

# Developing Intrapreneurship as a Career Perspective for Senior Professionals: Towards an Innovative HRM and Career Management Approach

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**Abstract** How can intrapreneurship, being a stimulant for innovation, serve as a perspective for employees in later career stages? Career development in later stages is hardly studied in combination with intrapreneurship and vice versa. Intrapreneurship, also referred to in this article as internal entrepreneurship, is described in entrepreneurship studies as a role or approached as a set of activities, as a process, with behavioural and attitudinal aspects. In HRM or career management theory, however, the phenomenon is hardly mentioned. A reason for that may be that it is quite an intangible phenomenon, not recognised as a profession, vocation, function or job, the common terms in these specific domains. Internal entrepreneurship can be a clear option for HR development or personal career development when it is termed as a role or specific set of competences. Active career development or career management is often considered and propagated as a rational and well planned process based on conscious decisions. But career choices and decisions are in fact grounded on affective reasons and unconscious layers of the mind. Planning a career, specially on the long term, seems to make not too much sense in our rapid changing world. In this study it is assumed that under specific conditions an intrapreneurial perspective can be constructed in later career stages. A passionate entrepreneurial drive is considered as the key-factor on individual level to create this perspective. Answers to a set of research questions are found based on a mixed and multi method approach. Qualitative interviews and simulations applied in field experiments are the main methods. The objectives of the study are the design of a theoretical model and an innovative tool for HRM practice for the development of intrapreneurship in later stages. This paper presents the outline of a study in progress and the results of a pilot study. The latter provides a 12 element description of the intrapreneurship phenomenon, both on individual and organizational level; it contains opinions and experiences of experts out of practice. This description in combination with a literature review makes clear that an innovative career management approach is needed for the development of internal entrepreneurship in later stages. An approach characterised by a pro age attitude, dialogue between employer and employee, that makes it possible to reveal unaware and unconscious aspects of intrapreneurial talents and motivation.

**Key words** intrapreneurship, innovation, career perspective, life-career stage aware HRM

## 1 Introduction

Intrapreneurship, generally defined as entrepreneurship within the boundaries of an existing organization, is widely advocated as a mean for organizational innovation and many other advantages on organizational as well as individual level (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2001). Although it is recognized that HRM can contribute to the innovative power of organizations, internal entrepreneurship is not considered to be a possible solution for problems in the specific field of human resource management. Intrapreneurship is for example not presented as an answer to the actual problem of the greying workforce in relevant policy reports (Task Force Ouderen (*Older Employees*), 2003, Grijs Werkt (*Grey-hairs Work*, 2008) in The Netherlands. A successful stimulation or development of intrapreneurship specially for older employees would contribute to solve expected problems regarding the ageing labour force and at the same time also conduce innovation. The central question in this study is how intrapreneurship can serve as a perspective in later career stages and how it can be developed in those stages. Intrapreneurship and career development are considered as the two core concepts in the study. The first mentioned is approached as a career perspective, a possible role, or specific set of competences. In literature the phenomenon is analysed and described in several different ways, as a process, a series of activities and from personality, behavioural and contextual viewpoints (Hornaday, 1970, Gartner, 1990). But as a tool for career development, or in a broader sense, as a HR instrument this

phenomenon is missing in literature so far. Career development the other core concept in the problem statement, is used here in the sense of active career advancement. It can be the purpose of employees or of the employer, but a mutual 'ownership' based on a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) of both parties is widely advocated nowadays. Besides conscious and rational, planned approaches (Greenhaus, et al., 2000, Reardon et al., 2006), also strategies based on using chance are propagated in order to develop careers in our post modern society (Krumboltz & Levin, 2002). All kind of prejudices and stereotyped ideas about older employees and older careerists are unfortunately still rather common in organizations today (TNO Arbeid (*Labour*), 2004). All together intrapreneurship can be considered as a rather uncommon career perspective, bothered by ageism in later stages and subject to planning and also chance. The more specific research questions of this study ask for insight in the nature and meaning of intrapreneurship for older professionals. How does the intrapreneurial perspective emerge and what are crucial influential factors? Out of the pilot study combined with an extensive literature study the following sensitising concepts emerged for the main study: meaning and perceptions of internal entrepreneurship on conscious but also on unconscious level (Dijksterhuis, 2004, 2007), the development of the entrepreneurial career perspective, and entrepreneurial spirit and its emotional dimensions (Kuratko, 1989). The final goal of the main study is to develop a theoretical model explaining the development of intrapreneurship as a career perspective in later stages. Furthermore a tool for practice will be the result, a scenario or protocol describing how to stimulate intrapreneurship, focused on professionals in later career stages. Intrapreneurship and career development are here approached from the standpoint of the employee, in this case the professional in later career stages, without neglecting the position and importance of (HR) management in developmental and change processes in organizations. It will be argued that an innovative approach of HRM and career management is needed in order to develop an intrapreneurial career perspective for senior professionals.

## 2 Methodological Aspects

The study is performed in two successive phases. The first phase, qualitative interviews with acting intrapreneurs in non-profit organizations, the so called actor interviews, started in June 2008 and will be finished next December. The choice for non profit organizations was made because there is a strong drive for a more market directed strategy and a entrepreneurial orientation in these sector, at least in several industrialised countries. The results out of the actor interviews will be used in a focus group session with managers of non profit organizations. In spring 2009 the start of the second phase is planned, implying field experiments using simulation. The simulation sessions will be replicated in The Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, within the city triangle Eindhoven, Leuven, Aken. Cities and regions often have a strong innovative character. Multinational cooperation in neighbouring regions have their own specific dynamic (Ulijn & Brown, 2004). It will be relevant to investigate the impact and significance of national, organizational and professional culture (Ulijn & Brown, 2004) regarding the development of intrapreneurship in later stages. All together the research design encompasses a mixed, (qualitative/ quantitative) method (Creswell, 2003) consisting of several, different methods and techniques in a multi methodical set up (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The units of analysis in the first phase are acting intrapreneurs, professionals 40 plus and in the second phase 40 plus professionals pre-nascent intrapreneurs. A pilot study was performed in 2007, serving as a compass for further literature investigation, leading to definitive and detailed research questions. A start was made with inquiries in the field in an early stage of the study in order to pursue further investigations with data and findings, offering an initial interpretation frame grounded in practice. The pilot study consisted of eight personal, open interviews with experts (males and females, 50/50) out of practice; (HRM) managers, being also experienced intrapreneurs or entrepreneurs with a background in different industries and sectors. The main interview topics were aiming at the meaning of intrapreneurship, the attitude of employers and employees to the phenomenon and the conditions for developing and fostering it. The rough interview data consisted out of expert opinions and observations, but also partly of personal experiences of the participants. These qualitative interviews were analysed applying open and axial coding, and resulted in a 12 element description of the intrapreneurship phenomenon. The results of the analysis were confronted with bodies of literature out of different domains, entrepreneurship, HRM and career management. Several findings could be confirmed or covered by theory, some findings however lead to definite questions for further study. The results of the pilot study are presented in the next section.

### 3 Results

In this section the results of the pilot study will be discussed and confronted with literature. A description of intrapreneurship consisting of 12 elements is composed, based on the found concepts and their properties. The first six elements are particularly related with aspects on employee level, their attitude towards intrapreneurship, competences and personal characteristics. The last six ones refer to employers, management and HRM, the organizational level and the interplay between individual and organizational level. This distinction is based on the two level model of the entrepreneurial process (Menzel, 2008). The life/career stage aspect is found in several elements of the description and will be easily recognised.

#### 3.1 Intrapreneurship on the individual level:

##### 3.1.1 The meaning of intrapreneurship: connotations and associations

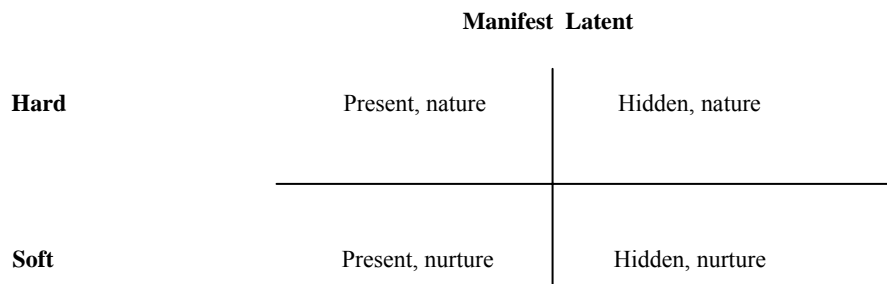
Intrapreneurship stands for specific activities like marketing yourself, taking initiatives and on the other hand also a certain mentality and way of being, with self definition, flexibility, change and freedom in career and work life as central elements and connotations. Intrapreneurship is described as active behaviour in terms of doing, but also in terms of being. Intrapreneurship is about what you do and who you are. Both dimensions: acting and being seem to be relevant. Mentioned connotations are, in general, referring to quick change, flexibility and moves across the boundaries of the own vocational domain. In entrepreneurship literature two different research streams, the trait and the behavioural approach (Hornaday, 1970, Gartner, 1985) are focussing on the “being” and “doing” aspects regarding intrapreneurship.

##### 3.1.2 Characteristics of intrapreneurs

All kinds of personal characteristics emerged out of the interviews, hard, genetic factors like aptitude and also soft, attitudinal factors (“*working hard*”, “*passionate*”) and skills (“*listening skills*”) which can be influenced more easily. In literature all kinds of characteristics and features are mentioned (Kets de Vries, 1985, Hornaday & Aboud, 1971, Driessen, 2005). Hard or soft also refer to the question if entrepreneurship can be learned or not. Are entrepreneurs born or can they be “created”? In this study the developmental standpoint is taken according to Comenius who stated: Everything can be learned”. Although innate predispositions may play a role some authors argue that entrepreneurs are mostly made (Pinchot & Pellman, 1999). A developmental approach focussing on motivational aspects (Kuratko, & Montagno.,1989) may foster the development of intrapreneurship Older employees are judged by the expert participants as not flexible and having a stronger need for security. This may refer possibly to prejudice and stereotypes (TNO Arbeid, 2007, Nauta et al., 2004).

##### 3.1.3 How to identify intrapreneurs?

Characteristics can be estimated by experienced people and also measured with specific instruments like tests, assessments. These are sometimes clearly present (“rebel”, “extravert”), but sometimes not (“silent workers”, “hidden talents”). The visibility or presence aspect is connected with both entrepreneurial qualities of the employee as well as the person of the intrapreneurs. It also refers to two standpoints for observation and assessment, the organization may observe intrapreneurship or not and the employee may observe entrepreneurial qualities within himself or not. Brown (2004) describes the dimension of secrecy with respect to intrapreneurship and Dijksterhuis (2008) comments the phenomenon of unconscious self knowledge. How can unconscious or hidden (self) knowledge about entrepreneurial talents be elicited? Combining the hard-soft dimension with the manifest-latent dichotomy results in the matrix presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Aspects of intrapreneurial characteristics**

### 3.1.4 Employee's attitudes towards intrapreneurship

Those differ per sector, organization, profession and life stage. In late career stages the interest seems to be not very strong, but there are always individual exceptions. Hart et al. (2007) studied the life/career stage aspect, in fact the age aspect for independent entrepreneurship. They found that the percentage of older entrepreneurs is rising, but the highest percentages of nascent entrepreneurs are found in the earlier life stages. These data are not present for intrapreneurship yet. The emergence of intrapreneurship in general is not well investigated and comparative studies are missing.

### 3.1.5 Intrapreneurship in later career stages

Intrapreneurship started in later career stages (40+) is closer to a person's self concept and based on a more conscious choice. There is a vast amount of career studies where arguments can be found to underpin this finding out of the interviews (Super, 1957, 1980, Savickas, 2002, Kuijpers, 2001, 2006). Intrapreneurship can be considered as a complicated career role and choice option, being a rather vague and intangible phenomenon, appearing in several different types and forms (Brown, 2004, Zahra et al. 1999). A career decision for this specific option can benefit from a grounding in an experienced and matured self concept.

### 3.1.6 Intrapreneurship and career development

Employees should develop their career competences and skills ("*self marketing*", "*self reflection*") before considering intrapreneurship as a new work and career role. A plea for a thorough career development approach.

based on active personal career management, applying specific career competences (Kuijpers, 2001, 2006).

The elements referring to the individual level of the concept can be summarized as follows. Intrapreneurship stands for certain activities and all kinds of personality characteristics, the soft ones being more open for development. Intrapreneurs and their characteristics can be identified, but often remain invisible or unaware for the organization and/or the person. It is a challenge finding measuring methods and techniques that will elicit this hidden entrepreneurial potential. The concept is rather diffuse and the emergence in organizations is argued by experts and not yet investigated sufficiently. Experts have a positive opinion regarding the quality of choices for internal entrepreneurship in later stages; career development facilitates a career choice for intrapreneurship. Regarding intrapreneurship as a perspective in later career stages, the participants are critical or bring up objections, some of them being possible prejudices.

## 3.2 Intrapreneurship on organizational level

### 3.2.1 Employers attitudes towards intrapreneurship

Employers are ignorant and resistant, there is ambivalence and tension between theory and practice, words and action, but in future intrapreneurship seems to become inevitable. Several authors (Pinchot, 1985, Antoncic & Hisrich (2001) argued the advantages of intrapreneurship on organizational and individual level. There is a mismatch with power structures and the need for control in many organizations. Experts don't agree about the emergence of intrapreneurship in organization: this differs from widespread to incidental. The mismatch is described by Menzel (2008) as a basic dilemma confronting the intrapreneurs and the organization he/she is working in. The labour market mentioned as an important condition for intrapreneurship specially for older employees points at the importance of contextual aspects. All experts have apparently their own observations, definitions and standpoints.

Could it also be a matter of unawareness of the emergence and existence of internal entrepreneurship from the site of the experts or just the fact that a clear definition is still missing (Maes, 2004), making communicating about this subject difficult and unclear.

### 3.2.2 Facilitation of intrapreneurship

Management and management style (“*coaching*”, “*close to staff*”) play an important conditional role. HR- management should be strongly developed and focused on human values, life stage aware policy and implemented through education, using career and talent management as important instruments.” In fact all organizational aspects mentioned by McKinsey play a role”, stated one expert. This refers also to studies discussing conditions for organizational development and change or creating high performing organizations.

Appelbaum (2000) points at the relevance of the AMO (ability, motivation and context) factors. Culture (Ulijn & Weggeman, 2001) but also structure and strategy are context variables that have to be taken into account.

### 3.2.3 Career planning and intrapreneurship

Intrapreneurship can be the result of a planned and directed match of personal characteristics and intrapreneurial competences or the result of discovery and recognition. This refers to a discussion in career theory (Van Aken & Reynaert, 2007) if planning is still an effective approach in career management, taking into account the “raplexity” (Hamaker, 1998), rapid changes and increasing complexity, of our time. Chance plays an increasing role in our lives and careers (Krumboltz & Levin, 2002).

### 3.2.4 Intrapreneurship and career management

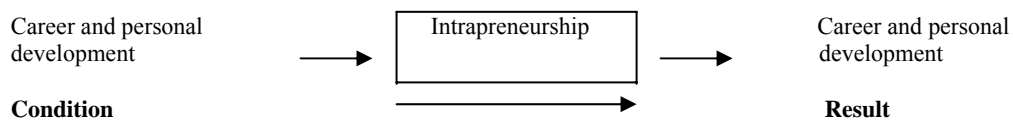
Internal entrepreneurship should be integrated in the total career span (in years) and not restricted to a specific stage, neither to just one organization, but a specific approach of older employees might be needed and stimulation and guidance starting at young age. A plea for life stage aware HR policy, with attention for older employees if needed. The work of Ilmarinen (2005) provides a lot of arguments for the application of these approaches.

### 3.2.5 Development of intrapreneurship

Internal intrapreneurship can be developed based on partnership between employer and employee, stimulating independency and responsibility. Rousseau (1995) was one of the first authors that underline the importance of this partnership or psychological contract.

### 3.2.6 Intrapreneurship and career development

The intrapreneurial role develops in stages; it results in a positive, satisfying, stimulating experience, fostering the development of careers on individual and organizational level and also contributes to the development of generic skills such as self determination and self knowledge. Different stages in the same job or role refer to mini-cycles as described by Savickas (2002). Careers develop in more or less clear stages in time (Super, 1980), but mini-stages in every new job lead to a dynamic image.. In Figure 2 career development is depicted as a condition, fostering intrapreneurship and as a result of fulfilling the intrapreneurial role.



**Figure 2 Intrapreneurship in career developmental perspective**

In sum, experts have different observations regarding the emergence of intrapreneurship although the advantages and benefits are recognised. On organizational level several categories of preconditions can be identified for a successful development of intrapreneurship, traditional and more general ones relevant for organizational development as such referring to managerial, and HRM aspects and culture. Career management should take into account the role of chance, the unconscious and flexible planning or manoeuvring. Fostering the two levels of the intrapreneurial process is not enough to create intrapreneurship. An exchange or dialogue of both levels is needed resulting in a psychological contract, to overcome the underlying conflict of intrapreneurship (Menzel, 2008).

## 4 Discussion

The pilot study provided an interesting description of the intrapreneurship phenomenon, partly from a specific career developmental viewpoint. Several relevant topics were investigated related to the

individual level of the employee as well as the organizational context. In the semi structured interviews opinions and observations, but also personal, more in depth experiences came across. Of course a focus group interview session could have provided a general and more summarized view on intrapreneurship too. Besides the practical difficulties related to gathering experts out of their demanding practice, it would probably not have resulted in the broad array of data with a touch of personal experiences. The 12 element description provided a good entrance to further literature study and a compass for the main study. A focused approach with more detailed research questions can be performed in the next phases. Another interesting conclusion on methodological level was the awareness of the unconscious. The provided expert opinions sometimes seemed to have a “talk of the month” level, a fairly usual phenomenon in management and HR professional practice. This resulted in the question, how to elicit data on a more deeper and even unconscious level? The answer was found in the development and application of some specific elicitation techniques for the main study interviews, association, metaphors and the critical incident technique. The results of the analysis of the expert interviews were confronted with relevant literature, making clear that much of the topics are already investigated in a large amount of studies. Some topics however stayed on the sieve needing (further) investigation. The above-mentioned research questions are the result of this literature confrontation. Furthermore the pilot study revealed a need for more intensive studies regarding the background and emergence of intrapreneurship. Further study to investigate the emergence of intrapreneurship in profit and non profit organizations would fill a gap in entrepreneurship research. Socio-demographic data to start with, would provide interesting background information regarding the phenomenon. Much of what was found in the pilot study is covered by mainly entrepreneurship studies. The question is if these studies can be transferred one to one to the intrapreneurship phenomenon and specifically to intrapreneurship in later career/life stages. Entrepreneurship research in general may provide lots of interesting leads and inspiration for intrapreneurship studies of course.

## 5 Conclusions

The results of the pilot study in combination with the literature review also underline the need for a specific innovative career management approach for the development of intrapreneurship in later career stages. Besides more traditional preconditions related to organizational development and change (Applebaum et al. 2000) it supposes a combination of specific conditions on organizational level regarding HRM and career management, for example active career development systems and an effectively functioning life stage aware policy. On the other hand employees should have a pro-age attitude too and at least an entrepreneurial spirit or attitude to start with. Furthermore this approach should provide answers to the question how to create an intrapreneurial perspective for senior professionals, given the circumstance that nascent intrapreneurs are sometimes invisible or their qualities stay unaware or unconscious. Specific approaches seem to be needed regarding human resource an career development. An approach that takes into account that intrapreneurship as a rather vague and intangible phenomenon and the circumstance that unconscious and emotional layers of the personality of employees play an important role. It should result in a “click” solving the dilemma of intrapreneurship and moderating age or life stage related issues. A dialogue framed in a psychological contract is another necessary precondition in this search for stimulating and generating intrapreneurial spirit as a first step to intrapreneurship.

The following research questions are formulated in order to find the grounds and outlines but also some specific methods for an innovative HRM and career management approach.

(1) What are conscious and unconscious meanings and perceptions of the intrapreneurship phenomenon as experienced by acting intrapreneurs? How to reveal latent intrapreneurial personality characteristics and concealed candidates for intrapreneurship?

(2) What is driving intrapreneurs? What is the nature and what are the emotional dimensions of their entrepreneurial spirit? What can facilitate and develop this spirit? What are influences of life-career stages on entrepreneurial spirit? How to foster entrepreneurial spirit in order to develop an intrapreneurial perspective? \

(3) What is the role of career competences in the development of intrapreneurship in later career stages? Which specific competences are crucial?

(4) How is an intrapreneurial career perspective developing as a process and what are the influences of life-career stages o that process? What is the interplay of individual and organizational

elements? How to use this interplay in order to develop intrapreneurship in later career stages?

The findings of the actor interviews in phase one of the main study should deliver answers on the above questions, but also provide propositions and additional questions that can be tested, respectively answered in the second phase of the study applying simulation as a data-generator. By formulating these questions the objective of the pilot study was reached too.

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