
Introduction

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Biographical notes: Christophe Loué is a Professor and Researcher at Ferrandi Paris, a school run by the Paris and Île de France Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He took up his post as a Professor at the school after having spent several years as a Junior Consultant at the Paris CCI's Human Resources Department and 12 years as Teacher and Researcher at Novancia Business School Paris. He teaches human resources management, management and entrepreneurship in Bachelor's and Master's programs. His main research focuses on the identification of entrepreneurial skills, the acquisition of skills by the students and the measure of their entrepreneurial intention, motivation and self-efficacy. He focuses also on the field of business development, as well as the definition of the profile of the business developer.

The concept of business development was introduced within organisations a few decades ago, but academics have only considered the concept more recently. Researchers agree that this subject has received little attention in the academic literature until now, and that the topic is still in an exploratory stage. Most works on this specific subject were published after 2005, and we are still far from a consensus on the concept and its definition.

The generic subject of business development actually covers two dimensions, one addressing business development as a function and its contribution within organisations, and the other focusing on the business developer, considering the person, position, role and activities. Specifically regarding business development, the term is frequently used but its meaning is unclear, since it can refer to many usages and applications. Even the definitions proposed by business development academics vary, from 'execution of innovation processes', 'corporate entrepreneurial behaviour', 'building partnerships', to 'new revenue opportunities'. So the literature may deal with innovation, entrepreneurship, marketing, sales and strategy. The business developer covers equally diverse meanings and applications, and has sometimes been defined as an 'integrated generalist', which suggests different realities. In fact, a business developer can work in different departments (IT, marketing, sales, research and development), at different levels of the organisation: from operational (sales people, and key account managers) to highly strategic (vice president for merger-acquisitions or business development), and the practices may be very diverse (technical development, product development, marketing offers, etc.). The business developer may also possess very different characteristics, being an entrepreneur, a salesperson, etc.

This special issue on business development thus represents the diversity of points of view on those two concepts. The eight articles presented here focus on various dimensions of business development and business developers. The business development articles consider different types of companies (microenterprises, start-ups, international firms, and in various life cycles), evaluating characteristics such as innovation, knowledge management, etc. Other articles concentrate on business developers; different populations are identified (such as owners, entrepreneurs), and role dimensions are evaluated. The empirical articles use interviews, case studies, longitudinal analysis and quantitative methods. Most articles underline the importance and sometimes the underestimation of this business development concept in organisations.

The first two articles in our special issue will explore the dimensions and uses of business development in organisations.

Voeth, Poelzl and Eidhoff's goal is to clarify how business development is perceived and implemented in practice. Their quantitative analysis of 352 German companies concludes that business development focuses on growth opportunities in four areas, namely products, processes, markets and business models. In this respect, the business developer plays an internal role (working on processes and improving company efficiency), and an external role (collecting information in markets).

Sørensen's article contributes to clarifying the link between business development and growth opportunities at the planning and implementation stages. The analysis of 73 CEOs of SMEs shows that business development increases the effectiveness of business planning and firm performance, helping to demonstrate the specific contribution of business development in organisations.

The next three articles explore the components of business development and its impact.

The article of Nogueira, Fernández-López, Calvo and Rodeiro-Pazos quantitatively analyses the effects of four sources of innovation (products, processes, marketing and organisation) and finance on the survival of 148 Spanish companies. Results demonstrate that commercial innovation safeguards firms from bankruptcy, whereas product innovation increases their chances of survival.

Corsi and Prencipe explore the moderating effect of governance structure on the relationship between innovation propensity and international development of SMEs. Evaluating five dimensions of governance structure in 2,876 Italian companies, the authors conclude that ownership concentration and foreign group affiliation positively mediate the relationship between innovation propensity and international development.

Scaringella's research investigates the evolution of the contribution of business models, open innovation and knowledge management during initial and further business development stages. The longitudinal study suggests that in a successful spin-off, the three variables evolve from single to multiple business models, from outside-in to inside-out open innovation, and from composite to fungible knowledge management.

The three last papers focus on the characteristics and role perception of the business developer.

Veilleux, Haskell and Béliveau look at which of the international entrepreneur's characteristics (prior knowledge, alertness and activeness) and opportunity recognition methods (tie-based and non-tie-based sources) foster the international business development of their high-tech companies. Ten in-depth interviews in Canada suggest that entrepreneurs' characteristics and sources should evolve between the start-up and growth stages.

Reyes' work focuses on the link between the role perceived by the business developer and the strategy of the organisation. Two owners of VSE pharmacies in France are interviewed, and a link between the perceived role of the owner (health professional or retailer) and the choice of strategy is proposed.

Simon and Tellier present a research based on the study of one of the main activity of business developers: business opportunity recognition. The authors show in what ways the personal networks of business developers are particularly useful for developing business opportunities.

The diversity of articles proposed in this special issue illustrates the global interest among academics in business development and the exploratory stage of the literature. Indeed, the eight articles come from eight different countries in Europe and North America, proof that business development is a reality everywhere. Also, multiple dimensions of the concept of business development and business developer are explored in this special issue in terms of organisations' effort, structure, processes, people and impact. This diversity clearly demonstrates that the academic literature is at a stage of exploration of this new reality in organisations.

We want to thank the authors for their useful contributions and hope that these articles will help to create greater interest among researchers and professional communities, and consequently generate more research in order to clarify these concepts and better understand the antecedents, components and consequences of business development and business developer.