

DESCRIPTION OF THE THESIS TOPIC



Doctoral school EDGE- Nantes- Université



Contrats doctoraux 2023 : call for thesis topics

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| Proposed topic | Valuing the past: a lever for the sustainability of family businesses in western France. |
| Topic proposed by | <p><u>Thesis Director</u>: Paulette ROBIC : <i>Maitresse de Conférences-HDR en sciences de Gestion, IAE LEMNA-Nantes-Université.</i></p> <p><u>Co- Thesis Director</u> : Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, <i>Professeur des Universités en Histoire contemporaine, UFR Histoire, CRHIA Nantes-Université.</i></p> |
| Abstract | <p>This topic aims to study the extent to which the valorisation of the past represents a resource for family businesses. Conducted according to a multidisciplinary approach - management and history - the research aims not so much at making a history of companies as at considering the relationship that companies have with their history. The theoretical corpus mobilised is on the one hand that of resources-skills-competitive advantages and valorisation of the past on the other. The scientific challenge will be to reinforce the knowledge that we already have on the question. The practical challenge will be to contribute to the reinforcement of archiving practices in companies and to the development of a tool for the work of professional historians. The methodology used will be qualitative and exploratory, with several cases without a time limit but with a geographical limit - the west of France. The thesis will be able to join Lemna's axis 2 and NU's identities axis and NU's Next-Cluster Gender.</p> |
| Key words | competitive advantage, family business, history, sustainability, resource, uses of the past |

Subject title

Valuing the past: a lever for the sustainability of family businesses in western France.

Context and description of the subject

The health crisis, like the subprime crisis of 2008, has put family businesses back in the spotlight, via the media, because they are more resilient to crises than managerial companies. Generally known for their discretion, some of these multigenerational companies do not hesitate to tell their story and communicate it in the press, often regionally, following the example of the Breton agri-food group Triballat-Noyal, which became Olga.

In March 2020, in the "debate" entitled "Do companies tell themselves stories?" in the magazine *Entreprise & Histoire*, Corinne Le Page (Lepage et al. 2020), a lawyer and former Minister for the Environment, stressed the need for companies to stop telling themselves stories and instead to say what they have done, otherwise they risk being called to order by their employees, their customers, citizens and politicians. Ces discussions interrogent la valeur du « passé » des entreprises telle une ressource pour leur « futur ». L'enjeu pour les entreprises est donc de s'appuyer sur leur histoire pour pouvoir continuer d'avancer ce qui de fait inscrit leur action dans la temporalité.

The aim of this research is to examine the ways in which the past is brought into the present and to understand, from an interdisciplinary perspective combining management sciences and contemporary history, how this constitutes a resource for companies.

This research is rooted in the extension of work conducted in strategic management (Brunninge, 2009; Suddaby, Foster, and Quinn Trank, 2010; Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014 and Caillaud, Gorge, and Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2018) which show how history can constitute a resource for organisations and which have highlighted the need to undertake more empirical studies to understand more finely the mobilisation of the past by companies.

The approach is in line with the work of Ooi (2002), who sees history as knowledge constructed and mobilised by organisations in order to strengthen their identities and culture (Foster et al. 2017).

This work is also in line with the very dynamic history of companies, but it aims less at making a history of companies than at considering the relationship of companies to their history, a more original approach. This approach is more original. However, it implies that we also go through company histories, based on case studies, in order to understand which factors lead to which types of historicity regimes. The vocation of the thesis will consist more specifically in looking at categories of companies that are distinguished by their longevity. Among them are family businesses, transmitted from generation to generation (Antheume, Robic, and Barbelivien 2013).

Thus, for these types of firms, the subject aims to understand the mechanisms of their longevity that are at work.

The problematic that will guide the research will therefore be the following:

To what extent is valuing the past a resource for family businesses?

In this thesis, the objective will be to understand how the past can be a resource for the family business that ensures a certain longevity. It is indeed possible to retain the hypothesis that 'telling' one's story generates resources that provide competitive advantages that guarantee a certain durability.

This general problem can of course be broken down into several questions, in particular:

- - How history becomes a resource for a company?
 - What influence do representations of history have on the use of the past? Do women leaders have a different relationship to their history than men?
 - How do family businesses relate to their archives and those of the family? Is the creation of archives linked to the size of the company?
- Has history always been a resource for family businesses?
 - How has the use of the past evolved over the course of the company's history?

The thesis will cross the notions of: resource, competence and competitive advantage in relation to the valorisation of the past.

Resource, competence and competitive advantage :

According to Wernerfelt (1984), one of the founding authors of the Resources Based View (RBV) theory, the company's resources are made up of tangible and intangible assets, acquired in part externally and developed internally throughout its history, according to a long socialisation process which makes them difficult or even impossible to imitate and which consequently gives them value. Moreover, for Barney (1991), competence is the ability of the company to combine its resources, both tangible and intangible, to create a competitive advantage. In order for a company to gain a competitive advantage with its resources, it must articulate them and mobilise them. The history of the company as an intangible resource must be activated and mobilised to represent a competitive advantage. The management of a

company corresponds in particular to the exploitation of its resources and skills. Using its past is one of the ways of mobilising this resource and allows the company to consider its history as a resource rather than a brake on its development. In this respect, the use of the past represents a challenge for the sustainability of companies.

Valuing the past:

We will consider that the relationship to the past is more broadly integrated into the perception of time: past-present-future, which has been described in terms of "regimes of historicity" (Hartog 2003). The perception of time and in particular of the past is part of the process of social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1967). Thus, the company's past can be permanently interpreted and reinterpreted by its stakeholders and they can use it as a lever for their decisions. This means that if history can be perceived as a source of inertia for the company under the action of the routines inherent to the organisation, sometimes described as 'organisational memory' (Girod-Seville 1995), it can also be considered as a factor of change (Brunninge 2009).

Scientific issues

Although there is a growing body of research aimed at understanding how the past generates competitive advantages for companies that mobilise their past, it is still too rare. There is a need to deepen our understanding of this issue. Furthermore, among the research that has been conducted so far on this topic, the need to undertake more empirical studies has been highlighted. This thesis topic may make a contribution to this end.

Practical issues

This thesis work could open up perspectives in terms of the constitution and management of archives for family businesses, both large and small, and thus provide them with a good reflex for their archives, including the most recent ones, as it is known that the archiving of electronic documents poses specific questions. In this way, this research will contribute to providing companies with a tool to "write" and "tell" their history and thus be able to generate resources and a better positioning. In the same way, this thesis work can have a positive effect on the work of historians by changing the practices of companies regarding their archives.

Methodology

The research design proposed to understand how the valorisation of the past constitutes a resource that favours the durability of family businesses is essentially an exploratory qualitative methodology based on several cases. Access to the field, in this case the archives, will determine their characteristics. Semi-structured interviews with family business actors are also a key element of this work. This will lead to the 'creation' of original archives in accordance with the ethical rules of sociological research.

Although this is a subject for a thesis in management and history, there is no time limit. Indeed, the starting point of the research is contemporary and the analysis is retrospective, given that the subject is about how the company is interested in the past. Research in management and history requires a holistic study of each case in order to be able to make a social history. This leads to an interest in the men and women who make up the company and/or have 'made' the company, the family members in and outside the company, the family here, its organisation and its environment.

A geographical boundary is envisaged for reasons of opportunity. We are in the west of France, at the intersection of the Pays de la Loire and Brittany, where family capitalism is developed. Thanks to our

previous research within the Observatory of the Perenniality of Family Businesses, which we co-created and for which we are responsible, we know several companies in these territories. For the conduct of this research we would like to make available a large number of memoirs and interviews that are archived at the Observatory.

We believe that a relatively large and heterogeneous corpus is desirable in order to identify explanatory factors for the use of the past, such as size. We propose to work on companies of all sizes because most of the work conducted so far on the question of the use of the past by companies has been based on longitudinal studies of large companies (Brunninge 2009). The constraints linked to the accessibility of sources and the preference for what is easily visible certainly explain this situation. In order to carry out the surveys with the companies, a logbook will have to be kept by the doctoral student in an ethnographic perspective. It could prove to be an effective reflexive tool.

Correspondence with one of the LEMNA axes / Correspondence with one of the Nantes University axes (Health of the Future / Industry of the Future / Identities / EUniwel / Other identified axes (please specify)

This doctoral research will be part of the LEMNA's axis 2 "Transformations of Work", in the sense that it is interested in what organisations produce in a historical perspective. The thesis will be able to take advantage of the knowledge already produced in this field by the teacher-researchers attached to the axis.

More specifically, it will benefit on the one hand from the co-supervision of Paulette Robic – Associate Professor-HDR, member of the Lemna and of axis 2. and responsible for the Observatory of the Perennity of Family Enterprises. and on the other hand from that of Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, Professor of Contemporary History, member of the CRHIA - UFR Histoire, Nantes-University.

Moreover, positioning the thesis in the conception according to which history corresponds to knowledge manufactured and activated by companies to reinforce their identities and their culture, this research will be able to be registered in the axis SHS Identities of Nantes-University. In the same way, it could find its place in the I-Site NExT within the Gender Cluster since it requires a social history of companies and therefore of its actors - managers and employees, by analysing the role of men and women. In this case, the two co-directors, Paulette Robic and Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée are members of the Gender Cluster.

Timeframe envisaged

The multidisciplinary character - management sciences and contemporary history - will require research and consultation of archives. It is well known that the consultation of archives requires a lot of time, so some adjustments can of course be made during this doctoral work.

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| Year 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Administrative formalities and research agreement -In-depth reading and constitution of the bibliographic database -Literature review - Field research - Review and consultation of public archives. - Seminars, conferences and doctoral courses -First exploratory interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuation of the literature review -Individual and group interviews -Transcription of interviews -Analysis of exploratory data - Consultation and analysis of archives - 29th Days of History of Management and Organisations, Saint-Etienne France.. |
| Year 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Data processing and analysis (interviews) - Further consultation and analysis of archives - Enrichment and deepening of the literature review -Submission of papers - Doctoral seminars (management & history) and training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thesis plan -Doctoral seminars (Management & History) and training -Submission of papers 30 th Days of History of Management and Organisations - France. |
| Year 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Doctoral seminars (Management & History) and training -Submission of articles -Papers -Start of thesis writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing the thesis - Proofreading and correction of the thesis - Defending the thesis |

Selected bibliography

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Wernerfelt, Birger. 1984. « A resource-based view of the firm ». *Strategic management journal* 5 (2): 171-80.

More information

Fate of previously supervised PhDs

- Marine Gouédard : Professeure assistante en management. Escca de Bordeaux
- Rose Toki : Enseignant Chercheur Contractuel d'Enseignement et de Recherche -Faculté de Droit d'Economie et de Gestion - Département d'Economie Finance Entrepreneuriat - Université d'Angers.

Expérience dans l'encadrement doctoral

-Paulette Robic :

Co-direction thèse – avec Miruna Radu-Lefèvre (Audencia – Nantes) : Marine Gouédard : « *Une approche par la configuration pour comprendre l'influence familiale sur les stratégies d'innovation des entreprises familiales* », Nantes Université, soutenance le 26 juin 2019 -

- Direction de thèse : Rose Toki : « *Préparer les citoyens à la gestion des risques majeurs / risques de catastrophes à l'échelle des communes : Une approche par l'instrumentation gestionnaire* », Nantes Université, soutenance le 13 décembre 2021.

- Direction de thèse : Iliass Tayache : « *Le transfert de connaissances dans un contexte de succession familiale* », en cours - inscription 25 01 2021.

- Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée :

- Direction de thèse : Zélie Baud « *En notre siècle, les martyrs sont revenus* » : *les enjeux politiques et mémoriels des proclamations de martyrs au XXe siècle (1920-2005)* » Inscription 01-09-22

Average duration of theses already supervised- 4 ans

Nombre de thèses en cours financées par un contrat doctoral

- 1 : Contrat doctoral élève ENS Zélie Baud encadrement : Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée :