

What is the role of millennials in the internationalization of a family business?

How do millennials help family businesses to go global?

ALESSANDRO CIRILLO · BARBARA MAGGI · SALVATORE SCIASCIA · VALENTINA LAZZAROTTI · FEDERICO VISCONTI

Published on October 1, 2021

In an increasingly globalized world, **internationalization is a critical growth path** for family businesses. But expanding beyond domestic markets introduces not just financial or strategic challenges—it raises deep questions about **who should lead**, how family dynamics shape strategic decisions, and what role **millennials** play in this transformation.

Millennials, defined roughly as those born between 1981 and 1996, are reaching maturity in a time of rapid digital change, geopolitical complexity, and shifting consumer expectations. Their values, work preferences, and global mindset differ significantly from those of their parents or grandparents, who may still lead the family firm.

This study explores a crucial intersection: **millennial involvement in the internationalization of family businesses**—and more specifically, **who facilitates their involvement**. Should this be the founder, whose deep knowledge and legacy command loyalty? Or is a non-family CEO better equipped to open space for new generations to thrive globally?

WHAT WE STUDIED

The researchers conducted a **qualitative multiple-case study** involving **ten Italian family SMEs** operating in international markets. In each case, they focused on:

- The presence and role of **millennial family members**
- The **leadership structure**—whether the business was still led by the **founder** or a **non-family CEO**
- The level and nature of **international engagement** by the next generation

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** with both senior and next-generation family members, complemented by document reviews and secondary data.

The goal was to uncover how **different leadership configurations** impact millennials' actual involvement in internationalization—not just their attitudes or aspirations, but their day-to-day roles and influence.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Millennials Want to Contribute to Internationalization

Millennials in family businesses show a strong **interest in global markets**, often viewing internationalization as:

- A **personal growth opportunity**
- A way to **modernize and professionalize** the business
- A chance to align the firm with **global values**, such as sustainability and innovation

They tend to bring skills in languages, digital marketing, and intercultural communication—key assets for expanding abroad.

2. Leadership Structure Shapes Next-Gen Engagement

The study highlights two main leadership configurations:

a. Founder-Led Firms

When the founder remains CEO, they may either:

- **Empower millennials** by giving them responsibility in international projects (e.g., leading a foreign market entry or attending global trade shows), or

- **Restrict involvement** by retaining tight control, particularly if they view the younger generation as inexperienced

Interestingly, founder-led firms tend to involve millennials **earlier**, often through informal mentoring or trial-and-error experiences.

b. Non-Family CEO-Led Firms

In firms led by professional non-family managers:

- Millennials are more likely to receive **structured roles and responsibilities**, such as export coordination or digital strategy
- The involvement is typically more **formalized** and aligned with performance metrics

However, these CEOs may lack the familial authority to **encourage long-term commitment**, especially if trust or alignment with family values is weak.

3. Leadership Style Matters as Much as Structure

It's not only *who* leads but *how* they lead that makes the difference. Effective leaders—whether founders or outsiders—tend to:

- **Mentor and coach** millennials rather than micromanage them
- **Encourage innovation**, even if it means taking risks
- Allow room for **autonomy** and fresh ideas
- Value the younger generation's **global mindset**

In contrast, rigid or hierarchical leadership—regardless of who it comes from—tends to limit next-gen engagement in international initiatives.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESS OWNERS

1. Engage Millennials in Meaningful Roles

Involving younger family members in tasks like export development, digital strategy for international markets, or partner scouting empowers them while adding real value to internationalization efforts.

2. Adapt Leadership Styles to Encourage Growth

Founders must shift from directive to **collaborative leadership** if they want to unlock millennial potential. Non-family CEOs, on the other hand, must build **trust and cultural understanding** to align with family values.

3. Build Bridges Between Generations

Internationalization is a long-term journey. Establishing **cross-generational teams** or innovation task forces can foster both skill development and succession readiness.

4. Invest in International Learning Paths

Encourage millennial family members to study, work, or intern abroad. Their global exposure will feed directly into the firm's internationalization capacity.

IMPACT

This study challenges simplistic succession narratives. It shows that **millennial involvement in internationalization is not automatic**—it is shaped by leadership choices and cultural dynamics. Whether led by a founder or an external CEO, the business must cultivate **intentional leadership practices** to empower the next generation.

For family businesses looking to expand abroad while ensuring continuity, this research underscores a key insight: **intergenerational collaboration is a strategic asset**, not just a succession formality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Assess your current leadership model:** Is it empowering the next generation to explore and execute international strategies?
- **Provide mentorship, not micromanagement:** Leaders must serve as guides, not gatekeepers.
- **Include millennials in strategic discussions** about global markets—not just operational roles.
- **Encourage feedback loops** between older and younger generations to enhance mutual learning.

Spotlight by CeFEO, *What is the role of millennials in the internationalization of a family business?* How do millennials help family businesses to go global?. Downloaded on 27 June 2026 from <https://spotlight.cefeo.se>

CEFEO AUTHORS



Alessandro Cirillo

Affiliated Researcher

University of Naples, Federico II

alessandro.cirillo2@unina.it



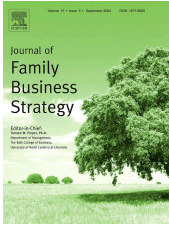
Salvatore Sciascia

Affiliated Professor

LIUC Business University

ssciascia@liuc.it

PUBLISHED IN



Cirillo, A., Maggi, B., Sciascia, S., Lazzarotti, V., & Visconti, F. (2021). Exploring family millennials' involvement in family business internationalization: Who should be their leader? *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, 13(3), 100455.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfbs.2021.100455>

Spotlight is an online magazine that translates research from the Centre for Family Entrepreneurship and Ownership (CeFEO) at Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping University, into accessible insights for family business owners, practitioners, and policymakers.

Spotlight is supported by the WIFU Foundation. This partnership advances dialogue and education in responsible family entrepreneurship and ownership.



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