

# Thicker Than Water: Balancing Individual Career Goals and the Family Business

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**KEYWORDS:** Family Business, Conflict, Succession, career.

With family-owned businesses accounting for a whopping share of the economy, the nature of family members' *individual* career development in that sector is important and interesting. How indeed do family members perceive their own individual career management needs when they work for the family firm? Surprisingly little research has been done on this topic (although many studies have focused on intergenerational succession). **Our study** (<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/CDI-06-2020-0156/full/html>) shines a light on this subject and suggests a way forward for both families and future researchers.

It stands to reason that family members experience some tension between family requirements and their own career hopes and aspirations. After all, family members are “privileged” to have a career, and perhaps leadership, available at the company by dint of birth. Yet in some sense, they are also “burdened” (to deal with any family pressures and grapple with the fact that working at the company is a “given”). So many factors come into play that are unique to this cohort: family loyalty (often a guiding motivation), being “socialized” into the family business from a young age, family pressures and expectations, educational goals beyond the realm of the business, the relative ease of this career choice, etc. So whose aspirations are being fulfilled with family company employment – the individual's, the family's, or both? We opted to explore this area – the fault lines where individual and group needs meet.

Our study involved in-depth interviews with 15 participants who are members of owning families and between 20 and 50 years old – the phase of life when individual career development is especially relevant for

most people. Subjects worked at family owner-managed small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in traditional industries (manufacturing, sales, repair, etc.) that were well established locally. The study was conducted in Sweden, a country notable for its social, political and economic stability, gender equality and support of individualism.

## What We Found

Our research brought forth the following five interrelated themes expressed by family members working in their family's business. Each is a useful lens for seeing and understanding the dynamics of individual career management within the family business:

**The “education trap”:** Family members at family-owned businesses are less likely to pursue college or graduate degrees, instead tending to learn on the job whatever they need to know to acquire competence in their roles, and assume those roles sooner. A lack of educational credentials can potentially hobble family members if they decide to leave the family business at some point. (Then again, a prospective employer may understand that real-world, experience-based capabilities are more important than letters after one's name.)

**Entering the family business as the “default” option:** For many family members, it seems natural if not inevitable that they'll enter the family business, after spending time there while growing up and developing emotional ties to it. This is not a case of outright family pressure, but it can lead to a general lack of alternative career choices. On the other hand, some study members said having the family “default” option made it easier to venture into a different career path knowing there was a backup plan.

**Lack of individual career goals beyond the family business:** Individual family members tend to make the family business goals their own as well, rather than cultivating a full range of individual goal-setting for career development.

**The “blessed curse” of the family business career opportunity:** The blessing for individuals is the greater career opportunities available to them as members of the family – which is often seen by other workers as preferential treatment. The curse is that it locks in a career path that limits alternative career possibilities.

**Following the “paved road” is not viewed as career development:** Many family firms don’t consider individual career development for family members and many family individuals don’t do so either. Family members in our sample often made their own career needs less central than the company’s. Simply following the preordained “paved road” is not seen as a career per se within the family business.

Further, these themes can be simplified into three conclusions:

- Family business needs are the primary focus when family members consider educational choices and also whether to join the business versus other career options.
- Goal setting tends to emphasize family business development needs rather than family members’ career development paths.
- Individual career development for family members tends to be neglected at family businesses, as it is considered less as a “career” when the key roles at the company have been earmarked just for members of the family.

The tension between the needs of the family business and the individual is not necessarily experienced as negative, as long as there is sufficient alignment between the two.

## Takeaways

What can business owners learn from this research? Well, one primary recommendation is for family businesses to be aware of the issue in the first place—career development is often not even on the radar at family enterprises. Overall, family firms should pay more attention to individual career management

within the business. They may need consultants, teachers or other external support to help them establish a co-evolution of the family business *and* its individual family members with their personalized career development needs.

Family members working at the business should also be frank about their own career management needs, and seek out a mentor if needed. And remember that both individuals and the family firm benefit when family members cultivate as wide a range of skills and talents as possible; feel the freedom to make wise personal and family-based career choices; and attain true career satisfaction whether inside or outside the family firm. Family business stakeholders can all celebrate other family members who venture into unrelated fields: Eventually they will lend their help, labor, resources and allegiance to the family enterprise in some way.

We recommend that further research be conducted on this important and under-examined subject, with bigger samplings and perhaps a focus on larger family-owned businesses, or some that have already seen several generations of succession.

## Explore the Research

**[Torn between individual aspirations and the family legacy – individual career development in family firms,](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/CDI-06-2020-0156/full/html)**

(<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/CDI-06-2020-0156/full/html>) by Leona Achtenhagen, Kajsa Haag, Kajsa Hultén and Jen Lundgren, Career Development International, January 2022.