

Enhancing SME innovation performance

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Summary

SME innovation is highly important, as it is not only a key antecedent of SME performance and competitiveness, but also spurs employment and growth of an industry. Unfortunately, SMEs often fail to realize successful innovation outcomes. In this dissertation, I investigate the drivers of SME innovation performance in three empirical chapters, turning to a different perspective on SME innovation in each chapter.

In Chapter 2, my co-authors and I adopt a policy maker perspective on achieving SME innovation performance by investigating whether innovation subsidies have an enduring effect on the innovation process of SMEs. Specifically, we examine the influence of subsidies that provide support for innovation projects on employee involvement by comparing subsidized to unsubsidized SMEs. We test this relationship by applying a conditional difference-in-differences analysis to our longitudinal data set, involving manufacturing SMEs in the Dutch province of Limburg. Our findings reveal a greater increase in employee involvement among SMEs that receive a subsidy, thereby providing compelling evidence for the structural impact of innovation subsidies on an SMEs' internal organization. In an additional analysis, we establish the important role of employee involvement in achieving product innovation performance.

In Chapter 3, my co-authors and I embrace an intra-organizational perspective to discover how manufacturing SMEs can achieve innovation performance. We draw on dynamic capabilities theory to explain how absorptive capacity – the ability to recognize, assimilate and utilize valuable external knowledge – is a critical factor in accomplishing service innovation performance. Our structural equation modelling analysis confirms this, and indicates that absorptive capacity is driven by the degree to which employees are involved in the service innovation process and the SME's diversity of external innovation partners.

In Chapter 4, my co-authors and I take a dyadic perspective, representing both SMEs and customers. We analyse both the requirements that customers establish for innovative offerings and the extent to which SMEs engage in co-creation when determining these requirements. With in-depth interviews across 24 SME–customer dyads, we determine that about half of the SMEs in our sample engage in co-creation in the process of defining their customers' requirements for servitized offerings. Furthermore, we identify 9 customer requirements for servitized offering and find that their importance to customers depends on the servitization strategy the providing SME pursues.