

The Survival of Family Firms: The Importance of Control and Family Ties

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ABSTRACT *The aim of this article is to analyze the survival patterns of a group of family firms which have already spent at least 25 years in the market. To this end, we use the Kaplan–Meier product limit estimator supplemented with qualitative information gathered by direct observation and discussions with entrepreneurs. The main findings are that small family firms which have reached their 30th year in the market face a very high risk of sudden exit, increasing with firm age. Further control carried out by means of interviews with entrepreneurs identifies problems connected with succession as one of the main causes of the decision to close down.*

Key Words: Family Firms; Succession; Survival Function; Kaplan–Meier Estimator; Hazard Function; Italy.

JEL Classifications: L20, C34, C41, M13.

1. Introduction

For entrepreneurs who start a new firm, there sooner or later comes the moment when they decide, or are forced by circumstances, to retire. This decision gives rise to a succession problem which can be solved either by hiring professional managers or by appointing the founder's heirs to run the firm. If a professional manager or a heir is appointed, the founder (principal) can decide whether to stay and monitor him (which he usually does) or to give the agent acting on his behalf

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an incentive structure which is the same as his own, and thereby engage in delegation (Vickers, 1985).

The resulting agent appointment game is more likely to be incentive compatible for the principal when he chooses an agent of his own type, namely a member of his family (who, as a natural consequence of family ties, can be supposed to have an incentive structure the same as his own).

This solution to the appointment game is supported by the history of small family firms in Italy (Santarelli, 2001), which shows that those entrepreneurs who do not have heirs wishing to continue their activity (or do not have heirs at all) prefer to close down their businesses rather than hand over control of the firm they have created to an outsider.¹ As a matter of fact, firms controlled by the entrepreneurs who started them often close down—rather than becoming Berle and Means (1932) corporations (see also Burkart *et al.*, 2003)—when their founders are about to retire and no viable conditions exist for the persistence of family control after their retirement. According to the above theoretical considerations, succession may affect the likelihood of survival of family firms, even those characterized by the most favorable prospects of success. In-depth analysis of the succession event, therefore, provides the rationale for supporting the *age dependence* model put forward by Jovanovic (1982) (see also Hopenhayn, 1992; Audretsch, 1995; Cooley and Quadrini, 2001) which identifies age as the main dimension of heterogeneity among firms.² When succession is considered, i.e., in the case of family firms which have already spent at least 25 years in the market, survival can be taken as dependent on age, since entrepreneurial firms experience different dynamics with respect to their managerial counterparts (which, by definition, are not affected by the succession problem) with the passing of time.

Following the approach suggested by Borenstein *et al.* (1998), we combine the theoretical considerations put forward in this section with economic evidence provided by statistical analysis and qualitative information gathered from discussions with entrepreneurs. Accordingly, Section 2 contains an extension of the results presented in Santarelli (2001) which uses the Kaplan–Meier product limit estimator to analyze the relationship between survival and age for a sample of *small* family firms in manufacturing, retailing, and the hospitality sector, the purpose being to identify whether around the 30th year in the market, i.e., when the succession problem usually manifests itself, this kind of firm is more likely to exit the market. Section 3 uses direct observation and interviews with entrepreneurs who have already faced or are facing the succession problem to set out the factors affecting their decisions concerning the future of the firm they have created. Finally, some concluding remarks are made in Section 4.

2. Data and Econometric Issues

2.1 Data

From the empirical viewpoint, our first step was to study, by means of statistical analysis, the likelihood of survival after the 25th year following start-up of small family firms registered with the Chamber of Commerce of Rimini, in the Emilia–Romagna region of Italy, during the period 1950–1965 and which had survived for at least 25 years. The “family” nature of these firms is confirmed by the fact that they are all single proprietorship firms—which is clear evidence of unlimited liability—and that in 78% of them at least one relative of the owner, besides the

owner himself, occupies a crucial managerial position. At the end of 1999 such firms were aged between 34 and 49, and therefore had already faced (or were about to face) the succession event. Their small employment size is confirmed by the fact that at start-up time they had an average of 3.53 employees, whereas the current average size of surviving ones is 7.68 employees.³ Thus, firms in our analysis satisfy the narrowest family business definition commonly accepted by scholars of family business (Astrachan and Shanker, 1996) that requires direct family involvement in daily operations, more than one family member with significant management responsibility, and multiple generations involved.

Emilia-Romagna is one of the most economically advanced Italian regions and is characterized by the presence of a large number of family firms, most of which belong to industrial districts (Forni and Paba, 2002). For these reasons, the Province of Rimini, in the southeastern area of this region, is an ideal observatory for study of the patterns of survival of such firms. We focused our analysis on manufacturing, retailing, and hospitality services, which are still the most important activities in the local economy. The total number of single proprietorship firms registered during the 1950–1965 period and still alive after 25 years was 908, most of which (63.10%) were in the retailing sector, whereas manufacturing and hospitality services accounted for, respectively, 19.94% and 17.95% of the whole sample (Table 1). Nearly two-thirds (62.44%) of the initial firms that survived for at least 25 years were still active at the end of 1999, i.e., between 9 and 24 years after completion of their 25th year in the market. The percentages of survivors are high in all three industries, although hospitality services (70.55%) appeared to perform better than manufacturing and retailing. This is probably connected to the spatial agglomeration of hospitality firms in the Rimini area, which is favored by the endowment of tourist amenities (such as beaches, discotheques, amusement parks, etc.) and is likely to result in a higher likelihood of survival for firms in this industry⁴.

2.2 Econometric Issues

Among many problems concerning survival analysis, it is impossible to make complete measurements of the life spans of all the subjects in the sample. Some individuals, firms in this case, can be “lost” from the sample without their having necessarily exited from the market.⁵ Accordingly, for each individual we can observe either the time to *failure* (i.e., the exit from the market) or the time to *loss*

Table 1. Number of firms registered in the chamber of commerce files and active for at least 25 years, and number of survivors in 1999

	Number of firms born in the 1950–65 period and active for at least 25 years	Percentage	Number of firms still active in 1999	Percentage of survivors
Manufacturing	172	19.94	107	62.21
Retailing	573	63.10	345	60.21
Hospitality	163	17.95	115	70.55
Total	908	100	567	62.44

(or *censoring* time, i.e., the time at which the observation is stopped). This means that for the censored individuals, we know only that the time to failure is greater than the censoring time, since they were still in the sample at that time. With these incomplete observations, the estimation of a survival function cannot be a simple description of the sample (Kaplan and Meier, 1958). In the presence of a complete sample one could easily estimate the empirical survivor function via maximum likelihood procedure as:

$$S(t) = \Pr(T > t) = 1 - \Pr(T \leq t) = 1 - F(t) \tag{1}$$

where T is the random variable representing failure time. This survival function gives the population probability of surviving beyond time t . Due to the censored nature of our sample, it is not possible to know the exact number of observations with duration greater than t . The Kaplan–Meier estimator modifies the estimated survival function, keeping the maximum of the available information.

Suppose that we have a sample of N individuals each with a time to failure, or *lifetime*, T_1, T_2, \dots, T_N . If the observations are not complete, we can only have *observed lifetimes*, defined as:

$$t_i = \min(T_i, L_i) \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, N \tag{2}$$

where L_i represents the *censoring time* (or the limit of observation). These censoring times can be constants or values of other random variables: in any case, they must be independent⁶ from T_i . In this way, the individuals in the sample are divided into two mutually exclusive classes: deaths (or failures) and losses. Let us partition the age scale into intervals $(0, u_1), (u_1, u_2), \dots, (u_{k-1}, u_k)$, and then let us denote with δ_j the number of pure exits and with λ_j the number of losses during interval (u_{j-1}, u_j) . The relationship between N, n_j, n'_j, λ_j , and δ_j is described in Figure 1.

Accordingly, the number of individuals still in life after u_{j-1} is denoted by n_j and δ_j deaths are observed in the interval (u_{j-1}, u_j) , and the estimated conditional probability for interval j is defined as:

$$\hat{P}_j = \frac{n_j - \delta_j}{n_j} = \frac{n'_j}{n_j} \tag{3}$$

Once we take the k intervals into account, the Product-Limit estimate (or Kaplan Meier Estimator, KM hereinafter) is given by:

$$S(t) = \prod_{j=1}^k \left(\frac{n'_j}{n_j} \right) \tag{4}$$

Number of individuals	N	n_1	n_1'	n_2	n_2'	...
Number of losses (λ_j) and deaths (δ_j)	λ_0	δ_1	λ_1	δ_2	λ_2	
Division points of intervals	u_0		u_1		u_2	...

Figure 1.

The resulting estimator turns out to be consistent for $S(t)$ (Lancaster, 1990).

Another important measure when dealing with survival analysis is the hazard function, or the age-specific failure rate. Let us define first the hazard rate as:

$$\lambda(t) = \lim_{\Delta t \rightarrow 0} \frac{\Pr(t \leq T < t + \Delta t | t \leq T)}{\Delta t} = \frac{f(t)}{S(t)} \tag{5}$$

where $f(t)$ is the density function whose c.d.f. is $F(t) = 1 - S(t)$. For each time t , the hazard rate $\lambda(t)$ is the probability of exiting in the period $t + \Delta t$, given that the individual is still alive at time t . For our purpose, we use the integrated hazard function, defined as:

$$\Lambda(t) = \int_0^t \lambda(t) dt \tag{6}$$

which can be consistently estimated by means of the Nelson–Aalen estimator (Aalen, 1978; Nelson, 1972), defined as:

$$H(t) = \sum_{j=1}^k \left(\frac{\delta_j}{n_j} \right) \tag{7}$$

3. Results

The Kaplan–Meier estimator applied to the sole proprietorship firms born in the period between 1950 and 1965 and which have survived for at least 25 years in the territory of the Province of Rimini provides a clear picture of the time in the firm’s lifetime at which mortality rates have the strongest impact. It should be pointed out that the focus of our analysis is the survival patterns of these firms *just* as a function of their age, independently of the period in which such firms were born. This approach has two main advantages: first, it does not capture any “cohort effect”, and second, the impact of the business cycle (if any) is spread over a longer period.

Figure 2 reports the results for all the relevant industries. It will be observed that after about 30 years in the market (i.e., five years after the firm’s 25th birthday), the likelihood of sudden exit starts to increase dramatically, suggesting the strong dependence of liquidations on the owner’s retirement. Both the manufacturing and retailing sectors exhibit patterns of survival which do not differ significantly from those revealed by computation of KM for all industries. In manufacturing, however, the likelihood of exiting the market seems to be lower after the fortieth year following foundation, suggesting that the manufacturing firms in our sample may have dealt with the succession event either by hiring professional managers or by leaving the firm in the hands of a direct heir. Conversely, in hospitality services (including hotels, restaurants, and catering firms), the mortality of aging firms starts to be very high just after their 30th year of activity, although in the following two decades the likelihood of survival remains higher than in the overall economy.

The results from estimation of the integrated hazard function are reported in Figure 3. Inspection of the hazard curves supports the evidence from the KM estimator. The probability of exit, given that the firm is still active in the previous period, tends to increase exponentially with age, after the 30th year in the market.⁷

This finding indicates that the agglomeration economies, which typify the hospitality industry in the Province of Rimini, positively affect the persistence of

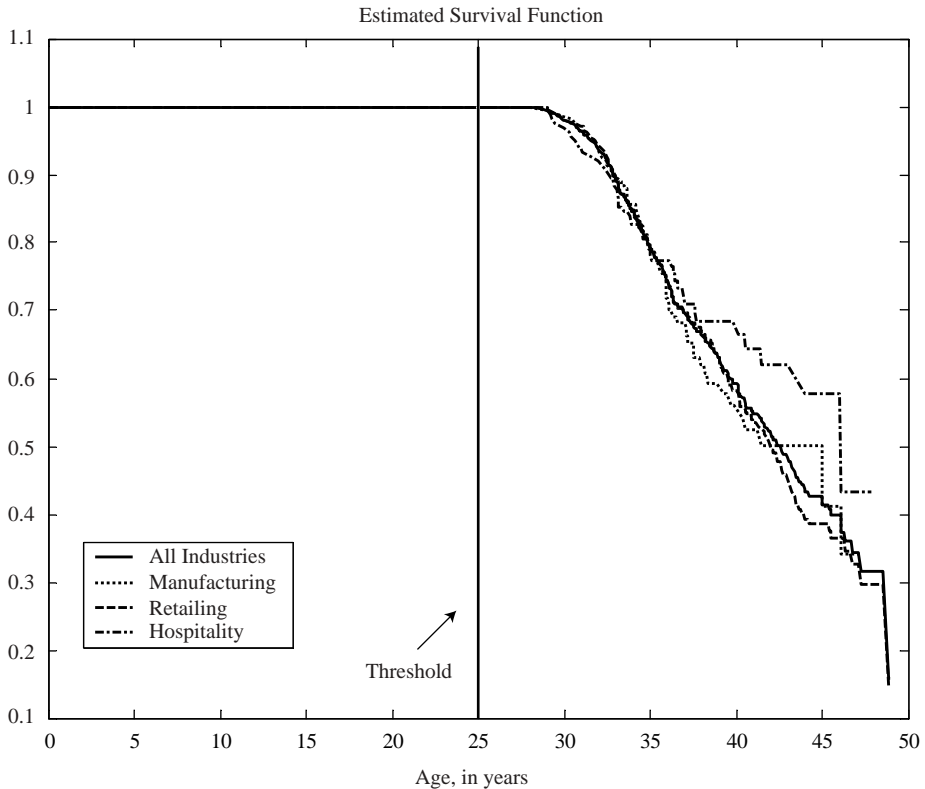


Figure 2. Kaplan–Meier survival estimates.

firms in the market, thereby limiting the negative impact of the succession event on the survival of small sole proprietorship firms. Besides, it is likely that family traditions exert a positive impact on firm's survival in this industry, which is characterized by the involvement of more than one generation of the same family in the management of entrepreneurial activities.⁸

The results from the KM estimator (Figure 2), and those from the analysis of integrated hazard functions (Figure 3), show a similar pattern of firm survival and risk of exit across different industries. We also tested statistically the hypothesis of homogeneity of the industry-level survival curves. For this purpose, two tests were performed, the Log Rank test and the Generalized Wilcoxon test; the results are reported in Table 2. Since neither of the two tests was statistically significant, we cannot reject the hypothesis of homogeneity in the survival patterns, therefore concluding that industry specific factors have not exerted a significantly different impact on the likelihood of survival of these firms. The likelihood of survival among small family firms is therefore mainly driven by the passing of time.

4. Qualitative Evidence from Interviews

The quantitative evidence indicates a high risk of sudden exit from the market in the age period during which a firm is more likely to face the problem of succession. We discussed these results with a number of local entrepreneurs whose firms had

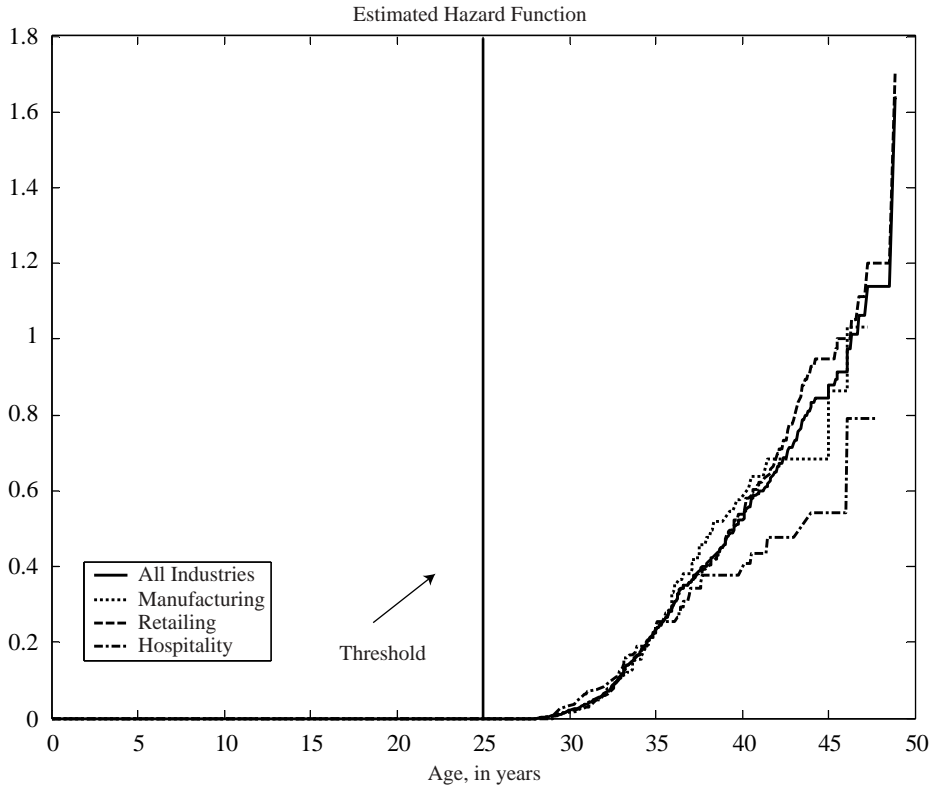


Figure 3. Cumulative hazard function: Nelson-Aalen method.

already faced, or were about to face, the succession event. We interviewed the owners of those firms still active at the end of 1999 by means of a postal questionnaire. Although the response rate was comparable to those of similar surveys, the results cannot be generalized, but they nevertheless provide useful insights into social aspects connected with the problem of succession that cannot otherwise be measured.⁹

Our findings on the higher likelihood of exit when owners/founders are close to retirement met with nearly unanimous agreement among the interviewees, who declared that the family firm is perceived as a social value which should be preserved by transmitting control to the founder’s heir. Some of the interviewees regarded as potential “heirs” also key employees who had proved extremely loyal and competent during their service. Besides, it is not unusual for the designated heir to be an employee who has married (one of) the daughter(s) of the entrepreneur. Accordingly, founders find the separation between ownership and control

Table 2. Test for the homogeneity of the industry level survival curves

Test	$\chi^2(2)$	Probability
Log Rank (LM)	2.12	0.348
Generalized Wilcoxon	0.28	0.871

entailed by transition to the managerial form difficult to accept, and they prefer to close down the firm when patrilineal descent is not possible and (as the second-best option) none of their employees is willing (or able) to continue the business. In their opinion, the family firm is an organization able to manage effectively most of the various factors—ranging from resource allocation to human relations and from technical mastery to market strategy—which allow realization of a company mission or vision. In fact, the family succession in the firm still represents the best way to keep “idiosyncratic knowledge” within the firm (Bjuggren and Sund, 2002), whereas family ties are a good way to overcome the agency problem that arises at the moment of succession and to avoid transaction costs.

In particular, as far as the “human relations” issue (see Uhlaner and Psarothis, 1992) is concerned, in a small family firm it is more likely that the employees will satisfy their own needs and wants while simultaneously fulfilling company goals.¹⁰ Many interviewees mentioned the strong bonds tying the founder to his firm, and stressed how in most cases he himself is one of the main obstacles against transfer of the decisional functions to his successors. In particular, in the hospitality industry nearly 90% of the retiring founders stated that they had joined their successors in running the firm even after official retirement, and thus continuing to exert *de facto* control over the firm’s strategies. This evidence confirms that the founder is reluctant to provide the firm with a managerial structure consisting of professional managers hired externally to the family. In this regard, it is worth noting that only a few entrepreneurs attributed significant importance to attendance at business schools by their heirs: they were in effect convinced that the “art” of running a firm can be only learned through direct involvement in its activity, thereby benefiting from close and constant interaction with the person who created it.

5. Conclusions

We can draw some broad conclusions from quantitative and qualitative analysis of how succession affects the likelihood of survival in the case of small family firms. First, the probability of exit tends to increase exponentially with age, after the 30th year in the market. This result is consistent with Jovanovic’s (1982) *age dependence* model and the findings of the empirical literature on firm survival, because it identifies age as the main factor affecting the likelihood of survival of sole proprietorship, entrepreneurial firms. Second, the sectoral evidence on the hospitality industry is to some extent consistent with the general finding of the literature on location clusters in Italy that economic agglomeration positively affects the likelihood of survival of small firms. In general, our qualitative evidence shows that owners/founders perceive their firm as a “value” which *must* be transmitted to their heirs. From their perspective, appointing professional managers to run the firm implies the substantial failure of an entrepreneurial system based on the strength of family ties. Accordingly, when their heirs are unable to continue the family business, or when there are no heirs, they prefer to close the firm down rather than hand over control to outsiders.

Notes

1. In the field of the economics of entrepreneurship, also De Wit and Van Winden (1989), Bates (1990), Vivarelli (1991), and Reynolds (1997) discuss family background as a key determinant of

- firm formation and dynamics, by using econometric estimates to explain new firm formation as an act of self-employment.
2. Extending Jovanovic's model, Hopenhayn (1992) argues that the post-entry performance of firms is influenced by the amount of sunk costs in the industry, with a greater degree of sunk costs reducing the likelihood of exit and leading to lower observed growth rates of surviving firms. By following a similar perspective, Audretsch (1995) observes that firm-specific characteristics also influence the post-entry performance, with a greater start-up size increasing the likelihood of survival. For a critical survey and an empirical test of this literature, see Lotti and Santarelli (2004).
 3. At the industry level, average start-up size was 2.9 employees in manufacturing, 2.2 in retailing, and 6.0 in hospitality. In 1999, the average size of survivors was 8.5 employees in manufacturing, 3.7 in retailing, and 8.2 in hospitality.
 4. It is, therefore, likely that in such an environment: (a) the succession process is less dramatic, since the founders' heirs are more willing (and able) to continue running the family business; and (b) there exists a (local) market in which firms can be more easily sold and bought.
 5. Of course, this can be due to several reasons. For instance, an individual can be dropped from a sample if its characteristics change over time or simply because, at a certain point, the measurement has to be stopped.
 6. Censoring times may differ from individual to individual or they may be the same, also according to the sampling techniques employed.
 7. Again, the hospitality industry looks like an exception, since it shows higher hazard rates for firms between 30 and 35 years of age, but thereafter the risk of failure significantly decreases.
 8. See Evans and Leighton (1989) and—based on Italian data particular relevant to the present article—Vivarelli and Audretsch (1998) and Vivarelli (2004).
 9. In particular, we obtained 61 answers, distributed as follows: 23 in the manufacturing industry, 17 in the retail, and 21 in the hospitality industry.
 10. Although this is also connected to the widespread practice of “envelope salaries”, which has been shown to be very common in Italian small family firms.

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