

This thesis deals with how managerial work sets the agenda for managerial learning in small firms. Although studies of learning in organizations are numerous, research on managerial learning in the small-firm context is limited. In particular, our knowledge of managerial learning suffers from an insufficient understanding of what top managers in small firms do. The primary purpose of this thesis is to describe how the work of small-firm managers sets the agenda for managerial learning, and how their learning can be supported. Additionally, the thesis explores the use of so-called "Action Technologies" in supporting managerial learning in small firms.

Drawing on an observational study of six owner-managers in small (17-43 employees) manufacturing firms, and a synthesis of earlier studies, this thesis shows that three features of managerial work shape managerial learning in small firms: The small firm's top manager (i) operates in context with specific *structural conditions* that affect his/her behavior, (ii) have certain *cognitive predispositions* guiding his/her behavior, and (iii) have certain *behavioral preferences* directing his/her behavior.

The main argument in this thesis is that managerial learning in small firms is made difficult due to features that make it hard to come to a point where learning (in terms of reflection and conceptualization) is given time and resources, as the manager has trouble in finding time for learning, and as learning risks to become low-priority. Learning is also difficult due to barriers related to the learning process: the work of the manager fosters a superficial learning orientation, makes it difficult to probe deeply into and to develop complicated understandings of issues at hand, and makes peer-learning rarely possible.

Drawing on an action research project of managerial learning in four networks of small-firm owner-managers, the thesis also explores, in a concrete manner, how managerial learning might be supported in a way that circumvents the deficient situation for managerial learning in this kind of firm. More specifically, it seems that Action Technologies by their design constitute a learning context that supports the learning of the small-firm top manager by dissolving the barriers to learning identified above.



CHALMERS



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