrollment fees, inconvenience locations, schedules that are not compatible with full-time employment and other policies and practice that frustrate and confuse.

The failure of the educational service providers to communicate programs' details and failure by adult themselves in information seeking in each course.

The negative beliefs, values, attitudes or perceptions about the programs.

CONCLUSION

The SBMs engaged in self-directing learning activities that were oriented to resolve problems in order that they could achieve their business goals. The skills that SBMs most frequently referred to as important in managing their businesses were people skill, process skills, and technological skills.

A learning technique that is highly valued by the SBMs is learning from practical experience. There are two forms of SBMs learning styles that are informal and formal learning.

The SBMs seek further study especially when the business environment is experiencing and facing some changes and unpredictable future, then the relevance of knowledge based on traditional and narrow assumptions requires reconsideration. A well-designed course should enable learners to research a career area and analyze the social, political, technological and personal effects upon it.

SBMs have demands on further education. However, many SBMs have limited of time. Independent business managers may not participate in educational program, especially formal learning. They participate in educational programs when they perceive what they expect to gain from participation. Therefore, the education institutions ought to work to assure that the educational activities are conducted effectively. The associations may benefit from educational expertise in the area of curriculum development and teaching techniques.

The institutions should provide the linkage of information for the learners and may develop their relationship with trade associations and by providing access to facilities and equipment. Their activities can improve the opportunity to encourage the participants and also improve the quality of their educational activities.

The educators should develop programs designed to help improve the SBMs self-directed learning skills because the SBMs prefer informal learning methods by talking to experienced people and peers, reading and searching information around them. The providers of formal educational activities for SBMs could ensure that their presenters are knowledgeable in work experience and credible. They should be well prepared and focused on related topics and problems. Finally, the number of participants is important. If there are too many learns it is difficult to control and the participants may not have enough chance to participate in discussion.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER STUDY

The researcher should study about the skills that SBMs require by conducting research to find out about what skills they have more and less for determining their business continuing education needs, e.g., the competency in financial planning, accounting procedure, management skills, and marketing skills.

Finally, it can be concluded that SBMs are individuals with a high need for achievement. Many of them turn to education as part of their solutions to the problems and opportunities they encounter throughout their lives. They tend to think that knowledge and information acquisition may be instrumental in helping them deal with situations that require adaptation and change. They may be motivated to participate in both formal and informal educational activities with educational service providers to undertake self-directed learning opportunities. To acquire knowledge germane to business, the thrust of many educational institutions are to provide content knowledge about some specific or discipline because the ability to integrate the functional knowledge of business into a holistic activity requires exercising the skills of analysis and synthesis.

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