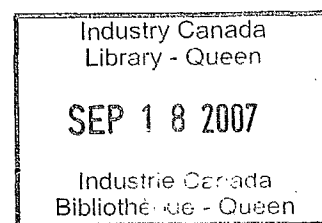


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SYMPOSIUM ON SME RESEARCH PRIORITIES

FINAL REPORT

August, 1995



Industry Canada



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INTRODUCTION

The Entrepreneurship and Small Business Office (ESBO) of Industry Canada organized the SME Research Symposium of May 18th, 1995, as a first step in developing, among researchers, a coherent analytical basis for the next stage of small business policy development. The purpose was to examine how to optimize small business research so that the work of industry associations, research institutes and governments is complementary and shared. Ultimately, the goal is to create stronger research relationships and, eventually, a cooperative approach to establishing priorities. Hence, the anticipated result of the symposium was to establish concrete areas for cooperation among participants, including research topics and funding priorities, and to map out a future course of action.

Four topics were addressed in separate workshops: Financing SMEs, Skills Development, Technology Commercialization, and Export Market Development. While many felt that the goals for the day were too ambitious, participants and workshop leaders nonetheless worked to address three questions:

- what are their research priorities in the coming year?
- what gaps exist in those areas?
- how can stakeholders cooperate to fill those gaps?

The results of those discussions are summarized by each workshop leader in this final report.

Main Themes

While the workshops appeared to address separate aspects of small business needs, several themes emerged which cut across the four areas:

- *Size of SMEs.* Participants pointed out that the needs of a small enterprise ("SE") differ markedly from those of a medium-sized enterprise ("ME"). Hence, a proper definition of "SE" versus "ME" is necessary, as well as further probing into the differences between the two, and how their needs -
- in financing, skills development, technology and export market development -- are being met.
- *Use of electronic communications tools.* New communications technologies provide ample scope for developing new ways of thinking, of obtaining information, of manufacturing, of simply doing. Harnessing these technologies to meet the specific needs of Canadian SMEs, and to

develop their competitiveness, provides fertile ground for research and policy development.

- *SME Characteristics benchmark study.* Different aspects of SME operations have been extensively surveyed, evaluated and reported upon. However, there is as yet no benchmark set of data that establishes the "normal" operations of SMEs in different industries, or in different economic conditions.

Participant Feedback

The symposium drew forty participants, primarily from government. Overall, the comments from the evaluation sheets were very positive: most felt that the symposium had provided a good opportunity to network and exchange valuable information. Fifteen of the sixteen individuals who filled out the questionnaire felt that the symposium had been useful; fourteen indicated that a similar meeting in a year's time would likewise be useful -- although only if concrete actions resulted from this year's recommendations. Concerns centred on the very short timeline in which the meeting was organized; that the Discussion Paper was not available ahead of the symposium; and the preponderance of Industry Canada representatives. Many felt that more representation from the private sector would have helped round out the discussions.

WORKSHOP SESSION Ia: FINANCING SMEs

Workshop Leader:

*Mr. Gerry Tapp, Director
Taxation and Business Financing Policy Analysis
Industry Canada.*

Current Research and General Discussion

The workshop opened with a brief overview of research to date and in progress. Major research initiatives to date include:

1. *Research conferences:* Industry Canada sponsored a series of conferences in March, 1995, on various issues concerning businesses in Canada:

- "Corporate Decision-Making in Canada": understanding the effects of corporate governance structures on decision-making, performance of enterprises and, ultimately, on prospects for economic growth in Canada.
- "Science and Technology": understanding the impact of science and technology on the Canadian economy, jobs and growth, and the implications for public policy.
- "Implications of Knowledge-Based Growth for Micro-Economic Policies": examining the influence of knowledge-based growth on the Canadian economy and the policy implications that arise. The conference was broadly divided into three parts: concepts and measurement issues dealing with knowledge; factors that facilitate economic growth; and the impact of the global telecommunications revolution on the Canadian economy.

The papers from these conferences will be available in the Fall, as part of the Industry Canada Research Volumes series.

2. *Asia-Pacific Research Project:* this project will undertake a comprehensive analysis of the implications of the growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region in the world economy to Canada. Specific questions include: how and to what extent will the growth of the Asia Pacific region affect Canada? Are Canadian firms well placed to take advantage of the sustained high growth in that area? Will competitiveness pressures alter the structure of Canadian trade and industry toward overspecialization in resources? Participating authors will perform original research; papers will be presented at a conference to be held in Vancouver in

December 1995, and subsequently published in an Industry Canada Research Volume. This project is sponsored by the Strategic Investment Analysis Branch of Industry Canada.

3. *Entrepreneurship Research Alliance (ERA)*: The ERA was established in April, 1994, to "develop an understanding of why some business ventures succeed while others fail". Headed by Dr. Raphael Amit at the University of British Columbia, ERA teams perform research in five areas: Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Decision-Making; Financing and Competitiveness Issues; Entrepreneurship and Innovation; Entrepreneurship and Government Policies; and Family and Gender Issues. Planned research includes a large-scale empirical study of the banking/financing criteria for new economy businesses, and the nature of contracting practices between entrepreneurs and venture capitalists.

4. *Longitudinal dynamics of firms*: Dr. John Baldwin at Statistics Canada is conducting research into the dynamic process by which small enterprises grow and displace large firms, and how technology and innovation differ in large and small firms. Upcoming work also includes extending the *Strategies for Success* study to examine financial competencies in emerging firms.

5. *Small Business and Special Surveys*. The Special Surveys Division of Statistics Canada is planning a survey of 2,200 small firms in Canada which have less than fifty employees.

Gaps in Current Research

While the overview dealt with many aspects of SME research outside of financing, the discussion on gaps in the available research emphasized the financing aspects of SMEs. The most critical gap identified in the financing workshop was the lack of baseline data on the *characteristics of small and medium-sized enterprises*. Several participants pointed out that issues such as technology and innovation differ between SEs and MEs, yet it is unknown whether this is due to financing difficulties, or other barriers encountered by small firms. Baseline data on the "normal" behaviour of firms under various conditions would provide valuable insights into these questions.

Other research gaps identified include:

- *Management skills*. What skills are required for SME managers to effectively run their businesses in a changing economy? How do they acquire these skills, and what role does the government have in ensuring that adequate skills training is available?

- *Institutional frameworks.* How do changes to bankruptcy and other legislation affect lending practices? How do the provinces differ in their legislative frameworks?
- *Equity markets.* There is a need to examine the performance of stock markets, and their efficacy at providing sources of financing.
- *Taxation.* What is the impact of taxation policies on SME performance (i.e. tax expenditures, conflicting policies.)?
- *Banking practices.* Do current Canadian banking practices appropriately balance risk and price for debt to achieve optimal levels of access?

Areas for Future Cooperation

Reflecting the magnitude of the knowledge gap about the characteristics of SMEs, participants agreed that a study to gather baseline data on small and medium-sized enterprises is a priority for future cooperation between researchers. While such a study could be as comprehensive as the labour force survey currently conducted by Statistics Canada, it must avoid adding to the paper burden already experienced by SMEs.

A secondary area identified for future research concerned the sharing of bank data, particularly the Canadian Bankers' Association database.

WORKSHOP SESSION 1b: SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Workshop Leader:

*Dr. Keith Newton, Special Advisor
Strategic Policy, Planning and Consultation
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The workshop on skill development began with a brief scene-setting introduction, followed by a group discussion which consisted of three parts: general information exchange, identification of research issues, and consideration of methodological approaches.

CONTEXT AND PROBLEMATIQUE

The importance attached to skill development stems from the conviction that in the knowledge-based economy (KBE), ideas and knowledge are the crucial factors of production. Growth is fuelled by innovation that is, in turn, driven by the twin engines of technological advance and human resource development.

The urgency of the problem of skills development in SMEs derives from a number of factors:

- recent empirical evidence suggests that Canadian firms underinvest in training. The 1991 National Training Survey, for example, shows that some 70% of firms undertook training. Closer examination reveals that most of this training was for health and safety or orientation. The average employee received only two days of training per year.
- Betcherman et al. (1994) show that, while there are concerns that Canadian firms are not adopting new technologies quickly enough, the rate of adoption of complementary organizational innovations (such as employee involvement, teamwork, job redesign and pay-for-knowledge) is slower still. The study concludes that some 70% of firms can only be described as "traditional" with respect to human resource management practices.
- A forthcoming Industry Canada publication by Newton (1995) reviews considerable evidence of deficiencies in management skill development in Canada.
- All of the problems identified above are particularly severe for SMEs.

Employers stoutly maintain that "people are our most important asset" yet, clearly, there is a gap between rhetoric and reality.

One underlying reason for the gap is that, although the link between skill development and the "bottom line" is intuitively obvious, there is very little hard empirical evidence at the micro level to show salutary impacts on productivity, costs, quality, profits, etc. Some research done in the United States at the Department of Labours Office of the American Workplace has spawned an evocative new expression -- "the high-performance workplace". Canadian evidence points to links between human resources management practices and performance (Betcherman et al.; Gordon and Wiseman; Baldwin and Johnson) but this is clearly an area that cries out for further research.

Other possible research issues include:

- the amount and importance of informal training on the job.
- quality issues: what works and what doesn't?
- training technologies.
- comparative studies: how do we stack up against other countries, and what can we learn from them?
- what is an appropriate role for government in encouraging more -- and better -- skills development?

THE WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

Current Research and General Discussion

The discussion began with the observations that, while the highly technical skills for the knowledge-based economy are important, we must pay attention to the *full* range of skills. Ultimately, the goal is to heighten societal awareness of the importance of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurialism.

Participants then contributed the following items of information relevant to research on skill development in SMEs:

- the Association of Provincial Research Organizations is sponsoring a number of demonstration projects on diagnostics.
- A joint Statistics Canada/Quebec Bureau of Statistics survey for Human Resources Development Canada, the Quebec Ministry of Education and the

Quebec Labour Force Development Board, will cover 21,000 establishments employing over 20 people; the study will examine a number of labour market variables including job vacancies, skill needs and HR management practices.

- Statistics Canada is developing a "globalization data base" to assess firms' viability to compete in international markets.
- Statistics Canada is testing a Generalized Workplace Survey of both employers and employees to examine various labour market factors including training, skills, and compensation.
- An international literacy survey will shortly give us the ability to compare ourselves against other countries in terms of basic skills.
- The "kid study" is an ambitious Statistics Canada project to track people from the pre-school stage right through the schooling system and beyond to identify the determinants of success.

Future Research Priorities

- The impact of human resources development practices on firm performance.
- The relationship between firm age and size and skill acquisition strategy.
- The applicability of distance learning technologies.
- Women in small business.
- The use of diagnostic tools not only for assessment but as a research technique per se.
- Evaluation research: building evaluation right into program design and publicizing the results.
- The skill needs of micro, self-employed, and home-based businesses.

Methodological Considerations

- The size definition is crucially important in SME research: there are important qualitative differences between micro businesses and those of 40 or 50 employees.

- Greater use could be made of diagnostic and evaluation research.
- While broad-based surveys will continue to be useful, a sectoral approach may be better for research on performance impacts of HR practices. These, in turn, should be supplemented by case studies and focus groups.
- There is a need for more longitudinal research, both for performance impact studies of the firm, and also to track individuals through various skill development stages.
- The regional dimension needs more careful attention: national surveys are dominated by Ontario and Quebec, which may be of questionable relevance to Newfoundland or Saskatchewan.

Communication

There was strong consensus that, in the final analysis, any research is only as good as the way in which it is communicated. There is clearly a need for networks and a clearing-house function; initiatives such as the Canada Business Service Centres and the proposed Industry Canada "Management Information Network" could play a useful role here. The most urgent need, however, is to ensure that research is reported in a clear and readily-understandable manner and communicated to the maximum possible number of users. This will require an innovative use of a variety of media.

WORKSHOP SESSION IIa: TECHNOLOGY COMMERCIALIZATION

Workshop leader:

*Dr. Denys Cooper
Technology Assessment and National Coordination
Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP).*

Current Research and General Discussion

To help focus the discussion, the topic of technology commercialisation was divided into three key areas: "management" issues (i.e. those pertaining to how technology and innovation are managed); government issues (i.e. those that relate to government policy); and resources issues (i.e. those that affect or are affected by a firm's resources). At the end of the session, participants voted to determine research priorities among the topics listed; each participant could vote for no more than three topics. The group's discussion revealed the following:

- Few universities have a postgraduate degree in technology management, although several do have undergraduate courses as part of their degree work. Seventeen university chairs involve various aspects of technology management, including Dr. Raphael Amit's U.B.C. chair in entrepreneurship, yet few address problems specific to SMEs.
- A Statistics Canada report showed that patenting was not as important as some would expect in Intellectual Property management. With faster technology turnovers, other IP tools are more in use, including confidentiality clauses in contracts.
- There has been little or no in-depth work done on the relative economic merits of transferring technology from university or government to a spin-off company, versus to an established firm. Some recent work at the University of Calgary has examined the relative economic benefits in terms of job creation by university spin-off firms (1995), as well as Cooper/Barker on sales and jobs on some of the 300 university spin-off firms in Canada. Furthermore, Statistics Canada has been studying the problems of adopting technology in SMEs and large firms. The first report is due later this year, and the full report in 1996.
- *Technology Opportunities:* There is a need to exploit technologies in Canada which have been funded with Canadian taxpayers' money. A number of initiatives were brought to the attention of the group:

a. Technology Partnerships Program (TPP): Margaret Caughey described this new program, a joint venture of the three granting councils (the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, the Medical Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) and Industry Canada. The TPP is designed to encourage technology transfer between universities and industry by bridging the gap between the two. The TPP will fund university activities in applied R&D that demonstrate the feasibility of a new product, process or service. An interested partner firm must then carry out the necessary market research, product/process development, engineering, sales and marketing to launch the innovation onto the marketplace.

b. Trans-Forum: is an Internet-based communication and information service which links the technology transfer offices of a growing number of universities, colleges and research hospitals across Canada. Its purpose is to enhance technology transfer from institutions of higher education to Canadian business, especially SMEs. Trans-Forum makes key information instantly available to technology transfer officials interested in seeking technology, expertise, etc.

c. Pilot project of the NRC and NSERC, where universities have disclosed a number of technologies. Key ones will be provided to the NRC/IRAP 250 Industrial Technology Advisors to discuss with SME industrial clients to determine interest in solving company problems or providing new opportunities.

d. CATA and Faxback: The Communications Research Centre uses the Canadian Advanced Technology Association's (CATA) Friday Faxback system to disclose key technology opportunities. This system sends information to over 8,000 key decision-makers, most of which are in industry.

■ *Internet:* There were mixed reactions on the level of its use by SMEs. Few companies are hooked up to the Internet -- as are few technology associations. However, this will grow. As it now stands, more individuals outside of Canada access information on Canadian developments than do Canadians! It was suggested that CANARIE be asked to fund the development of user tools to make the system more user friendly, rather than expecting Canadian entrepreneurs to surf the world.

■ *Diagnostic tools:* There was significant interest in diagnostic tools. Denys Cooper informed the group that, at the end of March 1995, Industry Canada hosted a three-day seminar to discuss seventeen different diagnostic tools available and/or in use in Canada, the United States and

the United Kingdom. The results from the Industry Canada/National Research Council/Canadian Technology Network sponsored event will be discussed by the NRC in May, with a policy proposal to be explored on the role, promotion and funding issues for consideration by various groups. With government downsizing, diagnostic functions could conceivably be moved into the private sector, either through industry associations or private companies. For an SME to expose company data for assessments done by the private sector groups, there would have to be a strong commitment to confidentiality. This was reported to work in the United States, for some sectors.

- *The National Business Networks Demonstration Program:* funded by Industry Canada and the private sector, the demonstration program has been created to encourage Canadian SMEs to form business networks among themselves. The Program has two goals: to inform businesses of the benefits of creating such networks, and to provide a national support structure to help them do so.

Research Priorities

Participants in the technology diffusion workshop voted on the areas of greatest importance for future research. The results, in descending order of priority, were:

- *Information technology:* What is the level of information technology adoption across Canada? How can it be harnessed to improve the level of technology adoption and innovation of Canadian SMEs? How can the Internet/World Wide Web be harnessed to improve Canadian competitiveness through innovations such as remote, "virtual" design, etc.? What is the role of the government's Open Bidding System (OBS) in encouraging government procurement of new technology?
- *Technology management:* how are technically innovative firms different from other growing SMEs? How can the government service those differences? Is there enough being taught in universities and colleges re. how to manage technology?
- *Technology transfer:* How can we best manage the movement of new technology out of the institution and into a corporation for commercialization? What role is there for industry associations (such as CATA) to play in this process?
- *Industry Associations:* Given government downsizing, what new roles can industry associations play in providing information to members, etc.?

What government services can be devolved to these associations, and what is the most effective means of doing so?

- *Virtual corporations:* Little is known about Virtual Corporations -- how they operate, grow, and how to measure their performance. Traditional measures of direct job growth are not a real measure of performance. With greater outsourcing, it is likely that the role by virtual corporations will grow. By their very nature they will need to be well linked with other partners.
- *Company certification/ISO 9000:* Many SMEs are opposed to obtaining a CSA standard or ISO 9000 certification. Cost appears to be a key reason - both for the internal time and the cash outlay required. As of July 1994, only 253 firms in Canada were ISO 9000 registered compared with 850 in Europe, or 35,000 in the United States. Is ISO 9000 seen as marketing for the corporation and/or a product? How do firms which have moved to ISO 9000 compare with those in the same field which have not?
- *Regulatory reform:* have regulatory changes really solved SMEs' problems?
- *Spin-off technologies:* which is a more effective means of commercializing technology: creating a spin-off firm, or licensing the technology to a corporation that already exists and has a track record?
- *Government technology transfer programs:* which is the most effective program -- Technology Partnerships Program (TPP), Trans-Forum, or IRAP/NSERC?
- *Diagnostics:* how to best develop a "road map" for businesses engaged in innovation.
- *Intellectual property:* what role does it play in innovation? Are patents useful at a time when a technology changes faster than the patenting system can keep up with?
- *Expert systems:* How does the size of a firm affect its use of expert systems?

WORKSHOP SESSION IIb: EXPORT MARKET DEVELOPMENT

Workshop Leader:

*Mr. Geoff Nimmo
International Operations
Industry Canada.*

Current Research and General Discussion

The workshop opened with a general information-sharing session. The following described research that they are currently engaged in, or are planning on carrying out:

1. *Rena Blatt, Government of Ontario.* Described a research project that she was leading that tracked women entrepreneurs. The sample size was approximately 100 Ontario companies - in response to a question, Rena said she would be pleased to add more companies.
2. *Jay Kryslar, Government of Alberta.* His department is examining export services, and have recently updated their data on business registered in Alberta that are involved in exporting. They have also looked in depth at particular sectors, notably international education.
3. *George Fox, New Brunswick.* The government performs an annual survey of manufacturers asking about their desire to expand their markets. Some of these are export ready; some are not. This type of survey enables the province to know where their potential exporters are at.
4. *Guy Lassonde, Government of Quebec.* He described a study they have undertaken on SMEs and exporting (Report on SMEs and Exportation). After discussing his work, Mr. Lassonde made the point that what was interesting was what type of SME was exporting -- what was the criteria by which a small company judged whether it should be exporting.

Future Research Priorities

- What are the basic factors that motivate SMEs to be export ready?
- How successful are programs and services that are available to SMEs for exporting? Were SMEs taking advantage of these programs? Was it leading to more SMEs exporting; and were SMEs able to access the programs?

- What role do intermediaries play in export development? Are SMEs using them? Should they be using intermediaries more effectively?
- What role do immigrants play in the development of SME export capacity? When and for what reasons do immigrants change from being importers when they initially come to Canada, to become importers/exporters.
- What role do/can mentoring programs play in the development of SME exporters?
- What is the present situation for SMEs and exporting at the present time (need for basic trade data by size of firm, and province of origin)?
- The ability of SMEs to access electronic information engendered much discussion. How can we best encourage small companies to use the new electronic tools? Is there technological resistance to these tools? How does the ability to use new electronic services affect a companies ability to export effectively? Are SMEs prepared and able to access the electronic information and assistance that government is making available. Can we create a comparative advantage for our companies through the use of these tools?
- Inter-provincial trade. What percentage of inter-provincial trade do SMEs contribute. What percentage of total SME trade is within Canada?
- Globalization and SMEs. What are the opportunities and risks for SMEs with globalization?
- How do SMEs want to access government services. What would they be able to pay?

Methodological Considerations

- The definition of SMEs is too broad to undertake any meaningful research in this area. The definition needs to be far more precise in order to fully appreciate the differences between the needs and operations of SMEs of differing size. Questions such as where most SMEs are exporting to, what the patterns of trade are, and where should resources for SMEs be placed, need to be addressed by size of firm.
- There is a need for a good solid baseline regarding the exporting activities of SMEs at the present time. Current data is uncertain, particularly at the provincial level. Also, the fact that trade statistics deal with the port of exit for exports, and not where the exporter is actually based.

- Regarding the question as to whether or not SMEs should be included when deciding sectoral and geographic priority markets, the point was made that for SMEs the priority was not markets outside of Canada, but provincial markets.

V: FUTURE ACTION

Small Business Survey

It was clear from the discussions that the most important area for future work lies in developing a data set that establishes the normative characteristics of SMEs. To this end, Industry Canada will work with federal, provincial and private sector partners to define the terms and cost of such a Small Business Survey. Such a survey would be carried out by Statistics Canada, using a sample that provides an appropriate selection of firm sizes, growth patterns, regional content and sectoral distribution; this sample could be derived, in part, from the Small Business DataBase (SBDB).

In addition to providing valuable information for domestic policy needs, the goal of such an exercise would be to develop a survey of world-class standards that will place Canada at the forefront of international best practices in this area. Over a period of years, a picture of the small business community will emerge -- one that is clearer than both public and private sectors policy-makers have ever had before. This empirical evidence will then provide us with the means to determine the effectiveness of public sector initiatives aimed at removing the impediments to SME growth.

The CBA and Other Surveys

The Canadian Bankers' Association is conducting a survey of the financing needs of small business, as part of the benchmarking exercise announced in the February Budget. This survey, which is expected to be carried out this Fall, should provide further insight into the question of access to capital issues. In addition, the Bankruptcy Office is working to carry out a study on the reasons for business births and deaths.

The results of these and other studies should form the basis of a better understanding of the policy challenges facing the public sector and the business opportunities facing private sector intermediary partners. The Entrepreneurship and Small Business Office expects to be able to discuss the results of these surveys and their implications at the next research symposium in the Spring of 1996.

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