

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITY OF SMALL ENTREPRENEURS FACING GLOBAL CHALLENGES: A CASE STUDY IN THE ORNAMENTAL PLANT PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Ornamental plant productions certainly represent one of the most dynamic agricultural sectors in the world, so much so that the current trend in the international markets of the production of ornamental pot plants seems clear is growing as well as constantly changing, both in relation to surfaces and number of firms. In parallel grows the values of the gross saleable production and consistency of ornamental plant business also involved in the process of marketing these products. Within this diverse and fragmented sector the production of ornamental pot plants assumes increasing significance, since its extreme variability of cultivated species make very complex and difficult the effort to frame in a single context the peculiarities of the and organizational activities phenomena. The study - by analyzing a representative sample of ornamental pot plants of Sicilian producers, operating in districts with high vocational production - highlighted the main orientations of entrepreneurs and assessed the overall organizational level. The results showed that Sicilian entrepreneurial connotes the high dynamism of firms, certainly due to the high profile training at the relatively young age of the producers. Therefore, in virtue of a changed scenario in the international markets, this research provides a comprehensive view of the sector of Mediterranean ornamental productions, placing its focus on the entrepreneurial organization and management.

KEYWORDS

small farms, ornamental plant production, ownership, organization capability, innovation.

INTRODUCTION

For over thirty years there have been studies on organizational culture, pointing out how businesses who do not have adequate preparation can not engage in activities capable of change their cultures and generate superior financial performance (Barney, 1986). As noted by many scholars and practitioners organizational culture typically is defined as a complex set of values, beliefs, assumptions, and symbols that define the way in which a firm conducts its business. In this sense, culture has pervasive effects on a firm because a firm's culture not only defines who its relevant employees, customers, suppliers, and competitors are, but it also defines how a firm will interact with these key actors (Louis, 1983). A firm's culture is one of several attributes that differentiate firms one from another (Alchian, 1950; Alchian and Demsetz, 1972).

In this direction a relatively recent strand of literature has carried out several empirical studies taking into account the role of organizational capability on the success of firms (Zander and Kogut, 1995; Grant, 1996).

The organizational capability of an entrepreneur can be expressed on the base of its capacity to manage (1) Human resources (in terms of number, quality, skills, and experience) (2) Physical and material resources: machines, land, buildings, (3) Financial resources: money and credit, (4) Information resources: pool of knowledge, databases, and (5) Intellectual resources: copyrights, designs, patents, etc. (Business Dictionary, 2015).

Several studies pointed to the positive relationship between the dynamic ability of an organization and efficiency of its functioning. Due to the contemporary conditions of running a business, there is a need to predict the resources and organizational skills needed in the implementation of creative solutions (Allegra, 2012) and to combine them in an unconventional way to generate new sources of value (Bratnicki, 2011).

It is therefore useful to reflect on why for marketing practitioners, it is generally important to understand the interactions of customers with products, services, and brands from a psychological ownership perspective (Jussila *et al.*, 2015). This means that the intellectual framing of psychological ownership provides marketing practice with the necessary means to understand customers' relationships with products, services, and brands, and helps decision makers develop new ideas on how to create value for customers and design corresponding strategies (Jussila *et al.*, 2015). In this direction organizational models in the Sicilian ornamental plant industry have been recently also examined through an empirical analysis based on transaction cost theory (Galati *et al.*, 2015).

Ornamental plant productions certainly represent one of the most dynamic agricultural sectors in the world, so much so that the current trend in the international markets of the production of ornamental pot plants seems clear is growing as well as constantly changing, both in relation to land under the number of firms (Di Vita *et al.*, 2015a). In parallel grows the values of the gross saleable production and consistency of floriculture business also involved in the process of marketing these products. Within this diverse and fragmented sector assumes increasing significance as the production of ornamental plants in pots, whose extreme variability of cultivated species helps to make it a very complex and difficult effort to frame in a single context the peculiarities of the phenomena and motivational economic activities.

Although the production of ornamental plants certainly represents one of the most important European agricultural sectors, both in terms of turnover and in terms of employees, in the last 10 years the European Union has experienced a downward trend, as in area planted in the total value of productions, whose the latter appear attributable in large part to high energy costs (in relation to the wide use of greenhouse cultivation, especially in northern European countries), to the progressive increase in labour costs, and increased competitive pressure arising from the entry of new competing countries in the international arena (Zarbà *et al.*, 2013; Schimmenti *et al.*, 2013; Spampinato *et al.*, 2013; Radić *et al.*, 2015; Timpanaro *et al.*, 2015). These factors, together with a slowdown in demand on a global scale, have led to a progressive reduction in prices in major international markets.

In this context, Italy continues to play a significant role, intercepting 18% of the total cultivated area in Europe and 14% in value. In light of this, due to the importance of the productive sector of ornamental pot plants played in Italy, our study focuses on the current organisation of Sicilian businesses that operate in this field and their growth prospects.

This paper, which points out the first results of a wider research on the cultivation of ornamental pot plants in Sicily, aims to identify the producers' organizational capabilities in human resource management, through the analysis of a sample of Sicilian entrepreneurs.

1. THE SICILIAN PRODUCTIVE CONTEXT

A recent study observe that, in the last three years, a relative stagnation of the business structure of the sector (number of holdings, cultivated area and number of people employed), while recording a downward trend in relation to the quantities offered (decrease in production of flowers and fronds, pot plants, trees and shrubs).

The ornamental sector plays an important role today in Sicily as part of the socio-economic region, both in terms of income produced and of people employed, and participates in the formation of the regional agricultural GDP to over 7% (ISTAT, 2014).

Sicily is one of the most important producers in Europe and the ornamental plant and flower production, including the cultivation of cut flowers, extend for a cultivated area of about 3,000 hectares, which make up 8% of the national total area of approximately 37,000 hectares (ISTAT 2014).

The value of production is estimated as a total turnover of approximately 250 million euro which represents 9% of the national total, recently stood at about 2.77 billion euro (ISMEA, 2011; Zarbà *et al.*, 2015; Allegra *et al.*, 2014; Pappalardo *et al.*, 2014).

The reputation of the Sicilian production was consolidated over time thanks to some excellent products such as ornamental citrus (orange and lemon), olive trees, bougainvillea and palms. To these we must then add the production of other Mediterranean plants, including Oleander, Myrtaceae, Carob, Kenzie, Cycas and Laurel.

2. METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted on a representative sample consisting of 24 companies located in areas traditionally suited to ornamental nursery production. The survey was carried out in the main production areas of Catania, in the province of Messina and in Marsala. It was decided not to include in the sample the production area of Ragusa, involved mainly in the production of cut flowers.

The selection of companies was made on the basis of information provided by the technicians of Regional Department of Agriculture and Forestry, taking into account the specificities of different types of production and the geographical location as well as the principle of ordinariness of businesses. Interviews were conducted face to face, with the aid of a questionnaire that allowed to detect the main the organizational issues that drive the ornamental plants entrepreneurs.

With regard to the sample, a total of 24 companies examined, it is made up of nine production units that fall in the area of Catania, 10 enterprises covering the area of Milazzo and five companies in the area of Marsala. The companies are, in most cases, family farms, with a prevalence of capitalist enterprise-cultivators.

The average age of the interviewed entrepreneurs is 50 years, while the level of education prevalent is graduating high school (80%), while graduates represent only 8%. The business name of the sample mainly consists of individual firms (75%), while only 25% of companies surveyed consisted of societies.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

In order to carry out a framework of the management issues that engage entrepreneurs in the Sicilian ornamental sector, the study focused on the main organizational capabilities inherent to their productive activity.

The first element of the investigation shows that the work is considered by most entrepreneurs as an opportunity for self-realization, confirming that one of the main reasons that pushed entrepreneurs to undertake the business is the passion and the desire to continue activities already undertaken by parents. In fact, one in three claims to have continued the company from a family member. Even with the difficult economic prospects, who presented themselves at the start of activities, accounted for a valid reason related to goodwill in the choice of this type of production.

In the ornamental plant sector the collaboration with the family is a practice quite common in work organization for the producers, the Tab. 1 in fact shows that almost 80% of the companies interviewed have recourse to the help of the labour by family members. Only a limited portion of the sample say they do not use this practice. This result confirms that the collaboration with the families is of considerable importance for ornamental companies, and characterizes them as family farms.

The companies examined mostly take advantage of labour outside the company, although the use of family labour is very common; the contribution of family labour is continuous in 54% of cases and in 25% of sporadic cases. However, the contribution of family labour is completely absent in 21% of the sample.

Table 1. Family farms and collaboration with family members

| | Absolute Frequency (n) | Frequency distribution (%) |
|--------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Never | 5 | 20,8 |
| Sometimes | 6 | 25,0 |
| Often | 4 | 16,7 |
| Always | 9 | 37,5 |
| Total | 24 | 100 |

In taking account of the activities that engage more entrepreneurs (tab. 2), the activities related to the Productive process are the business operations that engage more respondents; these voices commit 83% of the activities of the management. The increased market uncertainty, especially in a time when orders are dwindling and the amount required for shipping are reduced, strongly influences the activity of production planning, which is today the most difficult challenge, given what entails, from an economic point of view, which are the plants unsold at the end of the season. For this reason, sometimes the manufacturers, to reduce risks, prefer to limit the number of plants produced based on the sales of the previous years, resorting, in case of conspicuous orders, to purchasing plants from other producers in the area.

Moreover, even for entrepreneurs of the ornamental plant sector, marketing activities which includes all the strategies adopted both within the internal market especially in the foreign market, which is another important factor for commitments for 79% of respondents.

Even the staff management engages especially the work of the entrepreneurs surveyed on an ongoing basis, in fact despite the high level of trust declared by respondents to its workers, the complexity of many operations related to the production cycle require the constant presence by entrepreneur in order to manage individual employee activities. Thereby confirming the entrepreneurs' transversal figure who perform different tasks simultaneously.

In contrast, there were no particular uses of time under normal administrative activities, relations with suppliers of raw materials and in relations with the public administration which appear in most cases completely consolidated over time, (tab. 2).

Table 2. Operations which deal more with the entrepreneur

| | Absolute Frequency (n) | Frequency distribution (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Productive process | 20 | 83,3 |
| Relations with suppliers | 10 | 41,7 |
| Administration and accounting | 11 | 45,8 |
| Marketing activities | 19 | 79,2 |
| Staff Management | 14 | 58,3 |
| Public Administration relationship | 9 | 37,5 |

In taking account of the organizational difficulties that entrepreneurs encounter in carrying out their activities (Table 3), the activities related to Financial resource management are the main obstacles that engage more respondents; these voices commit 58% of the activities of the management. The progressive loss market shares and the consequent limited availability of capital available to entrepreneurs determines a greater difficulty in the enterprise management, and the difficulties inherent in a rational and adequate logistics management, customer relationship especially with regard to foreign markets is the second critical factor in terms of importance, following Planning and Labour management.

Even the production activity, pressed by competition from foreign countries both within the EU and the Mediterranean, impose to the entrepreneur some difficulties in combining adequate quality standards with reduced production costs.

On the contrary the activities linked to bureaucracy -such as fiscal rate system and the relations with the public administration - that are often seen as an obstacle to the normal business activities, are not considered by the majority of those surveyed as specific management difficulties. As far as possible, they delegated to internal administrative staff to the company or to external consultants.

Despite the employ, management can be considered a very important activity, both for the high consideration of entrepreneurs towards their employees and because the personnel costs represent about 80% of the total cost of production, this it does not seem to be a critical element.

Considering that almost all declare its willingness to enable new forms of association and organization between producers, we have tried to interpret factors management and which activities are considered most useful to the needs of entrepreneurs.

Innovation, which is considered essential for the growth of the company by 66% of respondents, it is rarely introduced by a private company, for objective difficulties and costs associated with research and development. Therefore, this factor is in first place among the common activities to be developed.

Table 3. Critical elements of entrepreneurs in business management

| | Absolute Frequency (n) | Frequency distribution (%) |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Planning and labour management | 10 | 41,7 |
| Financial resource management | 14 | 58,3 |
| Customer relationship | 11 | 45,8 |
| Employ management | 3 | 12,5 |
| Bureaucracy | 4 | 33,3 |

The low concentration of supply and the low level of training of skilled labour are the main weaknesses highlighted by the respondents, which the association might somehow mitigate (58%). At the same time the progressive disappearance of a public service and free technical assistance, carried out until a few years ago by the public technicians of the Regional Department of Agriculture and Forestry, has prompted 54% of those interviewed to indicate in a joint service of technical assistance as “additional activity” for which an association of entrepreneurs should assume (Tab. 4). In this regard it is noted as associations, although not widespread, is being taken increasingly into account by entrepreneurs especially strengthened in those areas where businesses are weak.

In starting any synergic activities with other companies appear with limited meaningful collaboration, with regards to the economic and fiscal management of the companies (41%) while it appears a little felt (29%) the need to establish any production cooperative between local businesses.

In order to meet these needs of stimulating productive synergies of the companies involved, it has recently been made consortiums and associations of producers with the aim to achieve a higher concentration and diversification of products and improving commercialization strategies and communication.

Table 4. Producer's organization purpose

| | Absolute Frequency (n) | Frequency distribution (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Economic and fiscal aspects | 10 | 41,7 |
| Cooperation | 7 | 29,2 |
| Training | 14 | 58,0 |
| Innovation | 16 | 66,7 |
| Technical Assistance | 13 | 54,2 |
| Supply concentration | 14 | 58,3 |

The training of the entrepreneur and the workforce is an essential element in order to obtain a greater competitive advantage. Considering that almost 90% of entrepreneurs affirm to have adequate technical skills and possesses an upper-middle class degree, the areas that require training in general coincide with those identified as important for growth. The main “training demand” regards the aspects related to the commercialization and marketing, the incidence of which is around 83% (table 5). Moreover, given that in many cases growing techniques are modified in connection with the acquisition of new techniques and innovative technologies coming mainly from northern Europe or following the introduction of new species. More than 66% of those interviewed require a level of training more oriented with the acquisition of new agricultural techniques. Quality certifications are increasing among companies, due to the attention to security issues in the workplace (37%) and due to inspections by the competent authorities.

While the need for training programs to be allocated to the staff onto the farm business management was not particularly significant in this context.

In view of the fact that the development of the sector will depend on the ability of entrepreneurs to remain competitive in the market, the analysis was finally focused on realistic actions, in terms of organization capability that they think should be undertaken in the next years. Based on the statements of the interviewed sample, it is noted that the diversification of production, or the introduction of new species within its production process, is the top priority for one out of three entrepreneurs.

In relation to factors associated with the increase of the competitiveness of the company (Tab. 6), the ability to innovate and to adapt to the changing demands of the market is considered by entrepreneurs as essential elements for the growth of the company, both for process and product innovation, enhancing the technology of the productive process and diversifying the production through the exploitation of biodiversity of local ecotypes (Timpanaro et al., 2013; Foti et al., 2014)

Table 5. Training and education required by respondents

| | Absolute Frequency (n) | Frequency distribution (%) |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Farm Management | 5 | 20,8 |
| Marketing and sales strategies | 20 | 83,3 |
| Innovative agricultural skills | 16 | 66,7 |
| Work safety | 9 | 37,5 |
| Staff training | 5 | 20,8 |

Among the projects of medium and short term, the development of new business strategies, through an optimization of the supply chain and the progressive development of new marketing channel (Di Vita et al., 2015c, Caracciolo et al., 2015, D'Amico et al., 2016), represent a very important competitiveness tool, for the 66% of interviewed producers. This reinforcement would better address the challenges of the markets, allowing for a more directly relation with the final consumers and, in particular, with foreign buyers, primary recipients of the productions of Mediterranean plants. In this regard, it was observed a particular interest in intensifying participation to some specialized fairs, such as Essen in Germany and Angers in France, considered by companies essential for those who want to create new business contacts.

The favourable propensity and the willingness to develop new synergies with other businesses farms (50%), seems to mark a major change in the mentality of the Sicilian entrepreneurs, which are traditionally reluctant to associate

By contrast, little relevance is attributed to measure public funding; in fact economic incentives are considered important only by 37% of entrepreneurs, confirming less dependence on ornamental plant entrepreneurs to public funds as opposed to what happens in other sectors related to the Sicilian agriculture (cereals, livestock, olive cultivation, viticulture.) whose unclear mechanisms are often controversially highlighted (Di Vita et al., 2014; Di Vita et al., 2015b).

Table 6. Intervention areas for increasing of organizational competitiveness

| | Absolute Frequency (n) | Frequency distribution (%) |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Product innovation | 17 | 70,8 |
| Process Innovation | 22 | 91,6 |
| New marketing channel | 15 | 62,5 |
| Financial re source | 9 | 37,5 |
| Farm synergies | 12 | 50,0 |

CONCLUSION

In the last decade, the international context of ornamental plants in pots has been affected by changes that have induced considerable increase in the levels of competitiveness among companies. Therefore, new challenges await the future of Italian producers. In virtue of a changed scenario in the international markets, this research has aimed to form a comprehensive view of the sector of floriculture and ornamental productions, placing its focus on the entrepreneurial organization and management, with the aim to increasing competitiveness. By making the best use of human potential and his activity, the organization builds its own competitive advantage in a particular market (Gajda, 2015; Migliore *et al.*; 2014; Platania, 2013; Lanfranchi and Giannetto, 2014).

The study - by analysing a representative sample of ornamental pot plants of Sicilian producers, operating in districts with high vocational production -highlighted the main orientations of entrepreneurs and assessed the overall organizational level.

The results showed that Sicilian entrepreneurial connotes high dynamism, certainly due to the high profile training at the relatively young age of the producers.

This sector is affected by progressive evolution, determined by the competitive pressure of foreign countries and the slowing down of demand on a global scale, which is leading companies to reorganize to reduce costs and improve the quality of the production.

The increased market uncertainty, especially in an economic phase crossed by a deep economic crisis, strongly influences the activities of production planning and is a constraint to desirable growth targets for companies.

Experimentation in the company represents an unbearable cost for long-term prospects, for uncertainty of the results and the lack of patent protection. It appears appropriate that is needed government intervention, through the provision of financial resources in order to promote investments, to increase the research and experimentation, in order to maintain an adequate level of competitiveness in an environment that has become international (Pilato, 2014; Bellia and Pilato, 2014).

Unlike other sectors of agriculture, the surveyed Sicilian entrepreneurs considered training staff as extremely important. In almost all cases, this takes place in the company and is fully borne by the firm; local schools or any educational institutions fail to form suitably

qualified to people be used in companies of flora ornamental. Only companies of higher dimensions, which also constitute a small minority in the Sicilian production landscape, have technicians and consultants within them to train and update their staff through a process of periodic training.

The study also shows that, for a large number of the companies surveyed, there was a good propensity for innovation through the introduction of mechanized production facilities aimed at reducing production costs, in a continuous process of quality improvement with increased attention to environmental issues. It would seem a tendency to aggregation between producers, especially for certain functions such as the concentration of the commercial offer, the acquisition of products and services, and research and innovation. Improved coordination of all the stakeholders would seem to be, at this stage, the best development strategy to be able to hold its own against other productive realities which have appeared in recent years in the market of Mediterranean plants, dominated until a few years ago by Italian firms.

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