DAIRY FARM SUCCESSION: RURAL PROFESSIONALS' SKILLS REQUIREMENTS AND TRAINING NEEDS

Sub-Theme: Labour Force of The Future

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Abstract:

Family farm business succession planning can be complex since every situation and family differs, and emotive issues can eventuate. Farm succession planning generally involves input from a range of rural professional from different fields, such as accountants, lawyers, bankers and farm consultants, who work as a team to provide knowledge and skills from their respective fields. A case study with six rural professionals was conducted to seek information on farm succession consultancy. This paper reports on the rural professionals' views on knowledge and skills required for succession planning consultancy, gaps in skills and knowledge, and training opportunities. Developing succession consulting process skills is more challenging than advancing the technical skills that RPs already have expertise in. Findings show that there are limited formal opportunities for succession advisors to learn the process skills required for succession consulting and these are largely acquired through experience. Those rural professionals who had been mentored found this was particularly helpful for developing these skills. In contrast, rural professionals identified that technical skills, and opportunities to develop and update these, are available from their professional organisations and other sources. Skills requirements, and available opportunities and resources are identified, and opportunities for further training suggested.

Keywords: *Family business, rural professional, farm advisor, succession planning, professional development, New Zealand*

Introduction

The majority of farms worldwide are family owned (Lowder et al 2014) and New Zealand is no exception. In 2015, close to 70% of New Zealand dairy farms were owner-operated (LIC & DairyNZ 2016). Research has shown that many New Zealand farming families believe it is important to retain ownership within the family (Nuthall & Old 2014), and eventually these farm business owners will need a succession plan. Trusted advisors can play a crucial role in this succession planning (Strike 2013), which is part of a family farm business's strategic planning. An advisor who can offer both reliable advice, and a sound process, can have a positive influence in preparing the family for succession (Reay et al 2013).

In New Zealand, rural professionals (RPs) who advise farming clients on succession come from a range of backgrounds, including accountants, bankers, farm consultants, financial planners and lawyers (Blackman 2011, Dooley & Smeaton 2010). Few of these rural professionals (RPs) are experienced and recognised succession advisors. Others can lack confidence or interest in working with clients on succession planning (Dooley & Payne 2008).

The knowledge required and the complexity of this process means that a team of RPs is involved in succession planning for a family business, with one RP often taking a leading role. These RPs are professionals in their own field with expertise in technical issues relevant to succession such as business structures, legal or tax implications, finances and farm management. However, they are also being asked to assist clients with processes such as succession planning and governance which require skills most RPs are not formally trained in. Managing the family succession process is increasingly challenging, affected by: complex and diverse business models; high land prices; a need for business viability; changing expectations of the stakeholders; and the risk of damaging family relationships in the process. Furthermore, there can be no definitive succession planning process because every farming business and family differs, so processes and structures need to be tailored to suit the family (Blackman 2011).

Upton et al (1993) state that a good consulting practice should be well grounded in theory, with theory guiding practice. However, for many professionals, their learning after qualifying as professionals is largely 'experiential' (Kolb 1984), particularly for the development of process skills. Most RPs are not explicitly trained in how to assist clients with strategic, extended and people-focussed consultancy processes such as those for succession planning and governance. Acquiring the consulting skills and knowledge for advising on succession planning requires more than just learning the technical skills. Process skills development, including skilful conflict management skills, are required. Schein (1999, p20) defines process consulting as ‘the creation of a relationship with the client that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in the client’s internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client’. Thus for the most part, the consultant’s role in the process is to assist and support client(s) to find their own solution and then take ownership of this solution (Schein 1987). RPs tend to learn their process skills ‘on the job’, and may lack the process skills, knowledge and theory, and inclination, to effectively negotiate the complex family relationships and often non-explicit family expectations which can arise in succession planning.

Most succession research has focussed on the family. There has been little work done on how professional advisors work on succession planning with their family farm business clients. The objectives of this research were to first investigate the practices and processes of RPs advising their family farm business clients on succession planning and implementation, and second, to identify the RPs views on industry knowledge and skills gaps relevant to succession consultancy practice, and any training and development needs in this area. This paper addresses the second objective. Findings will help in identifying needs, and planning the development of training opportunities for RPs.

Method

A case study approach (Dey 1993) was employed to investigate the background, professional practice, knowledge and skills gaps, and training needs of six RPs working with family farm business clients on succession. To capture some of the diversity in RPs working in the succession field, RPs from different professions (accountants, farm consultants, banker, lawyer), and specialisations (specialist, generalist) were interviewed (Table 1). The main case selection criterion was that they had some experience and interest in farm succession consulting. The business, and their role in this, affects their access to colleagues’ expertise and own level of experience, the amount of succession work they do reflect their level of specialisation in this area, and succession viability and strategies can differ for different farming types or SMEs. In 2014 and 2015, Agri One held university-level governance and succession courses, and some of the RPs interviewed attended one these courses. These courses advocated a process consulting approach. Course attendance was a criterion for some RPs selection to gain insight into the usefulness of the course and their views on the PC approach proposed. Other RPs were selected simply because they were known to be experienced in farm succession consulting.

Table 1: Case study respondents

	Role in the business	**Business the RP works for**	**Clients**	**Succession work**	**Agri One Course**
RP1	Accountant, 1 of 6 Directors, Succession planning specialist	Independent Accounting and Advisory firm, member of an international accountancy group	Mostly SMEs 25% to 30% of clients are sheep and beef farmers	35% succession work and increasing	Yes
RP2	Accountant and business / farm adviser, 1 of 5 Partners	Accountancy firm with 30 staff	80% sheep and beef, 15% dairy farmers	15% to 20% succession work	No
RP3	Farm Consultant, Partner in the Company	Farm Advisory company with 8 independent consultants	Predominantly dairy farm businesses	30% strategy & governance work, including succession	Yes
RP4	Dairy Farm Consultant, 1 of 5 Directors	Rural Consultancy firm. Offices in two regions	Specialises in dairying	20% work is succession & governance, may specialise in future	Yes
RP5	Rural Banker, Succession Specialist	Bank	Large farming clientele, 60% dairy farmers.	100%	No
RP6	Lawyer, Senior Associate, in the Rural Team (1 of 5 lawyers)	Regional law firm with 6 offices	Rural clients from across all agriculture areas	10% to 15% of rural team's work	Yes

It was recognised that the selection criteria could result in a non-representative sample, however, this is a norm in case study research. The fact that the RPs had either attended a university-level course pertinent to succession consultancy, or were known to be succession consultants, suggested they would have an established practice and process for this succession consultancy (pre- and post-course) that they could comment on, and / or given succession consultancy serious consideration.

The interviews were exploratory and focussed on the RPs farm succession consultancy, rather than their other work. A semi-structured interview approach provided flexibility to adapt questions to better explore the topic in the interview process. This was particularly useful because of the variation in the RPs roles and approaches to succession consultancy, allowing the interview to be adapted to allow for this diversity.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. A thematic approach (Dey 1993) was used in the data analysis for the study: RPs were asked about their: background, experience and training; clients; practice and processes; and industry training needs. To help identify industry needs, RPs were asked what they consider works well for them in their practice and what they consider to be more challenging or would be useful to have further training in. They were also asked more generally what training might be useful for RPs working in farm business succession planning, what resources (including courses) they have found to be useful in developing their practice and what might be needed. Those that attended the Agri One succession and governance courses gave their opinion on these courses.

Results

The skills and knowledge that the RPs considered to be useful to RPs working in farm succession are described, followed by the RPs suggestions for training and development.

Skills and knowledge required for farm succession advisory work

Table 2 summarises the skills and knowledge that the RPs identified as being important for farm succession advisory work. ‘Strategic thinking’ and ‘systems thinking’ were identified as beneficial inherent attributes. Other attributes were categorised into process skills and technical knowledge.

The process consulting skills identified by the RPs reflected the skills that the RPs used in their own succession planning work. People skills, communication skills, and understanding and managing the process came through strongly as being important, particularly by those RPs managing the process and working with clients in the earlier stages of the process. Technical skills were largely around understanding business models and their implications, and recognising and analysing opportunities.

Table 2: Skills and knowledge important to RPs working in farm succession.

Skills and knowledge required
Inherent traits • Systems thinking • Strategic Thinking

Process consulting skills
• Be aware of the importance of succession planning and raise this with clients
• Be able to initiate the succession planning process
• Understand the succession planning process
• Empathy. Asking the right questions.
• Identify who needs to be involved
• Identify family wants and expectations, and ensure shared communication
• People management e.g. the family
    o Understand family relationship dynamics
    o Understand the personalities
    o Understand the capabilities
    o Encourage and manage communication
    o Understand and manage conflicts
• Communication skills
• Understanding industry context
• Change management understanding and skills
• Identify capability in or available to the business, and address gaps
• Avoid conflicts of interest
• Be able to collaborate, and confidently engage, with other RPs in coming up with a plan and implementing this
• Understand management transition requirements, and possibly support and manage this e.g. farm company advisory or governance group
• At level lower than governance (strategic management), be able to discuss the business with clients and ensure the business has, or can develop, the skills required at this level (within the business or external e.g. consultant)

Technical knowledge and skills • Have models of succession and the succession planning process which are useful for explaining these to clients • Understand the need for a strong business, and be able to evaluate business performance and viability • Able to recognise what is possible (strategies, opportunities). • Understand asset management, including off-farm investment. Can advise on using equity, including farm business equity, to grow the overall business • Understand business structures e.g. legal, financial and other implications such as flexibility, risk, asset protection, tax, transfer, control, transparency • Have the technical skills to implement succession in association with other RPs e.g. put business structures and legal documentation in place • Understand non-family succession business models which require governance • Understand business governance and management, and structures required

Training and development needs and recommendations for succession advisory work

The RPs considered that succession training opportunities and resources are largely required in the soft skills area (i.e. process consulting) where few structured training opportunities are available, rather than in the technical knowledge and skills. They pointed out that RPs already have technical knowledge and skills, and undertake training in these areas as part of their professional development in their area of expertise e.g. seminars on business structures from an accounting or legal perspective. Also, in succession planning, RPs work in teams with other RPs with the technical skills they lack so a pool of expertise is available, although the process is often driven by one RP.

The RPs came up with a range of training opportunities and resources which can benefit RPs working on succession with rural clients, some of which are available and some were suggestions where training opportunities and resources are lacking. These courses and resources are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Training and resources for New Zealand RPs working in farm succession.

Training and resources available and suggested	
Industry courses and seminars conferences (Mostly technical)	• Offered by professional bodies - accounting, TEO (tax), legal, NZIPIM. Meet RPs PD requirements
Industry Conferences	• Similar to above
Succession and Governance courses (Technical / Process)	• Institute of Directors, Institute of Management (Governance), Australian course (Family Communication), Agri One (Governance and Succession)
Internal organisation courses (Process)	• Banks, MAF in the ‘old days’, HR in organisations • Sales, negotiation, leadership, management, communication skills
Mentoring by experienced industry people (Technical / Process)	• Useful for strategic areas such as succession, governance and equity partnerships where every case is different so cannot learn by repetition. • Provides observation, backup support & evaluation • Some larger firms do this in-house. Some RPs had been mentored via their organisation • ***Industry mentoring scheme suggested***
Professional training (Technical)	• University qualification
Further academic study (Technical / Process)	• ***Paper or Course on soft skills drawing on expertise across the University suggested***
Webinars (Technical/ Process)	• Available on industry organisation websites

Reading (Technical / Process)	• Industry articles and books on succession and related topics • Books on management and working with people
Models to explain concepts (Technical / Process Resource)	• e.g. RPs find the 3 circle family model useful • ***Development of models to explain succession process and outcomes suggested***
Experience, on the job training (Technical / Process)	• Work-related skills e.g. consultancy skills, business structures, equity partnerships
Time spent working in the area (Technical / Process)	• Specialisation increases experience and expertise
Colleagues with expertise in own discipline and other RPs (Mostly technical)	• Experts in different fields within a firm that can be consulted e.g. business structures, legal, accounting, tax implications
Informal learning from others (Technical / Process)	• Discussion and working with colleagues and other RPs
Personal experience (Technical / Process)	• Personal farm succession experience developed awareness of the process, what worked well, what did not, and why

Both formal and informal training or learning opportunities were identified. Formal learning included seminars, courses, formal mentoring, academic qualifications. Informal learning included learning through experience (work and personal) and from colleagues and other RPs, and self-directed learning e.g. reading, webinars. Models of structures and processes were also identified as a useful resource by some RPs, not only for their own understanding and as a way to think through a situation, but also to explain concepts and processes to clients.

The general view seemed to be that opportunities exist for learning and keeping up to date in technical skills and knowledge in their field. The majority of the formal learning opportunities identified cater to technical learning such as business structures (legal, accounting, tax, risk, asset protection, transparency, control, flexibility, potential impact of future legislation aspects). RPs take advantage of seminars and conferences offered by their various professional bodies to keep up to date. Some RPs also mentioned having colleagues with specialist expertise within their business to consult with on technical aspects as required.

Technical knowledge and skills needed were identified by RP2 as being in: asset management, identifying opportunities, using the ‘lazy equity’ in the farm business, and using business structures to facilitate management succession as well as ownership succession. Professional bodies may be less likely to offer professional development in these aspects. He also thought RPs need to be aware of other RP's expertise e.g. understand what legal documentation is required, and if need be, encourage clients to work with a lawyer to ensure this is in place.

The soft skills, such as processes, are largely acquired through informal learning, through personal experience, and working with others both within the firm and other RPs. RP6 noted that communication skills are developed over time. RP5 considered that consultants are more likely to have the soft skills than accountants or lawyers because of the nature of their work, however, accountants and lawyers are more likely to have the technical skills, and resources available to keep up to date. RP5 advises that those working in succession should be older and more experienced to have the *"resilience, but also just having a bit of presence to understand the diversity we face"*.

RP5, as a succession specialist, observed that spending time dedicated to working in the succession area is an effective way to learn. *"You can't help but learn. I'm learning all the time and I'm learning four times as much because I'm just doing this as if I was doing something else"* (RP5). This suggests those RPs who specialise in succession and family business will develop their expertise to a far greater extent than those who do this as part of another job.

Three of the RPs had been mentored. They identified this as being particularly helpful in developing the skills and knowledge required to work in succession and other strategic consultancy, especially early on in their career or when starting out in a new area of work i.e. succession. One RP still continues to be mentored even though he is experienced and he mentors others as well. RP3 noted that mentoring is particularly useful with strategic work where cases can be fewer, are complex and unique, and the work is process driven and requires good people skills, thus making it more difficult to learn than more repetitive task-oriented work. He suggested a scheme to facilitate mentoring could be helpful to those working in this area, although he noted that some larger practices are likely to be doing this already.

Only one RP identified webinars as a resource for training, however, his stated preference was for learning opportunities where RPs interacted in person.

RP3 found the models presented at the Agri One governance course useful and now uses one of the models when working with succession clients. He suggested some resources for formal process planning could be developed and available for RPs to use with clients to provide structure around the process. Something (models) to show "… *the various stages and outcomes that are needed, a flowchart, decision making chart, so you can* *present that to the client so they know where they're at in terms of the phase of the succession plan"* (RP3).

RP5 suggests there are some opportunities available to attain the skills and knowledge required, although some are hard to find and the information is not all in the same place. He acknowledges there is a lack of structured learning opportunities in the soft skills area, and suggested some resources and learning opportunities that could be useful to those working in succession. He attended an Australian course on family dynamics and communication, and reads books on business management, mindfulness, using questions, and managing conversations for professional development, and makes the point that *"the communication stuff is really the interesting learning bit for me … that's been magic"*.

He has done a university communication paper and suggests psychology papers may also be useful. He suggests a university could develop a soft skills paper targeted to those working in succession planning, with content on communication, family dynamics, questioning, conflict management, change processes, mindfulness, personality types, decision making, and containing some of the tools and models helpful to succession planning. This paper may require input from staff from a range of disciplines and expertise. External people with expertise in succession could also provide a valuable contribution.

RP5 also identified a need for debriefing or supervision support for people working with families on emotive issues, such as in the succession area, to help retain mental resilience. He explained that advisors can invest a lot of themselves in family meetings which can be exhausting, with the risk that *"sometimes we transfer a situation to where our background is"* and interpret or react accordingly, when they really need to remain detached and *"on the level"* in meetings with clients. He meets with a support person once a year.

Three of the RPs interviewed attended Agri One succession or governance courses, which had a strong process consulting approach. They all found the process consulting approach presented at the course helpful. RP1 found the course useful for upskilling his process consultancy practice in working with succession clients and evaluating his professional practice, commenting that he *"gained massively from it [the course]"*. He has also found the accreditation associated with the course useful in achieving credibility and recognition as someone with expertise in farm succession. RP3 identified the process consulting approach presented in the governance course he attended as being insightful in his *"initiating some of the [succession] conversations around that"* now, as well as thinking more broadly about what the family and business situation might be. As a result of attending the course, he also has a greater awareness of, and focus on, business performance and viability and recognising that succession is more achievable with a strong business.

RP4 wanted a more structured approach to working with families on succession planning. He found the course interesting and useful, even just in terms of the thinking, and has implemented some of the processes into his consultancy practice. He suggested that it would be more interesting for participants if the course had a better mix of attendees i.e. if there had been more consultants which he could relate to *"… Just talking to a number of them [attendees] they certainly didn't work with clients the way I did. So it would have been really good to have a group of farm consultants or a better mix, to have … more consultants dealing with this stuff in a similar fashion [to me]"*.

RP6 found the AgriOne course on farm succession useful in "*developing reasoning and your thinking around how it all works. [Name] was quite good with his experience…*", although he pointed out that the cases used in the course were more complex than he deals with as a lawyer, and that lawyers do not interview family members so the soft skills component of the course will be more relevant to other RPs.

The RPs who specialised in succession (RP1, RP5) were more likely to identify and access resources that require independent input such as webinars, and reading material across a range of topics, including books (most RPs identified industry articles). These two RPs had also done more succession-related courses than other RPs and had undertaken post-graduate study in an area of relevance to succession planning. They both identified learning the process skills as being particularly advantageous in the courses they had done.

Discussion

The availability of quality advice and support for families planning farm succession is an industry concern. Prior succession research (Dooley & McLeod 2012, Dooley & Payne 2008, Dooley & Smeaton 2010), and anecdotal evidence both from RPs commenting on their own and other rural advisory professions, and from farmers who have experienced a lack of support or are uncertain who to approach for reliable succession advice and support, suggest that this concern has validity. Nicholson et al (2009), in a survey of SME's (non-rural) use of business advisors identified few family business advisors in New Zealand, and questioned whether some of these had "the requisite training and understanding to properly consult with family businesses" with particular reference to succession, governance and conflict management.

Publications on RPs' consultancy practice are limited, and work on their strategic, extended and people-focussed consultancy processes such as those for succession planning even more so. Furthermore, there is very little on the skills and training required by RPs undertaking succession advisory work. Instead, most New Zealand farm succession publications are industry and farmer-focussed media articles and industry-funded academic deliveries such as industry reports or research reports, or succession guidelines for farming families provided by businesses working in succession such as banks and accountancy firms. Hence, the research reported here is intended to inform organisations on needs and opportunities for RPs upskilling in farm succession practices and processes to better meet industry needs.

Farm succession consultancy requires both technical and process skills and knowledge, which is generally recognised in the family business advisory literature (Grubman & Jaffe 2010, Hilburt-Davis & Senturia 1995, Kaye & Hamilton 2004, Schein 1999). Grubman and Jaffe (2010) identified the need for consultants helping family businesses with wealth management to have both technical (expertise or content) and facilitative (process) expertise, and identified the knowledge area, competency, and skill components required for consultants working in this area, breaking these into foundational skills, and family client skills at the individual and family level. They identified a more comprehensive list of skills, but as in this research, the process skills required outnumbered the technical skills, and the key skills identified in this work (Table2) were identified. They also identified similar training opportunities, and noted that there was no formal education curriculum (USA) in the industry for client relationship and family dynamics skills.

Our research identified that the RPs interviewed identified available opportunities to upskill in technical areas, and took advantage of these. In particular, they identified professional development courses offered by their industry bodies as being particularly useful in keeping up to date with advances in technical areas in their field, including those relevant to succession such as business structures. The RPs further noted that the collaborative approach used in succession planning, with several rural professionals involved in the process, with one RP who is a "trusted advisor" (Strike 2013) from an accounting, legal or farm advisory background usually taking a leading role, ensures the wide range of necessary technical skills is covered. This approach was practiced by the interviewees, with one RP suggesting when only one person tries to work with a family on the whole process, the succession plan often fails to be implemented. This team approach is also advocated in the literature for family business advising (Kaye & Hamilton 2004, Su & Dou 2013).

However, there is still a need for someone with process consultancy skills to lead the process, manage communications, drive and coordinate the professional team, and guide the family through the process. The process consultancy skills are where the RPs identified challenges. These skills are critical for those raising succession issues with clients and / or leading the succession process with their family business clients. The RP leading the succession process needs to ask the right questions of the team of rural professionals while supporting and guiding the client(s) to develop and take ownership of their succession plan (Schein 1987).

RPs identified that their consulting skills were largely acquired through experience. RPs found mentoring to be very helpful for succession consulting since succession consultancy processes cannot be readily learnt through repetitive practice given the few cases and uniqueness of each consultation. This aligns with Grubman and Jaffe (2010) who identified common sense and intuition, experience, mentoring, and an informal peer and social network as the main learning opportunities for the soft process skills.

RPs identified that formal training opportunities are limited in process consulting areas such as: people skills, conflict management, asking the right questions, change management and communication skills. The two RPs who specialised in succession planning had looked for other ways to upskill: these were more self-driven and included reading widely and completing post graduate study in related areas. It was suggested that there is an opportunity for training organisations and universities to develop courses on succession and consultancy process, possibly with accreditation. Nicholson et al (2009) similarly identified a lack of training opportunities for family business advisors in New Zealand, including at university level, and suggested a need for university courses and research on advising family business, and networking opportunities.

Succession consultancy is best suited to RPs with strong strategic and people skills which appeared to be exhibited by the RPs interviewed, and it can be surmised that people with these attributes may be more interested in working with clients on succession. Most RPs interviewed were also experienced RPs who got into this work as their career progressed, and perhaps, as their clients have had a greater need for these services, suggesting these could also be factors. These factors suggest training opportunities, particularly for those wanting to specialise, may be best targeted to professional or post-graduate courses for those in the workforce. Accreditation of courses would enable those skilled in family business or succession consulting to differentiate themselves, which one RP has found beneficial, as well as giving clients confidence in their ability.

Those RPs specialising in succession had undertaken more formal and independent training in relevant topics, and one RP noted that working in this field continuously also increased experiential learning as well. This suggests that farmers who are concerned to identify RPs with expertise to assist them in succession planning (Dooley & McLeod 2012) are likely to benefit from seeking specialist input in driving the process, particularly given the high cost, both financially and in family relationships from a poor succession plan.

Conclusion

This research identifies the need for RPs working in succession, particularly those taking a lead or facilitative role, to have a combination of content expertise and process skills. While training for the former is available, the latter is usually acquired through experience and interacting with other RPs. Since succession planning is complex and unique to each family, processes skills are critical for managing the family dynamics and potential conflict, as well as for developing the succession plan as part of a multi-disciplinary group. RPs undertaking a facilitative role in succession planning are likely to be limited to a small group with interest and expertise at this level. A need for formal learning opportunities for succession planning and working with family businesses in New Zealand, and overseas, was identified. Such an opportunity could allow those RPs interested in undertaking formal training to develop the process expertise required for succession planning and recognition for this, helping both the RP and farming family clients wanting to identify RPs with this expertise.

This exploratory research used a case study approach with a small sample of experienced rural professionals. Their experience in working with clients on succession planning enabled them to provide knowledgeable insight into skills required and training opportunities available to those working in succession, as well as identifying gaps and useful resources for further training opportunities. However, this study cannot identify the level of expertise in succession planning and the range of specific process and content skills required that is available in the industry. A survey of RPs, or farming families' views on RPs, could provide insight on this aspect.

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