

MECHANISMS FOR MANAGING AMBIDEXTERITY IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES: TWO CASE STUDIES IN THE DERMOCOSMETICS SECTOR

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Abstract: *Innovation is presented as the competitive weapon by which companies respond to the challenges of a dynamic environment. However, devising a strategy that balances the needs for short-term profitability and long-term survival becomes more complex when it comes to small and medium-sized businesses. Their limited resources, both in terms of human capital and financial means, hinder the development of organizational ambidexterity within these structures. The contribution of our qualitative study is manifested through the detection of the mechanisms enabling the SME to respond to the dual requirements of exploitation innovations and exploration innovations, particularly in a turbulent environment. We are therefore interested in the market of dermocosmetic products because it represents a young and growing market. The results obtained from the in-depth analysis of two cases, show that the simultaneous pursuit of these two imperatives is possible under certain conditions. We highlight three prerequisites: The necessity to rethink management and to conduct a new organizational and strategic adaptation process; The promotion of a culture and a social context stimulating ambidextrous behavior; Maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders.*

Keywords: Ambidexterity, Exploitation, Exploration, Adaptation, Innovation, SME.

JEL classification: O30, M10

1. Introduction

The market is increasingly saturated, the lifespan of products is getting shorter and the competition is more aggressive. Innovation then becomes a means of business survival. Henceforth, businesses are required to be ambidextrous, in other words, to combine exploitation activities and exploration activities. Exploitation grants through progressive changes, the ability to continue existing practices while reducing costs. It allows to increase the efficiency of the different processes of an organization to make it more able to face the present. Exploration consists of introducing new ways of doing things in order to seek effectiveness. There is indeed a notion of invention in the proper sense of the term because exploration allows the creation of new products, processes and/or technologies. It exposes the organization to the risk of not being able to use what is discovered and therefore facing more or less significant failures (He and Wong, 2004).

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The SME with its unique characteristics represents an interesting field for the in-depth examination of organizational ambidexterity. If large companies have the resources necessary to set up different ways of accessing it, this does not correspond to SMEs whose human, financial and organizational capacities are generally more limited. Through an exclusively qualitative methodology, based on the study of two cases, we explore the mechanisms regulating the tension between the two activities. The problematic is therefore formulated as follows: How does an innovative small and medium-sized enterprise manage to reconcile the requirements of exploitation and exploration?

2. Theoretical framework

The company engages in innovation through two main paths: continuity (exploitation) or rupture (exploration). Continuity in the innovative activity is ensured through continuous improvement of existing products and services through the improvement of knowledge. The rupture in innovative activity is reflected in the creation of new products and services reflecting new knowledge by exploring new perspectives (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2011). According to Bogaert et al. (2020), the conceptual distinction between exploration and exploitation has been the subject of much research since the seminal article by March (1991), both in strategic management and in organizational theory (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Gupta et al., 2006), in the field of inter-firm cooperation (Kauppila, 2010) and in innovation management (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004).

These are processes that compete for rare sources and present distinctions and tensions between them. The challenge for a company is how to dedicate enough resources to exploration to ensure its long-term viability and at the same time invest in sufficient exploitation to maintain its current viability. It follows that organizations and managers must, in an appropriate and balanced way, allocate their resources between the two modes of learning. Organizational ambidexterity represents the ability of a company to jointly lead exploitation and exploration innovations (Good and Michel, 2013; Papachroni and Heracleous, 2020).

The current literature did not provide much information about the mechanisms for achieving ambidexterity in SMEs, despite the fact that it represents an interesting unit of analysis. Studies present ambidexterity as a risky strategy when it comes to SMEs, given that it consumes resources and generates organizational tensions (Abebe and Angriawan, 2014; Alcade-Heras et al., 2019), even more difficult to manage for these companies (Tarteau, 2020). Lubatkin et al., (2006) state that although ambidexterity does not guarantee improved performance of the SME, it nevertheless presents a growth vector for the company's revenue compared to its non-ambidextrous competitors.

The existence of a positive link between ambidexterity and performance is recognized in the literature, whether measured subjectively or objectively (Zhang et al., 2016; Severgnini et al., 2018; Ubeda-Garcia et al., 2020). However, authors have insisted on the importance of taking moderators into consideration when studying the relationship between ambidexterity and performance (Junni et al., 2013), particularly in the context of SMEs (Tarody, 2016; Osiyevskyya et al., 2020). Ambidexterity can be conditioned by:

- The "reference group" to which the company belongs (D'Souza et al., 2017).
- External environmental factors, size and age of the company (Hughes, 2018).
- The existence of an organizational context that encourages individuals to share their time and resources between these two activities called contradictory (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).
- The availability of adequate resources, and openness to the outside through inter-organizational relations, thus allowing the going beyond the traditional boundaries of the company (Saibi, 2016).
- Absorptive capacity (Solís-Molina et al., 2018).

Due to the ambiguity of the business environment, adaptability is a crucial requirement for SMEs. According to Osiyevskyya et al. (2020), “organizations that succeed in dynamic environmental circumstances are ambidextrous, but finding the balance between exploration and exploitation is an extremely difficult managerial challenge”. Entrepreneurs who own SMEs must therefore be aware of the need to combine exploitation and exploration, which is of crucial importance for the success of their businesses (Lubatkin et al., 2006; John Schreuders and Alem Legesse, 2012). However, awareness of the usefulness of ambidexterity within the SME, if it is a necessary condition, is not enough to boost innovation, it would still be necessary to take the appropriate measures should be taken to encourage the coexistence of the two logics of innovation within this type of organization.

Managers in SMEs with fewer hierarchical levels “are much closer to the operational core of the company” (Lubatkin et al., 2006, p. 649), and “play both strategic and operational roles” (Mothe , 2019). The level of integration of the management team, i.e. its collaborative behavior, information exchange and joint decision-making between team members, positively influences the extent to which SMEs pursue an ambidextrous orientation, which itself has a positive impact on their relative performance (Lubatkin et al., 2006).

Saibi (2016) points out that in the context of the SME “the impetus towards ambidexterity can be guided both by top-down initiatives (ambidextrous leadership) with a top-down logic, but also by initiatives carried from bottom-up, with a bottom-up logic (contextual ambidexterity)”. The SME must ensure an optimal combination of “bottom up” and “top down” logics by implementing managerial mechanisms capable of capturing the benefits of both. To ensure interdependence, it is essential to overcome the “top down” and “bottom up” contradiction and thus avoid being locked into a too narrow conception (Saibi, 2016).

3. Empirical framework: study of ambidexterity within innovative SMEs

3.1. Research Methodology:

Our study is based on an exclusively qualitative methodology, relying on a study of two cases (see below). This is justified by the fact that its methods focus on discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives and thoughts of participants, that is, qualitative research explores meaning, purpose or reality. For data collection, we conducted semi-directive interviews, based on a triangulated interview guide with documentary analyzes and observations on the site. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, so that they can be processed and analyzed by adopting the technique of content analysis.

Table 1: Characteristics of semi-structured interviews conducted.

CASE	1	2
Characteristics of the company	SMEs located in Marrakech, Morocco Creation date: 1997 Field of activity: dermocosmetics Has ambidextrous characteristics	SMEs located in Marrakech, Morocco Creation date: 1999 Field of activity: dermocosmetics Has ambidextrous characteristics
No. of interviews	4	4
Interviewees	Founder-strategy consultant Founder - Production Manager Communications and Marketing Manager Chief financial officer	Founder/CEO Commercial manager Production manager Chief financial officer
Average duration	1h – 1h 30 min	
Key investigative elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation of the company - Specificities and types of innovations adopted - Resources mobilized - Factors influencing the adoption of an innovation. - Mechanisms for reconciling exploration and exploitation activities. - Difficulties encountered during the implementation of the process 	

3.2. Results and Discussion:

We proceed, through the multiple case study conducted, to the discussion of the implementation of ambidexterity within the SME. We emerge with explanations and observations related to the mechanisms for managing the exploitation/exploration dilemma.

3.2.1. Perception of innovation success

Both SMEs agree that through innovation, productivity gains increase. Growth was also and continues to be achieved - especially internationally - and particularly in terms of increased turnover. However, the vision of success differs. The members of the company (1) emphasize the need for the innovation achieved to meet the needs of the consumer. *"It's not enough to innovate, you also have to make sure that the new products correspond to the demand, meet the needs of the consumers"* replies the communication and marketing manager. The members of the company (2) rather evoke the importance of the participation of the accomplished innovation in the financing of the other planned innovations: *"For me, a successful innovation is likely to provide increased internal funding that can be very useful for financing other innovations and that will give our company a competitive advantage"* announces the General Manager & Founder.

3.2.2. Effect of Past Experience

Knowledge accumulates over time and forms repertoires of organizational and dynamic routines. Whether at the level of the manufacturing process or R&D, this accumulation of experience has a very important role in improving innovation capacity. The Strategy Consultant & Founder (company 1) affirms *"Past experience is interesting so as not to make the same mistakes again and improvements must be made so that old practices are efficient and more interesting in the face of a changing context."* In the same way, the Production

Director & Founder (Company 1) recognizes that *"There are always changes or adjustments to be made. This allows us to improve our credibility and position ourselves against competitors."* The narratives collected also show that at the level of operating activities, past experience allows them to be improved. It minimizes costs and risks, while refining practices that are based on existing knowledge. The Commercial Director (company 2) draws attention to the fact that: *"An innovation may be attractive, the accumulation of experience will allow the company to identify the risks relating to the regulatory aspect, take advantage of the reputation and improve brand image. "*

3.2.3. Practices that contribute to develop a culture of innovation

- Leadership and strategic capabilities:

Based on the interviews conducted, we confirm the idea of Saibi M. Amokrane (2016) qualifying the leader the "conductor" of ambidexterity. The owner-leaders of the two SMEs rely on listening, collective intelligence, experience, recognition of new ideas, directing attention to new avenues, so that they develop innovative approaches: *"I insist on listening and trust so that employees feel more invested and therefore offer us their own ideas. Also, everyone within the company must know the reason and the interest of their task. Another thing, I think it is essential that the various members also feel entitled to be wrong. When we talk about innovation, we are faced with the risk so it becomes normal that some innovations are doomed to failure, in this case, we must know how to bounce back or rather work on the elements that led to failure to further improve the company. "* Declares the Strategy Consultant and Founder (Company 1)

The leaders of the two companies have a high intellectual level with a high degree of specialty in the field of their activities (PhD in Pharmacy and PhD in Biochemistry). As a result, their explicit determination to prioritize innovation in the development strategy of their companies and to face the risks with methodology. This is a living situation of the postulate of Souitaris, (2001) concerning the impact of Leadership on the implementation of an innovative project. Their training in foreign university laboratories (France) where research is supported by companies and multinationals with high involvement in R&D, has in fact reinforced their ability to valorize the results of their explorations. The contact from a young age with prospectors of exploitable research patents has probably awakened in them an entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of opportunity. However, the respective ages of the owner-leaders (55 years old and 64 years old) do not seem to negatively influence their risk-taking tendency, contrary to the hypothesis of Matta and Beamish (2008). This may be due to the fact that the two firms are relatively young (24 and 21 years old) and therefore the leader's seniority is not very long. As such, both leaders are still under the impulse of the beginning of a term of office, where the leader is more likely to propose improvements or even metamorphoses in accordance with the postulate of Sanyal and Bulan (2010).

- Valorization of human capital:

In the second case studied, the SME found itself in the need to resort to HR experts to set up a cultural system favorable to innovation and technology. This system is based on the interest given to the staff. It focuses on customers, shareholders, individuals, employee qualification processes, their training and the communication between them and managers. To be able to continue to innovate, and create a culture of innovation, it followed a perspective based on segmentation based on the research of customer needs and their priorities. The company has taken a step back to listen to its customers, analyze their desires and find out why they choose or not its products. However, all this presupposes the presence of motivated and competent personnel. The Marketing Manager (company 2) confirms *"Understanding the needs of customers is not given to everyone... get a customer to perceive clearly the added value of a new product that is not yet proven, is a professionalism"*. This professionalism is based on a prerequisite: information monitoring: "

we must keep informed of what is being done in the world concerning our field of activity" General Manager & Founder (Company 2). This monitoring strategy has led to the search for the best in terms of market experience.

- **Adaptability and flexibility of the human resources:**

The study also allowed us to observe that engineers and technicians are involved in several projects, in parallel, by organizing themselves in project mode with small collaborative teams whose members are chosen for their skills. Indeed, because of its size and the versatility of its employees, the two innovation strategies of exploitation and exploration are in this case integrated in the same set so that the same person can, so that the same person can engage in both logics. The results show the importance of collective intelligence and continuous training which allows a better learning process in order to capitalize on past mistakes, especially on the estimation of time and cost during the elaboration of the when developing specifications, and to broaden skills in order to develop new solutions. Indeed, the two SMEs have reorganized their structures towards more flexibility, through a series of innovations, in order to be able to respond to possible changes in the environment. For example, following the multiple constraints caused by the COVID19 pandemic, the SMEs studied went through a period of mechanical organizational form (very centralized and hierarchical) to an organic organizational form (low degree of formalization, great flexibility). The results show that the size of the firm does not seem to decelerate innovation as stated by Becheikh et al, (2006). It is the nature of the activity that is imposing.

3.2.4. The influence of the company's external environment

The literature refers to the term "relationship capital" to designate to the organization's reputation and customer loyalty. Researchers (Mom et al., 2015; Mubarik et al., 2016) explain it as a mix of different relationships such as market relationships, power relationships, and cooperation. *"Sometimes you have to go outside the company for solutions, ideas, skills, knowledge, etc. Innovation is the business of many, so we can rely on innovation supporting organizations, universities, other companies, customers or suppliers, ..."* says the Strategy & Founder Consultant (company 1). A view that is consistent with the postulate of Perri et al., 2017. According to Mubarik et al, (2019), improving relations with suppliers and customers helps the organization not only to exploit the market (exploitation) but also to develop new market trends (exploration). Moreover, the Commercial Manager (Company 2) draws attention to the fact that, *"An innovation may be attractive, the accumulation of experience will allow the company to identify risks related to the regulatory aspect, benefit from the reputation and improve the brand image."*

The study allowed us to observe that the Dermocosmetics sector is dynamic, unpredictable and uncertain, therefore it requires more innovations. On the other hand, this sector is characterized by a complex and strict regulation. The interviewees insist, for example, on the constraint to be permanently in conformity with the quality standards for reasons of safety and guarantee for the consumer. Moreover, the two companies have been certified in different ways and on several occasions. One has the ECO CERT, VEGAN, Halal and ISO 22716 certifications. The other has ECO CERT, ISO 22716 and NAHO certifications. These certifications are causing profound organizational changes in both entities. This pushes them, at each takeover, to radically redefine their practices and internal processes. From this point of view, both companies are continuously establishing contextual innovation.

Conclusion:

To define, innovation is not straightforward in view of the different variants that often overlap with different impacts on markets, technologies, customer habits, etc. Each firm has its own

vision of innovation. This article explores in the field the mechanisms for the implementation of ambidexterity within the SME.

We retain the empirical results below, which may have relevance for different countries and also represent an answer to our problematic:

1. We affirm the key role of the owner-leader in managing the exploitation and exploration requirements within the SME. On the one hand, the level of diploma and experience greatly contributes to the design, implementation and maintenance of innovation activities. Lifelong training is an excellent alternative. On the other hand, the leader must be able to allow a certain freedom of action and tolerance for error, so as not to restrict not only the potential for creativity and innovation of his collaborators, but also their desire to engage.
2. Product innovation is at the core of the development strategies of dermocosmetics brands. It allows them to strengthen their brand image (new assets), to adapt to new consumer trends (new ranges) and to justify price increases (renewed formulations). It is a dynamic and uncertain environment, with quite complex regulations. To survive in this environment, it is important to establish relations and collaborations with customers, suppliers, universities or research centers. In other words, when resources are limited, it is preferable for a SME to prioritize network ambidexterity, i.e. exploration and exploitation partnerships, above structural ambidexterity.
3. SMEs operating in turbulent environments can become ambidextrous by adopting an organic management structure at the top of the company, based on different responsibilities assumed simultaneously by a restricted group of flexible managers, instead of having each, as often, responsibility for a single activity; and to combine it with a very structured type of mechanistic organization at the operational level.

However, it should be noted that our research also has limitations that do not affect its results but reduce their scope. A first limitation is methodological and stems from the fact that our research was conducted on two cases of SMEs. This limits its external validity, which is why the sample should be enlarged to give more credibility to the results. The model developed could, for example, be enriched in the context of subsequent qualitative research in other areas of activity. It could also open up the possibility of being tested on a large sample of SMEs to validate or invalidate its assumptions.

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