

When in Rome, do as the Romans do...

Knowing the cultural context

Some Dutch venture seekers, in the know, are shifting into another gear when working in a cultural context outside their own. Assistant Professor Rainer Harms and Lecturer Martin Stienstra rolled up their academic sleeves to explore if Western textbook models are hitting the mark, Robbin Engels reports.

TEXT: ROBBIN ENGELS | PHOTO'S: GIJS VAN OUWERKERK >

Associate Professor Saras D. Sarasvathy, a leading scholar in entrepreneurship and ethics, has taught and written textbooks on the 'effectuation approach'. Her work explains how expert entrepreneurs use the logic of effectuation to solve problems in highly uncertain market environments. She discovered in her case studies, entrepreneurs are not always operating in practice in the same way they are being taught in modern textbooks. They are acting more on an intuitive level and using the means available to them. Stienstra said, 'It's never 100% clear cut how entrepreneurs actually operate.'

The causation approach in business management, on the other side of the coin, is more a planned way of developing a venture, focused on fixed goals and targets. But how are domestic entrepreneurs behaving in different countries?

A few years back at an academic conference in Maastricht, Stienstra listened to Sarasvathy speak on the subject. 'I asked her afterwards, "So, how do you view the impact of culture in current literature and theories?" She answered succinctly, "In my opinion, it has a relatively small influence".'

EPICC project takes root

Her remarks triggered Stienstra, along with his colleague Harms, to delve into research, validating if her opinion that culture played an insignificant role in how an entrepreneur succeeds is true or not. As a result, last year the birth of the EPICC Project (Entrepreneurial Processes in a Cultural Context) came to fruition, as part of the degree program in International Business Management.

As co-leader in the research project and a German native, Harms was eager to understand patterns that begin to emerge which may lead to new theories. 'Our current students see under the magnifying glass on how causation and effectuation decision-making processes affect how an entrepreneur behaves.'

If an entrepreneur discovers they are causal in their approach, it might be necessary for them to think also in an effectual way, particularly if their decision-making style is rooted deeply in their own national culture. To raise awareness, Harms suggest research in this area will aid in 'unearthing' entrepreneurs, helping them make conscious and valuable decisions about their venture.

Although too early to draw any concrete conclusions, the EPICC project – still in its fledgling stages,



Lecturer Martin Stienstra

proposes to discover patterns in the decision-making processes of an entrepreneur and how this has an effect on how domestic entrepreneurs behave in different countries based on their own cultural set of beliefs.

The research team said once the publication results were brought to a wider scientific audience, textbook theories may just have to be slightly tweaked, allowing room for a broader discussion on the topic. Turning to a former student, 22-year-old Marc Huijsing (MSc Strategic Management), who says the modern entrepreneur is a person possessing the ability to 'move outside their own comfort zone'. What he learned after taking the course last autumn was that entrepreneurship was not as 'generic' as he'd previously assumed but depends on the cultural context. 'You can never make the assumption that people in other cultures will behave similar to people in your own culture,' Huijsing concluded. |



Dr Rainer Harms

Help wanted: nascent entrepreneurs

The term nascent entrepreneur can be anyone engaged in the creation of a new venture, be it of a commercial or social nature. Student entrepreneurs fall in this category and can often be defined as people who are seriously interested in eventually starting their own business, becoming in turn self-employed.

After receiving the preliminary data results from their first case study, Stienstra and Harms plan to continue building international networks. 'Now we are happy to have formed collaboration for our research project with Saxion Hogeschool.'

As a consequence, four natives from Russia, Sudan, Indonesia and Iran, who follow the Saxion MBA degree program supervised by Adrienn Erős, will contribute to their resulting data. Stienstra said

he wanted to prevent a language barrier block in communications. 'We'd like people who can go through the cases in their native language, at least to make sure we are properly interpreting interviewees.'

Both researchers want to hear from a wide range of student entrepreneurs. 'We still need protocol candidates from Australia and South America, and then we can happily say that we succeeded in full representation on every continent where entrepreneurs might decide to start a venture.' Interested student entrepreneurs, enrolled in any academic discipline, can contact the project leaders to participate in the qualitative research project, m.r.stienstra@utwente.nl