

**EMPOWERING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN SMALL BUSINESS
MANAGEMENT IN MAURITIUS IN CASE STUDY APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing is today's challenge in imparting effective knowledge to the community as universities tend to focus on academic knowledge based on theoretical foundations and abstract concepts. These are in essence useful and practical for students but when it comes to sharing such knowledge to the community, it becomes demanding to undertake such an effort. This paper posits that there was an earlier effort of sharing knowledge through university-based teaching and research to the Mauritian community, especially female entrepreneurs. This exercise was possible through a training programme jointly offered by the HRDC and the University of Technology/Université des Mascareignes back in 2011. The training covered three critical areas namely Accounting and Finance, Marketing and Business Management. Such a programme was offered both in three urban and rural locations with potential and already self-employed female entrepreneurs in the age group 20 to 55. It was seen that knowledge sharing took place in effective classroom interaction with a teaching methodology that used Kreol as a medium while emphasis was on research undertaken in each of the chosen fields. Using a descriptive case study approach, this paper highlights both the effectiveness of the training programme and how it has been helpful in sharing and transferring knowledge from academia on to society using social sciences as a medium of teaching and learning outside the traditional classroom.

Keywords: Knowledge Sharing, Female Entrepreneurs, Business Management, Mauritius.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Universities have always been perceived as centres of learning excellence for higher education. It is widely accepted that higher education is a leading instrument in promoting development (Cloete, Bailey & Massen, 2011). To this extent, they cater to the intellectuals who are well educated and apt to learn at the highest level in the educational pathway. Jowi et al (2014) claim that it is recognised now, more than ever before, that the universities and research organisations influence the economic competitiveness of individual economies in the context of globalisation. Little has been said or developed regarding how universities and institutes of higher education could contribute to such learning. In the Mauritian case, education at the tertiary level focuses on inculcating knowledge to advanced learners who

will come out as graduates and who will have the possibility of either getting a job that meets their needs or simply pursuing a profession at their own expense. The argument might come from the fact that society members might be barred from such training as they are less keen to join a university and benefit from the knowledge and research experience that it might share. This is in itself a contradiction because Mauritius as a small developing state needs the contribution of institutions to share knowledge emanating from teaching and research to the community. In doing so, the university or any tertiary education provider fulfils partly the role of sharing something meaningful to the community. The LET Learning Group (1999) supports the idea through the possible future for higher education that lies in the development of knowledge economies, in which learning resources will be created, distributed, used and modified across a network of institutions. In this context, this paper posits that the time has come for universities to make the step forward to sharing knowledge to the community.

1.2 Background of the Study

Knowledge sharing is important to the community and this comes from the capability of institutions, governments and stakeholders to undertake this effort. To some extent, the State plays such a role through short-term training programmes offered to target audiences of the community. It is worth stating that such an effort might be welcoming in that some academic and theoretical concepts are passed onto the community but it remains to be seen how such an effort is effective or not. The question is what would be the relevance of universities if knowledge from research is not shared to the wider community? Doesn't it look like a wasted effort if university education limits itself to teaching and learning for students?

It is important to note here that there has been some effort undertaken in a near past by universities and local institutions in imparting knowledge to the community. A good example here is business knowledge shared to female entrepreneurs in Mauritius when there was a concerted effort between the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) and the Université des Mascareignes (UdM) then known as the Swami Dayanand Institute of Management to provide training to women entrepreneurs. The idea was welcomed in the sense that both institutions collaborated in the setting up of a training programme in different locations of the country with initiation to business management practice for women.

The problem stemmed from the non-pursuance of such activity over the long-run although certain insightful information came out from the training provided. Firstly, academics were able to share their knowledge based on their teaching and learning experience with female entrepreneurs. Secondly, this type of engagement enabled academics to see, compare and contrast striking differences between the imparting of academic knowledge in the classroom and that of sharing it to female entrepreneurs. It is believed that such an effort lays down the premises of effective sharing of knowledge to the community and that such an initiative needs to be reinvented.

1.3 Literature Review

First of all, it is important to see why knowledge sharing is important for the university and the community within which it operates. Hasmath and Shu (2016) claim that knowledge sharing is an activity through which knowledge (namely, information, skills, or expertise) is exchanged among people, friends, families, communities (for example, Wikipedia), or

organizations. Tallyfox (2015) states that knowledge sharing is effective in companies with a flexible, decentralised organizational structure. When new knowledge is created at a more operational level, it can become a great challenge for management to spread and harness this new knowledge through the organisation. As both managers and leaders play an equally important part as committed employees in creating a vibrant community, knowledge transfer is more successful in a highly flexible and responsive environment. As the community is of vital importance for an engaged and distributed management, organisational structure both encourages sharing knowledge and is strengthened by leveraging maximum value and advantage from sharing knowledge.

Potocnik and Verheuen (2007) point out the need for sharing knowledge between research institutions and industry has become increasingly evident in recent years. Historically, research institutions were perceived as a source of new ideas and industry offered a natural route to maximising the use of these ideas. However, the past decade has seen a significant change in the roles of both parties. They also claim that at present, certain research institutions have staff who actively pursue links with industry, but do not interact amongst themselves. By pooling their knowledge transfer competencies, they can ensure that such skills are made more widely available throughout the research institutions.

Knowledge sharing is a critical team process that involves members interacting to share ideas, information, and suggestions relevant to the team's task at hand (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). Knowledge sharing is a critical component of knowledge management. Knowledge management is generally referred to as the way an organization creates, retains and shares knowledge. Knowledge sharing is further explained as the process by which individuals exchange tacit and explicit knowledge in order to create new knowledge (Van den Hooff & De Ridder, 2004). Knowledge sharing can occur between individuals, within teams and across the organization. Research supports the idea that cognitive resources available within a team will be underutilised if knowledge is not shared (Argote, 1999).

Bulchandani (2015) states four critical benefits of knowledge sharing to the community namely the creation of awareness, the provision of fast solutions, the increase in co-ordination and the acceptance of new ideas. She purports Knowledge sharing plays a very vital role in creating awareness amongst the people in an organization. If things are properly shared, employees become aware about what is expected out of them and they can thus create a road map keeping in mind the availability of resources, its pros and cons and try to achieve better results for the company as well as clients and themselves.

Secondly, if a team is working on a project and it gets stuck on any complication that arises while working they can have an immediate solution for the same, because of the culture of sharing, from the one who has handled such things. This will thus improve your response time towards your clients making the delivery of the project on time without any delays. While the activity of sharing takes place people tend to get more comfortable while dealing with each other hence increasing the co-ordination and efficiency of work.

Regarding the acceptance to new ideas, Bulchandani (2015) claims an absence of such a sharing culture can result into lack of employees taking interest in management's objective. Also they feel isolated thinking themselves to be an unimportant part which results into resistance to new ideas and later into employees leaving away. Organisation can adopt a

variety of mechanisms like Knowledge management and preserve the knowledge which can be later used by other employees even when one moves out and this practice would develop a legacy for the company.

1.4 Literature Gap

Taking into consideration the benefits earned from sharing knowledge to the community, it can be said that the literature provided did not specifically address a particular situation like the Mauritian industry. This paper considers that there is a need to develop knowledge sharing with the community and, in this case, it appeals to a targeted segment comprising women entrepreneurs willing to start a business. Definitely, they need to have some business knowledge and this is not easily available to them. Universities with the collaboration of local authorities have the potential of providing research information or any form of knowledge that they have developed and created to address the specific needs of the target audience; female entrepreneurs in this case. This is the reason why there was a need to see how well research could be transmitted to the selected audience. From the training provided, three key areas were identified namely accounting, marketing and business management knowledge that was provided to the entrepreneurs and where such transmission of knowledge looked to be very useful.

2.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three research questions were developed from the case study regarding female entrepreneurs and they are outlined below:

- What are the key areas of knowledge that can be shared to female entrepreneurs in Mauritius?
- How does such knowledge sharing benefit female entrepreneurs?
- What lessons are learnt from knowledge sharing in such a context?

2.1 Case Study approach and observations made

A case study approach was adopted for this purpose. Dudovskiy (2019) points out that case studies are a popular research method in the business area. They aim to analyse specific issues within the boundaries of a specific environment, situation or organisation. According to its design, case studies in business research can be divided into three categories: explanatory, descriptive and exploratory.

Explanatory case studies aim to answer 'how' or 'why' questions with little control on behalf of the researcher over the occurrence of events. Descriptive case studies aim to analyse the sequence of interpersonal events after a certain amount of time has passed.

Exploratory case studies aim to find answers to the questions of 'what' or 'who'. Exploratory case study data collection method is often accompanied by additional data collection method(s) such as interviews, questionnaires, experiments etc.

In the present case, the explanatory case study was the preferred methodology used because the training and knowledge sharing were provided by lecturers from the University of Technology (UTM) and the Université des Mascareignes (UdM).

2.2 The research framework

The research framework is based on a strategy developed by the HRDC in 2011 along with the UTM and the SDIM (now UDM) as a means of enhancing knowledge and skills of female entrepreneurs in Mauritius. At the same time, such research incipiently aimed at transferring both educational and research to the community. It was noted that traditional academic material could not be disseminated owing to the theoretical and complex nature of such information. Research-based information and practical experiences were shared to female entrepreneurs.

The training took place in three locations namely Pont Lardier near Montagne Blanche, Curepipe and Richemare Flacq in 2011. Three sessions were conducted by three resource persons specialised respectively in Accounting and Finance, Marketing and Business Management.

Female entrepreneurs came both from a rural and urban background. For each session, there were around 50 participants. The entry requirement was not rigid nor specific but it could be evidenced that the age group varied between 25 and 50. All women had either initiated a business or were about to gain idea in developing a personal activity into a business.

The training was done in Mauritian Kreol although some terminology was expressed in English. During each session, there was a representative from the HRDC to moderate the training and see how participants benefited from such training.

3.0 CASE STUDY

Three case studies regarding knowledge sharing will be presented. The first one covers Accountancy and Finance, followed by Marketing and Business Management.

3.1 Case One: Sharing Accounting and Finance knowledge

Accounting and Finance are important aspects of entrepreneurship since finances are the key to initiating, running and managing a business. In the training session undertaken by the HRDC and the UTM/UdM, the basics of finance were developed. The course comprised the need for effective financing, budgetary considerations, taking loans, reimbursement of loans, payback terms including the management of the current account and assessing profit and loss.

The element of research from academia consisted of making trainees learn about the Mauritian financial system, the relevance of the Value-Added Tax of 15% as well as a few legal considerations concerning ownership and transfer of a business as well as the cessation of business in relation to the local condition.

3.2 Benefits to trainees

The courses were provided on an hourly basis over three weeks while female entrepreneurs were able to grasp the basics of finance for start-up businesses. They could understand the

importance of finance in business but also learn about the means of getting soft loans to develop their business. They were also initiated to computerisation of accounts although most female entrepreneurs favoured the traditional paper-based accounting system.

3.3 Case Two: Sharing Marketing knowledge

The training on Marketing was a new one to female entrepreneurs. Marketing was introduced to the participants by associating information linked with advertisements on the media, awareness campaigns on health and food consumption including some social corporate responsibility undertaken by entrepreneurs in local communities.

The course in Marketing comprised the need to effectively use the controllable elements of Marketing namely product, price, place and promotion. From the research area, elements pertaining to the local context were introduced like the use of Kreol and local vernacular in developing slogans, the need to 'Mauritians' products including the need for branding using local terminology and emphasising the benefits of consuming 'mauricien'.

3.4 Benefits to trainees

Trainees had little idea of marketing although they knew that advertising and sales promotion were part of the course. They could understand the benefit of designing and branding products according to the Mauritian reality and be choosier in terms of words and description of their products. Bearing in mind that local products hold value in the mindset of Mauritians, they were enthused by adopting a Mauritian approach to marketing.

3.5 Case Three: Sharing Business Management Knowledge

The training programme on business and management was another key contributor to the empowerment programme for female entrepreneurs. Business management focused on the principles of management and organisation including certain foundation knowledge on leadership and communication.

The contribution of academic research came from explaining the transition of sole proprietorships into start-up businesses with a proper organisation structure, management and accountability or responsibility principle that should rest on the trained manager and not the owner. Emphasis was put on the feminisation of management and the importance for women to shoulder responsibilities in the changing business environment of Mauritius.

3.6 Benefits to trainees

Trainees found the managerial approach to business management fruitful especially when entrepreneurship demands effective leadership and drive from potential managers. They appreciated the fact that women could take charge of their business and that entrepreneurial mindset regarding ownership to women was something new and important for them.

Insights from sharing academic knowledge and research to participants

To attest the findings concerning the benefits of sharing knowledge to trainees, a selected sample of findings developed after using both oral and written feedback has been included. The names of the participants have been withheld for confidentiality purposes.

4.0 MARKETING COURSE

'I benefited greatly from the training. I would like to improve my understanding of branding as I find that my products are targeted to Mauritian customers.'

'I find marketing a useful concept for me because it developed a knowledge of packaging that I need to know in order to keep pace with competition through an attractive package.'

I find the marketing training interesting in that I got an idea of branding and become astute in creating and designing a product package that reflects the Mauritian reality.'

4.1 Accounting and Finance course

'I now find the relevance of basic Finances and accounting for businesses. Very often I thought that it was reserved for professionals but some basic knowledge helps in better financially managing a business.'

'The need for good book-keeping and management of accounts is important. I learnt about the relevance of financial custody including the need to makes checks and balances regularly.'

'I got some basic knowledge of taxation thinking that it was all too often limited to government authorities. I come to know how taxation impacts my business and where I can benefit from levy in the Mauritian context.'

'I learnt about financial governance and I am willing to shoulder such a task that can be merged with other key management functions in my business.'

4.2 Business and management course

'I appreciate the importance of leadership and management in my business. I understand that principles should be well mastered and I think that I can better understand my responsibilities as a manager.'

'I find female empowerment an important concept that trainers have transferred through this training. It will give me more confidence in handling a business.'

'I do understand the importance of communication, communication tools and a few motivational concepts to nurture good relationships with employees and customers. This effort encourages me to better know the implications of good business management.'

Lessons learnt from sharing knowledge to female entrepreneurs

Knowledge and its efficient management constitute the key to success and survival for organisations in the highly dynamic and competitive world of today. Efficient acquisition, transfer and application, of knowledge often distinguish successful organisations from the unsuccessful ones and are essential for management of knowledge (Oye et al, 2011). The key lessons learnt from sharing knowledge from academia to female entrepreneurs might be the relevance of modern management knowledge to trainees, the inclusion of local practices in

Accounting and Marketing including practical knowledge of female empowerment related to the small business enterprise.

The first lesson concerned about the sharing of modern management knowledge to trainees. Management has been a male-oriented issue and little has been said of female empowerment. Past perceptions of leadership skills, competence, and assertiveness may hinder the ability of women to succeed in management. Many companies associate masculine characteristics with success and achievement. These include assertiveness, aggressiveness, and task-oriented leadership abilities (Jogulu & Wood 2006). The possibility of envisaging women manage their own businesses was new and provided a new perspective to female entrepreneurs. Evidently the shyness from becoming a manager had to be overcome by emphasising the gender issue and stating how women should be able to manage on their own.

The gender issue would again reflect the accounting and finances practice whereby women were liable to be less apt to accounting management. According to Scandura (1993) public accounting used to be a completely male-dominated profession along with most any other business field and related companies. This dominance has left little room for women in the various levels of management, even if more women are becoming part of the business world. They were limited to secretarial and clerical duties. In this particular context, new insights into finance like the application of the Vat, the possibility of comprising book-keeping and the financial custody of managing a business onto women proved to be a new contribution to such targeted society members.

Regarding marketing, it was important to see how women were keen to learn and know about marketing apart from their basic knowledge that marketing was merely cosmetic in approach. Zanis, in a statement to Rooney (2019) affirmed that a lot of women felt the responsibility of their positions in this business because they did have more influence broadly. Because advertising and marketing affected so many people, she saw an even higher focus on and involvement in diversity and inclusion activities, and so the desire to share and connect with her peers is higher in this area. In the Mauritian context, women learnt about the principles of marketing, certain foundations of marketing relating to branding and packaging and the possibility of targeting near customers better.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The training programme for female entrepreneurs undertaken in 2011 was an intuitive experience from academia who were so far limited to teaching within the classroom environment of their respective institutions. Getting 'out of the box' and coming to educating female entrepreneurs located in urban and rural areas was a challenge for the staff involved. This programme enabled trainers to firstly think into how to make their learning easier and more fluid in terms of content. Regarding the context, it was useful to relate the teaching material to the needs of local entrepreneurs. The use of Kreol was interesting in translating already established management and business concepts to the Mauritian situation.

The other useful challenge came from the possibility of sharing research to the female entrepreneurs. This was not a question of using research information in the form of complex statistics and formulae but rather experiences learnt and applied in the classroom that could be shared to the trainees like contextualising accounting, marketing and business

management to potential entrepreneurs. The other research element was to find out how new concepts like Value-Added tax, transfer of ownership and computerised accounting could fit in the purpose of the raining.

6.0 LIMITATIONS

The key limitation of this paper is the time frame of the training programme. This was undertaken in 2011 but not followed afterwards because of a lack of resource persons and sufficient time. The programme could not be pursued over sufficient time say 6 months to allow for comprehensive training and the useful channelling of research from academia to the trainees. However, the HRDC developed other programmes like Graduate Trainee and Apprenticeship programme and occasional courses for women entrepreneurs serviced by the HRDC and related ministries like Co-operatives.

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