



Managerial work in small organizations – Evaluating some old, pretty old, and new empirical evidence

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Abstract

Small business management is a research subject that goes back to at least the early 70s. Much has been written on the subject, but a quick review of the literature shows that empirical studies of what managers in small organisations do are relatively rare. In this paper, I give detailed accounts of three studies of managerial work in small organisations: One conducted in the late sixties (Choran, 1969), and one twenty years ago (Kurke and Aldrich, 1983). The third study to be presented is a new study of six owner-managers in small manufacturing firms (17 – 43 employees) conducted by a colleague and me during the winter 2002-2003.

By means of the summary of the empirical data – embodied by the three presented studies – on what managers in small organisations do, the purpose of this paper is to evaluate the possibilities to draw a coherent picture of what top managers in small organisations really do. The studies have all used structured observation (as designed by Henry Mintzberg) in the collection of data, which facilitates cross-study comparisons. The two early studies are critically examined and compared with the results from our new study.

The analysis of the studies shows that it is difficult to draw a coherent picture of what managers in small organisations do. The samples of managers used in the two old studies are heterogeneous and an in-depth analysis of the cases shows big differences between the managers behaviour, which makes it difficult to construct any reliable “general” picture. Hence, the inconsistency between the cases makes it difficult to construct any coherent picture of managerial behaviour also when trying to do so within the single studies. When putting the three studies together it becomes even more difficult to generate a coherent picture.

The newest study presented in this paper gives a picture of what managers in small firms do that question some of the taken for granted truths of managerial behaviour in small firms. Drawing on these findings and on the critical analysis of the two earlier studies included in this paper, I argue that we need additional data on managerial work in different small



organisation settings before we will be able to put forward any reliable statements of what managers in small organisations actually do. Not until we have developed a better empirical grounded understanding of what managers in small organisations do, will we be able to be of support in the improvement of management in small businesses.