Spotlight by CeFEO

Which mix of founder identities drives radical innovation in young tech ventures?

Pairing a social mission with one focused drive beats trying to do everything at once.

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Ask most people what makes a startup founder tick and you will hear about ambition, or vision, or grit. Researchers have a more structured answer. Founders carry social identities, mental pictures of who they are creating value for and how they will know they have succeeded. Some build for the market and measure themselves against competitors. Some build for a community of peers. Some build for society at large. The interesting question is not which of these a founder has. It is what happens when they have more than one at the same time.

A new study of 368 Italian technology ventures tackles exactly this. Daniel Pittino (Jönköping International Business School / CeFEO and the University of Udine), Francesca Visintin, and Gouya Harirchi (both University of Udine) ask how combinations of founder identity shape one of the hardest outcomes in entrepreneurship: radical innovation. Their finding upends an intuitive assumption. Being a little bit of everything is not the recipe for breakthroughs. Being two strong things, and letting the third recede, is.

WHAT THE RESEARCHERS STUDIED

The study builds on a well-travelled framework from Fauchart and Gruber (2011), which sorts founders into three social identity orientations. Darwinians are market-driven: they benchmark against rivals and define success as competitive performance. Communitarians are peer-driven: they build for a group they belong to and care about recognition within it. Missionaries are cause-driven: they want their firm to move the needle on a societal problem such as sustainability or health.

Where earlier work tended to file founders into one box, Pittino and colleagues treat the three orientations as dials rather than categories. A founder can score high on two of them, or low on one and high on another, in any combination. That shift, from types to degrees, is what lets the team study hybridity directly.

The sample is a strength worth dwelling on. It covers 368 new technology-based ventures across Italy, all under ten years old and operating in OECD-classified high-tech sectors, from scientific R&D to machinery manufacturing. Data came from phone interviews in 2018 with each firm's CEO or majority shareholder, the person closest to the venture's strategic choices, and were cross-checked against accounting data from the Aida database. Each identity orientation was measured with a validated three-item scale; reliability was strong across all three.

The outcome variable is refreshingly concrete. Rather than asking founders whether they feel innovative, the researchers measured the share of last year's revenue that came from products genuinely new to the market, not merely new to the firm. On average, nearly half of sample revenue (49%) came from such market-novel products. That figure is anchored in money, not self-image, and it correlates with the ventures' patent activity, which lends it credibility.

The team also accounted for the usual suspects, founder age and gender, firm size and age, total assets, past financial performance, sector, and whether the venture sat in a science park or accelerator. Three controls stood out as consistent predictors of radical innovation in their own right: younger founders, ventures that had been incubated or accelerated, and firms in manufacturing. Holding those constant, identity configuration still did real explanatory work.

WHAT THEY FOUND

Purpose pulls breakthroughs forward; the other two do little on their own

Taken individually, only the Missionary orientation moved the needle. The stronger a founder's societal mission, the more radical the venture's innovation ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$). Darwinian and Communitarian orientations, on their own, showed no significant link. The market-focused founder, oriented toward benchmarks and incremental gains, and the community-focused founder, anchored to a group's existing norms, were each, in isolation, a weaker engine for the genuinely new.

Two strong orientations beat one, but only in the right pairs

This is where the study earns its title. A strong mission paired with a strong Darwinian streak produced more radical innovation than mission alone. So did a strong mission paired with a strong Communitarian streak. In the first pairing, market discipline gives a purpose-driven founder a credible route to scale and a language investors understand. In the second, a trusted peer community supplies early legitimacy and the feedback that turns an abstract aim into a workable product. Either way, the mission supplies the reason to break with convention, and the second orientation supplies a coherent way to do it. The slope-difference tests confirm both pairings are statistically distinct from the mission-only baseline, not artefacts of a single coefficient.

Trying to be all three at once backfires

When a founder scored high on Missionary *and* Darwinian *and* Communitarian simultaneously, the positive effect of mission on radical innovation weakened sharply. The reason is not lack of motivation. It is incoherence. Market logic says compete and scale; community logic says honour the group's norms; both are being asked to serve the same broad social mission, and they pull in different directions. The founder struggles to prioritise, and stakeholders struggle to read what the venture stands for. This is the most counterintuitive result in the paper, and arguably the most useful: more identity is not more capability. The drop is not marginal: every comparison involving the all-three-strong founder shows a significantly weaker mission effect than the focused alternatives. When a venture tries to satisfy competitive benchmarks, community expectations, and a societal cause at the same time, the evaluative frames it relies on to judge what is worth doing stop agreeing with one another, and the clarity that radical innovation demands erodes.

An unplanned finding: market plus community, without the mission, also works

One result the authors did not predict turned out to be among the most intriguing. Founders strong on both Darwinian and Communitarian orientations, but *not* on Missionary, also produced high radical innovation. Competitive ambition projects the innovation outward toward the market; community embeddedness grounds it in a trusted user base that refines and legitimises it. With no overarching societal mission in the mix, there is no competing normative goal to muddy execution. The configuration stays focused. It is a reminder that breakthroughs do not require a grand social purpose, only a coherent pairing of drives. The authors read this through the original theory: market and community orientations are both relational and execution-oriented, while the mission introduces a broader, more abstract goal. Two execution drives can reinforce each other cleanly; add a sweeping mission on top and the alignment frays.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FOUNDERS AND THE PEOPLE WHO BACK THEM

The headline lesson is about configuration, not intensity. A founder asking how to become more innovative is asking the wrong question. The better question is which two of their motivations are strongest, and whether those two reinforce each other or compete. The study's term for the winning pattern is focused hybridity: commit to a clear pair, and resist the urge to be equally everything to everyone.

For investors, incubators, and accelerators, the result reframes founder assessment. A founder who presents as mission-led, fiercely competitive, and deeply community-rooted all at once may look like the complete package. This evidence suggests the opposite risk: that such a founder will struggle to set priorities and communicate a consistent story. Incubation and acceleration were, separately, among the strongest predictors of radical innovation in the data, so the structures that help founders sharpen focus appear to matter a great deal. The practical move is not to screen out ambitious, multi-motivated founders, but to help them decide which two commitments will carry the venture, and to make peace with letting the third sit in the background for now.

The findings sit in technology ventures, not family firms, and the study makes no claim about family business. Still, the underlying logic travels. Family-firm founders and successors carry their own competing identities, as stewards of a legacy, as operators chasing performance, as members of a community of employees and a region. The study's central caution, that holding too many strong commitments at once can blur judgment and dilute innovation, is a useful lens

for any leader navigating a succession or a strategic pivot, where identities are most likely to multiply and collide.

WHY IT MATTERS

Most identity research stops at attitudes and intentions. This study connects founder identity to a hard, financially anchored organizational outcome, and does so with a configurational method that treats identity as a blend rather than a label. That is a meaningful step. It tells us that a founder's identity is not just a personality footnote but a structure that organizes how opportunities get judged, how risks get framed, and how a venture's story gets told to the outside world. Read that way, identity coherence becomes a strategic asset a founder can actually manage, not a fixed trait they are stuck with.

The cross-sectional design means causality cannot be nailed down; ventures already pursuing bold innovation might, in turn, reinforce a founder's sense of mission. The authors address this with an endogeneity check and find their results stable, but the caveat stands, alongside the limits of a single-country, single-founder sample. The natural next questions are whether the pattern holds across countries, how founding *teams* combine identities, and how these configurations shift as a venture matures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Audit your own identity profile honestly. Name the two motivations that genuinely drive you and acknowledge which one is weaker, rather than insisting you are equally market-, community-, and mission-led.
2. If your venture is mission-led, deliberately pair the mission with one execution engine, either market discipline or community embeddedness, and build the venture's strategy and story around that pairing.
3. Resist the temptation to be everything to everyone. When market, community, and societal goals are all pulling at once, simplify before scaling; coherence is what stakeholders reward.
4. For investors and incubators, treat a founder's identity coherence as a diagnostic, not an afterthought. Help founders sharpen a focused pairing rather than celebrating apparent breadth.
5. If your strengths are competitive and community-based without a societal mission, lean into that combination rather than manufacturing a mission you do not feel; the evidence shows it can drive breakthroughs on its own.

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