

# The father's role in supporting the son's business knowledge development process in Vietnamese family businesses

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Many family businesses do not survive into the second generation. A common reason put forward for this is poor succession planning for the second generation. This paper is designed with the aim to explore the role of the father in supporting the son's business knowledge and development in Vietnamese family businesses.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research adopted an inductive qualitative approach using multiple face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five father–son succession pairs. The interview participants were a cross section of Vietnamese family businesses, where the father–son pair was involved in the process of business knowledge transfer and the succession process was at an advanced stage.

**Findings** – The results suggest that the father plays different roles at different stages of the son's business knowledge development process. In particular, the father acts as an example during the son's childhood; a supporter to encourage the son to gain more business knowledge from both formal education and working experience outside the family business; a mentor and trouble-shooter after the son joins the family business as a full-time employee; and as an advisor after the son becomes the leader of the firm.

**Originality/value** – Most Vietnamese family businesses are still operating under the control of the first generation, and as a result, research into the succession process in Vietnam can help to provide valuable insights. Furthermore, existing research into the role of the predecessor in the whole process from the successor's childhood until the end of the succession process is ambiguous and requires further research to clarify this research gap.

**Keywords** Family business, Vietnam, Father, Business knowledge development process, Son

**Paper type** Research paper



## 1. Introduction

The important role of family firms in making a significant contribution to global economic growth is undeniable (Astrachan and Shanker, 2003; Sharma *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, there are only a few family companies that survive to the second generation and even fewer to the third generation (De Massis *et al.*, 2014; Sonfield and Lussier, 2004). Although this succession failure has many root causes, unsuccessful planning for the next generation's

succession is one of the most significant reasons impacting on the longevity of the family business (Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004; Eddleston *et al.*, 2013; Joshi and Srivastava, 2014; Lu and Wang, 2011). In addition to the issue of transferring ownership, failure in training successors to be future leaders has been highlighted as a key influence on the success of succession plans in family businesses (Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004; Joshi *et al.*, 2013; Ward, 2016). There are many related factors influencing the success of the succession process including: the successor's motivation to undertake a role in the family business (Dawson *et al.*, 2015; Handler, 1994; Sharma and Irving, 2005); the successor's formal education (Morris *et al.*, 1997); the successor's working experience (Brockhaus, 2004; Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011); or the relationship quality between founder and successor (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001). Previous researchers acknowledge the important role of the predecessor in supporting the process of developing the successor's business competence (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001; Letonja and Duh, 2015). However, the role of the predecessor in the whole process from the successor's childhood until the end of the succession process is ambiguous and requires further research to clarify this gap and is the focus of this research.

Lehman *et al.* (2004) argue that culture is a key factor impacting a person's attitude towards an organization. Furthermore, the majority of studies on organizational commitment have been conducted in individualistic, developed-country contexts, where attitudes and cost-benefit calculations, rather than culture, are the main elements determining social behaviour (Heydenfeldt, 2000; Husted and Allen, 2008). Conversely, the collectivism seen in East Asian contexts focuses more on teamwork and group norms (Yao and Wang, 2006). The difference here relates to individualism as opposed to collectivism. Yao and Wang (2006) conclude that personal need is the eventual goal in individualism, whereas collectivism highlights supporting the ultimate group's purpose above individual advancement. In other words, individualism highlights individual rights and freedoms, whereas collectivism emphasizes obligation to the group and team work, as well as fostering relationships between group members (Triandis and Suh, 2002). Hofstede Insights (2017) assigns Vietnam a score on individualism of 20, whereas that of the USA is 91. This is manifest in a close long-term commitment to group members, be that to a family or extended relationship group. Loyalty and responsibility in a collectivist culture is vitally important and outweighs most other social regulations and rules (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Vietnam gained independence on 30 April 1975 under the leadership of the Vietnamese communist party. As a result, private firms were not allowed to operate in the Vietnam economy after 1975 (Vuong, 2014). However, private companies were allowed to participate in Vietnam's economy again after 1986 due to policy reforms (Vuong, 2014). Therefore, most of Vietnamese family businesses are still operating under the control of the first generation (Vuong *et al.*, 2011). Equally, the majority of Vietnamese family businesses are following the traditional father-son succession, as 74 per cent of SME owners are male (Rand and Tarp, 2011), and the oldest son would often be expected to be the successor due to the social order in collectivist cultures in East Asian countries such as in China, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan (Yan and Sorenson, 2006).

Based on the current gaps in the research and the current Vietnamese family business situation, the aim of this research is to investigate the role of the father (founder) in supporting the son's (successor's) business competence and development within the Vietnamese context. This is investigated through the use of separate interviews of father and son pairs in five Vietnamese family businesses. Investigating this topic will help to fill gaps in knowledge and help maintain the longevity of success in family businesses in

Vietnam. Furthermore, helping to assure the success of Vietnamese family businesses across generations is a positive contribution to maintaining Vietnam's economic growth.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Family businesses

Family businesses have been explored with more regularity in academic studies since the 1980s (Salvato and Corbetta, 2013; Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011). However, there is a lack of consensus about the definition of a family firm (Chrisman *et al.*, 2005; Westhead and Cowling, 1998; Westhead *et al.*, 2002). Chua *et al.* (1999) suggest that studies relating to the definition of family businesses should begin by clarifying the business objective being pursued, its vision, and the characteristics of these family firms. Westhead *et al.* (2002) argue that there are four main factors to consider when defining family businesses: namely, the majority share ownership by a single family; a key intention to pass ownership to the next generation; the perception of the firm as being a family firm; and management by family members.

In addition to the four main common characteristics in family businesses, there are four unique characteristics in Vietnamese family firms. Firstly, most family businesses are operating under the control of the first generation, for the reasons outlined above (Vuong *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, as Rand and Tarp's (2011) survey, which covered 2,739 enterprises in ten provinces spread from North to South Vietnam indicated, about 74 per cent of SME owners were male. Thirdly, approximately 80 per cent of SME owners did not have a bachelor's degree. Fourthly, the oldest son would be expected to be the successor due to the social order in collectivist cultures in East Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan (Yan and Sorenson, 2006). Indeed, the current Vietnamese family business context seems similar to the Korean family business context in 1993 when Kuratko *et al.* (1993) identified the differences between Korean and US firms. Most Korean family business owners at that time were the first generation of private owners and male, due to the fact that most family firms were created after the Korean War. Meanwhile many US firms were at least second- or third-generation family businesses (Kuratko *et al.*, 1993). In addition, successors were preferred and expected to be the oldest son in Korean family firms, while in the US sample, it was just as likely to be a daughter as it was a son (Kuratko *et al.*, 1993).

### 2.2 Family business succession process

It has been argued that succession is one of the most challenging issues that the majority of family businesses face (Astrachan, 2010; Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004; Handler, 1994). Scholars also suggest that the continuity of successful businesses from one generation to the next relies mainly on good succession planning (Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004; Cadieux, 2007; Handler, 1990; Ward, 1987). In addition, a good succession plan can improve cooperation with stakeholders, enhancing the chance of a smooth and effective succession in family firms. Davis (1987) asserts that there are three main goals in a succession plan:

- (1) to efficiently and fairly distribute property from the previous to the next generation;
- (2) to pass business leadership to the successor; and
- (3) to maintain and foster family harmony.

Despite the importance and necessity of a succession plan for the continuing existence of a family business, researchers have found that it is often not carefully undertaken (Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004; Handler, 1990; Miller *et al.*, 2003; Ward, 2016). The approach to succession

relies on several components, including the predecessors, the successors, the family, the type of business and the stakeholders (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004; Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001; Csizmadia *et al.*, 2016).

Ensuring successful succession is considered important in all firms (Miller, 1993; Worrell and Davidson, 1987); however, the situation is far more complicated in a family business. Assuring leadership and ownership across the generations is one of the biggest challenges for family firms (Dyer, 1986; Handler, 1994; Lansberg, 1999; Miller *et al.*, 2003). The process includes changes at both management level and ownership level (Alcorn, 1986; Breton-Miller *et al.*, 2004). Handler (1990) and Breton-Miller *et al.* (2004) suggest that succession happens over a long period of time. It starts, potentially, before the successor joins the company and proceeds through the formal nomination of the heir, the transfer of ownership and management stage and the actual takeover.

In particular, Aronoff and Ward (2011) note that there are several phases beginning with the “development” phase of the next generation, where function, knowledge and leadership skills are built, to a “transitional” stage as the successor and the organisation itself is prepared for leadership, leading to the “takeover” phase where the successor takes increasing full control of decision making. According to Handler (1994), a slow and subtle transition process to adjust the roles of predecessor and successor is of paramount importance, and should be a constant process (Barach and Ganitsky, 1995). Handler (1994, p. 134) suggests that “succession is not simply a single step of handing on the baton; it is a multi-staged process that exists over time, beginning before the heirs even enter the business”. Although Breton-Miller *et al.* (2004) assert that there are many areas that family businesses need to prepare for effective succession, having a clear plan for the successor to develop the necessary business competence is one of the most important to ensure an effective succession process.

### 2.3 Successor's business competence development process

With regard to the preparation of the successor in business competence development, previous researchers highlight that to achieve an effective succession, the successor has to develop certain special characteristics, including business and industry knowledge (Duh and Letonja, 2013), decision-making and interpersonal skills (Chrisman *et al.*, 1998), passion (Andersson *et al.*, 2002; Schlepphorst and Moog, 2014), legitimacy and credibility from both family and non-family stakeholders (Barach and Ganitsky, 1995; Sharma, 2004), an innovative spirit (Litz and Kleysen, 2001) and networks and social capital (Sharma and Irving, 2005; Wang *et al.*, 2009). Successors improve these business competences through the process of preparation, which often includes four stages: firstly, business knowledge gained in childhood (Haldin-Herrgard, 2007; Varamäki *et al.*, 2003); secondly, through formal education (Morris *et al.*, 1997; Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011); thirdly, work experience gained outside the family business (Brockhaus, 2004; Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011); and fourthly, continued development of their knowledge and skills after joining the family business as a full-time employee.

Varamäki *et al.* (2003) highlighted that the successor starts to gain business knowledge from their childhood through the family business context (Varamäki *et al.*, 2003). Haldin-Herrgard's (2007) research provides a good example from a second-generation member of a family business who had taken over the family business. The interviewee said that the process of transferring knowledge had happened over a long period of time: it started from when she was three-years-old and she used to play with her dolls under her father's desk in his office. During this time many of the traditions, values and social networks were transferred implicitly.

The successor's business knowledge continues to grow through formal education (Barbera *et al.*, 2015; Bozer *et al.*, 2017; Duh and Letonja, 2013; Dyer, 1986). Morris *et al.* (1997) assert that the smooth transition and post-succession performance is positively related to a successor's formal education. In other research, Goldberg (1996) discovered that the most successful successors gained at least a college degree, whereas the less successful ones held only a high school diploma. This finding is supported by research from Dyer (1986) who suggests that obtaining a college degree is the first barrier that a potential successor has to overcome. For example, Dyer (1986) highlighted that family businesses like Levi Strauss and Du Pont support their younger generation by providing opportunities to study in one of the top universities in the US. This is based on the belief that it may identify and develop intellectual capacity and potential leadership qualities for the future. In addition, Sardeshmukh and Corbett (2011) argue that formal education provides the successor with current business concepts and develops their business skills that may then be applied to their family business context. Similarly, Man *et al.* (2016) found that business founders who are aware of their own deficiencies believe that successors could offer new knowledge and insights to the business and that these can be improved by the quality of the successor's formal education.

Previous researchers have acknowledged that the successor's working experience outside of the family business impacts significantly on the successor's business knowledge development process (Brockhaus, 2004; Duh and Letonja, 2013; Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2015). Duh and Letonja (2013) conclude that external working experience provides the successor with new knowledge and information as well as the skills to apply it to new contexts. This can help successors to identify and exploit new opportunities to enhance the development of their family firms. In addition, Brockhaus (2004) reports that many advisors recommend that the successor should work outside the family business for at least three to five years. Experience outside the family business helps the successor not only to improve business competence but also provides them with a sense of identity, self-confidence and credibility.

External working experience may not only help the successor to improve their technical and leadership skills, but can also develop the perspective and confidence needed to lead the family business forward (Ward, 1987). Furthermore, the successor's success and experience gained before joining the family business can be critical in building credibility in the family business system (Chirico, 2008). Ward (1987, p. 60) concludes that:

[...] gaining experience outside the business is one of the strongest recommendations that can be made for successors. In all our interviews, no one who worked outside the family business regretted doing so.

However whilst Sardeshmukh and Corbett (2011) acknowledge that external working experience supports successors in bringing in completely new market information and applying it effectively in the family firm context, they conclude that it may not always provide the successor with the most relevant experience needed to be the family business leader. This idea is also consistent with Goldberg's (1996) findings that successors who joined the family business at a younger age after their college education performed better.

The successor's business knowledge development process also improves greatly after joining the family business as a full-time employee (Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001). Sabri *et al.* (2016) argue that the successor often gains business knowledge from the founder through the mentor-mentee approach where the predecessor acts as a mentor who has the knowledge, experience and/or expertise and will counsel the successor as a mentee. The successor absorbs the knowledge from the predecessor. Normally, a predecessor will advise what and how to do something, explain why it is done and amend actions or mistakes made by the successor

(Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Sabri *et al.*, 2016). This approach is consistent with Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) research which proposed a pattern to the transfer of knowledge between individuals as occurring through observation and continuous use and reuse. Furthermore, observation and tracking of the founder's work practices is found to support the successor's business knowledge development through the learning-by-doing process (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001).

In addition, Henry *et al.* (2013) argue that the business knowledge transfer process in a family business is more informal and unstructured, whereas it is more structured and formal in non-family businesses. According to a study by Letonja *et al.* (2012), it is particularly beneficial to let the successor observe the predecessor at work; get involved in the daily operations; sit in on meetings and negotiations with partners; and to let them find solutions by themselves, thus taking responsibility for their decisions. They also found that it is significantly important to let the next generation be involved early and start integrating them into the family business, in order to develop their business competence (Letonja *et al.*, 2012).

In summary, the successor's business knowledge development process is divided into four main stages. A successor gains business knowledge through firstly, the family business context during childhood; secondly, through formal education; thirdly, through external working experience; finally, after becoming a full-time employee in the family business. However, this business knowledge development process operates more productively after the successor joins the family business as a full-time employee.

The existing research highlights the role of the predecessor in supporting the successor's business competence development process after the successor joins the family business as a full-time employee (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Letonja *et al.*, 2012; Sabri *et al.*, 2016). However, knowledge about the role of the predecessor in supporting the successor's business knowledge development process during childhood and formal education and gaining external experience before joining the family business are still limited and need further research, particularly in the context of collectivist societies. Research in some areas, such as the benefit and ideal duration of work experience outside the family business, still provide contradictory views. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to seek an in-depth understanding of the ways in which the father (founder) supports the son's (successor's) business competence development process in Vietnamese family-owned businesses.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection

This study was designed to seek an in-depth understanding of the father's role in developing the successor's business competence during the succession process. The research adopted a qualitative inductive approach using face-to-face discussions with participants and collecting data based upon their feelings, experiences and opinions. Qualitative approaches have been widely used in family business research (Chirico, 2007; Dumas, 1989; Handler, 1990; Sabri *et al.*, 2016), and this approach supports the development of an understanding of the role of the father in supporting the son's business knowledge and development in the family business.

The concept of a Vietnamese family business is defined based upon the criteria outlined by Westhead *et al.* (2002), which suggest four characteristics to recognise family businesses, namely, a single family holds the majority of the shares; the owner(s) are considering passing ownership to the next generations of family members, the owners form an emotional kinship group who perceive their company as being a family business and the company is managed directly by family members.

Multiple semi-structured interviews with five father–son succession pairs were conducted in this study. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to follow relevant emergent concepts which emerged from the interviews (Whiting, 2008). The participants were interviewed separately, as they might have been unwilling to answer some of the questions honestly in the presence of their father or son, especially if it involved criticism or sensitive subjects (Kaplowitz, 2000).

Two key prerequisites for inclusion in the sample for this study were that each father–son pair had to be involved in the process of business knowledge transfer, and secondly, the succession process should be advanced, meaning that the son as a successor had taken on a significant role in the family firm.

To ensure that the sampling provided the best and most reliable data for this study, the researcher interviewed participants who were willing to fully commit to the research and provide honest answers. However, the main issue faced during the process of family business selection was obtaining permission from both father and son in the same family business. This proved to be extremely difficult. The reason for this difficulty may lie in the collectivist culture, in which individuals are uncomfortable sharing their personal experiences with a stranger (Gambrel and Cianci, 2003; van Hoorn, 2015). To overcome this barrier of the collectivist culture in Vietnam, the researcher had to contact potential family businesses through the researcher's own personal network. As a result, five father–son pairs were selected based on the sampling criteria set out for this research. A potential for bias existed in gaining access to the case companies through the researcher's personal network, but it was the only way to proceed and obtain reliable information of the depth required for such a study. All five case studies had been established as viable businesses in excess of 15 years. They were operating in different businesses/trades such as transportation, farming and agriculture, construction, transportation and manufacturing. In addition, despite the fact that the majority of the sons had at least a bachelor degree, with one exception, none of the fathers did. Notably, only one out of the five cases had already successfully passed the business to the second generation. The remaining cases had reached an advanced stage in the succession process, meaning that the son had gained a high position in their family business but the father still retained overall control. The cases represent urban and rural settings and both Northern and Southern locations. The names of companies and participants were hidden by coding, for example, F1 (father in Case 1) and S1 (son in Case 1). Table one provides an overview of the five case profiles (Table I).

### 3.2 Data analysis

All participants were interviewed in Vietnamese. The transcription was sent to a professional translating company for translation into English. The data analysis process was applied to the Vietnamese transcript, whereas the English transcription version was used for data presentation. The data analysis process was conducted using a thematic analysis approach.

The coding process the authors used was a complete-coding strategy (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Coding was undertaken to identify all the text which related to the research aim. Labels were attached to the relevant text and collated, it was then analysed to identify themes. The themes were generated through an inductive approach, rather than applying a pre-existing coding framework. Finally, the themes were reviewed to ensure coherency and to ensure they accurately reflected the meaning within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

	Case information				
	1st Case	2nd Case	3rd Case	4th Case	5th Case
Industry	Construction	Manufacturing	Agriculture	Transportation	Farming
Date firm established	The late 1990's	The early 2000's	The early 1990's	The early 1990's	The early 2000's
Total capital investment	Over \$1m	Over \$1m	Over \$1m	Over \$1m	Over \$1m
Location in Vietnam	North (Urban area)	North (Urban area)	North (Rural area)	South (Urban area)	South (Rural area)
<i>Fathers' profile</i>					
Age	Early 50's	Early 50's	Early 60's	Early 50's	Early 50's
Education	High school	High school	High school	High school	High school
<i>Sons' profile</i>					
Age	Late 20's	Early 30's	Mid 30's	Mid 30's	Late 20's
Education	MBA (From overseas)	2 Master degrees (both from overseas)	Bachelor degree (From overseas)	Diploma	2 Bachelor degrees (Both from overseas)
External work experience	Part-time jobs	None	Yes	None	Yes
Position in Family	Eldest son	Eldest son	Eldest son	Eldest son	Eldest son
Siblings	2 sisters and 1 brother	1 brother	1 sister	3 sisters	2 sisters
Relationship with the author	Friend	Introduced through a friend	Friend	Introduced through his sister	Friend

Table I. Case profiles



Secondly, the key codes were selected and grouped into themes. The differences and similarities between the cases were investigated and used to identify the themes and their meanings by employing three levels of comparisons, which are:

- (1) *across all fathers*, which enabled the identification of the emergent themes between the five fathers;
- (2) *across all sons*, which assisted in the recognition of the distinctions between the five sons; and
- (3) and, finally, *across all paired father-son cases*, which helped to identify the differences and similarities among the five father-son successions.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

##### 4.1 Role of the father in supporting the son's business competence development process

4.1.1 *Father's support during the successor's childhood.* Research has shown that the development process of a successor's business competence tends to start during the successor's childhood (Haldin-Herrgard, 2007; Handler, 1994; Varamäki *et al.*, 2003); however, the role of the successor's father (also the founder in this study) in this period has not been investigated in depth. All fathers in this study agreed that the process of developing their son's business competence began years ago, during the sons' childhood.

The fathers-as-founders acknowledged that they played an active and encouraging role in guiding their sons to become the type of leader that they wanted them to be. Indeed, typical responses from the sons were that their fathers acted as an example during their childhood. The sons often played or occupied themselves inside the business while their fathers worked. Thus, their characters were shaped by observing the way their fathers treated others (Haldin-Herrgard, 2007). For example, S4 recalled that his own ability to regulate his emotions was developed from his father:

The most impressive skill I have learned from my father was emotional control. He always keeps calm when solving serious business problems. For example, when an employee makes a serious mistake, the team leader often loses his temper and blames the employee, but my father deals with the problem in a different way. He calls the employee, who has made the serious mistake, to his office and talks to him, to find out the reason for the mistake first, rather than blaming the employee.

Or S1 revealed that:

I am not sure about the first knowledge lesson that I gained from my father. Scolding employees to push them to work is the most memorable lesson I learned as a child. I used to play around the construction site where my father worked. My father explained that business could not be done without pushing employees to work hard.

This process of competence development was carried out at every opportunity, including during family meals or leisure time. Founders often discussed their desire to pass the family business on through generations, as well as teaching them about morality in business. For example, F1 said:

I often tried to find opportunities to discuss how much I care about the family business, how difficult it was to build this firm from nothing, and my passion. From that, I encouraged him to undertake this family business and pass it down through the generations.

Overall, this outcome strongly supports the research of [Varamäki et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Haldin-Herrgard \(2007\)](#) who suggest that the process of a successor's developing knowledge happens from childhood. This research highlights that the father played an important role in shaping the future leader of their family firm by acting as an example. A part of the father's knowledge will be transferred automatically to the son through the family context, for example at meals, or during leisure times. As a result, the son may have access to knowledge on a daily basis, even if they do not intend to learn from it at the time or are even aware that they are absorbing key points from it.

*4.1.2 Father's support of the son to gain a formal education.* Researchers have agreed that a successor's academic course and practical training outside of the family business influences the process of their business knowledge development ([Cabrerá-Suárez et al., 2001](#); [Chirico, 2007](#); [Martínez et al., 2013](#)). However, there appears to be little in-depth research available regarding the relationship between the role of the founder and the successor's formal education. The results from this research indicate that the father paid a great deal of attention to the son's formal education and that they played a key part in encouraging the sons to pursue their education further, in order to be an effective future leader.

Importantly, although none of the fathers in this study had any experience with higher education, all of them prioritised their sons' formal education. They believed that education was the foundation of success and that it supported the process of the successors' development of business competence. Consequently, all the successors had been encouraged to learn and undertake higher education or training. This result is consistent with previous research ([Dyer, 1986](#); [Goldberg, 1996](#); [Morris et al., 1997](#); [Pérez-González, 2006](#); [Sardeshmukh and Corbett, 2011](#)), which all emphasise the important role of formal education to the successor in supporting the succession process. As F2 commented:

Investment in my son's education is an investment in my family's business future.

In addition, F1 acknowledged that paying attention to the next generation was his family culture:

In my generation, my parents spent all their money and put their heart into helping their children study and expand their knowledge. Thus, caring about the next generation's education is in our culture.

Although S4 has only attended diploma-level courses, his father always supported him to pursue short business programs to enhance his knowledge. As F4 commented:

Formal education is absolutely crucial as a foundation for life's development. Unfortunately, my son did not have a chance to pursue higher education, but I often encourage him to gain more business knowledge through attending short-term business courses.

Furthermore, the comments from all of the successors underlined how their fathers had inspired them with the belief that knowledge from formal education is the key to unlocking success in business, and that it is particularly useful for developing future family business leaders. For example S2 said:

My father always encourages me to pursue higher education often saying that I will not give you fish in an easy way, but I will give you a fishing-rod [it means that, the father would not give the son money in an easy way, but he will encourage the son to get knowledge in order to gain money].

To sum up, the result of this research highlights that the founder (father) pays great attention to the successor's formal education, as the way to invest for their family business future leader.

*4.1.3 Father's support of the son to gain experience working outside of the family business.* The impact of the father on the son's accumulation of knowledge through the external work experience process was highlighted in this research. Typical comments from the fathers were that working outside the family firm might help to improve their son's business competence, critical thinking ability or expand their business relationship, except for F2. This result is consistent with Brockhaus's study (2004), who reports that the majority of advisors suggested that successors should get experience from working outside the family business for at least three to five years. He reported that gaining experience by working outside of the family business could improve successors' business competence and provide a sense of identity, credibility and self-confidence (Brockhaus, 2004). For example, F1 commented that:

In my opinion, working only in the family may not be good for my son. I encouraged my son to work for another company before joining the family business, to learn how bosses treat their employees, how private firms run their business, as well as the differences between family business and private business.

In addition, F3 suggested that his son should experience some failures rather than have a smooth business career, and this could help him to understand his father's knowledge more easily:

The successor should not have a smooth career inside a family business. They have to fail sometimes by spending years working outside the family business in order to gain real experience.

Conversely, F2 stated that his son would be better to learn business experience from him rather than learning from outside, because he believed there are few people who can share their sincere experience with his son. F2's view is in line with Sardeshmukh and Corbett's (2011) research and Goldberg (1996), who suggested that working outside the family business may not provide the successor with the relevant experience needed to be the family business leader. In other words, the successors do not gain much experience as they often work in only a junior capacity. F2 revealed that:

To be honest, nowadays, the proverb: "Traveling forms a young man" does not seem to be relevant for a successor. A successor will make a lot of mistakes if he is new to the business field without any advice from people who have experience. However, he only learns one lesson after making a lot of mistakes. Furthermore, there are a lot of frauds out there, and sincerity is rare in the business field. Therefore, he just needs to learn from me, who will share my experience with sincerity.

Three sons have been identified as having experience of working outside before entering family business; they are S1, S3 and S5. All of them agreed completely that their father encouraged them to work outside before returning to their family businesses. Two sons did not have external working experience; however, their typical comments reflected that it is good to work somewhere after graduation to get more work experience, and hence, they possibly regretted not having had that opportunity. This supports Sardeshmukh and Corbett's (2011) opinion that experience working outside the family business might help successors in expanding their knowledge and support them in the process of understanding

their previous generation's knowledge. However it also supports their own findings and that of [Goldberg's \(1996\)](#) that attitudes can vary and not all family business owners would agree that time outside the business has benefits that outweigh the early introduction of the successor to full time employment within the family firm.

In summary, the fathers strongly encouraged their sons to gain more business experience before returning to their family business, which is the way to improve the sons' business competence, critical thinking ability or expand their business network. However, there was one father, who believed that external experience from outside the family business did not provide the successor with the relevant knowledge needed for a family business future leader.

*4.1.4 Father's support of the son to develop business competence after joining the family business.* The outcome of this study emphasises the vital role of the father in supporting the process of the son's business competence development after joining the family business as a full-time employee. All fathers in this study agreed that to train their sons to become an effective leader, the sons should observe their father's way of managing and solving business issues, become involved in the daily operations of the family firm, join business meetings and negotiations and take responsibility for any mistakes resulting from his decision making. The role of the father was revealed as a mentor, providing business advice and supervising the successor to ensure he manages the business effectively, as well as resolving any consequences of the successor's mistakes as a trouble-shooter ([Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001](#); [Chirico, 2008](#)). F2 commented that:

At present, I am transferring my business gradually and always backing him up, like singing a duet with him. If he meets difficulties at high tones, I am always ready there to help him. He can only grow fast if he does business tasks by himself. However, I have to oversee him at the same time to find out the problems and fix them before they are beyond my control.

In addition, the fathers argue that making mistakes is normal in business life and people learn from their mistakes, as F5 said:

Young people tend to be hasty and think they are capable of doing anything. So, if you try to tell them they are wrong, they may not listen to you. Thus, the founder should let the successor make some mistakes in his life, then he will listen and the knowledge transfer process will become much easier.

All sons admitted that their business competence had improved considerably after joining the family firm due to the fact that their fathers pushed them to work hard to gain as much business experience as possible. For example S1 recalled that:

He asked me to start from fundamentals such as learning legal documents and business operation methods. Furthermore, I had to work in almost all of the important departments for two years to learn the most basic issues.

To sum up, this finding is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that the successor could learn much business knowledge from the predecessor by observing how the predecessor handles the business and the day-to-day family business operation ([Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011](#); [Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2001](#); [Letonja and Duh, 2015](#); [Sabri et al., 2016](#)). The father's role is thus highlighted as the mentor who transfers their business knowledge to their son, and who is ready to play the trouble-shooter role to fix problems which may result from their son's mistakes.

4.1.5 *Father's support of the son after the succession process.* All interviewees agreed that the valuable experience from fathers is not purely business experience, but includes experience of life, and society. As a result, the role of the father, after the succession process has been completed, is described as advisory; that is to say, fathers are always available to support their son when they need advice to solve business issues, or overcome obstacles in their life (Handler, 1990). Furthermore, the role of sons at this stage is highlighted as combining the business knowledge transferred from their father and combining it with their own knowledge gained through work experience and education.

Only one out of the five case studies (Case 4) had completely transferred ownership to the second generation. Interestingly both S4 and F4 fully acknowledged that, although the tangible assets of the business had been transferred to S4, the role of the father continued to be vital to the son even after the succession process was legally fully completed. In practice the father continued to play an advisory role, providing guidance to his son when the son faced business problems (Varamäki *et al.*, 2003). As S4 admitted, he still needed his father's experience in supporting the stable development of the firm. In addition, F4 confirmed that he would like to continue to play the role of counsellor by providing business experience to his son:

I believe that while I am still of sound mind I can continue to support my son by transferring my experience to him. My experiences are not only experiences in the business world, but also in life, society, family, and behaviour.

Despite the fact that the remaining four cases were towards the end of their succession process, all of the participants strongly acknowledged that the role of father would not finish after the succession process. This is because the fathers' business experience and knowledge was important to the sons in maintaining the stable development of the family business (Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001). For instance, S2 expected that:

The business knowledge transfer process keeps going as a constant process and only ends when my father is no longer able to have these discussions. Even when I am strong enough to undertake the family business, I still need him to play a role as my advisor, who supports me and gives me guidance when I face business problems.

Furthermore, the son's comment highlights the reason why the role of the father would not end after the legal completion of the succession process. Sons generally believe this would only happen if the relationship between father and son became disconnected, or broken. This is unlikely in a Vietnamese family however, because of the culture of collectivism. Thus, the duty of maintaining the stable development of a family business after the succession process is not only based on the son's ability, but also depends on the father's role as an advisor. S3 elucidated this:

It is really hard to tell you when the end of this process is. What does the 'end' mean? When the predecessor retires and transfers the whole business to his son and is not involved in the family business anymore. At this time, we can say that this is the end. But it would not be the end, if the son still needs help from his father to help solve current business issues. In addition, I suggest that the 'end' means when two people end their relationship and there are no more connections. It won't happen in a family business, because the founder and successor are father and son. The connection between them is a bloodline relationship.

Overall, this research result is consistent with previous research, which suggests that the founder plays the role of an advisor after the succession process (Handler, 1990; Varamäki *et al.*, 2003). However, it expands previous research by indicating that the father would play an advisor role until they were physically unable to provide advice due to health problems. It is perceived as a duty by the older generation.

4.2 Summary of the key findings about the father's role in supporting the son's business knowledge development process in the family business

Figure 1 describes the key findings of this research about the role of the father in supporting the son to gain business knowledge through four main stages: during the first stage, the father acts as an example during childhood, who shapes the son's leadership characteristics and inspires his motivation to join the family business; during the second stage, the father plays a vital role in encouraging his son to pursue higher education and gain work experience outside the family business; during the third stage, the father acts as a mentor who provides guidance, pushing the successor to develop as a business expert, whilst also being ready as a trouble-shooter when the son faces challenges; during the fourth and last stage, even when the succession process has finished and the son has become a leader, the father remains an important influence as a consultant with rich business experience and provides advice when the son faces business issues. This role is only finished when the father is physically unable to continue because of health problems. Importantly, the role of father at the last stage is considered as their duty to make sure of the stable development of the family business.

5. Conclusions, limitations and future directions

The existing literature is largely focused on how the successor gains business knowledge during the succession process (Bracci and Vagnoni, 2011; Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001; Chirico, 2007; Sabri *et al.*, 2016; Varamäki *et al.*, 2003). In addition, the majority of the research focuses on the role of the predecessor in supporting the successor to gain business knowledge after the successor joins the family business as a full-time employee rather than considering the predecessor's role in the process before the successor joins the family business and after the successor becomes the leader (Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001; Higginson, 2010; Letonja and Duh, 2015; Sabri *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the role of the predecessor in the whole process is under researched and represents a gap in the literature. The outcome of this research contributes to knowledge by providing a diagram with an in-depth understanding about the different roles of the father-as-founder in supporting the process of the son's business knowledge development and the father-son dynamic in Vietnamese family businesses.

The results of this research offer insights into the successor's business learning process with particular relevance for family businesses in the Vietnamese (and other similar Asian) context and thus for effective succession planning. In addition, this research supports the stable development of family businesses across generations. This is vital not only to



Figure 1. Role of the father in supporting the son's business knowledge and development in the family business

individual family businesses and employees but in the wider context of the national economy. Family businesses in general do not survive into the second generation and even fewer to the third generation (De Massis *et al.*, 2014; Sonfield and Lussier, 2004); therefore, this research helps to inform the way to support the emerging economies into the future.

In particular, this research offers a model of the learning process for the successor as well as the role of the father in supporting this process. Family business owners can more easily recognize the key stages of the successor's business competence development process. As a result, they can adjust their succession plan to be in accord with each stage of development. Furthermore, governments can also help to aid the process by providing theoretical business and entrepreneurship education, which will underpin and support the practical hands-on development of successors delivered within the family business. Higher education programmes could offer greater focus upon the skills required in managing smaller family-owned businesses to better reflect their importance within the national economy.

In common with any research, this study has some limitations that provide suggestions for future research. Although the sample size is relatively small, it provides an in-depth understanding of the role of the father in supporting the process of the son's business knowledge and development in Vietnam. Future researchers may extend this study by employing a mixed method or quantitative method. Secondly, this research's outcome is heavily dependent on the perspectives of fathers as founders and sons as successors. As a result, it may not demonstrate every facet of the father's role in supporting the business competence development process of successors. Future researchers may have to collect other family member's perspectives instead of limiting their research to only two perspectives. Lastly, this research only focused on the family business transfer from father to son. Thus, further research may be expanded by looking at different genders between founder and successor, such as father–daughter, mother–daughter or mother–son.

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