Original scientific paper

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH THROUGH Q-ANALYSIS: GATHERING RESEARCH EVIDENCE IN THE SUCCESSION PROCESS IN SMES, PILOT STUDIES

Irena STEJSKALOVÁ[a]**, Jiří SLÁMA**[ab*]**, Tomáš KINCL**[a]**, Zuzana DVOŘÁKOVÁ LÍŠKOVÁ**[b]**, Markéta ŠINDELKOVÁ**[a]

[a] Faculty of Management, Prague University of Economics and Business, Jarošovská 1117/II, 377 01 Jindřichův Hradec, Czech Republic
[b] Faculty of Economics, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Studentská 787/13, 370 05 České Budějovice, Czech Republic
* Corresponding author

Abstract

Succession planning in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is a critical challenge that can determine the sustainability and growth of a business. This study explores the application of Q-methodology to assess the alignment of perspectives between incumbents and successors during the succession process in SMEs. Through a qualitative analysis of case studies from three different organisations, the research evaluates how the convergence of opinions impacts the success of leadership transitions. The study combines narrative analysis with Q-methodology, enabling both qualitative and quantitative insights into succession dynamics. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with incumbents and successors, followed by Q-sorting exercises to map opinion alignment. The results reveal varied outcomes, showing that a high degree of opinion alignment does not always guarantee successful transitions. This is demonstrated in the museum case, where the transition was less successful despite exhibiting the highest level of opinion convergence. Conversely, the electrical components company, which had lower alignment, experienced a smoother transition, highlighting the importance of structured succession planning alongside opinion convergence. The findings suggest that while opinion alignment is a factor, successful succession also relies on the preparedness of both parties and a well-structured process that addresses interpersonal issues. This research contributes to the literature on SME succession by demonstrating the utility of Q-methodology in analysing leadership transitions and by providing insights into the complexities of opinion alignment and its role in successful succession planning.

Keywords: Leadership Transition, Propositional Analysis, Q-methodology, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), Succession Planning.

INTRODUCTION

Companies, especially smaller ones, struggle at some stage in their existence to find a suitable successor to an existing manager; this is often a planned process but sometimes occurs unexpectedly. Non-profit organisations also have specific succession problems. This may be related, among other things, to the fact that their primary objective is to satisfy a particular

social service rather than to generate profit. The research examines the congruence of opinions between the incumbent and the successor in small and medium-sized enterprises. Acharya et al. (2020), in relation to the lack of information in decision-making, point out that when businesses cannot obtain sufficient information about applicants, they hire fewer applicants to minimise losses from hiring unsuitable employees. Businesses that have used external consultants have argued that they focus primarily on hard issues, often forgetting that the real key to effective succession planning management is managing soft issues (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2017). Chhabra et al. (2023) highlight that the following factors are important for the development of human capital in an entrepreneurial environment: skills, experience, innovative thinking and the ability to deal with risks. They also state that the time it takes for a successor to prepare for a managerial position influences their success. Adebayo (2020) noted that a significant degree of uncertainty is created by the insufficient number of candidates (or, on the contrary, a large number of candidates) for all stakeholders (investors, customers, suppliers, but also employees). Knowledge of the company is essential, as it will be necessary for the successor to determine the strategy in the medium term (3-5 years). Within the framework of company management, it is advisable to focus on a limited set of core competencies, rather than attempting to master them all (Dessein et al., 2016).

In a family business, according to Roth et al. (2017), succession preparation, i.e. professional preparation of successors and the use of consulting bodies (family council, board of directors, advisory committee), play a key role in succession planning. Communication and mutual understanding between the incumbent and the successor are also key to a successful succession. Selecting a successor is a complex process that combines personality traits, skills, relationships and experience (Udomkit et al., 2021). For a successful handover to occur, it is often necessary to emotionally detach from the process (Umans et al., 2020). This emotional detachment reduces the risk of conflict and supports the succession planning process.

Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives, our study focuses on management succession (rather than ownership transfer) in SMEs, viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon where various stakeholders interact, strategic decisions are influenced by the cognitive traits of top management, and conflicting incentives may arise. From a stakeholder theory perspective, successful succession hinges on actively engaging all internal parties, such as incumbents, successors, employees, and external advisors who collectively shape and legitimise the transition mechanism (Sharma, 2004). Complementarily, Upper Echelons Theory underscores

that the personal characteristics and mental models of incumbent leaders and potential successors critically influence strategic decision-making during the handover process (Hambrick, 2007). Furthermore, stewardship theory adds that when family leaders and their designated successors share common values and exhibit a strong sense of psychological ownership, the transition is more likely to reflect trust and a long-term orientation beneficial to the firm's sustainability (LeBreton-Miller and Miller, 2015). Conversely, agency theory reminds us that inherent conflicts – stemming from differing risk preferences and information asymmetry between principals and agents – can introduce agency costs that complicate the succession process (Fama and Jensen, 1983). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why congruence in values and strategic vision between incumbents and successors, in this case, captured by the Q-analysis, is essential, as well as for identifying potential misalignments that might hinder a smooth transition in SME family businesses.

This article presents one possible method to organise information in a clear and structured system, allowing for the extraction of the most critical elements. People cannot process all available information in decision-making because of limited time or cognitive abilities (Matějka and McKay, 2015). It seems appropriate to deal only with selected information. But how to determine which ones should these be? The selection of information (data) depends on the dynamics of the succession process and the obstacles involved (Marques and Couto, 2020). Open communication between all parties involved and active participation of the incumbent appear to be key aspects. By starting the processes related to the transfer of ownership earlier, misunderstandings can be avoided, and conflicts minimised (exchange of information is guaranteed). The successor thus has sufficient time to prepare and contribute to a harmonious transfer of power. Pre-planned succession is also confirmed as crucial by the authors of the study Bozer et al. (2017). In addition, for family-owned companies, parties involved (including employees) also help the process by providing an objective (unbiased) and expert perspective. If the successor and the incumbent have different (divergent) views, a system of independent consultants (tertius iungens) can help, as described in their study Bertschi-Michel et al. (2021). The moderation process should thus bring together groups with different perspectives on succession while building competence.

To summarise, succession transfer is a critical process and a key issue for the entire company's success (Matias and Franco, 2020). Therefore, it makes sense to deal with it (structure and mechanisms) using different methods (e.g. Q-analysis). Since this study has the

task of applying within itself an analysis of statements, which is not entirely common, it can also be said to be classified as a case study, which aims to take lessons from a given case, examined through admirable or interesting practices (Hendl, 2016). The research presented in this article is characterised by a narrative approach to case studies (Stejskalová and Štrach, 2015); it is a typical case of an intrinsic case study – a combination of a personal case study and organisational analysis.

The Q-method is a unique technique in which respondents react transparently to statements based on structured (in-depth) interviews. The Q-analysis allows working with both qualitative and quantitative data. This study focuses on using Q-analysis in succession management (or succession of ownership) in small and medium-sized enterprises or non-profit organisations, as well as the firm's future development from the perspective of the incumbent and the successor. The study is characterised by a combination of propositional analysis from initial interviews with business owners and their successors, simplifying the researcher's work (Stejskalová and Štrach, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Research question

The research question (RQ) was defined as follows: Does the congruence of opinions prior to the handover process lead to a successful leadership transition?

The answer to this question, three companies were selected for the research, each of which had experience with succession or was currently undergoing a succession process. An interview was conducted with both the incumbent and the successor from each company. These interviews formed the basis for the statements' analysis; afterwards, the respondents were asked to Q-sort the statements into a factor array. This process generated the input data for the Q-method. The combination of propositional analysis and the Q-method ensured high data quality and depth.

The focus of the study was on three factors: (1) how succession was handled, (2) the perception of the company's future development, and (3) the likely leadership style within the company. Based on the information gathered, firm-specific recommendations emerged.

The Q-method analysis of the respondents' statements was conducted through the Ken-Q Analysis web application. The application's output was derived through a correlation matrix and factor analysis.

Characteristic parameters

Data collection preparation included 32 questions for a semi-structured interview, which formed the basis for the analysis of statements. This approach differed from most standard procedures, which tend to look for statements in the literature review. From the semi-structured interview, a set of cards with 25 statements – the so-called Q-set – was created, along with an A3 template for asking the respondents for statements, the so-called Q-sort. These were produced using the expert method for Q-analysis. The number of statements had to be chosen in such a way so that, when divided into arrays, they formed a quasi-normal distribution pattern, where the left section contained the statements with which the respondents agreed the least (negative opinion) and the right section expressed the highest level of agreement (positive opinion). The condition required an equal number (n) of statements expected to be rated positively and negatively. The pilot interview was conducted with a person not directly involved in the company (research subjects). The pilot interview was intended to debug the propositional logic – some statements were replaced or their polarisation adjusted. If, during the interviews, a respondent strongly leaned towards one side of the polarity (either negatively or positively), the relationships between these statements became decisive.

The sample for data collection included three companies from various industries, each with a turnover of up to CZK 20 million and less than 15 employees. In each firm, the intended successor was a candidate for the highest-ranking managerial position (job). All candidates were interviewed for approximately 40 minutes in a semi-structured format, with the session audio-recorded and accompanied by brief written notes. From these edited interviews, frequently repeated statements were selected. After a time interval, the interviewees were asked to sort the statements into an inverted "bell" array – a standardised step of the Q-method. The respondents first sorted the statements into three categories (negative, neutral, and positive). After the initial, respondents were asked to comment briefly on each stored statement. These comments provided additional information and confirmed that the respondent understood the task. The final Q-sort was recorded photographically. Thus, audio, textual and graphical records were archived for the entire research process.

Propositional analysis of interview data

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed in full text form. This full text was then converted into statements. An example of a transcription is a paragraph from an interview with the incumbent in a hospitality company.

Table 1 Excerpt from the interview (full text)

Please the company's industry. Interviewer (Ier), Interviewee (Iee)
Hospitality.
Ier – How many employees do you have?
Iee – About 14.
Ier – Plus, temporary workers, right?
Iee – Yeah, 3-4 temporary workers.
Ier – I'll ask for a turnover roughly?
Iee – It doesn't have to be roughly; we're doing 12 million a year.
Ier – Okay. The year the company was founded?
Iee – This company we're running now or the restaurant in general.
Ier – It'd be good if you could tell me the history of this restaurant, because the restaurant "Na Hlinisti" existed before, right?
Iee – It's been here for 150 years. There was a German owner here before the war, I can lend you an article about it. And the beginning of our company was about 2004. We renovated it for 5 years from our own money and then Plzeňský Prazdroj (Inc.) renovated it, to whom we committed to buy beer for 10 years.
Ier – And what's your legal form?
Iee – Limited company.
Ier – Do you have business premises here?
Iee – Me or the Ltd.? I also have a brewery restaurant. But that's a different company, right? Yeah, this company's just here.

Source: Šindelková (2019)

Statements from the entire interview were then sorted thematically into tables. A paragraph converted into statements looks like this:

Table 2 Paragraph from the interview converted into statements.

Identification data of the company in the hospitality industry
The company operates in the field of hospitality.
The company has about 14 employees and 4 temporary workers.
The turnover of the company is about 12 million per year.
The restaurant of the same name has existed for about 150 years, the current company has been in business for 14 years.
The legal entity of the company is Ltd.
The restaurant is located in Jihlava.

Source: Šindelková (2019)

The extensive text file was simplified by converting all the interviews into a simplified form, making it easier to extract the monitored parameters (e.g., turnover). There was only a partial

handover planned for the restaurant in 5 years; the successor had been with the company for 7 years and had started discussing succession with the current owner shortly before his departure. In the electrical components company, the handover was scheduled to take place in 4 years. A successor had been sought for 9 years in advance, and the selected person was not originally an employee of the company but was working in a technical field. The company had never planned for succession in other positions.

The handover had already occurred regarding the museum, and the board began searching for a successor six months after the director announced that he no longer wanted to serve. This was a year before he left. The board selected a successor who had worked for the organisation for 3 years as a PR manager. The restaurant and museum successors had both been with their respective companies for approximately ten years. In contrast, at the electrical components company, the co-owner had worked there for 20 years, and the successor had been employed for only ten months at the time of data collection.

However, other psycho-behavioural data, such as feelings and attitudinal values, could also be read from the statements. According to the incumbent of the restaurant position, the most critical competency was experience and communication with people; the successor emphasised similar traits, specifically communication and a positive attitude. The perspective of the incumbent and the successor in the electrical components company differed. According to the incumbent, the most important competencies are technical proficiency, business spirit and hard work, whereas according to the successor, business skills, people management, cashflow management and planning were prioritised. The incumbent in the museum stated that the most important competency was "giving life to the heritage". The successor cited creating vision, concepts, annual plans, oversight, motivation, effective use of resources, and ensuring the quality of the collection.

The most important criterion for selecting a successor was mutual trust, according to the incumbent of the restaurant. The successor highlighted reliability, solidarity and qualification. For the electrical components company incumbent, the most important criterion for selecting a successor was continuity of leadership, while the successor also emphasised industry experience and capabilities. The museum's incumbent identified the ability to reconstruct monuments as the most important selection criterion; for the director position, it was education, experience in the field, and familiarity with the company. The successor stated that knowledge of the museum industry, grants, and legislation was essential, and on these points, the predecessor and successor agreed.

The incumbents in all companies believed that their sudden departure would negatively impact the company's functioning. In contrast, all successors viewed the sudden change more positively. In line with ethical research standards, all participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was strictly protected throughout the study. To ensure researcher neutrality, reflexive notes were taken during data collection and analysis, minimising potential biases in interpretation.

Data analysis by Q method – factor analysis

The Q-sort from each participant was processed using the Ken-Q Analysis web application (beta version). Each sort value, otherwise known as a factor loading (i.e., - - - to + + +), was assigned a numerical statement value for each respondent. The software calculated a Z-score (a weighted ratings average) for each factor loading. A unique set ("average Q-sort" or factor array) was created from all respondents' Q-sorts.

RESULTS

Factor analysis results

The resulting Q-sort indicated that respondents mostly agreed that employee satisfaction and minimal employee fluctuation were important. There were also statements suggesting that the ideal successor should possess skills exceeding the incumbent's. It was considered important to map the shortcomings of their company's employees.

Statements where employees were recognised for contributing to the company's values and striving for work-life balance were generally positively rated. For most potential successors, industry experience emerged as a central concern. Conversely, respondents largely agreed that their companies did not address succession at least 2 years in advance that successors did not need to have worked in their company for at least 10 years. Successors for leadership positions were not designated in most of the firms surveyed. Statements suggesting that some companies had a succession program in place or would be able to adapt quickly to a sudden change in leadership also received generally negative ratings from most respondents.

Scheme 1 Resulting factor array

----	---	--	-		+	++	+++	++++
12	4	17	24	7	14	18	19	25
	2	10	5	3	20	22	21	
		13	15	11	23	9		
			8	16	1			
				6				

Scheme 1 (continued)

Explanatory notes	
Value	**Textual statement**
1	The company has the potential to increase its sales.
2	For most prospective positions, we have a future successor.
3	I've worked in a similar position (and at a different company) for most of my career.
4	The successor must work in our company for at least 10 years.
5	I've always wanted to do what I'm doing today.
6	Change in management will have a negative impact on the company.
7	I had to work hard for my position.
8	I'm one of the most senior members of the staff.
9	The successor must be experienced in the field.
10	The company is able to adapt quickly to any change.
11	Ideally, succession planning should be completed earlier.
12	In our company, we plan for succession at least 2 years in advance.
13	I have been in my current field for a short period of time.
14	The most important thing for working in the management of our company is persistence and mental balance.
15	I've been with this company longer than I was with the previous ones.
16	The ideal successor would be able to bring our company to higher profits.
17	For succession we use our program.
18	We recognize employees for their quality of work.
19	The capabilities and shortcomings of our staff have been mapped.
20	Employees know the vision of our company.
21	The ideal successor has some better skills than me.
22	We strive for a work-life balance for our employees.
23	It is important to build loyalty among our employees.
24	Each employee has a development plan.
25	The satisfaction of our employees and minimal employee fluctuation are important to us.

The Ken-Q Analysis (beta version) application automatically calculated the correlation matrix of all respondents. The highest correlation between the incumbent and the successor was

observed in the organisation working in the museum sector (41% agreement). The incumbent and the successor had worked together in the company for 8 years. The correlation for respondents from the hospitality business was 11% (together in the company for 7 years). Respondents from a company in the electrical business even had a negative correlation (-2%, meaning their views were completely independent or even contradictory). At the time of data collection, the successor had been employed by the company for only 10 months and had not yet fully internalised the company's values.

Table 3 Correlation matrix

Incumbent / Successor	Incumbent of the restaurant	Successor in the restaurant	Incumbent of the electrical components company	Successor in the electrical components company	Incumbent in a museum	Successor in the museum
Incumbent of the restaurant	100	11	7	31	22	45
Successor in the restaurant	11	100	3	47	20	20
Incumbent of the electrical components company	7	3	100	-2	-14	-9
Successor in the electrical components company	31	47	-2	100	35	18
Incumbent in a museum	22	20	-14	35	100	41
Successor in the museum	45	20	-9	18	41	100

Synthesis of the results of propositional analysis and Q-method

For each respondent, statements from the interviews and Q-sort were compared. If there was a clear inconsistency, the information was assessed as invalid and discarded from further conclusions. Most of the time, the results were consistent, yet there were a few discrepancies. For example, the incumbent handing over the position in an electrical components company stated his shortcomings during the interview and ranked the statement "There are skills that the ideal successor should do better than I do" at position -4, the position to the far left, which expresses the strongest disagreement. Such data collection does not provide any useful insight.

Synthesis of results from the section focused on succession management

According to interviews with respondents, succession at the restaurant has only recently been addressed, and only for the managerial position. Statement No. 12: "In our company, we plan for succession at least 2 years in advance", also received a negative rating from both respondents. The length of experience is addressed in statement No. 4: 'The successor must work in our company for at least 10 years'. It is marked negatively for both respondents (even if the successor has been with the firm for 7 years; however, she has worked in the industry her entire career). Statement No. 9: "The successor must have experience in the industry" is rated positively by both respondents and is even at the extreme end for the successor. Thus, the Q-method confirms the information obtained from the analysis of the statements and gives a brief but clear overview of how succession is handled in the company.

The electrical components company also planned for succession for this position only and started 9 years in advance before the complete handover of responsibility and statement No. 12: "In our company we plan for succession at least 2 years in advance" was rated most positive by the incumbent, however, for the successor at this position -2 and during the interview and Q-sort comments, he stated that he did not know how long they had been looking for a successor before he started 10 months ago. Analysis of the statements indicated that training was already underway. Statement No. 4: "The successor must work in our company for at least 10 years" is ranked the most negated position by both respondents. The successor does not have direct industry experience but has a technical background and worked in the technical field and information technology. Statement No. 9: "The successor must have experience in the field" is ranked as the second most negated position by the incumbent and assigned a rank of 1 by the successor. In this case, the answer also depends on the point of view, i.e. whether a related field is also taken. In any case, the results of the two analyses do not contradict each other, providing a plausible picture of this firm's succession.

The museum was looking for a successor six months in advance, and statement No. 12: "In our company, we always plan for succession at least 2 years in advance" was rated the most negated by both respondents. The successor had worked in the firm for 3 years before becoming a director, and statement No. 4: "The successor must work in our firm for at least 10 years" was also ranked by both respondents in the very negative position. Statement No. 9: "The successor must have experience in the industry" is then rated neutrally by one candidate and positively by the other (suggesting an importance worth consideration). Overall, succession was the least addressed in this company, and the legal form of the organisation plays a role in this aspect. It

is a non-profit organisation where the board of directors elects the directors, as both candidates stated during the interview.

Synthesis of the results from the section focused on the future development of the company

An important aspect in succession is the question of the company's direction and whether two individuals will have corresponding conclusions. In the restaurant, the incumbent gave statement No. 1: "The company has the potential to increase its sales" the highest possible rating, and from the analysis of the respondent's statements, it is clear that sales are still trending upwards and there is potential for further growth. Whereas the successor stated that the turnover is constant and there is no more potential for further growth, as the turnover level is sufficient. Statement No. 1: "The firm has the potential to increase its sales" scored a factor loading of 1. However, respondents agreed on statement No. 10: "The firm can adapt quickly to any change"; both have neutral factor loadings. The incumbent said that leaving the firm immediately would be a significant problem for the company. The successor is more optimistic and thinks the firm could withstand the situation. Overall, there is some disparity of opinion in this company about the possibility of the company's growth, which may be a source of concern.

Respondents in the electrical components company are similarly divided (as in the previous company), with statement No. 1: "The company has the potential to increase its sales". The incumbent gave a neutral rating, and the successor the second most positive rating. The interview responses are consistent; the incumbent thinks the firm is established and has successful products to continue seamlessly after the handover. The successor says he would be happy for the company to continue as it is, and he thinks it depends on the staff. Both also think that the potential for further growth of the company is with reference to the successor's continued care. In statement No. 10: "The firm can adapt quickly to any change", the respondents disagree. The incumbent rated on a scale of -2, and the successor rated 1. During the interview, the incumbent stated that quitting overnight would affect the turnover, but the staff is said to be able to do many activities on their own. It would be necessary to find someone to run the company. The successor said there would be some losses, but the company would survive. In this company, respondents differ in some opinions, but there are more where they agree. Again, according to the Q-method, the successor has a slightly more optimistic view of a sudden change in management.

At the museum, the incumbent did not want to comment much on the growth potential, but the successor said that sales are increasing and there is potential for further growth (depending on grants and subsidies). Statement No. 1: "The company has the potential to increase its sales"

had a negative (-2) rating for the incumbent and a neutral rating for the successor. During the interview, the incumbent said that if the director left the company overnight, it would be a problem for the organisation, and the successor noted that the organisation would have to readjust itself to this situation. The rating of the statement No. 10: "The company can adapt quickly to any change" is the same for both respondents (-3). This is the most negative rating for statement No. 10 of the three companies.

Synthesis of results from the section focused on the respondent's likely leadership style

Leadership style is reflected in many aspects of the company's operations. In the restaurant, both respondents, when interviewed, answered the company values similarly. According to the successor, they are personal relationships, and in parallel, the other person stated that they are also related to friendly staff and customer satisfaction. They agree that family relationships work well in the company, and the composition of the staff is almost always the same. Employee satisfaction is said to be assured by above-average salaries, polite and fair treatment and good workplace relations. On statement No. 25: "Employee satisfaction and minimal fluctuation are important to us", respondents agreed with a rating of 3.

The incumbent in the electrical parts company mentioned customer trust as a value (goodwill) of the company, the successor mentioned a careful and reliable approach and decent behaviour. The company operates based on family relationships, and the staff composition has been the same for 15 years. However, they have selected different aspects in ensuring employee satisfaction, according to the incumbent, it is through increasing remuneration, informal relationships and social activities. According to the successor, it is through reasonable workload emphasising employee involvement (delegated responsibility). Statement 25: "Employee satisfaction and minimal employee fluctuation are important to us" received positive factor loadings for both respondents, 2 for the incumbent and 3 for the successor.

Respondents from the museum provided a similar assessment, with the incumbent saying that their value is for the institution to develop and have a positive external impact (both on the public and the wider environment). The successor has the added value of visitor and museum user satisfaction. The staff mix here is also stable, and the incumbent ensured their satisfaction by providing space for their development, friendly behaviour, and respect. The successor ensures employee satisfaction through benefits (financial and non-financial), a pleasant working environment, employee courses and free visits to family events for its family members. Here, respondents diverge widely. The Q-method shows that satisfaction is somehow important to both respondents, as statement No. 25: "Employee satisfaction and minimal employee

fluctuation are important to us" received a positive rating, 1 from the incumbent and 2 from the successor.

Recommendation for each company

Each company in the analysed sample is unique and has its own specifics. The restaurant is a management-led firm focused on strong, friendly relationships, which is also a reflection of the management style in which respondents agree the most of the three companies analysed. Succession has only recently been addressed here. However, the respondents disagreed on how the company should develop further. The incumbent sees potential for further growth here, but the successor thinks the current state is satisfactory. It is recommended to clarify the issues regarding the future development of the company and the direction the company is taking.

The electrical components company is also a company with very informal relationships, and they began to address succession with the greatest anticipation of the three firms analysed. The respondents have very similar views on the future development of the company. However, the management style of the employees is quite different, with the incumbent trying to motivate the employees in multiple ways and the successor looking at things very practically, wanting to focus on a reasonable workload. This is partly because the successor has been with the company for a short period. It will be necessary for the successor to engage more with the corporate culture to better motivate employees within the corporate paradigm.

In the museum, succession planning took the shortest amount of time. According to the successor in a state-funded organisation, succession cannot be planned, but a successor was sought at least six months in advance. This is most likely related to the negative assessment of the sudden change in management (the organisation was unprepared for it). Respondents differed in how they presented themselves, especially their varying views on ensuring employee satisfaction. The incumbent included satisfying social needs in motivation, while the successor used more material incentives. It is also recommended to prioritise interpersonal relationships, personal development, respect, self-fulfilment, and other non-material factors.

The reality of the three companies surveyed one year after the research was as follows: There was a succession in the electrical components company and the museum. In the restaurant, the planned successor became co-owner with the original owner.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of the results shows that a congruence of views between the incumbent and the successor does not always guarantee a successful handover of the company's leadership. The

highest level of agreement was found in the museum, but there was still a less successful handover, suggesting that the involvement of other factors, such as individual competence and the ability to adapt to new roles, is important in addition to mere agreement of views. This result supports the findings of Acharya et al. (2020), who highlight the importance of soft skills in passing on leadership. In addition, the results of the analysis show that companies that do not consider long-term succession planning face greater challenges during the transition to a new leader.

On the other hand, in the electrical components company, where the congruence of opinions between the incumbent and the successor was lower, the leadership handover was more successful. This contrast suggests that a successful handover can result not only from a congruence of opinions but also from a well-prepared and structured process that allows the successor to assume responsibility gradually. This is consistent with Cesaroni and Sentuti (2017), who state that effective succession depends on the ability to focus on soft skills and manage complex interpersonal issues.

It is also interesting to compare the role of the length of successor preparation in the leadership transition process. For example, in a restaurant, it was found that even though the successor had been with the company for seven years, the leadership handover was not fully realised, showing that the length of preparation alone may not always be a determinant of success. This finding is in line with the findings of Chabra et al. (2023), who highlight that personality characteristics, innovative thinking and the ability to manage risks play an important role in addition to experience and skills. Moreover, as Bozer et al. (2017) point out, the involvement of independent consultants can help to balance different opinions and bring a much-needed independent perspective to the process, which was lacking in the restaurant.

On the other hand, in an electrical components company, where the successor had been employed for a relatively short period, there was a smooth handover, suggesting that the ability to manage the transition process effectively may be more important than the length of tenure. This success confirms the importance of well-structured succession planning, as noted, for example, in a study by Matias and Franco (2020), which highlights the need for a clear vision and strategy in the handover process. In this case, it appears that a combination of professional preparation, strategic planning and mutual understanding between the incumbent and the successor can be a key success factor, even if the two parties have some differences of opinion.

Understanding and defining the different perspectives of parties involved in diverse business areas can be facilitated by, among others, the Q-method (Sneegas et al., 2021). The question of succession using Q-analysis was addressed by Barbosa et al. (2020), who identified aspects that

facilitate a female heir's takeover of a family rural farm. The method used contributed to the design of public and private interventions rather than identifying the need for congruence or incongruence in the views of the successor and the incumbent. Nevertheless, this study may prove important in developing techniques and focusing on future research.

Watts and Stenner (2012) state that Q-analysis allows key aspects to be seen among participants with a high level of qualitative detail. Our research has reached a similar conclusion, albeit only in a pilot study, and also leans towards another conclusion Watts and Stenner (2012) assert, i.e., that the Q-method does not provide data that can be generalised to a broader population, as it may not include all possible perspectives on the area of study.

The contradictions observed between respondents' interview responses and their Q-sort rankings call for further in-depth examination. One plausible explanation is that respondents may have misinterpreted the Q-sort task; while interviews allow for elaboration and nuance, the Q-sort method requires participants to allocate pre-defined statements into a forced, quasi-normal distribution. This task constraint may result in a differential understanding of statement polarity or meaning, thus causing discrepancies with their verbal accounts. Additionally, social desirability bias might have influenced respondents' oral responses; in the more interactive and less structured interview setting, participants could have felt compelled to present a more favourable image of themselves or their organisation, whereas the more anonymous and systematic Q-sort could have elicited responses that more closely reflect their underlying opinions. Finally, the time-pressured nature of the Q-sort exercise may have led to insufficient reflection on the relative importance of each statement, resulting in impulsive or superficial rankings that diverged from the more considered positions expressed during interviews.

These inconsistencies underscore the importance of employing a multimodal approach in researching business succession, as they reveal how different data collection modalities can capture distinct facets of respondent behaviours, intentions and attitudes. Future research would benefit from further exploration of contextual variables, such as time pressure, cognitive load, or emotional engagement, that may account for such discrepancies, thereby enhancing the interpretive robustness of findings in succession studies.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The results of this study cannot be fully generalised to all aspects of succession. The data collection may have been influenced by the subjective attitudes of the respondents as well as their expressive skills, and there may be biases in the transcription (coding) and interpretation of the interviews. Analysing statements reduces the data, and some knowledge may be lost in

the process. However, by following a clear methodological procedure, data loss can be minimised to only those elements of minor or negligible importance to the research's purpose. As this is a pilot study, only three companies were selected.

CONCLUSION

The most valuable outcomes of the application were the correlation matrix, which recorded the agreement of respondents' classifications, and the Q-factor array, which displayed the resulting Q-sort composed of all respondents' answers. From the correlation matrix, it was possible to see which respondents agreed and disagreed most within companies. Additionally, the original data allowed identification of the specific statements where the disagreements occurred, and from the factor array, we could observe where all respondents most strongly agreed.

This paper aimed to verify the methods that contribute to the current use of the Q-method, which is primarily used abroad, and to introduce a modified version of the method of statements. The combination of these two methods should be explored further in future research. Researchers could build on this work and apply this combined approach in various studies. For example, one could investigate the relationship of agreement between the respondents' opinions and the number of years in the company, as already outlined in this paper. Alternatively, the relationship between the retirement age and the number of years spent in the company in a managerial position could be explored to assess the willingness to hand over leadership. Another avenue for future research could involve combining these methods with a personality type test and investigating the relationship between the respondents' opinions and their personality or managerial types. In short, there are a variety of ways in which the methods can be used to achieve a deeper understanding of the succession process.

The findings from our research can be interpreted through the frameworks of Upper Echelons Theory and Stakeholder Theory. Our results, particularly the observed variance in opinion alignment between incumbents and successors across different firms, underscore that individual differences in values, experiences, and mental models may critically influence leadership transitions' smoothness and eventual success. In our study, we define "succession success" using observable criteria such as the continuity of strategic vision, perceived satisfaction among employees, and operational stability in the post-handover period. For instance, despite relatively high opinion convergence in one case, the anticipated success in the succession process was not fully realised, indicating that more profound cognitive or personality disparities between the leaders may undermine the intended outcomes. This aligns

with the Upper Echelons Theory, which posits that top managers' personal characteristics and cognitive frameworks directly influence strategic decision-making processes, thereby shaping the succession process. Similarly, our findings emphasise the need for structured communication and coordination mechanisms to bridge differences among stakeholder groups, thereby fostering overall organisational stability and sustainability during the succession process. This is consistent with the Stakeholder Theory, which asserts that succession is not merely an internal leadership change but a multi-faceted process that involves complex interactions among diverse stakeholders, including family members, employees, and external advisors.

REFERENCES

Adebayo, P. O. (2020). Integrating succession planning for family business continuity: A conceptual analysis. *NIU Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 253-262. https://www.ijhumas.com/ojs/index.php/kiujoss/article/view/869.

Acharya, S., & Wee, S. L. (2020). Rational inattention in hiring decisions. *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, 12(1), 1-40. https://doi.org/10.1257/mac.20180390.

Barbosa, R. A., de Faria Domingues, C. H., da Silva, M. C., Foguesatto, C. R., de Aragão Pereira, M., Gimenes, R. M. T., & Borges, J. A. R. (2020). Using Q-methodology to identify rural women's viewpoint on succession of family farms. *Land Use Policy*, 92, 104489. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104489.

Bertschi-Michel, A., Sieger, P., & Kammerlander, N. (2021). Succession in family-owned SMEs: the impact of advisors. *Small Business Economics*, 56(4), 1531-1551. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-019-00266-2.

Bozer, G., Levin, L., & Santora, J. C. (2017). Succession in family business: multi-source perspectives. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 24(4), 753-774. http://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-10-2016-0163.

Cesaroni, F. M., & Sentuti, A. (2017). Family business succession and external advisors: the relevance of 'soft' issues. *Small Enterprise Research*, 24(2), 167-188. https://doi.org/10.1080/13215906.2017.1338193.

Dessein, W., Galeotti, A., & Santos, T. (2016). Rational inattention and organizational focus. *American Economic Review*, 106(6), 1522-1536. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20140741.

Fama, E. F., & Jensen, M. C. (1983). Agency problems and residual claims. *The journal of law and Economics*, 26(2), 327-349. https://doi.org/10.1086/467038.

Hambrick, D. C. (2007). Upper echelons theory: An update. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 334-343. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.24345254.

Hendl, J. (2016). Qualitative Research: Fundamental Theories, Methods, and Applications (in Czech). Portál, Ltd. 407 pp.

Chhabra, M., Hassan, R., Shah, M. A., & Sharma, R. (2023). A bibliometric review of research on entrepreneurial capacity for the period 1979 to 2022: Current status, development, and future research directions. *Cogent Business & Management*, 10(1), 2178338. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2178338.

LeBreton-Miller, I., & Miller, D. (2015). The arts and family business: Linking family business resources and performance to industry characteristics. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 39(6), 1349-1370. https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12177.

Marques, A. P., & Couto, A. I. (2020). Intergenerational management succession: Specificities of the Portuguese family business. *European Journal of Economics and Business Studies, 6(1),* 43-55. https://doi.org/10.26417/ejes.v6i1.p43-55.

Matějka, F., & McKay, A. (2015). Rational inattention to discrete choices: A new foundation for the multinomial logit model. *American Economic Review*, 105(1), 272-298. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20130047.

Matias, C., & Franco, M. (2020). The role of the family council and protocol in planning the succession process in family firms. *Journal of Family Business Management*, 11(4), 440-461. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFBM-01-2020-0004.

Roth, L., Tissot, M. C. H., & Gonçalves, R. B. (2017). Family owned business succession and governance: A multiple case study in Brazil. *Revista de Ciências da Administração*, 19(48), 96-107. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8077.2017v19n48p96.

Sharma, P. (2004). An overview of the field of family business studies: Current status and directions for the future. *Family Business Review*, 17(1), 1-36. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-6248.2004.00001.x.

Sneegas, G., Beckner, S., Brannstrom, C., Jepson, W., Lee, K., & Seghezzo, L. (2021). Using Q-methodology in environmental sustainability research: A bibliometric analysis and systematic review. *Ecological Economics*, 180, 106864. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106864.

Stejskalová, I., & Štrach, P. (2015). Gathering Research Evidence in the Information Age: Qualitative Research Through Narrative Analysis. In *XIV International Business and Economy Conference Bangkok, Thailand*. 7 pp. Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Šindelková, M. (2019). *The Use of Statement Analysis in Case Studies* [master's thesis in Czech]. Prague University of Economics and Business, Faculty of Management, Department of Management. 85 pp.

Udomkit, N., Kittidusadee, P., & Schreier, C. (2021). Disharmony within harmony: contrasting views between incumbents and successors on the selection criterion adopted for family business successions. *Journal of Family Business Management*, 12(4), 892-907. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFBM-03-2021-0023.

Umans, I., Lybaert, N., Steijvers, T., & Voordeckers, W. (2020). Succession planning in family firms: family governance practices, board of directors, and emotions. *Small Business Economics*, 54, 189-207. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-018-0078-5.

Watts, S., & Stenner, P. (2012). Doing Q Methodological Research: Theory, Method & Interpretation. London: SAGE Publications. 248 pp.