

Knowledge sharing in family SMEs: the role of communities of practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of communities of practice (CoP) as knowledge-sharing tools in family small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In this context, CoPs that jointly involve family and non-family members are expected to act as knowledge-sharing tools.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employs a multiple case study methodology, analysing the cases of six small companies in different sectors and countries over a period of 8 years. Both primary and secondary data are used.

Findings – The results show the role CoPs play in involving family and non-family members in empowering knowledge-sharing initiatives. A CoP's role in knowledge sharing depends on the presence (or lack) of a family leader, the leadership approach, the degree of cohesion around shared approaches and values within the CoP, and the presence of multiple generations at work.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature on knowledge sharing in family businesses, by exploring for the first time the role of the CoP as a knowledge-sharing tool, depending on families' involvement in the CoP.

Keywords Knowledge sharing, Community of practice, Family firms, SMEs, Italy, Germany, Scotland, Sweden

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Knowledge sharing is key in organisations' strategic development (Cunningham *et al.*, 2016), as strong links have been claimed between knowledge sharing and performance (Geiger and Schreyögg, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2013). In family SMEs, knowledge-sharing initiatives are a particularly important resource due to constraints on resources (Dotsika and Patrick, 2013). The ways in which family SMEs manage their knowledge resources are strongly affected by the presence of the family in the business (Duh *et al.*, 2010).

As most studies focus on larger non-family organisations (Wong and Aspinwall, 2004), knowledge sharing in family SMEs remains little explored (Cunningham *et al.*, 2016), despite the potential of investigating knowledge sharing in an empirical setting, where the challenges



of family members' involvement might trigger knowledge initiatives (Seaman, 2015; Giovannoni *et al.*, 2011; Tagiuri and Davis, 1996). Studies on knowledge sharing within family firms have reported contradictory results, while some find that families boost business due to the altruistic nature of familial influence (Karra *et al.*, 2006; Zahra *et al.*, 2007), others reveal more challenging behavioural issues that prevent knowledge sharing in family firms (Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2006; Poza *et al.*, 2004).

Taking the tension between these contradictory results as its starting point, this study contributes to the literature on knowledge sharing in family SMEs by revealing the role of communities of practice (CoP) in the context of family firms. Some researchers emphasise that 'the family business must function as a community of practice' (Fotea *et al.*, 2012, p. 30). For example, Konopaski *et al.* (2015) argue that a family business can be viewed as a CoP, where family members learn about the firm's continuity. More recently, McAdam *et al.* (2019) adopted Wenger's (1998) CoP framework to investigate how individuals involved in family businesses collectively learn and develop competencies to support decision-making processes. They explored a three-generation family business and illustrated how a family-based CoP centralises social and learning-based practices.

While prior studies view CoPs as a conceptual lens through which knowledge management is interpreted within the whole family firm, this study aims to understand how CoPs might function as knowledge-sharing tools in family SMEs involving sub-groups of employees, including both family and non-family members. This study uses a social identity approach (Biscotti *et al.*, 2018; Frank *et al.*, 2017; Cunningham, 2020) to conceptualise the family firm as a complex context in which family and firm identities overlap: the coexistence of family and business shapes CoPs' social context, such that individuals' identity within a CoP – regardless of whether they are family or non-family – becomes defined by how their CoP membership influences knowledge-sharing processes. This approach makes it possible to investigate how CoPs, as groups of people including both family and non-family members, contribute to knowledge-sharing initiatives within family firms.

2. Literature review

2.1 Knowledge sharing in a family business

While knowledge is currently viewed as the most critical resource in gaining a competitive advantage, the plurality of business actors emphasises the need to manage knowledge flows successfully within and outside an organisation (Bagnoli *et al.*, 2020; Secundo *et al.*, 2019a, b; Simeone *et al.*, 2017, 2018). The sharing of resources through interaction is critical in reinforcing or transforming existing knowledge within an organisation (Sanchez-Famoso and Maseda, 2014). For such sharing to take place, individuals must share their knowledge with each other (Carrasco-Hernández and Jiménez-Jiménez, 2013; Patel and Fiet, 2011).

Knowledge sharing is the process of transferring individuals' wisdom, skills and technologies in order to generate greater knowledge resource (Tsai, 2002). It is expected to ease knowledge mobilisation in reciprocal and meaningful exchanges. The need for efficient knowledge sharing is especially pivotal in family firms and, among these, in family SMEs, where limited resources lead to knowledge sharing on an *ad hoc* basis, particularly in relation to more tacit forms of knowledge, such as know-how and experiential wisdom (Durst and Edvardsson, 2012). Family SMEs have been found to have rich knowledge sources held by individuals within the organisation (Sirmon and Hitt, 2003); therefore, knowledge sharing is essential for knowledge management.

Family influence has divergent effects on a firm's capacity for knowledge-sharing activities. On the one hand, family ties ease the relational flow between organisational members (Sanchez-Famoso and Maseda, 2014), which is particularly relevant for tacit-to-tacit knowledge sharing. On the other hand, the coexistence of family and non-family members

fosters challenges that might prevent knowledge sharing. For example, non-family members have been found to be at disadvantage in knowledge sharing in a family-firm context, because relational familiarity between family members generates an idiosyncratic communication style that excludes non-family members (Marret *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, family members are commonly reluctant to share knowledge with non-family employees (Matlay, 2002; Neckebrouck *et al.*, 2017), as they fear expropriation of the firm's specific skills (Chrisman *et al.*, 2014; Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2011).

These mixed results regarding family influence in knowledge-sharing initiatives indicate that there is still a research gap about how family SMEs manage knowledge sharing (Salojarvi *et al.*, 2005). Scholars have called for empirical evidence (Cunningham *et al.*, 2016) on such phenomena. This paper contributes to addressing this call by providing an empirical analysis of how CoPs that jointly involve family and non-family members can act as knowledge-sharing tools.

The findings show that a CoP's role in knowledge sharing depends on the presence (or lack) of a family leader, the leadership approach, the degree of cohesion around shared approaches and values within the CoP, and the presence of multiple generations at work. This study offers several contributions to the stream of research about knowledge sharing in family SMEs.

The first contribution is related to the presence (or absence) of a family leader around whom a consensus of family and non-family members is established. The path-goal theory shows that heterogeneity of the leadership approach inevitably has implications for knowledge sharing (Cunningham *et al.*, 2016). The socialisation literature emphasises that family leaders may engage in certain behaviours and practices that contribute to enhancing or preventing employees' sense of commitment (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005). This study contributes to the socialisation literature by showing that family leader involvement in CoPs may produce opposite effects on the effectiveness of the knowledge-sharing process, depending on the leadership approach.

This paper's second contribution involves the relation between knowledge sharing and the level of cohesiveness in CoPs – that is, “the degree of closeness and emotional bonding experienced by the members of the family” (Lee, 2006). According to Zahra (2012), cohesion defines how information is shared and used and how the firm acquires knowledge. According to the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985), individuals' identity is defined by their membership in groups. Cunningham (2020) extends the identity perspective to illuminate identity formation among non-family employees in family firms. This study contributes to this stream of research by showing that cohesion among individuals belonging to a CoP – both family and non-family members – can strengthen or weaken the effectiveness of a CoP in knowledge sharing.

The third contribution of this work is related to the multiple generations involved in a family business, which allow for different levels of cooperation and thus different levels of knowledge sharing (Lawrence *et al.*, 2005). The literature has widely investigated the effects of the presence of several family generations in a family firm (Miller *et al.*, 2003; Mussolino and Calabrò, 2014) and the intergenerational processes of knowledge transfer that they activate (Murphy *et al.*, 2019). The simultaneous presence of several generations in a business stimulates a greater openness to new things, as well as a greater willingness to innovate and invest in the company's future (Frank *et al.*, 2019; Zahra, 2012). Previous evidence has shown that, when more generations are involved, the firm's points of contact with the outside world increase, encouraging the internalisation of new knowledge (Lionzo and Rossignoli, 2013). However, a wider intergenerational presence could also strengthen the company's attitude against innovating and trying new paths, to the extent that family members close themselves off to protect their privileges and identities (Konopaski *et al.*, 2015). Still, as in several other contexts, the presence of family members with contrasting features and aims in a family firm

can create a powerful barrier to the effective sharing and creation of new knowledge, unless appropriately dedicated managerial practices are embraced to facilitate the translation process. This study contributes to this stream of research by showing that an intergenerational presence among individuals belonging to a CoP that includes both family and non-family members can affect the role of the CoP in knowledge sharing.

2.2 *The CoP as a knowledge-sharing tool in a family business*

Prior studies have explored how family firms manage knowledge sharing. [Zahra et al. \(2007\)](#) suggest that family firms seek to formalise their knowledge-sharing processes, which may cause the knowledge sharing to be less fluid than it could be. [Lin \(2013\)](#) find that family firms have low preference for incentivised knowledge-sharing tools, preferring instead to leverage spontaneous networks in which the intention to share relies on a reciprocal and multi-directional flow of interaction. Networks have been found to be managerial tools that allow SMEs to gain new knowledge from the outside ([Rossignoli, 2017](#)).

We argue that CoPs in family SMEs, as spontaneous group of people that jointly involves family and non-family members, can act as effective knowledge-sharing tools. A CoP is a group of people who share similar interests and collaborate over time to exchange ideas, find solutions, share knowledge and build innovations based on ability rather than hierarchical position ([Brown and Duguid, 1998](#); [Lave and Wenger, 1991](#); [Wenger, 1998](#)). According to [Cross et al. \(2006, p. 33\)](#), people within CoPs are individuals who “share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who regularly interact with learning how to do it better”. [Lave’s \(1992\)](#) theory of socially situated learning argues that knowledge and learning are embedded in the activities, interactions and relationships of a CoP. According to this theory, knowledge sharing can begin and develop through informal relationships and proximity to others in a specific social context that is the CoP.

Studies have investigated the existence of CoPs within family firms ([Fotea et al., 2012](#); [Konopaski et al., 2015](#); [McAdam et al., 2019](#)) and family SMEs ([Hamilton, 2011](#); [Zahra, 2012](#)). These studies draw from [Lave and Wenger’s \(1991\)](#) theory and assert that a family business can be viewed and function as a CoP ([Konopaski et al., 2015](#)). Such studies provide evidence on how CoPs in a family business foster trans-generational entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurial decision-making ([Fotea et al., 2012](#)), support family members’ learning about firm continuity ([Konopaski et al., 2015](#)), and centralise social and learning-based practices ([McAdam et al., 2019](#)). We contribute to this stream of research by providing empirical evidence of how CoPs can act as knowledge-sharing tools in family SMEs. Our evidence shows that, in family SMEs, CoPs consist of a set of social relations between family and non-family members and become an authentic context that enables knowledge sharing.

Within these CoPs, people play different roles, regardless of whether they are family or non-family members. The key role is played by the community leader – the individual responsible for ensuring that the community functions as a knowledge-sharing mechanism. Another important role is that of the community sponsor, to whom the CoP’s leader responds. Lastly, the facilitators are the people in the CoP who build membership, maintain the activity and energy, establish the behavioural style of the community, manage discussions and relationships, create contacts and liaise with the sponsor. Understanding which roles are played by the family and non-family members involved in a CoP is key to understanding how the CoP functions as a knowledge-sharing tool.

This study aims to answer the following research question:

RQ. How do CoPs that jointly involve family and non-family members act as knowledge-sharing tools in family SMEs?

3. Method

We perform an in-depth case study to address our research question. This choice was made due to the theory-building aims of this paper, which made an inductive methodology with a multiple case study the best choice (Yin, 2009). The cases we examine can be considered polar cases (Yin, 2003), in the sense that they involve SMEs operating in German, Scottish, Swedish and Italian contexts. The following subsections describe the research context, the data collection and the data analysis steps.

3.1 Research context

To develop our research, we sample cases characterised by different family impacts on the process of translating knowledge for decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1989). We chose family SMEs with the following characteristics: (1) the family is present in the business, through ownership, governance and/or management; (2) the firm is small or medium sized; (3) both primary and secondary data are available; (4) a CoP is managed within the firm, whether it began intentionally or not (Zieba *et al.*, 2016); and (5) the firms are located in different countries (i.e. Germany, Italy, Scotland and Sweden).

3.2 Data collection

To develop our study, we employed both primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of a series of semi-structured interviews that followed a common format for all cases, along with a second group of more in-depth, unstructured interviews (Miles *et al.*, 2013; Wengraf, 2001). All interviewees agreed *a priori* to participate in the study and be recorded. We anonymised the names of the companies and interviewees to maintain confidentiality. The secondary data consists of the companies' press releases, brochures and archived data, to identify the specific characteristics of the cases.

We studied the firms over a period of 8 years (2014–2021). To improve our understanding of the studied phenomenon, we chose cases that were located in a variety of countries. The interviews lasted 1–3 h and were audiotaped; we then produced transcripts from the tapes. The interviews began with open conversational questions to encourage the participants to feel at ease and to respond freely, allowing them to tell their own story and describe how they relate to parents and colleagues during working and non-working hours. Table 1 lists the interviewees and type of information gathered. Notes were also taken during the interviews, making it possible to contextualise the answers given during the interviews.

3.3 Data analysis

We collected the data through observations, meetings, interviews and site visits to the selected firms over an 8-year period. In the six analysed firms, we interviewed the CoPs' members, including both family and non-family members. In the majority of interviews, two researchers participated: one managed the inquiries, while the other recorded the answers. When discrepancies occurred among our data sources, we questioned the respondents further. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed for the analysis.

To analyse the data, we coded the retrieved information into a database to reconstruct each company's history, map its business areas and roles, identify the ownership and governance characteristics, and understand in detail the activities people engage in within the firm's daily operations. We interpreted the transcribed interviews and observation notes carefully. From the transcriptions, we identified recurring keywords in the quotations. By grouping the keywords, we were able to classify patterns of recurring topics into empirical categories: leadership, cohesiveness and multiple generations at work.

CoP details	Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta	Epsilon	Zeta
Members	18 members: the founder's three nephews + top technicians of the three company plants	19 members: the family leader and his two sons + five managers + top technicians + one external consultant	37 members: the founder's two sons + commercial forces (seven directors + 16 supervisors + 10 external exclusive agents) Non-family CEO	Seven members The owning family (mother, father, two daughters) + one sales representative + two production representatives	10 members: the late father, his wife and daughter + four top technicians and sales managers	Six members: the father, mother and two children (son and daughter), two nonfamily members
Sponsor	Family leader	Family leaders' sons	Non-family CEO	Mother and daughter	Family leader's daughter	Family leader's son
Frequency of sharing opportunities	Daily (informal call), weekly (formal meeting) and monthly (3-day meeting)	Daily (informal call), weekly (formal and informal meeting) and monthly (formal meeting)	Weekly (informal call), monthly (periodic formal meeting)	Daily, weekly (formal meetings)	Weekly (informal) meeting with directors and top technicians, biannual strategy workshop with top management team members (head of sales, head of services)	Monthly meeting of family directors
Gender	Male and female	Male and female	Male and female	Female and male	Male and female	Male and female
Average age	43	48	43	Not available	56	45
CoP's experience (years)	15	23	14	21	20	10
Task domain	Plant performance	Company strategy and performance	Commercial practices	Production performance	Company strategy and performance	Commercial practices
Main objective	Plants' "constructive" competition	Continuous manufacturing process improvement	Renewal and development of company commercial practices	Production planning for the coming period; improving production performance	Continuous distribution and services improvement	Further development of commercial practices
Source(s):	Authors' own creation					

Table 1.
Details of the CoPs in the studied family SMEs

To ensure that a good match resulted between the findings and the interviewers' perspectives, we first submitted the findings to firm members for checks, asking for their feedback, and sometimes requested a further interview. Moreover, we triangulated multiple sources of evidence (i.e. archival analysis, participant observations and interview results) to improve the quality of the study.

4. Empirical setting

Herein, we refer to the companies as Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon and Zeta. Alpha was founded in 1970 and holds a leadership position in the European market in manufacturing tooling for punch presses. It has had a regular and organic growth path since 1990. In 2021, Alpha had a turnover of €135 million, with 160 employees. The firm now counts 13 family owners; of these, four family members are involved in the business.

Beta has been active in the speciality chemicals industry since 1984; it is a leader in integrated chemical and geological services. Beta has a turnover of €68 million, with 70 employees. At present, the firm has five family owners, while nine family members are involved in the business.

Gamma was founded in 1974 to produce automation technology for pharmaceutical companies. It specialises in designing and producing automation systems for the machinery used in vaccine production. After years of high growth, Gamma adopted a narrow diversification in 1985, buying a competitor that produced automation technology for antibiotics sterilisation. Due to its competitors' large scale, the difficulties of managing two business units, and – importantly – conflicts in the family regarding the firm's strategies, the family sold the manufacturing unit in 2000 and continued to design and trade automation systems for pharmaceutical companies. In 2008, the family completely retired from the business and appointed an experienced CEO. The firm is currently owned by the two founders and their two sons, who participate on the board of directors as non-executives. Gamma now has a turnover of €190 million, with 130 employees.

Delta is a second-generation family business located in the south of Sweden. The company was founded by one family in 1947 and was then taken over by a different family in 1974. The firm is currently run by the second generation of the second family. Two members of the second generation lead the company as the CEO and vice-CEO. The company specialises in automatic product lathing and is a subcontractor in the automobile industry. However, the first-generation members, who purchased the company in 1974, are still active on the board and act as advisors to the company. The company has 69 employees and a turnover of €12 million at present. The current CEO took over the position 10 years ago and has doubled the turnover since then. The company continuously invests in its employees by training them.

Epsilon was founded in 1950 to sell office furniture and equipment to business customers. After years of growth, the company suffered from the advent of online furniture in 2010, with its office equipment stores suffering and its sales going down. There were also some conflicts between the late father and his daughter regarding the direction and strategy of the business for sustaining itself in the long run. After the death of the father in 2011, the company completely reorganised its strategy and introduced a new business segment. Due to its ageing workforce, the company was facing a knowledge drain and had difficulty finding new employees with relevant qualifications. The family firm is now run by the second (mother) and third (daughter) generations. It has 10 full-time employees and an annual turnover of €1.5 million.

Zeta is a small architectural business. The firm was founded in 1999 by a sole proprietor, the father of the family, and is now managed by the son (the second generation). In 2005, Zeta became a limited company. The son took over from his father, who was 64 at that time. The business focuses on domestic building projects, and their customers are mostly private

clients. The company is a typical family business. The mother and sister are directors, and the father is further involved in the company as an advisor. The managing director (the son) recognises the need for improvement in his risk- and knowledge-management system. The firm is also a member of the Scottish Family Business association, and the son finds it useful to discuss and share ideas and thoughts with like-minded CEOs of other family firms – particularly to observe what other family firms have been doing regarding risk assessment and knowledge accumulation. This is important, as the son's objective is growth and the business aims to grow by more than 20% in terms of its sales and workforce. In addition, the CEO plans to concentrate more on sophisticated building projects that require better project monitoring and control. For this reason, the CEO is very interested to see how other family firms handle project monitoring and set up project knowledge databases. The company employs 10 full-time employees and has an annual turnover of €1.2 million.

A CoP has been identified in each of the six family businesses, in which family and non-family members compare ideas, translate and transfer knowledge, identify problems and find solutions. Table 2 describes these CoPs, their functioning, the people involved, and the roles determined during the first round of interviews.

5. Findings

5.1 *The family's impact on the ability to translate knowledge*

This analysis combines the observations obtained from the data and frames the CoPs' contribution to the translation of knowledge through the family features of leadership, cohesiveness and multiple generations at work, as shown in Table 3. The results discussed in the following subsections compare findings from different sources, thereby providing a "chain of evidence" (Yin, 2009).

5.1.1 Alpha. The family leader is the main sponsor of the CoP at Alpha. Over time, he shaped the business and the CoP's identity around his ideas and values. His leadership of family and non-family members is sustained by the trust he has gained on a daily basis due to his charisma and ability to manage the firm. People with different views are excluded from the CoP; only those that identify with the family leader's orientation and thoughts are involved. Over time, the more the CoP identified with the family leader, the less open were the discussions between the CoP members about the business. As one of the founder's nephews noted:

During our meeting, it is quite impossible to suggest something different from what my uncle has in mind . . . I mean, this is not only due to my uncle's way of living the conflict but also because of the trust that all members give him . . . they truly think that what he believes is always the best for the company.

The family members' active participation in Alpha's CoP and the strong leadership has led to a sort of competition among the three plants' representatives to gain approval from the family and the other plants' representatives.

This plant competition is the engine of the team functioning. When we meet personally every 5 weeks, the best plant representatives are awarded and win a symbolic prize. However, what makes a plant representative proud is . . . being in charge of transferring the learning to other plants, explaining to the other site plants how they reached that kind of improvement, transferring to them the new things they learned, so that the others are able to do the same.

The deep focus of the CoP members, the systematic meetings and the strong cohesion among the CoP members favour the development of a common language and a mutual understanding of problems, which leads the members to assist one another in gathering and interpreting incoming knowledge. However, this process of translation and knowledge

Table 2.
Details of the
companies taken as
case studies

	Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta	Epsilon	Zeta
Date company was founded	1970	1984	1974	1947	1950	1990
Generations currently involved	3rd	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd and 3rd	1st and 2nd
Respondents	Owner managers, employees	Owner manager, employees	Owner managers, employees	Owner managers, employees	Owner managers, employees	Owner managers, employees
Period of data collection	2014–2021	2014–2021	2014–2021	2014–2021	2014–2021	2014–2021
Industry sector	Manufacturing	Chemicals	Manufacturing	Manufacturing (automotive sector)	Office equipment	Architecture
Number of employees	160	70	130	69	10	10
Annual turnover in thousand EUR in 2021	135,000	68,000	190,000	12,000	1,166	1,253
Main products	Tooling for punch presses	Integrated chemical and geological services	Automatic technological products	Automatic product lathing	Office equipment	Domestic building projects
Main customers	Mechanic manufacturers	Real estate manufacturers	Pharmaceutical manufacturers	Automobile manufacturers	Business customers	Private clients
Source(s): Authors' own creation						

Item	Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta	Epsilon	Zeta
Leadership	<p>Strong family leader and CoP members aligned with him</p> <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Context-specific CoP member experiences and learning Competition among CoP members limited to predefined topics This favours exploitation but impedes exploration 	<p>Leadership and sense of belonging based on reciprocal trust</p> <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructive debates with conflict Freedom to propose new ideas without fear of judgement Incoming proposals taken into account Open debate feeds exploration 	<p>Lack of a family leader and appointment of an external CEO</p> <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free debate incentivises new ideas for customer satisfaction CEO fosters the exploration of innovative solutions 	<p>Strong family leadership; aim to reach "zero mistakes", even though mistakes happen; company sponsors events off the job to incentivise learning and cohesion</p>	<p>With the new managing director (daughter), leadership and sense of belonging is now based on reciprocal trust</p> <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructive debates with conflict Freedom to propose new ideas without fear of judgement Open debate feeds exploration 	<p>Leadership and sense of belonging based on reciprocal trust</p> <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructive debates with conflict among the managing board The managing board acts as a sounding board for the incoming son and daughter and provides guidance for steering the firm Open debate feeds exploration Strong cohesiveness around an open-minded and forward-looking culture External expert participation
Cohesiveness	<p>Strong cohesiveness and uniform thinking patterns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common language and mutual understanding Limited innovation competences CoP members act as problem solvers 	<p>Strong cohesiveness around an open and forward-looking culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive debates to develop new skills External expert participation Fast decision processes 	<p>Strong</p>	<p>Strong; knowledge sharing is facilitated through informal and procedures and meetings</p>	<p>Strong cohesiveness around an open-minded and forward-looking culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive debates to develop new skills External expert participation 	<p>(continued)</p>

Table 3.
Family and knowledge-sharing outcomes

Table 3.

Item	Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta	Epsilon	Zeta
Multiple generations	<p>Links between generations driven by the family leader</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only existing knowledge is transferred • Directors stretch to exploit actual knowledge to meet the family's expectations • Short-term investment and orientation 	<p>Links between the two generations take place in an open-culture context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiential learning among older and younger generations working together • The second generation is one of the main sources of new knowledge • Encouragement to pursue innovativeness and long-term results 	<p>Weak link between generations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited intergenerational learning • Family steers the CEO to explore innovation to maintain the firm's long-term reputation • Family does not pursue company entrepreneurship 	<p>Strong link between generations as first and second generation actively participate;</p> <p>continuous improvement through knowledge sharing is aimed for within the family and the company</p>	<p>Until the death of the father (only managing director), links between generations driven by the family leader</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only existing knowledge is transferred • With the new managing director (daughter), there is encouragement to pursue new ideas 	<p>Links between the two generations take place in an open-culture context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiential learning among older and younger generations working together • The second generation is one of the main sources of new knowledge

Source(s): Authors' own creation

sharing is context-specific; that is, it occurs within the boundaries defined by the family members. The family members aligned with the leader select the topic to discuss, address the debate and decide on the final solution. Even if they favour open and broad debates, the dialogue and knowledge exchange are limited by the precise boundaries they define. That is, the CoP's contribution is oriented towards improving the current systems, structures and mechanisms in each plant, while the family overrules any other ideas and suggestions.

The simultaneous presence of two generations helps the CoP to remain committed to the company's goals and influences the overall decision-making process. As a founder's nephew explained:

During our meetings, we always felt and touched passion and enthusiasm for the company. This is because we all grew up identifying ourselves with the family and the company. We are all part of it and need to contribute to its success.

5.1.2 Beta. In Beta, only two family members participate in the CoP. The oldest son leads the CoP, while both sons maintain contact with customers and identify market needs and expectations. The CoP is led democratically, and open debates among family and non-family members are encouraged to be constructive, even during conflict discussions. The trust and cohesiveness around the family have grown over time, thanks to the family's ability to involve people: they foster positive conflicts in the CoP and constructive relationships among members. A non-family member of the CoP stated:

We always compare ideas and opinions in our group. Each one takes into account the others' observations, because we value each other and we know that everyone works for the common good.

In Beta's CoP, the sense of belonging leads the top managers to trust one another and the family members involved in the CoP. This sense of belonging encourages managers to propose new ideas without judgment or criticism, leading to an open debate that feeds the exploration of new avenues. The family also allows external experts, such as consultants or customers, to participate in CoP meetings. Family members encourage intense exchanges with outsiders, and the members perceive these as a valuable source of fresh ideas and new insights into the knowledge-translation and -transfer processes. As a CoP member remarked:

I'm always inspired by the new perspectives from the external experts we invite each week, which keeps me from being overwhelmed by the rigorous schemes when leading my R&D team.

The CoP is in favour of new ideas, and its members are incredibly open to acquiring knowledge from external stakeholders. Therefore, the translation process appears to be relatively easy and smooth. Even disagreements are seen as a constructive way to improve knowledge.

5.1.3 Gamma. In Gamma, family members play a marginal role in the CoP. As a family member, one of the board of directors said:

There are too many personal issues between us. It is quite impossible to speak about business issues, regardless of these personal problems.

While the family team is in conflicting relationships, the business follows the path determined by the non-family CEO. The CEO leads the CoP and gives individuals the freedom to debate new ideas for customer satisfaction and to generate new solutions and practices. The wide commercial domain of the CoP helps motivate individuals to come up with new ideas and proposals. As the commercial company director explained:

Our team is always looking for new solutions to improve current processes. Everyone appreciates and considers each idea. This motivates everybody to give his specific contribution, and we thus interpret each problem from different points of view.

The new solutions come from integrating different knowledge domains (i.e. each agent's different technical and product knowledge), which is essential in continuously producing innovative solutions for customers. The new solution is then "placed" in a repository for any member to access and use. Nevertheless, the lack of a family leader and the separation between family and business strongly reduce the family's role in promoting and ensuring the CoP learning process.

The family is not a cohesive group that shares common goals; rather, it is in conflict and is neutral on firm issues; it does not pursue company entrepreneurship and is completely disinterested in promoting new innovative solutions. The lack of family cohesion and the family's distance from the business limit – or even impede – knowledge sharing and transfer between generations.

Despite the family's low involvement and the wide room for discretion left to the team, family members in Gamma act to keep the CoP's focus on family values, which are mainly to increase the firm's reputation. Family members intervene when a team decision could diverge from this aim, which is the only case where the family monitoring function leads to an effective decision. As the CEO explained:

Sometimes, family members leave their silent position and intervene to stress the solution or the investment they prefer. They usually promote a choice because of the reputation it may produce.

5.1.4 Delta. In 1995, Delta became ISO-certified, making high quality and precision guiding principles in the company.

Being a family business, it becomes natural that all family members are involved in it, no matter if it is a farm, restaurant or a supplier in the automotive industry.

In this region, cooperation between the mostly family businesses is common. Sharing orders with neighbouring companies is also common, if a firm's own capacity is insufficient. In this way, the companies become CoPs themselves, which leads to joint product development at times or to offers for bigger projects in the automotive industry.

During the financial crisis of 2008–2009, the company lost almost half of its turnover, as many customers from the automotive industry cancelled their orders. Instead of reducing its workforce, the company kept all its employees and invested in training them instead. The company used the same strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second-generation family CEO explained:

... we invested in training and running small volumes to test the machines and so on. But we came out the other side really battered, but still on track – and, above all, with pretty much all the production staff left.

Owning families are usually the hubs in these networks, as they meet other family owners in the community, such as at Church or the sports club. The boundaries between family life and business life become very fluent and intertwined. As one female business owner put it:

The day has 24 hours. That's quite a lot of time to do things together as a family. Me and my daughter [the CEO] work together and, on the weekend, we occasionally have time for our hobby, motorsport.

The company also uses databases to store the employees' knowledge. However, as much of the knowledge is tacit, such as how to operate machines, intensive training on the job is needed for new employees. In total, all four members of the owning family (both first and second generation) are working in the business, making it a vital part of their family life. Regarding the employees, the family is present in the factory and the company almost daily, so, as one family member commented:

... [the employees] are learning and contributing all the time.

5.1.5 Epsilon. In Epsilon, the daughter is the main sponsor of the CoP. Over the years, she has shaped the business and the CoP identity around her ideas and values. Her leadership of the family firm is sustained by the trust she has gained from her ability to manage the firm, especially in terms of driving and supporting the transition of the business strategy. As she pointed out:

After the sudden death of my father, the workforce didn't trust me and couldn't imagine that I have the capabilities to bring the company on track and make the changes happen.

Another challenge was that the daughter had no industry experience in this sector, as she was a tax advisor by training. At first, in order to gain some knowledge about the office furniture sector, she joined several trade organisations to speak to industry experts in this field. Later, she organised weekly CoP meetings at her firm. At these meetings, key employees from different company functions and processes sit together to share their knowledge and discuss how to develop new services for the customers. As she noted:

At the beginning, my employees were afraid to speak to the boss and tell him how we can develop new ideas and services. When my father was alive, this would never have happened, due to his authoritative leadership style.

With the help of a change-management consultant, the daughter made the necessary changes happen. She stressed:

Now, our salespeople talk regularly to our customers to get feedback on how satisfied they are. Then we sit together and discuss what we can improve. This is a new learning experience for my employees.

These changes have helped the daughter and the employees to gain a mutual understanding of problems and to assist in gathering and interpreting information. In the next step, to further improve the CoP, the daughter and managing director has implemented a knowledge-management system in the company to share ideas among the workforce and get everyone involved in the CoP.

5.1.6 Zeta. In Zeta, four family members participate in the CoP. While the son leads the CoP, he maintains contact with his clients and identifies market needs and expectations. The other two directors – the mother and daughter – support the son. The father (the founder of the business) now works as a freelancer and joins the board meetings from time to time. The CoP is currently led democratically among the family members and the workforce to support a constructive and fruitful discussion of issues and practices in the firm. This trust and commitment has grown over time; as the son recalled:

Before joining the firm, I had worked for larger architectural businesses and learned to value the open discussions with management. I tried to implement such an open-minded culture and knowledge sharing in our small firm. Now, our workforce and other directors find it beneficial to have regular CoP meetings in the firm.

To summarise, the CoP is in favour of new ideas, and the members are more open to acquiring new knowledge from external stakeholders. To support this open-minded culture and knowledge transfer, the son invites external experts from his former business practices to lift the knowledge of the firm. As he pointed out:

When I joined the firm, we had difficulties in managing sophisticated construction projects. There was no sound project management and cost control. Some of my former colleagues were helping me to implement such a system for my small firm and to convince our employees that it would pay off.

Over the years, Zeta has developed a good dialogue with these former colleagues and has developed a strong CoP practice among internal and external CoP members.

6. Discussion

Our results demonstrate the role CoPs play as knowledge-sharing tools in family SMEs. In both Beta and Gamma, our results confirm the role of CoPs in encouraging discussions and knowledge sharing, and thus new knowledge generation. The cases of Delta, Epsilon and Zeta further highlight the crucial role played by the owning family in supporting the knowledge-acquisition process from non-family members while simultaneously fostering the alignment process around selected ideas. These results make it possible to show how CoPs help to empower the knowledge-sharing process for decision-making, which is usually challenging in family firms (Duarte Alonso and Kok, 2018; Coyte *et al.*, 2012; Desouza and Awazu, 2006; Dotsika and Patrick, 2013).

The leader's approach appears to be fundamental in driving the overall business process within the CoP, in the cases of both strong or weak involvement from the family. If the leader is on board, the translation and transfer processes are smoother, and the engagement and contribution of other members (whether younger family members, managers or external consultants) promote knowledge sharing. These results are consistent with those of Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2005), who emphasise the relevance of the leader's engagement and support in promoting effective cultural knowledge sharing among staff. In Beta, the family leader's approach within the CoP drives members to prioritise the development of innovations and the continuous search for new products, processes and customer solutions. In this case, we perceived a longer time perspective within the CoP knowledge sharing, which motivates members to explore new solutions with a long payback period, thereby establishing tools to effectively share knowledge within the CoP. Beta's CoP benefits from the participation of external collaborators, who bring new skills and knowledge that further stimulate debate and knowledge sharing in the CoP. This is also apparent in Delta, Epsilon and Zeta, where the family drives the knowledge sharing. Particularly in Delta, the surrounding community plays a vital role supporting these processes. Accordingly, we suggest that a CoP can expand beyond single organisations and include multiple stakeholders in a community (Johannisson and Wigren, 2006). In contrast, the family in Alpha has shaped a social context that is biased towards a short-term orientation that limits the CoP's ability to pursue solutions with a long time span. In this case, the family requires short-term results from the business, favouring the exploitation of current solutions and avenues. The CoP is thus used with a different aim, and consensus from non-family members is reached more by relying on a power game than through real knowledge-sharing processes, which limits the firm's ability to develop a long-term perspective and the engagement dynamics within the group. Moreover, the families in Delta and Zeta illustrate how important strong family members are when guiding the firm in knowledge-sharing initiatives.

Cohesiveness appears to play an important role in knowledge sharing within family firms (Lee, 2006). Interestingly, when family members have personal issues, as in the case of Gamma, the engagement of non-family members in the CoPs drives the knowledge sharing towards a professional path. In this case, the non-family CoP members create a professional context based on an exploration approach that leads to debate and innovation through knowledge sharing. These results contribute to explain how and why some family firms may distance themselves from family beliefs, the family's history of previous success or family ties (Eddleston *et al.*, 2012), leaving room for non-family members to generate commitment among CoP members.

Finally, our results show how an intergenerational presence fosters innovations (Frank *et al.*, 2019; Konopaski *et al.*, 2015), due to the different skills, culture and aims of the stakeholders involved. For example, in the cases of Beta and Delta, the results reveal an experiential learning process among older and younger generations working together, as well as a gradual integration of the company vision, with new ideas coming from the new members of the family. An understanding of the different visions can only happen if

knowledge is shared. Obviously, this can be challenging, especially as different generations “value” knowledge differently.

Taken together, our empirical evidence shows that the CoP’s role as a knowledge-sharing tool is affected by the family shaping the social context. In sum, the role of the CoP as a knowledge-sharing tool depends on the presence (or lack) of a family leader, the leader’s approach, the degree of cohesion around shared approaches and values within the CoP (that the family may – or may not – foster), the presence of multiple generations at work and the level of intergenerational learning among them.

As a result, the family affects the speed of the execution process by introducing pressure into the social context of the CoP. During discussions and debates in open contexts, it can take time to reach a shared agreement. Still, members can acquire more awareness and knowledge about the topic under discussion. As recent studies have highlighted (Bagnoli *et al.*, 2020), tensions and paradoxes can contribute to translating knowledge and not only affect the decision-making process but also shape the company’s business model through innovation. In this regard, a closed context avoids debates and conflicts, with little need to reach an agreement, which speeds up both the decision-making process and the execution of decisions, as we observed in the cases of Alpha, Beta and Zeta. In Gamma, however, the family’s distance from the CoP reduces the pressure to embrace new ideas and thus the speed of execution. This comparative analysis shows that, as this pressure increases, so does the speed of learning and execution.

7. Conclusion

Studies about knowledge sharing within family firms have reported contradictory results. Taking the tension between these contradictory results as its starting point, this study contributes to the literature on knowledge sharing in family SMEs by revealing the role CoPs play in knowledge sharing. We provide empirical evidence on how CoPs can act as knowledge-sharing tools in family SMEs.

While prior studies have viewed CoPs as a conceptual lens through which knowledge management is interpreted within the whole family firm, this study aims to understand how CoPs might work as knowledge-sharing tools in family SMEs, while involving a subgroup of employees that includes both family and non-family members. The findings show that a CoP’s role in knowledge sharing depends on the presence (or lack) of a family leader, the leadership approach, the degree of cohesion around shared approaches and values within the CoP, and the presence of multiple generations at work. This study offers several contributions to the stream of research on knowledge sharing in family SMEs.

Our study has some implications for practice. First, it focuses attention on the importance of the leadership approach, the degree of cohesion around shared approaches and values, the presence of multiple generations, and the level of intergenerational learning between generations for knowledge sharing. However, these results should be interpreted with the study’s limitations in mind. First, industry, size, governance mechanisms and geographical location can affect the social behaviour of a CoP’s members. Second, some of the information came from the interviewees’ perspectives, although our findings also rely on direct observations. Furthermore, although we collected the data over a long period, social relations inside the CoPs may have changed over time or could have been influenced by specific events during those years. The family characteristics could also have changed over time, causing different studies carried out with a different sample to produce different results.

This study’s results raise some potentially fruitful directions for future research. First, despite the limitations, we shed light on the importance of the family in the CoP’s role as a knowledge-sharing tool within a family SME. Further research should thus investigate the influence of family-related traits (e.g. degree of ownership, family values, trust level among

family members, governance tools and mechanisms, personal traits, gender heterogeneity, etc.). We contend that multiple CoPs are likely to coexist in a single-family firm, depending on firm and/or family size, which future research could investigate. Finally, we call for further studies on knowledge sharing in single- and multiple-generation family firms. Multiple-generation family firms are particularly interesting in regards to internal knowledge sharing between generations, as well as external knowledge sharing with other stakeholders.

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