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A meaningful life: Being a young New Zealand entrepreneur

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Abstract

Changing characteristics of work and careers have resulted in a shift in perceptions of the potential value of entrepreneurial activity. In parallel there has emerged an appreciation of the non-economic impact of entrepreneurship on those who enact it. However, there still remains a limited understanding of the consequences of choosing to be an entrepreneur, and what that choice means in terms of that individual's life and work. The potential for the young as a group to engage with entrepreneurship as a 'career option' is high, therefore the central research objective of this study was to learn what meaning young New Zealand entrepreneurs attach to 'being in business'.

The study was grounded in an inductive, interpretive research design, underpinned by the tenets of constructivism. Phenomenologically focussed, in-depth interviews were used to gather data from ten young New Zealand entrepreneurs. These interviews were semi-structured and emphasised language, meaning, and narrative. The resulting data were analysed using elements of a constructivist grounded theory approach.

A key finding was that the nature of the relationship between the entrepreneurs and their firms was a strong attachment grounded in emotion. The intertwining of the life of the business with the life of the young entrepreneur was viewed positively, and frequently involved personal transformation. Businesses were more than mechanisms for achieving monetary wealth.

The relationship between the young entrepreneurs and their work was also intense. Balance of work and life was not an issue, nor did they seek to differentiate between the two spheres. They were content to have the two blended in a manner of their choosing. Consistent with this was their drive for personal authenticity and adherence to strong ethical imperatives. Being an entrepreneur was less about career (and even less about a job) and more about fulfilling needs of a higher order.

Almost all the participants strongly identified as entrepreneurs. They felt it was the identity most consistent with their values, attitudes, and aspirations. They accepted that in some instances the label small-firm owner manager was accurate in terms of the scale of their operations, but rejected its appropriateness on any other grounds.

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