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The Big Concerns of Small Business: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents insights from a qualitative study of small business owners across Australia. The findings identified four key themes that emerged from the discussions. The first focuses on regulation and examines small business owners' views on the nature of workplace regulation. The second theme identified that small business owners view success as a trade-off between structural quantity (i.e. more employees, greater financial returns), and functional quality (i.e. personal satisfaction and lifestyle). This third theme focused on owners' perceptions of their business and its role in their personal and professional life. The final theme examined the future of the Australian workplace. An overall review of the findings is then presented to draw together the discussion and conclusion.

BACKGROUND: The literature on the interface between small business and regulation consistently suggests that workplace regulation system can be difficult for small business owners to negotiate, particularly if they lack specialist knowledge (Hodges & Bond, 2014; McKeown, Mazzarol, Lazaris, & Gilles, 2016). It is not just whether the small firm complies with workplace regulations, but the owner-manager's ability to understand what they need to do in order to comply (PC, 2015). In general, terms, the Australian Workplace Regulations (WR) system is structured around a dichotomy in which employers and their employees are separated into two distinct and often adversarial groups (Perry, Meredith & Cunnington, 1988). However, within the SME workplace, this separation is often blurred. The smaller the size of the firm, the more informal workplace relations and systems become. Further, for the micro-enterprises (with 1 to 4 employees) and the non-employing Nano-enterprises, these formal workplace regulations and their implementation systems, while not irrelevant, are either uncommon or informal in nature (ABS, 2013). This is an important consideration given that the overwhelming majority (88%) of Australia's estimated 2.12 million businesses are either Nano or micro-enterprises (ASBFEO, 2017).

Another key theme of Australian WR literature is the time pressures they face in managing their daily operations. The long hours worked by small business owners is already well known, with almost half (49.1%) of owner-managers reportedly working more than 40 hours per week (ABS, 2013). Despite these long hours and time pressures, a common view of the literature is the dedication and satisfaction many small business owners commonly report (see for example Birch, 1987; Hendrickson et al, 2015; Moran, 1998). This result suggests the need to embed small business within the context in which they operate emerges as a potentially crucial factor in understanding their stories.

Another seemingly contradictory theme that emerges in the literature is the notion of regulation as opportunity (Jacquemin and Janssen, 2012; Kitching, Hart & Wilson, 2015). For instance, regulation can provide business opportunities for new services and products being provided or for compliance to become part of marketing and a competitive advantage. This accords with studies examining the tensions between those making or implementing regulation and those on the receiving end. As noted by Williams and Schaefer (2013, p.173) "…public policy and business advice…should perhaps focus more strongly on personal values and a sense of being able to contribute to… their engagement with small businesses." The SME literature also highlights an increasing sophistication in measuring the metrics of business success. Throughout the world, government policy and interest in SMEs is broadly focused on their ability to grow, and by doing so generate new jobs and economic output. The small business sector is typically viewed as "the engine of the economy", and there is an assumption that growth is really only measured in terms of jobs created (ILO, 2015). While SMEs are viewed as a source of job generation, only a relative few firms actually choose to grow at a significant level. High growth young firms have been labelled "Gazelles" due to their leaping rate of expansion, and while they do contribute to net new job creation and economic growth, such firms are rare (Birch, 1987; Neumark *et al*., 2011; Hendrickson *et al.*, 2015). This type of firm is unlikely to represent more than 1 percent by employment or 2 percent by annual turnover of all firms in a national economy (OECD, 2010 & 2016). There is recognition that the majority of SMEs are not growth oriented and if growth is considered it is modest and incremental in nature. Further, most Nano (non-employing), and

micro (1-4 employees) firms are not seeking to grow in a manner that would see them employing more people (Perry, Meredith and Cunnington, 1988; Moran, 1998). However, the contribution they do make is also of considerable importance. For example, SMEs contribute around 70 percent of all employment in Australia, and just under 60 percent of all industry value added (ASBFEO, 2017). There is recognition that SMEs, regardless of their growth orientation, also positively sustain or even increase investment and often operate as key sources of knowledge exchange and transfer and of innovation. This provides an indirect but powerful mechanism that assists larger organisations' growth and investment. This is a view supported by other research literature (Davila *et al.,* 2015; Acs *et al.*, 2016; Degryse, 2016; Horowitz, 2010; ILO, 2015; Kinner, 2015; MBIE, 2014; McKeown & Cochrane, 2014; OECD, 2016, Osimo, 2016; Reedy & Litan, 2011; Simpson, Padmore & Newman, 2012).

METHOD: Qualitative research methods provide an opportunity for a systematic, in-depth examination of questions and ideas that may not be easily answered through quantitative methodologies (Barr, 2004). This study use it to provide deeper understanding of the everyday realities of workplace regulation to question how they are really practiced. Focus groups and depth interviews were used as while interviews are one-on-one and involve an in-depth exploration of the interviewee's thoughts, feelings, focus groups allow a trained moderator to lead the discussion amongst a group who share a similar interest in a topic. Group interaction can help stimulate thought, elicit both new ideas and insights into convergent and divergent opinions (Threlfall, 1999).

The data from these discussions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed as this preserves the nuances of the interview and initially examined using a manual thematic analysis involving a review of each transcribed document. This was supplemented with analysis using the Leximancer text analytic software (Leximancer 2016), which employs algorithms to explore and transform lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns without the need for manual intervention (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer is an appropriate analysis method for textual data where exploratory research is required and reduces researcher bias to provide an objective analysis of the data (Sotiriadou, Brouwers and Le, 2014). Data collection took place over the period 1 May to 30 June 2017 in metropolitan and regional areas as shown in Table 1

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

FINDINGS: An important overall finding from the workshop discussions is that a common characteristic of small business owner-managers is the time pressures they face in managing their daily operations. Despite these long hours and time pressures, a common view held by the participants was that they retained a passion for their work and their businesses. This passion was also often bound within the geographic setting of the individual's business location as well as the industry and profession or occupation of the business owner. While this means that many of the narratives heard were highly individual, there were four common themes that emerged and these are examined in the following sections.

THEME 1: IT'S NOT THE REGULATION IT'S THE IMPLEMENTATION

A shown in Figure 1, the analysis of the notion of workplace regulation with Leximancer text revealed four key themes. The most important theme was "**People**", encompassing concepts relating the owner-managers' frustrations and challenges in hiring, motivating, and managing their employees. The sense of responsibility for the job security they provide to their employees is highlighted. Closely associated themes were "**correct", "take", "hire", "involve"** and "**tell"**, which reflect the owner-managers' concerns over achieving compliance with regulations, taking decisions, involving their staff and telling them how to perform. Getting things done correctly is dependent on having employees who are able and appropriately skilled to perform their jobs. It is also important that people they hire understand their own responsibility for performing work safely and meeting all compliances. However, the owner-managers expressed frustration that employees viewed their employer as the only person responsible for the safety of the workplace, or the implementation of workplace regulations. In their view, this is something that requires mutual responsibility from both parties.

INSERT Figure 1Here

The second most important theme was **"Federal Government"**, and the central role that it plays in the design and management of the Australian *Workplace Regulation Framework*. Key concepts that emerged related to the many programs and support initiatives offered to small business by government. It can be seen in Figure 1 that "government" encompasses concepts such as "time", "told" and "mentioned". These reflect the time that owner-managers have to spend on compliance matters and the communications and information exchanges with various regulatory agencies. However, participants' expressed frustration with too many overlapping or competing programs from federal, state and local governments. There was also a frustration that many could not avail themselves of support and training due to a lack of time. Further, even when they sought to take advantage of these programs the type of support they received was not always ideal.

The third most important theme was **"business regulation"** with both positive and negative aspects. As Figure 1, show the positive face of regulation was typified by owner-managers, and regulators working together to achieve the right outcomes. However, the negative face is that of a small business owner who keeps meeting a regulator who constantly says "No" to any proposals. Other important concepts identified in this analysis were "**skills"** and "**staff**", with the first associated with the employer's view that job security is the responsibility of the employee and their ability to keep their skills and competencies competitive in the modern job market. The second concept of **"staff"** relates to the ability of the staff within regulatory agencies (i.e. Fair Work), to work collaboratively and constructively with the small business owner to resolve staff issues within their business. As noted above, the interaction between the small business owner-manager and their employees, consultants and staff from workplace regulators is a highly personal one for many.

Overall, this theme shows small business owner-managers as people who are busy with multiple responsibilities. They must manage the often-competing needs of the people they employ, government regulations they must adhere to, and the business they must operate. This is a significant burden, providing jobs for employees, keeping the workplace safe and healthy, meeting the demands of workplace regulations, managing diversity and finding time to maintain the competitiveness of their business. The following sections examines these in more detail with specific reference to interview and focus group data.

The importance of people - as noted above, employing others was the key issue that emerged within discussions around workplace regulation. Some reasons many small business owners may not grow employee numbers is captured in the following:

> *I don't employ anyone because it's just too complicated; it's too difficult and too much risk (B, Tamworth).*

The actual fear many small businesses have at the thought of hiring staff is explained in the following example:

> *It frightens me getting any new people. I'm lucky that I got the people that I've got. They're not going anywhere I don't think. But employing new people, over the years we've had horrific problems (Ross, Latrobe Valley).*

Providing both a small business owner and an Industry Association perspective:

> *It's is frustrating to the billy-o to get through the whole process of employing people. And you know getting rid of people, and then motivating them and incentivizing them and I mean it's frustrating and it's really hard. There are just too many risks (Tony, Hobart).*

There were a number of options small business owners use to get around these issues, in particular the use of informal workplace contracts:

> *Agriculture still very much depends on the informal economy, but we've decided that the potential reputational damage & liability is too great. I was horrified to hear that the lovely folk that the land owner used to use to pick cherries have at times been badly cheated – one grower lying about how much work there was - it was only a few hours & then paying them just $7.50 an hour (Lucie, Hobart).*

These latter quotes add the nuance of responsibility and the performance aspects required to manage others to achieve the small business owners' goals. It is a perspective that has a range of permutations.

For instance, the lack of suitable staff also arose in a number of different forms. One was the shortage of "good staff" as well as the investment in training required. For example:

> *Sometimes getting staff, finding good staff is hard and reliable staff is even harder. The ones we have at the moment are all pretty good. Our biggest problem is if one of them goes, is starting all over again, training a new one (Mick, Latrobe Valley).*

One owner-manager provided a different view on the interface between regulation and the need to attract and retain good staff:

> *My example of this is the recent 457-immigration rule. Made without any deliberation, discussion or other notice to those concerned. We got no notice and were in negotiations to hire overseas when they suddenly said 'Oh this is not happening. That deprives us of a lot of international talent; it has a huge impact, way beyond what they expected. (Liam, Melbourne).*

A key idea emerging here is the importance of a fit between the person and the organisation – an important function of the Human Resource Management (HRM) function in larger organisations. However, in the small business it is the owner-manager who generally bears the responsibility. Other common themes were the notions of mutual trust and respect. Some of the areas where things can go wrong if this fit is not a good one were discussed in terms of the difficulties in terminating staff and the potential for unfair dismissal claims. The other major topic raised by small business owners was the issue of workplace health and safety (WHS).

Workplace health and safety - was the second most common area identified, not so much the regulations in themselves but the inability of them to scale down to be appropriate to smaller businesses

> *I think some of the Work Safe things are a bit out of control.. ... look, I understand it is the boss's job to protect the staff members, but it is also for the staff members responsibility and to have their own duty of care. (Steve, Regional Victoria).*

A 'caught in the middle' theme within WHS also emerged where for instance:

> *many small businesses are forced to comply by their client audit. So, the client will actually impose those systems and you know as part of the contractual terms so they will be required… if you want that contract on that site you comply with the client (Bill, Hobart).*

This leads into another perspective on workplace regulation identified by those working in the consultancy space in particular as it is often this lack of specialist advice that they are providing to small business. This was summed up by one owner-manager in what the WR literature commonly calls the tripartite nature of employment as one where:

> *Firstly, as a small businessperson understanding the systems, right. And secondly implementing them without making a mistake. And so, and then there's the last one of that trio is the employee themselves, and what their attitude is to you (Tony, Hobart).*

The identification of individual role in within regulation also emerged in data analysis in another form.

The human face of the regulator – emerged in discussing the issues related to the frustration identified in dealings with individuals from within a regulatory agency. One example from an owner-manager was in applying for a permit to develop an outside eating area on vacant land adjacent to his shop:

> *I drew up the proposal, plans and everything and they just knocked it back and said "No." …anytime this particular lady is approached it is always no (Mick, Latrobe Valley).*

There were also very positive sides, with both the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) and the Fair Work Commission being praised for the quality of service delivered by their staff:

> *I've struck up a good relationship with a few of the staff at Fair Work over the years as they are my go-to people when I have staff issues. (Michael, Melbourne).*

A similar sentiment was expressed in relation to dealings with the ATO:

> *One of my favourite things is to tell people how amazing is the ATO. They set the benchmark for government. ... It is a very complex field for a small business progressing, there is a lot of stuff to figure out and that is something that someone like us I guess could take the approach of 'oh you miss one thing on this form, you miss this thing and it means you screw of this*

submission; let's go punish you for that, let's fine...'. (Instead) it takes an approach of let's make the system work... Let's together make this thing work. (Liam, Melbourne).

The importance of finding the "right person" to help also addressed in terms of the language of how to find the right source in the first place.

Navigating the sources of help - where many of the newer small business owners voiced their frustration with simply finding the right source of who to ask. The following sums up the confusion:

One thing I find hard is that you've got, state government small business week, you've got federal government small business information and all, and some of them cross over. … I just need one bit of information, a resource that tells me things (Sarah, Melbourne).

While there were a number of respondents who provided consultancy services to small business, there was also quite a bit of criticism of consultants. For instance:

…the value of consultants can be highly variable – I've found the business association mentoring services useless. I looked at one of the mentoring services run by a local business association. They matched me to a bank manager & sent me a mentoring agreement form – I was supposed to undertake to do what I was told! (Lucie, Hobart).

The price of being regional - the "tyranny of distance" imposing extra costs on regional small businesses was a constant theme that had a number of different dimensions, such as the extra cost of transport:

We are looking at a freezer at the moment. To get it delivered, just to drop it at the kerb they want $450 delivery. (Mick/LaTrobe Valley).

Another key issue, particularly for regional business owners, was the quality of broadband internet services across Australia. The following comments illustrate this:

We have NBN, we had that put on; it is always dropping in and out, and I am always arguing with them to tell us if they have got the antenna in the right place, and they don't want to know about it (Jeff & Michelle/Margaret River, WA).

However, poor installation and servicing was often remediated by recourse to regulators:

When I complained it's just, "yeah, whatever" (but) I mentioned the Ombudsman and they got straight onto it. (Mick, La Trobe Valley).

The quality of broadband internet services was not just an issue for regional businesses, as one owner-manager from Melbourne explained:

A real barrier is technology with internet speed being key one access to venture capital. People have huge access to technology in the United States and in Asia, but that just doesn't exist in Australia so that is a pretty big challenge to overcome particularly to scale up gain financial backing and maintaining that backing. (Liam, Melbourne).

Overall, an important result from this theme is that SMEs are dealing with many of the issues, which confront larger businesses – but often without the presence of specialist staff to help manage either the external compliance demands of regulation, or the day-to-day practicalities of business operation. The findings suggest that identification of the type or source of regulation provides a more structured approach to identifying what the real issues for small business are and how they can be addressed.

THEME 2: BUSINESS SUCCESS IS NOT JUST ABOUT MONEY

The theme of business "success" embedded in more nuanced ideas than money and employing staff emerged as the second key theme. This is illustrated in Figure 2 where nine themes identified, of which two "**using"** and **"cash"**, were found to be completely separate, with the first encompassing all the other concepts other than cash. A sentiment lens was used within the Leximancer analysis to assess the positive or negative context in which the concepts were used (Zaitseva, 201). The most important theme was **"represents"** associated with the owner-managers' perceptions about what their business represents to them, and how they make what they produce, essentially everything associated with their business. This is related to the concept of "**doing**", which addresses what individuals were seeking to achieve with their business.

INSERT Figure 2 Here

Another significant concept was of **"using"**, how participants were seeking to use their businesses and their role as business people. This includes the willingness to take risks and focus on pragmatic business activity rather than social engagement. This concept was found to be closely linked to **"look"**, a concept that related to the owners' sense of how they felt they or other similar people, should look at their role as business people. Connected to the concept of **"using"** was the related concept of **"business"**, which was in turn connected to **"cash**". As shown in Figure 2, these concepts relate to the operation of the business in a profitable manner with an eye on cash flow and the successful management of the enterprise. Of less importance, but connect to the **"business"**, concept were the concepts of "**mentor"** and **"people"**. These concepts reflect the interpersonal relationships that exist between the owners and their social and professional networks. The overall Leximancer findings suggest that many SME owners focus is not necessarily on growth or creation of jobs, but on pursuing their own goals and ambitions. The ideas, tools and systems that they use in the operation of their businesses define how they look at the world and how they act. While the financial sustainability of their businesses is contingent on the generation of cash and profit, this is not necessarily and end in itself. In addition to the financial aspects of their business are the human resources, from both people they employ and the support they get from third party advisers such as business mentors.

The metric of growth and financial success – while recognising the importance of positive cash flow and the management of a sustainable business, what comprised "growth" or "financial success" in the business was a somewhat subjective matter. For example:

> *'Putting food on the table' and 'being able to pay the bills' were both accepted as the 'table stakes' of what a small business should achieve (David, Melbourne).*

A comment from Paul, a mentor to small business adds an important corollary:

> *Look, it is, it might sound very money-grabby, but it is all about making money it really is. If you don't, and again I mentor people that, they're actually running a hobby rather than a business.*

For most of the small business sample in this research, though these traditional metrics of success were firmly grounded in the business needs. As JP (Melbourne) noted:

> *The company will scale and grow as much as it needs to in order to deliver what we need to, to the Australian public, which is the best local marketplace. If we require more talent and skill to run the company, then we will hire.*

However, for many it was the original philosophy behind the business that was key:

> *We don't really look to growth as a business solution to all problems - we really focus on doing the good work of using technology to make a difference (Liam, Melbourne).*

Knowledge transfer – and the link in the literature to outsourcing, a result supported in the comments made by a number of those attending the forums or interviewed.

> *On one project [the client] actually gave me two of their casuals for three hours each. So, they were paying, but I still did an induction with them. I explained the process because they didn't know what they were doing … They're outsourcing the job but also the IP - you're actually capturing it all (Robyn, Melbourne).*

'Soft' metrics of success – also emerged**,** such as that noted by Geoff (Melbourne):

> *This matters to me because I get tremendous fun out of it I think, and enjoyment. Watching and working with people, helping them grow. I mean, yes, there's financial benefits as well but that's never really been the number one issue.*

The focus on output rather than returns such as financial gains arose a number of times. For instance:

> *For me, producing something, something good that someone wants that's business success. (Ross, La Trobe Valley).*

These findings add further insight into the themes of passion and giving back noted above, and returns to the notions of autonomy and individuality. This fusion of success being determined by individual goals is seen in the example of:

> *Our value proposition is that we make very small quantities of very high-quality wines and the pricing reflects that. It's a natural fit for us, partly because we don't see any point in doing what everybody else is doing – it allows us to make a virtue out of being small rather than it being a huge disadvantage … I guess of making our own minds up & doing things our way, finding our own way forward (Lucie, Hobart).*

Overall, many of the small business owners interviewed confirmed the suggestion initially raised by Simpson, Padmore and Newman (2012), that success is a dynamic concept that changes as a business. This allows owners to reassess their critical success factors – and subsequently modify their strategic and tactical behaviours. The idea of metrics evolving and changing over time may provide some reconciliation of the business mentor views noted earlier and being a mix of hard and soft measures suggest that "success" for many small business owners is not measured in high growth and the generation of new jobs. Other metrics able to measure their contribution to the economy should be examined instead. These might be found in how they contribute to employment retention, the enhancing of social capital and maintenance of economic stability within local communities. Small business owners' very personal identification with their business carries through into the way they see, measure and attach value to success. The social enterprise nature of some of the small business participants in our study may explain some of this but there were similar concerns for employee health and welfare also expressed by even the more financially focused businesses. The desire to have a good job/ person fit and to offer flexibility when and where it can be provided do seem to be a genuine feature of the small business environment.

THEME 3: MY BUSINESS IS ME

Many of the small business owner participants provided reasons for being in business that they felt deeply about and linked strongly to their own personal identity. For example:

> *It's my vocation. I don't accept the concept of retirement for myself, I intend to be farming grapes, making & selling wine 'til I die, hopefully at a very, ripe old age, getting in the way & driving everyone bonkers (Lucie, Hobart).*

The Leximancer analysis undertaken with this data identified three primary themes shown in Figure 3. The **"business as a workplace"** theme captured the owner-managers' perspective of their business as a place in which people, with abilities and technology engaged with each other to share ideas, different ways of looking at problems, and working together in a manner involving shared responsibilities. Closely related to the business concept was the owner-managers' "**personal feelings"** about a wide range of issues exemplified by the concepts of flexibility (of work and lifestyle), satisfaction of wants, resolution of problems, plus things and outcome that have impacted upon their life. The third most important theme of **"Time"** was connected directly to their work and associated work, working with others, making things happen, and the months of work involved as well as engagement with mentors and clients across different projects and on different levels. The overall pattern is of small business lying at the centre of an environment in which the small business owner-manager's personal feelings, thoughts and actions drive and shape outcomes - within a time-constrained context that impact on the actions they take, and the nature of the relationships they have with others both within and outside of the firm. These issues are discussed in more detail within the subthemes highlighted below.

INSERT Figure 3 HERE

Passion and feeling - The word "passion" was used by a number of small business owners and centred around notions of it as energy that results in real dedication and in-depth involvement in their business – often with a pattern of serial or even multiple concurrent businesses. For example:

> *It started for me when I was 8, I was selling flowers out of my parent's garden to the florist down the road because I saw that I could make some money out of it and by the time I was 14 I had my own fashion label. So, it's in your blood. (Bev, Melbourne).*

The view amongst the group who identified as service provers to small business echoed the idea that there is something beyond having a job, that there is a need or even a calling that they are responding to. For instance:

> *I'm a financial planner ... it, it gives me the opportunity to actually, change people's lives, ... I'd like to have a company that facilitates you know, good life styles for young professionals in Tamworth. (Frank, Tamworth)*

The passion came as a surprise to some:

> *So, I, started my business really just because I needed to, I was unhappy in my last role and thought it'd be wiser for me to take some time out, go out on my own for 6 months ..After 6 months, I thought, "well this is pretty good, I have the lifestyle back, it's great, I'm doing some interesting projects, I don't have the weight of internal politics and the organisation and all that stuff to worry about". ..six months turned into a year, and then, ..from there, three years. Now, I wake up in the morning and I really love what I'm going to do. (Sarah, Melbourne).*

Making a difference - The motivation to make a difference also came about where small business owners identified a need. The reason given by one owner-manager in relation to developing a phone application is just one example of what 'making a difference' means as far as business creation:

> *The passion is to, this role, delivering disruptive change. From an idea that I had and actually making the landscape better. (JP, Melbourne)*

The notion of making a difference also emerged as an internal motivating force for some business owners. Another perspective on the individual nature that 'making a difference' came up as an issue for small business owners is seen in the following excerpt from another small business owner:

> *If I was just "hey I just need money to pay my bills and do all my other stuff", then I'd be much better to get a job than walk in at 8:30 and away at about 6. I feel it's kind of, not me, even though I go into organisations and try and do only what they think they want, I can't, because I get so drawn into, involved and passionate about what I'm doing. I have to work with them and help them – that is my job! (Sarah, Melbourne).*

Innovation - the ability to have the freedom to innovate also part of what creates the drive and passion emerges in the excerpts above. However, a number of the advisors to small business offered an important corollary to this and distinguished between those who are entrepreneurs and those who "just have a business." The difference in mindset between being an employee versus a business owner was explained further:

> *There is a cultural divide in Australia between those that are getting off their arse and making a go of it and having you know, building a business, and taking on all of the risk. Right. And those that have an employee mentality. and there's a certain level from my point of view being one of those willing to take a risk is that you know, if I'm going to put it all out there, then (Tony, Hobart).*

Just what the entrepreneurial mindset looks like was discussed in a number of forums and interviews. It was generally seen as a deep desire, and need for innovation. This is well captured in the following:

> *I'm still researching really & constantly learning, it's just that everybody is a bit more interested in the results these days – there's that blend of rigor and creativity. Taking something really old and remoulding it, to innovate to form my own practice – something unique – that sounds more than a tad pretentious but there you are. Source of identity, expression – after 7 years and a lot of growth etc. I'd say there's probably an extensive meshing of ego with this. Also, a source of pride, of something to build for future generations to enrich people's lives, show people something surprising that they haven't seen before - tradition with a twist if you will (Lucie, Tasmania).*

The notion of purposeful disruption emerged in a number of interviews with small business owners:

> *We wanted to change the way that the industry worked. The traditional model is that the major retailers, the big companies in the retail industry now have such bargaining power that they force their supplier's price lower and lower. Until their suppliers can no longer make a profit in their business. So, our model is to be engaged by the by the major market retailer to*

> *go into their supply base … to generate value that can improve their bottom line and simultaneously deliver the cost savings to the retailer as well as the consumers. (Eric, Melbourne)*

Vigour and dedication - This view as to the role of passion as energy is implicit in many of the quotes above and this was explored further. It isolated the specific notions of both the vigour and dedication by business owners to the development and maintenance of their business:

> *I was in the final year at university. I was trying to think how you would actually apply what we were learning … seeing how new technology can solve things that people assume are omnipresent problems (Liam, Melbourne).*

While the theme of passion was common to the majority of the business owners in both forums and interviews, there were also stories of the pressures of running a small business and these were commonly expressed in terms of the issues with work life balance and dealing with difficulties.

Work life balance and resilience - emerged as both a motivation for and challenge to maintain for many small business owners. This mixed narrative is captured in the following example of a small business owner who is also a mother of three young children:

> *[The company] is effectively me – I manage the wee vineyard we lease, I do the bulk of the vineyard work and the day-to-day running of things. .. The vineyard is … about 40 minutes away – it's really about as far away as you'd want & I find it frustrating that I can't really be there enough – essentially to do it properly I feel like I'd need to be living out on the vineyard –but then I'd be out tootling about all the time & everyone else would have to travel so I guess that tension is probably useful. ..Being on my own so much gives me a lot of freedom but can sap the motivation too…*

The excerpt above provides insight into both the ability to "be in charge" but also the "illusion" of control. The double-sided nature of work life balance emerged repeatedly as both a surprise for the new business owner:

> *We moved here three years ago to get out of Melbourne. We wanted, we were hoping a quieter life, but it turned out not so quiet. It's has turned out a lot more work, than we anticipated. What with 16 hour days, 7 days a week, so you know we don't have much time to get out and about (Mick, La Trobe Valley).*
>
> *You get this awesome flexibility as part of the project, that at traditional workforce never would of had, where you can work from home or you can work from an aeroplane or the. The negative of that is that, you do work from home and you know the work day doesn't end when you leave work, it continues on and you know, never escape (Eric, Melbourne).*

The notion of there being inherent tensions in operating as a small business owner was a theme developed further, particularly by a number of individuals who had dual roles as both small business and advisors to small business raised concerns with issues of ill health and mental health concerns.

Lack of role clarification/ role ambiguity – here the 'master of all' persona many small business owners have to assume (generally because of not wanting or being able to employ specialist staff) was raised in a number of ways. As one owner-manager described his work:

> *Pretty much 24/7 for me. I have to be switched on all the time. It's the amount of information that's coming through and I need to act on that information if it's a problem that needs to be solved and I need to solve it or find someone in my team to solve it…. (JP, Melbourne).*

This also manifested in the way some small business owners reported being dealt with by clients.

> *You know the thing that is quite interesting as a Nano-business is that I don't think clients give you the same level of, respect, as your time consideration as well; they do some of the larger businesses. So, they keep pushing for more and demanding more. It's really disrespectful of my time. (Sarah, Melbourne).*

Collaboration and networking – was used to overcome some of the issues discussed above. For instance, Mimi explained how she, her partner and a good friend all share a larger identity based on work life balance concepts – but each then operate their own company within this "We decided to stay separate but work very closely". Another small business owner added a comment that resonates with many of the views provided by this group:

> *It started off at the corner sort of thing where a couple of small business wanted to get together and share ideas and share common issues of, common problems that they have in small business. [My mantra] is really I may not be able to directly help that person but I may know someone who can (Bev, Melbourne).*

The ability of networks and collaboration to span traditional boundaries, such as '*tyranny of distance which plagues so many Australian businesses'* was identified by many of the 'older' small business owners as a result of their prior work experience and connections:

> *the experience in those large organisations and the various networks you develop in those organisations, both nationally and internationally, and particularly, because of the ideas that I, and the principles that I was working with were shared, across an international community and so there were a number of like-minded individuals, that I could work with as a need arose from time to time on, consulting projects where we would come together with common purpose and also with a high level of trust (Geoff, Melbourne).*

The importance of networking and collaboration was not limited to small business delivering services to clients. It was also very much about how some businesses are actually working with their clients:

> *We have done a number of similar projects that take a seemingly intractable problem using technology in ways that the client otherwise would never be able to even to pose on their own and this formulates a sense of the harmony between the client and us. We can bring technology and they can bring the understanding of the problems of how to go about to fix that and ... the end result (Liam, Melbourne).*

This theme reveals the intensely personal nature that small business has for many owners. The financial logic of many of the business choices made was not very sound – an aspect is dealt with in more detail next. What did come through though was the amount of work and effort being put in. A passion for making a difference, for innovating and using collaboration and networking tools emerged as strong and consistent themes. There were also concerns noted with role ambiguity, issues of work life balance and resilience all offering a corollary to the risk-taking high achiever stereotype of the small business owner. These tensions need further investigation.

THEME 4: THE FUTURE OF WORK

Discussions about the future of work were not as detailed as the three prior sections. Given the well-documented time-poor nature and lack of longer term planning in small businesses, the ability to have a wider and longer-term overview of change is not surprising. However, the views that were expressed were generally characterised as highly positive. For example, Tony predicted that workplace regulation would become easier for small business:

> *With artificial intelligence, it will become easier in the future. Where they'll be able to understand obscure questions, and give you an answer... in the end, it's going to be all transferability and portability (Tony, Hobart).*

The Leximancer analysis undertaken for this part of the discussion identified two primary themes: "**business**" and "**red tape**", the latter of which is a general description of government regulation. All the concepts, other than "red-tape" were found within the "business" theme.

INSERT Figure 4 HERE

As shown in Figure 4, there were seven separate themes with the most important being focused around the concepts **"business"** and **"innovation"**, which reflect the owner-managers' perception of the future workplace environment being shaped by innovation and new ways of working or "doing" things. However, there was a sentiment that their ability as small firms to shape this future using "**technology"** was likely to be impacted in a negative way by government regulation and red tape. For small firms trying to play a role in shaping the future with innovation there was a sense of the task as

being "**impossible"**, due to the difficulties of overcoming regulators. By contrast, this was not viewed as being such a problem for large firms that have greater bargaining power in such circumstances. Despite these concerns, the role of technology as an enabler emerged as a key driver and enabler in a number of different ways. For example:

> *Because of the capacity to manage and store documents, to share them through Drop Box and things like that. Particularly when you're working in a project context (Geoff, Melbourne).*

There were also those owner-managers with the networked collaborative communities where social media was seen as a key tool as "*a huge part will always be on to the social media platform. That's really important* (Mimi, Melbourne). Although interpersonal networking and collaboration via face-to-face engagement was also important:

> *This isn't just the local town pub. It's a meeting place, it employs local young people and it is pretty much the heart of all community events (David, Latrobe Valley).*

A number of small business owners mentioned a bleak house scenario where government will fail to capture the benefit of change and instead persevere in imposing outdated ideas. It is captured in an analogy offered by JP (Melbourne):

> *Innovation always happens from the outside. If you think of a coral reef. The very centre of the reef dies first, not the, the very edges, because the very edges the, ecosystem at the very edges is evolving the fastest to deal with new threats… So there, where innovation happens is always on the outside [but] the regulators are the very centre. And they are the first to stale and stagnate and they can never see what's happening at the out, at the edge.*

This concern was developed further by Eric (Melbourne) who suggested that:

> *Technology adoption really opens forward ways of doing business and innovating but I find regulation really prevents that across industry. Often you know there's this cycle of the government to, they've traditionally gone through where the life cycle of technology has been 10 years, but they develop a 10-year process before they're ready to accept new technology. Now we're on a yearly or six-monthly basis and the regulations just not keeping up.*

Overall, the small business owners' views were generally ones of excitement at the opportunity the future provides – but this excitement was tempered by real doubts as to government's ability to provide the lead that will allow the small business sector to flourish. Given the touted ability of technology to 'level the playing field' and overcome the size disadvantage that is necessarily a feature of small business, the fact that such concerns were found to be widespread amongst small business owners suggests that actions are needed to allay these concerns.

SUMMARY: This last section summarise the various themes with a further Leximancer analysis (refer Figure 5) along with extracts from the transcript text to support the conclusions and recommendations made. It is worth noting that all these concepts, when examined together form a single major theme **"business"** that reflects the holistic nature of the small business owner-manager's world in which there is little if any separation of work from personal life, or the person from the business. The most important theme illustrated in Figure 5 is **"work"**, a complex construct encompassing several concepts that relate to the workplace, its characteristics, how decisions are made within it, plus the person and the job roles that they undertake. Key issues that emerge within this area are the growing flexibility of work, which can be undertaken almost anywhere due to contemporary computer-based, information and communications technologies. However, this flexibility also result imposes significant time burdens on the small business owners who receive increasing amounts of information, as well as growing demands on their limited time. They need to either do the work themselves, or find someone to whom they can delegate this work. Hard work is recognised and accepted as necessary by small business owners, even those who thought they were pursuing a small business opportunity for lifestyle purposes.

The second most important theme and concept is "**business"**, which is closely connected to "**work"**, but also connects to "**time"** and the concepts of "doing", "stuff" and "making". As shown in Figure 5, the relationships between the business and doing "stuff" is a reflection of the owner-managers' general goals and objectives for their businesses, and the things they need to do in order to

fulfil their dreams. They express a strong motivation and passion for these things and it was common to hear them talking about wanting to change the status quo and bring about disruptive change.

Insert Figure 5 Here

Related to "business" is the issue of "time" and "making things work". Here the pattern that emerges is one of an often busy and overworked, time poor small business owner who is under pressure from both a lack of time and money. The regulatory systems that they are required to navigate are often complex and they strive to understand them so as to avoid making mistakes. Closely associated with "work" and "time" is the issue of "**people"**, a theme and concept that encompasses the owner-managers' frustrations and achievements in relation to the employment, motivation and management of people. Without this employment of people, the workplace cannot become a "company", although the concept of "company" is not directly connected to the concepts "staff" or "job", even though they fall within the theme "**company.**" Finally, the theme of "**working**" is comprised of the concepts of "working" and "community", which reflects the way in which many owner-managers achieve their goals by collaboration and working within a community. This social and strategic networking is a key aspect of their ability to innovate and grow their businesses, as well as simply getting things done.

A clear finding from this study is the intensely personal nature that small business has for many owners. Key issues that emerged were the amount of time and effort many business owners put into the business – with notions such as vigour and dedication emerging strongly. Similarly, the notion of innovation arose strongly. There were also two key areas of concern which merged, namely the tendency for work life balance to be something small business owners were good at considering for their employees – but very poor at for themselves. Seemingly related to this was the issue of "role creep", where the need to assume multiple roles within the organisation due to the inability to hire specialist staff appears to produce situations where it is actually hard for the small business owner to identify what their role is (and where it stops). This personal nature of the small business and is owner-manager also raises the issue of how we should seek to measure and assess "success" in such firms. The small business owner's very personal identification with their business carries through into the way they see, measure and attach value to success. The social enterprise nature of some of the small business participants in our study may explain some of this but there were similar concerns for employee health and welfare also expressed by even the more financially focused businesses. The desire to have a good job/ person fit and to offer flexibility when and where it can be provided do seem to be a genuine feature of the small business environment.

Another key area of focus for this study was the role of regulation. In particular, the finding that workplace regulation can originate from multiple jurisdictions and regulatory authorities. This study highlights the way in which regulation is enforced and that it is often the individual operating on behalf of a regulator who drives the outcomes for the small business owner. An important result from the study is that SMEs are dealing with many of the issues, which confront larger businesses – but often without the presence of specialist staff to help manage either the external compliance demands of regulation, or the day-to-day practicalities of business operation. This returns us to the issue of 'voice", which was the reason for this phase of the research project. One key finding the addition of the small business voice makes to the wider literature is the notion of scalability – the rules and regulations, from employment through to workplace health and safety, are generally written for medium to large organisations often rely for their successful operation on the presence of speciality staff to understand, implement and enforce them. This is often simply impossible and even self-defeating for small business where the majority of firms (60%) do not employ anyone other than their owner-manager (ASBFEO, 2017; DIISRTE, 2012).

The last area of examination related to the future of the Australian workplace as perceived by these owner-managers. While most small business owners saw the future of work for themselves as one on excitement and change, this excitement was tempered by a more general doubt. These doubts focussed very heavily on the role of government policy, and a perceived inability by government to provide leadership. This was particularly focused on the application of technology in a way that will allow the small business sector to flourish through smarter regulation and a levelling of the playing

field. Lastly, there we note the limitations of our methodology. While we have been guided by best practice principles using analysis tools and distributing the coding and analysis findings across several chief investigators who have independently assessed the results. However, while qualitative research allows issues to be examined in detail and in depth and is sometimes more compelling than quantitative data, the results cannot be generalised across all small businesses. Data collection is very dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies and issues of anonymity and confidentiality can present problems when presenting findings.

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Table 1: Sample Structure of Forums and Interviews

Sample Structure						
State	Metropolitan			Regional		
	Small Business Owner	Owner of Service Provider to Small Business	Both provider & Small Business	Small Business Owner	Owner of Service Provider to Small Business	Both provider & Small Business
NSW	5	1	4	3	2	2
Tasmania	3	1	3			
Victoria	10		3	7		
W.A.	1			1		
Total	19	2	10	11	2	2

Figure 1: Leximancer Concept Map – Workplace Regulation

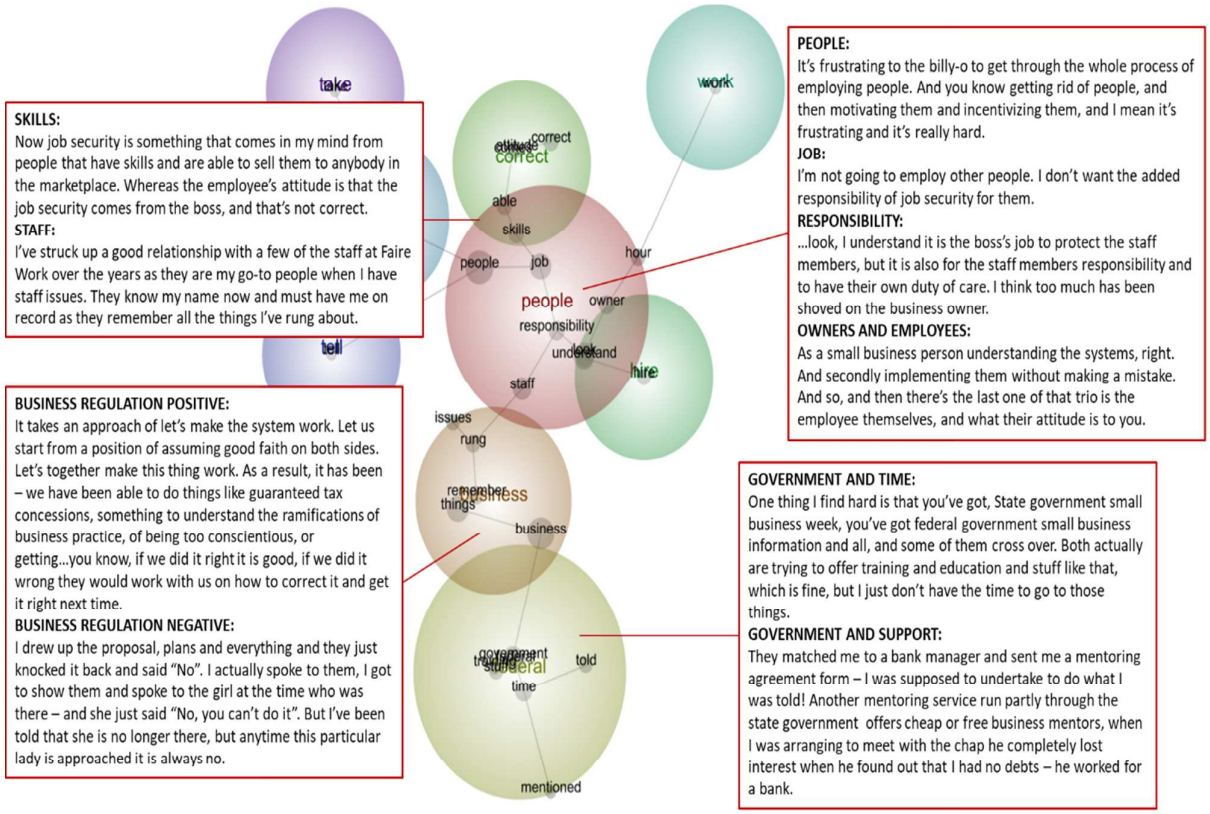
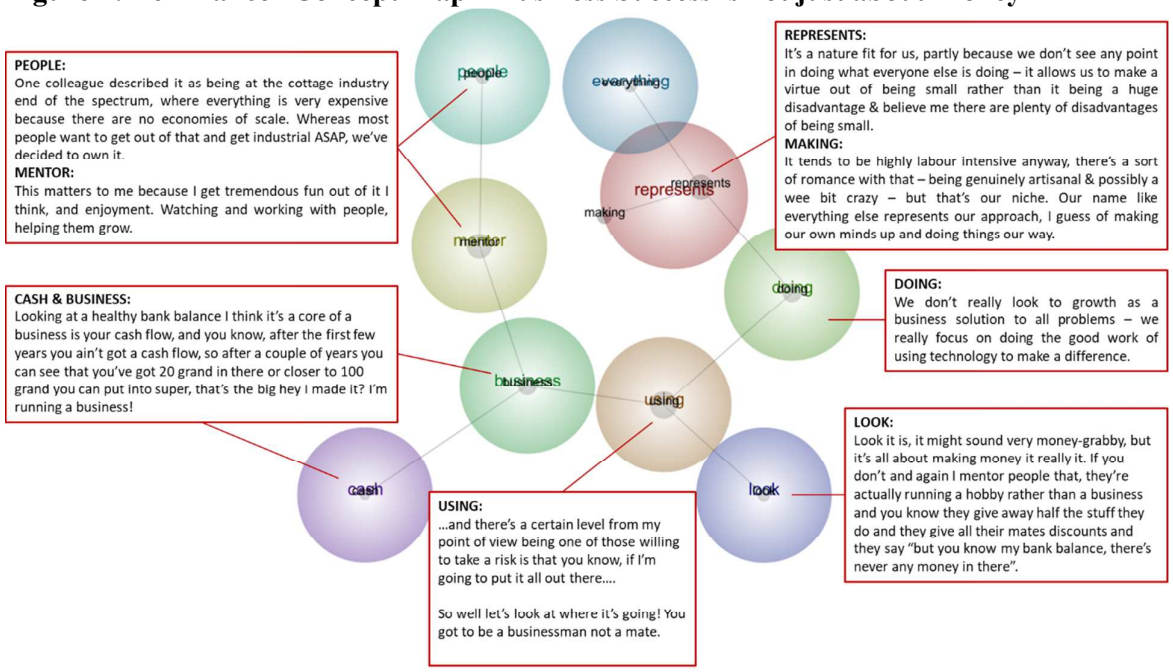


Figure 2: Leximancer Concept Map – Business Success is not just about Money



PEOPLE:
One colleague described it as being at the cottage industry end of the spectrum, where everything is very expensive because there are no economies of scale. Whereas most people want to get out of that and get industrial ASAP, we've decided to own it.

MENTOR:
This matters to me because I get tremendous fun out of it I think, and enjoyment. Watching and working with people, helping them grow.

REPRESENTS:
It's a nature fit for us, partly because we don't see any point in doing what everyone else is doing – it allows us to make a virtue out of being small rather than it being a huge disadvantage & believe me there are plenty of disadvantages of being small.

MAKING:
It tends to be highly labour intensive anyway, there's a sort of romance with that – being genuinely artisanal & possibly a wee bit crazy – but that's our niche. Our name like everything else represents our approach, I guess of making our own minds up and doing things our way.

DOING:
We don't really look to growth as a business solution to all problems – we really focus on doing the good work of using technology to make a difference.

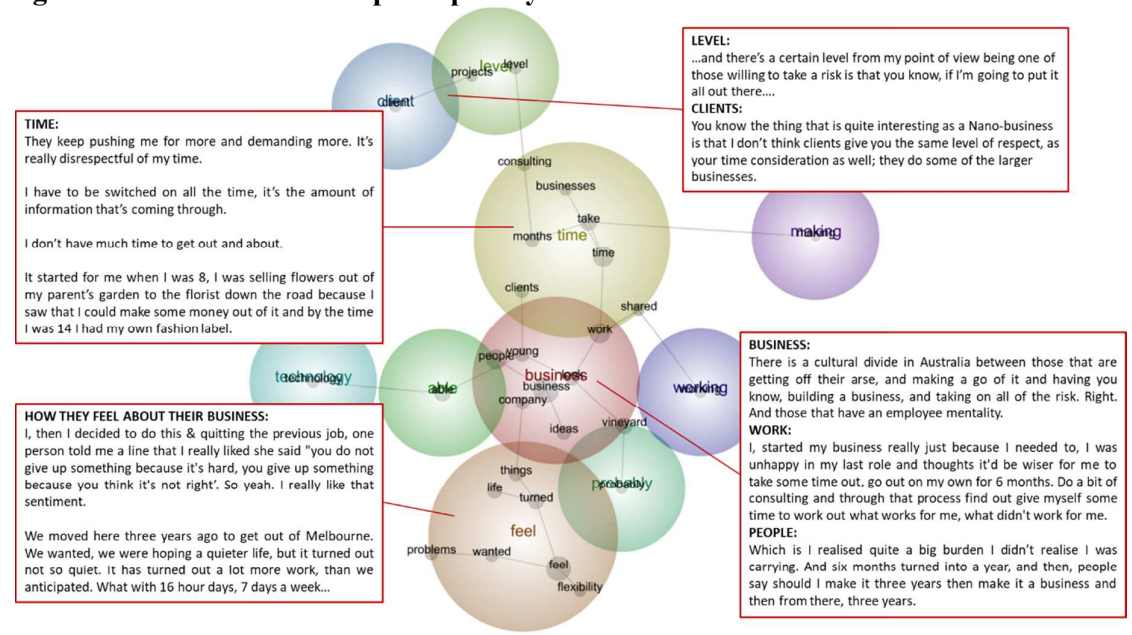
CASH & BUSINESS:
Looking at a healthy bank balance I think it's a core of a business is your cash flow, and you know, after the first few years you ain't got a cash flow, so after a couple of years you can see that you've got 20 grand in there or closer to 100 grand you can put into super, that's the big hey I made it? I'm running a business!

USING:
...and there's a certain level from my point of view being one of those willing to take a risk is that you know, if I'm going to put it all out there....

So well let's look at where it's going! You got to be a businessman not a mate.

LOOK:
Look it is, it might sound very money-grabby, but it's all about making money it really it. If you don't and again I mentor people that, they're actually running a hobby rather than a business and you know they give away half the stuff they do and they give all their mates discounts and they say "but you know my bank balance, there's never any money in there".

Figure 3: Leximancer Concept Map – My Business is Me



LEVEL:
...and there's a certain level from my point of view being one of those willing to take a risk is that you know, if I'm going to put it all out there....

CLIENTS:
You know the thing that is quite interesting as a Nano-business is that I don't think clients give you the same level of respect, as your time consideration as well; they do some of the larger businesses.

TIME:
They keep pushing me for more and demanding more. It's really disrespectful of my time.

I have to be switched on all the time, it's the amount of information that's coming through.

I don't have much time to get out and about.

It started for me when I was 8, I was selling flowers out of my parent's garden to the florist down the road because I saw that I could make some money out of it and by the time I was 14 I had my own fashion label.

HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS:
I, then I decided to do this & quitting the previous job, one person told me a line that I really liked she said "you do not give up something because it's hard, you give up something because you think it's not right'. So yeah. I really like that sentiment.

We moved here three years ago to get out of Melbourne. We wanted, we were hoping a quieter life, but it turned out not so quiet. It has turned out a lot more work, than we anticipated. What with 16 hour days, 7 days a week...

BUSINESS:
There is a cultural divide in Australia between those that are getting off their arse, and making a go of it and having you know, building a business, and taking on all of the risk. Right. And those that have an employee mentality.

WORK:
I, started my business really just because I needed to, I was unhappy in my last role and thoughts it'd be wiser for me to take some time out, go out on my own for 6 months. Do a bit of consulting and through that process find out give myself some time to work out what works for me, what didn't work for me.

PEOPLE:
Which is I realised quite a big burden I didn't realise I was carrying. And six months turned into a year, and then, people say should I make it three years then make it a business and then from there, three years.

Figure 4: Leximancer Concept Map – The Future of Work

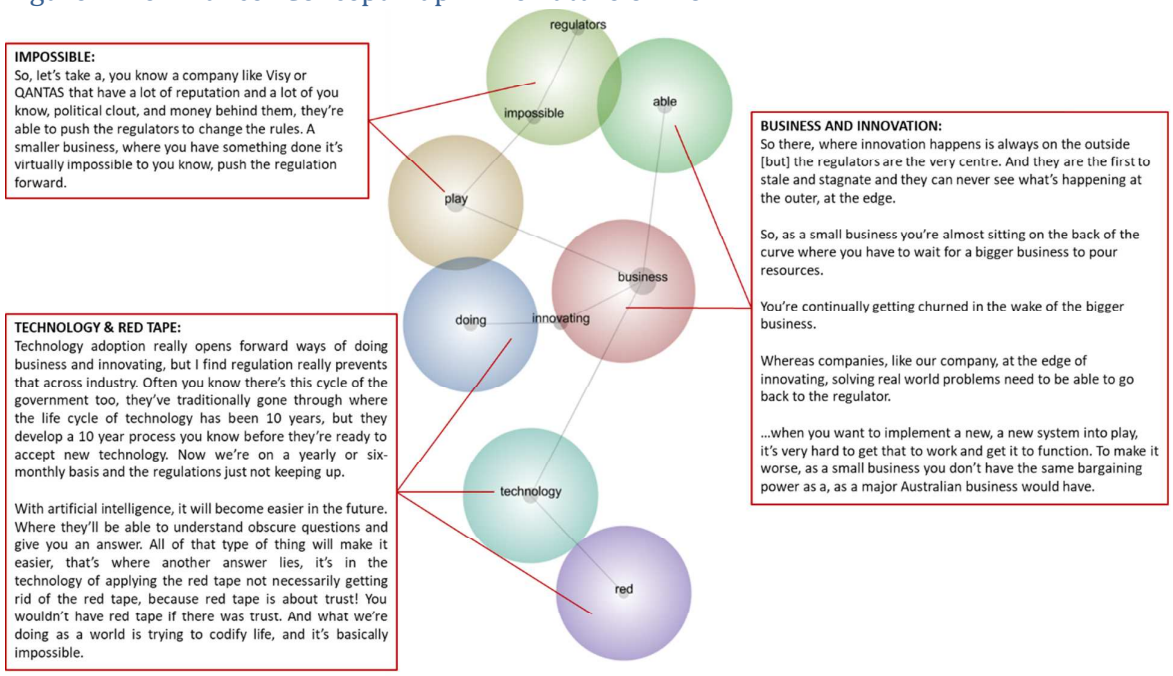
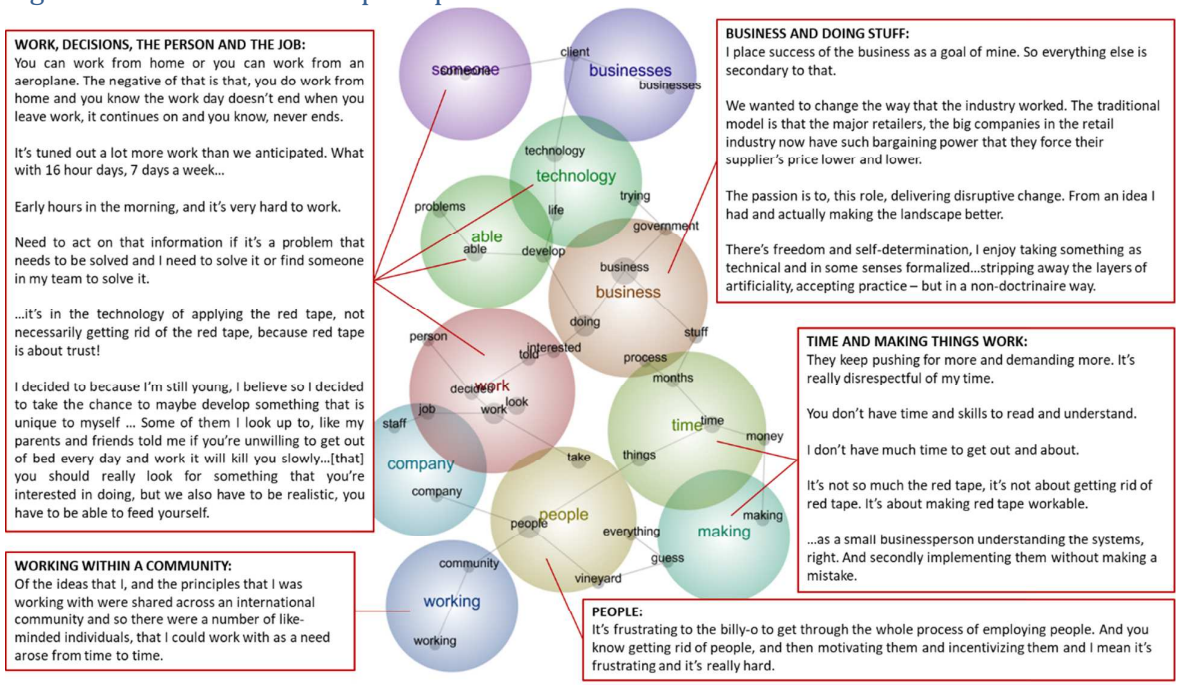



Figure 5: Leximancer Concept Map – All Discussions