
ECONOMICS

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THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEUR'S GENDER, AGE AND FIRM'S AGE IN AUTONOMY. THE CASE STUDY FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC

ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to explore the question of autonomy as an element of entrepreneurial orientation (EO) in the segment of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Czech Republic. In relation to the independence of the researched companies, we have investigated whether the evaluation of an independent position of the companies differs according to three criteria: gender, age of the entrepreneur, and time of the company spent in the market. The researched entrepreneurs were divided into men and women, entrepreneurs "younger" (under the age of 45) and "older" (45+), and into "beginners and advanced" (1-10 years in business) and "experienced" (more than 10 years in business). The results showed that 46 % of the respondents perceive their companies as independent, 65% of them have reasonably autonomous staff in their companies, and 71% support the initiative of their employees in business opportunities. In relation to the criteria examined, we have found out that gender does not play the differencing role in autonomy between men and women. However, entrepreneur's age and firm's age do so. 68% of "experienced" companies are statistically more aware of the fact that staff in their company is reasonably autonomous in comparison with the "novice and advanced" companies. Furthermore, "younger" entrepreneurs support the initiative of their employees more (64%) than "older" entrepreneurs.

JEL Classification: L26, M21

Keywords: small and medium-sized enterprises, autonomy, entrepreneurial orientation, entrepreneur's gender, entrepreneur's age, firm's age.

Introduction

The topic of SMEs is a very discussed issue by many authors from different points of view. According to many authors (Mura *et al.*, 2015; Ključnikov *et al.*, 2016; Škarpová *et al.*, 2015; Norek & Arenhardt, 2015; Gajowiak, 2015), small and medium-sized enterprises play an important role in the international economic environment. They enter the international division of labour either directly through contacts with foreign partners or indirectly through

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importing and exporting companies as subcontractors. With an increasing liberalization of international trade, their activity continues to grow (Důbravská *et al.*, 2015).

The topic often discussed has currently been the entrepreneurial orientation of SMEs and their attitude to corporate performance as well as exploring different factors that determine the actual entrepreneurial orientation, including those that may hinder the development of EO. Among these problematic areas, a limited access to external sources of financing is often pointed out. SMEs especially perceive the lack of financial sources in the countries with the less developed financial system or the countries with the unstable currency, that substantially limits their entrepreneurial opportunities (Ključnikov & Junger, 2014a; Ključnikov & Junger, 2014b; Spoz, 2014; Meluzín & Zinecker, 2016). Restricted access to external financial sources may also limit such elements of the EO as independence, proactivity and innovativeness of SMEs.

EO has emerged as a major concept within both strategic management and entrepreneurship literatures. The autonomy as an element of EO provides owners, managers and other employees with freedom and flexibility to develop and implement new ideas and entrepreneurial initiatives. Moreover, it can motivate them to participate more actively in future development of the company.

The autonomy in EO context is clearly a vital aspect of entrepreneurial value creation and essential for the notion of strategic entrepreneurship. The autonomy may not be an issue among independently owned and managed firms because such founders are already acting autonomously (Lumpkin *et al.*, 2009).

The aim of this article is to examine the question of autonomy as an element of EO in the segment of SMEs in the Czech Republic in relation to the entrepreneur's age, gender and time of the firm in business.

This article has the following structure. In the theoretical part, the important attributes of business environment in the SMEs segment and the autonomy of employees are presented as a construct of EO. In addition, the role of gender, age and time of entrepreneurship in business are introduced here. In the next section, objectives, methodology and resources of information used in our research are presented. Finally, the most important recommendations for theoretical area and economic practice are stated.

1. Theoretical background

As for vast majority of SMEs as being important for Czech as well as EU economy, and their evident influence on economic performance, it is understandable that they are of interest to many studies of different authors (Ivanova & Koiso, 2014). A tendency towards independent and autonomous actions is a key component of EO according to Lumpkin and Dess (1996). Miller (1983) found out that majority of entrepreneurial firms had the most autonomous leaders. As for the character of SMEs, personality of the entrepreneur plays an important role in influencing autonomy and other elements of EO. Based on existing records of differences in EO depending on the gender and age (Goktan & Gupta, 2015; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Mueller & Conway Data-on, 2008), it can be assumed that men and women, younger and older entrepreneurs will have a different approach to autonomy.

However, the influence of entrepreneurial activity on economic development is not solely a question of size of the entrepreneurs' company or the schemes. It is strongly dependent on individuals and particularly on their decision about establishing a new entrepreneurial unit (Smékalová *et al.*, 2014). One of the most important preconditions for their success followed by a positive impact on the performance characteristics of the economy as a whole is a friendly environment and perception of their business activities accompanying most stages of the company's existence – its foundation, growth and stabilization, and

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eventually remediation. The state plays an indispensable role in this respect. Belás *et al.* (2015) state that a positive perception of the business situation by society might mean a greater interest in starting a business which can further lead to a higher rate of GDP and higher employment rates. In general, it is the prevailing opinion that countries with better conditions for doing business also achieve a higher standard of living.

The SMEs segment has its own characteristics and disadvantages which are transformed into business risk. This risk can be divided into market risk (lack of market space for the realization of own production), financial risk (poor access to finance businesses), operational (risk of failure to deal with the processes in production of goods and services) and other risks (Belás *et al.*, 2014, 2015).

EO is usually understood as a five-dimensional construct consisting of *innovativeness, risk-taking, proactivity, autonomy and competitive aggressiveness*. The definition of EO most widely used is based on work of Miller (1983), further developed by Covin and Slevin (1989) and many others, and augmented by Lumpkin and Dess (1996) (Schillo, 2011).

Lumpkin and Dess (1996) have contributed significantly to the extension of knowledge regarding EO, and they have enriched the original three-dimensional concept of Miller (1983) with autonomy and competitive aggressiveness (Krajnakova *et al.*, 2015). Miller (1983) suggests that only firms that possess all three dimensions (innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness) to a similar extent should be considered as entrepreneurial. On the contrary, Lumpkin and Dess (1996) argue that any firm that uses an effective combination of autonomy, innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness can be considered as entrepreneurial.

EO enables SMEs to survive or even to outperform the competitors. Many authors study relationship between EO and firm performance (Brettel *et al.*, 2015; Zahra & Covin, 1995; Wiklund, 1999; Rauch *et al.*, 2009). For example, according to Rauch *et al.* (2009), “It is reasonable to conclude that EO represents a promising area for building a cumulative body of relevant knowledge about entrepreneurship”. The results of Brettel *et al.* (2015) state that corporate entrepreneurship has a positive impact on financial measures of the company performance. This effect on performance, which tends to be modest for the first few years, increases throughout the years suggesting that corporate entrepreneurship may be a generally effective means for improving long-term company financial performance. Moreover, the results of Haviernikova and Srovnalíková (2014) indicate that corporate entrepreneurship is a particularly effective practice among companies operating in hostile environments (as opposed to benign environments).

Based on surveys of U.S. and U.K. firms, findings of Brouthers, Nakos and Dimitratos (2015) indicate that SMEs have higher international performance when they possess greater EO and when the type of alliance (research or marketing) used is aligned with capabilities of the firm. Then, they found out that participating in alliances strengthens the relation between EO and international performance. These results have important implications for managers and policy makers interested in improving SME international performance.

Autonomy is one of the key dimensions of EO. According to Lumpkin and Dess (1996), autonomy refers to the independent action of an individual or a team in bringing forth an idea or vision being carried through to its fulfilment. In general, it means the ability and will to be self-directed in the pursuit of opportunities. They suggest that the evidence of autonomy in firms may vary according to size, management style or ownership. Therefore, it can be assumed that promoting the independence for employees, or rather application of democratic as well liberal style of management and leadership, can be an incentive for entrepreneurial behaviour. Consequently, this could also lead to increasing company performance.

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According to study of 72 subsidiaries of micro, small and medium-sized Italian companies by Pisoni *et al.* (2013), a subsidiary autonomy reflects local country characteristics, but not the economic development. Their findings also show that those subsidiaries looking for penetrating local markets are generally more autonomous than the ones pursuing cost-cutting strategies.

It is clear that business characteristics play a significant role in determining the rate of growth of firms, especially in SMEs. The industry sector, age and size are three of the most common business characteristics to be linked with a small business growth. A business size at start-up is an important variable included in a number of empirical studies (Cowling *et al.*, 2015). According to Clear and Dickson (2005), there are some task elements that must be taken into account when considering the autonomy: the method of working, pace of work, procedures, scheduling, work criteria, work goals, workplace, work evaluation, working hours, kind of work and amount of work. The authors state that differing levels of employees' autonomy are reflected in the level of trust of employers. They consider telework as a way to increase autonomy.

Taking into account the *firm's age*, the literature concentrating on small businesses' survival suggests that "younger" businesses are more likely to be concerned about survival than growth if they do not fail within the first few years of starting up (Cowling, 2006). According to Pervan and Kuvek, 2013, Canton *et al.* (2013), company size and its age can play an important role when obtaining external financial resources.

Gender plays an important role in explaining differences between men and women entrepreneurial intentions. For example, Gupta *et al.* (2009) state that women have more social qualities (expressiveness, connectedness, relatedness, kindness, supportiveness, timidity) whereas men are connected more with managerial qualities (independence, aggressiveness, autonomy, instrumentality, courage). Their results show that there are not just the biological differences between men and women, but both gender (masculinity or femininity) and business are influenced by social environment, which influences intentions to become an entrepreneur. According to Dokmanovic and Drakulic (2011), women have particularly been affected. An increased number of people working in the unprotected informal economy with an unequal access to resources, including loans to start businesses, new technologies or information, have caused the situation when women are entering the labour market under unfavourable conditions.

There are differences between entrepreneurs-men and entrepreneurs-women (Diaz-Garcia & Jimenez-Moreno, 2010; Eddleston & Powell, 2008), e.g. in understanding of what success is. According to Lim and Envick (2013), women perceive success as the ability to have control over their destiny, to build relationships with prospective clients and to do things that fulfil them whereas men define success as achieving objectives.

The results of a survey called "Attitudes of women towards entrepreneurship" done in June 2014 by the Association of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises and Crafts of the Czech Republic (AMSP) revealed that women in the Czech Republic were becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of independence, which is due to their own business (71% of women respondents consider "my own working hours" as the most positive aspect of doing business, 67% mention "a chance to organize their own working hours", 54% point out "an independence from others to decide", and 39% mention the fact that "it is not necessary to obey the superiors"). Concerning AMSP of the Czech Republic and its point of view, women have more confidence in themselves than in the past, which is evident in the current overall trend when there is an extremely high number of women entering business (ten times more than men do). On the other hand, 55% of all respondents are worried that business would not feed them. This was one of the major obstacles to overcome (AMSP, The Czech Republic, 2014). The findings of Robb and Watson (2012) state that women who are confident starting a

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new venture are not discouraged from doing so by a false belief that new ventures initiated by women are less likely to be successful than those initiated by men.

The experience gained over the years of entrepreneurship also influences individual elements of EO. According to Kraus (2013), more experienced entrepreneurs are more risk-taking, innovative and proactive within the organization. These results were partly confirmed in our research as well (Kozubíková *et al.*, 2015). We have found out that “younger” companies are more active when taking the initiative in the markets with the aim to be ahead of the competitors in comparison with the enterprises being in the market for more than 10 years. A recent report by the OECD/The European Commission (2014) calls for policies that let European economies make use of the entrepreneurial potential of individuals from all social classes having a dual goal of spurring the economic growth and promoting social inclusion. The policy-makers have recently argued that a special attention needs to be paid to members of social groups that are “under-represented in entrepreneurship or face greater barriers when starting businesses than people from the mainstream“. Two of the groups addressed in the report are defined by age: “youngsters” and „seniors“.

Age is often merely a control variable in entrepreneurship research. A common characteristic of these studies is considering the age as a chronological variable but ageing is not only a biological process, but also a psychological one. The study of Lévesque and Minniti (2006) showed that the costs for the opportunity time increase with the age. These discourage older individuals from choosing the forms of employment involving risk or postponement of satisfaction. Kautonen *et al.* (2014) revealed that the rate of entrepreneurial activity declines for owners-managers in their forties because these individuals engaged in business activities or planning to be engaged face high costs for the opportunity time due to risk of an uncertain future revenue stream.

The level of autonomy is necessarily connected with management characteristics which include 1) the owner-manager’s managerial style, 2) the nature of an organisational structure, 3) the degree of delegation within the organization, 4) the manner in which strategic objectives are set, and 5) the importance of personal objectives in the decision making process (Mukhtar, 2002). Among the important characteristics typical for people who lead others are, e.g. assertiveness, determination, energy, confidence, perseverance, and others. According to Bělohávek (2008), a good manager is the one who can divide work and give it to others. Promoting autonomy for employees should then be associated with a more liberal style of management.

The influence of the entrepreneur’s gender, age and existence of the firm on EO, firm’s performance, etc., is the topic often discussed by many authors as mentioned above. Our objective is to find out results regarding the autonomy as an important element of EO in the Czech Republic through our own research.

2. Research aim, methodology and data

The aim of this article is to explore the question of autonomy as an element of EO in the segment of SMEs in the Czech Republic according to selected factors, namely entrepreneur’s gender, age, and firm’s age.

The research was done in the Czech Republic in 2015. The companies were chosen from the Albertina database and 1.650 randomly selected firms were addressed by e-mail or phone to fill in the questionnaire placed at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1U9coaC5JRL0N2QOOO6Xb8j3mnaZXdSM47Kugt4EDGFo/viewform?usp=send_form. The data was provided by 1.141 owners of SMEs in 14 regions of the Czech Republic. The questionnaire consisted of 52 questions. In the first nine questions, respondents and their structure in relation to their education, gender, age, residency

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and size of a firm, the length of time and area of business, motives for starting a business, and the most important characteristics of entrepreneur were analysed. The rest of the questions were connected with answers on a 1-5 scale (1 – totally agree, 2 – agree, 3 – no opinion, 4 – disagree, 5 – completely disagree) focused on five elements of entrepreneurial orientation.

In accordance with the objective set, three topics of the questions were chosen to find out results regarding autonomy of the firms. The first one was “My company has a reputation of an autonomous business”, the second one „Staff at my company is reasonably autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations” and the third one „I support the initiative of my employees in identifying and implementing business opportunities”.

The structure of the sample according to the business area was as follows: trade companies (33%), manufacturing companies (23%), construction companies (14%), transport companies (6%) and agricultural firms (3%). The largest number of companies worked in other sectors (39%). The total is more than 100 % because some respondents chose more than one business area.

In relation to gender and age of the entrepreneur, the structure of the sample was as follows: 75% men (861 respondents) and 25% women (280 respondents), 48% older entrepreneurs – more than 45 years old (542 respondents) and 52% younger entrepreneurs – less than 45 years old (599 respondents).

In accordance with the length of time in business, out of the total number of 1.141 companies, 62% (705 firms) were in business for more than 10 years, 38% (436 firms) for less than 10 years.

Taking into account the gender, age and existence of the firm in business as important factors influencing EO, we have stated the following three hypotheses:

H1: The entrepreneurs perceive their company as one with a reputation of an autonomous company. We assume that there are no statistically significant differences between entrepreneurs according to their gender, age and existence of the firm.

H2: The entrepreneurs believe that staff in their company is reasonably autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations. We assume that there are no statistically significant differences between entrepreneurs according to their gender, age and length of time of the firm in business activities.

H3: The entrepreneurs support the initiative of their employees during the search for and making use of business opportunities. We assume that there are statistically significant differences between entrepreneurs according to their gender, age and existence of the firm in business activities.

The associations in contingency tables were analysed by Pearson statistics for counting the data. P-value has been compared to standard 5% confidence level. P-value that is lower than the confidence level leads to rejection of the null hypothesis. The null claims that there is no association between variables. The calculations have been performed using software available at <http://www.socscistatistics.com/tests>. Statistically significant differences in particular responses were examined through the Z-score. The calculations were carried out through open-source software: <http://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/ztest/Default2.aspx>.

3. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows results regarding the evaluation of the topic: "My company has a reputation of an autonomous company" in terms of gender, age of entrepreneur and length of time spent in business.

Table 1. Perception of company's autonomy

My company has a reputation of an autonomous business	Gender		Age of entrepreneur		Length of entrepreneurship	
	Men	Women	45-	45+	10-	10+
1. Totally agree	55	22	43	34	29	48
in %*	6,39	7,86	7,18	6,27	6,65	6,81
2. Agree	338	113	241	210	173	278
in %*	39,26	40,36	40,23	38,75	39,68	39,43
3. No opinion	182	63	124	121	104	141
in %*	21,14	22,50	20,70	22,32	23,85	20,00
4. Disagree	261	72	171	162	115	218
in %*	30,31	25,71	28,55	29,89	26,38	30,92
5. Totally disagree	25	10	20	15	15	20
in %*	2,90	3,57	3,34	2,77	3,44	2,84
Total amount	861	280	599	542	436	705
in %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Chi-square	2,7617		1,3329		4,1041	
p-value	0,5985		0,8558		0,3921	

Explanatory notes: *in% of all respondents in each group (e.g. 6.39% of men = 55/861, i.e. 55 men out of a total number of 861 men), "45-" – entrepreneurs younger than 45 years old, "45+" – entrepreneurs older than 45, "10-" – companies being in the market for a period of up to 10 years, "10+" – companies being in the market for more than 10 years.

Source: own source.

Independently of the chosen factors, 528 respondents, i.e. 46,28 % (it was calculated as men and women together who totally agreed or agreed, i.e. 55+22+338+113) out of all 1.141 respondents state that their company has a reputation of an autonomous company. This is understood in a sense that the owners of the company act independently.

The final value of the test criteria (chi-square and p-value) did not show any statistically significant differences in the overall structure of responses. The calculated values of p-value were higher than the specified level of significance (0,05) in all cases.

The hypothesis H1 was confirmed. The entrepreneurs perceive their company as one with a reputation of an autonomous company.

Table 2 shows results of the test criteria in order to determine statistically significant dependence from the viewpoint of designated social groups. That means the differences in responses of men and women, entrepreneurs younger and older than 45 and companies being in the market for a period of up to 10 years and more than 10 years to the topic: "My company has a reputation of an autonomous business."

Table 2. Differences in perception of autonomy of the company within certain groups

My company has a reputation of an autonomous business	Gender		Age of entrepreneur		Length of entrepreneurship	
	Z-Score	p-value	Z-Score	p-value	Z-Score	p-value
1. Totally agree	-0,8513	0,3953	0,6089	0,5419	-0,1028	0,9203
2. Agree	-0,3272	0,7414	0,5135	0,6101	0,0827	0,9362
Together 1+2	-0,7491	0,4533	0,8099	0,4179	-0,0293	0,9761
3. No opinion	-0,4821	0,6312	-0,6669	0,5029	1,5402	0,1236
4. Disagree	1,4706	0,1416	-0,4978	0,6171	-1,6412	0,1010
5. Totally disagree	-0,5630	0,5755	0,5589	0,5755	0,5744	0,5687

Source: own source.

There are no statistically significant differences found neither through calculation of the Z-score and p-value nor identified in terms of social groups. The assumption of no existing statistical significant differences between men and women, older and younger entrepreneurs and firms being in business for more and less than 10 years was confirmed.

Table 3 shows results regarding the evaluation of the topic: “Staff at my company is reasonably autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations” from the perspective of gender, age of entrepreneur and length of time of entrepreneurship.

Table 3. Perception of autonomy of the company’s employees

Staff at my company is reasonably autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations	Gender		Age of entrepreneur		Length of entrepreneurship	
	Men	Women	45-	45+	10-	10+
1. Totally agree in %*	44 5,11	17 6,07	34 5,68	27 4,98	29 6,42	48 4,68
2. Agree in %*	518 60,16	161 57,5	353 58,93	326 60,15	173 54,82	278 62,41
3. No opinion in %*	191 22,18	70 25,00	138 23,04	123 22,69	104 25,00	141 21,56
4. Disagree in %*	94 10,92	27 9,64	63 10,52	58 10,70	115 11,70	218 9,93
5. Totally disagree in %*	14 1,63	5 1,79	11 1,84 ¹	8 1,48	15 2,06	20 1,42
Total amount in %	861 100	280 100	599 100,01	542 100	436 100	705 100
Chi-square	1,7056		0,5732		7,0012	
p-value	0,7897		0,9660		0,1358	

¹ Rounded to 100 %. Total share is more than 100 % because of rounding numbers during the calculation

Source: own source.

Out of the total number of 1.141 respondents, 740 of them (i.e. 64,86%) agree that they consider the staff in their company to be adequately autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations (it was calculated as men and women together who totally agreed or agreed, i.e. 44+17+518+161).

The final values of statistical criteria showed no statistically significant differences in the overall structure of responses. The calculated values of p-value in all cases were higher than the specified level of significance (0,05). The hypothesis H2 was confirmed in the first part.

Table 4 shows results of the test criteria with the aim to determine statistically significant dependence from the viewpoint of designated social groups. That means the differences in responses of men and women, entrepreneurs younger (less than 45 years old) and older (45+) and companies being in the market for a period of up to 10 years and more than 10 years. The topic of the question was: “Staff at my company is reasonably autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations“.

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Table 4. Differences in perception of autonomy of employees in the company within certain groups

Staff at my company is reasonably autonomous in the implementation of specific business operations	Gender		Age of entrepreneur		Length of entrepreneurship	
	Z-Score	p-value	Z-Score	p-value	Z-Score	p-value
1. Totally agree	-0,6210	0,5353	0,5208	0,6031	1,2704	0,2041
2. Agree	0,7884	0,4295	-0,4179	0,6745	-2,5395	0,0111
<i>Together 1+2</i>	<i>0,518</i>	<i>0,6031</i>	<i>0,1842</i>	<i>0,8572</i>	<i>2,0124</i>	<i>0,0445</i>
3. No opinion	-0,9747	0,3320	0,1384	0,8890	1,3441	0,1802
4. Disagree	0,6018	0,5485	-0,1006	0,9203	0,9426	0,3472
5. Totally disagree	-0,1814	0,8572	0,4751	0,6312	0,8283	0,4065

Source: own source.

Statistically significant differences were found in the “Agree” answers among the companies being in the market for less than 10 years and more than 10 years. The "experienced" companies statistically (67,09%) agree more with the statement that staff in their company is reasonably autonomous in comparison with the “novice and advanced” companies (61,24 %), p-value = 0,0445. The hypothesis H2 was not confirmed completely in the second part.

Table 5 shows results regarding the evaluation of the topic: "I support the initiative of my employees in identifying and implementing business opportunities" in terms of gender, age of entrepreneur and length of doing business.

Table 5. Perception of employees' support of initiative in the company

I support the initiative of my employees in identifying and implementing business opportunities	Gender		Age of entrepreneur		Length of entrepreneurship	
	Men	Women	45-	45+	10-	10+
1. Totally agree	103	28	68	63	52	79
in %*	11,96	10,00	11,35	11,62	11,93	11,21
2. Agree	508	167	382	293	262	413
in %*	59,00	59,64	63,77	54,06	60,09	58,58
3. No opinion	202	63	118	147	97	168
in %*	23,46	22,50	19,70	27,12	22,25	23,83
4. Disagree	41	20	27	34	21	40
in %*	4,76	7,14	4,51	6,27	4,82	5,67
5. Totally disagree	7	2	4	5	4	5
in %*	0,81	0,71	0,67	0,92	0,92	0,71
Total amount	861	280	599	542	436	705
in %	100 ¹	100 ¹	100	100 ¹	100 ²	100
Chi-square	3,0743		13,1991		1,0345	
p-value	0,5455		0,0103		0,9045	

¹ Rounded to 100%. Total share is less than 100% because of rounding numbers during the calculation.

² Rounded to 100%. Total share is more than 100% because of rounding numbers during the calculation.

Source: own source.

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The results show that generally 806 respondents out of all 1.141, i.e. 70.64%, support the initiative of their employees in implementing business opportunities (it was calculated as men and women together who totally agreed or agreed, i.e. 103+28+508+167).

From the overall structure of responses, there were statistically significant differences identified at the 5% level of significance in responses between entrepreneurs younger than 45 years old and older than 45 (chi-square = 13,1991, p-value = 0,0103). As a result, the hypothesis H3 was not confirmed completely in the first part.

Table 6 shows results of the test criteria in order to determine statistically significant dependence from the viewpoint of designated social groups. That means the differences in responses of men and women, entrepreneurs younger and older than 45 years old and companies being in the market for up to 10 years and more than 10 years to the topic: "I support the initiative of my employees in identifying and implementing business opportunities".

Table 6. Differences in perception of company employees' support of initiative within certain groups

I support the initiative of my employees in identifying and implementing business opportunities	Gender		Age of entrepreneur		Length of entrepreneurship	
	Z-Score	p-value	Z-Score	p-value	Z-Score	p-value
1. Totally agree	0,8950	0,3735	-0,1436	0,8887	0,3712	0,7114
2. Agree	-0,1898	0,8493	3,3335	0,0009	0,5043	0,6171
<i>Together 1+2</i>	<i>0,4217</i>	<i>0,6745</i>	<i>3,4975</i>	<i>0,0005</i>	<i>-0,8041</i>	<i>0,4237</i>
3. No opinion	0,3308	0,7414	-2,9650	0,0031	-0,6149	0,5419
4. Disagree	-1,5385	0,1236	-1,3239	0,1868	-0,6255	0,5287
5. Totally disagree	0,1622	0,8729	-0,4857	0,6241	0,3863	0,6965

Source: own source.

The final value of Z-score and p-value show statistically significant differences in positive answers among entrepreneurs "younger" and "older" (p-value = 0.0009), when entrepreneurs under the age of 45 agree to support initiatives of their employees statistically more (450 out of 599, which makes 75.13%) than entrepreneurs older than 45 years old (356 out of 542, i.e. 65.68%). Statistically significant differences regarding a neutral stance in this social group ("No opinion") have also occurred. The hypothesis H3 was partially confirmed in its second part.

Our research did not verify the origin of statistically significant differences in the approach to independence in relation to the age of entrepreneur. In relation to the age of entrepreneurs, there are interesting survey results (Lukeš *et al.*, 2014) supporting the study's findings by Levesque and Minniti (2006) that with an increasing age the business discourages individuals due to high risk or postponement of satisfaction. From the total amount of people involved in the new entrepreneurial activity in the Czech Republic, people younger than 35 years old represent 53.3%, and since 2006 their share has been increasing. The growth of new business activities within this age group is likely affected by several factors. One of them is worsening employability for graduates that occurred in the context of economic crisis. The second may be the influence of the Internet, mobile applications and information and communication technologies in general, which are closer to young generation and can find good opportunities there. Finally, their own specific roles could be played by the subjects and

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educational activities aimed at businesses, which have recently been developed at high schools and partly at secondary schools.

Regarding the gender aspect of our research, in any of the examined issues, our results do not confirm the assumption of Gupta *et al.* (2009) that men are more associated with so-called managerial qualities among which there is also independence. Moreover, our results do not confirm Diaz-Garcia and Jimenez-Moreno (2010) or Eddleston and Powell (2008) assuming a different approach to entrepreneurial issues between men and women. The results of Lukeš *et al.* (2014) survey provide us with an interesting view when comparing a new entrepreneurial activity by the following combined criteria: age group, gender and necessity of doing business. It is evident that men in the age group of 18-24, who are starting a new business, start their business activity because of need in 6% of cases only. Men of age 25-34 make 14% of all cases. On the contrary, women of age 45-54 start their businesses because of need in 43% of cases only. From the data, it is possible to see different nature of business opportunities and motives that different socio-demographic groups have.

An attempt to act autonomously and independently of the male support and thus to cope with the opposite sex was also confirmed by the results of AMSP (2015) research. One of the biggest trends that have been revealed in the context of a long-term project of women in business is the growth of female entrepreneurship. A third of all businesses today are done by women (almost 70% of all businesses in the age group of 25-54 years old). According to the chairperson of AMSP, Karel Havlicek, the current business requires the following essential prerequisites for success: women's artfulness, resilience, the ability to concentrate on the result and not on the victory, and having a clear mind to focus on work. Besides, being self-employed enables to take advantage of telework (Clear & Dickson, 2005). It can be attractive especially for women who want to fulfil their multiple role of wife, mother, employee, housewife and others. The possibility of telework or offsite working assumes employee's valued skills and loyalty because a direct control of telework is problematic. However, teleworking includes two locations: a central office or a place where the firm in question is established, and another place that is remote from the central office (most often the home where work is done and which by definition is beyond the physical gaze of managers and colleagues). Moreover, telework or home office implies a high personal responsibility and being hardworking.

As written elsewhere, Lumpkin and Dess (1996) state that the level of autonomy differs depending on size of the company, management style or type of assets. That is why the greater or lesser independency of SMEs, among other things, is significantly related to applied management characteristics as stated above (Mukhtar, 2002). According to Clear and Dickson (2005), there are some task elements that are necessary to take into account when considering the autonomy: the method of working, pace of work, procedures, scheduling, work criteria.

Conclusions

Considering EO as an important element of firm's performance, it is necessary to research their elements, including autonomy, also in relation to SMEs as those are having an essential role in the economic development.

Our research has shown that the researched entrepreneurs try to act independently, as 65% of them consider their staff appropriately autonomous and 71% support the initiative of their employees.

In relation to the factors researched, such as entrepreneur's age, gender and firm's time in the market, it has been found out that gender does not play the differencing role in autonomy between men and women because both men and women consider important (more than 60%) to act autonomously.

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The differences in approach to the autonomy in relation to the age of entrepreneur arose only in the perception of employees' support of initiatives, when the entrepreneurs younger than 45 years old support business initiatives of their employees more (75%) than entrepreneurs older than 45 (66%).

Another factor of the examined ones is related to the existence of the company in the market manifested itself as a differentiating issue in perceptions of autonomy of employees in the phase of implementation of business tasks. The companies being in the market for more than 10 years think that their staff is reasonably autonomous slightly more (67%) than younger firms (61%). This result is associated with the idea that employees of the established companies are well acquainted with their tasks, they have a decent position in the company and it could be assumed that they have a greater independence not only in the performance of repetitive tasks, but also in the implementation of new business ideas and opportunities.

Although it is clear that there are certain limits to our research, we expect that our article has brought interesting findings as well as new incentives for further research, other constructs of EO and other factors influencing autonomy of SMEs.

Despite the impact of this study concentrating on the Czech Republic, there are interesting findings that are useful for practice, e.g. findings regarding a similar approach to autonomy between men and women, which can support a greater involvement of women on management positions in SMEs. The research has also shown that within the studied area, there are certain gaps and there are possibilities of further research, e.g. relations between the degree of autonomy and management style applied in work of SMEs in the Czech Republic.

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