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The Role of Organizational Vision in Guiding Idea Generation within SME Contexts

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Guiding idea generation in SMEs: What's vision got to do with it?

Structured Abstract:

Purpose

This article concerns the control of idea generation inside SMEs and the role that organisational vision plays within this process. It is understood that there are connections between entrepreneurship and creativity and that without the ability to generate new ideas firms can quickly stagnate and decline. Present knowledge concerning the control of idea generation is disparate, drawing tentative links to the subject of organisational vision but not arriving at firm conclusions. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate regarding the control of ideation in SMEs by assessing the potential role of organisational vision within this process.

Design / Methodological Approach

A qualitative, inductive methodology is used, gathering data from 57 participants within ten different SMEs through semi-structured interviewing. Analysis processes juxtaposed literature and data through the constant comparative method, resulting in the development of ten case studies.

Findings

This paper shows that structure is necessary for optimal idea generation and that there is a connection between organisational vision and ideation, with visions argued to be best placed to provide structure for idea generation within SMEs. Additionally, this paper finds that employee perception of control mechanisms plays an important role in the effectiveness or otherwise of organisational attempts to guide ideation.

Originality / Value

This research develops a theoretical understanding of the role played by vision within the ideation process. It is theorised that organisational visions are an antecedent to ideation, acting as a target for new ideas, providing a broad framework and channelling thinking by enabling individuals to judge where ideas have arisen from, and how relevant they might be.

Keywords: Idea generation, innovation, vision, small-medium enterprises

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Introduction

Today's knowledge-based organisations depend for their success on creativity, innovation, discovery and inventiveness (Martins and Terblanche, 2003). Markets are subject to rapid change and fierce competition (Kempster and Cope, 2010; Klijn and Tomic, 2010) and in these settings long-term performance arguably depends on an organisation's ability to think differently (Burns, 2008). This extends to small medium enterprises (SMEs) which, due to resource constraints and intense competition, depend on ideas in order to survive (Banks et al, 2002; McAdam and Keogh, 2004) and generate competitive advantage (McAdam et al, 2010). With this as the context, the ability to produce new ideas is vital as it serves as an underpinning for the introduction of new products and services (Amabile et al, 1996), finding organisational efficiencies (Houghton and DiLiello, 2010; Pullen et al, 2009) and marketing products and brands (Powell and Ennis, 2007).

Despite the importance of ideation, it is understood that SMEs in particular face resource restrictions and constraints (including financial, human and physical) (Hessels and Parker, 2013; Pissarides et al, 2003; Vossen, 1999) which limit what they can practically explore and subsequently develop. While it is recognised that constraints can lead to the identification of more opportunities in some circumstances (Burg et al, 2012), in light of this literature it can be argued that SMEs need to guide the ideation process in such a way that they can focus their resources effectively in order that ideation can contribute to competitive advantage. Extant literature contains research examining how organisations can structure or guide idea generation (Busco et al, 2012; Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005) but this predominantly focuses on larger organisations rather than SMEs. While this existing work can be considered a useful starting point, the idiosyncrasies of and unique pressures facing SMEs (Burns, 2007; Pullen et al, 2009) mean we cannot automatically extend findings to these contexts. This said, current knowledge ranges from a view that 'too much' control inhibits idea generation (Hitt et al, 1996) to suggesting that a lack of control can inhibit innovative performance (Leonard and Swap, 2005) to arguing for a 'balance' in terms of control and freedom inside organisations (Busco et al, 2012). Further exploratory research (Chiesa et al, 2009) argues that different control mechanisms operate at different parts of the innovation process with "social controls" (Chiesa et al, 2009, p440) being utilised in situations of high uncertainty.

Adding to the disparate nature of the literature outlined above, further connected studies argue that leaders must provide a 'path' for others to follow (Amabile and Khaire, 2008), or that managers and leaders must set an appropriate 'stage' (i.e. platform) for new ideas (Amabile et al, 1996; Houghton and DiLiello, 2010; Woodman et al, 1993), which arguably begins to resonate with definitions of organisational vision (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992). Given these indications of a possible link between vision and ideation what can be said about the role of organisational vision in the guidance of idea generation? Developing knowledge about the guidance of ideation in SME contexts is important because we know that whilst ideation is important to the success of these organisations, they suffer resource constraints that impinge on their ability to explore new avenues. Ascertaining whether organisational visions could play a part in the guidance of idea generation and assist SMEs in the targeting of creative effort could extend our knowledge in this area. The fundamental aim of this paper is therefore to contribute to the debate regarding the control of ideation in SMEs, assessing the potential role of organisational vision within this process. While of relevance to the theoretical field, this aim is also of relevance for SME

owners/managers and will, potentially, provide practical techniques for structuring the somewhat ethereal ideation process.

This paper is arranged into five key sections. The literature review will begin by building a shared understanding of the term “idea generation”, separating it from definitions of creativity and innovation. Once key terminology has been analysed, attention will turn to the literature surrounding the guidance of idea generation, relating this to the ‘visioning’ literature as and where appropriate. Following an outline of the methods adopted by this study, the findings and discussion sections will provide empirical evidence aimed at answering the research question derived from the literature review. Implications of these findings, both theoretical and practical, will be debated in the conclusion together with areas of possible future research.

Literature review

Understanding creativity and its link to the entrepreneurial process

Existing literature suggests that there is a connection between entrepreneurship and the generation of creative ideas (Fillis and Rentschler, 2010; Lee et al, 2004; Schmidt et al, 2012). Process models of entrepreneurship (Moore, 1986) include references to “creativity”, seeing this as an antecedent to idea implementation and ultimately venture growth. Other researchers see entrepreneurship and innovation as entwined (Drucker, 1985) or overlapping (Anderson and Li, 2014) concepts, indeed Amabile et al (1996) indicates that the origins of new products, programs or services - the lifeblood of entrepreneurial firms - can be traced to creative ideas. Drawing from Sternberg’s (1999) definition viewing creativity as the ability to produce work that is both novel and appropriate, Lee et al (2004) argue that entrepreneurship is a form of creativity and can be labelled as such “because often new businesses are original and useful” (Lee et al, 2004, p882). While innovative ideas are scarce (Stevens and Burley, 1997), creativity is thought to enable the entrepreneur to act on opportunities in order to create competitive advantage for organisations (Fillis and Rentschler, 2010). Indeed Fillis and Rentschler (2010) go on to argue that entrepreneurship as a concept has three underlying dimensions; innovation, risk-taking and pro-activeness. Given the connections that are made in the literature between creativity and innovation on the one hand and entrepreneurship on the other, that creativity and innovation are believed to be important to entrepreneurial organisations, and that creative ideas are often scarce, it is arguably relevant to seek to understand more about the factors that either encourage or diminish this ‘creative’ effort inside entrepreneurial organisations.

Defining the term ‘creativity’ is somewhat problematic. Broad definitions see it as the thought processes and intellectual activity used to generate new insights or solutions to problems (see Martins and Terblanche, 2003). Other literature carries a different emphasis, suggesting that creativity is essentially the ‘generation of new ideas’ (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), or that it is a social process that relies on fluid, open structures and a supportive culture (Davis and Scase, 2000). Indeed several sources recognise the social context of ideation (Catmull, 2008; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Harvey and Kou, 2013; Sailer, 2011), with a seminal contribution to this field from Csikszentmihalyi (1999) arguing for a ‘systems’ model of creativity which recognises the influence of the individual, domain and field. For Csikszentmihalyi, it is important to recognise that creativity cannot be divorced from its social context; the ‘audience’ is as important to the creative process as the individual developing the idea. Further seminal models of the creative problem solving process

(Osborn, 1953; Altshuller and Shapiro, 1956) indicate that a combination of divergent and convergent thinking (Penaluna et al, 2010) is necessary for creativity, with Wallas (1926) indicating four stages; preparation, incubation, insight and verification. Creativity as a process must include some form of lateral thinking (De Bono, 1970), facilitated by problem immersion (Czikszenmihalyi, 1996; Wallas, 1926) and knowledge creation (McAdam and Keogh, 2004), alongside a process of reduction or convergence (Penaluna et al, 2010) to something of value. These divergent and convergent aspects of creativity unquestionably require different skills and processes (De Bono, 1970; Penaluna et al, 2010), therefore it is logical for us to separate 'idea generation' as a term in order to explore the factors which affect it.

This paper focuses on the control of idea generation as a specific aspect of the creative process rather than the entirety of the creativity continuum. Idea generation involves divergent thinking and, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the pulling together of information, concepts and experiences in order to produce something 'new' (Banks et al, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Staber, 2008). The conceptual model developed by McAdam and Keogh (2004, p128) provides reinforcement of this view. They themselves separate idea generation from other stages of the creative process such as 'knowledge creation' (i.e. the search for information to inform the ideation process) and 'idea screening'. Without a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting idea generation, we can argue that research examining the broader innovation ecosystem may be flawed. This is the reasoning behind our focus on ideation rather than creativity as a whole. It is also understood that individual factors such as 'talent' (Florida, 2002) and 'imagination' (Barrett, 1998) impact the ideation process. While these 'individual' factors are recognised as important and are not discounted, this paper focuses on organisational factors affecting idea generation, namely control and the possible role that organisational vision might play within that process.

Guiding idea generation in SMEs

It has already been noted that the guidance or control of ideation is an area of the present literature which is debated with a variety of authors advancing opinions about how important this is to the production of new ideas (Busco et al, 2012; Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005). Indeed there is a question as to the extent to which ideas can be 'controlled' at all (Andriopoulos, 2001). Previous empirical discussions (Hitt et al, 1996; Chiesa et al, 2009) argue that organisations can exert some form of influence over idea generation (expressed as 'concept generation' by Chiesa et al, 2009). It is worth noting at this juncture that the word 'control' within this paper implies the way that managers and leaders guide, frame or structure ideation towards a particular goal; it is not intended to indicate or describe any form of micro-management (Avramidis, 2008), simply the notion that organisations need to direct the production of ideas if they are to ultimately arrive at innovations.

Quantitative research into this issue indicates that firms attempting to impose strict financial controls are the least innovative (Hitt et al, 1996) with practitioner literature including Rudkin et al (2001) also advising that ideation can be hampered if tasks or projects are tightly framed. With these understandings in mind it might therefore be assumed that a laissez-faire approach should be adopted, however Leonard and Swap (2005) claim that an element of control is in fact a vital driver of idea production. It is argued that too little monitoring can lead to poor levels of innovation, because 'good' ideas, however these are determined, are not pushed through the decision making chain. Chiesa et al (2009, p416) note that "flexible and

social control management systems” typify the early stages of radical innovation projects, providing further evidence that some form of structure or guidance supports idea generation. Despite the informative nature of these findings it is necessary to keep in mind that much existing empirical research (Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1996) has taken place in large organisations. SMEs face very different pressures such as scarce resources, a lack of skills and a need for flexibility (Hessels and Parker, 2013; Vossen, 1999). For this reason, while existing research is undoubtedly useful for informing our thinking, we cannot automatically extend findings to SME contexts.

In light of the varied understandings captured above it is no surprise that there are also thought to be a variety of ways in which ‘control’ of ideation is operationalised in organisations. Practitioner literature suggests that leaders need to engender particular behaviours in their organisations (Rudkin et al, 2001), whilst academic sources (Amabile et al, 1996; Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Osborne, 1953) make the case for mapping creative processes and/or building settings which encourage creative work. Further discussions make the point that leaders must not assume that their ideas are best; instead the suggestion is that those in leadership positions must provide “paths through the bureaucracy” (Amabile and Khaire, p105), enabling their followers to think differently. This notion that there must be a ‘path’ to follow begins to link with understandings of organisational vision. Previous empirical research adds to this thought, drawing further tentative links between idea generation and vision by suggesting that managers and leaders must set the ‘stage’ for new ideas (Amabile et al, 1996; Houghton and DiLiello, 2010; Woodman et al, 1993).

Despite the inferences noted above signalling a potential connection between idea generation and organisational vision, there are a number of possible reasons why connections have yet to be made between the concepts. These include the fact that visions can be ‘squishy’ topics for managers (Spragins, 1992), and that the setting out of a future plan (i.e. a ‘vision’) does not sit comfortably with the need for divergent thinking (Klijn and Tomic, 2010; Penaluna et al, 2010) which is at the core of ideation. It is also recognised that the dominance of owner/managers in small firms can be a significant issue, with small firms often being ‘saturated’ with the ideology of the owner family, operating under a ‘negotiated paternalism’ (Ram and Holliday, 1993). Indeed Timmons (1999) finds that the strong desire that entrepreneurs have for autonomy and control can hamper the growth of their business ventures. Furthermore Burns (2007) highlights the chaotic nature of creative thought and, as stated previously, there remains a question as to whether ideas can be ‘controlled’ at all (Andriopoulos, 2001). In order to understand the veracity of these points and whether a link *may* be made between ideation and organisational vision it is important to examine the ‘visioning’ literature more closely.

Vision

Collins and Porras (1991) argue that decentralisation and a flattening of hierarchies has led to organisational vision becoming increasingly important in helping individuals understand where an organisation is heading. It is understood that vision is often explained as the direction of an organisation, set out by a leader, highlighting what needs to happen in order for it to reach a given destination (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992). Vision arguably provides a “hook around which to build a common language and a momentum for change” (Ndela and du Toit, 2001, p164), with further sources suggesting links between vision and the innovation process (Hill and McGowan, 1999), indeed that creative ideas are built through ‘strategic intuition’ (Duggan, 2013). Connected literature discussing the issue

of strategic foresight arrives at a similar conclusion, suggesting that foresight can lead to positive organisational outcomes including adaptive learning, ambidexterity and innovation (Sarpong et al, 2013). Building from this, McAdam et al (2010) argue that the leadership role is more important and influential in SMEs than larger organisations, citing Pearce and Ensley's (2004) notion that vision and drive must be focused on innovation if it is to ultimately impact on performance. This point again suggests a connection between vision and the creative process although the specific role played by vision is not elaborated upon. In a similar vein leadership and vision are thought to be essential to instilling 'entrepreneurial dynamism' in small organisations (De Jong and Vermeulen, 2006) although the specific nature of this relationship is again unexplored.

Part of this issue may be explained by the understanding that vision statements are often incredibly 'squishy' topics for managers (Spragins, 1992). In other words it is believed to be difficult for a leader to create a robust vision that has relevance to all day-to-day operational roles and tasks. While producing a "documented innovation plan (...) may pave the road" (De Jong and Vermeulen, 2006, p592) with respect to ideation in a small firm, employees may still struggle to relate generic visions to their day-to-day work. More recent contributions have attempted to address this specific concern whilst discussing the content of visions (Gdanz, 2009). The most compelling visions are thought to be more than slogans, with the best being goal-orientated and containing substance that is relevant to would-be followers as well as those in leadership positions (Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002). In these instances it is believed that vision carries more weight than strategy as it becomes a guiding force for day-to-day behaviour (Lipton, 2002). McCarthy (2003) adds to this notion, stating that strategy formation is considerably more informal within small firms, residing in the mind of the entrepreneur and often being short-term in orientation. Vision therefore takes on more importance in these settings.

Aside from constructing a vision, communicating that vision to employees is arguably the most important part of the entire process (Amabile and Gyskiewicz, 1987). Indeed previous research suggests that many small businesses fail to share "a common vision with all stakeholders" (Bruce and Picard, 2006, p309), with it understood that visions are meaningless unless individuals are connected to them in a profound way (Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002). Given the importance of shared vision in the articulation of strategic goals and the subsequent benchmarking and measuring of performance (Chell and Tracey, 2005), this is a significant point. The leadership role in SMEs (McAdam et al, 2010) in terms of communicating and cascading organisational vision is therefore of crucial importance.

Visions within SMEs (and indeed larger organisations) must also evolve as the businesses themselves change (Powell and Dodd, 2007). Without this evolution it is thought that gaps quickly emerge between the vision and operational reality. This arguably reinforces the tension between vision and the ideation process, where the call for divergent thinking (Klijn and Tomic, 2010; Penaluna et al, 2010) has the potential to continually and radically alter the direction of organisational travel and therefore undermine the existing vision. Indeed Drummond (2004, p487) notes that a 'myopic' vision can lead to SMEs becoming "bound to a suboptimal course of action through the passage of time." Engagement with primary stakeholders during the visioning process (Kohtamäki et al, 2012) is therefore important, with leaders using this input to plan towards change (Kets de Vries, 2003; Schraeder, 2010). Despite this, it can be argued that ideation in and of itself could be chiefly responsible for the divergence between organisational vision and operational reality, rendering visions meaningless in terms of future ideation unless the vision also changes accordingly.

In sum, this review suggests that some element of ‘control’ is necessary if organisations are to produce appropriate and workable ideas (Busco et al, 2012; Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005) but how organisations might achieve this ‘control’ is not discussed in great depth, particularly with reference to SME contexts. Extant literature, whilst informative contains disparities indicating that there is a need for exploratory work in this area. The literature search demonstrates in particular that whilst there may well be tension between organisational vision and the guidance of idea generation, a relationship may exist between the concepts. There is therefore a need to understand (1) the extent to which control is either necessary or indeed desirable for ideation within SMEs and, (2) whether, and in what way organisational vision might contribute to this guidance, framing or structuring. The research question taken forward by this study from this point is therefore;

To what extent is control important to the generation of ideas in SME contexts and in what ways does organisational vision contribute to any such framework or guide?

Methods

As this study is investigating an under developed area of research where literature, as discussed above, is relatively disparate in nature, a qualitative, inductive approach is most suitable (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010; Mason et al, 2009). Where an exploration of a field is called for Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) suggest that positivist or neo-positivist approaches are unrewarding, these concerns being particularly relevant given the difficulty in quantifying ‘ideas’. This study does not seek to make claims about or to compare absolute quantities of ideas developed across different contexts.

Given the need for exploration, and guided by an interpretivist philosophy, a purposive approach to sampling (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990) was indicated. It is recognised that small qualitative samples do not facilitate generalisation (Kempster and Cope, 2010) however this does not limit the credibility of findings as this study sought to understand whether there was convergence or divergence in terms of views rather than whether a ‘model’ or other such framework could be built. This study was based in South West England, a regional economy dominated by SMEs (Wetherill, 2010), which play a critical role in economic development (Cornwall Council, 2014; Devon County Council, 2014). This regional sample nevertheless shares in the national culture and business system of the UK and so findings can be considered relevant at a national level. The difficulty of gaining research access into SME settings has previously been discussed (Alcadipani and Hodgson, 2009; Altinay and Wang, 2009), with it being noted that these organisations have limited time and resources to engage with academic inquiries. This study therefore adopted an approach utilised previously (Reveley et al, 2004) in making use of professional and institutional networks in order to develop a relevant contact list.

Contextual information regarding the organisations participating in this study is provided in table one. This shows the level of difference achieved in the sample with participating SMEs ranging from 150 full-time members of staff at the largest, to three (3) at the smallest. Major economic sectors are represented, with the sample including retail, design, manufacturing, charitable and healthcare organisations. While it is not the intention of this study to engage in a debate about what constitutes a ‘creative’ organisation (Powell and Dodd, 2007), the sample does include what could be classified as ‘creative’ organisations (e.g. organisations B, D and I) as well as those one could term ‘non-creative’ (e.g. organisations E, F and G). It is

to be remembered though that this study is built from the understanding that all organisations, particularly SMEs require ideas in order to survive (Banks et al, 2002; McAdam and Keogh, 2004) and generate competitive advantage (McAdam et al, 2010).

Insert Table One about here

Data was collected for this study through an extensive series of semi-structured interviews (Alvesson, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are a key method of capturing views of organisational life, with this data subsequently informing the development of case studies regarding each of the organisations listed in table one (Yin, 2013). Views were sought from participants at all organisational levels including senior managers and operational staff and, where relevant, middle and junior managers. A total of 57 interviews took place and summary statistics regarding the number of interviews conducted within each organisation appear in table two. The interviews themselves were all conducted in person at each organisation's main operating location. They typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes although some exceeded 60 minutes in duration. Data collection occurred between March and December 2012.

Insert Table Two about here

In keeping with accepted traditions within the interpretivist field, a loosely structured interview "guide" (Alvesson, 2011) was developed to ensure that there was a level of comparability between interviews. This document included questions specifically guided by the themes present in extant literature alongside questions designed to elicit more general discussion surrounding ideation. In total the interview guide contained questions on seven themes; the extent to which the organisation generated ideas, how the work environment impacted ideation, managerial control, relationships and social interactions, reactions to error, the storing and sharing of ideas and finally, recognition of ideas. Questions were framed in the following format; "*How would you define the term 'control' in the work environment?*" and "*Can you describe a time when you felt most able to generate ideas at work?*" The goal of the interview process was to encourage participants to speak personally and at length (Silverman, 2013) about their interpretations of the questions posed. To ensure that questions were likely to facilitate productive discussions, the interview guide was refined through pilot testing sessions within two (2) organisations known to the researchers.

Analysis processes within this study sought to explore key themes within the data and construct understanding by juxtaposing the data and the literature, following a constant comparative method (Silverman, 2013). QSR Nvivo version nine was used to assist the analysis process with the researchers using it to store, code and search collected data. This is similar to the approach adopted by other studies within this and related fields (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Kempster and Cope, 2010) and ultimately resulted in the production of rich, narrative "stories" of idea generation from each organisation visited (Tsoukas and Hatch, 1997). In order to construct these "stories", data analysis itself followed similar stages to other studies in associated fields (Kempster and Cope, 2010), through familiarisation, immersion, categorisation, association (pattern recognition), interpretation and finally explanation stages. Ultimately this process was aimed at exploring themes from the point of

view of the participants with the researchers being concerned primarily with understanding ‘the how’ and ‘the why’ Yin (2013). The understandings produced through this process informed the development of the case studies mentioned above which were then examined for areas of convergence or divergence. This examination brought forward several cross case themes which were then investigated in further detail by going back to the underlying data supporting the case studies. Organisational vision and the way in which it assisted the control of ideation was one of the themes which emerged from the data analysis process. The following findings section provides an overview of the evidence collected.

Findings

The role of control mechanisms within ideation

In order to build an understanding of the relevant issues within SMEs it is necessary to begin by constructing a view of the ‘control’ mechanisms that operate in these settings which influence ideation. This will begin to provide evidence answering the first part of the research question. Findings presented here largely compare the situations in organisations believed, by employees, to generate many ideas with cases where few ideas were believed to be generated. It is also important to recognise that this is one interpretation of the findings and, although based on a strong analytic foundation and ensuring accurate representation of participant views, it is recognised that there is perhaps more than one way in which this material could be interpreted.

As noted in the methods, interviews contained a direct line of questioning regarding ‘control’ in the work environment. Individuals were asked to reflect on the term in the work context with respect to idea generation, with follow up questions used to elicit greater discussion where necessary. When asked about the term ‘control’ and its role with respect to idea generation the following views were uncovered. These provide some insight into the operationalisation of managerial control with respect to ideation in SMEs.

“I think the word guidance is better [for defining the control process]. Being able to have some kind of oversight there to say “you are on the right track; you’re on the wrong track; why is this good; why is it bad” and then kind of working from that basis of knowing which direction you are going in.”

(Professional employee, organisation I)

“...there needs to be a structure in terms of the company’s aim and ambition and then if people’s ideas sit within what we want to try and get done then it can work.”

(Senior manager, organisation H)

Both of these organisations were believed, by employees, to generate many ideas. The individuals suggest that the guidance of idea generation in these settings is some form of broad structure or oversight, a structure that allows individuals to match ideas to wider aims and objectives. The first quote is particularly instructive with this individual believing that guidance should provide a “*basis of knowing which direction you are going in.*” This potentially starts to resonate with understandings of organisational vision discussed earlier in this paper, although this evidence in itself does not permit the development of firm linkages between the concepts. Furthermore the phrase from organisation H, “*...sit within what we want to try*”, arguably shows that leaders/managers in this setting reserve the right to set a defined course for ideation. This contrasts with evidence from a senior manager at

organisation B, again believed to be a highly creative organisation, where too much control was thought to lead to a “*sanitised view*”.

In addition to the observations above, a further key point from the first quotation surrounds the understanding that control mechanisms should provide feedback on ideas; “*you are on the right track; you’re on the wrong track*”. From the perspective of this individual, this feedback was considered important to the development of future ideas, allowing for thinking to be further refined and developed toward a specified goal. Similar views to those presented thus far were captured in other organisations, towards the ‘larger’ end of the sample.

“Well no, you definitely need a form of control but if it (idea generation) is too controlled then I don’t think people will be open and give ideas so yes... control in moderation I think.”
(Professional employee, organisation A)

I think there needs to be structure because I believe that if you have no structure to the management of idea generation you end up with a lot of disgruntled and disillusioned employees... because you can’t run with every idea everyone has and therefore there needs to be a structure to [demonstrate] how you let people down and how you encourage people and how you take things forward.

(Senior manager, organisation C)

While organisation A was perceived to generate many ideas, employees of organisation C felt that ideation was generally poor. Despite this, similar views regarding the ‘control’ of ideation were elicited. These views reinforce the growing consensus that an element of control is necessary if organisations are to generate ideas but the view from participants is that this control must not be too limiting or lead to any sort of “tunnel vision”. The first quote suggests that “*if it is too controlled then I don’t think people will (...) give ideas*” but contrastingly at organisation C it is believed that “*no structure*” leads to employees becoming “*disgruntled and disillusioned*” with the process of ideation. Control “*in moderation*” was believed to support ideation in these settings with the senior manager at organisation C noting that some form of structure demonstrates “*how you let people down (...) and how you take things forward*”. Knowing that SMEs face resource restrictions (Hessels and Parker, 2013; Pissarides et al, 2003; Vossen, 1999), limiting their ability to ‘run with every idea’, it is perhaps by communicating a structure for idea generation that disillusionment with the process can be avoided. The key theme emerging from the quotations presented thus far is that organisations need to keep idea generation “on track” but that additional control, in the form of strict parameters, is likely to stifle the creative process. Several of the views presented so far come from ‘senior managers’ and whilst informative, employees lower down the hierarchy sometimes expressed very different opinions about the ideation process;

“I don’t think they [ideas] ever really get taken up they just sort of... you get nodded at and that’s as far as it goes I think.”

Manual Employee, Organisation C

“If they [ideas] are not in line with what [the senior manager] wants then they are disregarded I feel.”

Professional Employee, Organisation J

These opinions, coming from organisations perceived to generate few ideas, paint a picture that idea generation can be approached with a lack of openness and trust within SMEs.

Words and phrases such as “disregarded” and “you get nodded at” are notable, indicating a possible view, on the part of employees, that the higher echelons of SMEs (however large or small) are closed to idea generation; the broad consensus being that managers retain firm control over the process. Indeed these views exist even within what are otherwise believed to be creative firms such as organisation B; “once they have their plan that’s it, regardless of what you are doing”. Notably this particular informant felt that organisation B was not as effective at generating ideas as other respondents. It is arguably the view of these employees that if managers didn’t generate or ‘sponsor’ an idea then no action on that idea takes place. Indeed this plurality is recognised by the senior manager within Organisation J;

“I think it’s also about a matter of perceptions of whether... to what extent I think [the employees] are interested in new ideas and to what extent they think it’s their... place isn’t quite the right word... but their place or their contribution to actually put them forward or whether they feel that I listen to them.”

Senior Manager, Organisation J

Perhaps the most interesting word within this quotation is “perceptions”. It is recognised here that it is not necessarily organisational systems (such as control systems) themselves that are having an impact on ideation, but the *perception* that employees have of those systems. It is arguable that employee perceptions have a role to play in determining whether the organisational processes or procedures set up to guide or otherwise control ideation have a positive or negative impact. This point will be developed further in the forthcoming discussion. Attention now turns to the second part of the research question, assessing whether there is a possible relationship between vision and idea generation.

The role of vision in the idea generation process

Evidence presented so far points to the need for SMEs to develop broad frameworks to guide idea generation but, perhaps more importantly, that it is employee *perception* of those frameworks which is crucial. Having identified these issues, there is a need to understand *how* organisations develop frameworks for ideation. An emergent theme from this study concerns the role that organisational vision has within this process. Many interview participants independently brought forward the subject of ‘vision’, with a collective opinion surfacing that vision may be well placed to provide a framework or guide for the development of new ideas. The following quote, although from an organisation perceived to generate few ideas, is particularly instructive in demonstrating the possible link between vision and ideation.

“I think for us we are so behind with it (idea generation)... or so disjointed from doing it that actually it would be a stepped process and I think the primary and initial step would be to start communicating and giving the employees more of the bigger picture and more of an awareness of where things are at. Until that happens I don’t think you could really take things much further forward because they’re shooting at the wrong target.”

Senior manager, organisation C

While the word ‘vision’ is not directly used by this individual it can be strongly argued that this is indeed what is being proposed. Phrases such as “the bigger picture” provide support for this assertion, linking to notions of organisational vision (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992). It is notable that communicating this “picture” is thought to be “the primary and initial step” needed to support ideation in this setting, without which it is

believed that employees will be “*shooting at the wrong target*”. The way the participant’s understanding is narrated through this quotation suggests that, at least in this setting, organisational vision could provide a target for ideation. Whilst intriguing, it is important to recognise that this is the view from only one organisation. Does this view repeat within the wider sample; are similar perspectives held or is this view unique to this particular setting? Quotations below, coming from settings in which ideation is perceived to be effective, suggest that this interpretation of the potential link between vision and idea generation is more widely held.

“... it is just not as overt as that I think, it is a bit more tacit, and it (the vision) is so ingrained in the history of the organisation that we don’t have to go “this is the vision everybody!” It has developed over time... and helps people to judge where an idea has come from and how relevant it might be.”

Senior manager, organisation D

“(Employees are) massively (linked into the vision). But then I think they would be because they are a creative team and it just would make no sense to have any of them not understanding it... But again it is about staff being aware of what the vision and the direction is so that they can understand that certain ideas will just not be appropriate... because they don’t... you know... pertain to that framework so it all comes back to that doesn’t it.”

Senior manager, organisation B

These quotations show a remarkably similar view regarding the interaction between organisational vision and ideation to that captured within organisation C. The first participant suggests that the link between vision and ideation is arguably “*a bit more tacit*” with the vision developing over time, helping employees to “*judge where an idea has come from and how relevant it might be*”. The use of the word “*judge*” is particularly important, suggesting that vision potentially guides ideation by channelling thinking towards a common ambition or goal. The second quotation can be analysed along similar lines where it is said that “*it is about staff being aware of (...) the vision (...) so that they can understand that certain ideas will just not be appropriate.*” This again points toward a view of vision acting as a guide or check on the direction of ideas. Linking back to a previous finding where it was suggested that appropriate control can help to prevent employees becoming “*disgruntled and disillusioned*” with ideation, it can be argued that the way in which organisational vision is conceptualised here suggests it is capable of providing a boundary within which individuals can explore. By communicating the vision upfront, leaders and managers can guide thinking, implicitly showing why certain ideas are not deemed relevant in certain situations. While it is not the aim of this study to claim generalisation, it can certainly be suggested that there is convergence rather than divergence in views.

Views from employees lower down the hierarchy follow a similar pattern of thinking to that already presented. Having said this, the quotation below suggests that communication of the vision, even in an organisation believed to generate many ideas, can be a problematic issue.

“I think if that link (between vision and idea generation) was made for all departments, so you could understand where everybody fitted in with the vision of [organisation] more fully then... yeah, I think that would be good. I think that would be good for supervisors and general staff level especially.”

Professional employee, organisation B

This individual believes that a stronger connection between vision and idea generation would be beneficial “*for supervisors and [the] general staff level*”. Organisation B is a relatively large SME in comparison to the rest of the sample and the way in which this participant conveys their thoughts points to there being a lack of clarity regarding the role of different departments. In this case it is believed that a stronger link to the vision would positively impact idea generation. A similar view to this was found within organisation G;

“I know there is a vision but it just seems somewhat distant from me and what I am doing. It is quite demoralising sometimes.”

Professional employee, organisation G

Language used by this participant is again telling, believing that “*distance*” between the vision and operational reality has a “*demoralising*” effect. What can perhaps be gleaned from both of these views is that employee *perception* is again an important issue to consider. While senior managers may believe that visions are effectively communicated, employees, as evidenced here, can hold substantially different views, impacting the efficacy of vision as a guide for ideation as a result.

Discussion

Findings presented above have important theoretical and practical contributions to what is known about the guidance of ideation in SME environments. Recognising the disparate nature of present literature surrounding the guidance of idea generation (Busco et al, 2012; Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005) and that SMEs face very different constraints and pressures to larger organisations (Hessels and Parker, 2013; Pissarides et al, 2003; Vossen, 1999), means existing empirical work (Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1999) cannot be assumed to be applicable in these settings. As ideation is known to be fundamental to the survival and success of SMEs (Banks et al, 2002; McAdam and Keogh, 2004; McAdam et al, 2010), adding to knowledge regarding the control of such processes can positively benefit such organisations, enabling them to best direct their limited resources.

Data collected for this paper initially contributes to knowledge regarding the *nature* of control mechanisms necessary for idea generation in SMEs and in this way assists in addressing the aim. Analysis of interview transcripts reveals a shared understanding that whilst control of idea generation is necessary, this should not be oppressively limiting. A common theme amongst all interview participants was that broad structure is necessary to provide “*oversight*” but that this should not be “*stifling*”. It was consistently recognised that some structure is necessary for ideation but that too much control led to employees not being “*open*” or simply presenting a “*sanitised view*”, subsequently thought to undermine the idea generation process. Furthermore the way that participants narrated their experience points to control mechanisms being a “*guide*” for thinking, preventing “*disgruntlement and disillusionment*” with the idea generation process. Previous work shows that “flexible and social control management systems” typify the early stages of radical innovation projects (Chiesa et al, 2009, p416). Findings presented here build from this and arguably show that framing the management task as “*guiding*” rather than “*controlling*” ideation is important in enhancing creative performance.

More significantly, a key theoretical contribution arising from this study is recognising that the way in which control mechanisms are *perceived* is a crucial issue. Demonstrating the

plurality that exists within organisations, employees were found to say that ideas “*don't get taken up*”, “*you get nodded at*” or ideas are “*disregarded*”. While managers in the same organisations believe they are receptive to new ideas, findings show that employees perceive it to be difficult to disagree with or alter the plans they believe that managers have. Given the importance of divergent thinking (Penaluna et al, 2010) to the creative process as a whole this presents a problem. Without the ability to think differently no new ideas will surface. It can therefore be argued that ‘openness’ and transparency surrounding the control of ideation is of significant importance (Ekvall, 1996; Moultrie and Young, 2009). From a theoretical stance this study therefore calls for the consideration of employee perceptions while designing relevant control mechanisms for ideation. Overlooking the way in which our control mechanisms are perceived will, in light of the findings presented here, negatively impact the effectiveness of ideation.

Building from the above, it can be argued that involving employees (Brown and Cregan, 2008) in the design and development of control mechanisms will benefit the ideation process as a whole. As SMEs contain fewer levels of hierarchy and smaller numbers of employees overall (Burns, 2007; O’Gorman and Doran, 1999), employee involvement together with improved openness and transparency should arguably be easier to achieve in practice. Having said this, evidence presented within this study suggests that even micro organisations (such as Organisation J) can struggle to achieve this in their operations, emphasising the importance of employee *perceptions* as a factor within this area.

Moving on from discussions surrounding the link between control mechanisms and idea generation, and the nature of these mechanisms, key to both the aim and research question at the heart of this paper is the subject of vision. Emerging from the interviews, the theme that vision could play a role in the guidance of ideation repeated across the sample. Language used within the findings section such as “*the bigger picture*” and words previously used in this discussion such as “*oversight*” begin to resonate with understandings of organisational vision (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992). Whilst existing literature hints at connections between the concepts (Amabile and Khaire, 2008; De Jong and Vermeulen, 2006; Hill and McGowan, 1999; Houghton and DiLiello, 2010; McAdam et al, 2010) this study finds support for a theoretical link in SME contexts.

Based on evidence gathered for this paper it is thought that an organisation’s vision can be seen as a framework for idea generation, providing the necessary broad direction or structure which individuals can subsequently use as a guide for the development of ideas. The way in which participants discussed ideation and vision suggests it is vision that arises first. At organisation C it was thought to be the “*primary and initial step*” to improving ideation, communicating a “*target*” for ideas. Views from organisations D and B suggest the same interaction with vision enabling employees to “*judge*” ideas and “*understand*” their relevance in light of this framework. At organisation G, where ideation was believed to be less effective, it was thought that “*distance*” between the employee and the vision was “*demoralising*”. These findings present somewhat of a challenge to the work of Duggan (2013) in particular, who suggests that the flash of insight provokes vision. Within the bounds of this study the opposite has been found, organisational vision arises first and provides a framework for the development of ideas. Judge et al (1997) propose that successful innovation is chaos within guidelines. Our proposition resonates with this conceptualisation, with vision setting the ‘guidelines’ for the development of ideas in SME contexts.

Furthermore this study finds that organisational vision can help to provoke a form of self-evaluation or critique of ideas. Recognising that part of this study's aim was to assess the role or 'ways' in which organisational vision can contribute to the guidance of ideation, this is an important point. Again, language used by participants is instructive, recognising that vision can "*help people to judge where an idea has come from*" and "*understand that certain ideas will just not be appropriate*". It can be argued that vision is therefore playing an important role in the ideation process by channelling thinking, provoking this self-critique and therefore reducing the time needed for 'idea screening' (McAdam and Keogh, 2004). With organisational vision facilitating this critique of ideas, SMEs will arguably be better able to direct and target their limited resources (Hessels and Parker, 2013; Pissarides et al, 2003; Vossen, 1999). Finally, the concept of *perception* is also of importance here. Even in creative organisations (e.g. organisation B), participants felt that there could be a lack of clarity surrounding organisational vision. It can be argued that involving employees in the development of the vision could diminish issues of "*distance*" and "*demoralisation*".

Conclusion

The contribution made by this study to the theoretical field is threefold. Firstly, addressing the research question, it has been found that a broad structure which allows employees to match their ideas with the wider aims and ambitions of an organisation has a positive influence on perceived levels of idea generation in SMEs. Existing literature on this topic (Busco et al, 2012; Chiesa et al, 2009; Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005) is disparate and focused on larger firms, but findings from this study, while not generalisable at present, suggest that the guidance or structuring of idea generation in SME contexts needs to take the form of broad frames which channel but do not inhibit new thinking.

Secondly, in addition to the control or guidance mechanisms themselves, employee *perception* of those mechanisms is also critical. Evidence suggests that in settings where there is a lack of openness (Ekvall, 1996; Moultrie and Young, 2009) or a perception, on the part of employees, that organisations are "closed" to new ideas, ideation is diminished. We can therefore posit that employee perception of organisational structures and mechanisms designed to control ideation has an impact on divergent thinking (Penaluna et al, 2010).

The final, and most significant contribution arrived at by this study explicitly addresses the core aim of this paper and surrounds the link between organisational vision and the guidance of idea generation. Convergence in the data set suggests that there is a common understanding regarding the role that vision plays in this process. It can therefore be theorised that visions act as a target for idea generation, providing a broad framework and channelling thinking by enabling individuals to judge where ideas have arisen from, and how relevant they might be. It is argued that organisational vision in SME contexts is an antecedent to ideation, with the vision providing a guide for the development of *relevant* ideas. Providing information about the direction of the organisation (i.e. the vision) (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Ndela and du Toit, 2001; Spragins, 1992) was strongly thought, by the participants, to facilitate this process of creative ideation.

From a practical perspective the primary point that entrepreneurs can take from this research is that "no control" is as detrimental to idea generation as too much control or structure (Busco et al, 2012; Leonard and Swap, 2005). There must be a direction or a goal that idea generation is aimed towards although micro-management (Avramidis, 2008) should be avoided in order to provide employees a degree of autonomy or creative 'licence'. As noted

by a senior manager in Organisation B idea generation “*needs to be a bit more ragged now and again*”. Developing an appropriate vision should be, as eloquently put by a senior manager at Organisation C, the “*primary and initial step*” towards increasing the level of idea production in a given setting. Data presented here suggests that vision, whether explicit or implicit, can assist employees in evaluating their ideas, focusing their efforts and targeting their thinking towards ideas that are relevant to their organisations. By putting these practical steps into action, entrepreneurs within SME settings will improve creative performance within their firms.

Although making important theoretical and practical contributions this study suggests a number of avenues which could form the basis of future research. Due to its exploratory nature, this research does not claim generalisation at this point in time, rather that there is convergence rather than divergence in the dataset. Collected data suggests that there is a link between vision and the guidance of idea generation but further research, testing theory emerging from this study is necessary to support or refute the claims made by this paper. In particular, the direction of causation in the theorised relationship is not yet clear. Is it the case, as appears in this dataset, that organisational visions are providing the conditions for enhanced idea generation, or is it that organisations generating more ideas are more likely to have effective visions in place? This needs to be tested through further research.

A further key point that could form the basis of a future study is the potential tension between organisational vision and ideation. This paper notes that ideation in and of itself could drive divergence between organisational vision and operational reality. Further work examining the dynamic interaction between the concepts would therefore be valuable in extending the understandings constructed here. This study could also consider the structure of SMEs as a variable, examining how ownership or management philosophies (e.g. the dynamics of family run businesses) impact on the link between vision and ideation. A final interesting avenue of future research focus could surround how ideation influences emergent strategy. While it is known that effective management teams have well defined visions and that strategy flows from that vision, how much influence can employee ideation have on emergent strategy and how does that work?

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