Entrepreneurship and Mental Well-being

Focus groups outcomes

October 2021

Table of content

Introduction

The purpose of our data gathering has been to identify the fundamental issues that are on stake for entrepreneurs when it comes to their mental health. This analysis will help us to define what they would need in terms of support. For data collection, we choose to apply a methodological mix with the objective of triangulation; two methods will be used complementary at the same time, for the same research object. Data are collected by a quantitative research method (surveys) in conjunction with focus groups. This report addresses the focus group method and its outcomes.

Focus group methodology, originally used in marketing and social sciences, has been more widely used and shown its value in health research. The underlying idea is that these focus groups would enable the collection of meaningful data on people's perceptions of their environment and their wellbeing at work. Focus group discussions tend to capture more personal and deep responses than purely quantifiable data. It creates the possibility to ask participants about their beliefs, opinions and attitudes towards a concept or idea (Kitzinger 1995).

For this project, the decision has been made to organise an online event for our target audience on the topic of mental wellbeing. The event comprised sessions with keynote speakers, followed by group discussion sessions involving the participants of the conference. These group interviews represented not only a convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously, but also they provided the opportunity to comply with the general characteristics of focus groups: people's involvement, the discussion focused on a topic, the homogeneity of participants with respect to research interests, and multiplication of meetings (Freitas 1998).

Focus groups deploy group interaction as part of the methodology. They capitalise on communication and allow to explore topics. Participants impact on each other through their answers to the questions and contributions during the discussions. In this way, the data gathered from this method should be seen as able to complement and further explain the statistical information obtained from other evaluative processes within this research. It is important to keep in mind as well that, as the group interaction constitutes a social

atmosphere, the comments should be interpreted as making part of this context (Krueger 1994, Morgan 1988, Breen 2006).

Method

After the keynote sessions of the speakers, the participants have been invited to take part in the focus working groups.

Participants have been randomly assigned to one of the different groups, that were guided by each time two persons of the organizational team. The moderators have observed and made annotations during the session, and registered their impressions soon after the end of the session. These annotations, although they are not part of the data of the session, will be part of the researcher's interpretation.

The number of participants that was admitted to the meeting, was 42 in total (of which 10 of our own organizational team). As focus groups ideally are conducted in smaller group settings, the groups were composed of a number between 4 to 10 participants. Though, the number of participants has been fluctuating throughout the session as people were leaving and re-joining the online rooms. The duration of the session has been set to one hour. It has been communicated that, contrary to the rest of the online event, the group sessions would not be recorded.

The focus group has been installed as a safe place where shared information would be confidential and cannot be disclosed out of the group setting. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, to exchange anecdotes and comment on each other's understandings and points of view. The moderators stimulated discussion with observations or subjects.

The 3 focus groups that took place, were:

Group 1, moderators: Allan Michael Lawrence (Projects beyond borders, UK) and Indre Alekniene (Association Mintes Bietes)

Group 2, moderators: Kim Peeters (UCCL - University College Leuven-Limburg, BE) and Irma Drent (Avans University, NL)

Group 3, facilitators Yvonne Farrand (Projects beyond borders, UK) and Rob De With (Avans University, NL)

The group sessions' organizers have made use of the online collaborative whiteboard platform Miro in order to organize the brainstorming and gathering of ideas using digital sticky notes. The input from the Miro boards, together with additional notes have been the primary sources we've relied on to draw up the current report.

During the focus group sessions, a set of 5 questions was addressed. These questions relate to the key themes helping to identify the needs of entrepreneurs, existing coping strategies, and criteria for supportive tools. We chose open-ended and engaging questions. In order to make the focus group discussion more effective, specific follow up or probing questions were asked at large of the discussions.

The 5 guiding questions were the following:

Question 1 - In the past, who or what has been most helpful for you as a means of avoiding psychological distress due to your entrepreneurial activities?

Question 2 - In the past, who or what has been most helpful for you as a means of relieving or coping with psychological distress due to your entrepreneurial activities?

Question 3 - What would you consider to be the key areas where you need more knowledge, information or support in order to maintain a healthy work-life balance?

Question 4 - How, in what form, would you like to receive or acquire such additional knowledge, information or support?

Question 5 - How can we make such information or support as easily accessible as possible?

In general it has been noticed that discussion often moved between questions and the identified key themes. With a broad set of questions, answers can be overlapping, on the other hand these help to cover the topic more in its entirety. Extra specific questions that

were asked during the discussions have contributed to obtain the more detailed and additional informations.

For the analysis of our focus group data, we've used the form of qualitative or ethnographic summary, bearing in mind that the main unit of analysis is the group. A first draft has been presented to the moderators for additions or adaptations. It should be taken into account that the focus group results are mainly exploratory and need to be interpreted together with the outcomes of the quantitative research technique.

This report will present the most important information obtained from each one of the main topics of the discussion during the group sessions. For consistency, we choose to bring the answer results on the different questions coming from the 3 different groups together, in order to be able to interpret them as a whole.

Results

Question 1: strategies for avoiding psychological distress

<u>In the past, who or what has been most helpful for you as a means of avoiding psychological distress due to your entrepreneurial activities?</u>

Group 1 has welcomed the initiative of this event by indicating that it is essential to dig into and get a profound understanding of real life experiences of entrepreneurs in order to obtain valuable answers to this question. Academic research is necessary to give an overall background and to provide insight into general tendencies, but should be completed with testimonies of the target group itself. The participants recommend to continue integrating entrepreneurs' practices and struggles in the further process of the project.

All 3 groups recognise the importance of prevention. Therein, **self-care** has been mentioned often as an important measure. Self-care needs to be understood as a practice of consciously doing things that preserve or improve mental or physical wellbeing.
In the first place, the groups have pointed towards the benefits of meditational activities for mental health and emotional wellbeing. Yoga, meditation and mindfulness are practices to be believed to help not just for instant stress relief, they contribute to personal transformation and resilience building in the longer run as well.
Secondly, physical selfcare has been identified by the participants as an important strategy. In particular, physical exercise has significant mental health benefits: it is good for your self-esteem and general mood, and makes you less prone to symptoms of anxiety or depression, according to the participants.
Then, another form of self-care, more to be considered as emotional selfcare, such as giving yourself permission to take a pause, has been discussed about. Consciously scheduling rest

moments in your time frame, or taking dedicated breaks from electronics are ways of taking care of yourself.

Some participants highlighted that self-care ideally should take place within a routinely, regular working schedule. Not only this will help you to engage in self-care more enduringly, routine also has great benefits in itself. It will give you a sense of structure, and can contribute to mental peace and harmony. Of course you need to find what type of routine suits best for you, and keep room for improvisation and moments of creativity.

Groups 2 and 3 particularly stressed the importance of having a **network**. A network gives a feeling of connection and belonging, and provides emotional support. In the opinion of the participants, a close network can have another important additional signal function, eg. indicate that it's time to get some rest. When it's difficult to self-recognise when something is wrong and to understand triggers, the direct environment often sees and knows first before the entrepreneur him/herself. A good support system can consist of family members, a partner, friends, other professionals or peers.

The groups then drew attention to the fact that the type and level of support depends on team size - whether you're a solo-entrepreneur or part of a larger organisation. Being a **solo-entrepreneur** is considered to be a particularly vulnerable position, because there are fewer surrounding contacts to exert the function to send a signal when the entrepreneur risks to get overworked and mentally exhausted.

The **physical space** wherein entrepreneurial and leisure activities take place is another important factor, says group 3. Frequent teleworking can cause an imbalance between working atmosphere and private life. It is fundamental to get literally out of the workplace, and out of your zone of comfort. In particular, getting in contact with, and spending time in nature is sometimes what you need to get inspired and focussed again.

Then, in crisis situations, entrepreneurs are not always able to understand what is happening to them, and if the situation of stress and pressure persists, lots of damage and energy-draining can happen. Therefore, the group points out the importance of an early **diagnostics**, and the need for clinical assistance if this is a next step that should be undertaken. Participants believe that a diagnosis can give comfort, as symptoms previously experienced as scary and inconceivable, will make more sense. It may also shift feelings of

self-blame and guilt. Further, having a mental health diagnosis can give access to recovery programmes, health professionals and various support groups.

Question 2: coping strategies for mental health

<u>In the past, who or what has been most helpful for you as a means of relieving or coping with psychological distress due to your entrepreneurial activities?</u>

Group 2 is indicating a few coping strategies to diminish psychological distress that have proven to be effective according to their own experiences. Self-awareness is the first important step. When we go through tough times, often it is difficult to discern our mental health issues, as the research participants indicate. In order to be aware of your mental health state, you need to continuously be working on your own **reflection skills**. **Awareness** can originate and grow through self-reflection methods and assessment exercises that encourage and support this reflective process. Online self-assessment tools and checklists are found to be helpful in this. Lots of them exist already, so if an new one is considered to be developed, it should have its own originality.

Next, it's about creating a more indulgent and self-accepting attitude towards oneself. By accepting that not everything needs to be perfect, letting go of perfectionism, you also let go of the huge amount of stress coming with. Participants described this as 'developing a **growth mind-set'**. This means that you believe in your ability to learn, develop and change, and that mistakes need to be seen as the natural part of learning.

Subsequently, there is the importance of **reconnecting to your motivations, passion**, which were the original drivers behind starting a business. When we get overstressed, we tend to lose this sensation of passion and joy, and get a feeling of being trapped. Participants indicated that they had felt the need to remind themselves of the mission statement and driving vision of their initiative, which tend to get into the background when we're caught up in daily activities – and even to re-define them.

Another group adds that particular significance must be attached to **assertiveness**. It's about getting your message across and expressing feelings and thoughts in a confident way, while avoiding to be aggressive. Assertiveness is important in communication, as it improves relationships and effectiveness within the working environment. Moreover, it's also about

setting limits and staying in control. Entrepreneurs easily can get overwhelmed and it's essential for them to learn to say no and to know and to indicate their boundaries. Training for entrepreneurs to develop more assertive skills could be useful.

It is essential as well to do a thinking process about your particular type of **personality** and how traits and characteristics can help you to fit with the job in your own way. Eg. how is it to become an entrepreneur while being an introvert, or on the other hand when you're 'naturally' reaching out for a network. It has a different impact on emotional well-being. Even coaching should be no 'one-fits-all' approach, but according to each specific personality type.

Forms of **self-care** that have been talked about in the previous section, were mentioned in the discussion about topic 2 as well. Group 1 participants declare that is important to change habits, introduce new ones and break patterns. **Physical activities and meditation** have been given as examples of change. Group 3 participants elaborated the connection between physical activities and stress relief: dancing, jogging, swimming and other types of sports but also singing and meditation were referred to. In the same group, developing an infinity mindset (daily reflection on confidence/energy/courage) was indicated as a helpful coping strategy. Removing yourself to a different environment, not only for short episodes of time, but disconnecting for a long period, was another major factor.

The role of the **network** came again into picture in different groups. More specifically, contacts with other entrepreneurs were acknowledged to be of interest. In the participants opinion, exchanging with and socialising with like-minded people can have positive effects for entrepreneurs' mental health. The reasoning behind this is that because of sharing the same position, challenges and problems, it creates a sense of recognition and solidarity.

Finally, the issue of **time management and planning** has been addressed. Subtopics mentioned here were: actively cutting back on working hours, limiting screen time, using technology to save time, delegating tasks or even outsourcing them.

Question 3: key areas of interest for support

<u>What would you consider to be the key areas where you need more knowledge, information or support in order to maintain a healthy work-life balance?</u>

In group 2, **financial** issues were found to be a key trigger. Often (small) entrepreneurs have limited access to funding and cash flow and administrative tasks can be a persistent source of stress.

Therefore, professionals in this area can pick up the existence of problems and start playing a more important role, such as bank managers and accountants. They could serve as first points of access for psychological help. Providing better training for managers and HR personnel on mental health could be helpful as well.

Various other areas have been indicated by the other groups, such as:

coaching and mentoring,

conflict resolution strategies,

personal management/energy management,

diagnostics (how to identify the triggers and signals received from your own body/behaviour),

some specific areas related to psychological behaviour such as: the drivers of ADHD, recognising imposter syndrome, and working with chaos and ambiguity.

Another area to be gained more knowledge about was: **time management and setting priorities**. In some groups or by some participants this has also been called as 'multi-tasking issue/prioritisation management'. When it comes to priorities, goals and how to make choices, participants particularly wanted to know how to stick to what you really want (objectives) and on the delimitation of your target audience. They also want to learn about how to find the right balance between work and private sphere. Participants are motivated to develop their time management skills as they expect to get rapid, concrete and rather visible improvements in their daily life as a result of it.

Group 2 showed the will to learn more about how to **develop a strong professional network**. An issue for the participants was: who do you have to spar and bounce ideas with, which critical sounding boards does the entrepreneur have at his/her disposal? A professional network is seen as important not only because it would strengthen business

connections and permits gaining knowledge and good advice, a professional support network also has the capacity to spill over into the entrepreneurs personal friendships.

Questions 4 and 5: criteria for additional information or support

As the topics treated by questions 4 and 5 are quite related, the discussion of the outcomes will be taken together.

Question 4 - How, in what form, would you like to receive or acquire such additional knowledge, information or support?
Question 5 - How can we make such information or support as easily accessible as possible?

To start with, group 1 stipulates that it is important to identify and use what is already out there: some interesting supportive materials already exist.

Characteristics of the channels through which this information can reach entrepreneurs, were:

accessibility driven,

adaptability to generations = age-appropriate resources (Gen 2 / Alpha communication – how do they need to consume this support and information),

online,

safe space.

It has been indicated that a first step is to identify the target cohort in order to develop appropriate and effective tools. Another point that has been discussed was the nature of the platforms. It could be interesting to explore alternatives to the larger ones, linked to big corporations (such as Google, Facebook).

The different forms enumerated in which support or information could be provided, were: podcasts, coaching sessions, training, apps and intervention sessions. Some examples

given were apps for yoga or mindfulness that work with short, 5 to 10 minute sessions. Intervention sessions can indicate that the problems you're dealing with are not just individual but universal problems, and help to develop compassion, what, on its turn, can make you compassionate about yourself. Also, tools for purpose mapping and self-analysis/reflection were found to be helpful. Positive examples cited were: Jessica's tool on wellbeing, DigiBurn and DigiHealth.

The importance of the availability of applications has been underlined. Toolkits with a flexible nature and where you can 'dip in and out', were considered to be interesting. When referring to support, 24/7 access should be guaranteed, for which online tools/platforms could be a practical solution. When it comes to accessibility, open source platforms with available tools, with the right search words (library of tools/aggregating tool) were identified as much needed initiatives.

Methods that were mentioned, have been: the learning-feedback loop for creating and testing a minimum viable product, and kinaesthetic learning in an online learning environment (immersive learning that includes computer simulations of the work environment).

On a more theoretical level, it has been suggested that the 3 core elements of entrepreneurship (Values, Purpose and Responsibilities) can be taken into account when developing strategies for entrepreneurs.

Again, it was stressed that entrepreneurial networks can be valuable. In this case the focus should be not only on marketing your business but also on entrepreneurs' health. The importance of establishing a network for emotional support cannot be underestimated.

Finally, it has been discussed that there exists an awareness taboo/shame about the topic (eg. in Belgium) and that this factor should also be taken into account when improving the accessibility of tools.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has presented the outcomes of three focus group discussions with entrepreneurs that were organized in June 2021 on the topic of mental wellbeing. We suggest that there are a few striking results to be withheld and taken into consideration in the further development process of the actual project.

The importance of a network is a point that has been emphasized during the sessions. Research participants believe in the different functions a network could have for themselves as an entrepreneur and in particular in its benefits for mental health. Participants indicate that they would like to know more about how the existing network can realize its potential, but also how to develop a stronger network, especially with other entrepreneurs.

Also, self-analysis and reflection are found to be key, but difficult to do solely based on self-assessment. An interesting issue to investigate could be how to involve the direct surrounding environment of the entrepreneur into a process of self-analysis.

Psychological topics, and those related to personal development induce a lot of interest. Participants are keen on gaining more knowledge and skills on subjects related to psychology and mental well-being. Different subthemes and specific areas have been mentioned.

As the group sessions have been held as part of an event that addresses the topic of mental health, it can be supposed that our participants already have a certain degree of interest for those themes. Nonetheless, they showed aspirations to learn more or to explore new domains of knowledge.

Another outcome that has been found, was on the participants' interest in time and prioritisation management. For an entrepreneur, there are so many tasks that need to be planned, so effective time management plays an important role in determining how much gets done. Although good time management is important for everyone, it's to be found crucial for entrepreneurs.

Taking care of your mental health, has been determined recurrently by the research participants in form of different acts of self-care. The participants have identified self-care as an effective way to improve their mental wellbeing, and express that self-care should take a more prominent place into their life routine. Expressions of spiritual and physical self-care have been identified the most, next to emotional self-care examples. It could be interesting to integrate more examples of emotional self-care in the further process.

Last, the participants in the focus group sessions have stressed the need for early detecting of mental health issues and consulting with professional help. The interlinking with health professionals and mental wellbeing provisions should be given enough attention.

References

Breen, R.L. (2006) A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 30:3, 463-475, DOI: 10.1080/03098260600927575.

Freitas, H., Oliveira, M., Jenkins, M., and Popjoy, O. The Focus Group, a qualitative research method. ISRC, Merrick School of Business, University of Baltimore (MD, EUA), WP ISRC No. 010298, February 1998. 22 p.

Kitzinger J. (1995). Qualitative Research: Introducing focus groups BMJ. 1995. 311: 299 doi: 10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299.

Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (1988). Focus groups as qualitative research. Sage Publications, Inc.