

The Impact of Returning Entrepreneurs' Knowledge Search on Entrepreneurial Success

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Abstract

The current society is facing a change in the mode of economic development and employment structure, the employment situation is becoming more and more severe, and the difficulty of employment has greatly increased, so the number of people who choose to return to their hometowns to start their own businesses has increased. However, due to the lack of relevant knowledge and skills and entrepreneurial experience, entrepreneurs often face many difficulties and challenges. The article takes returning entrepreneurs as the research object, constructs a model of the impact of knowledge search on entrepreneurial success, and introduces the moderating role of the entrepreneurial institutional environment. The study finds that knowledge search can drive entrepreneurs to achieve entrepreneurial success, and the entrepreneurial institutional environment plays a moderating role in the relationship between knowledge search and entrepreneurial success.

Keywords

Returning Entrepreneurship, Knowledge Search, Entrepreneurial Institutional Environment, Entrepreneurial Success

1. Introduction

In recent years, various industries as a whole have been facing major challenges of industrial structural adjustment, economic downward pressure and weakening of potential growth momentum, and the employment situation has become more and more critical. How to achieve fuller and higher quality employment has become an important social issue. The labour force has gradually shown the trend of returning to their hometowns for entrepreneurship and self-employment,

and the population of rural migrant workers returning to their hometowns for entrepreneurship has been rising year by year (Cao & Tang, 2024). At the same time, the state vigorously implement the strategy of rural revitalization, pointing out that “the issue of agriculture, rural areas and peasants is a fundamental issue related to the country’s economy and people’s livelihood, and we must always take the solution of the ‘Three Rural Issues’ as the top priority of the work of the whole party” (Xi, 2017). National policies and guidelines also make the labour force who go out to work feel the prospect and possibility of returning to their hometowns to start their own businesses, which on the one hand stimulates the passion of the labour force to return to their hometowns to start their own businesses, and increases their chances of realizing the value of their lives (Zhang & Li, 2021); on the other hand, it provides an important human capital for the realization of the modernization of agriculture and rural areas (Cao & Tang, 2024).

However, returning entrepreneurs may face many difficulties and obstacles, such as a lack of entrepreneurship-related expertise and social experience, limited ability to grasp market dynamics and a single industry to choose from; limited cultural qualifications and a lack of a rich knowledge base; insufficient understanding of national preferential policies; and cumbersome entrepreneurial processes that dampen enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, thus affecting the smooth implementation of their entrepreneurial activities. The rapid development of information and communication technology provides a convenient way for returning entrepreneurs to contact external suppliers, customers, scientific research institutes to provide support or collect information on the business status of competitors in the same industry, so as to improve the technology, capabilities and information and other resources of their own entrepreneurial enterprises, and to better cope with the uncertainty of environmental changes, improve the efficiency of resource utilization and productivity (Zhang & Li, 2021). Therefore, returning entrepreneurs should conduct knowledge searches in order to master the knowledge and skills needed for entrepreneurship, understand the market environment and industry dynamics, or meet the needs of innovation and development and enhance core competitiveness. At the same time, the institutional environment faced by returning entrepreneurs should not be ignored. The state provides policy support for this group of people, on the one hand, insisting on helping them to make up for the short board of knowledge and skills, and making every effort to break through the bottleneck of employment and entrepreneurship; on the other hand, it assists potential entrepreneurs to establish enterprises, helps to build a bridge of resources and information between new start-ups and investors, provides support for new start-ups, broadens the channels of access to external resources, accelerates the flow of entrepreneurial information, knowledge and resources among new start-ups, and alleviates the pressure of insufficient entrepreneurial resources (Liu & Yu, 2020).

In summary, the article focuses the research perspective on the entrepreneurial behaviour of returning labour force to their hometowns, explores the influence mechanism of knowledge search on entrepreneurial success, intro-

duces the entrepreneurial institutional environment to regulate the entrepreneurial process, and provides certain references for the promotion of labour force returning to their hometowns for entrepreneurship, improving self-employment ability, promoting rural economic development and building a new socialist countryside.

2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypothesis

2.1. The Relationship between Knowledge Search and Entrepreneurial Success

Knowledge search is a hot topic shared by several disciplines such as economics, organization, behaviour, etc., and is able to complete the process of integrating and disseminating knowledge with the help of intelligent tools and according to the user's needs. Knowledge search is a problem-solving activity that organizations engage in order to continuously improve their own knowledge and technology, the results of which include new perspectives and ideas on the management or technology of the organization (Almeida, Dokko, & Rosenkopf, 2003). The meaning of knowledge search has gradually been extended to a broader concept, and scholars such as Katila have conducted detailed studies on knowledge search, including problem-based and relaxed search, to explore the impact of knowledge search on breakthrough and incremental innovation under certain conditions. Numerous scholars believe that knowledge search is acquired from the outside world, which is not only limited to the retrieval of knowledge, but also includes the activities of integrating and exploiting existing knowledge (Katila & Ahuja, 2002), Chesbrough analyzed the impact of the dynamics of the external environment and the internal variability of the enterprise on the knowledge search (Chesbrough, 2003); Maurer classified the knowledge search into two types, which were studied from the technological and geographic aspects of enterprise were studied (Maurer, Hartnell, & Lippstreu, 2017); Mueller classified knowledge search into two types, one is exploitative search and the other is exploratory search, and studied the influence of internal mechanisms of enterprises as well as the external environment on knowledge search (Mueller, Syed, & Wolfe, 2016). Research findings show that organizations can rely on knowledge search to acquire new external knowledge to improve their performance. Simply put, knowledge search is the complete process by which organizations retrieve, acquire, integrate and use new external knowledge. This process not only acquires external knowledge and skills, but more importantly integrates and applies the knowledge, strengthens the enterprise's ability to integrate and utilize knowledge, and helps the enterprise to improve its core competitiveness and achieve breakthrough innovations.

Entrepreneurial success can be divided into the success of creating a new business and the success of the entrepreneur's career depending on the object of study (Xi, 2017). Scholars in the field of management prefer the former definition, arguing that success at the firm or organizational level is more in line with

the intent of entrepreneurship research (Zhong & Song, 2022), whereas in the case of entrepreneurial success, most scholars have focused only on the impact of the success of the individual entrepreneur's career on the success of the firm and its economic performance (Zhang, 2022). The entrepreneurial success of firms is important for wealth creation and social development, and academics will explore the deeper connotations of entrepreneurial success by linking the success of SMEs to innovation, human capital, and social and entrepreneurial financial capital. The entrepreneurial success that is the focus of this paper also focuses on the firm level, covering aspects such as business conditions, industry reputation, and social contribution.

In the process of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs carry out knowledge search can improve the enterprise's technology level, comprehensive ability and information reserves and other basic resources, so that the organization can better adapt to changes in the external environment and promote entrepreneurial activities. Entrepreneurs can use the searched knowledge, skills and information and other resources to solve the difficulties faced in entrepreneurial activities. At the same time, entrepreneurs' knowledge-seeking behaviour enhances the organization's ability to perceive changes in the external environment, which is conducive to the firm's ability to grasp market opportunities, thereby improving the efficiency of the firm's resource utilization and productivity, and enabling the firm to achieve better development and higher performance.

Therefore, the article proposes Hypothesis 1:

H1: Knowledge search can facilitate entrepreneurs to achieve entrepreneurial success.

2.2. The moderating Role of the Institutional Environment for Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurial institutional environment is a complex system of standards of behaviour, consisting of regulatory, normative and cognitive environments, in which the enterprise is located (Zhang & Li, 2021). Most scholars believe that the entrepreneurial institutional environment refers to a series of laws, regulations and policy combinations introduced by the government for entrepreneurial enterprises, which can provide the necessary policy support, access to resources and regulate the market system for entrepreneurial activities. In order to avoid "market failure" in resource allocation due to information asymmetry of start-ups, the government has introduced relevant policies that can replace the market mechanism, allocate scarce innovation resources to start-ups, provide support for start-ups, and help establish a bridge of resources and information between start-ups and investors (Liu & Yu, 2020).

During the entrepreneurial process, firms have to deal with a complex and turbulent external environment in addition to the uncertainty of the internal environment. When the institutional environment ensures that entrepreneurs and firms have unrestricted access to opportunities and resources, the entrepreneurial success rate of entrepreneurs and firms can be improved. At the same time,

government policies are a kind of support to enterprises and entrepreneurs, and when government policies provide better services to entrepreneurs, they will motivate entrepreneurs to improve their own quality and knowledge-seeking ability, and thus increase the success rate of entrepreneurship.

Therefore, the article proposes Hypothesis 2:

H2: The entrepreneurial institutional environment positively moderates the relationship between knowledge search and entrepreneurial success.

The model diagram of this study is shown in **Figure 1**, with knowledge search as the independent variable, entrepreneurial success as the dependent variable, and entrepreneurial institutional environment as the moderating variable.

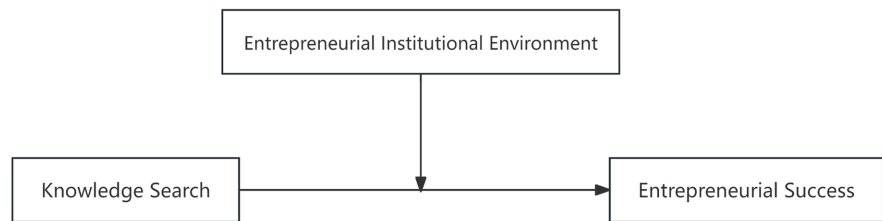


Figure 1. Research model.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Sources and Sample Characteristics

The survey respondents selected for the article are founders and core team members of returning entrepreneurial companies. The questionnaire includes four parts: basic personal information, knowledge search scale, entrepreneurial policy environment scale and entrepreneurial success scale. The questionnaire survey was conducted over a period of three months from March 2023 to June of the same year. The study chose companies in the hometown that have a migrant labour background and have been in business for more than 5 years, and distributed the questionnaire to the entrepreneurs and core team members of the company. On the one hand, with the background of migrant workers, these members are exposed to a wide range of information sources, diverse information content, and have a strong ability to search for knowledge; on the other hand, due to the accumulation of entrepreneurial experience, these members have a high degree of understanding of and concern for the entrepreneurial institutional environment, and have a deep understanding of the definition of entrepreneurial success. Through the online survey method, 120 questionnaires were distributed, of which 107 were valid, with a recovery rate of 89.2%. Males accounted for 52.3% of the sample; the industry where the enterprise is located is the construction industry, which accounts for the most; the number of years of entrepreneurial enterprise is 2 - 4 years, which accounts for the most, 28%; and the proportion of those engaged in professional and technical work before returning to their hometowns to start their own business is the most 30%.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

The first part is individual characteristics measurement, which takes classified statistics on the personal information of the employees of entrepreneurial enterprises, from basic information such as gender, age, entrepreneurial experience, type of work before returning to entrepreneurship, total investment scale of the current company, and the development stage of the enterprise. Individual factors have a certain impact on whether they choose to start a business, the type of entrepreneurial enterprise and business scope, etc., and these variables are treated as control variables in this study.

The second part is the knowledge search measurement scale. This scale is mainly based on the scale designed by (Almeida, Dokko, & Rosenkopf, 2003; Kaitila & Ahuja, 2002) and compiled to measure the breadth and depth of knowledge search in two dimensions respectively. The higher the score obtained, the higher the entrepreneur's attention to knowledge.

The third part is the enterprise entrepreneurial institutional environment measurement scale, which mainly refers to the theory of entrepreneurial institutional environment of Liu Yu (Zhang & Li, 2021) and Zhang Zuoxiang (Zhang, 2019), and measures the entrepreneurial institutional environment created by the government for the returnee entrepreneurs from the perspectives of the policy environment and the market environment, and makes certain modifications in combination with the returnee entrepreneurs' own situation. The higher the score, the more policy support provided by the entrepreneur's local government and the more favourable the market environment is for their entrepreneurial development.

The fourth part is the Entrepreneurial Success Measurement Scale. This scale is mainly based on the scale designed by Zhong Yurui (Zhong & Song, 2022), Zhang Xiaomei (Zhang, 2022), and Chao Yufang (Chao, Wang, Zhai, & Chang, 2022), and compiled by combining with the actual situation of the current returning entrepreneurs, and the higher the obtained scores, the better the business condition of the entrepreneurial enterprises. The specific questionnaire questions are shown in the **Appendix**.

3.3. Reliability and Validity Tests

The scales involved in the questionnaire were measured in a five-point Likert scale manner. The measurement scales for each variable were first tested for reliability and validity, as shown in **Table 1**. Meanwhile, the reliability coefficient of the knowledge search scale is 0.914, the reliability coefficient of the entrepreneurial institutional environment scale is 0.941, and the reliability coefficient of the entrepreneurial success scale is 0.945, and the scales in the questionnaire have high reliability. At the same time, the KMO values of the three scales are greater than 0.8 and the significance coefficients are less than 0.05, indicating that the validity of the scales used in the study is good. The results of the questionnaire can be used for subsequent data analysis.

Table 1. Reliability and validity tests.

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	KMO	Bartlett spherical test	Degrees of freedom	Statistically significant
Knowledge Search	0.914	0.952	992.096	45	0.000
Entrepreneurial Institutional Environment	0.941	0.966	1528.993	66	0.000
Entrepreneurial Success	0.945	0.911	1528.993	36	0.000

4. Empirical Analyses

4.1. Correlation Analysis

As shown in **Table 2**, Knowledge search and entrepreneurial institutional environment are significantly positively correlated ($r = 0.474$, $p < 0.01$); knowledge search and entrepreneurial success are significantly positively correlated ($r = 0.494$, $p < 0.01$); entrepreneurial institutional environment and entrepreneurial success are significantly positively correlated ($r = 0.680$, $p < 0.01$). The correlation analysis initially verified the research hypothesis of this paper and provided support for the subsequent regression analysis.

Table 2. Correlation analysis.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1). Gender	1					
2) Entrepreneurial experience	0.122	1				
3) Stages of Business Development	0.123	0.032	1			
4) Knowledge Search	-0.122	-0.081	0.018	1		
5) Entrepreneurial Institutional Environment	-0.015	-0.071	0.075	0.474**	1	
6) Entrepreneurial Success	-0.022	-0.058	0.088	0.494**	0.680**	1

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4.2. Regression Analysis

On the basis of correlation analysis, knowledge searching ability was taken as the independent variable, the six items of gender, entrepreneurial experience, and stage of business development were taken as control variables, and entrepreneurial success was taken as the dependent variable in a linear regression analysis to analyse the influencing factors of entrepreneurial success. The results are shown in **Table 3**.

Model 1 was constructed with each control variable, knowledge search as the independent variable and entrepreneurial success as the dependent variable. The adjusted R² is 0.337, which represents that external knowledge search can explain 33.7% of the dependent variable and has a good fit. Secondly, F-test was conducted on the model ($F = 16.757$, $p < 0.01$), and the test value data is good. It can be seen that knowledge search can have a significant positive impact on entrepreneurial success and hypothesis 1 is valid. On the basis of model I, entre-

preneurial institutional environment is included as a moderating variable to construct model II, and the results show that entrepreneurial institutional environment has a significant positive effect on entrepreneurial success; model III considers the interaction term between entrepreneurial institutional environment and knowledge search, and the adjusted R² is 0.522, which represents that the independent variable can explain 52.2% of the dependent variable, and the results show an increase in the goodness of fit, and the model is subjected to an F-test ($F = 35.820, p < 0.01$), the test value data is good. It indicates that knowledge search can positively influence entrepreneurial success through the entrepreneurial institutional environment and hypothesis 2 is valid.

Table 3. Regression analysis.

Variable	Entrepreneurial Success		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 2
Gender	0.032	0.009	0.006
Entrepreneurial experience	-0.025	-0.002	-0.005
Stage of business development	0.076	0.04	0.044
Knowledge Search	0.495**	0.224**	0.296**
Entrepreneurial Institutional Environment		0.571**	0.765**
Entrepreneurial Institutional Environment* Knowledge Search			0.188**
Adjusted R ²	0.337	0.490	0.522
F-value	16.757	40.042	35.820

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Recommendations for Countermeasures

It focuses on the important role of mastering knowledge searching ability and entrepreneurial institutional environment for returning entrepreneurs to grasp entrepreneurial opportunities, updating technical equipment, tapping potential resources, stimulate entrepreneurial passion and promote entrepreneurial success, and puts forward corresponding countermeasures and suggestions to guide returning entrepreneurs to achieve entrepreneurial success.

5.1. Acquire Knowledge Search Capability and Improve Enterprise Technology Resource System

In order to successfully achieve their entrepreneurial goals, returnee entrepreneurs should first fully understand the importance of knowledge search for their entrepreneurial success. Before starting a business, they should analyse whether they lack knowledge in certain aspects in the light of their actual situation, make a reasonable knowledge search plan, and focus on improving their information collection and analysis abilities. At the same time, returning entrepreneurs should focus on strengthening the learning of new technology and new information

when conducting knowledge search, not only to understand the market dynamics and the current situation of the industry, but also to ensure that they keep pace with the times and focus on the updating and utilization of external knowledge. Moreover, in order to better carry out knowledge search to obtain new business opportunities and identify new opportunities, returning entrepreneurs should establish and improve their own knowledge resource network system and improve their information analysis and integration ability for entrepreneurship. Take the initiative to seek cooperation from the outside, pay attention to the technical achievements of scientific research institutes or other universities, contact enterprises in the same industry or upstream and downstream of the industrial chain, make up for the shortcomings of the enterprise, and improve the core competitiveness of the enterprise.

5.2. Reasonable Use of Entrepreneurship Support Policies to Enhance Self-Employment

Returning entrepreneurs should pay attention to the construction of the institutional environment of the country and society when embarking on entrepreneurship. China has introduced relevant support policies for returning to the countryside for entrepreneurship and employment, which provide great help for the labour force to return to the countryside for entrepreneurship, and certain imperfect systems and regulations are also being gradually adjusted. Entrepreneurs should maintain a continuous focus on entrepreneurship policies, pay attention to real-time changes in the market and economic situation, and ensure that business decisions are consistent with market dynamics and government policy directions. Entrepreneurs should also pay attention to the reasonable use of policies and institutional environment, to avoid certain policies and systems are not applicable to the current business development situation or the status quo of the industry, in order to reduce unnecessary waste. At the same time, entrepreneurs returning to their hometowns should pay attention to the timely updating of the policy and institutional environment, so as to avoid the outdated policies affecting the success of entrepreneurship.

6. Conclusion and Outlook of the Study

This paper takes entrepreneurs and core team members within returning startups as survey objects, constructs a model of the impact of entrepreneurs' knowledge search on entrepreneurial success, and introduces the moderating role of the entrepreneurial institutional environment. The results show that: 1) entrepreneurs' knowledge search positively affects their entrepreneurial success; 2) entrepreneurial institutional environment positively moderates the impact of knowledge search on entrepreneurial success.

This paper enriches the research of scholars in the field of entrepreneurship research on the study of entrepreneurial groups returning to their hometowns, focuses the research perspective on such groups of people who have a background of migrant labour but eventually choose to return to their hometowns to

start their own businesses, in order to lay a foundation for exploring the reasons for this and to provide ideas; based on the framework of knowledge ability, it enriches the relevant research on entrepreneurial success, and probes into the impact of knowledge search on entrepreneurial success; based on the external perspective, it introduces the entrepreneurial institutional environment as a moderating variable to explore the boundary conditions affecting entrepreneurial success, which complements the existing research model.

7. Research Outlook

Based on the findings of other scholars, this study has researched and analyzed the influencing factors of knowledge searching ability and entrepreneurial success of returning entrepreneurs. However, there are still some research limitations: first, this paper investigates a total of 120 labour forces who chose to return to their hometowns to start their own businesses, which is a relatively limited sample size. There was a high degree of regional homogeneity, and a larger national sample was not collected. In order to get more comprehensive conclusions, future research can consider expanding the sample size or selecting entrepreneurs with different entrepreneurial backgrounds. Second, entrepreneurial success is the result of many factors, and in future research, other variables or intermediate variables can be added appropriately to further explore in detail the interactions among the variables in the model, in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the influencing factors that promote entrepreneurial success.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Dear Sir/Madam: Thank you for participating in our questionnaire in your busy schedule! The purpose of this questionnaire is to understand how knowledge search affects the entrepreneurial performance of startups. Your serious participation will directly affect the accuracy and objectivity of the survey results, so please study it carefully and fill it out truthfully. The information collected in this survey is for academic reference only, absolutely confidential, and will not be used for any other purpose. Thank you for your participation!

I) Basic personal information

1) Your gender

A) Male

B) Female

2) Your business project belongs to the industry is

A) Agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery

B) Manufacturing

C) Construction

D) Catering

E) Retail

F) Education, etc.

3) How many years of entrepreneurial experience do you have after returning home

A) Less than 2 years

B) 2 - 4 years

C) 4 - 6 years

D) 6 - 8 years

E) More than 8 years

4) The current total investment size of the company

A) Less than 500,000 yuan

B) 500 - 2 million yuan

C) 201 - 4 million yuan

D) 401 - 8 million yuan

E) More than 8 million yuan

5) The current annual net profit of the company's business ventures

A) Less than 500,000 yuan

B) 500 - 1 million yuan

C) 1.01 - 3 million yuan

D) 301 - 5 million yuan

E) More than 5 million yuan

6) The stage of development the enterprise is currently in

A) Start-up period (the early stage of business, the time when technology and products are initially sold)

B) Growth stage (stage of technological development and production expansion, the process

by which the start-up gradually grows into a mature enterprise)

Mature stage (stage of stable development)

II) The following is a description of your company's knowledge search, please tick the appropriate number according to your company's actual situation (the values in the table represent: 1. almost none 2. relatively few 3. medium 4. relatively many 5. very many)

	subject	1	2	3	4	5
1	You use a wide range of search channels in your search for knowledge					
2	You actively try to seek new knowledge from a wider range of fields					
3	You have access to high-quality novel knowledge from a wider range of fields					
4	You search for knowledge in a wide range of fields					
5	You search for knowledge from different disciplines or industries					
6	You repeatedly use a particular search channel to acquire knowledge					
7	You are constantly mining and refining the knowledge you search for					
8	You re-use the knowledge you search for over and over again					
9	The knowledge you search for externally has a high degree of specialisation					
10	You extract and utilise knowledge with a high degree of intensity					

III) The following is a description of the entrepreneurial institutional environment faced by your company, please tick the appropriate number according to the actual situation of your company (the values in the table represent: 1. almost none 2. relatively few 3. medium 4. relatively many 5. very many)

	subject	1	2	3	4	5
1	Local government organizations and departments are assisting individuals to start their own business					
2	Local government organizations have special support policies for individuals to start their own businesses					
3	Local government organizations have sponsorship for start-up businesses					

Continued

- 4 Even if a business faces failure in the early stages, government sponsorship is still available to help the business get back on its feet.
- 5 If you are an entrepreneur, you know how to protect your new company through government support.
- 6 If you are an entrepreneur, you know how to use government policies to address the risks of starting a business.

IV) The following is a description of your company’s entrepreneurial success, please tick the appropriate number according to your company’s actual situation (the values in the table represent: 1) hardly any 2) relatively few 3) medium 4) relatively many 5) very many)

	subject	1	2	3	4	5
1	Business sales are growing					
2	Profits of the business are growing					
3	Overall, the business is growing					
4	The business has a low level of debt					
5	Overall, the economic situation of the business is satisfactory					
6	The business is providing more jobs in the local area					
7	The business has gained the trust of its customers					
8	The enterprise satisfies customers					
9	The enterprise contributes to social development					

This concludes this questionnaire, thank you again for completing this questionnaire!