

Human Resources Practices in Successful Family Businesses in Puerto Rico: A Pilot Study

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This study explores the prevalence of human resource processes (HRP) in successful Puerto Rican family businesses. We apply qualitative approach to investigate a sample of prominent companies in Puerto Rico. Results indicate that establishing formal human resource procedures in family businesses is generally a slow process and is largely a function of organizational growth. Our results also suggest that the introduction of formal human resources processes such as recruitment, selection, training, job descriptions among others were related to eventual continuity. We conclude that professionalization of human resources processes is fundamental for continuity and endurance of family businesses in Puerto Rico.

INTRODUCTION

Family business represents the oldest and most prevalent type of business organization worldwide. As such, they play a significant role in the stability and health of the new global economy (Bakr, McGuire, and Soufani, 2009). Family businesses are an essential component of the US economy, accounting for over 50% of the country's companies and a large share of its national wealth (Family Firm Institute, 2014). Even though not all family operations are small or new, family businesses do represent a significant fraction of the small business sector in the US.

Puerto Rico has been a US territory since 1898 and has adopted many of the mainland's management processes. Family businesses have been part of the Puerto Rican economy even before its incorporation into the US, and currently represent 27% of its top businesses (Vega, 2015).

Vega (2015) found that the family businesses behave in a unique fashion, with their internal environment being impacted both by general and specific factors related to the founding family and its dynamics. Family businesses also need to construe social capital in their communities and with constituents in contrast to other types of business organizations. They are capable of establishing more intimate relationships with their employees, which translates into a, expected social responsibility rarely observed among non-family businesses. As a result, 'corporate social responsibility' can be considered an intrinsic feature of family businesses.

Here we investigate the reasons underlying long-term endurance and success of Puerto Rican family businesses. To this purpose, we explored how human resources processes (HRP) are carried out in second-, third- and fourth-generation small family firms, and investigated whether HRP related to business continuity. Despite the increasing share of family firms in the economy of Puerto Rico economy

is rising, their level of engagement with HRP is poorly understood. For this reason we analyzed the presence of human resource processes in family-run businesses through three main questions:

1. Do family firms incorporate human resources processes in their businesses?
2. Is there a relationship between the use of such processes and the continuity of the family firm?
3. Which human resources processes (recruitment, selection, training, performance appraisals, compensation, promotion) are most prevalent in family firms?

METHODOLOGY

Participants were selected from a pool of well-known and successful family firms in Puerto Rico. Published information on other firms not sampled in our study was also collected and analyzed. Owners or founders were first contacted by phone call, and upon agreement to participate in a one-to-one in-depth interview they were sent a formal letter explaining the details of procedures. A total of six family businesses constitute the sample of this study.

A pilot study was conducted on a small sample of firms to determine the feasibility of the project. The pilot interviews were based on a structured questionnaire, conducted on and off company premises, and lasted for approximately an hour.

A structured questionnaire was used as a guideline for interview purposes. Questionnaires and interviews are used together in mixed method studies of educational assessment (Brookhart and Durkin, 2003; Lai and Waltman, 2008). Structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews generate confirmatory results despite differences in methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Harris & Brown, 2010). Our questionnaire consisted of the following sections:

1. The Demographics
2. The Founders' Background and its Companies
3. HRP in their Businesses
4. Relationship Between HRP and the Continuity of Family Firm
5. The Family Business and Corporate Social Responsibility

The questions directly related to HRP were scattered throughout the questionnaire and divided as shown in Table 1.

TABLE I
QUESTIONNAIRE SECTIONS

Human Resource Process	Questions
Recruitment and Selection	30, 44, 49
Succession Planning	31, 32, 33, 34
Retirement Benefits	35
Strategic Planning	36, 37, 38
Job Descriptions	39, 40, 50
Performance Evaluations	41, 42, 53
Compensation and Benefits	44, 45, 46, 47, 48
Leadership	51
Training and Development	55
Teambuilding	56
Corporate Social Responsibility	57, 58

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed to each statement in the questionnaire a five-point Likert scale ranging from “a very little extent” to “a very great extent”.

Once interviews were carried out, data were tabulated according to the multiple questionnaire sections.

RESULTS

Demographics

33% of respondents were second-generation, 16% third-generation, 33% fourth-generation and 16% had all three generations working together. All current principal managers and founders were male. 33% of founders are still active in the business. The major players in the history of the sampled companies are grandfather (33%), grandparents siblings (50%), great grandfather (33%), and father (33%); notice that more than one major player could be cited by respondents. All cited major players were also male.

The average number of family members involved in the business was two, and 83% of respondents had succession plans in place. All respondents were college educated and one of the respondents indicated family members were only considered for any position in the firm if they had a Master's degree. The average annual revenue has had a steady growth over the years. All respondents provided personal investment at the time of starting the company. 83% of the companies had a mission statement when the company was founded and 100% of these have later modified them. Table 2 lists the values cited as important by respondents.

TABLE 2
RELEVANT VALUES ACCORDING TO OWNERS AND FOUNDERS OF FAMILY
BUSINESSES IN PUERTO RICO

Value	Companies regarding value as important (%)
Ethical Values	83%
Personal Values	83%
Financial Values	83%
Work Values	83%
Business Values	83%
Economic Values	50%
Philanthropic Values	50%
Public Values	33%
Spiritual Values	33%
Cultural Values	33%
Emotional Values	17%
Physical Values	17%
Relational Values	17%
Recreational Values	17%

Regarding the first question of the study (incorporation of HRP in family businesses), we observed that 83% of the respondents felt a sense of obligation to their employees to the same extent as to their customers (83%) and shareholders (83%).

67% of companies with succession plans in place involved human resources in their development. All respondents provide compensation and benefits for family members involve human resources in the process. 83% of the companies have similar compensation plans for their family members and 67% of the companies used similar decision-making process guidelines for family members. 83% of the family firms have job descriptions in place for family members as well as non-family members, and 50% provide leadership training for family members. Job standards are equal for family and non-family members in 100% of the companies, while 67% of the firms provide training and development for the younger-generation family members.

Corporate social responsibility is an important topic for 100% of the businesses studied, and the involvement extends mainly to donations (100%), in-kind donations (67%), personally volunteering (67%) and serving on boards (50%).

The second question addressed the relationship between HRP and continuity in family businesses. 50% of companies started implementing HRP when the company became too big to be handled by founders alone, 33% implemented HRP when their second-generation owners considered it necessary, and 17% utilized them since the businesses were founded. 50% of companies (including a late-nineteenth-century and two early-twentieth-century firms) believed that formalized processes have definitely contributed to the continuity of the business, 33% replied that human resources practices are necessary and contribute to increased competitiveness, and 17% have been using HRP despite being second-generation businesses and hence unable to evaluate factors promoting long-term continuity.

The third question referred to degree of implementation of HRP in the business, and detailed information is provided in Table 3.

TABLE 3
SPECIFIC HUMAN RESOURCE PROCESSES ADOPTED BY FAMILY FIRMS IN
PUERTO RICO

Human Resource Process (HRP)	Companies implementing practice (%)
Job Descriptions	83%
Recruitment/Selection	100%
Training	67%
Performance Evaluations	100%
Compensation	100%
Promotion	100%
Succession Planning	83%
Other HRP	33%

Although all companies go through formal processes, similar specifications regarding selection and recruitment were applied to family members for their companies. Some of the requirements include:

- Passion, leadership and results
- Work experience outside family business, and merit
- Having a Family Member Hiring Policy: education, industry experience, superior quality compared to others
- Family members are selected; they join the business if they like it and qualify for the position
- If they want to work in the business, they can come and prove themselves
- They must like what they do because it is not a family obligation

Regarding succession planning, companies comments included:

- Members must have interest, education, the right character and be part of the family board.
- There is strategic recruitment, profile development, education and training.
- There is a plan in place where family members can gain adequate experience and prepare to assume management.
- Each family member must spend considerable amount of time in each department as well as training in the industry.
- Education is a must.

One-hundred percent of the companies indicated that there is good communication between family members and that they enjoyed after work hour activities. Most of the company founders, owners, presidents and CEOs are aware of the benefits associated with instituting HR processes, although not all companies have implemented them.

DISCUSSION

Family Member Involvement and Commitment

Previous studies had examined organizational commitment and intention of later generations in the family business. Dawson (2013) argued that when individual identity and career interests were aligned with their family enterprise, they experienced affective commitment to the company. Caspar (2010) proposed that family businesses must achieve both strong performance and keeping the family involved in operations. In addition, family businesses that survive for many generations make sure that their sense of ownership goes together with a strong sense of purpose. They develop a shareholder's agreement, make decisions as a board, ensure financial and corporate strategies as well as making ownership meaningful by nurturing family values and giving new generations a sense of pride in the company's contribution to society. Mahto (2013) also concluded that family involvement was central to the commitment to continuation.

Caspar (2010) also argues that charity is key to the commitment of families to their businesses, by including family members not involved in business activities and promoting family values. Charity and other acts of social responsibility result in increased good will toward the business. In our study, we found that all of the businesses, irrespective of their current generation, have reviewed their mission statement so as to include the viewpoints of the newer generations, and all of them are involved in corporate social responsibility activities with their communities, engendering both an increased involvement of the next generation in business affairs and a growing sense of pride of belonging to the family business.

Human Resources Processes as an Element of Business Continuity

Dana, Smyrniotis and Bi (2015) explored management and governance practices associated with family business multi-generational continuity and identified 35 main practices in family business governance, which classified into seven factors underlying continuity: commitment to and planning for the future as a family-in-business; governance; communication and conflict management; professionalization of the business and use of non-family resources; mentoring and development of family members and definition of roles and responsibilities; continuity, succession planning, and exit options; and philanthropic and charitable activities and building social goodwill. The seven key factors highlight the importance of implementing human resources processes in businesses including family firms.

Our study sheds light on the presence of HRP in the Puerto Rican family firms, the role of HRP in their "professionalization" and the link between formal HR processes and business continuity. The results were supported by respondent comments and interviews with owners and managers. They indicate that although the adoption of HRP is slowly growing in family businesses, such systems are not universally established. In some cases, adoption of more formal HRP is strongly resisted by owners struggling to ensure the continuance of the business.

The results indicate a link between the use of human resources processes and overall continuity. Human resources processes are part of business "professionalization", meaning the transition from informal to formal management style (Schwelzer, 2007). This process may be challenging for family businesses, especially during the transitional phase from founder or owner to professional managers. The interviews also revealed that family companies have evolved over the years and incorporated practices that required due to company growth. Specifically, respondents indicated how human resources policies and procedures were established to avoid discrimination practices between non-family and family members.

Some articles on family businesses in Puerto Rico have been recently published and although they do not specifically address human resources processes, they provide relevant information on family companies that have endured for multiple generations. "El Motor Detrás de Mendez & Co." (El Nuevo Día, 2012) describe themselves as that a passionate fourth-generation family business committed to growth. The 2012 article of the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Nuevo Día*, "La Nueva Ruta del Ponce Cash & Carry" state that they are a third-generation business currently in the hands of daughters who have been involved in the business from a young age. In the article of June 2013 "Sólidos Cimientos", the company

Maderera Donestevéz is cited as a company jointly managed by first, second and third generation family members who share views on work ethic, values and the importance of education and business experience for younger generations. The involvement of family members from different generations in all areas of business before take-over is also frequently mentioned. Some smaller companies currently managed by second generation family members are in a transition phase and may be involved in internal conflict over the need to “professionalize”. Those business are less likely to exhibit structured human resources processes but may beginning to realize the importance of convincing founders of the need of professionalizing.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The main implication from our study is that human resources processes are as important in family firms as in other businesses. In order for a family business to ensure its continuity, it needs to professionalize its operations and family members. Professionalization of a family business involves many areas, and we have provided evidence that those related to human resources processes such as recruitment and selection, job descriptions, performance evaluations and compensation and management are the first to be established. The effective use of HR processes can be seen as factors that determine the continuity of the family firm.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major limitation seen in this study is the limited number of participants. Due to the lack of availability of any listing of family businesses in Puerto Rico, our survey was limited to well-known and mainstream family businesses. We were also unable to present comparisons with other industries. Further research should broaden the sample base.

Despite its limitations, this study does provide valuable insights into human resources issues in Puerto Rican family businesses. Our preliminary results echo previous research in larger organizations, which associates the use of HR processes with business continuity. The importance of human resources processes grows as businesses takes on more employees and increases financial capabilities. Family businesses experiencing continuous growth also tend to establish formalized HR processes once new generations assume leadership roles.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the use of HR processes in successful family owned firms in Puerto Rico, as well as the links between HRP and business continuity.

The evidence from our interviews support the premise that owners of family business operating for three generations or over constantly seek a common ground between family and business interests. We conclude that in order for a family business to endure and grow, they must professionalize their businesses procedures including HR processes. Based on our sample, we found that family firms are beginning to use HR processes as a means to professionalize the business. We have not examined whether it is better or worse for family firms to rely upon professional HR processes. Since this study has not collected performance data, we cannot investigate whether Puerto Rican family firms that rely on professional human resources processes enhance the prospects of continuity. Thus, future research is needed to confirm the relationship between the effective use of professional HR processes and the continuity of other successful family firms in Puerto Rico.

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