

# Brokering sustainable learning communities: a rural micro-firm capability framework

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**Purpose** –This poster exhibits the literary-identified capabilities required by micro-firm tourism practitioners to ‘broker’ local tourism practice in interaction with the broader tourism stakeholder base.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Adopting a learning community focus, guided by the understanding that individual learning and capability development occurs within a social context (Lave & Wenger, 1991) the authors analyse relevant tourism network and dynamic capabilities literature and catalogue micro-firm broker capability criteria based on the findings.

**Background** - In Europe, micro-firms employ less than ten (European Commission, 2011), while Industry Canada defines a micro-firm as one with fewer than five employees (Industry Canada, 2013). The overwhelming majority of tourism firms are micro in size and are instrumental in the economic growth, competitiveness and employment of rural communities (Johnson, Sear & Jenkins, 2000; Saxena, Clark, Oliver & Ilberry, 2007). These firms employ in excess of 7.7million people in Canada, and when combined with small firms they account for 98.2% of all Canadian businesses (IC, 2013). Canadian micro-firms’ main focus is concentrated on the local market, with 73% of the firms having over 60% of their market concentrated in the local community (IC, 2002).

Rural micro-firm practitioners have long since collaborated in pursuit of tourism development (Tinsley & Lynch, 2007). Such practice facilitates the emergence of a shared repertoire of stories, rules and routines, which permit community members to engage with one another effectively (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Micro-firms have an inclination to leverage their immediate business communities to counteract knowledge deficits and resource constraints associated with their small size (Denicolai, Cioccarelli & Zucchella, 2010). This approach can restrict rural micro-tourism provider access to the wider professional community and the knowledge it holds (Aylward, 2012; Reinl & Kelliher, 2010). As such micro-firms are encouraged to engage in multi-level networks alongside representatives of government agencies, higher education institutes, indigenous businesses and rural development groups (Drda-Kühn & Wiegand, 2010; Saxena *et al.*, 2007). This wider approach to knowledge generation acts to enhance their business capabilities, open resource channels, and/ or improve their competitive position (Kearney *et al.*, 2014).

Tourism research distinguishes between informal networks which exist at a local community level and formal networks, established and resourced by public actors (Morrison & Lynch, 2007; Tinsley & Lynch, 2007). Frequently under the guidance of a broker (Aylward, 2012; Halme, 2001) who is keen to further develop community engagement, network interactions are not isolated but rather form an evolving ‘learning community’ (Morrison, Lynch & Johns, 2004) wherein stakeholders pick up from prior encounters (Granovetter, 1995). Sustaining such a learning community (LC) requires ‘*network strategies which span individual actor boundaries and cross different levels of analysis*’ (Haugland *et al.*, 2010; 282). Research has provided pointers to capabilities required to coordinate a well-functioning tourism destination (Haugland *et al.*, 2010; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009; Vanneste & Ryckaert, 2011). At a local community level champions are recognised as being pivotal in brokering learning and practice within, between and beyond formal network engagements (Philipson *et al.*, 2006; Reinl & Kelliher, 2014). While competencies key to individual micro-firm success; namely relationship management and opportunity management (Kearney *et al.*, 2014; Kelliher & Reinl, 2009) would likely be of value in this context, brokering a LC which links in a reciprocal way to the destination level would require a specific set of capabilities which

remain elusive in both the literature and in rural development policy spheres. Haugland *et al.* (2010: p 273) expand Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) dynamic capabilities definition: 'processes to integrate, reconfigure, gain and release resources - to match and even create market change', by emphasising the collective capabilities of tourism stakeholders in that pursuit. Zollo and Winter (2002) suggest that such capabilities are distinguishable as stable patterns of collective activity which arise from learning and from the modification of routines in pursuit of improvement; a process which functions as a capability building exercise (Granovetter, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Key capabilities required for managing tourism networks, include role development and implementation, joint knowledge creation, network orchestration and visioning and alongside these, the partnering capability necessary to link unknown network actors (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009). In addition Haugland *et al.* (2010) note the importance of co-production and consensus building. The aforementioned capabilities function as prerequisites for learning and knowledge exchange in tourism networks (Morrison, Lynch & Johns, 2004) however one-way network provider exchanges are inadvisable when striving for sustainable micro-firm learning in practice (Halme, 2001; Kelliher & Reinl, 2009) and different network approaches will yield different capability outputs (Denicolai, Cioccarelli & Zucchella, 2010). 'Learning networks' for example, promote the development of sustainable learning behaviours by assisting micro-firms to identify and leverage opportunities for learning in a community of practice (Halme, 2001). Given that knowledge is constructed and transformed in the community where it belongs (Lave & Wenger, 1991) local communities can leverage a strong sense of 'shared identity' for developmental benefits (Lee *et al.*, 2005). A resource sharing capability (predominantly skills and knowledge) is required to support that goal (Halme, 2001; Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Saxena *et al.*, 2007) particularly in a micro-firm context. The division of roles and tasks must be achieved without diluting the connectivity required to build shared meaning and support knowledge exchange in the wider LC (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Reinl & Kelliher, 2014).

**Findings** – Adopting a learning community focus in consideration of local tourism practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) under the guidance of a *broker* (Aylward, 2012; Halme, 2001) the micro-firm capability framework presented in this poster suggests that a strong sense of local community and role identity must be present to broker a LC in a rural micro-firm setting. Efforts to promote tourism development within rural communities should acknowledge histories of network engagement and the development of competencies that occur as a result. The broker should be recognised and developed as a guardian of engagement rather than being critical to the practice of the community itself. The criticality of this broker role is more clearly elucidated by the reality that LCs with leaders are more likely to be sustainable than those without. The literary findings suggest that stable patterns of engagement should seek to build broker value and nurture autonomy in pursuit of sustainable learning behaviours between rural tourism stakeholders at intersections of local/ regional practice, which in turn should offer up a sustainable resource base to support future collaborative practice.

**Originality/ value** – This framework highlights the potential value of 'local broker' capability development in supporting a sustainable learning community for collaborative rural tourism development.

**Future research** – The authors will explore and refine the literary-identified micro-firm capabilities required to broker sustainable learning communities in Canadian and US rural tourism contexts.

**Key words:** rural tourism; micro-firms; sustainable learning communities; broker capabilities

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