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GROWING NICHE BUSINESS THROUGH INNOVATION: A FAMILY RUN OPEN FARM IN IRELAND

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Abstract

This case study presents an analysis of Leahy's Open Farm, a family business that has continuously reinvented itself, since its launch in 1996. The open-farm industry in Ireland is a niche that faces many regulatory, organisational and economic challenges. This case study presents an overview of the challenges and potential for this growing market. Challenges include; rising insurance costs (33% increase) and dealing with (50% reduction in revenue in 2020) and recovering from the economic impact of COVID-19 restrictions.

Leahy's have been able to develop the business by adding new revenue streams, nurturing employee skills, harnessing their competency base and consistently applying an organisational learning mind-set. A firm innovation capability perspective is employed as a theoretical lens to analyse Leahy's strategic intent, use of resources, processes and mind-set that enable them to develop the business.

Primary and secondary data collection methods were employed. Semi-structured interviews with Leahy's open farm leadership and staff as well as ethnographic observations. A literature review of open-farm publications and interviews with an Irish state agency in agriculture, horticulture and food was conducted to develop an overview of the open-farm industry in Ireland.

A key finding from this study is the observation that the open farm industry in Ireland is not regulated or supported by a state body and falls between two government departments (Agriculture & Tourism). In the UK however, the National Farm Attraction Network (NFAN) provides supports and collects data on open farms. NFAN have been helpful to Leahy's in the absence of an Irish network. This lack of support is likely to result in an inconsistent approach being taken by open farms in Ireland, and results in an un-coordinated approach to managing and promoting the market. A roadmap for open farms (Figure 1: Roadmap for Open Farms in Ireland post COVID-19 Economic Crisis) has been suggested to aid these businesses to strategically plan for the future. Leahy's are an example of an open-farm that has consistently sought to be a leader in this marketplace and has demonstrated an admirable capacity to innovate through fostering an open and innovative environment.

This case study demonstrates how firm innovation capabilities can be applied to analyse the innovation capacity of small family businesses and sets an agenda for increased research and development for the open-farm industry in Ireland.

Keywords: Family business, innovation capabilities, open farms, business challenges

1 Introduction

Getz *et al.* (2004: p. 5) define a family business as 'any business venture owned and/or operated by an individual, couple(s) or family'. From humble beginnings, Eddie and Eileen Leahy supported 7 children and built up a successful family farm. The Leahy's took a brave decision in 1996 and opened their traditional dairy and pig farm to the public and hence 'Leahy's Open Farm' was launched. Initially, the farm showcased old agricultural machinery and equipment. Soon after they added children's slides and a coffee shop, where freshly made home baked goods were on offer daily to cater for the growing number of visitors coming to their Open Farm. The farm has since grown from strength to strength and attracts thousands of visitors every year to this East Cork tourist attraction.

According to Wilson (2007) open-farms operate on a pragmatic basis and in addition to family needs, various factors such as increasing overheads e.g. insurance, the need to re-invest, update and innovate affect an open-

farm's competitiveness in the marketplace. Leahy's has been able to achieve consistent growth and ensure the delivery of high-quality products and services thanks to their strong innovation practices. New revenue streams are continuously being developed as a result of Leahy's intentional innovation practices, and from emergent innovative behaviours that occur as a result of their adhocracy organisational structure.

2. Company Background

In 2014, their son (Donal) and daughter-in-law (Teresa) took over the running of the open farm and have added significant value to the business with the introduction of new product lines and services. The new owners have gained extensive experience in managerial and agricultural roles and bring this knowledge into the day to day running of the business. Over the last six years, they have added an Ice Cream and Chocolate Factory, increased the range of indoor and outdoor animals, extended the museum indoor and outdoor activities, such as an indoor soft play area and an outdoor digger park. They have also purchased eight acres of land to allow for expansion of this private limited company. The business is funded through a number of revenue streams; annual memberships, pay as you go rates, tours, parties, seasonal events, onsite services and product sales.

On average, seasonal events, such as Christmas, generates approximately 33% of annual revenue and the summer season generates approximately 50% of annual revenue, subject to weather conditions. The ice-cream factory generates approximately 25% of annual revenue and generated €80,000 in revenue in its first year of trading. The sales of their ice cream have increased year on year.

The Open Farm welcomed 78,000 visitors in 2019 and estimated to increase by 9% to 85,000 in 2020. However, due to COVID19 this is estimated to fall to 60,000 visitors. The business has introduced a number of cost-saving measures to ensure the viability of their business. This will be discussed further in section 6 (challenges facing the business).

While a key customer for the open farm is families, the business also targets active retired groups, family events (birthdays, communions, confirmations), school tours and bus tours. They offer group rates with added extras of a guided tour, an open farm quiz, bastible making and four course lunch. Due to the seasonal nature of their business, the number of seasonal employees fluctuate. Generally, they have up to 12 full-time employees, some who are on reduced working weeks and at weekends they require up to 20 staff. During busy periods, such as the summer and Christmas, they have up to 45 staff rostered. This is a family run business with several family members employed and it also employs students who live locally.

Through the financial support of SECAD (supports rural development and enterprises through government and EU funding), Leahy's Open Farm has built a new car park, new equipment for the ice-cream and chocolate factory, a climbing frame, developed the adventure trail, soft play area and crazy golf. The business was awarded funding recently from the LEADER programme, following a competitive process, who financially support community led projects and rural enterprise development across the country. This funding will be used to build a Leprechauns castle on the farm, which is intended to be an inclusive play area, that is both wheelchair friendly and accessible to all. This new addition to the extensive range of facilities already on offer, will be launched in Summer 2021.

3. The Open Farm industry in Ireland & UK

Leahy's advised there is no data or umbrella organisation for the Open Farm industry in Ireland and this was confirmed by Teagasc. Teagasc is a national body who provides advice and training to the Agriculture and Food Industry in Ireland (*Teagasc.ie - About, 2020*). Teagasc argued it falls between two government departments, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, with no department taking responsibility. Therefore, there is very little information available on the size of the market, number of competitors etc. Leahy's have looked to the UK for ideas on developing their business and have made many trips to open farms operating in the UK.

There is an umbrella organisation in the UK, the National Farm Attraction Network (NFAN) and Leahy's have found this organisation very useful. NFAN has over 200 members and provides professional support, assistance and organises regular networking events. NFAN inform their members about EU funding and grants but given the UK will leave the EU on the 31st of December 2020, access to EU funding is now in doubt. During the 1990s open-farm attractions were the fastest growing type of visitor attraction in the UK and Northern Ireland (*Wilson, 2007*). NFAN estimate that there are approximately 400 farm and rural attractions in the UK, welcoming 45 million visitors a year. 219 of these farms are members of NFAN and have

approximately 25 million visitors annually. NFAN members buy local produce, educate local school children, as well as provide the regions with excellent leisure destinations, which contributes greatly to the UK tourism economy (About the National Farm Attraction Network, 2020).

NFAN carried out a survey in 2020 and found the average farm park welcomes 113,821 annual visitors, employs 62 people and has a turnover of approximately £1.4 million. Cumulatively, this generates over £300 million for the rural tourist economy in the UK each year. NFAN's members support approximately 13,500 jobs, which equates to over £100 million in salaries (About the National Farm Attraction Network, 2020). Although no such data on this industry exists in Ireland, it is very clear the importance of this sector to the UK rural tourism economy. Open Farms would be part of the Agri-Tourism sector and no economic reports have been done on this industry to establish its value to the economy.

Caslin, (2018) defines the Agri-Tourism industry as a farm that offers accommodation, food and other attractions connected with authentic real life but very little is available on this industry in Ireland. Examples of diversification projects in the Agri-Tourism sector include Glamping/Camping, conversion of old farm buildings for tourism accommodation/amenities and open farms/pet farms. The most successful projects complement the existing farm business. Caslin observes that Agri-Tourism can help to regenerate peripheral regions and help small farms who are suffering from declining agricultural viability. Agri-Tourism is part of rural tourism and Rural Tourism is defined as 'tourism in rural areas' (Delheure et al., 2014, pg. 179) and is outside the major urban centres, whereas rural tourism in the EU context "provides between 10% and 20% of rural income and employment" (Industrial Heritage and Agri/Rural Tourism in Europe, 2013, pg. 9).

4. Innovation Capabilities of Leahy's Open Farm

As can be observed in section 2, Leahy's Open farm are an organisation that are constantly innovating and developing new revenue streams that allow the business to grow. These innovations occur thanks to intentional practices, and from emergent behaviour due to the adhocracy organisational culture. An organisation's ability to innovate can be linked to the practices of employees across the organisation as well as internal and external processes that support organisation innovation. Nada and Ali, (2015) build on this concept to propose a holistic conceptual framework for service innovation capability, which focuses on themes including *managerial capability, operational capability, strategic capability and adaptive capability*.

A useful thematic perspective on innovation capabilities is presented by Carlgren, (2013), which focuses on the following themes: Strategic Intent (*Organisation Vision*), Resources (*Knowledge and competency base, technology, networks and relations*), Processes (*Organisational structures, managerial systems, generative processes, ways of working*), and Mindset (*values, norms, culture, how decisions are taken*). The intent to categorise the practices and processes associated with a firm's innovation capability can provide insight into how to better manage the activities that lead to enhanced innovation, and may also provide an insight into processes that can be implemented to systematically build innovation capabilities within the organisation (Börjesson, Elmquist and Hooge, 2014).

In the case of Leahy's open farm, it became clear from speaking with the management (Teresa), this SME demonstrated an excellent aptitude for activities and processes associated with strong innovation capabilities. The Roadmap for Open Farms in Ireland post COVID-19 Economic Crisis (Figure 1), highlights that the nurturing of employees' skills, the harnessing of a competency base and becoming a learning organisation are strategies for building on innovation capabilities within an organisation. These three elements are discussed further below.

Nurturing Skills

Leaders in organisations can create conditions under which individual's innovation capacity can thrive (Surie and Hazy, 2006). An important element of this is for leaders in SME's to consider how they nurture the experiences and self-efficacy of their staff in respect of solving problems for the organisation. Leaders should focus on two dimensions to nurture innovation skills.

First, leaders should focus on the breadth of experiences that contribute towards problem solving – with (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Dougherty and Hardy, 1996; Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) linking a diversity of experiences to more effective innovation. Leadership in Leahy's achieve this through their open and

empathetic management style. Teresa expressed a desire for all employees who work with them to feel a sense of meaning and direction with their career's, with this mind-set applied to both full and part-time staff.

Second, leaders should focus on the depth of expertise in particular disciplines, with the depth of expertise being significantly linked to increased innovation capacity (Boh, Evaristo and Ouderkerk, 2014). Leaders can achieve this by providing individuals with support to pursue further education and certification, or by allowing employees greater responsibility in their areas of interest within the organisation.

The coffee shop on Leahy's premises is an example of a revenue stream, which has benefitted from this, with Leahy's providing support for Susan the coffee shop manager to pursue further education. The coffee shop was originally an informal tea, coffee and 'bake of the day' experience, but Susan has since developed a list of innovations and new revenue streams including a full-menu, take-away meals and picnics, catering for a children's menu, and individuals with gluten free (coeliac) and vegetarian requirements, as well as adjusting the menu to change to market preferences by developing healthier meal options. These new revenue streams helped to justify and pay for investment in a full commercial kitchen, which will in turn allow for increased quality, capacity, and revenue from the coffee shop. Furthermore, by delegating responsibility of management of the coffee shop, Teresa has time to shift her attention from operational level activities to tactical and strategic tasks.

Harnessing the Competency Base

While it is important to nurture individuals, innovation is typically a social process that requires the collaborative exploitation of individual skills (Wenger, 1999). Harnessing the competency base, asks for leaders to mindfully take stock of the skills that are available within your organisation and to collaborate with these individuals to find ways to add value to the business.

A key element to Leahy's continued development of new and exciting revenue streams has been their ability to incorporate the unique competence base of the family and employees. For example, during a regularly scheduled ideation session, a suggestion from a part-time employee to run ecology trips was further developed by Matt, the full-time yard manager. Matt, building on his degree in environmental science, developed an educational ecology and biodiversity school trip offering aimed at students studying Agricultural Science. Ecology elements of this trip offering have also been integrated into their summer camp and orienteering experiences, helping provide a competitive advantage for these packages.

This mind-set and approach are extended to encouraging part-time employees to apply their unique competencies. A part-time employee studying marketing in college was given range to apply her skills to promote Leahy's Open Farm. The employee used their knowledge of digital marketing to effectively develop their website and social media presence. Since the COVID-19 lockdown in Ireland, the website has since become an extremely important revenue stream, allowing the Open Farm to reach customers who are no-longer able to physically visit the farm.

This ability to harness or exploit the competency base requires an open mind-set, and the ability to delegate responsibility and trust your employees to have the best interest of your organisation in mind. These practices contribute towards a culture of innovation within the organisation, that can lead to emergent innovation behaviour that could not have been predicted if management did not harness their employees' competencies.

Organisational Learning

An open mind-set and organisational culture should also be extended to how you take information from your organisation's activities and use it as feedback to contribute towards incremental or radical innovation within your organisation. This perspective is consistent with the idea of organisational learning. Organisational learning can be viewed from several perspectives, (*the individual, how decisions are made, corporate culture or management systems* (Drejer, 2000)), but in the context of innovation it can be useful to take a user-centric view of organisational learning.

Do you actively seek feedback from your customers, are there clues in how your customers interact with your business that can be used as feedback? Can your customers contribute towards the incremental improvement of your current offerings or are there unmet desires that could lead to radical innovation? Do you have processes to capture and codify these learnings to create organisational knowledge? (Rudawska, 2013).

In the case of Leahy's open farm, the culture of management contributes to their ability to capture learnings and act on this knowledge. Informal processes are integrated into their daily routines. For

example, there is a culture of “have a chat” present, which has been passed down from the 1st to 2nd generation of family management. This “have a chat” culture is enacted in managements practices of taking time out from their busy day to connect with their customers and employees. This is similar to the culture in Google offices, where employees are encouraged to hang out and the offices are designed to have common areas, where spontaneous conversations can occur.

When testing new ideas, Teresa and the management team can approach regular and trusted customers for honest, informal feedback. For example, when they decided to develop a membership scheme for their farm, they opted for a different approach to some competitors. Rather than memberships allowing for a second free guest pass on visits, Teresa felt that it was important that a membership would only allow free entry for the member. Teresa feared there may be some negative reaction from customers, however thanks to the ‘have a chat’ culture in Leahy’s Open Farm, Teresa was able to gauge initial customer reaction, and after the initial reaction was positive, they were encouraged to continue with the membership approach. This has since proved to be an important revenue stream to the organisation, that was particularly important during forced closure during COVID-19 restrictions, resulting in a very low number of memberships being cancelled during this period.

This culture in Leahy’s enables the owners observe what is working well, what is not working well and allows for the spark of creativity that emerges from conversations between people with different perspectives.

Nurturing skills, harnessing the competency base, and organisational learning present three perspectives to understand the innovation capabilities of an organisation like Leahy’s Open Farm. Leahy’s also demonstrate significant competence in terms of their innovation approaches to strategic intent, use of resources, management of processes, and mindset as per (Carlgren, 2013). An organisation’s innovation capability enhances their ability to develop competitive advantage during positive economic conditions and may be vital for survival during challenging conditions.

5. Challenges facing the company

Due to COVID19, the family run business experienced a drop-off in visitor numbers and revenue, like many small companies in Ireland. The business needed to be innovative, while meeting the government guidelines, and following discussion with their employees, they decided to extend the outdoor summer camp programme. Every summer, the open farm runs outdoor summer camps over a three-week period. In order to boost their revenue stream and provide employment, they ran the outdoor summer camps from the 19th of June until mid-August 2020. This proved very popular, where the first summer camp sold out in 20 minutes. This generated approximately €8,000 in revenue for the business, normally the three-week summer camps generate €2,000. Due to COVID19, the business has introduced reduced handling of cash. Customers now buy items, such as, tickets for the digger park at a central kiosk. A positive knock-on effect of this has been increased sales of hot drinks and snacks (ten-fold increase compared to previous years). Following this success, the business intends on adding a seating area and kiosk in the new leprechaun castle, which will be added in 2021.

Like many businesses in Ireland, Insurance is a rising cost for Leahy’s Open Farm. The National Competitiveness Council (NCC) in their recent report on Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge highlighted the rising price of public liability insurance leading to an increase in costs of doing business and how it affects our competitiveness (*Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge*, 2020). The NCC supports the work of the 2018 working group ‘Cost of Insurance’ set up by government. According to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission public liability insurance accounts for about 12% of premiums overall amounting to €439 million in 2018, which has increased year on year since 2012 (CCPC, 2020). Leahy’s Farm and small businesses would welcome a reduction in insurance costs and consequently lower business costs. Leahy’s Farm insurance premium for 2020 increased by 33% compared to 2019 and they continue to experience small injury claims for injuries sustained by customers on the farm. Leahy’s recognising the increased operating costs, implemented a green initiative to reduce long term operating costs and ensure their way of working is more environmentally sustainable. The initiative included; installing Solar Power, replacing oil heating with an air to water system and changing all lightbulbs to LED. In an effort to further reduce costs, they have installed Solar Power, they plan on replacing oil heating with an air to water system and have changed all bulbs onsite to LED, in order to become greener and more sustainable.

Despite the innovative initiatives implemented by Leahy’s to combat trading restrictions and increasing operating costs, by October 2020, the business was down 50% on revenue compared to the previous year.

Given the business was in a strong financial position pre COVID-19, they have been able to weather the storm. However, this is very much dependent on opening their business as normal by Summer 2021 and a strong economic recovery. The ongoing pandemic and the associated financial difficulties are taking its toll on small businesses. One of the toughest decisions they had to make was letting their employees go in March 2020 due to COVID-19. The uncertainty of when they were to open again took its toll on the family run business.

Following the announcement of the second national lockdown on the 21st of October, Leahy's Open Farm was required to close for 6 weeks until early December. The owners were worried about the well-being and financial uncertainty of their employees. The government supports including the Pandemic Unemployment Benefit, Wage Subsidy Scheme and cash payments based on 2019 average weekly turnover alleviate some of the worry for employees and business owners. The economic outlook for 2021 and beyond and how the economy recovers is dependent on the length of the COVID-19 crisis and whether the EU and the UK can agree a free trade agreement before the end of 2020. The economic outlook is uncertain for small businesses and a recovery in domestic demand will be important for them. The Central Bank of Ireland forecasts GDP to grow by 3.8% in 2021 and 4.6% in 2022, following an estimated growth of 2.5% in 2020. Strong export growth in pharmaceuticals, medical devices and the IT sector has supported GDP growth and future growth is contingent on containing the Covid-19 pandemic. Unemployment (percentage of the labour force who are out of work) is estimated to grow to 9.3% of the Labour Force in 2021 and 7.8% in 2022. (CBI, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The shape of the open-farm industry in Ireland continues to shift, and external factors outside of Leahy's control will continue to provide new challenges. However, Leahy's Open Farm continues to demonstrate organisational resilience and continues to innovate and develop new revenue streams. Firm Innovation Capabilities' provides a powerful lens by which to understand the good practices that lead to the development of new business ideas and improvement in existing products and services. Firm innovation capabilities may also provide a useful benchmark by which an organisation can look to reflect and improve on their practices. Leahy's plan to continue to develop their product and service offerings, with plans in place to expand the physical site and further develop their food, education, experience and seasonal businesses.

Employees of Leahy's Open Farm are an intrinsic element in the success and implementation of any of the businesses' innovation practices, and this is recognised and encouraged by the farm's owners. They strongly believe that empowering their employees to make suggestions and offer ideas to solve problems, grow the business and add to the customer experience is at the centre of the farm's success. Encouraging and facilitating employees to implement and take ownership of their ideas means that there is a continuous pool of innovation capabilities to tap into.

The Open and Pet Farm industry is growing and developing in Ireland, and this industry has little to no support. It is recommended that the Department of Agriculture create a network for open and pet farms in Ireland, similar to NFAN in the UK. This case study can form a template for further studies of open farms and augment knowledge in this industry, which is currently not available. Following this primary research, we suggest a strategy and future roadmap for the open farm industry in Ireland as per figure 1. Roadmap for Open Farms in Ireland, post Covid19 crisis. This roadmap, with government support, is an opportunity for the open-farm industry to establish best practice principles, develop an open-farm rating system and grow a supportive network. These strategies are an opportunity for the many family businesses in the open farm sector in Ireland to re-innovate, grow and thrive following the many negative impacts to their business from the global Covid19 pandemic.

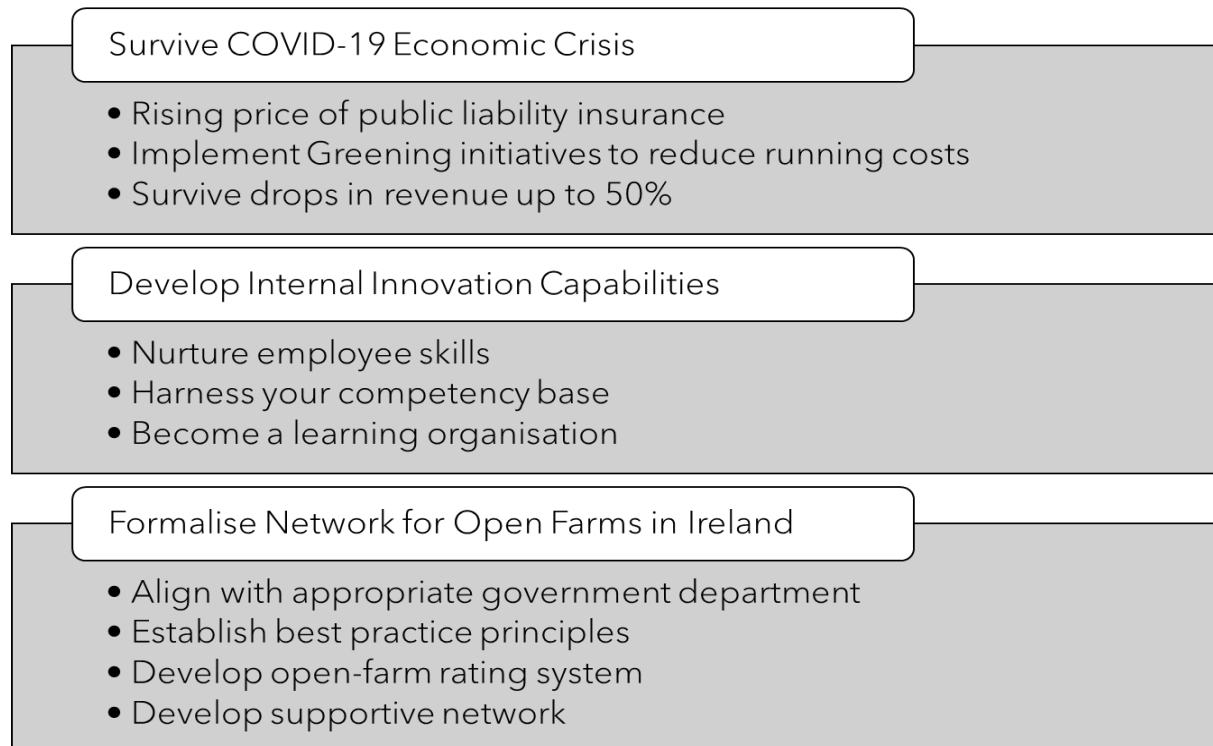


Figure 1. Roadmap for Open Farms in Ireland post COVID-19 Economic Crisis

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