

MANAGERIAL ROLES IN SMALL FIRMS

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The behaviour of managers in organizations is a frequently studied phenomenon. An examination of the literature does, however, reveal that our knowledge about this issue is based on studies of managers in large organizations. In most of the literature on managerial work, organizational size is not considered as a factor affecting managerial practice and when size is considered, it is seldom on the basis of systematic empirical studies of managerial behaviour in small firms. An example of this is Henry Mintzberg's contingency theory of managerial work, which includes an environmental dependence in which the size of the organization is one of the two variables (the other is industry). In his propositions on how size affects managerial work, Mintzberg draws solely on a small-scale study of three presidents in small firms observed for a period of two days each. Due to the limited scope of this study (made by Chorán), it can be argued that the empirical basis of Mintzberg's propositions on managerial work in small organizations is weak.

Using the same observation method as Mintzberg, Chorán, in his unpublished MBA thesis, studied if roles and activities differ between large and small companies. In his replication of Mintzberg, he identified two additional roles (the specialist role and the substitute operator) – which added to the ten roles identified by Mintzberg – that top managers in small organizations play that their peers in larger organizations do not. The purpose of this paper is to replicate Chorán in order to verify his list of roles that top-managers in small organizations play. Drawing on the empirical description of managerial practice in small firms presented in the paper, a secondary purpose of this paper is to provide a first explanatory account of *why* small firm managers behave the way they do. In doing this, I draw on recent work by Mintzberg and Hales. Empirically this study draws on direct observation (using the same method as Mintzberg and Chorán) of owner-managers in six small manufacturing firms (17-43) employees). Each manager was observed for one week and in all the study includes 1650 activities and about 270 hours of observation.

Although the conclusions from this study are still to be drawn, it could be said that the study carries both empirical and theoretical implications. In rejecting or supporting Chorán's rather tentative description of what managers in small organizations do, this study offers a deepened understanding of managerial practice in small organizations. The study provides managers in small organizations with an empirically grounded framework based on direct observation that could be used by supporting bodies in improving their activities and initiatives aiming at developing managerial practices in small organizations. The theoretical contribution includes a first step towards an explanatory account of the generic characteristics of managerial work in small organizations raising itself above descriptions of activity patterns depicting managerial behaviour.