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# **Modelling the Knowledge Transfer Process between Founder and Successor in Vietnamese Family Businesses Succession**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

The transfer of knowledge has been identified as an important part of the family business succession process. This paper examines the knowledge transfer process from founder to successor to understand and model the factors that influence the knowledge transfer process in the Vietnamese family business context.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

This research adopts an inductive qualitative approach, conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five father-son succession pairs. The interviews with founders and successors, ten in total, formed the basis of five case studies. The cases were all at an advanced stage of the process of business knowledge transfer and family business succession.

### **Findings**

A contextualized model was developed, highlighting the main factors that influence the knowledge transfer process from the founder to the successor in a Vietnamese family business context. This model identifies the influence of factors, some of which are not commonly presented in western family business literature. These include the importance of the role of the mother in mediating the relationship quality between the founder and the successor and the successor pursuing education and external work experience to improve their cognitive and reflective abilities. The need for affinity between family members is also highlighted as important.

### **Originality/value**

In Vietnam, most family-run businesses are still under the control of the founder. This research provides insight into the succession process in Vietnam. This research addresses calls for further exploration into the factors that influence the transfer of knowledge in the family business succession process and to research this process in a collectivist society, both of which remain under-researched.

### **Keywords**

Knowledge, knowledge management, family business succession, learning process, founders and successors

## Introduction

Research has concluded that family businesses make a significant contribution to wealth creation and economic growth in the world (Breton-Miller et al., 2004; Jaskiewicz et al., 2015), and can be considered to be a major player within the global economy (Ratten et al., 2017a). However, worldwide, only a limited number of family businesses survive to the second generation, and rarely to the third (Breton-Miller et al., 2004; Handler, 1994). In short, succession is one of the greatest obstacles that family businesses have to overcome in the longer term (Ramadeni et al., 2017). One of the main causes of failure may be unsuccessful planning for the next generation's succession (Breton-Miller et al., 2004; Csizmadia et al., 2016). The incomplete transfer of knowledge from an older to a younger generation has been highlighted as a principal reason that small and medium-sized family businesses fail (Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001; Chirico, 2007).

The founder's business knowledge has been considered as a source of competitive advantage and is easy to protect from possible appropriation by rival firms but is difficult to transfer to the next generation (Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). Malecki (1997) captured the essence of business knowledge by describing it as know-what, know-why, know-how, and know-who. Chirico (2007, p. 66) proposes three inherent competences that are sources of competitive advantage in family business that the predecessor needs to pass on to the next generation; (1) "Industry-related competences", relating to unique knowledge in a particular industry, (2) "Business competences", consisting of ways to manage the family firm, and (3) "Ownership competences", relating to developing an effective administration system to control the business. Chirico's (2007) definition of the business knowledge in family business is particularly relevant to this research because it describes key knowledge that is needed for a successor to maintain the stable development of a family business. A predecessor's knowledge is an important resource for the successor, as it can help a family firm retain its success and stabilise its development across generations in strongly competitive markets (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001; Chirico, 2007).

Family business succession is a complex process with a large number of variables whose influence on succession and the transfer of knowledge requires further exploration (Osnes et al., 2019). Previous research has found that Asian cultural values influence the family business succession process (Anggadwita et al., 2019; Pham et al., 2019). In such contexts, unique

social orders and interactions exist and influence the succession process (Yan and Sorenson, 2006). However, the succession process and the transfer of knowledge is still under-researched, particularly in the context of collectivist societies, such as Vietnam (Pham et al., 2019). Furthermore, there have been calls for exploratory research to add depth to the understanding of the family business succession process (Kiwia et al., 2019). This study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by examining the knowledge transfer process from founder to successor, through the eyes of the two actors, in order to understand and model the factors that influence the knowledge transfer process in the Vietnamese family business context.

## **Factors Influencing the Knowledge Transfer Process**

### **Characteristics of the predecessor**

The predecessor is considered to be the main source of knowledge in a family firm (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001; Chirico, 2007). A predecessor who is highly motivated is able to facilitate the process of knowledge transfer and can overcome the fear of losing power to support the knowledge transfer process (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). However, many predecessors may be impacted by the thought of losing their leadership position and becoming dispensable over time (Lansberg, 1988). It is not surprising that a predecessor is often unable to effectively pull back and foster an increasingly trusting relationship with a successor. This is often mentioned as a barrier to the knowledge transfer process and succession process. Knowledge transfer is enhanced greatly when the owner is willing to disseminate, rather than keep, knowledge (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011).

### **Characteristics of the successor**

The characteristics of a successor significantly influence the knowledge transfer process in family businesses (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Szulanski, 1996). Successors need to be highly motivated to gain business experience and knowledge from their predecessor (Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001; Chirico and Salvato, 2008). Lack of motivation may lead to postponement, passivity, and rejection or undervaluation of the knowledge transfer process (Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001).

The speed of successors' knowledge accumulation process is influenced by their education (Chirico, 2007; Csizmadia et al., 2016). Business knowledge continues to develop through formal education (Barbera et al., 2015; Bozer et al., 2017) and Morris et al. (1997) assert that a smooth transition and post-succession performance are positively related to a successor's formal education. Goldberg (1996) concluded that successors who had earned at least an undergraduate degree were often more successful than those with a high school diploma. Similarly, Sardeshmukh and Corbett (2011) argued that formal education provides the successor with current business concepts and develops their business skills. As a result, the performance of the successor after joining a family business can be related to the successor's formal education (Pérez-González, 2006).

External working experience provides the successor with new knowledge as well as real-world skills, which can support learning knowledge from his/her predecessor (Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011). Furthermore, it helps the successor to improve his/her business competence and simultaneously provides him/her with a sense of identity, self-confidence, and credibility (Brockhaus, 2004; Woodfield and Husted, 2017). However, there is a lack of consensus amongst researchers about the effectiveness of applying experience gained from working outside the family business context. Duties that a family business leader undertakes are often different from tasks previously completed as an employee in other firms (Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011). External working experience may not provide the successor with relevant experience to run a family business. This view is supported by Goldberg (1996), who found that successors who joined their family's business after college performed better in leadership roles than those having external working experience.

Higginson (2010) considers a successor's cognitive and reflective ability as factors that significantly affect the knowledge transfer process from mother (predecessor) to daughter (successor) in family businesses. She describes cognition as understanding the logic behind another's viewpoints, and this understanding can be developed by spending adequate time in discussion. Reflection is the ability to acknowledge the legitimacy of their cognition. In other words, the predecessor and successor spend time together to create a shared understanding (cognition), and the successor also needs time alone to contemplate the newly gained knowledge (Higginson, 2010). The main factor supporting the cognitive process of knowledge transfer is the time the predecessor spends with the successor in face-to-face

communication, both in extensive (over a long period of time) and intensive (many hours spent together daily) terms (Higginson, 2010). In addition, Lane and Lubatkin (1998) conclude that face-to-face interactions are crucial due to the generational gap, which has potential to distort the communication process. Fruitful interactions between two generations include regular structured meetings, feedback and reward systems, sharing assignments, and mutual involvement in stakeholder meetings, which can create a common language between founder and successor (Higginson, 2010).

### **The characteristics of the family context**

Personal relationships within a family business have been argued to be stronger than those within non-family companies (Barbera et al., 2015; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). This relationship is strengthened through a high level of trust among family members (Zehrer and Leiß, 2019). The quality of the relationship between the source of information and the recipient, in terms of a smooth flow of communication and intimacy, is one of the key factors in supporting knowledge transfers (Szulanski et al., 2004). Handler (1994) asserts that a respectful and understanding relationship between predecessor and successor, supports the succession process because successors will feel supported, recognized, and satisfied with the working environment. Trust between a founder and a successor is a competitive advantage in family business and the level of trust influences the knowledge recipient's behavior (Szulanski et al., 2004)

The quality of the relationship between predecessor and successor is influenced by the gender and age of the individuals (Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). Hollander and Bukowitz (1990) argue that father-daughter relationships are normally described as more harmonious and less contentious in terms of status. However, traditional gender stereotypes may hinder a female successor's access to leadership functions (Dumas, 1990).

The age gap between the predecessor and successor is also considered to be a factor in the relationship quality. Davis and Tagiuri (1989) argue that the relationship has a tendency to be harmonious when the predecessor is between the ages of 50 and 59 and the successor is between the ages of 23 and 32. However, a relationship becomes increasingly difficult when the predecessor is aged over 60 and the successor is 34-40 (Davis and Tagiuri, 1989; Ward, 2011).

Within the family business literature, research into the impact of family members' role on the knowledge transfer process is limited. Some research has examined the role of the successor's mother in family businesses (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2004). Although the involvement of the successor's mother in a business's daily running is overlooked in most of the literature, her role as a mediator between founder and successor has been recognised (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2004).

### **Vietnamese family business context**

Vietnam gained independence in 1975 and was led by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Private firms under this regime were prohibited in Vietnam from 1975 to 1986. In 1985, a failure of a currency adjustment scheme was followed by an economic crisis resulting in hyperinflation, shortages of consumer goods and staples, industrial stagnation, impoverished living conditions, and high foreign debt (Vuong et al., 2011). These conditions placed the Vietnamese government under considerable pressure. As a result, "Doi Moi" policies were launched in 1986 (MOIT, 2012) that allowed privately owned companies to operate in Vietnam (Vuong et al., 2011). These reforms that led to a transition economy, an economy changing from central planning to free markets, propelled Vietnam to a middle-income nation (MOIT, 2012). Previous research has suggested that family businesses in transition economies behave differently to those in developed economies (Ratten et al., 2017b). Cultural and institutional differences in Asian transition economies provide unique business and innovation systems, which influence business and entrepreneurship (Bell et al., 2019).

Since the policy reforms, Vietnam's government has supported investment in the private sector (Vuong et al., 2011). Vietnam has approximately 500,000 enterprises, 97 percent of which are small and medium-sized enterprises employing 51 percent of the country's labour force (VOV, 2016). Family businesses can be considered in terms of businesses controlled by members of the same family who govern or manage the business (Ramadeni and Hoy, 2015). Due to the timing of the reforms, most Vietnamese family businesses are still run by the founder and are preparing to transfer assets to the successor (Vuong et al., 2011). The majority of Vietnamese family businesses are male dominated, with succession flowing from father to son (Rand and Tarp, 2011), following the social order in collectivist cultures in East Asian countries such as in China, Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan (Yan and Sorenson, 2006). The exclusion of women, including daughters and other female members, can occur through



both macro-factors such as societal and cultural attitudes and micro-factors at an individual and family level (Wang, 2010). This leads to daughters often following different career paths and trajectories (Hytti et al., 2016). Vietnam still largely follows the primogeniture criterion that favours the first-born male child.

Vietnamese family businesses are facing a considerable, if common challenge, of how to transfer success across generations. Thus, the knowledge-transfer process from founder to successor is a pivotal issue not only for Vietnamese family businesses, but also for the wider Vietnamese economy.

## **Research Methods**

### **Research design**

Family businesses are contextualized in their environment making an in-depth multiple case study approach helpful for research investigation (Zaefarian et al., 2016). This study thus adopts a qualitative, multiple case study designed to add deeper understanding of the factors that influence the knowledge transfer process from founder to successor, as well as the relationship between these factors in Vietnamese family businesses. Qualitative approaches have been widely adopted in family business research (Chirico, 2007; Ratten and Tajeddini, 2017). The study focused on five cases, in line with the suggestion of Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) that the rigor of theory improves when data are drawn from at least four cases. This also met Eisenhardt's (1989) sample size suggestion for generating new theory and Creswell (2013, p. 101) advocates no more than four or five cases in a single study because "the more cases in individual studies, the less the depth in any single case".

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection method because a questionnaire-based study would not allow the level of interaction needed between researcher and participant to gain the subtlety or richness of information sought. In order to understand and model the knowledge transfer process effectively, it is important to understand the perspectives of both founder and successor in each case study. The researcher decided to interview the predecessors and successors in the five family-owned businesses separately, as participants may have been unwilling to answer certain questions honestly in the presence of the other, especially if the conversation involved criticism. A criterion sampling approach was used to ensure all case studies met predetermined criteria

of importance (Creswell, 2013). In this study, there were two key prerequisites to consider; firstly, each family business case study had to be involved in the process of knowledge transfer, and secondly, the succession process should be advanced, meaning that the successor had taken on a significant role in the family firm.

### **Case study selection**

To ensure that the sampling provided the most reliable data for this study, the researcher interviewed participants who were willing to volunteer for the interview and provide honest answers. However, the main issue faced during the process of case-study selection was that of obtaining permission from both founder and successor in the same family business. The reason for this difficulty may lie in the collectivist nature of Vietnamese culture, in which individuals are uncomfortable sharing their personal experiences with a stranger (Gambrel and Cianci, 2003). Five interviews were conducted with founders and five interviews with the corresponding successors, which provided a total of five case studies.

All case study profiles have some similar characteristics. For example, all case studies are medium-sized enterprises that have been running for at least 15 years with a total capital investment of over \$1 million (USD). In addition, all the founders are male, married, and had little formal education. The successors are all the founders' eldest sons with more formal education than the founder. The sample reflects the homogeneity and representativeness in most of the Vietnamese family business context. These are very strong characteristics in Vietnamese family businesses, and all five case studies include these characteristics. Most Vietnamese family businesses are operating under the control of the first generation due to policy changes in the 1980s (MOIT, 2012; Vuong et al., 2011). Details of the cases of the five cases and the founders and successors are provided in table 1.

**Table 1:** Case Demographics

	1 <sup>st</sup> Case	2 <sup>nd</sup> Case	3 <sup>rd</sup> Case	4 <sup>th</sup> Case	5 <sup>th</sup> Case
<b>Company Profile</b>					
Industry	Construction	Manufacturing	Agriculture	Transportation	Agriculture
Date established	The late 1990s	The early 2000s	The early 1990s	The early 1990	The early 2000s
Total capital investment	Over \$1M	Over \$1M	Over \$1M	Over \$1M	Over \$1M
Location in Vietnam	North (Urban area)	North (Urban area)	North (Rural area)	South (Urban area)	South (Rural area)
<b>Founder Profile</b>					
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	Early 50s	Early 50s	Early 60s	Early 50s	Early 50s
Highest Education	High school	High school	High school	High school	High school
<b>Successor Profile</b>					
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	Late 20s	Early 30s	Middle 30s	Middle 30s	Late 20s
Highest Education	MBA	Master degrees	Bachelor degree	Diploma	Bachelor degrees
Position in Family	Eldest Son	Eldest Son	Eldest Son	Eldest Son	Eldest Son
Siblings	2 sisters & 1 brother	1 brother	1 sister	3 sisters	2 sisters

### **Data analysis and presentation**

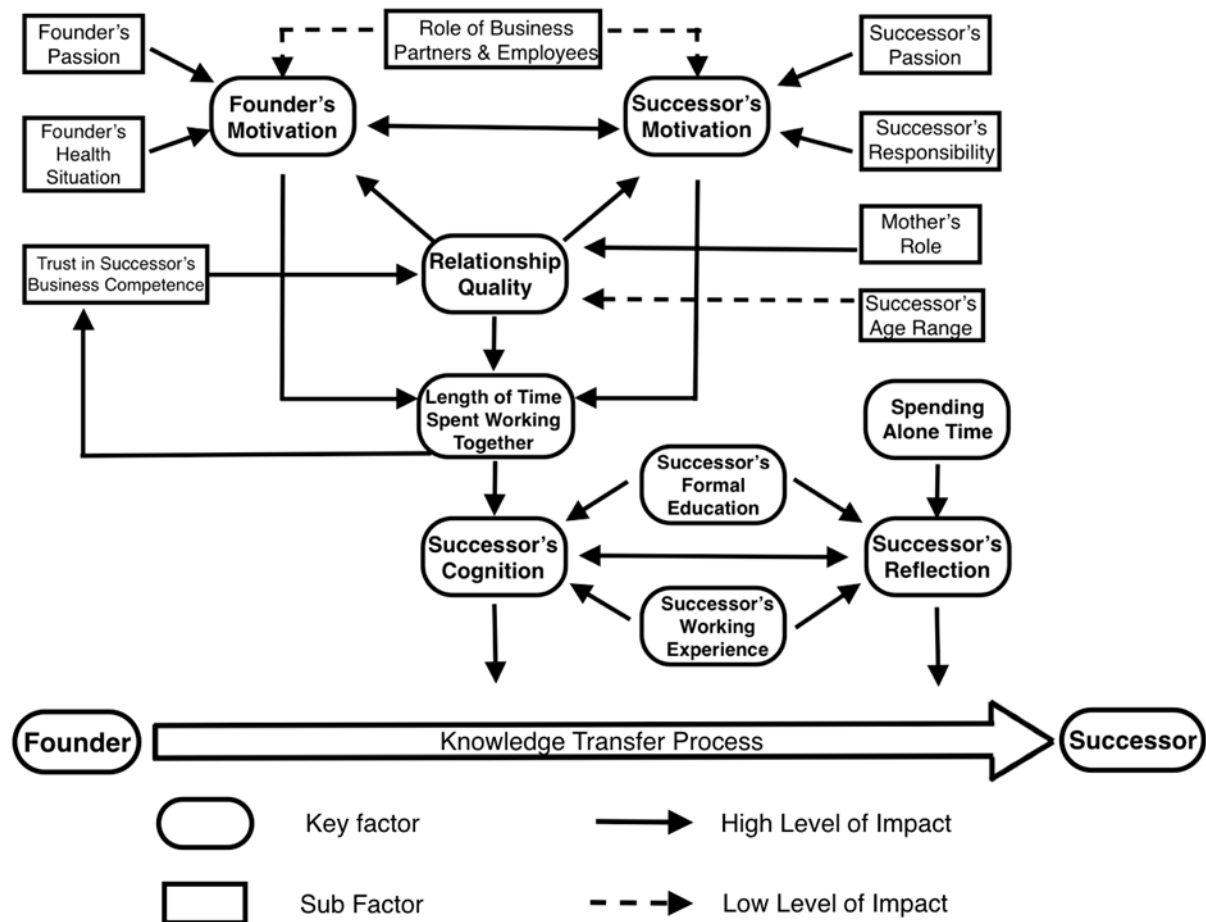
All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and recorded. Verbatim transcripts were used for data analysis to avoid losing any subtlety or responses through translation. The Vietnamese transcripts were then professionally translated into English for use in this work. The data were manually analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data. Then they identified key ideas and concepts within the data. The researchers then developed a coding system that reflected the identified themes. Selecting key codes was the next step, wherein the researchers reduced the total number of codes. The researchers then classified the codes and grouped them into key themes and sub themes (Braun and Clark, 2006). The researchers chose key themes based on the literature, such as founder motivation, successor motivation, or successor's formal education, while the sub-themes were identified from participant perspectives, for example, the founder's passion, the role of business partners, or the successor's responsibility. Cross-case replications, similarities, and differences were identified to highlight the relationship between the themes and improve validity of the factors.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Factors influencing the relationship quality between founder and successor during the knowledge transfer process**

Based on the results from this study, the researchers developed a model highlighting the factors that influence the knowledge transfer process in the Vietnamese family business context (Figure 1). This model provides additional insights to research in the family business field; that is, it suggests that the successor's cognition and reflection directly influence the knowledge transfer process from founder to successor, while the remaining factors indirectly influence this process. Existing family business literature suggests a direct impact of these factors on the process (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Hatak and Roessl, 2015).

**Figure 1:** The model of factors supporting the knowledge transfer process in Vietnamese family businesses



The following sections explain the model and present data from the interviews, which underpin the development of the model.

### Founder's motivation to transfer knowledge

The founder's motivation to transfer knowledge is a key factor to ensure the success of the knowledge transfer process in family businesses (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). The result from this research regarding the founder's motivation is consistent with previous studies, with strong agreement from interviewees about the importance of the founder's motivation in supporting the process. All founders in this research maintained that their successors lacked business experience and had weak management skills. They felt that a successor needed to be trained by the founder to develop skills in business, management,

conflict between family members, and government interaction. The study's findings are consistent with previous research asserting that successors should be trained to gain more business experience before taking over a family business (Man et al., 2016). This study expands previous research on factors affecting the founder's motivation by identifying four key elements that enhance the founder's motivation.

Firstly, the founders' passion was to keep their business within their family through generations, and they did not want to pass it to non-family members. Participants suggested that the motivation of passing the family business to a family member, rather than a non-family member, was due to a collectivism culture; they felt they could only trust family members. This finding supports previous research that has suggested that family business members feel that they cannot trust non-family members (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011). A founder stated that:

*"Choosing a non-family member to become successor is my last choice. If this situation happens, I am a loser and miserable until I die. It is because I have to always stand over them to watch out for my assets."*

Secondly, the data indicated that health problems relating to age influences the founder's motivation. Thus, they needed to transfer their family business to the next generation as soon as possible. For example, a founder said:

*"A 60-year-old man like me, there is not much time left anymore. Therefore, I have to hand over the business."*

Interestingly, the founder of the only firm run completely by the second generation, acknowledged that it had been difficult to make this decision. He shared that he had struggled to step down and transfer power. This suggests that when the founder's motivation is strong enough to overcome the fear of losing power, the knowledge transfer process may be more likely (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). A founder also suggested that he had to transfer his business to his son due to potential health issues:

*"I believe that I needed to transfer my business to my son when I was still of sound mind. So, if my son does something wrong, I still can fix it for him. However, if I transfer it when I am too old or unhealthy, it will be too late. I will have no capability to respond"*

*in that condition.”*

Thirdly, the data showed that the founders felt more motivated if their successors were highly motivated to gain knowledge. Most of the founders believed their successor's motivation to gain new knowledge fostered their enthusiasm to keep working and transfer their knowledge to the successor. For example, one founder cited his son's *“burning desire to gain new knowledge to improve himself”*, as one of the key factors that had maintained the founder's own motivation.

Lastly, the data showed that the founder's motivation to transfer knowledge to his successor is influenced by business partners' and employees' views. However, the level of influence found in this research is unclear, as fewer interviewees raised this issue. A successor explained that comments from business partners affected the founder's motivation and improved the successor's reputation in the business community.

*“If they [business partners] have good view on me, they tell each other. As a result, my reputation will be improved in my business field. And, of course, my father will feel more confident and proud of me, and then the motivation to transfer knowledge is also improved, when he hears good feedback about me from the customers as well as business partners.”*

### **Successor's motivation to gain knowledge**

Family business researchers largely agree that the successor's motivation to gain knowledge greatly influences the knowledge transfer process in family businesses (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Hatak and Roessl, 2015). However, research about the factors affecting the successor's motivation is still limited in family business literature. This research expands knowledge in this field by identifying four key factors that influence the successor's motivation.

The first is the successor's passion. All the successors answered the question about the importance of the founder's knowledge in a similar way. They emphasised that this kind of knowledge was vital to their family business career. Importantly, only family members were able to approach the founder to obtain knowledge. A successor stated that:

*“My father's business experience has been truly valuable, which was accumulated through decades of hardship. Importantly, not all people have the chance to learn it.”*

Included in this element is the successor's willingness to learn from the founder. The successors observed that they could save time and money by gaining knowledge from the founder. This supports Dawson et al.'s (2015) research, which suggests that successors who are driven by desire to work in a family business are associated with effective commitment. For example, a successor observed:

*"You can go very fast if you sit on the shoulders of a giant.... instead of trading with failures, money, health, I can utilize experience and knowledge from my father to reduce difficulties and avoid the repetition of the founder's mistakes."*

Secondly, the successor's feeling of responsibility influences the successor's motivation to receive the knowledge transfer. All successors believed their parents expected them to maintain the family business's stability, which motivated them to gaining knowledge and improve their business management skills. This further expands the research of Sharma and Irving (2005) who suggested that normative commitment to remain in the family business is based on a perceived sense of obligation. It follows that when successors believe knowledge transfer is important, normative commitment influences the incentive to remain in the family business and the motivation for gaining knowledge. A successor explained that:

*"I found that the pressure and responsibility to manage my father's business well, which was one of the factors, impacted positively on my motivation."*

Thirdly, the founder's motivation to transfer knowledge has a direct influence on the successor's motivation to receive the knowledge. All of the founders agreed that encouragement was effective in improving successor motivation. In addition, successors in all five cases acknowledged that they felt more motivated to gain knowledge because of support of the founders. For example, a successor acknowledged that his business competence had improved because his father pressured him to work diligently to gain company-wide business experience.

Lastly, the role of business partners and employees also influences the successor's motivation to receive knowledge. For instance, a successor acknowledged that senior employees and their business experiences were important to maintaining the success of a family business,



which he needed to take advantage of. However, the problem was how to ensure that the senior employees were willing to support the successor. In addition, a founder supported the idea of his successor by suggesting that successors need to realise the role of senior employees as valuable assets with valuable business experience. Successors felt they could not be successful without effective employee support. Therefore, a successor needed to maintain the relationship quality with senior employees. Furthermore, a successor said:

*“Good comments from customers and business partners not only make my father proud and improve his motivation, but also encourage me to gain more knowledge to improve my business management ability.”*

It is clear that the role of business partners and employees influence the successor's motivation. However, the level of this influence requires further study because not all interviewees highlighted this issue.

### **Relationship quality between founder and successor**

The importance of relationship quality and its impact on the length of time spent working together in supporting the knowledge transfer process has been identified in existing family business literature (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001). The result from this research is consistent with previous research, which indicated that there is a strong connection between the level of relationship quality and the length of time that they are able to spend working together to support the knowledge transfer process. This means that a quality relationship in which sides share knowledge accelerates the knowledge transfer process.

### *Factors influencing relationship quality during the knowledge transfer process*

The data indicated that there are three factors that directly influence the relationship quality between the two generations. They are the trust, the successor's age range, and the role of the mother.

In terms of trust, the results indicate that there are two kinds of trust in a family business: Bloodline-based trust based on the family relationship and trust based on the successor's

business competence. All of the interviewees acknowledged that trust based on relationship was a critically important factor in supporting relationship quality between two generations. This result supports previous research by indicating that trust based on a family relationship is a competitive advantage in a family business (Carnes and Ireland, 2013). However, the founder's trust in the successor's business experience is different from the founder's trust in the successor based on family relationship (Shi et al., 2015). Although all of the founders suggested that they trusted their successors because they were their children, they did not put their complete trust in their successor's business competence, a key aspect of trust to enable founder to delegate control. This suggests that the successor must prove his business competence to his father. Lack of trust was often attributed to successors being young and lacking business experience. As a result, the founder's trust in his successor is built up over time-spent working together. A founder summed this by saying:

*"Many people put their blind trust in somebody with the expectation that the person will achieve what they want. But if you blindly trust your son, who is still young, lacking in business experience and weak in business competence, this trust can ruin a business contract, or a business target, or your family firm. Therefore, I believe that I have to not only put my trust in my successor, who has lived with me for many years, but also closely monitor this kind of trust."*

The second factor was the role of the successor's mother (the founder's wife in all cases), which significantly influences relationship quality. Literature suggests the successor's mother plays an important role in maintaining relationship quality between founder and successor (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2004). This was highlighted in all interviews. The interviewees described the successor's mother as being a mediator or referee who observes the founder-successor interplay, intervening when tensions arise. Two founders explained the following:

*"In some cases when I cannot find a common voice with my son, my wife can explain issue clearly to my son."*

*"She [founder's wife] is a bridge between us."*

A similar perspective was echoed by the successors. This was summarized by one successor using the following words:

*“Only my mother, who is close to my father and me, has a clear viewpoint on the story. Other family members they cannot give their opinions when they don’t understand. When conflict arises between two generations, my mom plays an intermediary role to find a common voice between us.”*

This outcome confirms that the role of the successor’s mother is extremely significant for supporting and maintaining the relationship quality between founder and successor. In contrast, the role of siblings was not underscored in the same manner. A successor commented that:

*“Other members don’t usually intervene because they don’t understand our business problems. Thus, they cannot give their opinions when they don’t understand.”*

The third factor that influenced the relationship quality was the successors’ age range. Two successors suggested that the relationship between them and their fathers had started out more tense and slowly improved after they were in their mid-twenties. One successor stated:

*“Before I was 25, I felt uncomfortable to talk with my father, so I often avoided him. However, after the age of 25 or 26, I found it easier to talk with him and the opportunity of receiving his business knowledge become better and more productive.”*

A second successor presented something similar, but due to a different reasoning. He explained that:

*“I only realized my father’s advice was valuable when I was experienced enough. I was very excitable and not concerned about my father’s advice when I was a 21 or 22-year-old boy after studying abroad.”*

This outcome is consistent with previous research suggesting that the relationship between father and son tends to become more harmonious when the former is between the ages of 50 and 59 and the latter is in the age range of 23 to 32 (Davis and Tagiuri, 1989; Ward, 2011). The other three successors did not mention this issue, possibly because they all started to work full time in the family business after their mid- twenties, or because they were uncomfortable criticising their families.

### **The connection between the founder's motivation to transfer knowledge and the successor's motivation to gain knowledge and the link to the quality of their relationship**

The connection between the founder's motivation to transfer knowledge and the successor's motivation to gain knowledge, and the relationship quality has not been mentioned in current literature. However, this research suggests they are connected. The data indicated that an amicable relationship quality between founder and successor might improve both the founder's motivation to transfer knowledge and the successor's motivation to gain knowledge. These appear to impact positively throughout the length of time spent together to support the knowledge transfer process.

#### *Successor's cognition*

Higginson (2010) suggests that cognition is one of the most important factors in the knowledge transfer process. She defined cognition as the process of understanding the logic behind another's viewpoints, which can be captured by spending sufficient time in discussion with them. A major element in supporting cognitive ability is the amount and intensity of time the founder and successor spend working together. Discussing and sharing business issues with one another can foster the mutual understanding that supports the knowledge transfer process (Higginson, 2010).

The considerable influence of the length of time spent working together on the process of understanding knowledge (cognition) was highlighted by the data. Both founders and successors highlighted this. A founder explained that:

*"My son has to do the same things as I do, learn my way of running the business, and how I deal with business issues. In order to get this assignment done, he has to spend more time working with me."*

A successor identified that:

*"When the successor is eager for learning, he will attempt to find a way to improve relationships and actively increase the face-to-face time, in order to accelerate the process of knowledge accumulation."*

Interviewees indicated that regular discussion and sharing of business issues between founder and successor encouraged the process of comprehending knowledge. A successor highlighted:

*“Only working together can I learn, and then I can work towards finding reasonable solutions in the future.”*

In addition, they also identified the process of accumulating business knowledge as requiring time.

#### *Successor’s reflection*

Higginson (2010) states that reflection is the ability to recognize and absorb new knowledge. The predecessor and successor thus benefit from spending quality time together to create a shared understanding (cognition), and the successor also needs time for himself to contemplate the newly gained knowledge (Higginson, 2010; Pham et al., 2018). Although all successors agreed that the founder’s knowledge was very important to them, they believed that not all knowledge was applicable to their generation. For example, a successor explained that:

*“In my case, I take only what’s [knowledge] appropriate to myself, and reject what’s not suitable to my character.”*

Another successor suggested that:

*“If I do not reflect after the discussion with my father, the knowledge I gained from the discussion will soon go into oblivion.”*

Thus, they had to spend time alone to think and refine information before accepting and absorbing it. Overall, the process of knowledge transfer between founder and successor may not be productive without the reflective process.

Interestingly, the typical process of learning knowledge was described by the five successors in this study, who highlighted its circular nature as involving the successor’s cognition and reflection. At the beginning of the process, the knowledge is contemplated after discussion with the founder. Next, the successor shares his business ideas again with the founder to

identify any inappropriate or unclear business issues. Then he spends time alone to consider and absorb the new knowledge. Consequently, the process is repeatable until the successor feels he can comprehend everything. It is clear that there is an interaction between the successor's cognition and reflection that appears to be an active learning process (Pedler, 2011). A successor commented:

*"In my opinion, the process of understanding business looks like an action learning process... The discussion process between two generations and the time spent contemplating alone are repeated until I can absorb this business lesson into my mind as well as be able to apply it in my business life."*

### *Formal education*

Researchers have argued that the successors' academic and practical training outside the firm influences the knowledge transfer process in family business (Chirico, 2007; Martínez et al., 2013). However, there is a lack of evidence regarding the relationship between the successors' formal education and other factors in supporting the knowledge transfer process. This research explores the role of successors' formal education in supporting the process.

The role of formal education was acknowledged by the successors, who stated that it significantly influenced both their cognitive and reflective ability by enhancing their critical thinking ability, which helped them understand and then contemplate new knowledge from the founder. Critical thinking ability allows successors to see multiple outcomes of a course of action (Cottrell, 2011). They applied this critical thinking ability to decide whether they should take on knowledge imparted by the founder. For example, a successor suggested that critical thinking ability was the most valuable skill that he had gained from formal education because it helped him solve business problems, understand and contemplate new knowledge and had provided him with the tools needed to judge a complex issue. A successor stated:

*"I think knowledge is very important, whether it is gained from schooling or in society. I think that gaining formal knowledge from university is good, but this must be done seriously and not just for the certificate. The knowledge and critical thinking skills that I learnt from university are more important than the certificate."*

This suggests that business knowledge can continue to grow and develop through formal education (Barbera et al., 2015; Bozer et al., 2017). Interestingly, this research highlighted that the fathers were in favour of their son's formal education and actively encouraged them to pursue their education further to become effective future leaders. This was highlighted by comments such as:

*“So far, my son has sufficiently combined the characteristics that I require; morality and formal education. He lacks only experience in management, business and life.”*

This confirmed the view of Man et al. (2016) that founders aware of their shortcomings believed that successors could offer new knowledge and insights through a good quality education. This was despite none of the fathers having had any experience of higher education themselves and is in line with Confucian traditions present in Vietnam, which value knowledge and traditional education (Bell, 2019).

#### *Successors' experience working outside of the family business*

Experience working outside the family business is another important factor that influences the successor's cognitive and reflective ability. A successor suggested disadvantages of working only inside the family business:

*“If I had worked only in my family firm, I would be like a frog in a well. I would only see a limited sky area. As a result, my thinking ability would also be limited and I would hardly ever think broadly.”*

For participants without external working experience, their comments reflected a desire to have worked somewhere after graduation to gain more work experience. They suggested that experience working outside the family business could have helped them expand their knowledge and supported them in the knowledge transfer process. Duh and Letonja (2013) suggested that it could also encourage the application of new ideas and the exploitation of new opportunities.

Furthermore, most founders encouraged their successors to work outside the family business to gain more experience. Typical comments were that working outside the family

firm might improve successors' business competence, critical thinking ability or expand their business relationships. Business relationships and networks have been identified as important for business growth and development in Asian transition economies (Liu and Bell, 2019). This result is consistent with Brockhaus's (2004) finding that the majority of advisors suggested that successors should get at least three-to-five years of experience outside the family business to improve business competence and provide a sense of identity, credibility, and self confidence.

Conversely, however, a founder stated that his son would be better off gaining business experience from him rather than working elsewhere, because he believed there were few people able to sincerely share their experience with the successor:

*"A successor will make a lot of mistakes if he is new to the business field without any advice from people who have experience. However, he only learns one lesson after making a lot of mistakes. Furthermore, there are a lot of frauds out there, and sincerity is rare in the business field. Therefore, he just needs to learn from me, who will share my experience with sincerity."*

This view is in-line with Sardeshmukh and Corbett's (2011) suggestion that working outside the family business may not provide the successor with the relevant experience needed to be the family business leader.

## **Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions**

This study contributes to the literature by meeting calls to further explore the variables that influence succession and knowledge transfer processes (Osnes et al., 2019) and exploring the knowledge transfer process in the collectivist Vietnamese culture (Pham et al., 2019) wherein cultural interactions and social expectations influence family business differently to (more frequently researched) western cultures (Yan and Sorenson, 2006). Thus, this research offers a better understanding of the succession process in first-generation family-owned businesses in Vietnam and provides a contextualized model highlighting the main factors that influence the knowledge transfer process from the founder to the successor. The research suggests that the successor's cognition and reflection directly influence the knowledge transfer process from founder to successor, while the remaining factors indirectly influence this process. It



identifies the importance of the relationship quality between the successor and the founder and its link to the connection between the founder's motivation to impart knowledge and the successor's motivation to gain knowledge. It also highlights that pursuing higher education is viewed as improving the successor's cognitive and reflective abilities. Gaining external work experience was also considered to be a positive factor in most of the cases. In addition, the data emphasized the role of the successor's mother, implying that a close family member with affinity for and trust of both parties may be another key factor in maintaining relationship quality in this context. The model also sheds light on factors that may hinder the process of knowledge transfer in a Vietnamese family business.

In common with any research, this study has its limitations. This research employed a cross-sectional qualitative research method using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Thus, all data was collected as a snapshot from participants' memory and recall and could potentially be affected by the accuracy of their memories. Future research could mitigate this limitation by using a mixed method or employing a longitudinal study. The participants were all Vietnamese males (both founders and successors), which is common as the culture prioritizes sons as business successors (Anggadwita et al., 2019). Whilst the model may be applicable across similar family businesses across Vietnam, it may not be relevant to Vietnamese family firms that involve female founders or successors, as previous research has found that business succession is influenced by gender (Soost and Moog, 2019). The model may also be relevant to family businesses in East Asian countries that have a similar culture, such as Taiwan, China, South Korea, and Japan, and warrants further study. Future research could seek to further explore the family business succession process involving women in Vietnam and other collectivist and transition economies and could consider viewpoints beyond the founder and successor, such as other family members and stakeholders. Finally, the research utilised a relatively modest sample size; however, this conforms to the acceptable sample size put forward by Eisenhardt (1989) from which to generate theory.

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