

Building a business network: the experience of immigrant entrepreneurs

Abstract

Purpose – The importance of networks with respect to acquiring the resources needed for business creation is one of the main areas within entrepreneurship research. Although there is significant literature on the use of social capital and human capital by immigrant entrepreneurs, there is an absence of studies which report the impact of business networks. Therefore, this paper reports the findings of a study examining the process of business network development by immigrant entrepreneurs.

Design methodology – For each of the 28 entrepreneurs, data was collected using a questionnaire and an interview. In completing the questionnaire, the entrepreneurs were asked to fill out a network audit, followed by a series of multiple-choice questions. For the responses from the interviews, narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996) is used to create a coherent story of the entrepreneurs' experience of business networks.

Findings – This paper presents data characterizing the entrepreneurs, their experience in business networks, and enablers and disablers to the development of a business network.

Practical Implications – The outcome is multiple perspectives on the purpose, process, benefits and challenges of developing a business network, and the impact of participation in a formal business network.

Originality/value – The findings which emerge offer insights into the development of business networks by immigrant entrepreneurs.

Keywords – Entrepreneurs, business networks, immigrants, Ireland

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Since 2008 there has been a dramatic restructuring of economic and labour market policy in Ireland. The result is a wide range of policies which affect virtually every element of the entrepreneurial environment. Sustainable job creation requires that Ireland provide a business environment that enables indigenous and immigrant entrepreneurs to develop and produce innovative new products and services. Therefore, there is a need to support entrepreneurs throughout their business cycle and in all their activities. Essential supports include the provision of business incubation and access to formal business networks (Allen and Rahman, 1985; Dubini and Aldrich, 1991; Atherton and Hannon, 2006; Stephens and Onofrei, 2012). As the Irish economy evolves, SMEs and entrepreneurs will become a central element for enhancing national economic growth and employment (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs , 2007; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2008; Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation 2012). New structures and strategies are being explored that will help entrepreneurs to develop their business ideas and to grow sales and service provision. Forfás (2006) found that entrepreneurs in Ireland share a common background, business and personal characteristics, and that their personal drive and commitment plays a key role in assisting them to overcome barriers and difficulties. Foss (2010, p. 84) explains that for nearly two decades, the importance of social networks (and, to a lesser extent, business networks) for acquiring the resources needed for business creation has been one of the main areas within entrepreneurship research. This paper presents research on the business networking activities of immigrant entrepreneurs in Ireland. For each immigrant entrepreneur, data was collected using a short questionnaire (including a network audit) and an interview. The outcome is data characterizing the entrepreneurs, and the enablers and disablers to the development of their business network.

Entrepreneurs and business networks

Berglund and Johansson (2007, p. 78) propose that there is some kind of mystification regarding the assumptions that can be attached to the concept of *entrepreneurship*. Black *et al.* (2010) report that previous research has attempted to define the personality of entrepreneurs, hoping to show that entrepreneurs are intrinsically different from other people. Indeed, DeNoble *et al.* (1999) examined the critical issues faced by entrepreneurs during the start-up and early development of their companies with the objective of identifying their specific skill and ability sets. However, continuous attempts to define the entrepreneur have proved to be a mission impossible, with the entrepreneur continually appearing in different guises (Berglund and Johansson, 2007). Alternatively, studies have attempted to catalogue factors that contribute to entrepreneurial success and failure. Indeed, Kloosterman and Rath (2001, p. 190) report that many researchers have explored the differences in proclivity towards entrepreneurship between different ethnic groups, and the way ethnicity impinges on the resources of immigrant entrepreneurs and especially their embeddedness in social networks. Furthermore, studies that deal with the concept of human capital in relation to immigrant entrepreneurs focus on the effects of: education; experience; and family and professional background (Davidsson and Honig 2003; Sequeira and Rasheed, 2003; Marger, 2001; Thompson and Downing 2007; Omerzel and Antoncic, 2008).

Castells (2010, p. 500) explains that human activity is increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in terms of processes of production, experience, power and culture. Foley (2008) proposes that social networks

can have a strong influence on entrepreneurial activity because entrepreneurs are embedded in the social contexts that influence their decisions. Studies of the social networking activities of immigrant entrepreneurs often have the purpose of exploring integration into new cultures (Greve and Salaff 2003; Kloosterman and Rath, 2001; Kristiansen, 2004). Baker *et al.* (1997) report that research on the business networks of entrepreneurs is mostly constrained to snapshots at one particular venture stage and does not consider the dynamic nature of business networks throughout the entrepreneurship process. However, there is an absence of studies which report on the impact of business networks, specifically the impact of formal business networks on immigrant entrepreneurs. Therefore, this paper reports on the process of business network development by immigrant entrepreneurs. Specifically, this paper aims to address three research questions: Who participates in the business networks of immigrant entrepreneurs? What services do business networks provide for immigrant entrepreneurs? How do immigrant entrepreneurs develop their business networks?

Although entrepreneurs may have considerable knowledge about market niches, Allen and Rahman (1985) tell us that entrepreneurs often lack a complete set of business skills. As a result, entrepreneurs will typically seek help with functional aspects of their business, and certain technical aspects, where they recognize knowledge gaps. Immigrant entrepreneurs will face additional challenges; indeed, Granovetter (1983, p. 201) proposes that individuals with only a few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social (and business) system, and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate them from the latest ideas and trends, but may also put them in a disadvantaged position in the business environment. This is because

information on suppliers, regulators, customers, sources of funding and opportunities for growth may not be accessible outside of formal business networks. Formal business networks are those facilitated by employer groups, higher education institutions and/or government agencies. Typically, these groups have a managed communication system, regular meetings and access to funding for training and development workshops. For many entrepreneurs, forming social/business networks is a difficult process, but one which is crucial to success. Social networking is essential for all immigrants, but what distinguishes it from business networking is that business networking is only necessary for entrepreneurs, and so the potential to share networks is reduced. As an example: the social networking of one spouse may result in a larger social network for their spouse/family, but business networking tends to happen in isolation.

The entrepreneurial environment in Ireland

Much of the research on entrepreneurship has been conducted in the United States, and the findings are difficult to generalize for other cultural contexts (Pillis and Reardon, 2007). While Americans are relatively indulgent towards entrepreneurial failure, the Irish view failure as a sign of incompetence (Cuddy and Evertsen, 2004). Research has also indicated an aversion to entrepreneurial risk-taking (O'Farrell, 1986); a lack of respect for entrepreneurs (Hisrich and O'Conneide, 1986); and that entrepreneurial success can be a negative inviting "begrudgery" (Ardagh, 1997). Cooney and Flynn (2008) conducted a survey of 1,108 foreign nationals resident in Ireland, finding that 12.6% claimed ownership or part-ownership of a business. This is consistent with the rate of ethnic business ownership in other countries. Profiling of ethnic businesses found that they are small in scale, young in age, concentrated in the locally traded services sectors and operating at the margins of

mainstream economic environment. Cooney and Flynn (2008) and National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (2008) conclude that ethnic entrepreneurship in Ireland in its scale and industry focus is comparable to international experience of ethnic entrepreneurship.

Irish policymakers are trying to encourage indigenous and immigrant entrepreneurship. Indeed, Hegarty (2006) reports that, in all modern economies, entrepreneurial activity is a policy priority because new businesses are a source of innovation and new ideas, and create wealth and employment. Therefore, identifying any impediments to Irish entrepreneurship is a necessary first step towards cultivating indigenous and immigrant entrepreneurship (Pillis and Reardon, 2007, p. 384). Practical supports are available to entrepreneurs, typically from local councils/agencies; county enterprise boards; private training organizations; Enterprise Ireland, through its range of training and financial supports; and higher education institutions (HEIs). These supports typically manifest themselves in business incubation centres (BICs). In developing and delivering business development initiatives, BICs support business start-up, knowledge and technology transfer, and the commercialization of research by HEIs. However, De Faoite *et al.* (2003) highlight the failure of many programmes and initiatives to take on board the cultural, social and educational background of entrepreneurs when developing training and support systems. Although SMEs are central to enhancing national economic growth, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2010) report that entrepreneurs in Ireland do not see many opportunities. However, the number of “necessity” entrepreneurs rose markedly before and during the recession. Key to this policy debate is the potential for immigrant entrepreneurs to bolster indigenous business activity, and there is evidence that this is the case (Cooney and Flynn, 2008; NCCRI, 2008).

Razin (2002, p. 162) proposes that large firms are more efficient from a national perspective, and for many individuals are a more attractive employment alternative to necessity-based entrepreneurship. But immigrants may be shut out of more stable or lucrative jobs, resulting in fewer options for generating income. The propensity of immigrants to turn to self-employment as a route of absorption and upward mobility in their host society is influenced substantially by opportunities (including access to business networks) in the economic environment. Hiebert (2002) reports that we can expect to find concentrations of immigrants in specific groups and niches, and that this is largely explained by the role of ethnic social networks in channelling new entrants into the labour market. Andersson *et al.* (2009) provide mixed evidence which suggests that immigrant enclaves contribute to the ghettoization of ethnic communities, but that enclaves act as labour market intermediaries providing pathways to jobs. Furthermore, Barrett *et al.* (2002) argue that co-ethnic ties form an important role in immigrant enterprise, but a close dependence on community linkages is as problematic as it is beneficial. These ties can contribute to the entry of immigrants into small business, but can limit the opportunity for inter-ethnic networks and the likelihood of participation in formal business networks.

Jenssen and Greve (2002, p. 255) propose that business networks in particular are beneficial to entrepreneurship because entrepreneurs can directly reach people who are willing to support their new venture. Being in contact with a diverse set of individuals from the business community is important for entrepreneurs because it gives them access to information and other resources. However, the structure/formality of the business network may influence the usefulness of information and resources. A consistent finding in the

academic literature on immigrant entrepreneurs is their low propensity to use mainstream business support agencies and formal business networks. Instead, immigrant entrepreneurs often rely on self-help and informal sources of assistance. Indeed, Bashi (2007, p. 4) proposes a theory of migration networks where potential immigrant entrepreneurs achieve business start-up by activating connections with others of a similar ethnic background in the chosen destination. Therefore, a key issue explored during the data collection was the composition/development of the business networks and how formal business networks were accessed (if at all).

Methodology

In line with Foley (2008) and Stephens and Coyle (2010), the snowball sampling method was used to identify respondents. A total of 38 individuals with a wide variety of experience were approached to participate in this study, and 28 agreed (17 male and 11 female). In line with the approach used by Klyver and Terjesen (2007), the entrepreneurs were categorized according to several different criteria. The entrepreneurs' nationalities were: Polish, Estonian, South African, Scottish, Welsh, Indian, Ghanaian and Moroccan. In terms of age, 13 of the respondents were aged 26–35, ten were aged 36–45 and the remaining five were between 46 and 55 years. The respondents' educational attainment varied from early school-leavers to undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in a variety of subject areas. The respondents' previous work experience ranged from one to ten years, typically in complementary industries. The entrepreneurs in this study had developed businesses in five sectors: services, ICT, hospitality, retail and digital enterprise. Of these, 12 of the entrepreneurs had a business in the emergence stage, ten in the young stage and six in the established stage (Klyver and Terjesen, 2007). Ten of the entrepreneurs were members of a

formal business network, eight were aware of business networks in their community but were not formal members, and ten had little or no knowledge of formal business networks.

For each respondent, data was collected using a questionnaire and an interview. Data characterizing the participants, their experience in the network, and enablers and disablers to the development of their business network was collected. Ottesen *et al.* (2004) and McGrath *et al.* (2006) found that entrepreneurs often have inaccurate knowledge of their social and business networks. Therefore, in the present study, the entrepreneurs started the questionnaire by completing a network audit. This allowed them to develop an accurate picture of their business network. They were then asked to complete a series of multiple-choice questions. These questions related to: the reasons for developing a business network; the services received from a business network; their exposure to formal business networks; and finally, the benefits of a business network.

Given the small sample size and the explorative nature of this study, targeted network analysis as proposed by Carrington *et al.* (2005), Wasserman and Faust (1994), and Klyver and Terjesen (2007) was utilized. The entrepreneurs were asked to list ten people who are part of their business network (people with whom they communicate regularly about their business activities). The entrepreneurs identified a wide range of people, including: county/town council officials, members of local development bodies, accountants, business consultants, academics, graphic/Web designers, bank managers, former college class members, members of the local chamber of commerce, members of the police force, family members, former colleagues and other small business owners. The entrepreneurs classified

the ten members of their network based on: social group, duration of the relationship, communication technique, gender and nationality. Details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Average Business Network Membership

Social Group	Family	Staff	Customers	Consultants	Entrepreneurs
Members (n = 10)	2	3	2	2	1
Duration	< 1 year	1–2	3–5	5+	
Members (n = 10)	1	4	4	1	
Communication	Unplanned	Planned	Telephone	Email	Social media
Members (n = 10)	1	2	3	3	1
Gender	Male	Female			
Members (n = 10)	6	4			
Nationality	Shared	Irish	Other		
Members (n = 10)	6	2	2		

On average, two members were family, three were staff, two were customers, two were consultants and one was an entrepreneur. On average the entrepreneurs knew one member for less than a year, four for 1–2 years, four for 3–5 years and one for more than five years. On average, the entrepreneurs communicated via unplanned face-to-face contact in one case, planned face-to-face contact in two cases, telephone in three cases, email in three cases and social media in one case. The average network was 60% male and 40% female. The average network had 60% shared nationality, 20% Irish members, and 20% were another nationality.

Further evidence was collected through interviews with the entrepreneurs. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and superfluous material such as digressions and repetitions was removed to assist the analysis. For the responses from the interviews, narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996) was used to create a coherent story of the entrepreneurs' experience. The narrative is presented in the next section and recommendations are made in the penultimate section. Brush *et al.* (2009) cite the *Journal of Business Venturing*, which

argues in the introduction to a special issue that exploring the entrepreneurial narrative can make a unique contribution to narrative scholarship and aid understanding of the phenomenon of entrepreneurship. In adopting this approach, this paper maps onto Foss (2010) and pays attention to the voice of the entrepreneurs, inviting them to participate in the discourse by making respondents narrate their efforts and experiences.

Findings (network audit and questionnaire)

The respondents were asked about their experience of developing a business network. First, the entrepreneurs were asked about their main reasons for developing a business network. The six most common reasons were: to identify potential clients and contacts; to access support; to gain networking opportunities; to meet people with a similar outlook; to increase the profile of their business activities; and to meet more entrepreneurs who are willing to share their knowledge/experience. The entrepreneurs who accessed a formal business network reported that the opportunities afforded through the network events were not readily available in their home country. Second, the entrepreneurs were asked about the services they receive from their business network. The five main services from the formal business network were: access to events and notification of events; advice; friendship; business seminars; and courses and training. The entrepreneurs identified that advice, friendship and mentoring were available in their informal networks. Having a list of formal services allowed the entrepreneurs to reflect on the value they get from informal ties. Significantly, some of the entrepreneurs considered how formality could be brought to their networks to create better value from what is often an ad hoc communication system. This finding confirms the value of conducting a network audit, and maps onto Ottesen *et al.* (2004) and McGrath *et al.* (2006). Third, the respondents were asked how their relationship

with formal business networks has evolved. The four most common answers were: attending more events and trying to better utilize the network; providing workshops rather than attending them; offering advice to new members; and recruiting new members.

The entrepreneurs who were not members of a formal network indicated that, over time, they have become mentors to new immigrants and that their interactions are based on sharing experiences both good and bad. All the entrepreneurs felt that as their business developed, this was matched by their elevation in status in both informal and formal business networks. Fourth, and finally, the respondents were asked about the benefits of being in a business network. They identified seven benefits: knowing more entrepreneurs; getting new clients/members for their business; widening their contact network; improved confidence; increased sales; access to information; and the forum provided by the network to voice opinions and sell services. The entrepreneurs reported that a formal business network offered more practical business benefits, and that the ten-person network that they identified delivered additional/alternative benefits such as emotional support.

Findings (interviews)

Following the completion of the business network audit and the questionnaire, an interview was conducted to explore the impact of business networks. The responses indicate that there are a number of benefits, including: greater confidence associated with being within a group of similar people who share common experiences and, significantly, who have encountered similar challenges (some of which are specific to immigrants). As one entrepreneur explained:

Just sharing your experience with people from your own country helps to build a friendship linked to business, and then you can move forward knowing that you have people who will help. (Entrepreneur A)

Another entrepreneur advocate the value of having a business network with contacts that can provide reliable services:

When you need work done on your shop it's good to be able to have someone recommended. I wasted a lot of time getting my shop sorted because I didn't know the right people. Now we have a diary of tradesmen to work with. (The entrepreneur indicated that the tradesmen were a mix of nationalities) (Entrepreneur F)

This response also highlights the mix of nationalities both in the network and in the contacts and service providers accessed. This finding is in contrast with the simplistic model of immigrant entrepreneurs networking as a series of linked dyads (Bashi, 2007). In line with this, the next response indicates that networks are built independently of nationality:

I don't think it is easier or harder to network with other entrepreneurs because of nationality. If someone has something you need help with, then they will want the business and you will obviously need the help. (Entrepreneur H)

Other entrepreneurs shared the experience of Entrepreneur H and networked in communities with no sub-community of their nationality. Alternatively, the next quote indicates that initial networking can be based within a community of immigrants:

When I moved to Ireland, I moved into an area with other people from home so I got most of my help from them. But over time I [got to] know lots of different people. My new website is being done by a guy I met at a friend's wedding. (Entrepreneur J)

This quote is supported by the other entrepreneurs, who initially used the existence of people of the same nationality to explore the possibility for entrepreneurial activity:

Once I had met people from my own community and got help with setting up [home], I realized that I needed to network with other entrepreneurs and start to build

connections with people who could help my business [...] that meant attending training at and joining the local business group. (Entrepreneur M)

The next entrepreneur, because of the technical nature of their start-up business, contacted a different sub-community:

I looked for support at the local college [HEI]. Most of the people were Irish, but in my business (ICT) there was a mix of nationalities. I thought they all worked together well, and even though some have left, I know they still do work for people here. (Entrepreneur D)

Entrepreneur D saw her business network develop from the contacts she made at the HEI. The other entrepreneurs also indicate that they built their network (or at least some of it) based on contacts made at the HEI. Linked to this quote is the value of formal business networks. The entrepreneurs indicate that as their network expanded, their awareness of formal business networks increased as well. These formal networks are typically organized/facilitated by the local chamber of commerce and/or the local business incubation centre:

My network [provides] lots of handouts and talks that help improve my business approach. I used their advice to build up my Facebook profile and this has helped promote my business [...] and the network helped me get on LinkedIn. (Entrepreneur I)

Finally, when asked about the link between the development of their business and social networks, the entrepreneurs reported that although social networks have impacted on their business, they were surprised that this wasn't reflected more significantly in the structure of the business networks they identified in the audit. This is captured in the following quote:

I talk a lot about my business to everyone so I thought they were all involved, but now that I have thought about this [business network] I sort of figure that these people [on the list] help me deal with the shop and sales and getting the best deal. (Entrepreneur O)

The reason for this may be related to the range of services, and the advice, consultation and friendship required by entrepreneurs, which means that the people on whom entrepreneurs rely are biased by the issues which affect access to employment. The literature review indicated that entrepreneurs will typically seek help with functional aspects of their potential business, as well as certain technical aspects, where they recognize knowledge gaps. This is reflected in the business network audit, which identified business consultants, bank officials, and senior public representatives – all jobs which are subject to poor immigrant representation.

Conclusion

The findings from this research, specifically, the answers to the three research questions indicate that there are a number of positive impacts relating to improved confidence and key skill development associated with participation in business networks. Furthermore, there are additional benefits from closer contact with business activists, entrepreneurs, local government representatives, suppliers, consultants and, of course, customers. The first research question asked who participates in the business networks of immigrant entrepreneurs? Members of the business networks are drawn from a variety of roles and backgrounds reflecting the variety of aids, advice and support that an entrepreneur requires as they look to grow their business. Membership typically includes: local government representatives, members of local development bodies, accountants, business consultants, academics, graphic/Web designers, bank managers, former classmates, members of the local chamber of commerce, members of the police force, family members, former colleagues and other small business owners. By completing a network audit the entrepreneurs answered the second research question: what services do business networks

provide for immigrant entrepreneurs? The typical services include: accounting, website and social media provision, help with funding applications, staff recruitment, legal advice, outsourcing and office space. The final research question was how do immigrant entrepreneurs develop their business networks? The entrepreneurs develop their business networks using a mix of three approaches. First, some of the entrepreneurs engaged with a sub-community of their own nationality. Second, entrepreneurs (in the absence of the first sub-community) engaged with other members of the business community. Third, predominantly due to the need for specialist advice, the entrepreneurs engaged with a network located at an HEI and/or the local chamber of commerce.

The research presented in this paper complements previous research on immigrant social and business networks (Bashi, 2007; Andersson *et al.*, 2009; Jenssen and Greve, 2002). The entrepreneurs who participated in this study are positive about the impact business networking has had on them as professionals and on their business. This is in line with Davidson and Honig (2003), who propose that entrepreneurs would be well advised to develop and promote business networks, particularly inter- and intra-firm networks. Bensimon *et al.* (2004) propose that in order to ensure an appropriate link between research and practice, there is a need to study problems that are of greater relevance to policy-makers and practitioners. Therefore, this paper presents the following recommendations in relation to business networks for immigrant entrepreneurs. First, there is a need to promote business networks in the immigrant community. This would be best achieved using the testimonials of immigrants who have joined formal business networks. Second, higher education and business incubation providers need to target immigrant communities to attract additional entrepreneurs to their groups. This could be achieved by

using multilingual promotional materials and hosting open days. Third, and finally, immigrant entrepreneurs should target formal business networks and HEIs as part of their business development strategy. Successful implementation of these recommendations should help move immigrant entrepreneurs from the margins of the mainstream economic environment, and improve absorption and upward mobility in the host society.

Further research is needed to explore the experience of immigrant entrepreneurs. Specifically, research could first, conduct network audits over time with entrepreneurs and/or expand the sample size, and conduct network analysis with entrepreneurs at different stages in the business life cycle; second, research could explore the relationship between the development of an entrepreneur's business and changes in status, self-esteem, emotional intelligence, family life, etc. This research would help to improve our understanding of how immigrant entrepreneurs can be supported, with a view to improving business success and social integration. An improved understanding of the challenges and successes experienced by immigrant entrepreneurs will help policy-makers to improve the success of integration strategies. This research would complement studies by Kloosterman and Rath (2001) and Kristiansen (2004) exploring integration into new cultures.

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