

EMPLOYMENT GROWTH IS NOT A PRIORITY – THE CONCEPT OF GROWTH AMONG SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

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ABSTRACT

The growth of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) has attracted substantial interest from government agencies throughout the world. SMEs comprise the largest proportion of firms in most economies and frequently employ the largest proportion of the workforce. For these reasons governments view SMEs as a potential solution to the reduction of unemployment. Official measures of SME growth tend to focus on the number of employees within the firm. Recent Australian government studies into SME growth undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reflect this approach.

Research undertaken by the Small Business Unit at Curtin University of Technology with the owner managers of SMEs suggests that growth is measured less by the size of their payroll than by such factors as personal development and lifestyle. Workshop sessions, supported by Group Support System (GSS) software, undertaken over a three year period with the owners of fifty small firms indicate that business growth is likely to be measured by such factors as – market share, profitability, turn over, personal and professional change and level of freedom available to the owner in lifestyle choice.

This paper outlines the nature of these findings and argues that the official obsession with employment as key criteria for measuring SME growth fails to understand the motivations of many small business owners. Such a failure risks the development of inappropriate government policies and assistance programs targeted at generating growth in SMEs.

Introduction

Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) comprise the largest proportion of businesses in most economies and frequently offer the greatest potential for job creation (Asquith and Weston, 1994). In the United States small businesses employing less than 20 people were the major source of new jobs during the late 1980's (Phillips, 1993). A similar pattern was observed in Canada where the fastest growing sector of the economy was that of SMEs (DeLaurentis, 1994). Within the 18 countries of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) region, small to medium firms comprise over 90 per cent of all enterprises. Such firms also contribute between 30 to 60 per cent of GDP and account for as much as 84 per cent of employment (APEC, 1997). In Australia, SMEs account for about half the total employment in the non-agricultural sector (ABS, 1998).

The substantial contribution small firms make to overall employment statistics within most economy's makes them of particular interest to governments. Official statistical measurements of small business usually focus on employment as the key variable in classifying firms as small or large. Within Australia, for example, a small business is officially defined as one that is independently owned and managed, and employs less than 100 persons if a manufacturer or less than 20 persons if not (ABS, 1995). A medium size firm employs between 20 and 200 while a large firm generally employs over

200 persons (ABS, 1996). More recently the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has identified a micro businesses as employing fewer than 5 persons.

Employment trends in Australian Small Business

Unemployment within Australia has been a major policy concern for governments for decades. During the early 1990s unemployment rates rose to 'double-digit' levels placing extreme pressure on the Commonwealth Government to find solutions. By 1998 unemployment had fallen slightly but there were still an estimated 800,000 Australians seeking full time employment and unemployment rates of just over 8 per cent (Economist, 1998).

For much of the current federal government's term in office a key focus for the reduction in unemployment has been upon the small business sector. This was highlighted in the Prime Minister's *More Time for Business* statement released in March 1997 (Howard, 1997). The statement set a framework for developing a policy environment more encouraging to small business. As the public sector and corporate Australia continue to 'down size' their work force, it is the small business sector which is seen as the force most likely to break the employment drought. Any optimism the Government may have had regarding the future of the employment rate appears to have been based on the economic forecasts that anticipated real GDP growth rates of between 3 and 4 per cent for 1998 (Economist, 1997). The collapse of Asian financial markets in 1997-1998 has left a cloud of uncertainty over the Australian economy. Even optimistic predictions suggest relatively high unemployment levels until the end of the century.

Unfortunately for Government policy the evidence for the small business sector as a major engine for employment is not strong. Much of the confidence in the small business sector as a potential source of employment growth stems from research undertaken in the early 1980s. This indicated that firms with less than 20 employees generated around 88 per cent of all employment growth in the United States over the period 1981-1985 (Birch, 1987). Subsequent analysis of this research has indicated that these assessments were rather higher than originally estimated. While small firms certainly made a substantial contribution to employment, their total contribution to growth in the 1980s was closer to 37 per cent (Storey, 1994).

Similar patterns can be found in Australia where growth in small business employment over the period from 1993 to 1997 increased at an average of 5.3 per cent per annum while the growth rates among self-employed fell (ABS, 1998). Growth rates in employment levels among larger firms in Australia have been around 7 per cent per annum or twice the rate over the previous decade to 1997 (ABS, 1998). The ABS noted that the overall decline in the level of small business share of total employment over the period 1995-1997 was due to an increase in people working for large firms and a fall in the number of people operating their own businesses. This suggests that as the economy improved over this period more people ceased to be self-employed and sought work as employees of large firms.

ABS (1998) analysis of the average annual growth in employment within the small business sector over the 13 year period from 1983 to 1997 shows that the contribution of small businesses to overall private sector employment growth was negligible.

A longitudinal analysis of the employment change within the small business sector undertaken by the ABS highlighted what they describe as the 'churnover' factor. This is a measure of the number of jobs created as compared to the number of jobs lost in the sector. Table 1 shows this level of job generation and destruction for the period 1993 to 1996. It can be seen that the 'churnover' rate for small firms was quite high.

Table 1 – Small Business Job Generation and Destruction 1993-1996

	<u>1993-94</u>	<u>1994-95</u>	<u>1995-96</u>
	'000	'000	'000
Employment generation	117	151	621
Employment destruction	58	96	468
Net employment change	58	55	153
Job turnover	175	249	1,089
Churnover factor	3.0	4.5	7.1

(ABS, 1998: 138-139)

These figures do not suggest that small business will necessarily provide the federal government with a major source of relief to its employment drought. Many small businesses do not employ and are usually unable to offer long term full time employment. Finally, small firms exist as part of their industry sectors and frequently expand or contract along with them. Federal government policy is likely to be better placed targeting industry sectors rather than small businesses themselves. Nevertheless while the small business sector continues to represent half of all private sector employment any growth achieved will alleviate unemployment.

Growth characteristics of small firms

The characteristics of small businesses with employment growth in excess of 10 per cent were profiled by the ABS in their *Business Growth and Performance Survey* (1996). This study showed that employment growth was strongest among manufacturers with the wholesale and retail sector, accommodation, cafes and restaurants sector, and property and business services sectors also showing strong employment growth.

This study also found that employment growth was strongest among younger firms – less than 10 years old. Fastest employment growth was recorded among firms aged between 2 and 5 years. Other characteristics associated with employment growth in the small

business sector were – export behaviour, innovation, foreign ownership, unionization and franchising.

Exporting firms showed much higher employment growth rates than non-exporters. Higher employment growth rates were also recorded among businesses identified as ‘innovative’ – defined as those firms that introduced new or substantially changed goods or services. Foreign owned businesses and those with a unionized workforce were found to have experienced much higher levels of employment growth than those without foreign owners or a predominately non-union workforce. Finally, businesses operating under a franchise agreement recorded higher levels of employment increase and decrease over the survey period.

The *Yellow Pages* (1995) survey to growth oriented small business described those high growth businesses as typically being in the services sector, with five or more employees and a high turnover. Such small businesses also tended to have proprietary company status and were less than five years old. Other features of these businesses were their use of formal planning and management systems. They were more likely to be engaged in export and had younger, mostly male owners.

The Decision to Grow

Although successful growth within the small business sector is contingent upon many factors, the most important is arguably the attitude of the owner-manager. The decision to grow is a risky one that many entrepreneurs choose not to make. For example, a survey of 1,996 Small and Medium Enterprises undertaken by the Japan Small Business Research Institute in 1994 found 64 per cent of respondents did not wish to grow into large corporations (Kazumi, 1995). Similar findings were produced by the *Yellow Pages Small Business Index* (1995) survey of Australian small businesses that found less than 10 per cent of respondents were growth oriented.

The reasons why so many small business owner-managers should not desire growth are numerous. Concern over having to go into debt is a deterrent to many, particularly women (Taylor, 1986). Growth can also represent a loss of personal control by the owner-manager who may dislike the idea of passing the responsibility of running the business over to professional managers (Barnes and Hershon, 1976). It is important to realize that the problems associated with growth in the small business are just as difficult as those confronting much larger firms are. Effective growth strategies require careful planning and most small business lack the resources needed to undertake this (Shuman and Seeger, 1986).

For many small business owner-managers the decision to grow is fraught with problems (Bosworth and Jacobs, 1989). Inadequate management skills, particularly in strategic planning, can serve as a deterrent (Scase and Goffee, 1980; Boswell, 1973). Access to finance has also been identified as a major impediment to small business growth in firms requiring it for R&D (Jones, 1992). The inability of the small business to seek out sources of information and technology needed for growth has also been found to act as a potential barrier (Rothwell and Beesley, 1989).

According to Jones (1992) the majority of barriers to small business growth are found inside the business. These include a lack of technical and managerial skill, inadequate organisational adaptability and ability to acquire or use technology.

The Owner-Manager's Influence on Growth

At the heart of the small business growth process lies the owner-manager entrepreneur. According to Kazumi (1995) the entrepreneur is characterised by a combination of abilities and personal characteristics. Among the key abilities are such things as imagination, the ability to create and execute plans, negotiation, leadership and managerial skills. The personal characteristics are determination, optimism, independence and a willingness to take risks and rise to challenges. The qualities were supported by earlier studies in the United States (Brockhaus and Horwitz, 1985).

Churchill and Lewis (1983) identified eight factors relating to growth which focused on the owner and their business. The owner related factors were the goals set by the owner, their operational abilities in technical skills (e.g. marketing, production), their managerial skills and strategic planning abilities. Business factors were financial resources, personnel, planning and control systems, and process technologies including customer relations, marketing and distribution processes.

Gibb and Davies (1992) examined the growth process of small businesses in the United Kingdom. This analysis focused on the 'base potential for development' inherent within the firm. Growth was contingent upon the financial, physical and human resources available to the owner manager as well as their own experience, leadership, ideas and control base. A combination of external and internal factors need to be considered by small business owner managers seeking to grow their firm's operations.

Growth in the small business is strongly associated with the personality, attitudes and behaviour of the owner manager. The decision to grow is often a personal one associated with internal motivations not linked to the more rational economic considerations of government. For example, Perry, Meredith and Cunnington (1988) examined the relationships between the personal characteristics of owner-managers and small business growth. Their findings suggest uncertainty over all relationships except the need for achievement within the owner, which was indicated as significantly associated with growth.

It is unfortunate that so much attention has been paid to employment as a measure of growth in the small business. While employment growth is clearly important to government policy and national economic prosperity, it is an outcome of small business growth that is in turn driven by other more personal motivations. As the employment figures suggest, small businesses experience high 'churnover' rates and shift from self-employment to employee status when opportunities present themselves.

Growth Motivations of Small Business Owners

Research undertaken with small business owner managers undertaking a “Growth Program” suggests that growth is associated with a wide range of motivations of which the recruitment of new employees is not important. This research involved observations of the responses of fifty small business owner managers over a three-year period.

The Small Business Unit (SBU) of the Curtin Business School, Curtin University of Technology in Perth Western Australia conducts regular small business “Growth Programs” for the owner managers of small firms seeking to grow. Originally developed by the Small Business Centre, Durham University Business School (DUBS), Durham, U.K., the “Growth Program” involves a series of sixteen one-day training workshops over twelve months. Each participating owner manager is required to select an individual ‘project’ that will enable them to successfully grow and develop their business. Projects are supported throughout the program by individual counselling from Mentors.

At the commencement of each program all participants are asked to identify why they wish to grow their business and what growth means to them. These sessions are conducted using Group Support Software (GSS) from the Strategic Planning and Decisions Unit (SPDU) also located within the Curtin Business School. This GSS system utilizes laptop computers linked into a common server. Participants ‘brainstorm’ their ideas for growth and what it means to them by typing them directly into the laptops. All responses are collected by the server and sorted by key word using “*MeetingWorks*” software to generate an overall picture of the group’s view of the subject. A facilitator is then used to assist the group to place their collective responses into priority order.

This methodology enables a more efficient gathering of group ideas while also controlling for any peer group pressure or dominance by influential participants. It has been used on five small business ‘Growth Programs’ at Curtin Business School thereby providing a ‘rich picture’ of the attitudes and perceptions of a range of small business owners towards growth.

An initial question asked of the respondents was “Why grow?” This question was received with a range of responses the majority of which were focused around personal issues. As can be seen from Table 2 the responses grouped into three broad categories. The first related to **internal motivators** and included things associated with the owner manager’s sense of self or desire for personal advancement. The second category related to **external motivators** and included things external to the business that required the owner to respond to through a growth oriented strategy. Finally, the third category related to **altruistic motivators** that included employment creation and general benefits to the wider community.

Table 2: Motivations for Growth

<u>Internal</u>	<u>External</u>	<u>Altruistic</u>
▪ Financial security	▪ Grow to sell business	▪ Generate employment
▪ Personal Challenge	▪ Response to market pressure	▪ Benefit others in community
▪ Improve lifestyle	▪ Take advantage of opportunity	
▪ Ego	▪ Grow or die	
▪ To increase wealth		

These findings support the research of Perry, Meredith and Cunnington (1988) which found that growth motivations among small business owners was significantly associated with McClelland's (1961) need for achievement (**nAch**). Kazumi (1995) supports this citing research undertaken at the Japan Small Business Research Institute that classified growth oriented entrepreneurs as – innovative, ambitious, possessing a strong feeling of mission and being fiercely independent in spirit.

Key Considerations for Growth

In addition to examining the motivations for growth, the GSS sessions undertaken by Curtin Business School also examined the key issues to be considered by the small business owners when seeking growth. These considerations included how growth could be measured as well as the means by which growth could be achieved.

As shown in Table 3 the measures of growth identified by the respondents grouped broadly into financial, marketing and management areas. The financial issues were more commonly reported as measures of growth than the management ones. These findings are similar to those gathered by Mazzarol and Ramaseshan (1998) in a survey of 113 small businesses. This study found that profit growth rated significantly ahead of other factors as a success measure among small business owners. Growth in sales and growth in assets were rated in second and third place while growth in employee numbers was viewed as being of low importance to measuring success.

Table 3: Measures of Growth in Small Business

<u>Financial</u>		
▪ Turnover (dollars)	▪ Increased net profit	▪ Increased equity
▪ Profits (bottom line)	▪ Increased dividends	▪ Return on investment
<u>Marketing</u>		
▪ Increased Market Share	▪ Increased Customer base	▪ Increased sales
<u>Management</u>		
▪ Staff numbers	▪ Increased efficiency	▪ Increased well being

In examining how growth in their own business might be achieved the respondents in the GSS sessions were tasked to list as many potential factors as possible. A substantial list was produced that was ranked in order of priority. Twelve key areas were identified as shown in Table 4. It can be seen that the most important – from the owner managers’ perspectives – were profitability and management skill.

Table 4: Means of Achieving Growth in Small Business

Average importance rating (n = 10/10)	
▪ Profitability (9/10)	▪ Quality (7.1/10)
▪ Management skill (9/10)	▪ Technology (6.9/10)
▪ Human Resource Management (8.1/10)	▪ Production/Logistics (6.7/10)
▪ Strategic Management (7.9/10)	▪ Marketing (6.4/10)
▪ Personal development (7.5/10)	▪ Succession Planning (5.4/10)
▪ Finance (7.1/10)	▪ Accessing professionals (4.9/10)

The issue of **profitability** was focused on how to achieve enhanced profits in conjunction with increased turnover levels. It was observed that for growth to be achieved profitability must increase along with sales to avoid ‘running faster to stay still’. Greater profits were needed to provide finance for investment in new technology or marketing efforts.

Management skill was related to a range of issues that included a need to increase an owner's knowledge of products, general managerial skills and ability to coordinate and lead subordinates. Two important sub-themes emerged from within this area:

- **Balancing hands-on and proprietorship** – this considered finding ways to reconcile being a 'hands-on' practitioner at the same time as being a business manager, as the business grows. Lack of time to manage the business while operating within it. The need to balance personal life demands with those from a growing business, and getting more time to enjoy work rather than undertaking mundane tasks.
- **Communication** – this issue related to the need to maintain a standard of care in internal communication and feedback with employees. It concerned the development of managers and supervisors to become more effective in their roles and independent of decision making to assist the overall growth of the business.

Human Resource Management was concerned with recruiting, training and keeping good staff. A lack of good supervisors and skilled employees was identified as a key issue. Staff development to engender a sense of personal commitment, responsibility, customer service and 'best practice' behaviour was a major desire.

Strategic Management related to such matters as exit strategies, decision making over what to do and over what time period to allocate resources. The general vision and mission of the business was considered here along with how to establish and implement effective marketing and investment strategies.

Personal development concerns focused on the management of stress – particularly that associated with financial worries – as well as issues arising from family and work colleagues. These revolved around the need to convince others that the owner manager had the ability to lead the business in the right direction and the skill to resolve conflicts between staff and partners. Some owners even found themselves facing a sense of 'guilt' for being successful.

Finance related issues concerned financing growth and keeping up with the rapid changes in technology that required additional investment. Better information from improved reporting systems was identified as needed to enable the owner managers to control financial matters.

Quality considerations involved finding ways to achieve best practice and enhance customer service. Total Quality Management (TQM) and formal quality assurance systems were viewed as desirable in achieving this while staff training was seen as the means to do so.

Technology issues were divided into information technology and production technology. In the case of the former the main concerns were the need to keep up with the rapid changes taking place there and the cost of doing so. Also of concern was how to make use of such technology for future competitiveness. On the production technology side the future focus was particularly strong.

Production Logistics concerns related to finding ways to implement a better system of factory planning and logistics. **Marketing** focused on finding new market opportunities and the need to promote products and services. **Succession planning** was of concern to those from family businesses and **Accessing professionals** revolved around the need to find suitable consultants to assist the owner in their growth process.

Previous research into the successful growth of small business has highlighted many of these issues. Management experience and education have been found to be related to success (Sage, 1993). Formal strategic planning has also been found associated with small business success (Jackson, 1994). Kaufman, Weaver and Poynter (1996) found successful growth linked to financial skills and family support, while Simon (1996) found that reliability, value adding, quality, good service and long term partnering were all success strategies.

Too Much Emphasis on Employment Growth

The discussion outlined above suggests that considerations of growth among small business owner managers are a complex interchange of issues, part personal and part environmental. Any decision to grow is likely to be motivated by internal or external influences rather than a desire to generate employment opportunities for others.

As reflected in the GSS session findings the owner manager of a small business is likely to see staffing levels as a measure of their firm's growth, however, it may well be of less importance than financial or market factors. The employment of additional staff is a means to an end and must be balanced against the somewhat more important considerations of profitability and the owner's own management skill.

Government policy fixations with small business employment growth are understandable given the need political leaders have to reduce unemployment levels. In framing such policy it is important for governments to understand the complex web of motivations influencing entrepreneurial desire for business growth.

Employment growth within the small business sector will be achieved as an outcome of owner manager activity in pursuit of other goals. Assisting small business to achieve growth will require more emphasis to be placed on encouraging owner manager goal setting for personal lifestyle and wealth creation ambitions. If governments wish to assist the growth of small business they should look at how best to enhance overall firm **profitability**. Taxation regimes that work against profit retention and the imposition of 'on-costs' that increase the cost of labour will not serve to promote small business growth. Tax reform is a perennial cry from the small business sector and a topic of heated political debate. However, it is of concern that the taxation regulations in Australia place more emphasis on net-profit minimization to reduce taxes than gross profit maximization to fuel growth.

The enhancement of **management skills** among small business owners is likely to be another useful step in assisting growth. Financial support to enable owners to undertake management training is one option available to government but one that is currently ignored. The Training Guarantee Levy of the former Labour government has now been

scrapped and remains a controversial policy. It did at least promote an awareness of the need for greater training within Australian business. Government supported incentives for better management training within the small business sector are needed. Good programs are available from a range of educational institutions and private training providers. However, cost – both in financial terms and time – is a major obstacle to greater take-up rates of training by small business owners. Awareness is another. A major problem for many small business owner managers is that – ‘they don’t know what they don’t know’. For small businesses in regional Australia the problem is one of access to quality training. This problem is exacerbated by the closure of regional TAFE Colleges now facing greater competition from a deregulated education sector.

Effective management training for small business owners would serve to address many of the other considerations involved with growth. It would help in the area of human resource management, strategic management, personal development, financial and marketing skills, quality enhancements, production and logistics, and the use of technology. Put simply if we can get the owner manager right through effective training we can better ensure that the entire business will be better off.

Government policy can also assist with the issue of **accessing professionals**. The coordination of information on relevant small business advisors and the creation of national frameworks for the accreditation of such people are all relevant areas for government. Despite the presence of a Federal Office of Small Business much of the policy development for small business in Australia is fragmented between State and Territory authorities. National ministerial summits do take place but the level of cooperation remains low.

Shift the Focus to the Owner Manager

For those wishing to research small business management practice or assist the small business owner, there is a need to shift the focus of attention away from employee numbers as a measure of small business growth to other factors such as financial and market performance indicators. Further, while employment growth may be a priority for governments it is not so for the owner managers of small business. Although they represent half of the entire work force, personal ambitions rather than a desire to solve the government’s unemployment problems motivate the small business sector. Government policy makers need to shift their emphasis onto the things likely to encourage growth in the small business. While the decision to grow is a complex process the key to achieving growth appears to be the enhancement of owner managerial skills and increased profitability of their businesses.

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