

Internships as a Strategic Tool for Small Business: A Conceptual Study

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Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the many positive outcomes of academic internships. Those who benefit from these experiential activities include the student interns, the educational institutions those students attend and the business entities that provide the internship experience. In this exploratory study, the authors posit that academic internships have the potential to be a significant strategic asset for small businesses. The manuscript explores academic internships and small business attributes and attempts to reconcile the two through an analysis of small business needs. The authors propose that academic internships can contribute to the fulfillment of these critical needs and examine that potentiality through three lenses: a strategic, a resource-based view, and a cognitive psychological perspective.

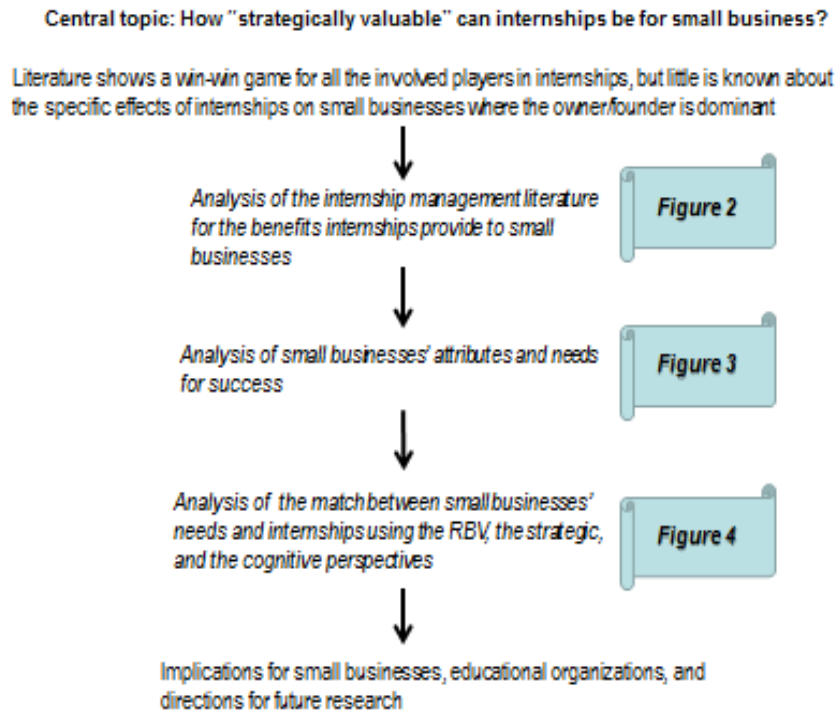
This paper presents an exploratory study of the strategic importance of academic internships for small businesses and poses additional questions for further research. It offers a synoptic vision of the potential benefits that can serve as a guide for the owners/managers of these entities in search of strategic improvement for their organizations and a model that can be used to clarify the message about the strategic value of internships to small firms.

The key players in the “internships game” are the host-organization, the student who interns, the educational institution, and the larger environment. The consensus about the value of internships for students and educational institutions seems to be commonly accepted. Positive outcomes largely dominate the landscape of internship and “practicum” experience where interns work in a business setting to apply conceptual knowledge learned in an academic context (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Hurst & Good, 2010; Mihail, 2006; Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004; Foncault, 2002; Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999; Planko, 1996). However, internships are frequently regarded only as an additional assignment or an administrative formality to earn a degree. While it is commonly accepted that these experiences are valuable to students and as educational pedagogy, little attention has been given to understanding the value of internships to businesses employing them (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; D’Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002; Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996). In fact, some businesses may even consider the time and energy involved to manage these internships as a distraction (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000).

The current study argues that internships have significant value for firms--particularly small businesses. Moreover, we suggest that it is important to have a clear message regarding this value so that more small firms will be willing to take advantage of this powerful strategic tool. However, taking advantage of the “strategic” potential of internships for small businesses requires choosing dimensions upon which one can evaluate the “connecting points” between internships and small businesses. To develop this message, we use three theories of organizational management to explain this relationship: the strategic approach, the resource based view (RBV), and the cognitive approach. These three approaches have been well researched and offer interesting perspectives to explore the potential benefits that internships can provide to small businesses.

Figure 1 illustrates the logic of the research and the associated findings encapsulated in three figures (Figures 2 to 4). We first focus on the benefits of internships for small business, illustrated in Figure 2. Then, we examine the attributes of small businesses’ specific strategic needs that we structure in a matrix [Focus of the need x Nature of the need] in Figure 3. Thirdly, we explore the match between small businesses’ needs and internships through the lenses of the three perspectives, namely strategy, the RBV and cognition, illustrated in Figure 4. Based on this analysis, we finally develop implications for several actors and directions for future research.

Figure 1. *Research Framework*



An internship is probably the best known element of the larger category of “experiential learning”, defined as a structured, student-centered, integrated curriculum-based educational experience utilizing practical applications and active involvement that extends beyond the traditional classroom setting (Beard, 2007). It may include student research, practical field experience, and/or clinical experience. Internships exhibit the following attributes: a defined period of time, the possible existence of compensation from the host firm, oversight by a faculty coordinator and a corporate counterpart, awarded credit (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000), and the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to real corporate-world situations (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Rothman, 2007).

OUTCOMES OF INTERNSHIP

The literature acknowledges the positive outcomes of internships for the students, the host organizations, and educational institutions. Internships appear to be a “win-win” proposition, where each of the participants experiences a positive return, even if some costs are associated (Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004; Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999; Planko, 1996). Several studies, attempting to assess internship’s value find the existence of a strong positive impact (Verney, Holoviak, & Winter, 2009; Harris & Zhao, 2004; Ryan, Toohey, & Hugues, 1996). However, Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami (2010) note

that, given the extensive use of internships, the weakness of empirical evidence regarding the positive impact of internships is surprising. To our knowledge, they offer the first integrated analysis of the “internship system”, including the three main actors and exploring a more complex phenomenon than is usually conceptualized in the literature. They suggest a model for two internship outcomes: the implementation of projects (on the firm’s side) and the student’s satisfaction (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010). The interest of their study lies in the contingency that they introduce in the field, claiming that the positivity of the outcomes “depends” on many drivers, including perceptual mechanisms and the management of the internship. They conceptualize the internship experience as a process involving many actors rather than a simple event (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010). This research focuses on the “firm’s side outcomes” since our goal is to explore the potential of internships as a strategic tool for small businesses.

The literature highlights interesting and positive effects for the host organization that can be organized in six main components. The most commonly stated positive effect resides in the powerful recruiting tool attribute of internships. Firms can use the internship as a “test-run” to assess the quality of their interns and their fit with the organization and culture at an average cost, which is approximately half the market hiring cost (Hurst & Good, 2010; Craig, 2009; D’Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009; Verney, Holoviak, & Winter, 2009; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002). Once hired, host organizations benefit from more loyal interns who are more likely to commit themselves for a long time and cost less to train (D’Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009; Verney, Holoviak, & Winter, 2009; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000; Ryan & Krapel, 1997; Planko, 1996; Strock, 1991).

The financial benefits are often mentioned in the literature and widely recognized by employers. Interns are frequently not paid, and that characteristic interests organizations that employ inexpensive labor (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Lee, 2010; Craig, 2009; Verney, Holoviak, & Winter, 2009; Harris & Fontenot, 2004). It should be noted, however, that the practice of not paying interns for work performed is under serious review by the U.S. Department of Labor (Cashill, 2010). A more thorough analysis of this developing trend is beyond the scope of this paper but should be further explored as more explicit policy is developed.

Small businesses can build stronger links with universities, develop guest speaker opportunities, strengthen the firm’s presence on campus, advertise it, and demonstrate its involvement in the community (Beard, 2007; Harris & Zhao, 2004; Foncault, 2002; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000; Planko, 1996). Some research has indicated that internships can provide opportunities inside the host organization for “retroactive-learning”. For example, junior employees can test their supervisory skills on interns (Farinelli & Mann, 1994), executives can intervene in the classroom and improve their teaching skills (Harris & Zhao, 2004), and internships can challenge the expert-novice dichotomy in terms of knowledge and experience between supervisor/mentor and intern, showing the complexity of the learning process (Fuller & Urwin, 2004).

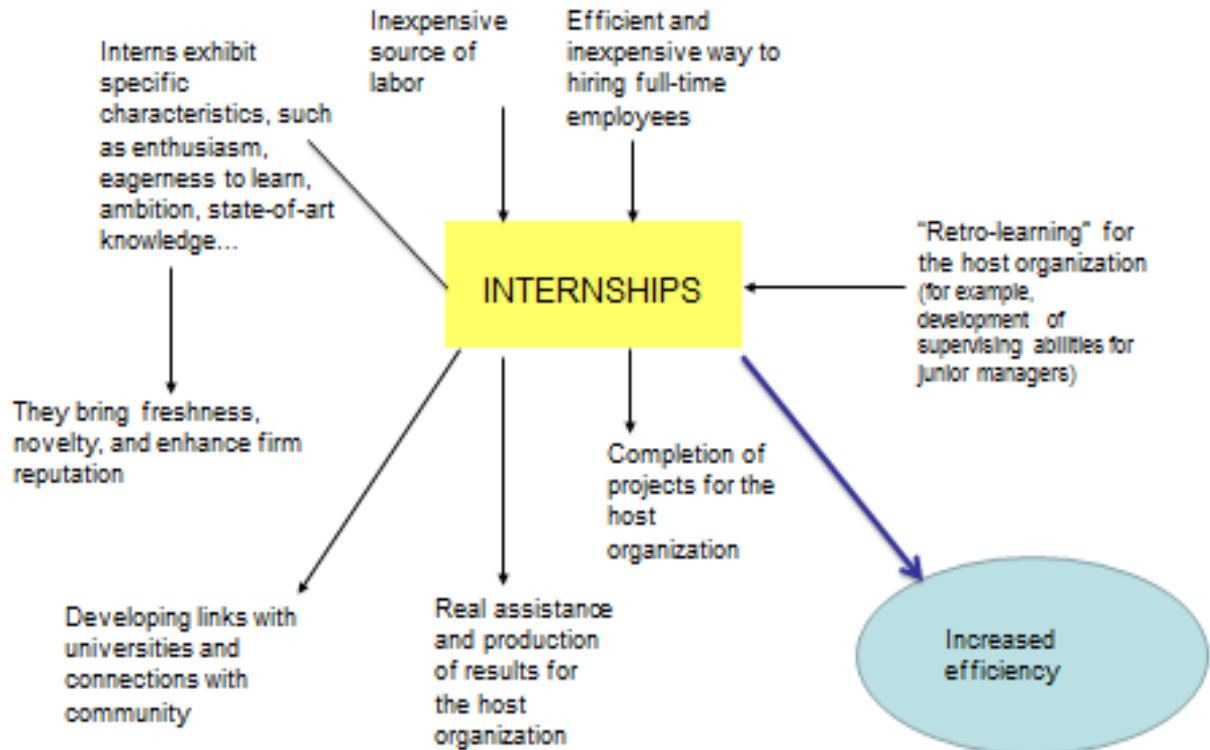
Successful interns are typically disciplined, reliable, mature, motivated, smart, “business-hungry”, determined and focused on the “prize” (Craig, 2009). They are also enthusiastic, full of hope and energy, committed to the organization, and adaptable. They want to prove themselves and work conscientiously (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Craig, 2009; D’Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009; Mihail, 2006; Greenbank, 2002; Curtis & Lucas, 2001; Foncault, 2002; Brindley & Ritchie, 2000). This long list implies positive effects for the host organization, which seeks such qualities among its future employees.

Finally, successful interns bring freshness and novelty into their host organization through ideas and behavior (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Hurst & Good, 2010; Lee, 2010; Farinelli & Mann, 1994). They have a high level of state of the art knowledge in the relevant disciplines valuable to the host organization (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Hurst & Good, 2010; Craig, 2009; Rothman, 2007; Mihail,

2006; Curtis & Lucas, 2001). Former interns impact the reputation of the host organization, building its corporate image (Verney, Holoviak, & Winter, 2009; Planko, 1996; Farinelli & Mann, 1994; Strock, 1991). Interns produce real and tangible positive outcomes for the host organization, providing assistance, solving problems and completing projects (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Hurst & Good, 2010; Lee, 2010) in a productive way that translates into a positive effect on the bottom-line (Ryan & Krapels, 1997; Planko, 1996; Farinelli & Mann, 1994; Strock, 1991).

From a review of literature related to internship management, we summarize these outcomes for small firms in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *The Literature and Internships Benefits for Host Organizations*



In order to understand the potential strategic value of academic internships to small businesses, it is first necessary to understand the dynamics of the small business environment.

INTERNSHIPS AND SMALL BUSINESS

DEFINITION OF SMALL BUSINESS

Acknowledging the lack of consensus on definition and little consistency in its use (Lieberman-Maconi, Hooper, & Hutchings, 2010; Beaver & Jennings, 2000; Keats & Bracker, 1988), in this exploratory study, we focus on organizations whose owners/managers exercise a large degree of control, act relatively freely, and know their organizations intimately. Although this definition may include large firms, it generally focuses on organizations in the 1 to 50 employee range (micro-organizations), and may include family businesses within the same employee range.

Several factors emerge from the literature regarding attributes of small firms that constitute sources of competitive advantage for them: 1) the ability to be flexible and to adapt rapidly to the market, not generally shared by large firms; 2) the specific governance system allows for unanimity in decisions and the small scale leads to a strong commitment from the organizational members and to organizational simplicity; 3) small scale and limited fixed costs reduce the size of the risk involved; and 4) small businesses exhibit a powerful potential for innovation for product and processes; and 5) they benefit from a strong drive to succeed due to the absence of bureaucracy, and their ownership structure and continuity (Lieberman-Yaconi, Hooper, & Hutchings, 2010; Newton, 2001; McMillan, 1975).

Research has extensively examined failure among small businesses and has generated an almost endless list of factors in the literature. Cooper (1981) uses two convenient categories to sort them: 1) the factors linked to knowledge, and 2) the attitude and behavior-related factors, to which we can add a third one, 3) strategic posture factors. This third category is added since strategic importance is regularly stated by management and small business researchers (Leitner & Guldenberg, 2010; Verreynne & Meyer, 2010; Ensign, 2008).

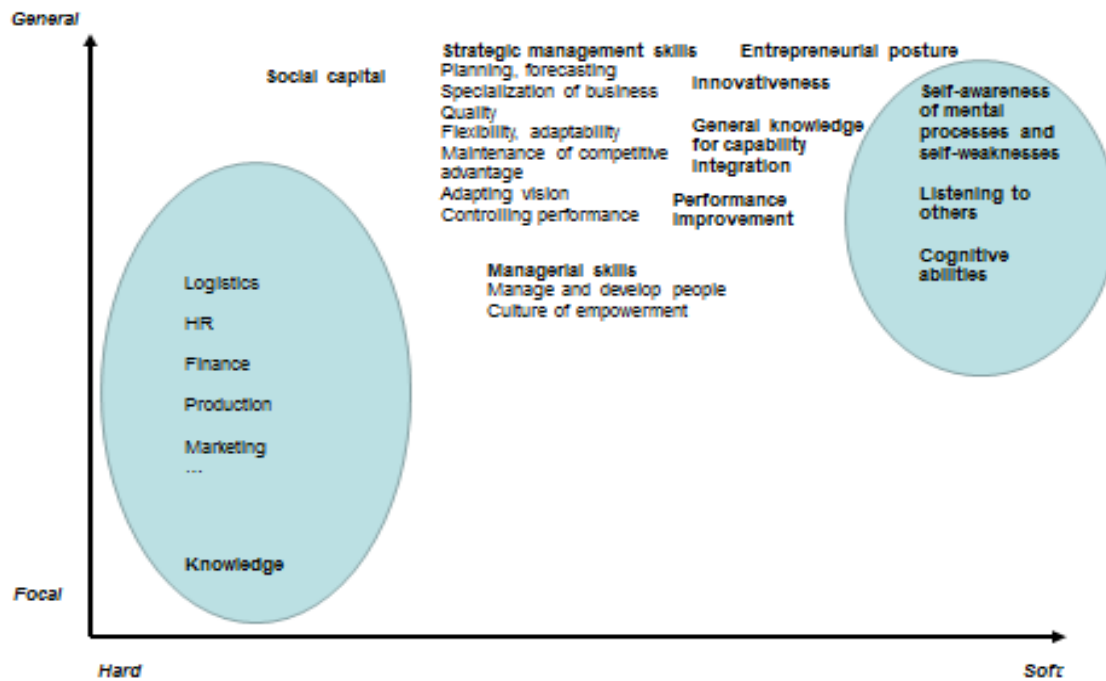
Not surprisingly, the analysis of the literature reveals that the critical capabilities required for small businesses' success mirror the analysis of their weaknesses and causes of failure. The critical capabilities required for small business success can be organized into six areas:

- the knowledge related to the classic functions in which strong deficiencies exist (Menefee & Parnell, 2007; Wasilczuk, 2000; Steiner & Solem, 1988; O'Neil & Ducker, 1986; Birley & Norbun, 1985, Khan & Rocha, 1982).
- the knowledge related to strategic-related activities, such planning, forecasting, and strategic management in general (Beaver & Jennings, 2000; Wasilczuk, 2000; Greenbank, 2000; Steiner & Solem, 1988).
- the global managerial skills to efficiently employ the human resources to improve performance (Newton, 2001; Beaver & Jennings, 2000; Wasilczuk, 2000; Jennings & Beaver, 1997).
- the ability to achieve strategy-related results, such as quality and customer satisfaction, specialization of products and markets, flexibility and adaptation, innovation, and the development and maintenance of clear competitive advantages (Newton, 2001; Beaver & Jennings, 1995; Steiner & Solem, 1988; Changanti, 1987; O'Neil & Ducker, 1986).
- the specific intangible assets such as a strong and positive identity, social capital and external relations, an appropriate organizational structure that allows flexibility and efficient coordination, and a simple capital structure (Runyan, Huddleston, & Swinney, 2007; Yu, 2001).
- an attitude of reflection, analysis, evaluation, and the awareness of the owner regarding the firm's weaknesses, as well as a global perspective on his/her part (Newton, 2001; Greenbank, 2000; Birley & Norbun, 1985).

Several authors also insist on the necessity to get external advice and insights (Menefee & Parnell, 2007; Yu, 2001; Keats & Bracker, 1988; Birley & Norbun, 1985). This family of capabilities would not be complete without some elements with strong psychological components required for success: entrepreneurial cognition with the use of heuristics and beliefs, entrepreneurial alertness, and the general ability for integration and coordination that constitute the essence of entrepreneurship (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Yu, 2001).

These critical capabilities can be represented on a two-dimension matrix, displaying the scope of the capability and its nature (hard vs. soft) in Figure 3. This matrix shows that most of the not-well known needed critical capabilities are dominantly "soft" and "general", rather than specific and "hard". These capabilities are fundamentally not technical but relate to behavioral or strategic aspects and exhibit several characteristics: dominantly "soft" and "implicit", they strongly impact and are impacted by the personality and behavior of the owner and are often hidden, difficult to measure and to analyze.

Figure 3. *What Capabilities Do Small Business Need? A Two-Dimension Matrix*



INTERNSHIPS AND SMALL BUSINESS NEEDS: THE MATCH

THE NEEDS

As discussed, small firms experience a shortage in knowledge in the diverse functions of the firm, such as marketing, human resources management, production and operational activities, organizational design, etc. A critical function is highlighted in the analysis: strategic management, planning and forecasting. Therefore, the knowledge involved appears to be technical but also managerial and, more importantly, strategic. Small firms also need to be flexible and to have the capacity to adapt to a changing market, to display creativity and innovation, and the ability to develop partnerships, alliances and a global network of connections. More globally, identifying their sources of competitive advantage and maintaining them appears critical for their success. Improving their overall efficiency and being able to coordinate and integrate the resources they possess is another required capability, as well as building an organization that fits their strategy. Finally, small business owners need to manage organizational change.

THE LINK

Because internships create a context where some attributes and players’ roles facilitate the achievement of those desirable results, internships can generate positive effects on small firms. We describe the links between internships and their potential positive effects in three axes: 1) strategy, 2) RBV, and 3) cognitive perspective. We describe the attributes of each of these three axes in regards to small business, and then we develop the potential contribution of interns in regards to these axes.

Strategy Attributes. The embryonic state of strategic analysis and design in small businesses has been well established in the literature as well as a critical need for it (Beaver, 2007; Frese, Van Gelderen, & Ombach, 2000). Davig (1986) claims that small businesses should develop plans and strategies and anticipate. A wait-and-see attitude can lead to disaster. Internships can boost strategic thinking by using interns’ skills, their eagerness to learn and to help, and their desire to prove themselves to realize

strategic diagnosis and developmental strategic projects. Strategic thinking is critical for success and performance; the process itself appears more important than the result since the way strategy develops influences organizational success (Ensign, 2008). There are no substitutes for strategic thinking, and small businesses should develop careful and innovative strategic management thinking (Beaver & Jennings, 2000).

The literature about small businesses' and family businesses' strategic needs paints a picture of a complex strategic process and strategic outcomes for these types of firms. Although the scope of that paper does not allow exploring in depth of that aspect, let us cite some of the choices to be made by decision-makers in relation to both the content and the process of strategy. Verreynne and Meyer (2010) insist on the necessity to mix several types of strategy processes such as simplistic, participative, and adaptive. Ebben and Johnson (2005) pinpoint the balance between efficiency and flexibility strategies for small business. A necessary choice has to be made between cost, differentiation, and combined strategies (Leitner & Guldenberg, 2010), between stabilization, turnaround, and harvest strategies (Herbert & Deresky, 1987), and between exploration and exploitation (Ireland & Webb, 2009). For O'Regan and Ghobadian (2004), the design of the strategic process itself is susceptible to variations on many attributes, which are linked to the characteristics of the owner/manager, considered as dominant in the design and implementation of strategy (Frese, Van Gelderen, & Ombach, 2000). Bouchiki (1993) and Sadler-Smith (2004) understand strategy in small businesses as an extremely complex system and frame it as rooted in complexity and chaos theory, integrating endogenous and exogenous factors to the firm as drivers of success.

Strategic thinking and process in small businesses when the owner/manager is dominant admit attributes that paint a non-rational process which could suffer from being too intuitive, independent from reasoning, unsystematic, unstructured, disorganized and subject to the whim of the owner, encapsulated in a quite chaotic phenomenon, with no apparent order and a dominant trial and error perspective (Lieberman-Yaconi, Hooper, & Hutchings, 2010). The reflecting cycle appeared not to be sequential but iterative and often circular; owners generate ideas and deliberate at once, in their own mind space (Lieberman-Yaconi, Hooper, & Hutchings, 2010). Information gathering is reactive, passive, and obtained from informal sources; its use remains limited and neglected, relying on intuition (Brouthers, Andriessen, & Nicolaes, 1998). Finally, the owner/manager exercises his/her activity with almost complete autonomy and with absolute discretion for strategic decisions (Lieberman-Yaconi, Hooper, & Hutchings, 2010); this leads to an extremely powerful influence of the owner on strategic outcomes, taking its sources in his/her values, personal and subjective goals, tacit knowledge, intuition, background and mental framework (Kelliher & Reinl, 2009; Brouthers, Andriessen, & Nicolaes, 1998). For example, the combination of these influences results in more conservative strategies for small businesses in comparison to their larger counterparts (Brouthers, Andriessen, & Nicolaes, 1998).

We believe that Beaver's (2007) description of strategy for small business is well suited to synthesize the complexity of its design and implementation: "strategy for small business is about articulating clarity of managerial thought and purpose properly applied to the resources and operating context of the firm to achieve sustainable competitive advantage."

This complexity and the multiple dimensions on which understanding and decisions must coexist call for managerial learning in various areas (such as improvement, idea generation, and development of human resources), the ultimate source of competitive advantage for small business (Kelliher & Reinl, 2009). An efficient strategic process requires access to adequate information (Pineda, Lerner, Miller, & Phillips, 1998). First, the obstacles that hinder the use of strategic management for small business decision makers, such as the lack of time or adequate knowledge, the lack of trust and openness, must be fought to allow the full potential of strategy to unfold (Beaver, 2007).

Following the same author, small businesses need to do specific things to increase their chances of success: managing their finances, forecasting the evolution of the business and checking assumptions, maintaining a tight control on stocks, but also understanding competition and customers, as well as their values, balancing stability and flexibility (Beaver, 2007). In the same vein, Tio and Kleiner (2005) claim that a family business CEO must master time management, nurture the right competences, ensure excellent human resources, be efficient, set up priorities, communicate effectively, maintain control, gather support for decisions, and make people cooperate. That is pretty ambitious for one individual.

Successful small businesses require strategic thinking (Ward, 1988), a balance of analytical and intuitive activities, information search beyond the current used sources, as well as environmental scanning (Brouthers, Andriessen, & Nicolaes, 1998). There is also an alignment of both rational and intuitive processes with the needs of the situation, and small business owners/managers should be able to switch between these two modes “on demand” (Sadler-Smith, 2004).

Potential Contribution of Interns. Interns have much more knowledge in “conceptual strategy” than most of the entrepreneurs, which means that they can offer a strategic insight to them, at least in terms of process and tools and complement the industry and practical knowledge of the entrepreneur. For small businesses, external actors are acknowledged as important sources of knowledge for strategic management and decision-making activities (Woods & Joyce, 2003).

Organizational design and implementation are fields where interns can contribute. They also can make diagnoses and suggest solutions to organizational weaknesses, help improve efficiency (Miller, 1987) and align it with the firm’s strategy (Miller & Toulouse, 1986). Managing organizational change can prove difficult for small business owners who lack the time and knowledge to implement it; interns are capable of suggesting a path for change and to pinpoint the areas of problems. According to New (1984), education and external agents are the best means to overcome resistances to change. Building relationships and connections were identified as requirements for small businesses; it also allows them to acquire knowledge and to get valuable relevant advice from outside sources (Newton, 2001). Managerial attention to flexibility, one of the requirements for small businesses (Beaver & Jennings, 2000) can be improved by the use of interns through dedicated projects or through a constant attention to change, bettering activities and processes.

Interns can use diagnoses and the RBV tools to identify the sources of competitive advantage of a firm. They can also provide the entrepreneur with the initial conceptual knowledge and the methodological tools that he/she may lack.

RBV Attributes. The literature exhibits consensus in regard to the role of RBV for small business management. RBV is considered as an appropriate model to analyze family businesses (Duh, 2010) since capabilities and resources drive strategy and performance in small firms (O’Regan & Ghobadian, 2004). RBV allows an analysis of the relationships between process, strategy, performance, and assets (Habbershon & Williams, 1999).

It seems possible to extract a list of required capabilities to increase the chance of success of small businesses. The reader can refer to the list of capabilities proposed by O’Regan and Ghobadian (2004), to three categories of capabilities that lead to performance suggested by Glunk and Wilderom (1998), which include managerial capital and organizational capital, and to a list of capabilities critical for family businesses in regard to intangible assets such as reputation, human capital, and culture (Huybrechts, Voordeckers, Lybaert, & Vandemaele, 2011). As another example, Mole (2007) explains that successful small businesses rely on the managerial ability to set objectives and implement them through a strategy, as well as to keep control. Finally, knowledge in different forms constitutes a critical resource for entrepreneurs (tacit and explicit, general and specific, technical and managerial). Knowledge enables the deployment and the exploitation of resources and requires integration of various types of knowledge (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001).

Capabilities appear as a moving target which obligates small businesses to permanently search and manage them (Autio, George, & Alexy, 2010). For small businesses, Edelman, Brush, and Manolova (2005) explain that performance is generated more by a better use of their resources than by their possession since resources enable the conception and implementation of strategies which improve effectiveness.

Commenting the importance of the RBV for small businesses, Duhan (2007) notes that considering their limited power in regards to their environment, small firms' performance depends almost exclusively on their ability to develop and use their capabilities. It is not surprising that small firms need to understand capabilities and their impact on strategy (O'Regan & Ghobadian, 2004).

Potential Contribution of Interns. Interns can bring state-of-art knowledge in the different specific technical fields as described from their current education or using research to extract it from existing sources. They can develop tools and procedures in the specific technical and administrative fields that will significantly improve the efficiency of the organization. Several authors noted the potential of positive outcomes from interns who have built marketing research tools, evaluation devices for employees, processes to optimize inventories, and developed other useful business practices.

At a higher level, interns can contribute to an enhanced learning environment within the organization and develop its absorptive capacity, as well as their experiential learning, which proves to be an important variable for their performance (Burpitt, 2004). Because interns are generally young, dynamic, enthusiastic, and "ready to change the world", they are likely to generate new ideas and to bring in a fresh perspective. This can contribute to the innovation and creativity required for small businesses. Because interns have had exposure to novelty, and a broad section of new situations and people, they can help the host organization acquire new capabilities (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). This is also made possible because interns generally do not have a stake in the firm and are not stranded into the existing culture of the host organization or its dominant logic (Lantos, 1994). Research shows that successful small businesses seek more advice from external sources (Wasilczuk, 2000), and the use of outside advisers in strategy can be critical for future success (O'Neil & Duker, 1986).

The importance of diagnosis has its place in that link because it allows the decision makers to have a clear understanding of their own organization and to take corrective actions. Khan and Rocha (1982) insist on the potential of diagnosis as remedies to knowledge deficiencies through analysis, research, and the associated decisions. Self-diagnosis (inside the organization and using available tools) is possible if enough will and determination exist (Newton, 2001). This diagnosis helps identify the need, locate the sources, and bring in the required knowledge. It contributes to innovation and to improve the overall efficiency.

Cognitive and Psychological Perspective Attributes. In small businesses, Autio, George, and Alexy (2010) state that the relationship between managerial cognition and the capability development is likely to be direct, highlighting the salience of top management cognitive process. Building organizational capabilities arises from the interplay of cognitive maps and of organizational processes. According to Alavarez and Busenitz (2001), entrepreneurial opportunities exist because decision-makers exhibit differences of perception and beliefs about the value of organizational capabilities.

In regard to strategy, Beaver (2007) shows that the owner's vision and beliefs strongly influence strategy design and implementation in family firms. In fact, the process of strategy thinking itself turns out to be a better driver of performance than the actual plan since the dialogue and the understanding generated during that thinking process fuels the owner's desire to innovate and improve the firm. Managers rely heavily on heuristics and mental models to make decisions, which suffer from biases (Mole, 2007).

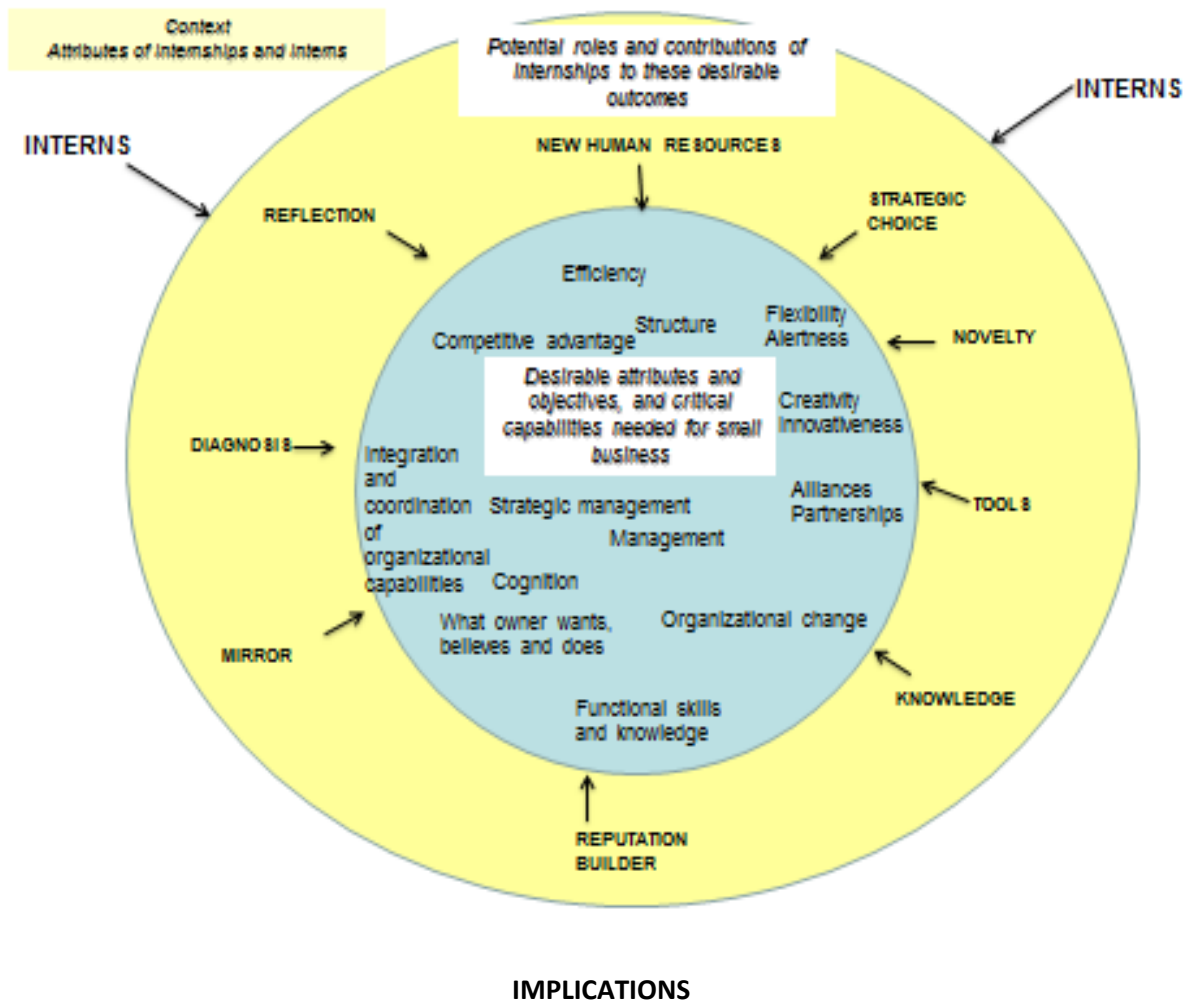
Sadler-Smith (2004) developed several characteristics of small business styles of strategic decision making, characterized by intuition, feeling, a holistic perspective, little or no deliberation, divergence, and simultaneity. The same author notes that performance is correlated with the intuitive style of decision making but in a causally ambiguous way. He concludes that cognition has value to be part of the strategic system (Sadler-Smith, 2004).

On a more practical stand, a study on Australian micro-firms shows that owners have preferences for certain types of advisers, namely accountants and bankers, and that the proportion of professional consultants intervening in these firms is very low (Jay & Schaper, 2003). Liberman-Yaconi, Hooper, and Hutchings (2010) notice that the owner's informal business and social relationships are mobilized for advising the small firm, far ahead of professional advisors.

The same authors, explaining the components of the strategy decision making process in small businesses, call for a widening of the owner's perspective, harnessing his/her personal characteristics, more scanning of the firm's environment, and more time allocated for research during the strategic process. In the same vein, Kelliher and Reini (2009) underline the necessity to understand the owner's mental frameworks, rooted in personal subjectivity, tacit knowledge, intuition, values and beliefs.

Potential Contribution of Interns. The central idea for the link in this last perspective lies in the power of internships to contribute to the understanding and the clarification of the beliefs and assumptions held by the entrepreneur or the organization and to challenge these ideas. Novices can often offer an interesting and novel perspective to small business owners who have become too "close" to their business and its problems. Thus, an astute intern can play the role of "sounding board" or "managerial mirror" to help the small business owner see new perspectives and understand his/her own mental processes. Simply exposing the ideas, explaining the principles to implement, and extracting the "what-to-do" from the entrepreneur can contribute to that clarification. Interns can help the entrepreneur evaluate and improve the coherence of what he/she wants, believes, and actually does (Andersson & Tell, 2009). Of course, this process is often a challenge since entrepreneurs may not be willing to listen to young and/or inexperienced interns. Below in Figure 4 is a summary of potential contributions of internships to small firms.

Figure 4. *How Internships Can Enrich Small Businesses*



The management process desirable for small businesses is unique and idiosyncratic to this type of organization and cannot be imported from large firms, including the strategy process and capability development (Lieberman-Yaconi, Hooper, & Hutchings, 2010; Beaver, 2007). In fact, the strategic value of the strategic decision making process is critical, as well as the capabilities that contribute to success. The owner/manager’s cognition dominates the entire strategic and capability building process.

One can extract from the theoretical and empirical literature principles and material that improve the strategic and managerial outcomes of the small firm. The following have been highlighted in our paper:

- the acquisition and development of technical skills and competences for performing the classic functions of the firm,
- the acquisition and development of non-technical competences linked to a style or a way of managing,
- the implementation of new stages of reflection and action in the strategic and managerial process (information gathering, search for external information, information processing methods, rational methods for decision-making, etc.),
- the exploration and understanding of the mental processes that lead to decisions, featuring the owner-manager’s mindset with its beliefs, assumptions, and modes of functioning.

Within that list, interns have potential to contribute to some of these actions. The argument of interns' inexperience and the absence of the owner's will are obstacles for interns. We believe that it can be overcome, and it is at this price that entrepreneurs can extract the greatest benefit from exploring their explicit knowledge and their beliefs and assumptions. Although this should be researched empirically, various factors can alleviate concerns about these obstacles:

- some owners will be willing to accept the help of interns, considering that they can bring much to the firm.
- all interns are not young and inexperienced; some have valuable work experience and exhibit capabilities well suited to the organization.
- for strategic level issues, interns can work on targeted components.

Therefore, we envision the potential contribution of interns through several mechanisms, including:

- advising activities that last over a long period of time involving various interns with different skills and experience sets for various tasks. Not all interns are qualified to contribute to the strategy of the firm.
- the level and nature of intervention of interns in a specific small firm depends on their experience, skills, and expectations, which connects to the intern selection process by both the firm and the university.
- more experienced interns can train and help other interns within the same firm; “trainer-interns” would stay a longer period of time to guide and supervise less experienced interns in their contribution to the small firm.
- universities, generally the internship prescriptors, can prepare their students to undertake a stronger oriented role as interns. This can include teaching consulting classes for small and family businesses and the skills needed to be successful as interns, connecting students and firms through university-sponsored consulting projects, and partnering with state agencies and nonprofit organizations that promote small business development.

The role of the instructors or coaches is critical in their influence of internship outcomes. Many recommendations exist in the literature for successful internships but examining these recommendations would be beyond the scope of our paper. However, the reader can consult past research related to the preparation and selection of interns, intern task attributes, and business and academic mentors (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Lee, 2010; D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009; Hurst & Good, 2010; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Craig, 2009; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008).

Even though the role of interns at the strategic level would need empirical research, the authors have seen on a small scale, parts of the strategic process enriched with interns' inputs and their direct contribution to strategic actions. This includes the opening of a new branch, the development of an entire logistical system for the central distribution system, or the development of a comprehensive business plan for a stagnant firm.

Additionally, small business decision makers should carefully plan the hiring of interns and select them by integrating many variables such as profile, expectations, needs of the firm, long-term hiring potential. The use of several interns can be profitable by using them for different roles. For example, a senior intern could establish a diagnosis and junior interns could handle more specific issues identified by the diagnosis. To enhance these discussions, Figure 4 can be used as a model to determine which objectives/attributes presented can be targeted for a specific company and how.

Prior planning on the part of the university is also critical to this process. Many difficulties exist inherent to internships (Rothman, 2007; Mihail, 2006; Curtis & Lucas, 2001; Ryan & Krapels, 1997). Therefore, faculty members must orientate their curriculum and internship assignment to facilitate this potential by providing more interactive teaching method, and by customizing their program to both the needs of the students and local business community. Universities must be able to match students' expectations with the needs of participating businesses.

DIRECTION OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Internships have the potential to provide great value for all parties involved, and if properly managed, may serve to enhance the competitive position of a small business. We argue that it is important for internship directors at educational institutions to manage the process so as to help small businesses maximize their value. This research has started a dialogue in the literature about this process and suggests a fertile research stream. We offer the following questions for future research.

1. Which other theoretical perspectives could enrich our current approaches to understand internships' benefits?
2. How different dimensions such as the strategic position, size, stage of development, industry, and the owner/manager's entrepreneurial profile mediate the benefits internships can bring to small businesses?
3. Why aren't internships valued in more universities and through various business disciplines?
4. What are the challenges of internships with family-owned businesses?
5. Which mechanisms are at play to hinder or contribute to the "cognitive-related" benefits of internships for small business?

To explore the nature and the extent of interns' contribution to small firms as defined in our paper, an interesting research project could include qualitative and quantitative aspects. "What did small firms get from internships?" would be the central question. After a careful selection of a group of small firms across industries, in-depth interviews with top managers in firms employing interns would help to understand their perception of the benefits generated by interns in their firms and the gap between their expectations and what they actually obtained. A qualitative study would generate a framework of analysis. This framework could be used to generate a larger inquiry using a standardized questionnaire in a large number of small firms employing interns to determine the perceptions of the top and functional managers. This may generate strong insights to our understanding of internship benefits provided to small firms.

CONCLUSION

We argue that internships may be considered a strategic tool for small businesses since these firms can benefit from the contributions of interns. Our claim does not include the unrealistic expectation that interns will mutate into experienced strategic consultants overnight. The acceptance and willingness of the owner to share with interns his knowledge and to be convinced that they can help beyond simple operational issues appears as an obstacle that we do not discount. However, ways exist to mitigate that issue. Interns can provide missing capabilities, provide diagnosis, help the firm to achieve strategic objectives, and offer a fresh perspective to problem-solving. They may also provide objective insight on the procedural aspects of strategic design and implementation.

While internships appear to be a strong strategic tool, our conclusions should be empirically tested and studied more extensively. The overall strategic contributions of interns should also be explored. However, our paper offers a framework that can be used to assist universities and internship directors as they seek to manage expectations and help students and small businesses gain the maximum value from these experiences.

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