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Regional entrepreneurship : the role of communication between actors in local network. An application in southwest France.

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## Regional entrepreneurship : the role of communication between actors in local network. An application in southwest France

### Abstract

Social networks stimulate business growth by creating opportunities, reducing transaction costs and develops knowledge exchange (Cavallo et al. 2018). However, conceptual and empirical research on the importance of the regional network on entrepreneurial decisions is still rather limited. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore what is start-up businesses' perception of the local ecosystem. In order to better understand entrepreneurs behavior within their environment, an exploratory study is conducted on business founders located in the southwest of France. 15 qualitative interviews reveal that local networking is systematically considered as playing an important role in the start-up creation. Therefore, communication among actors of entrepreneurial ecosystem is perceived as a key variable in order to create conditions for network dynamism. This research concludes by discussing the main results obtained and focuses on the importance of interactions between local actors, through a communicative ecosystem.

**Keywords:** network, communication, territory, regional, local, entrepreneurial ecosystem.

## Regional entrepreneurship : the role of communication between actors in local network. An application in Southwest France

### Introduction

« Since SMEs and entrepreneurs are loyal to their territory and create stable, local employment, the presence of a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem immediately benefits regions and cities by reinforcing their social and economic tissue » (Markkula, President of European Entrepreneurial Region, 2015). Actually, the territory constitutes a relevant observation scale for the entrepreneurial field (Surlumont et al., 2014). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of relational aspect or network (Turkina, 2018). Social networks stimulate business growth by reducing transaction costs, creating business opportunities, and generating knowledge spillovers. However, conceptual and empirical research on the importance of the regional network on entrepreneurial decisions is still rather limited. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore this specific point by raising the following issue : what is entrepreneurs' perception in matters of local ecosystem conditions ?

The importance of entrepreneurship explains the growing interest of researchers and decision-makers in understanding and promoting this activity to support economic development (Minnitti, 2008). Therefore, this theme is gathering researchers, professors, business leaders, consultants and politicians. As the report of the European Commission (2012) points out: "entrepreneurship is an essential component of endogenous growth and is essential for sustainable regional and local development". As a matter of fact, the creation (and keeping businesses going, especially SMEs) is crucial for the economic development of a region. Why are SMEs of interest ? Their weight is significant in several aspects, depending on whether one considers their share in employment, in added value created at a national level, or in the research and innovation effort. Indeed, France represents 4 million SMEs, which constitutes 99% of companies, 48.5% of salaried employment (in full-time equivalent). They realize 43.4% of the added value (Center of Documentation Economy Finance, 2018).

In order to better understand entrepreneurs perception of their environment, an exploratory study is conducted on 15 business founders' located in the southwest of France. Judging from these qualitative interviews, a local network based on strong communication systematically appears as playing an important role in the start-up creation. This research concludes by discussing the main results obtained and focuses on the importance of interactions between local actors that allows regional co-construction.

## Entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) and interconnexion with other actors

The ecosystem represents a diverse set of interdependent actors in a geographic region that influences the trajectory of the entire stakeholder group and potentially the economy as a whole (Cohen, 2006). Various definitions and perspectives of entrepreneurial ecosystem can be presented in table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual aspects of entrepreneurial ecosystem and interconnexions (adapted from Cavallo, Ghezzi and Balocco, 2018)

Authors (year)	Definition of EE
Van de Ven (1993)	“Networks of actors involved in developing each function, and how these functions and networks of actors interacted over time to facilitate and constrain innovation development” (p.218)
Spilling (1996)	“The entrepreneurial system consists of a complexity and diversity of actors, roles, and environmental factors that interact to determine the entrepreneurial performance of a region or locality” (p.1)
Neck, Meyer, Cohen and Corbett (2004)	« Entrepreneurial ecosystems are defined as the interacting components of entrepreneurial systems, which foster new firm creation »
Isenberg (2011)	“The entrepreneurship ecosystem consists of six domains. Actually, the entrepreneurship ecosystem consists of hundreds of specific elements that, for convenience, we group into six general domains: a conducive culture, enabling policies and leadership, availability of appropriate finance, quality human capital, venture-friendly markets for products, and a range of institutional and infrastructural supports” (p.1)
Mack and Mayer (2015)	“Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EE) consist of interacting components, which foster new firm formation and associated regional entrepreneurial activities” (p.3)
Mason and Brown (2014)	“A set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors (both potential and existing), entrepreneurial organizations (e.g. firms, venture capitalists, business angels, banks), institutions (universities, public sector agencies, financial bodies) and entrepreneurial processes (e.g. the business birth rate, numbers of high growth firms, levels of ‘blockbuster entrepreneurship’, number of serial entrepreneurs, degree of sell-out mentality within firms and levels of entrepreneurial ambition) which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment” (p. 5)
Stam (2015)	“The entrepreneurial ecosystem as a set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship within a particular territory (p.1765)

Audretsch and Belitksi (2016)	“A dynamic community of inter dependent actors (entrepreneurs, supplies, buyer, government, etc.) and system-level institutional, informational and socioeconomic contexts... interact via information technologies and networks to create new ideas and more efficient policies” (p. 4)
Auerswald, and Dani (2017)	“Represents the higher-level infrastructure that enables interactions between the entrepreneurial agents and institutions in the industrial sector... They cut across industries and focus on the environment surrounding entrepreneurs - with entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship clearly at the centre” (p.98 and p.113)

In this paper, we investigate a perspective that considers entrepreneurial ecosystem as bringing together public policies, general or specialist support structures, research and funding organizations, entrepreneur clubs to allow entrepreneurship connections (Morris *et al.*, 2015). One specific way to boost SMEs creation is to specifically promote these interconnection approaches with the surrounding actors (Cavallo, Ghezzi and Balocco, 2018). For Kofler and Marcher (2018), SMEs performance depends on the characteristics of the regional system where various factors such as firms, academia, and political decision-makers communicate with each others, to generate trust and effective collaboration. As a matter of fact, regional network actors must be strategically linked. These authors also indicate that in addition to regional network-level characteristics, a firm's success also depends on its network position and how it uses the network structure of its ecosystem.

## Methodology

How do entrepreneurs' perceive their local ecosystem conditions ? In order to better understand this issue, an exploratory study focused on companies located in the largest regional technopole that brings together 150 companies (1300 jobs). Qualitative interviews were conducted on a sample of 15 companies (random sampling, table 2) in order to collect their perceptions of local ecosystem conditions (average length of interviews: one hour and a half). The choice was made to conduct these interviews in a semi-directive way (transcription available upon request). This type of interview is very flexible because it allows the interviewer to evoke a theme before or after another depending on the sequence of ideas specific to the respondent. Before conducting these interviews, pretest has been conducted (three times) to ensure its effectiveness (guide available upon request). Information is gathered from the founder: these entrepreneurs are individuals who know how to detect opportunities, innovate, take risks and create new goods and services. They are at the root of business dynamics and fuel global economic growth (Julien, 2016).

In parallel line, in-depth discussions were also held with the director of the technopole, the entrepreneurial support officer, the incubator support officer and the regional investment agency to

have a broader scope and a better understanding of regional start-up. A manual thematic analysis was carried out. It aims at finding recurring themes between the different interviews of the corpus and the related contents.

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample

Company	Sector activity	Creation
I.	Management software ERP	2015
E.	Artificiel respirators	2014
Nh.	Solvent-free conductive electrical coating	2014
Nm.	Eco-friendly plastic food-packaging	2017
B.	Dematerialization of accounting documents and IA	2017
S.	Magnetic inspection for pipelines	2016
Er.	Training and business consulting	2011
M.	Cartography and optimization of delivery	2012
T.	Assessment of skills, professional reconversion and training	2018
B.p	Delivery of baskets composed of local specialties	2017
A.t.	Design strategies for local actors and public sector tools	2017
J.	Industrial consultancy	2017
L.a.	Health and adapted sport application for medical purpose	2018
P.	Education and sciences application	2017
En.	Energy activities and project development	2016

Information can be given in order to better understand the studied territory : the region of Pau, located in the southwestern part of France has a cluster configuration that appeals specific entrepreneurial competencies. It is generally assumed that clusters reinforce the attractiveness of a territory because they drain multiple activities related to a sector. Pau is located in a territory with multidisciplinary knowledge activities such as the geosciences sector (2300 scientific researchers at Total's international center, with one of the ten most powerful supercomputers in the world), the horse cluster (So-Horse is the second equine training center in France), chemistry (7500 jobs in Chemparc), agribusiness (more than half of the territory is agricultural) and aeronautics (7000 jobs).

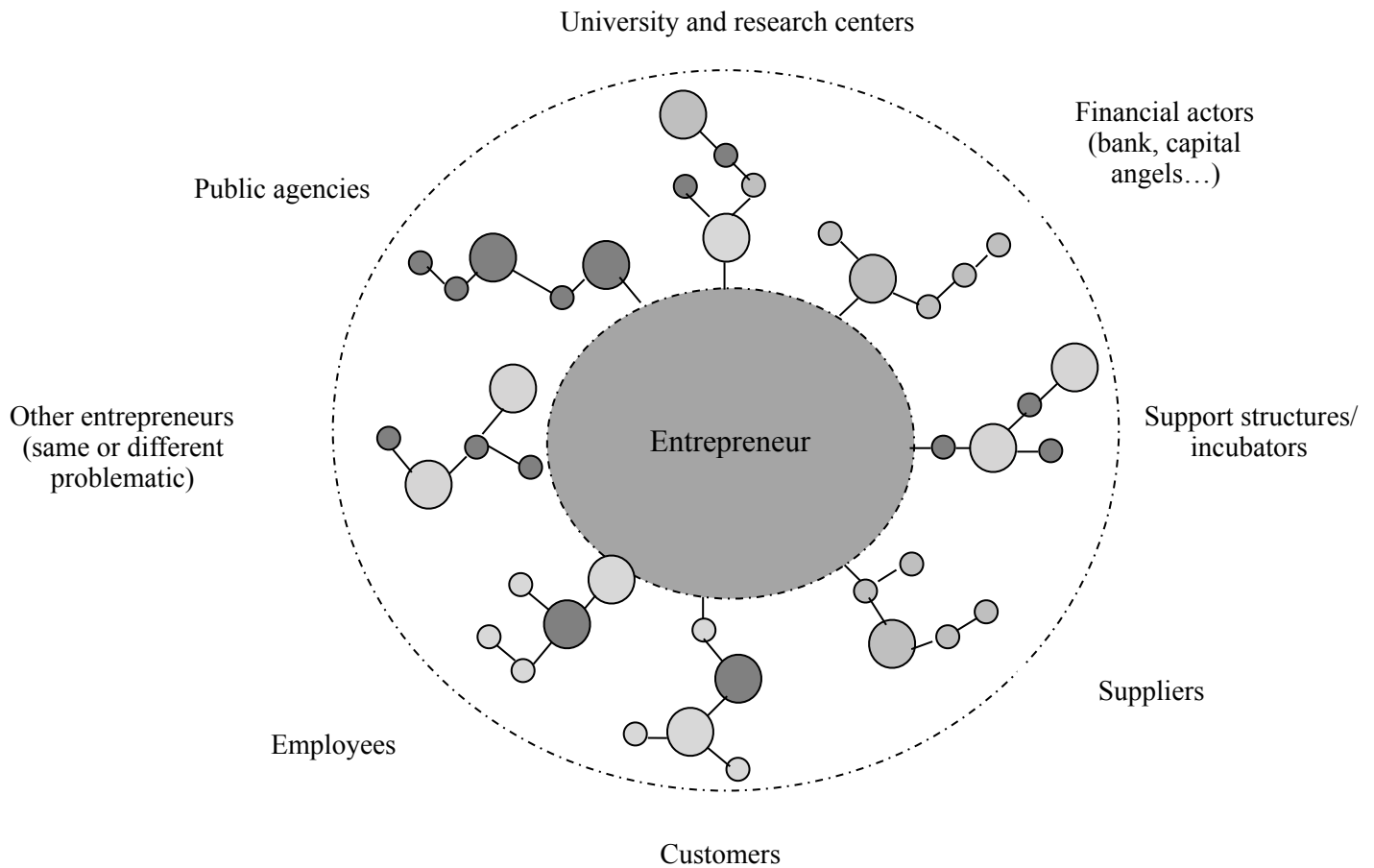
## Results and findings

After examining patterns of meaning, different themes have emerged. It appears that start-up creation decision holds a multidimensional aspect (illustrative verbatims are presented in appendix 1). As a matter of fact, different factors are cited by the sample: the structure of the sector (moderate competition that attracts opportunity business-seeker, vitality of the industry thanks to the various clusters), the presence of institutions supporting companies (local university and research laboratories, guidance and support structures). There are also cultural factors related to the quality of life that are cited as determinant in business creation (professional and personal balance). More specifically, one theme appears in all interviews : the interlink among the regional network actors and the necessity to communicate between actors (Figure 1). Indeed, the main interest lies in this capacity of developing relational environments favorable to entrepreneurs. These environments are the primary source of opportunity, not only in terms of customers, but also in terms of suppliers and partnerships. They allow them to multiply the exchanges of information and the creation of opportunities. These relationships can take several forms. Hence, the following network-related applications are identified by the interviewee: a) mix senior and junior entrepreneurs to benefit from feedback and mentoring b) gather intra-junior entrepreneurs that often ask themselves the same questions and who go through the same phases, regardless of the nature of the activity, c) introduce at an early stage entrepreneurs to institutions to match public territorial aspirations with private economic issues, d) facilitate relations between academics and entrepreneurs e) create a bridge between entrepreneurs and (potential) investors / banks, business angels. Insights are useful for entrepreneurs by better aligning their entrepreneurial propositions with their stakeholder relationships to value co-creation. In fact, effective co-creation is perceived by the sample as even more efficient in the local ecosystem if the SMEs are open to both inflows and outflows of knowledge. For instance, business networking events bring together groups of entrepreneurs who communicate through sharing and developing ideas. These events attract people from different experience levels and backgrounds, who are all looking for inspiration, advice, mentors and opportunities generally speaking.

The quality of the relationships within the entrepreneurial ecosystem as well as the existence of a communication are essential and should come from different parties: entrepreneurs but also institutions such as consular chambers (CCI), the town hall, the agglomeration ... Identification of all actors should be done easily, especially « the » strategic contact who could facilitate procedures or linkage. In fact, it could be an identification and insertion in a network that will facilitate the interconnections between individuals and companies (presentation to a business network), the

pooling of experiences and the sharing of good practices. These specific conditions - with listening and involved actors - help the entrepreneur in his project forecasting.

Figure 1. Entrepreneur's professional network and actors of communication



## Discussion

According to several scholars (Stam, 2015), too much attention has been spent on the elements of the system without proper importance being given to the connections between these elements and their dynamics (Acs et al., 2016). Communication is central in the relation with all stakeholders : it is what actually creates link and synergy in the ecosystem. Interviews reveal that communication is essential at all stages of entrepreneurial process, such as to generate an innovative idea, to communicate it to other parties, to materialize it in a successful profitable business and to organize a team.

Scholars refer to the entrepreneurial ecosystem as the interaction of different conditions: in fact, entrepreneurship takes place in a community of interdependent actors, individuals, entities and regulatory bodies within a given geographic area (Freeman and Audia, 2006; Isenberg, 2010;

Malecki, 2011; Kuratko et al., 2017). As Cooke et al (1997) mention, entrepreneurial ecosystem refers to the networks and institutions linking knowledge producing hubs such as universities and public research labs with innovative firms within a region. These linkages allow knowledge to spill over between different organizations, increasing a region's overall innovativeness. This research underlines how network conditions affect a regional entrepreneurship. The relational aspects appear as being based on communication between different actors that helps building strong relationships. The paper's findings indicate that each local actor can contribute to a creation of collective skills. In fact, entrepreneurial process is considered as a collective process, which supposes a multiplication of interconnections that can favor the collective pursuit of local opportunities (Venkataraman et al., 2012).

Concerning the « listening and involved actors » dimension, it is a major point of differentiation that is not necessarily found in large metropolitan cities characterized by the lack of availability (because solicited by a greater number of entrepreneurs). In this regard, Levratto and Torrès (2010) point out that because of their greater relative size, capitals have more difficulty than middle-sized city in structuring their offer of services and support to entrepreneurs. The devices have less readability and the multiplication of actors can also promote a dispersion, or even a dilution of the devices.

Even on a practical level, public institutions have been concerned by the importance of local networking. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development affirmed, almost twenty years ago that "government action must take into account the regional and local factors that influence entrepreneurship and build on these characteristics to encourage partnerships between SMEs. It must use local institutions, business groups and linkages to create and strengthen microeconomic links ».

## Conclusion

The ecosystem represents a diverse set of interdependent actors in a geographic region that influences the eventual trajectory of the entire stakeholder group and potentially the economy as a whole (Cohen 2006, Morris et al., 2015). The entrepreneurial ecosystem brings together public policies, general or specialist support structures, research and funding organizations, entrepreneur clubs and events to raise awareness and strengthen entrepreneurship (Theodoraki and Messeghem, 2016). One of the ways to boost the economic fabric of SMEs is therefore to promote networking approaches and groupings with the surrounding actors. Clearly, these actors should be interlinked in order to allow communication and to generate local SMEs development.

The findings represent an exploratory approach to a better understanding of stakeholders' relationships, allowing entrepreneurial development in a local level. This study supports the idea that a local network can take advantage from its regional characteristics to better communicate among its actors. It serves as a basis for future research on communicative entrepreneurial ecosystems. Further research is needed to better understand the conditions of a better communication in a networking context. Other research orientations could also identify communication skills of managers in entrepreneurship organization.

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## Appendix 1 - Examples of verbatims of the exploratory research

Company	Sector	Illustrative verbatims
I.	Management software ERP	<p>« Knowledge of local economic actors, business portfolio. It's easy to be in contact with key actors, and to talk to them about our professional objectives.</p> <p>Entrepreneurship is a matching between founders' competencies and opportunities that a territory offers. When people are looking in the same direction, it's easier to reach the objectif.</p> <p>From the moment that potential clients are far from big cities (Toulouse, Bordeaux), it's easier to find a position because of the lack of major competitors. We all know each other »</p>
E.	Artificiel respirators	<p>« To bring into value a sharp know-how available locally after the departure of a company, know-how which was thus preserved on the territory thanks to the availability of a specialized work force, and the actions of public institutions who were involved in our project and who gave as much information as possible in order to make this project concrete. »</p>
Nh	Solvent-free conductive electrical coating	<p>« Technology transfer by the University research center:</p> <p>After several years of experience in the sector, an innovative concept emerged which has matured following research conducted in connection with a university laboratory.</p> <p>An interface position between university research and the industrial world led to the creation of the start-up (transfer of technology). »</p>
Nm	Eco-friendly plastic food-packaging	<p>« Technology transfer by the University research center:</p> <p>Entrepreneurial valorization of research work carried out in connection with the university</p> <p>Quality environment: creation of an innovative product with a strong development potential and a related university institute »</p>
B.	Dematerialization of accounting documents and IA	<p>« Opportunity to establish as a precursor / pioneer in a territory with growth potential (low competition)</p> <p>"In Pau, there is everything to do, not like in other cities with fierce competition"</p> <p>« There was no other company offering such services in this territory and it was good to be among the first, 10 years ago. Public institutions and the incubator staff were involved, they played a decisive role, talking with us and redirecting to the right person»</p>
S.	Magnetic inspection for pipelines	<p>« The headquarter is based in Paris and an office opened in Pau to be closer to the market (attractive effect of the cluster)</p> <p>Presence on the territory because its specific resources match with the specialized skills of the company</p> <p>The activity of the company is based on the pipelines so proximity with the market (Oil &amp; Gas) and with the physical facilities in necessary.</p> <p>In Paris, there are too many actors to deal with, while in Pau, we can know each other and exchange. »</p>
Er	Training and business consulting	<p>« Knowing the local economic actors, developing easily an "address book » possibility to reach and to have access to different actors that facilitate connexions, and to have close ties within the network is determinant. »</p>

Company	Sector	Illustrative verbatims
M.	Cartography and optimization of delivery	<p>« Thanks to a first experience in this sector, it was possible to detect the technological limits of the existing offers on the market (product actually didn't fulfill the customers' need). Therefore identification of an opportunity (vacant position) was possible</p> <p>Interesting perspective of the region because of the easily reachable local ecosystem, on a human scale. In one month, it is possible to identify the local Who's who»</p>
T.	Assessment of skills, professional reconversion and training	<p>« Balance between private life (family ties and leisure) and professional life in a region that offers the possibility of joining both aspects.</p> <p>Network aspect: more accessible and available, compared to major cities where linking is more complicated. Communication tend to be easy with available individuals</p> <p>Lower competition, compared to bigger cities, so there are more interesting opportunities here. »</p>
B.p.	Delivery of baskets composed of local specialties	<p>« Personal knowledge of the region helps to better perceive the actors / dynamics ...</p> <p>It would be interesting to boost the ecosystem by allowing more exchange between people.</p> <p>Concretely, to build links:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Connect young designers with experienced entrepreneurs who have been there,</li> <li>2. Connect young entrepreneurs with each other</li> </ol> <p>Promote places and times that facilitate skills transfer (sectored or open to all) and communication between these people. »</p>
A.t.	Design strategies for local actors and public sector tools	<p>« The importance of the presence of an ecosystem that can allow exchanges between actors of a territory, a form of collaborative dynamics where everyone brings a particular light to the problem on the ground.</p> <p>We all have to talk to each other because if people stay on their side, things will not be able to move forward.</p> <p>It is necessary to facilitate inter-connections between individuals, between companies and institutions ».</p>
J.	Industrial consultancy	<p>« There is a certain motivation when you are in contact with a public institution or other private actors that pay attention to your project. You need to feel heard, understood by others ».</p>
L.a.	Health and adapted sport application for medical purpose	<p>« Being part of a network avoid beginner's mistakes, it allows meeting with key people who connect to the right person or facilitate certain decisions, role of facilitator of contacts ».</p>
P.	Education and sciences application	<p>« None of our business would have been possible without getting in contact with local actors, exchanging about possible things that could be developed locally.</p> <p>There is a possibility for whoever is motivated and determined to launch its startup. People are clearly available, especially if compared with other cities. It's obvious. »</p>
E.n.	Energy activities and project development	<p>« When I started my structure, I was put in the loop by people in charge of the incubator, which allowed me to meet several people who helped me to know others and and so on. It is possible de directly seize opportunities and to talk to experienced managers, who have a national and even international status. »</p>