

Call for papers

Towards an Ecosystem Approach of Corporate Entrepreneurship and Start-up–Incumbent Relationships

Guest Editors

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Corporate entrepreneurship is commonly defined as “the process whereby an individual or a group of individuals, in association with an existing organization, create a new organization or instigate renewal or innovation within that organization” (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999, p. 18). It encompasses bottom-up initiatives that are developed within organizations (Pinchot, 1985) to innovate using the firm’s resources (Robinson, 2001; Kraus et al., 2019), to renew organizations (Kraus et al., 2019) or to create a new business within the existing company (“corporate venturing”) (Hornsby et al., 2009). Corporate entrepreneurship also involves the way established firms and organizations, hereafter incumbents, interact with start-ups to benefit from their entrepreneurial spirit and thinking (Klammer et al., 2023) and to access relevant flows of knowledge as a basis for innovation (Audretsch and Fiedler, 2023). Thus, corporate entrepreneurship appears as a multidimensional phenomenon (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003; Kraus et al., 2019) based on the adoption of entrepreneurial attitudes, intentions, and behaviors within and between organizations (Bouchard and Fayolle, 2011).

Many researchers (Basso, 2006; Zahra, 1996; Ireland et al., 2009) have underlined the importance for incumbents to have a corporate entrepreneurship strategy for competitiveness and innovation purposes. Among a growing body of literature developing knowledge on corporate entrepreneurship (Urbano et al., 2022), scholars have focused on the factors underlying the emergence of entrepreneurial initiatives within organizations (Kuratko et al., 1990; Carrier, 1994), on the corporate entrepreneurship process (Bartoli and Ewango-Chatelet, 2016; Burgelman, 1983; Hornsby et al., 1993), or on the profile of intrapreneurs/corporate entrepreneurs (Allali, 2005; Hatchuel et al., 2009). Moreover, they have also shown that the implementation of a corporate entrepreneurship strategy depends on an environment that enables risk taking and challenges the status quo (Chebbi et al., 2020). Hence the importance of an organizational context characterized by management support, recognition, autonomy, and tolerance for failure (Brinette et al., 2024; Hornsby et al. 1993; Urbano et al., 2022).

This internal context, despite its importance, may not provide sufficient support for corporate entrepreneurs leading them to mobilize an external network to access additional resources and information. In fact, intrapreneurs, often considered as innovation champions, steer their projects by drawing on both the company’s existing and external resources. Partnerships with external actors such as suppliers, start-ups, customers or universities can offer intrapreneurs valuable resources to develop and accelerate their innovative projects (Rigtering and Behrens, 2021).

All these players build an ecosystem that could be a lever for implementing corporate entrepreneurship strategy, offering intrapreneurs unique opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and knowledge acquisition. The ecosystem as a concept is derived from biology and describes how a simple ecological element of the environment and the organisms that live within can co-evolve in a positive relationship (Theodoraki, Dana and Caputo, 2022). It has been used in different disciplines and approaches, including the configurations approaches (Spigel, 2017), network approach (Fernandes and Ferreira, 2021; Neumeyer and Santos, 2018); system approaches (Stam and van de Ven, 2021), process-based approaches (Spigel and Harrison, 2018), institutional approaches (Cloitre et al., 2022) and multi-level approaches (Theodoraki and Messeghem, 2017).

Several types of ecosystems and sub-ecosystems have been studied in the literature. The business ecosystem focuses on how companies can co-evolve their capabilities around a new innovation and collaborate across industry boundaries (Jacobides et al. 2018; Moore, 1993). The innovation ecosystem differs from the business ecosystem as the center of attention is “...the collaborative arrangements through which firms combine their individual offerings into a coherent, customer-facing solution” (Adner, 2006, p. 2). The entrepreneurial ecosystem concentrates on the creation of economic growth by promoting entrepreneurship on different geographical levels (Cobben et al. 2022; Isenberg, 2011) and by mobilizing actors like incubators, start-ups and institutions (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Theodoraki and Messeghem, 2017). For the knowledge ecosystem (Messeghem et al., 2023), the interest is on knowledge interactions between actors, in particular, academic networks and universities (Prokop, 2021) that are closely located to create and develop new knowledge.

Despite a growing interest and its large use in entrepreneurship research, the ecosystem approach remains for the moment absent from research related to incumbents and corporate entrepreneurship. Indeed, scholars have mostly focused on the external interactions of these companies. Dealing with open innovation context, Gutmann, Chochoiek, and Chesbrough (2023) point out that companies running open innovation projects face two major challenges like managing change internally and relationships externally and that corporate venture capital units (CVCs) accelerate innovation by bridging the gap between internal and external knowledge. Lô and Theodoraki (2021) have also analyzed external interactions in the context of Nested Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and ambidexterity. From a corporate entrepreneurship perspective, the importance of the institutional network in obtaining external resources and mentoring has been highlighted (Soltanifar et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023; Chebbi et Laviolette, 2023).

This external approach of ecosystems should be completed with an internal one as corporate entrepreneurship refers both to the adoption of practices and systems within incumbents, and to the extraction of new entities beyond incumbents' boundaries (Blondel and Loubaresse, 2023). In fact, incumbents can use various means and levers to develop their innovation capability such as the creation of Internal Corporate Accelerators (Selig et al., 2018) or the introduction of innovation trophies (Brinette et al., 2024). Moreover, Ferrary (2013) puts forward the idea that the challenge for these companies is to build their own ecosystem ("an intrapreneurial ecosystem") as a space for socialization and exchange between innovation players. Likewise, Klammer et al. (2023) explores, from the point of view of incumbents, how learning and unlearning mechanisms are unfolding when employees collaborate with start-ups. Thus, studying innovation from a corporate entrepreneurship viewpoint prompts scholars to explore new directions for research including internal and external interactions with ecosystems.

This is especially important considering the increasing pressures that incumbents face, stemming from environmental and economic crises. As already suggested by Hockerts and Wüstenhagen (2010), incumbents and new entrants have different, albeit complementary, roles to play for bringing new sustainable innovation to the market. Yet, by collaborating, they can accelerate the transition to more sustainable ecosystems (Klofsten et al, 2024). In the context of the circular economy, for instance, such relationships between incumbents and start-ups are about developing mechanisms by which circularity can be embedded in the extant ecosystems through the flow of relevant knowledge and values (Audretsch and Fiedler, 2023). As suggested by Theodoraki et al. (2023), these interactions are crucial because they provide a channel for the spillover of knowledge, learning, and capacities from one ecosystem element to another. Thus, by taking an ecosystem approach on corporate entrepreneurship and incumbent-start-up relationships, scholars can contribute to a better understanding of the transition towards more resilient and sustainable production systems.

Based on the entrepreneurial ecosystem research (Theodoraki et al., 2023), different perspectives could be adopted to apprehend the connections between corporate entrepreneurship and ecosystems. First, a structural perspective would help understanding the structure and configurations of the ecosystems mobilized by large companies to develop innovative projects, notably when collaborating with other external stakeholders such as start-ups. Second, an interaction perspective could also be considered to analyze the dynamics between the different players that build ecosystems that are more resilient in the face of economic and environmental crises. We also invite scholars to consider the evolution perspective of this ecosystem approach to analyze the development of the ecosystem configuration mobilized by companies and how it evolves over time. Finally, research could also take into account the context in which corporate entrepreneurship actions occur such as the territory, the size of the company (SME, large corporation) or its governance (family business, public/private organizations, etc.).

All these perspectives are very important and can provide a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem configuration, functioning and impact on the corporate entrepreneurship strategy implementation. The aim of this call is to address these different issues by mobilizing an ecosystem approach to better understand corporate entrepreneurship and innovation within incumbents.

Therefore, our proposal for this special issue of *Revue de l'Entrepreneuriat/Review of Entrepreneurship* aims to fill this gap in the literature by opening up corporate entrepreneurship and innovation research to the ecosystem concept. Interested scholars are invited to submit their conceptual/theoretical or empirical contributions. We welcome work that mobilizes original approaches from a variety of disciplines. All research methods (systematic reviews, case studies, quantitative studies, meta-analyses, etc.) are welcome.

Some of the topics that may be addressed in this special issue include, but are not limited to:

- Interactions between incumbents and start-ups within ecosystems
- Intrapreneurs, innovation and ecosystems
- Open innovation and corporate entrepreneurship
- Circular economy and corporate entrepreneurship
- Internal ecosystems and corporate entrepreneurship
- External ecosystems and corporate entrepreneurship
- Interactions between internal and external ecosystems and innovation
- Learning within ecosystems for incumbents and start-ups
- Ambidexterity, corporate entrepreneurship and ecosystems
- Corporate Venture Capital (CVC) and corporate entrepreneurship
- Corporate entrepreneurship, corporate venturing and spinoffs
- Corporate entrepreneurship and the evolution of the ecosystems
- Crowdfunding and the financing of corporate entrepreneurship
- Towards the emergence of the corporate entrepreneurship ecosystem?

Submission process and timetable

Authors are invited to submit full papers to the journal through the [dedicated online platform](#) by **December 15th, 2024**. Full papers should be written in English following [the guidelines for journal](#).

The special issue publication, following peer review, is planned for **Spring 2026**.

Contact

If you have any questions about the special issue, please email the editorial team and include all five guest editors as recipients.

For additional questions and to meet the editorial team and other prospective authors, join us for a “pitch my article” session in May 2024. Details will be available on *Revue de l'entrepreneuriat/Review of Entrepreneurship's* website. Attendance is optional and does not guarantee publication.

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