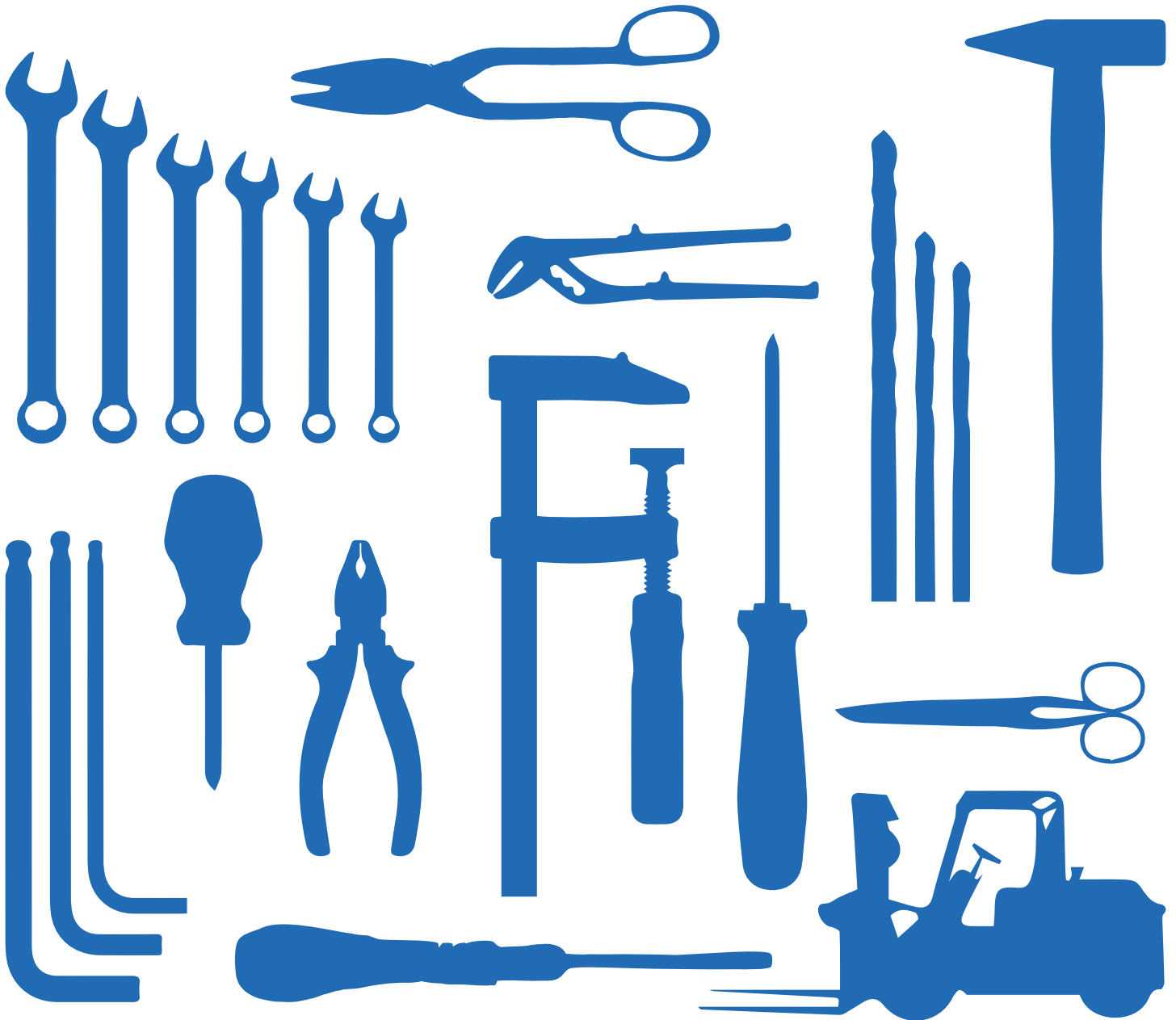


Adapting **Strategic Design** for Leadership Succession in **Manufacturing SMEs**



Master thesis

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Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering
Strategic Product Design
Academic year 2025-2026

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Abstract

Generational succession represents the most critical transition in the lifecycle of a family firm (Calabrò, 2021; Poccia, 2015). In Italy, 92% of family SMEs will face one in the coming years, yet only 18% have a structured plan (Lozzi, 2025). Despite an extensive body of academic literature on the topic, this knowledge remains fragmented, inaccessible, and rarely translated into tools that firm owners can practically use (Baltazar et al., 2025; Romano & D’Allura, 2025). At the same time, strategic design, a discipline developed to support organisations in navigating complex, systemic, and human-centred challenges, has been designed almost exclusively for large organisations with substantial resources, dedicated research functions, and established design cultures (Micheli et al., 2018). Family SMEs operate in a fundamentally different condition, characterised by limited resources, no prior design culture, and deep resistance to external intervention (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021; Wrigley et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021).

This thesis investigates whether and how strategic design can be introduced into family SMEs, and whether it can concretely support these firms during the process of generational succession. The research is structured around two extensive literature reviews, one on strategic design and one on family business and succession, followed by three rounds of semi-structured interviews, including professors, succession experts, consultants, and family firm owners in the Piedmont region. A co-creation process conducted over more than a month with a manufacturing micro-firm approaching its third-generation succession produced a realistic, field-tested representation of how succession actually unfolds in practice, and shaped the translation of strategic design principles into a management system grounded simultaneously in academic literature and organisational reality.

The result is a digital platform that translates this research into a structured support system for family firms navigating generational transition. The platform combines a five-phase succession process grounded in both strategic design and family business literature, a library of strategic design tools adapted for a non-design audience, a diagnostic system, and an interactive process canvas. The project sets out to demonstrate that strategic design can be meaningfully introduced into contexts distant from design culture, that it can be translated, adapted, and co-developed with its intended users to become a concrete and accessible instrument for family firms navigating one of the most complex moments in their lifecycle.

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Why the problem is relevant

Every family firm will eventually face succession. It is not a possibility but a certainty, one of the few constants in the lifecycle of an organisation that may otherwise adapt, pivot, and reinvent itself over generations (Calabrò, 2021; Poccia, 2015). And yet, despite its inevitability, succession remains the moment that family firms are least prepared for. Research indicates that approximately 70% of family businesses globally lack a formal succession plan (Calabrò, 2021; Poza, 2014). In Italy, 92% of family SMEs will face a generational transition in the coming years, yet only 18% have a structured plan (Lozzi, 2025). The probability of survival drops to 30% at the second generation, to 15% at the third, and to 11% by the fourth (Baltazar et al., 2025; Lozzi, 2025; Poza, 2014). In the next five years alone, approximately one million Italian firms will be involved in this process (Lozzi, 2025).

These numbers describe not just a business problem but a social one. Family firms represent 85 to 90% of all Italian companies, the highest proportion in Europe, and constitute the backbone of the country's manufacturing economy, particularly in regions like Piedmont (AUB Observatory, 2024; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; Poccia, 2015). When they fail during succession, the consequences extend beyond the family: employees lose jobs, clients lose trusted partners, and communities lose institutions that in some cases have been operating for generations (Buang et al., 2013; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020).

What makes this situation particularly difficult to address is not the complexity of succession itself, but the combination of complexity and the absence of preparation (Hauck & Prügl, 2015; Romano & D'Allura, 2025). As one succession consultant stated during the field research conducted for this thesis: "The owner has everything in their head but lacks an instrument for dialogue." Another expert described the structural consequence of delay: "The more generational succession is postponed, the more the governance of the firm becomes disordered, and the more company performance declines" (Dentella, as cited in AUB Observatory, 2026). Succession is rarely treated as a process to be designed. It is frequently approached as a sudden event to be managed reactively rather than planned intentionally, and the outcomes reflect this (Calabrò, 2021; Valencia & Pratama, 2024).

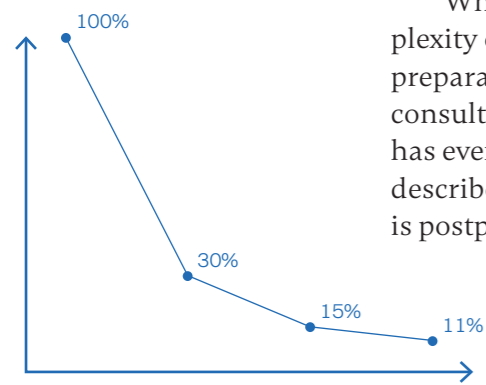


Fig. 1 — Survival rate of family firms across generations

The chart illustrates the progressive decline in survival rates across successive generational transitions in family firms. Starting from 100% of first-generation firms, only 30% survive the transition to the second generation, 15% reach the third, and 11% the fourth. Each point on the horizontal axis represents a generational handover, making visible the compounding risk of unplanned succession over time (Baltazar et al., 2025; Lozzi, 2025; Poza, 2014)

Gap

The literature on family firms, and specifically on the topic of succession, is certainly extensive. It has always been a relevant topic, and over the decades a considerable amount of research has been produced, such as detailed frameworks for understanding governance structures, successor selection criteria, knowledge transfer dynamics, and the barriers that prevent successful transitions (Baltazar et al., 2025; Romano & D'Allura, 2025). Over time, the quantitative dimension of this topic has also been developed through Observatory data, industry reports, and longitudinal studies (AUB Observatory, 2024; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). The knowledge exists.

What does not exist is a structured methodological instrument that family firm owners can actually use (Baltazar et al., 2025; Romano & D'Allura, 2025). Academic contributions on succession are characterised by fragmentation: different sources propose different frameworks, use inconsistent terminology, and rarely connect problems to concrete operational solutions. The accessibility that characterises this body of knowledge is, however, paradoxical, as the very people it concerns are deeply separated from this body of knowledge by cultural, linguistic,

and structural distances that the literature itself rarely attempts to bridge (Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021; Romano & D'Allura, 2025).

At the same time, the challenges that characterise succession, its systemic complexity, its emotional density, its resistance to linear solutions, are precisely the kind of problems that strategic design was built to address (Auernhammer, 2024; Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Hill, 2012). Strategic design is a discipline that applies design principles and methods to the formulation and implementation of organisational strategy, treating complexity not as an obstacle but as the very condition it was built to navigate (Calabretta et al., 2016; Meroni, 2008). Through its principles and tools, it gives organisations the means to surface what is hidden, build shared direction, and sustain long and complex processes over time (Buchanan, 2020; Calabretta et al., 2016; Hill, 2012). In theory, it is well suited to the challenge of succession. In practice, however, its principles and tools have been developed almost exclusively for large organisations with dedicated innovation functions, substantial resources, and established design cultures (Micheli et al., 2017; Calabretta et al., 2016). Family SMEs operate in a fundamentally different condition: limited time, limited budget, no prior design culture, concentrated decision-making, and deep resistance to external intervention (Magistretti et al., 2020; Manzke, J., 2022). Strategic design, like the succession literature, was not built for them. The question of whether and how strategic design can be translated into this context remains largely uninvestigated (Jarno Manzke, 2022).

This thesis positions itself at the intersection of these two gaps. The literature on succession and family business is difficult to access for the companies that actually need it, and strategic design presents a solution designed for other contexts and therefore cannot be effectively used by these firms (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021; Micheli et al., 2017). What this thesis proposes is that the missing connection, the bridge, can be strategic design, a discipline capable of operating simultaneously on multiple levels: as a disciplinary lens through which the fragmented knowledge on succession and family business is made legible, and as an operational methodology embedded within the succession process itself, providing family firms with the tools, language, and structure to navigate one of the most critical moments in their lifecycle.

Research aim & objectives

Building on the gaps identified in the preceding section, this thesis is guided by a central research question and two supporting sub-questions that structure the inquiry across different levels of investigation.

The main research question is:

- Can strategic design concretely support family-owned SMEs during the process of generational succession?

To address this question, the research is organised around two sub-questions:

- RQ1. Can strategic design principles be meaningfully introduced into organisations that are distant from design culture and have no prior familiarity with the discipline?

This question establishes the foundational premise of the thesis. Before strategic design can be applied to succession, it must first be determined whether it can enter contexts that are structurally, culturally, and linguistically distant from the environments in which it was developed.

- RQ2. How can strategic design be adapted, simplified, and translated into an accessible instrument that family firms with no design expertise can independently navigate?

This question addresses the form that any such intervention must take. It drives the iterative process development at the core of the thesis, informing every design decision from tool selection and language simplification to the choice of a digital platform as the final output.

Together, these questions define a project that is both investigative and constructive, asking not only whether strategic design belongs in this context, but building the instrument that attempts to demonstrate that it does.

Research & Methodology

This project follows an adapted version of the Double Diamond model (Design Council, 2015), structured around four phases: Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver, each alternating between divergent exploration and convergent synthesis. The model was chosen for its ability to structure a complex, multi-layered investigation that moves from understanding two separate domains to connecting them and ultimately producing a concrete instrument.

The process was expanded to reflect the specific demands of this project. The first diamond contains two parallel sub-diamonds running simultaneously: one dedicated to the exploration of strategic design as a discipline, the other to the world of family SMEs and succession. Only once both were sufficiently developed could they converge into a unified synthesis. This structural choice reflects the thesis's core argument, that the connection between these two domains is not given but must be constructed.

- Discover - Contextual Exploration and Theoretical Grounding: The first phase opened on two fronts simultaneously. A first round of contextual interviews was conducted to verify the relevance of the problem, understand how succession is perceived from the inside, and identify the cultural and linguistic gap between academia and manufacturing firms. In parallel, two extensive and independent literature reviews were launched; one on strategic design, tracing its evolution, principles, attitude, and process logic; the other on family SMEs, mapping their organisational dynamics, innovation behaviour, and the critical challenge of succession.
- Define - Knowledge Synthesis and Framework Development: With both literature streams sufficiently developed, the Define phase brought them into dialogue. Each stream was first converged independently. Strategic design was distilled into its guiding principles, attitude traits, and a baseline process, and the family SME literature was synthesised into a categorisation of problems, barriers, and solution spaces. These two convergences were then connected, mapping what strategic design has to offer against the specific needs of family firms during succession and visualising their intersection.
- Develop - Field Investigation and Evaluation and Refinement: The Develop phase introduced reality into the theoretical framework through two rounds of field research. The second round of interviews involved family firm owners and professionals including consultants and accountants, with the aim of understanding how succession is actually perceived and navigated from the inside. Given that only surviving firms were accessible, professionals were de-

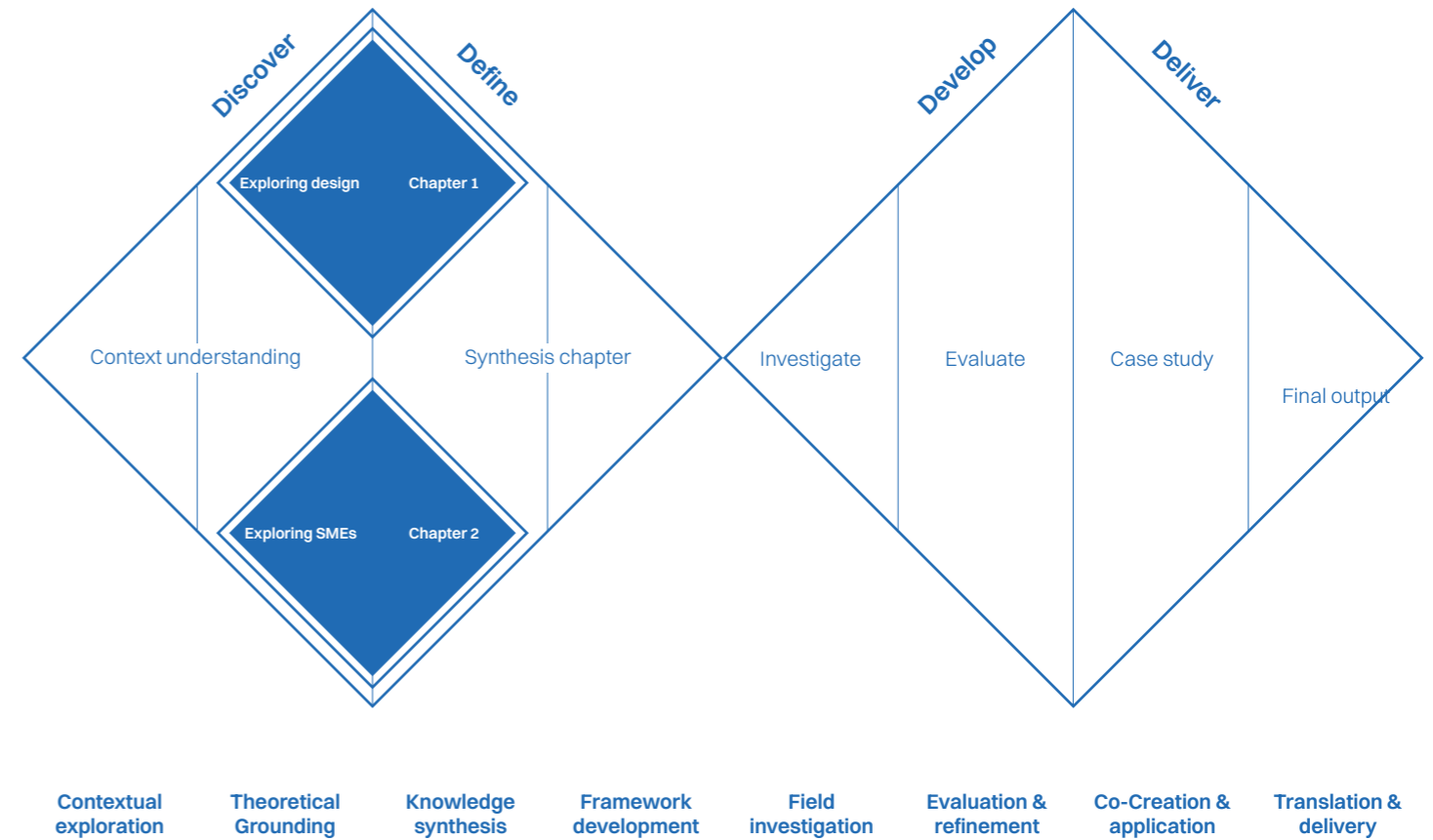


Fig. 2 — Research process: an adapted Double Diamond model

liberately included to overcome survivor bias and access case studies of failed or difficult successions. Patterns began to emerge. The third round was evaluative: professors, experts, and owners assessed the first iteration of the process, identifying where it was structurally sound and where it needed to become more flexible, more accessible, and less linear.

- Deliver - Co-Creation and Application: The final phase involved an extended collaboration with a manufacturing micro-firm approaching its third-generation succession. Over the course of more than a month, multiple sessions were conducted including interviews with the current and former owner, co-creation workshops, roleplay, and field visits. The company's succession history was reconstructed and analysed against the ideal process, revealing where the right things had happened for the wrong reasons and where structured planning would have made a difference. Working directly with the firm owner, the process was refined step by step and tool by tool, integrating company needs and ideas into a third and final iteration. This phase produced the third and final iteration of the succession process, grounded in the direct experience of a real firm navigating an approaching succession, and led to the identification of the most appropriate form for the final output.

Thesis Structure

The chapters of this thesis are organised to build a progressive and coherent argument rather than to reconstruct the chronological sequence of the research. In practice, the literature reviews, interviews, and iterative process development unfolded in a more interleaved manner than the chapter structure suggests. The material has been reorganised for clarity, grouping related activities and outputs into dedicated chapters regardless of when they occurred.

Chapter 1 establishes the first theoretical foundation, defining strategic design as a discipline, an attitude, and a process. Chapter 2 builds the second theoretical foundation, mapping the world of family SMEs and the specific challenge of generational succession. Chapter 3 brings these two foundations into dialogue, synthesising both domains and connecting the problems of family firms to what strategic design has to offer. Chapter 4 documents the field research conducted throughout the project, presenting three rounds of interviews that progressively grounded the work in the direct experience of practitioners and firm owners. Chapter 5 traces the development of the succession process through three successive iterations, each grounded in a different source of knowledge. Chapter 6 presents the final output and the digital platform through which all of this is delivered.

Strategic design terms

Strategic design	An integrative, future-oriented field where design principles and methods are applied to formulate and implement organisational strategy, bridging high-level goals and real-world implementation (Boyer, Cook & Steinberg, 2013; Buchanan, 2020; Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016; Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Helsinki Design Lab, n.d.).
Dark matter	A metaphor for the invisible mass of an organisation, its culture, governance, and structures, that cannot be seen directly but determines how the visible system behaves (Hill, 2012; Hill & Candy, 2019; Meyer, 2019).
Wicked problem	A complex, ill-formulated problem with no definitive formulation or stopping point, where solutions are judged as better or worse rather than true or false (Buchanan, 1992; Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Hill, 2012; Micheli et al., 2018).
Systems & integrative thinking	The ability to step back and see a problem as part of a larger whole, recognising that system properties emerge from relationships rather than individual parts, and synthesising contradictory perspectives into something new (Auernhammer, 2024; Brown, 2008; Hill, 2012; van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).
Abductive reasoning	A logic of “thinking through making,” where problem and solution evolve together through mini-hypotheses such as sketches or rough prototypes, rather than through deduction or induction (Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Dorst, 2011; Micheli et al., 2018; Steen, 2013).
Scenario building	The practice of translating information and intuitions into shared visions of possible futures, often by identifying driving forces and plotting them into future scenarios (Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016; Carella & Marengoni, 2022; Meroni, 2008).
Facilitation & stewardship	Facilitation is the skill of orchestrating collaboration across disciplines; stewardship is remaining embedded within an organisation to guide strategy into action over time, learning and adapting as the process unfolds (Boyer, Cook & Steinberg, 2013; Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016; Hill, 2012; Meroni, 2008).
Co-creation	A collaborative process where stakeholders, designers, and users combine knowledge and expectations to address problems together, aligning perspectives and creating shared value (Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016; Meroni, 2008; OECD OPSI, n.d.).
Visual thinking & materiality	The use of sketches, maps, and prototypes to externalise ideas and make them tangible, reducing perceived risk and helping stakeholders judge the consequences of different scenarios (Buchanan, 2020; Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016; Hill, 2012; Simonsen, 2014).

SMEs terms

SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise, defined by the European Commission according to staff headcount and annual turnover, with micro, small, and medium subcategories.
Socioemotional Wealth (SEW)	The non-financial value a family derives from owning and controlling a firm, including identity, reputation, and emotional attachment, which often shapes strategic decisions as much as economic considerations (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007).
Ability-Willingness Paradox	The phenomenon whereby family firms often have the capacity to innovate but lack the motivation to do so, due to non-economic factors such as risk aversion and the desire to preserve control (Chrisman et al., 2015).
Three-Circle Model	A framework describing a family firm as the overlap of three subsystems: family, ownership, and business (Tagiuri & Davis, 1982).
Family Pact	A written agreement that codifies entry criteria, decision-making authority, and ownership rules within a family firm, intended to prevent conflict before it arises.
Joint Reign	A period during which the incumbent and successor lead the firm together, enabling the gradual transfer of knowledge, trust, and authority.
Incumbent Shadow	The tendency of a founder or current leader to remain influential beyond their formal role, interfering with or limiting the successor's authority even after a transition has formally taken place.
Contamination	The introduction of new perspectives, knowledge, or ways of working into a firm, typically brought by a successor through external study or work experience.
NextGen	The next generation of family members positioned to take over leadership of the firm.
Titanic Effect	The belief, common in long-established firms, that the company is too solid or successful to fail, which can reduce the perceived need for innovation or succession planning.

Chapter 1

Strategic design

Design is a discipline that is difficult to define and frame. Its boundaries are extremely mutable and have undergone an evolution that continues even today. This discipline emerged between the 19th and the 20th century, moving from the production of physical artefacts to the shaping of organisational strategy, and its role has evolved from solving problems to setting them. Understanding this evolution is not only a historical exercise, but also a necessary starting point for understanding what strategic design is, what it can do, and why it represents a relevant and underexplored resource for the specific challenges addressed by this thesis.

This chapter aims to establish the first of the two theoretical foundations on which the entire thesis project is based. It traces the path of design from its origins in industry to its most complete and complex application, defining strategic design as a discipline. The chapter follows a logic of divergence and convergence. The first section, through an extensive literature review, case studies, and expert perspectives, seeks to study the discipline from multiple points of view in order to understand its multifaceted and complex nature. The second part converges the material collected during the exploration in order to organise it and encapsulate strategic design within a series of guiding principles, attitude traits, and an ideal process structured around the core logic of the Double Diamond.

A fundamental aspect of this chapter is that strategic design is a contested and fragmented discipline. There is no universally agreed definition among experts, there is no single process, and there is no shared vocabulary among practitioners and researchers. Rather than treating this fragmentation as a limitation, the chapter seeks to demonstrate how a work of synthesis is extremely necessary and, in itself, an act of strategic design thinking.

Before strategic design can be introduced into a context as distant and resistant as that of family-owned manufacturing SMEs, it must first be made coherent within itself, synthesised from a fragmented body of literature into a clear, accessible, and unified framework that can travel beyond the boundaries of the design community.

Evolution of design

The word “design” is a term notoriously difficult to place on a temporal axis when trying to frame its chronological dimension by identifying a point of origin and a possible trajectory of growth or maturation. It is equally complicated to frame from a semantic or dialectical point of view. The Treccani dictionary assigns the following description to the label design: “formal design activity of objects produced industrially, which integrates functional and aesthetic aspects” (Treccani, n.d.).

“Defined in its broadest sense as the conception and planning of all man-made products, design can fundamentally be seen as an instrument for improving the quality of life” (Fiell & Fiell, 1999).

Over time, the term design has progressively detached itself from the purely industrial concept, which had become too narrow and reductive. It has emerged that design is not merely a process linked to mechanised production, but also a means of conveying persuasive ideas, attitudes, and values about how things could or should be according to individual, corporate, institutional, or national

objectives (Fiell & Fiell, 1999). Design tools and methodologies have, in fact, been adopted by a variety of other fields and disciplines to identify and frame problems as well as to visualise scenarios for their solution (Irwin, 2015). There has therefore been what Verganti (2017) defines as a shift in the role of design: whereas it was previously only a matter of designing the “how” (solutions/products), it has gradually also become a matter of designing the “why” (meaning/strategy).

It is possible to divide the evolution of design in three waves. These phases are based on historical developments and the increasing complexity of this discipline. During this evolution, the focus of design value has shifted from the final “artefact” to the “process” of working. “Furthermore, the role of the professional designer has transformed from a lone innovator into a skilled facilitator who stewards the design capabilities of non-designers” (Buchanan, 2020). In its most complex and comprehensive form, design aims to address dark matter. Dark matter in a design context is a metaphor borrowed from theoretical physics, referring to the invisible mass of an organisation that, while undetectable directly, fundamentally determines how the visible system behaves.

Fig. 3-10 — Design evolution: key moments and artefacts. From left to right: The Great Exhibition, Crystal Palace, London, 1851; Wassily Chair, Marcel Breuer, 1925; LCW Chair, Charles and Ray Eames, 1945; Pepsi-Cola advertisement, 1950s; Lucky Strike packaging, Raymond Loewy, 1940s; IDEO logo, Apple Macintosh, 1984; Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO.

1919
Bauhaus founded



1950s–60s
Economic boom



1980s–90s
Human-centred design emerges



2008
Design Thinking enters management



Late 19th century
Industrial Revolution



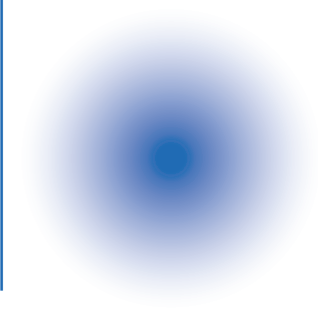
Mid 20th century
Rise of industrial design



1950s–70s
Corporate identity era



1990s
Rise of the internet and digital systems



Today
Strategic Design is frequently used in organizations

Tangible Design (First Wave)

Design emerged as a reaction to the rising division between the act of “making” and the act of “conceiving” (Caliskan & Wade, 2022). The focus was to fulfil consumer demand through the creation of physical, industrially manufactured objects. Through institutions such as the Bauhaus and influential individuals, the role of design in the production of tangible consumer goods marked the modern separation between the mental and manual aspects within the design process. Distinguishing those who produce from those who invent.

Intangible Visual Design (Second Wave)

Post-war America, a period during which there was enormous economic growth; rising incomes, pent-up demand, and new technologies produced widespread purchases of homes, cars, appliances, and other consumer goods. With the consequent saturation of markets and the increase in competition, differentiation increasingly relied on symbolic and psychological dimensions rather than purely functional improvements (Caliskan & Wade, 2022). Companies realised that their image, what today would be called brand identity, often had greater influence than the reality of the physical goods they produced (Caliskan & Wade, 2022).

Strategic and Systemic Design (Third Wave)

The design process itself became as relevant as the outcome (Caliskan & Wade, 2022). This phase was driven by the rise of large-scale computer systems and the internet, which hid the way things work under multiple layers of systemic complexity. In order to address “wicked problems”, challenges that are strange, moving, and shapeless, design began blending social research with typical design processes and methods (Caliskan & Wade, 2022). More recently, sustainability, circularity, and social impact have further expanded the systemic scope of design, positioning designers as agents of organisational and societal change.

1.2 Strategic Design as a Discipline

Given the evolution of design and the increasingly complex nature of contemporary problems, often governed by intangible variables that can be characterised as dark matter, traditional design is ineffective. Design thinking, an approach that aspires to solve internal organisational problems, is also inefficient. It is therefore evident that there is a need for a more robust paradigm capable of navigating systemic challenges with greater depth. In this regard, strategic design can be seen as the most complex and developed component of design. It functions as a “third wave” of design evolution, merging “making and managing” to address poorly defined and complex problems (Duck, 2012; Calabretta et al., 2016), namely “wicked problems” (Caliskan & Wade, 2022).

The role of the strategic designer is more complex than one might think, multifaceted, difficult to define, and constantly evolving. However, for purposes of initial definition, strategic design is a professional field in which designers employ their specific principles, tools, and methods to co-determine both the formulation and implementation of organisational strategy (Calabretta et al., 2016). By influencing high-level decision-making, and through a substantial commitment of monetary and non-monetary resources, designers set a clear direction for the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of an organization, shaping core brand values, market positioning, and the creation of new market spaces to deliver innovative outcomes that benefit both people and the organization alike (Micheli et al., 2017; Calabretta & Gemser, 2016). Other crucial examples of strategic decisions include the development of an innovation vision and the subsequent identification of business opportunities (Calabretta et al., 2016).

Strategic design is an integrative, future-oriented practice that moves beyond traditional aesthetics to address complex, systemic challenges. Unlike conventional design focused on discrete products, strategic design serves as a transversal framework that bridges the gap between high-level organisational goals and real-world implementation (Helsinki Design Lab; Buchanan, 2020). Organisations can enhance their innovative and competitive capabilities through decisions grounded in rigorous analyses of trends and data rather than intuition alone. At its core, the discipline utilises a participatory and material approach, employing prototyping as a speculative tool to uncover stakeholder needs and identify new opportunities. Regardless of the context, whether applied to business growth or broader social sectors such as healthcare and climate change, strategic design redefines how problems are approached. It transforms abstract vision into inclusive, resilient, and actionable strategies that reshape services, digital interactions, and social relationships (Helsinki Design Lab; Buchanan, 2020).

Strategic design recognises the interconnectedness of relationships between people and objects within organisations through a holistic approach. Rather than following the traditional “strategic planning,” which often separates vision from practical decision-making, this discipline emphasises patterns and synthesis (OECD OPSI, n.d.). By developing a deep understanding of the organisational system, it designs actions for outsized impact, utilising continuous feedback loops to assess results and reiterate continuously. Within this framework, strategic design serves to confer upon social and market bodies a system of rules, beliefs, values, and tools necessary to navigate the external environment (Meroni, 2008). It

is essentially an evolutionary capability, allowing an organisation to survive and thrive while simultaneously maintaining and developing its unique core identity (Meroni, 2008). Ultimately, by treating strategy as design, the central planning goal shifts toward calculating risk and reducing environmental uncertainty, providing a structured yet agile framework for long-term resilience (Auernhammer, 2024). When observed through a strategic lens, design transcends its traditional problem-solving function to assume a problem-setting role. Rather than merely optimising pre-existing solutions, strategic design acts as an exploratory capability aimed at uncovering new issues and latent opportunities. It no longer focuses exclusively on “knowing how” (know-how), understood as executional excellence, but on “knowing what” (know-what): the ability to define strategic direction and determine how to deploy available resources to generate future value (Meroni, 2008).

Organisations are gradually becoming aware that traditional ways of solving business challenges have a limit, as they are able to provide tangible benefits only up to a certain point (Calabretta et al., 2016). Therefore, it is becoming increasingly evident that the strategic design approach is not only welcome but necessary for a broad spectrum of social and entrepreneurial entities: from companies to consultancy firms, from institutions to governments, as well as territories and associations (Meroni, 2008). This is leading to the materialisation of a hybrid “middle ground” between design and management practices, and to the direct use of design tools to support strategic development (Dorst & Watson, 2023). For this bridge with organisations to take shape, it is necessary to build trust through process understanding, that is, by explaining and teaching organisational stakeholders how the design process works. “The skills deployed by designers and the practice they engage in are very different from the conventional working methods that most organisations are familiar with. To create understanding of the design process, designers need to clearly define what the different steps and activities they engage in entail, and demonstrate how they expect to bring about outcomes” (Calabretta et al., 2016). Innovation projects often fail precisely for this reason: organisations feel that they are being asked, in terms of capabilities and resources, more than they actually possess. It is the responsibility of the designer to mitigate this risk.

As Professor Calabretta explains (2016), for all these capabilities of strategic design to be effective, satisfying user needs and addressing organisational and societal challenges, strategic designers must operate at the intersection of desirability, viability, and feasibility.

- **Desirability** reflects the ability of a project to effectively respond to people’s needs and aspirations. These needs can be both explicit or latent. For an output to be considered truly desirable, it must contribute to societal progress and its well-being, other than improving people’s quality of life.
- **Feasibility** indicates the ability to translate the outcomes of a strategic project into tangible and concrete forms, both in the present and in the near future. This dimension ensures that the project vision can be realised through the effective use of resources, tech-

Fig. 11 — Strategic design versus traditional design (The Fountain Institute, n.d.)

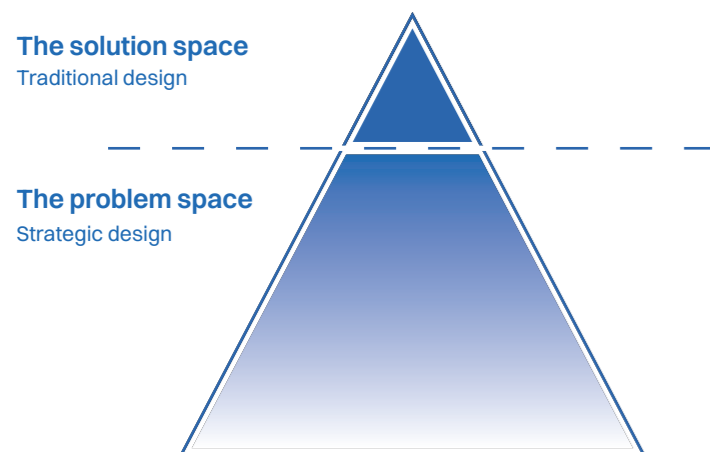
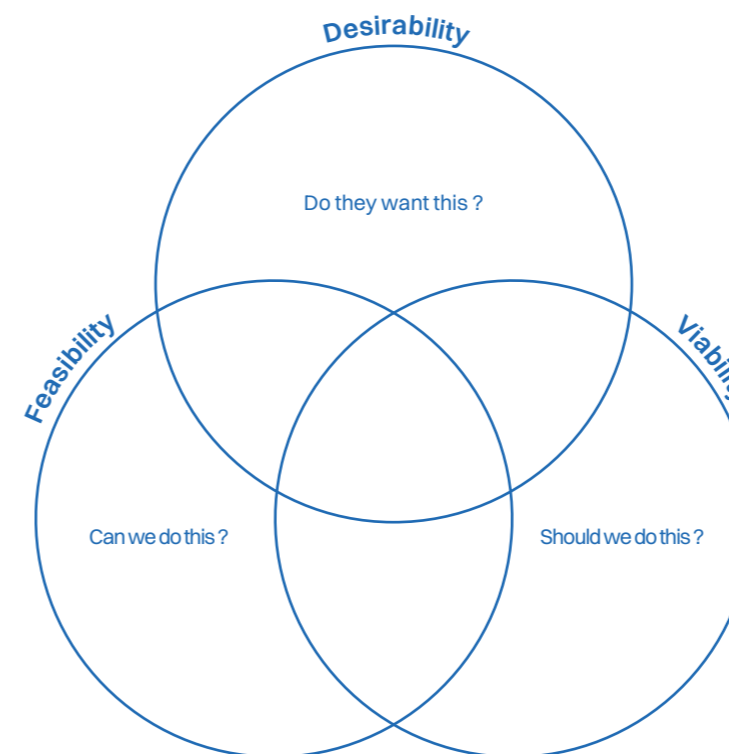


Fig. 12 - The three dimensions of strategic design (Calabretta et al., 2016)



nologies, processes, and human capital currently available or foreseeable within the organisation.

- **Viability** ensures that, once made tangible, the outcome of the project can be sustained effectively by the organisation in the long term. This dimension aims to generate measurable value through key performance indicators (KPIs), such as profitability, brand equity, customer satisfaction, and triple-bottom-line objectives, thereby ensuring the initiative's resilience within the business model.

Satisfying these three criteria is an extremely iterative process. During the design phase, in order to reach an optimal strategy, it is necessary to revise and adjust these three variables multiple times. Moreover, their intersection, although highly important, is ineffective without thorough implementation. As Calabretta (2016) states: “without implementation there is no innovation,” and all efforts will result in vain.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between strategic design and design thinking in order to correctly frame the discipline within its operational boundaries. Although strategic designers and design-thinking business consultants may appear similar at first glance, the two fields have very different approaches and practitioners. Design thinking focuses on training business leaders to “think like a designer” by providing them with 20th-century design tools. Strategic design, on the other hand, seeks to equip designers with 21st-century design methods to embed design within the strategic parts of an organisation (Hill, 2012).

Although it is important to clearly define strategic design and emphasise its distinction from design thinking, it is also necessary to acknowledge that, given the blurred boundaries between them, the former is often applied or implicitly referred to under the label of the latter. In practice, in order to build trust and process understanding, professionals often operate in disguise, adopting alternative definitions and labels. It is therefore appropriate to clarify that it is not the specific name that defines the discipline of strategic design, but rather its processes, its methods, and above all, the attitude of those who practice it.

1.3 Strategic Design as an Attitude

The strategic designer applies design principles to guide the strategic choices of companies and institutions (Caliskan and Wade, 2022). They act as a mediator who helps organisations to formulate and implement their objectives, using an approach based on concrete evidence to generate innovation for the benefit of society and the market (Calabretta and Gemser, 2016; Caliskan and Wade, 2022). Strategic design has proven to be effective in every field, regardless of the weight that design has historically had in the sector. The study by Micheli et al. (2017) also highlights how the size of the firm does not significantly influence the impact of this discipline; the only relevant variations in SMEs concern the central role of top management and a more streamlined and less rigid operational structure. However, as already observed, its relevance and effectiveness do not derive exclusively from the tools, practices and methods adopted, but are intrinsically linked to the key principles and the designer's attitude.

In Strategic design, guiding principles or pillars are defined as fundamental rules and heuristics established through experience and empirical evidence, with the aim to guide the practitioner during problem-solving (van der Bijl-Brouwer and Malcolm, 2020). While the practical elements used by the strategic designer

vary depending on the problem addressed and the solution identified, these principles remain unchanged, providing the foundations for any project.

- **Systems and Integrative Thinking:** This refers to the ability to take a step back to look at the bigger picture. By zooming out, it becomes evident how all problems within the same system are interrelated (Auernhammer, 2024; Hill, 2012). Alongside this is integrative thinking: the ability to embrace the contradictory aspects of a problem to generate a synthesis that goes beyond existing alternatives (Brown, 2008). This “gestalt vision” (Micheli et al., 2018) allows the designer not to limit themselves to optimising the present, but to define a clear strategic direction for the organisation (Calabretta, 2016). This capability of synthesising is fundamental for bringing order to fragmented information and making sense of highly diverse bodies of knowledge, helping to outline alternative pathways (Hill, 2012; Micheli et al., 2018).
- **Scenario Building:** This functions as a future-oriented capacity that allows organisations to look beyond immediate symptoms and “urgent” problems to focus on the broader systemic context and long-term opportunities (Calabretta et al., 2016). This principle consists of making an educated prediction of people's future attitudes, motives, and concerns within a specific area of life to understand the hidden forces that will shape tomorrow's market (Calabretta, 2016; Reframing Studio, n.d.). These abstract visions are then transformed into tangible and shareable knowledge (Meroni, 2008; Carella & Marengoni, 2022). These frameworks, often called Design Orienting Scenarios (DOS), define the space from which possible solutions can emerge by providing a world context for future product-service systems (Manzini et al., 2009; Zurlo, 2012). The ability to visualise future scenarios, also called foresight, is fundamental because, in addition to increasing trust in the project, it creates a “polar star” for decision-making (Calabretta, 2016; Corà et al., 2023).
- **Abductive Reasoning:** Abductive reasoning lies at the heart of every project. It is characterised by a logic of “thinking through making” (Dorst, 2011; Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Micheli et al., 2018). Rather than approaching the problem through a static analysis, the practitioner explores it in an iterative way, allowing the solution to emerge as the process moves on. Strategic design not only solves problems as they are presented in a brief but focuses on “questioning the question” and reframing the context [Hill, 2012; Dorst and Watson, 2023]. Such a principle ensures that strategy is a creative and fact-based practice, aimed at reshaping the components of the organisation in order to achieve its objectives (Caliskan and Wade, 2022).
- **Facilitation and Stewardship:** The strategic designer serves as a facilitator who intentionally moves beyond the archetype of the “lone genius” to orchestrate meaningful collaboration between diverse disciplines (Brown, 2009; Meroni, 2008). In this capacity, the designer is tasked with generating a deep process understanding that is both traceable and accountable to the organisation and its broader stakeholders (Calabretta et al., 2016). As a steward, they remain embedded within the organisational system to navigate the complex, long-term realities required to transform abstract strategy into tangible action (Hill, 2012; Boyer et al., 2013). This stewardship involves critical practices such as Aligning, which ensures strategic outcomes are compatible with organisational assets and values, and Structuring, which organises these processes into actionable, flexible frameworks (Calabretta et al., 2016; Caliskan & Wade, 2022). Furthermore, the designer acts through translating, converting information between different organisational “languages”, such as moving from user insights to viable business models, to enable effective knowledge sharing across stake-

holders (Calabretta et al., 2016; Hill, 2012). Ultimately, a core goal is educating or capacity building, which involves teaching design skills to non-designers to ensure the organisation can evolve its own creative capabilities independently (Meroni, 2008; Calabretta et al., 2016).

- **Co-creation:** In the realm of strategic design, co-creation is a fundamental and distinctive trait that defines the core of the discipline (Calabretta et al., 2016). It is a collaborative process where professional designers and non-designers work together, for brief moments or across the entire span of a project (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Piller & West, 2014), sharing the authorship of design products (Buchanan, 2020; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Through stakeholder engagement, co-creation stimulates widespread organisational commitment (Calabretta et al., 2016; Buchanan, 2020) and fosters a shared interpretation of the future (Meroni, 2008; Calabretta et al., 2016). This participatory approach is essential for uncovering hidden information, such as latent needs, beliefs, and emotional experiences, which are often absent in conventional strategy environments (Buchanan, 2020; Price & Wrigley, 2016).
- **Visual Thinking and Materiality:** The ability to use visual tools, such as sketches, maps, and storyboards, does not serve only to present final outputs, but constitutes a true research strategy (Hill, 2012; Simonse, 2014). Transforming ideas into something tangible is a central task of the strategic designer. Creating physical or visual models allows opportunities to move from the theoretical plane to the practical one (Calabretta et al., 2016). By making strategies visible, the perceived risk for managers is reduced, giving them the tools necessary to judge the validity of different scenarios and their consequences (Calabretta et al., 2016; Boni et al., 2009). This includes the practice of Inspiring, using storytelling and visual artefacts as “social technologies” to make abstract ideas feel vivid and real for stakeholders (Liedtka, 2017; Carlgren et al., 2016).

The project outcome, in addition to depending on how the guiding principles have been followed by the practitioners, is also influenced by their attitude and the different facets of their professional personality. In this sense, design attitude is defined as a composite set of distinct skills (competencies, capabilities, attitudes) that designers apply during the design process (Caliskan and Wade, 2022).

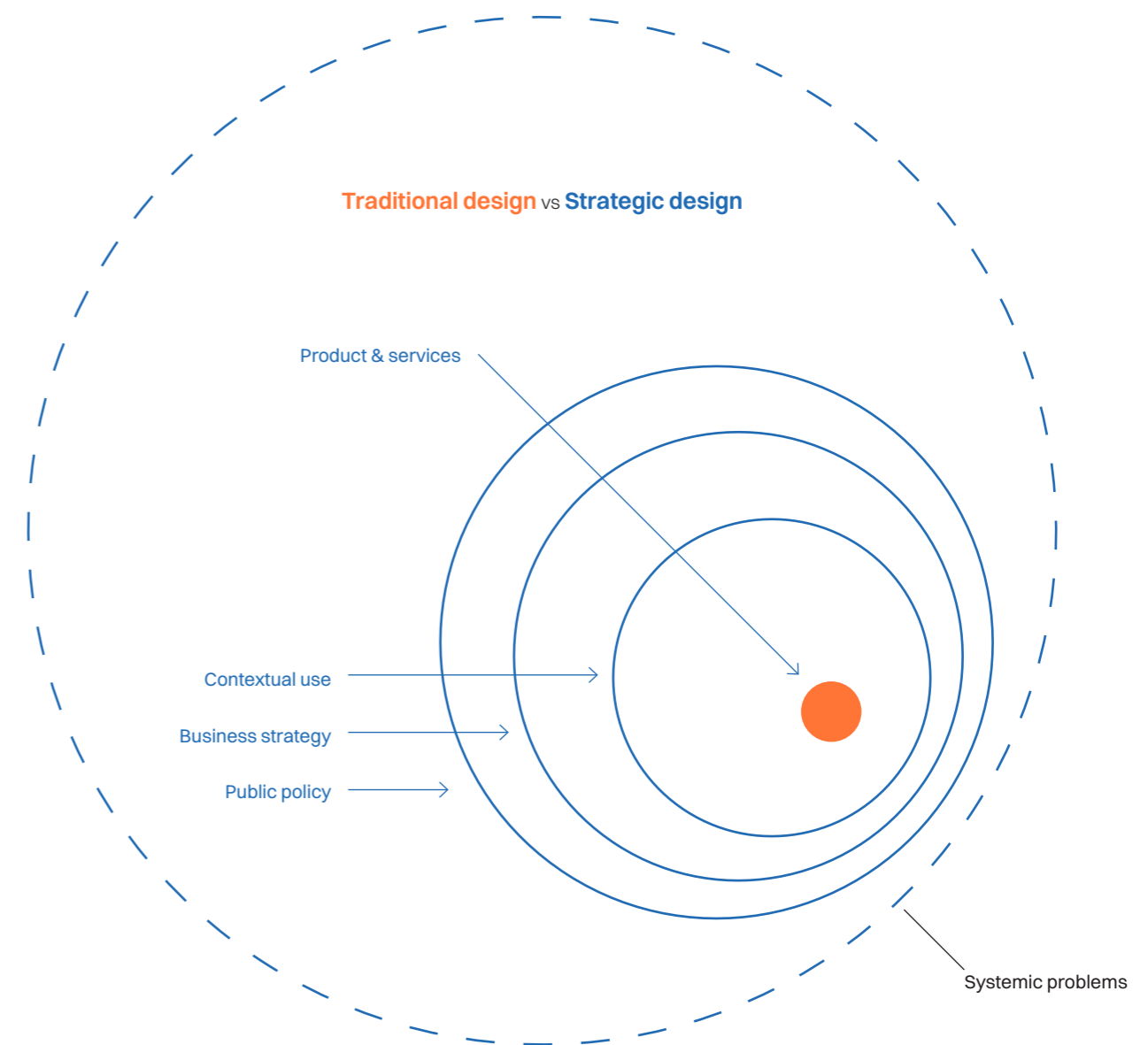
The personality traits that distinguish the strategic designer aren't widely addressed in the literature; their categorisation appears fragmented and not very uniform. In an attempt to overcome this heterogeneity, the different existing frameworks were analysed and integrated, filling their theoretical gaps in order to outline a complete profile. From this synthesis, the key traits that define the ideal personality of the strategic designer emerged.

- **Empathy and Human-Centeredness:** This is essential as practitioners, in order to capture both explicit and latent needs, must interpret reality through the eyes of all stakeholders (Brown, 2008; Micheli et al., 2018). This trait implies a marked “cultural sensitivity” and the ability to modulate communication strategies according to different contexts (Buchanan, 2020). The designer must also develop what is defined as system empathy in order to understand the plurality of perspectives that characterise the entirety of stakeholders (Van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).
- **Tolerance for Ambiguity:** Since strategic design is centred on wicked problems, typically ill-formulated and complex, practitioners must have a high tolerance for this type of ambiguity, and they must be comfortable operating in this space of uncertainty (Hill, 2012; Caliskan & Wade, 2022). This ability to transform chaos into an opportunity space is what makes design a key re-

source for navigating contexts of complex problems (Buchanan, 2020; Micheli et al., 2018).

- **Cognitive Agility:** This is a critical capability that allows leaders to shift their way of thinking as challenges become more complex (Graicer et al., 2022). Thanks to this flexibility, the professional is able to move across different sectors without remaining stuck in rigid mental frameworks, finding original solutions even for problems never encountered before (Graicer et al., 2022). Another key aspect is the opposable mind, which lowers the tension generated by holding two opposing ideas at once, through the development of a third superior alternative (Brown, 2008; Kolko, 2014). This agility makes it easier for the professional to escape rigid mental frameworks (Graicer et al., 2022).
- **Experimentalism and Optimism:** Strategic designers need an iterative prototyping approach to explore potential future directions (Brown, 2008; Buchanan, 2020). This is backed by optimism, the fundamental assumption that a better solution always exists (Brown, 2008; Micheli et al., 2018).
- **Ambition Mixed with Humility:** The strategic designer must be able to combine bold ambition with deep professional humility. On one hand, they must have the strength to intervene in contexts marked by strong resistance to change or rigid cultural legacies; on the other, they must recognise that a successful strategy always emerges from multidisciplinary work, in which design is only one of the fundamental components of the mosaic (Hill, 2012).

Fig. 13 — Strategic design versus traditional design (The Fountain Institute, n.d.)



1.4 Strategic Design Process

The term process refers to a series of actions or steps taken, or to be taken, to achieve a specific purpose from a defined precondition (Bohemia et al., 2017). In a professional or business context, it is more specifically described as a series of events, actions, or methods by which a set of procedures is followed to achieve an intended outcome or goal (Micheli et al., 2017; Corà et al., 2023).

Every strategic design process is characterised by guidelines and iteration, two aspects that are independent of the project context. However, the specificity of the challenges and the nature of the brief determine a different articulation of the process each time. This heterogeneity can be attributed to the lack of a fully shared vocabulary and methodology. Since this discipline is relatively recent, many professionals still note the absence of a universal toolkit (Galiskan and Wade, 2022). This fragmentation not only creates barriers within the strategic design community but also acts as a barrier when applying it in other contexts, such as SMEs. The objective of this analysis is therefore to define a complete and integrated process that fills the current methodological gaps, and then adapt it to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises facing the challenge of business succession.

Multiple experts have attempted to define it, and various organisations use it daily, each from a different perspective. As already mentioned, one of the main issues of this discipline is precisely the lack of a shared language and approach between practitioners and organisations (Caliskan and Wade, 2022, p. 305). When strategic designers have to communicate with one another or with expert stakeholders, this misalignment is certainly an obstacle, but it can be easily overcome; after all, one of the key characteristics of the strategic designer is mental flexibility. The problem becomes greater when it is necessary to connect the world of strategic design with a context that is not familiar with the discipline, such as SMEs; in that case, the situation becomes more complex.

Based on the literature review, an organic strategic design process that mirrors the structure of the Double Diamond emerged, a reference model widely used in design processes. The framework is articulated in four main phases: Systemic Comprehension, Visioning, Designing & Prototyping, and Developing & Embed-

ding. Each phase pursues specific objectives and is governed by specific guiding principles; internally, the process is further detailed into operational steps, sub-steps, and a dedicated selection of methodological tools.

In this case, the process is directed at a company or a practitioner who works with a client. The process presented here is derived from synthesising the literature, case studies, and experience. It is intended for a practitioner who must carry out a project for a client already familiar with strategic design. No connection with SMEs has yet been established. This first process aims to establish the foundation for this thesis, serving as a starting point from which, through analysis and iteration, a process capable of supporting SMEs in succession processes can be developed.

1.4.1 Phase 1 - Systemic Comprehension

This first phase focuses on research, an “X-ray” of the organisational universe to understand current constraints and untapped opportunities (Auernhammer, 2024). The objective is to take a step back in order to look at the bigger picture, to observe and consequently map the organisation’s ecosystem. The process involves an in-depth analysis of the company, examining its internal structure, routines, and relational dynamics, and then extending the investigation to the market, competitors, users, and the broader context. This is about mapping the dark matter and studying the interactions among stakeholders in order to bring to light the constraints and opportunities that govern the system (Calabretta et al., 2016; Hill, 2012).

All the steps of this phase must be completed before even taking into consideration the brief that may be provided by the client, operating as Reframing Studio does, “postponing the resolution of the immediate symptom to first focus on understanding the systemic context” (Reframing Studio, n.d.). The most important part is to understand how the organisation operates in its entirety and how it is perceived by other stakeholders; therefore, involving users in this phase can help develop a complete picture of the organisation.

1.4.2 Phase 2 - Visioning

Once the analysis of the organisational context has been completed, a deep understanding will have been developed; this phase aims at the synthesis and translation of the insights collected. The objective is now to make the situation clear both for the practitioner and for the organisation, converting information from one language to another, verbal to visual, visual to verbal, tacit to explicit, explicit to tacit, making the “invisible” visible to stakeholders (Calabretta et al., 2016; Buchanan, 2020).

This process facilitates the formulation of a strategic vision that can act as a polar star. Through visioning, the designer interprets future attitudes of people in order to realign them with the company’s portfolio of products and services. The aim is to determine how the organisation can evolve to respond to these changes, identifying the points of contact between new societal needs and the distinctive capabilities of the firm. The vision is finally aligned with the original brief and the organisational structure, culminating in the definition of a clear and shared vision statement.

1.4.3 Phase 3 - Designing & Prototyping

Once the second phase of synthesis and convergence has been completed, it is time to approach the second diamond with a new exploration. The third phase, therefore, focuses on design and iteration in order to explore different ways of materialising the vision defined previously.

It is a process of thinking through making, during which, in the search for a better solution, the various proposals are modified, generating new design paths and new ideas. This abductive approach allows the problem and the solution to evolve simultaneously, ensuring that the final output is not only desirable for the user but also technically feasible and strategically coherent for the organisation.

In this phase, creativity and co-creation are fundamental, stimulating widespread organisational and user commitment. Stakeholders are brought into the

process, at the beginning to understand their thoughts, needs, and motivations, in order to gather a large pool of unfiltered ideas that can support the design phase, and at the end to obtain feedback and user validation, and then iterate accordingly. This phase can be represented as a circular process, during which iteration continues until a solution is identified that can move on to the next phase.

1.4.4 Phase 4 - Developing & Embedding

After validating a solution that reconciles the brief, the future vision, and the company’s values, the process enters the phase of Stewardship and Integration. At this stage, the focus shifts to economic and operational viability. The development phase is focused on the realisation of the practical aspects of what was designed in the previous phases. In these last steps, through training and monitoring, the designer ensures that the new processes developed are embedded in the daily routines of stakeholders, thus guaranteeing the continuity and effectiveness of the project over time.

Strategic design is not a single method or a fixed toolkit, it is a discipline defined by the coherence of its principles, the attitude of its practitioners, and its capacity to navigate complexity that conventional approaches cannot resolve. What this chapter has established is a synthesised and unified framework: a set of guiding principles, a designer’s attitude, and a baseline process that together describe how strategic design thinks and operates. The work of this chapter was to collect that fragmentation, map it, and distil it into something coherent, not to simplify the discipline, but to make it legible. A discipline that remains scattered cannot travel. And for strategic design to reach contexts that have never encountered it, to bridge the cultural and linguistic distance that separates design thinking from the world of family-owned manufacturing firms, it first needs to be clear enough to be understood and structured enough to be applied.

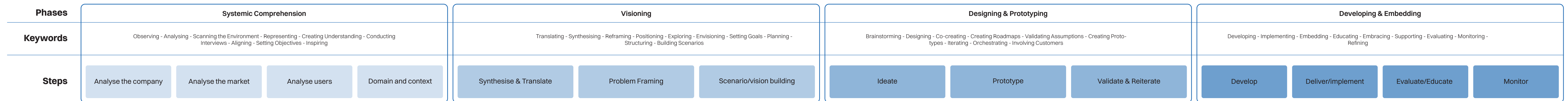


Fig. 14 — Strategic design process

Chapter 2

Family Firms

If the first chapter had the purpose of establishing the disciplinary lens, this chapter introduces the context toward which it will be directed. Family-owned small and medium-sized enterprises represent one of the most widespread and economically significant organisational forms in the world, yet they remain among the least studied in relation to strategic and design-led intervention. And within the lifecycle of these firms, no moment is more critical, or more frequently mismanaged, than generational succession.

This chapter builds the second theoretical foundation of the thesis. It begins by defining and classifying SMEs within the European regulatory framework, establishing the boundaries of the category before narrowing progressively toward its most relevant subset: family-owned firms. From there, the analysis deepens into the specific dynamics that distinguish family firms from other organisational forms, the emotional weight of socioemotional wealth, the complexity of the Three-Circle Model, the paradox between ability and willingness to innovate, and the role of design within a context that has historically marginalised it. The chapter then turns to the Italian and Piedmontese landscape, grounding the analysis in the specific territorial and demographic context this thesis operates within.

The final and most substantial section addresses succession directly, its definition, its dynamics, its barriers, and the conditions under which it can become a catalyst for innovation rather than a threat to continuity. Only 30% of family firms survive the transition to the second generation. 92% of Italian family SMEs will face one in the coming years. Only 18% have a plan. These numbers are not incidental, they are the reason this thesis exists.

What emerges from this chapter is a picture of organisations that are structurally complex, emotionally dense, and operating under pressures that are often disproportionate to their size and resources. It is precisely this combination, complexity without adequate tools, urgency without structured response, that makes the intervention this thesis proposes both relevant and necessary.

2.1 Definition and Classification

According to the Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003, an enterprise is defined as any entity engaged in an economic activity, regardless of its legal form, including self-employed individuals, family businesses, partnerships, or associations that regularly carry out an economic activity (European Commission, 2003).

Within this macro category are SMEs, namely small and medium-sized enterprises, a group of firms that share a series of characteristics and satisfy specific requirements. In the document issued by the European Union in 2003, with the intention of clearly framing SMEs in order to avoid misunderstandings in the future, these are defined based on two variables: staff headcount and annual turnover, where the maximum thresholds are 250 people and 50 million euros (European Commission, 2003).

In a business context, the definition of staff or headcount extends to include the sum of full-time and part-time employees, permanently employed external service providers (such as accountants or technical staff), and regularly engaged specialists or freelancers, such as designers and consultants (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021). It is important to note that these criteria represent the standard within the European Union, but other regions use different benchmarks; for example, according to the United States Small Business Administration's Table of Size Standards, some subcategories define SMEs as having between 500 and 1,000 employees (Knight, 2022).

By varying these two variables, different types of SMEs can be identified:

- **Micro enterprises:** an enterprise that employs fewer than 10 people and has an annual turnover or balance sheet total not exceeding 2 million EUR.
- **Small enterprises:** an enterprise that employs fewer than 50 people and has an annual turnover or balance sheet total not exceeding 10 million EUR.
- **Medium enterprises:** an enterprise that employs fewer than 250 people and has an annual turnover or balance sheet total not exceeding 50 million EUR.

Although these numbers may seem modest when compared to large multinational corporations, it is important to remember that these companies actually constitute the backbone of the economies of countries around the world. According to the World Bank (2023), SMEs account for over 90% of businesses worldwide and more than 50% of employment (Le et al., 2025). In Europe, SMEs constitute an even denser entrepreneurial fabric that represents approximately 95% of all enterprises and two-thirds of total employment in the private sector (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021).

Despite these high numbers, many SMEs find themselves facing performance challenges related to volatile market dynamics and regulatory hurdles, all while lacking many of the necessary elements to survive and evolve (Le et al., 2025). These external pressures have increased exponentially since the post-COVID era, particularly in relation to sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Zafar and Mustafa, 2017). In addition, SMEs are constantly confronted with limited internal resources, including restricted budgets, time, and human capital (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021). For this reason, strategic design is essential, as it offers a structured approach that allows these challenges to be addressed by aligning internal capabilities with external opportunities (Ezekwe, 2025).

2.1.1 Differences with large enterprises

Another fundamental aspect concerns the management processes of SMEs. It should not be assumed that small-firm management performs the same management processes as those performed in large companies by professional managers, only on a smaller scale. These are, in fact, unique processes that differ completely from the management processes found in larger enterprises (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021). Penrose (1995), in her seminal work *The Theory of the Growth of the Firm*, introduces a resource-based perspective (Resource-Based View) to justify the profound structural differences between small and large enterprises. The study highlights how these entities possess heterogeneous resources and how their respective environments, both internal and external, influence their productive capacity. This approach implies that the divergences between large and small firms originate precisely from the intrinsic resources they possess (Jang, 2017).

Tab. 1 — Comparison of family SMEs and large enterprises

	Family SMEs	Large enterprises
Scale	Under 250 employees, turnover under €50M. Often micro (<10) or small (<50). Owner and firm frequently indistinguishable.	Exceed EU thresholds. Often multinationals or listed entities with dispersed ownership and professional management.
Resources	Limited internal budgets, time, and human capital. Lack formal R&D capabilities. Rely on external knowledge through partnerships and consultants.	Abundant internal knowledge and dedicated R&D centres. Large talent pools and structured access to capital and research competencies.
Governance	Power concentrated in the founder. Family leadership prevalent (81.6% in firms with €20–50M revenue). CEO tenure 20–30 years. Governance informal or absent.	Collegial leadership, over 40% with two or more co-CEOs. Professional non-family managers. Institutionalised boards. Average CEO tenure 5–7 years.
Management	Informal processes. Decisions driven by intuition and gut feeling rather than performance indicators. Owner-managers often lack formal management education.	Formalised, hierarchical management practices developed by professional managers. Performance-driven, target-oriented, structured decision-making processes.
Innovation	Non-R&D innovation — trial and error, process revision, customer input. Higher output relative to investment. Engines of radical discovery. Growth constraint at 10–15 employees limits scaling.	Formalised R&D centres. Focus on incremental improvements to existing technologies. Lower innovation efficiency relative to investment. Stronger capacity to industrialise and scale discoveries.
Succession	Systematically postponed. Psychologically resisted. Sudden or unplanned handovers common. Selection often by primogeniture rather than merit. High risk to organisational survival.	Planned and institutionalised. Meritocratic selection criteria. Joint reign periods of ~9 years stabilise transition. Succession linked to +9% ROA/ROE when managed effectively.

2.1.2 Family firms

Among all the types of SMEs, the focus of this thesis is on family-owned ones, both because of their relevance within the global and European entrepreneurial landscape and because of the high level of complexity that derives from the involvement of human aspects, such as family and emotional relationships, within the organisation.

Family firms (FF) in general represent the oldest and most widespread form of commercial organisation and therefore are a fundamental pillar of the global economy. They serve as the primary engine for wealth creation and employment in both emerging and developed nations, and among SMEs, the majority are fam-

ily businesses (Baltazar et al., 2023; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2019; Lozano, 2017; Jing et al., 2022). Demonstrating this high presence of FFs, a report by the European Commission (2009) states that more than 60% of all European companies are family-owned, and their contribution to GDP is around 50% (Acosta Prado et al., 2017).

As in the case of SMEs, also for family-owned firms, a series of requirements must be satisfied in order for this label to be attributed. First of all, the majority of decision-making rights must be in the possession of the natural person(s) who established the firm, or in the possession of the natural person(s) who has/have acquired the share capital of the firm, or in the possession of their spouses, parents, child or children's direct heirs. The majority of decision-making rights may be direct or indirect. At least one representative of the family or kin must be formally involved in the governance of the firm. In listed companies, the person who established or acquired the firm (share capital), or their families or descendants, must possess at least 25 per cent of the decision-making rights mandated by their share capital (European Commission, 2009).

From a less technical point of view, these enterprises are characterised by a coalition of family members who exercise substantial influence over the firm's vision. A critical component of the definition is the intent for transgenerational sustainability, meaning the business is managed with the explicit goal of transferring leadership and control to future generations of the family (Baltazar et al., 2023, p. 1; Song et al., 2022; Kallmuenzer et al., 2018; Rondi et al., 2019).

The most popular framework used by literature to understand these entities is the Three-Circle Model, which views the family firm as the simultaneous overlap of three interdependent subsystems: the Family, Ownership, and the Business (Tagiuri & Davis, 1982). The intersection creates a unique resource known as "familiness," which includes the emotional attachment, shared values, and social capital that distinguish family firms (Costa et al., 2023). This component, called familiness, is a unique and distinctive characteristic; in this sense, the family is described as a problem-solving unit that addresses and reacts to external stimuli and threats in a way that differs among families (Hauck and Prügl, 2015).

This family component extends and also includes employees of the firm, and particularly those with managerial functions ("non-family managers"). Family firms generally tend to display intense employee concern and loyalty, and a wider range of stakeholders is involved in organisational processes.

Furthermore, this need to preserve the family aspect is reflected in owners who often pursue non-economic goals alongside economic ones, as well as in the preservation of a positive family image and reputation in the community (Kallmuenzer et al., 2018; Hauck and Prügl, 2015).

2.2 Innovation in family SMEs

Innovation is an essential component for organisations, regardless of their size and organisational structure. Successful innovation allows a company to obtain something unique that competitors do not have, which therefore provides a competitive advantage (Acosta Prado et al., 2017). This competitive advantage, defined as such by Porter in 1990, serves as a key driver of (family) firm performance as well as the long-term survival of (family) firms (Schumpeter, 1934; Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

Within the academic field, a firm's propensity for innovation is defined as: "a firm's orientation toward innovation [that] defines the reigning culture toward in-

roducing new products in an organisation. [...] It defines the firm's overall orientation as reflected in its risk profile and competitive stance" (Rondi et al., 2019).

Family businesses differ from other firms in terms of their engagement in collaborative innovation activities, the types of innovation outcomes targeted, and the allocation of resources, both financial and otherwise, for research and development aimed at innovation (Brinkerink & Bammens, 2018).

It is precisely these R&D expenditures, specifically the expenditure/sales ratio, that constitute the unit of measurement of innovation within a firm. Consequently, they also represent the firm's innovation commitment (Acosta Prado et al., 2017).

Having previously examined the fragile nature of family businesses, often immersed in complex dynamics and operating with fewer means and greater difficulties than ordinary firms, it is not unreasonable to state that innovation represents a matter of life or death for these businesses (Baltazar et al., 2023). Innovation in general, especially in the field of management, is not aimed solely at increasing competitiveness, but represents a real necessity for survival, for all SMEs but especially for family firms (Jing et al., 2022).

Furthermore, as stated by Alfredo De Massis, a well-known expert and professor of family business, in an interview: "We also know from scientific research that it is not possible to maintain a competitive advantage in the long term without innovation. Therefore, it is impossible for family firms to persist over time without innovating."

The absence of innovation leads to the materialisation of three possible scenarios:

- In the case where innovation is successfully achieved, a competitive advantage is generated (Rondi et al., 2019). For SMEs in particular, the use of design as an innovation lever makes it possible to create "white spaces" in the market and uncontested segments (Carneiro et al., 2025).
- In the case of poorly planned innovation, incorrectly executed innovation, or innovation that simply does not deliver the desired results, the firm may find itself in a stagnant or even critical situation, after which survival is no longer guaranteed (Jing et al., 2022). Weakly structured or chaotic innovation processes often lead to failure due to the inability to properly test the product or to understand its real differentiation within the market (Micheli et al., 2012).
- Finally, if, as happens in the case of many firms, innovation is set aside for various reasons, the result would be a flattening of the industrial landscape, composed of many players performing the same activities without making any effort to create differentiation. Without constant formal and meaning-based innovation, products tend to lose their identity, flattening into widespread and undifferentiated expressive archetypes (Rampino, 2008), ultimately pushing the company toward inertia and decline (Baltazar et al., 2023).

SMEs in general share a series of common characteristics in the field of innovation. First of all, it is quite rare that they operate according to a shared vision; they rarely rely on a long-term perspective, and their innovation programmes are rarely based on a roadmap or a structured plan (Calabretta et al., 2016). Furthermore, they tend to rely more on informal evaluation rather than on performance targets and indicators, often basing decisions on qualitative variables and gut feeling, dynamics that can be risky (Micheli et al., 2017).

2.3 SocioEmotional Wealth

The entrepreneurial landscape of family SMEs is particularly diverse and heterogeneous in terms of how innovation is approached. Each company has its own way of dealing with these dynamics. This is because there is an influence of non-economic factors that affect the willingness to innovate, generating heterogeneous innovation behaviour among family firms. This phenomenon can be explained through the previously introduced SEW framework (Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

Familiness, intended as the unique way in which resources and capabilities are allocated within a family firm, influences innovation processes differently depending on the specific company (Calabrò et al., 2019). As Gast (2018) explains, “family SMEs’ innovation behaviour is likely to be different from that of their non-family counterparts due to the affective value family owners derive from their firms.”

SEW is defined as the non-financial aspects or non-economic rewards that a family derives from its ownership and management position in a firm (Hernández-Perlines et al., 2019). Often described as the “affective endowment” of the owning family, it represents the emotional value linked to the business, which is rooted at a psychological level among family owners (Gast et al., 2018; Maseda et al., 2025). This involves preserving family control, identifying strongly with the firm’s reputation, and maintaining emotional attachment (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012).

According to the SEW perspective, families develop an attachment that goes beyond the purely professional dimension and extends into the affective sphere, and are therefore averse to losing their SEW endowments. For this reason, innovation projects, especially ambitious, risky, and costly ones, are often perceived as a threat to the preservation of SEW (Calabrò et al., 2019).

The key principle of SEW is that strategic decisions in family firms are primarily motivated by the preservation of socioemotional wealth rather than purely economic gain, in order to ensure the family’s ability to “earn a living” and protect its legacy. This results in greater caution when decisions must be made, and in an investment and long-term decision-making perspective that may benefit successors (Kallmuenzer et al., 2018). In fact, family firms typically adopt a transgenerational perspective, planning for the survival of the firm over decades rather than just the next quarter (Baltazar et al., 2025; Do Paço et al., 2021).

It is also necessary to distinguish between long-term SEW, which is focused on business continuity and future-oriented benefits, and short-term SEW, which focuses on immediate control and identity preservation. As Jing et al. (2022) state: “Family SMEs pursuing long-term SEW will reflect a higher innovation willing-

ness, but if a family SME pursues short-term SEW with corporate control as the core, it is not willing to implement management innovation.”

This strong emotional attachment of family members to their company derives from the fact that they typically grow up with the firm, are continuously exposed to family anecdotes and stories about it, and share a common historical narrative with other family members (Brinkerink and Bammens, 2018). This typically results in a strong awareness and pride of belonging. Because the family’s identity is so closely tied to the firm, decision-makers strive to uphold a favourable image in the community in order to enhance their own perception of self-worth. The firm’s reputation is often viewed as an external indicator of the family’s own quality and standing.

However, this system also entails a number of disadvantages. The first of these is strategic rigidity, meaning that family members, in order to preserve this status and the perception that inevitably links them to the company, may become too strategically conservative, minimising entrepreneurial behaviours (Gast et al., 2018; Calabrò et al., 2018). Moreover, the fear that certain projects or investments may sink the company leads to a reduction in spending on research and development (R&D) (Brinkerink and Bammens, 2018).

Internal conflicts may also arise. “The affective storm generated by family disputes, envy, and rivalries can permeate the business, leading to quarrels or legal disputes that paralyse operations” (Rondi et al., 2019).

During succession moments, there is also the risk of prioritising family members, often relying on the principle of primogeniture rather than on competencies, sometimes to the detriment of performance and the future life of the firm (Calabrò, 2021). Furthermore, firms may face financial fragility, limited access to credit markets, and an inability to scale up due to a lack of professional management education (Calabrò et al., 2019; Jang, 2017).

2.3.1 Ability - willingness paradox

As De Massis explains, family firms, as a type of organisation, are characterised by a high potential for innovation for several reasons, including the fact that the family often holds full decision-making power and can therefore implement decisions directly without needing to answer to external stakeholders. However, when considering the family’s willingness to innovate, the situation changes: innovation is often perceived as something threatening.

This phenomenon is known as the Ability and Willingness Paradox. This paradox manifests itself in family firms innovating less despite having the ability to do more. It originates from non-economic factors such as risk aversion, reluctance to share control, commitment to traditional products, the desire to maintain family harmony, or the intention to ensure intra-family succession (Hauck & Prügl, 2015). Ability and willingness are necessary but individually insufficient conditions: in order for an innovation process to be completed, both must be present (Chrisman et al., 2015).

More precisely, the literature defines ability as the latitude or discretion that the family has to direct, allocate, or dispose of firm resources and to select organisational goals. Willingness, on the other hand, refers to the favourable disposition or intention of the family to engage in behaviours that differ from those of non-family firms, and is driven by non-economic goals (Chrisman et al., 2015).



Fig. 15 — Dimensions influenced by Socioemotional Wealth

2.4 Design in Family SMEs

The role of design within SMEs, and specifically within family SMEs, is increasingly recognised not only as an aesthetic function but also as a strategic weapon, capable of influencing long-term sustainability and competitiveness (Micheli et al., 2012). Design plays a multifaceted role, acting as a critical driver for differentiation, a tool for connecting tradition with modernity, and a strategic asset that allows firms to overcome challenges often attributable to the “willingness–ability paradox” (Rondi et al., 2019). The aspect of tradition is fundamental for family SMEs: design makes it possible to decode and reinterpret the deep values preserved within the company’s “rich coffer”, translating temporally distant knowledge into avant-garde languages and products that are difficult for competitors to replicate (Rondi et al., 2019; Calabrò et al., 2019).

John Heskett (2001) also recognises that understanding and defining design can be an obstacle, particularly when a design practitioner must explain to non-practitioners what they actually do. Designers may know what they mean by design, but their understanding is often based on experiential knowledge that is not easily articulated or communicated. The problem is compounded by the fact that there is virtually no social agreement on what design is; indeed, clients and audiences often have a very different understanding of design from that held by professionals (Buchanan, 2020).

For this category of firms, design is essential for market survival, especially through product differentiation, enabling them to create new opportunities and act as first movers within new markets. Furthermore, design is also a fundamental driver of innovation, particularly in the manufacturing and service sectors (Carneiro et al., 2025; Micheli et al., 2017). Despite this evidence, which emerges repeatedly within the literature on the topic, in manufacturing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), good design practices and competencies are frequently marginalised. The sector is not fully aware of the potential of design, and by neglecting it loses many opportunities. This thesis also aims to fill this gap between industry and design competencies, with the hope of enabling the two worlds to communicate so that manufacturing family SMEs may benefit from it.

For this category of firms, design is not merely an aesthetic element, but an essential factor for competitive survival and product differentiation, acting as a fundamental driver of innovation both in manufacturing and in services (Carneiro et al., 2025; Micheli et al., 2017). However, a profound paradox exists: despite scientific evidence highlighting its value, there persists a consolidated tendency to “neglect and marginalise good design practices within organisations, limiting their capacity to capture its benefits” (Carneiro et al., 2025).

This thesis aims to dismantle this cultural inertia by acting as a methodological bridge between the industrial sector and design competencies. The objective is to transform this marginalisation into a conscious integration, providing family SMEs with the tools to decode the potential of Strategic Design and convert it into a driver of structural renewal and growth.

2.5 Succession in Family SMEs

In the context of family firms, succession is defined as the transition of leadership and ownership from one generation to the next, or to external parties. It is a critical milestone aimed at ensuring the transgenerational sustainability and continuity of the business beyond the tenure of the current leader. It is a phase defined by literature as the most critical event in the life cycle of a family business (Calabrò, 2021).

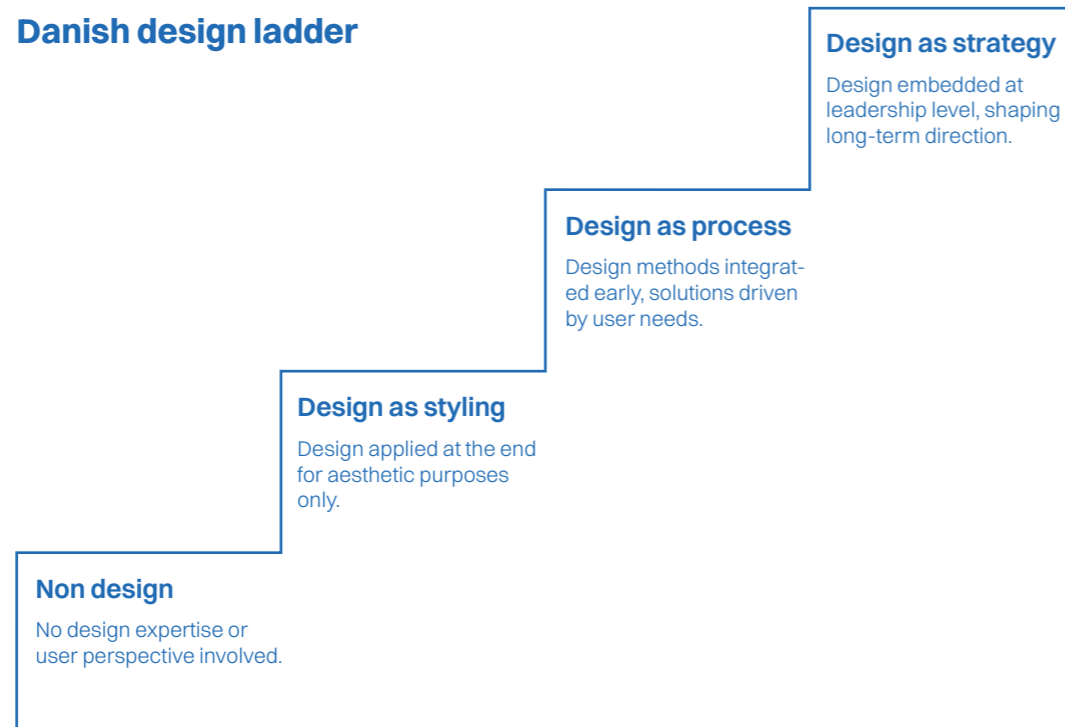
This phase can be described as a time frame characterised by many challenges and changes that can impact both the family and the firm, and can happen at different levels, for example, in ownership and/or management (Hauck & Prügl, 2015). This moment is particularly relevant and delicate, especially in the Italian context, where the percentage of leaders over 70 reaches 29%, the highest figure among industrialised countries, and success is often represented by very low percentages (AIDAF-EY, 2021).

Succession is a multistage process that, in most cases, is practised internally, maintaining both ownership and management within the family. This path is followed by about 70% of the firms that face the transition, and includes different actions, events, and mechanisms beginning long before heirs even enter the business (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; Calabrò, 2021).

It is therefore a critical phase marked by profound transformations that impose a redistribution of authority relationships both within the family nucleus and within the business organisation. This intrinsic complexity requires a high capacity for adaptation, as it calls into question balances that have been consolidated for decades.

2.5.1 Relevance

Due to the high complexity of this phase, many family firms are unable to complete it successfully, stopping entrepreneurial operations before they are officially passed on to the next generation; in fact, many family businesses do not even make it beyond the second generation. The centrality of the succession topic derives from the discrepancy between the widespread diffusion of family firms and the alarming failure rate that characterises their generational transition. Despite their structural relevance for the economic system, there remains a widespread lack of awareness and strategic planning: the probability of survival is estimated at only 30% in the transition to the second generation, dropping to 15% in the third



The Design Ladder: Developed by the Danish Design Center in 2001, identifies four levels of design integration within organisations. Research indicates a positive correlation between an organisation's position on the ladder and its business performance. For the manufacturing family SMEs addressed in this thesis, the starting point is typically the first rung, where design remains invisible or is perceived purely in aesthetic terms.

Fig. 16 — The Danish Design Ladder

and reducing to a mere 11% by the fourth generation (Baltazar et al., 2023; 2025).

The numbers also suggest that in Italy, around 92% of family SMEs will face a succession in the coming years and that only 18% have a structured process. In the next five years, it is estimated that about one million firms will be involved in this process (Lozzi, 2025).

The topic is so relevant that the European Union issued a recommendation inviting member states to adopt measures to raise awareness and educate entrepreneurs by offering planning tools specifically designed to support generational transition so that it does not negatively impact businesses but instead becomes an opportunity for the transfer of economic value and knowledge (know-how) and for innovation (European Union, 94/1069/CE). It is precisely in response to these initiatives that support measures were created. This also confirms how Strategic Design represents a crucial resource for the sector; on this assumption, the present thesis project is based, which aims to offer concrete methodological support to firms during this delicate transition phase.

2.5.2 Dynamics

In many cultures today, being the firstborn male child automatically grants the right to be the heir, the one who will take care of bringing the family dynasty forward and guiding it into the future (Calabrò, 2021). The prevalence of primogeniture proves that these crucial succession processes are often not properly designed.

This natural inclination of firstborn children to please their parents represents a determining motivation in the selection of the successor. The founder often perceives the eldest child as a guarantee of continuity: his tendency to respect rules and seek parental approval is interpreted as protection for the preservation of Socio-emotional Wealth (SEW) and for safeguarding the identity values of the business. However, this does not in any way guarantee that the successor, despite being the firstborn, will be the most suitable choice for the company, which is why failure often occurs.

In order to be a good successor, however, birth order and family membership are completely irrelevant if the current leader is not “succession-ready”. This term refers to incumbents who are inclined and mentally prepared to leave their role and transfer authority as well as decision-making power to a successor. Although the outgoing leader holds control over the various aspects of succession, the effectiveness of the process requires active participation from the heir. The successor must not simply inherit the role, but must demonstrate a clear willingness to assume responsibilities and show proactive operational initiative (Marler et al, 2017).

Researchers therefore emphasise the importance of a successor developing leadership skills and being accepted as a legitimate leader within the firm, and also report that individual attributes affect the succession process, further demonstrating that some successors are more suitable than others (Marler et al, 2017).

Having a proactive personality is one of the fundamental characteristics of a successor. Conversely, individuals with a low proactive personality, defined as passive, are a poor fit for the company. A proactive successor is likely to experience higher-quality exchanges with the incumbent and take full advantage of the learning opportunities provided. These individuals are also characterised by seeking opportunities, showing initiative, and persevering to bring about meaningful change. Moreover, this type of personality often feels the need to establish its own entrepreneurial mindset, which can be achieved by challenging and changing the status

quo and may therefore be perceived as threatening by the incumbent (Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

Post-succession company performance tends to be significantly improved when the heir possesses advanced academic education, such as a master’s degree or an MBA (Quarato & Salvato, 2026; Baltazar et al., 2025). However, educational qualifications must be complemented by solid professional experience developed outside the family business, a critical factor in ensuring the independence and credibility of the new leader (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; Poccia, 2015). Finally, the effectiveness of such a profile is fully realised when entry into the firm results from a personal and deliberate choice rather than family pressure, thus ensuring a sustained commitment to long-term objectives (Baltazar et al., 2025).

“Firstborn children are usually the ones who have experienced a special and unique socialisation with their parents. This is because they started interactions with their parents without the interference of other siblings. Eldest children, in fact, tend to have behaviours which are usually oriented towards pleasing their parents; they are more oriented to act by the rules set by the parents and will also unconsciously seek parents’ approval in choices they might have to make and actions they might need to do” (Calabrò, 2021).

Current landscape in Italy

Piedmont

- >65.000 active family firms
- 31.7% of business heads are over 65 · in 11% of firms the entire board is also over 65
- Only 5.6% of firms are led by someone under 40

North Italy

- >390.000 active family firms
- More than 65% of firms are family-controlled
- 32.3% of business leaders are over 65

Italy

- >820.000 active family firms
- 85-90% of all Italian companies are family-owned, highest in Europe
- 95% are micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees
- 92% will face generational transition, only 18% have a plan



Fig. 17 — Family firm landscape in Italy

2.5.3 Succession as a process

Despite the variety of methodological approaches used to plan and analyse this phase, researchers agree in defining succession not as an isolated and punctual event, but as a dynamic process articulated over time (Marler et al, 2017). Rather than generational transfer, it would be more appropriate to speak of generational overlap, emphasising that it should be a gradual phase characterised by a period of coexistence between generations (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; Deloitte, 2023).

In cases of intra-family succession, a period of “joint reign” occurs, during which incumbents often fill supervisory and consultant roles during the transition and later take on a more advisory role. A successor who has largely followed the advice of the incumbent will gradually begin making decisions independently. The period of coexistence is then followed by a progressively decreasing level of involvement from the incumbent (Marler et al, 2017).

Studies investigating succession-related topics usually consider a time frame of five to ten years in order to grasp this phase. This duration allows a gradual and effective transfer of resources, leadership, and knowledge to the successor. This process can be structured into four main phases:

- **Process Initiation:** This first phase involves establishing a shared vision and the future directions of the business, which must be agreed upon by all family members (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; Baltazar et al., 2025). During this stage, the roles of potential successors are determined, and guidelines for their training and development are established.
- **Successor Education and Preparation:** Potential successors undergo extensive training, formal education, and work experience. This phase focuses on the acquisition of both explicit business knowledge and tacit, experiential wisdom through interaction with senior leaders (Romano & D’Allura, 2025; Marler et al., 2017).
- **Successor Selection:** In this stage, a potential successor is identified based on objective criteria, expertise, and merit rather than family hierarchy alone.
- **Intergenerational Transfer:** The final stage is the official transfer of management and ownership. This requires careful preparation to maintain the firm’s core beliefs and strategic continuity.

For these phases to unfold smoothly, the literature suggests adopting a formal governance structure. This framework is essential to separate family emotional dynamics from business strategic needs, reducing the risk of internal conflicts (Morosetti, 2019; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). Traditionally, this system relies on three bodies: the Family Assembly, aimed at consolidating identity and shared vision; the Family Council, which acts as the key entity for establishing rules for the entry of new generations; and the Board of Directors, aimed at professionalising operational management (Morosetti, 2019; Poccia, 2015).

However, in small family businesses, the adoption of such a rigid structure may appear unnecessary or excessively bureaucratic. In contexts where ownership coincides with daily management, the boundaries between these bodies tend to blur, and imposing complex formal structures can become counterproductive. For many SMEs, the objective should not be the exact replication of these bodies but rather the internalisation of their essential functions through more flexible tools.

To respond to this need, the formalisation of a Family Pact becomes crucial (Poccia, 2015; Deloitte, 2023). More than a simple bureaucratic act, this document

functions as a true ethical–strategic statute, capable of translating complex governance mechanisms into clear and shared rules. Through the pact, access requirements, merit-based remuneration criteria, and ownership transfer mechanisms are codified in writing (Lozzi, 2025; Morosetti, 2019), preventing conflicts between heirs and the founder at their origin. The codification of these principles is statistically associated with higher growth rates.

2.5.4 Succession as a catalyst for innovation

Generational transition is one of the most dramatic changes in the life cycle of a family firm. To date, the literature has mainly treated succession more as a problem-ridden threat than as an opportunity (Rondi et al., 2019; Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

However, this phase, despite being critical, has the capacity to act as a catalyst for change and innovation, thereby increasing the firm’s competitive advantage. Often, the company is left with a strong need to innovate because incumbents, as they approach the end of their careers, feel less motivated to implement changes and investments.

The involvement of the successor can act as a catalyst for innovation, as a new individual who brings entrepreneurial opportunities, “youthful freshness”, and digital awareness that the older generation may lack (Maseda et al., 2025; Hauck & Prügl, 2015). The generational shift allows a family business to relaunch its core values in a more modern and innovative way rather than simply maintaining the status quo (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020).

Despite this fresh perspective brought by the successor, often coming from external education and recent professional experiences, the incumbent’s willingness to support innovation during this phase remains fundamental. Innovation activities are more likely to occur when both the incumbent and the successor show willingness and maintain clear communication and understanding regarding innovation and succession itself (Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

A high level of adaptability is also essential, so that the succession phase is not perceived as a problem-ridden threat or burden. Energy and resources should be devoted to seizing the opportunity to evolve and innovate rather than reacting to internal conflicts. Furthermore, incumbents tend to perceive the succession phase as more suitable for innovation when the successor brings relevant experience, both academically and through work in other environments and companies (Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

In any case, succession planning is essential in order to be prepared and obtain results rather than acting passively. When linked to innovation, this usually involves defining the roles of both the incumbent and the successor by dividing responsibilities in order to guarantee a certain degree of freedom to engage in innovation activities. Moreover, with a good plan based on communication and trust, the incumbent will soon begin to consider the successor’s ideas, information, and identified opportunities during the leadership transition and will be open to participative decision-making at eye level, which is beneficial for innovation.

What fosters innovation	What hinders innovation
Long-term orientation - Family firms manage innovation with rigour because long-term survival is the primary objective.	Conservative posture and risk aversion - Organisational rigidity and reluctance to invest constrain the capacity to innovate.
Multi-generational involvement - The next generation acts as a catalyst, bringing entrepreneurial opportunities, digital awareness, and external contamination.	Fear of losing control - Innovation is perceived as a threat to family harmony and SEW. Conflicting goals between generations further slow the process.
Innovation through tradition - Family firms can recombine legacy knowledge with new technologies, creating products deeply rooted in the firm's identity.	Gut feeling over data - Decisions rely on informal evaluation rather than performance indicators, making innovation closer to a gamble than a structured process.
Reputation as motivation - The overlap between family identity and firm brand motivates a strong commitment to quality and differentiation.	Reputational risk from failure - Any failed innovation can damage both family and firm reputation, making the perceived cost of failure outweigh potential benefits.
Open innovation models - Structural fragility pushes family SMEs to draw on external competences, transforming size limitations into a stimulus for innovation.	The Titanic effect - Family members may perceive the firm as unsinkable, reducing the perceived need to innovate.
Quick decision-making and flexibility - Concentrated ownership allows rapid responses to new market opportunities.	Uncertainty of R&D outcomes - Family firms struggle to justify investment when results cannot be guaranteed.

Tab. 2 — What fosters innovation vs what hinders innovation in family SMEs

2.6 Barriers to Succession - Friction

As discussed in the previous section, generational succession represents a moment of extreme complexity, as well as one of the most critical phases in the life cycle of a family firm. It is also widely recognised that each subsequent succession within the same company becomes progressively more difficult and the risk of failure increases; this occurs because the structural and relational complexity of family firms tends to increase exponentially over time (Hauck & Prügl, 2015).

Contributing to the delicacy of this phase is a series of barriers and critical issues that every entrepreneurial reality must learn to recognise in order to manage them with awareness. These are the most frequent obstacles encountered:

Lack of planning: Among all the factors that influence the outcome of succession, ineffective succession planning is the most common cause of failure (Romano & D'Allura, 2025). There are many family businesses that do not have any succession plan and face this phase with the hope that the next generation will one day take over and keep running the business.

- **The “Incumbent’s Shadow”:** Another important barrier is the founder’s identification with the firm. Many owners see the company as an extension of themselves and as the expression of their own spirit, their existence, and their beliefs. This leads to a reluctance to “let go” of control, where incumbents may stall, slow, or interfere with the transition even after a formal successor is named (Song et al., 2022; Marler et al., 2017; AUB Observatory, 2026). It is evident that established organisations tend to become inert over time and may react too late to external stimuli if the leader maintains his or her position for too long (Hauck & Prügl, 2015). Succession is often postponed until the senior leader reaches an advanced age, transferring definitive control around the age of 75 (AUB Observatory, 2026).

- **The “Triple Gap” (Generation, Communication, and Credibility):** The coexistence of different generations within the firm inevitably generates a gap between the incumbent and the successor. This potential ground for conflict can be summarised in three factors.
 - **Generation Gap:** This manifests as a divergence in strategic perspectives; while founders tend to prioritise immediate stability and risk aversion, successors are usually more oriented toward long-term profitability and business expansion (Valencia & Pratama, 2024).
 - **Communication Gap:** This often derives from the lack of explicit instructions and structured feedback from the senior generation. In addition, successors tend to consider the traditional methods of the first generation obsolete, creating a short circuit in the transfer of knowledge (Valencia & Pratama, 2024).
 - **Credibility Gap:** This concerns the mutual perception of adequacy and competence. On one hand, founders may have doubts about the actual preparedness of the NextGen; on the other hand, successors may encounter strong resistance when trying to inherit and maintain trust in the strategic relationships with suppliers and customers historically built by the founder (Valencia & Pratama, 2024).
- **Internal Conflict and Rivalry:** Generational succession frequently triggers a real “affective storm,” fueled by feelings of envy and competition among siblings or cousins. These tensions intensify dramatically when family members manage business branches or “kingdoms” independently, hindering a unified vision (Rondi et al., 2019). Family firms, therefore, often have to deal with internal conflicts arising specifically from succession-related issues (Baltazar et al., 2025).
- **External and Legal Obstacles:** Instability in regulatory policies and governmental restrictions often drains valuable energy from operational management, increasing the perceived risk during the transition (Baltazar et al., 2025; Kallmuenzer et al., 2018). Finally, an additional obstacle is represented by the Italian financial market, which suffers from the lack of a developed tradition of merchant banking capable of financially supporting SMEs during ownership transitions without pursuing short-term speculative objectives (Poccia, 2015).
- **Reliance on Birth Order:** There is a persistent use of traditional selection criteria, with 70.3% of firms assigning leadership to the firstborn (AUB Observatory, 2026). As already mentioned, research indicates that relying solely on primogeniture rather than merit can mitigate the positive performance impact of a transition (AUB Observatory, 2026). “Family businesses handed over to firstborns will experience declining performance levels. In the light of the birth order argument, this is because when taking over the firm, eldest children will try to preserve the status quo and not focus on radical innovations as they do not want to create discontinuity with what has been done by their parents (and unconsciously displease them)” (Calabrò, 2021).
- **“Mortis-Causa” Transitions:** Successions triggered by the death of a leader or handled as an emergency, rather than being carefully planned, are associated with a negative impact on company performance and higher levels of trauma for the organisation (AUB Observatory, 2024).

“observatory data on enterprises tell us that the more generational succession is postponed, the more the governance of the firm becomes disordered, and the more company performance declines, making it increasingly unlikely that future generations (second, third, and so on) will be able to ensure the continuity of the business. The issue is extremely relevant because it is not only an individual matter concerning the directly involved parties (the family and members of the firm), but also a social issue. Considering that family SMEs represent the majority of Italian firms, the risk of losing most family-run SMEs affects all stakeholders, including customers and the state itself.” (Franco Dentella, n.d.)

2.7 Determinants for Success - Solution Spaces

The following section identifies five determinants that the literature consistently associates with successful succession in family SMEs. Taken individually, each addresses a specific dimension of the transition. Taken together, they constitute the set of conditions that make a structured and sustainable generational handover possible.

2.7.1 Structured Planning and Shared Vision

The fundamental aspect for achieving successful succession is planning. Succession is not a single-time event but a dynamic multi-stage process that takes place over a significant period; for this reason, having structured planning and a shared vision is indispensable (Baltazar et al., 2025; Marler et al., 2017; Valencia & Pratama, 2024). Ideally, succession should be planned throughout the entire lifespan of the company's management, trying to loosen the identification of the firm with its leader in advance, in order to prepare the company to face a leadership change in a less traumatic way (Deloitte Report, 2023). Moreover, it is important to plan succession across the three facets that constitute family businesses: the family, the business, and its ownership (Baltazar et al., 2023).

For succession planning, it is never possible to start too early; in fact, as Paolo Morosetti (2025) states, the right moment to involve the new generations of potential successors is around the age of 16–18, gradually including them in the company's processes, ensuring, however, that three conditions are maintained: enjoyment, development of family identity, and sharing information about the business and family wealth. Involving successors well in advance increases the probability that they will replace the company leader at a younger age than the current average. This is because companies governed by leaders over 70 show significantly reduced performance (AIDAF, 2024). Delaying the transition not only reduces firm performance but also creates a particularly sterile ground for the successor to grow and innovate. In light of these dynamics, since a structured mentoring period lasts an average of nine years, the planning process should ideally begin in the senior leader's late 50s or early 60s (AIDAF, 2024; Quarato & Salvato, 2026).

The lack of a structured succession plan presents an enormous risk in the case of successions triggered by "mortis causa" (death-related), as this type of transition often results in traumatic leadership vacuums, leading to significant employee attrition and loss of specialised knowledge (Valencia & Pratama, 2024, p. 256; Quarato & Salvato, 2024).

A shared vision is essential. This requires establishing a vision and future directions that all family members agree upon. This agreement helps bridge the "communication gap" and "generation gap" that often hinder alignment (Tang & Hussin, 2020; Valencia & Pratama, 2024). The shared vision often leverages NextGen's updated skills, such as digital and environmental awareness, to explore new market opportunities and structure the firm for global competition (Quarato & Salvato, 2025; Maseda et al., 2025).

2.7.2 Governance: Establishing Family Balance

This aspect focuses on professionalising the structures that manage the intersection between the family and the business. This is critical for maintaining stability and ensuring that family dynamics do not interfere with business perfor-

mance (Baltazar et al., 2025, p. 130; Morosetti, 2019). In this phase, it is essential to understand that solid family governance must necessarily rest on the foundations of proper corporate governance. Rather than intervening during moments of crisis, the rules of the game must be established in advance: governance should never be a reaction to conflict, but a strategic action aimed at preventing it. For organisations that begin this process, the ideal approach is to avoid excessive initial complexity, preferring instead a gradual "step-by-step" construction. Each system must, in fact, be conceived as a "tailor-made suit," shaped around the specific needs of the family nucleus. From this perspective, the family is called to undertake an exercise of vision: asking who it is today and who it wants to become in the next 5–10 years is the only way to adopt solutions that are truly coherent and sustainable over time (Morosetti, 2025).

This balance is maintained through the three-pillar architecture previously discussed, which ensures clear boundaries between different spheres of influence: The Family Assembly, The Family Council, The Board of Directors.

Although there may be a desire to preserve the family dimension intact, research shows that firm performance is positively and statistically correlated with diversity within the BoD. It is therefore essential to diversify in terms of Age, Gender, and Family membership (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; Corbetta & Quarato, 2023; AIDAF, 2024).

Although aspects such as socio-emotional wealth (SEW) and familiness may generate resistance and a certain level of friction toward the inclusion of individuals external to the family, it is important, where possible, to make this effort since the benefits are tangible (Baltazar et al., 2025; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020).

While individual leadership remains the most common model, representing approximately 60% of cases, successful family firms are increasingly transitioning toward collegial leadership in order to manage growing organisational complexity. This shift is evidenced by the adoption of joint CEO models, which have doubled over the last decade. Such collegiate structures allow for a more balanced distribution of power and serve as a strategic tool for succession; they facilitate a smoother transition through a "joint reign" period, during which the senior and junior generations lead together to ensure continuity and knowledge transfer (Corbetta & Quarato, 2018, 2023).

2.7.3 Successor education & Selection

A successor's educational attainment has become a critical criterion for ensuring effective planning and uninterrupted operations (Valencia & Pratama, 2024). This shift toward professionalisation is reflected in the fact that approximately 80% of family successors now hold at least a Bachelor's degree, a trend that is steadily increasing, particularly among female NextGen leaders (AIDAF, 2024). Data shows that firm performance is significantly amplified when the successor pursues advanced studies, such as a Master's degree or an MBA (Quarato & Salvato, 2025; AIDAF, 2024). While roughly 50% of NextGen leaders continue to specialise in Business and Finance, a path statistically correlated with higher profitability and growth, there is a growing heterogeneity in educational backgrounds. An increasing number of successors are now entering the family business with STEM degrees in Engineering, Industry, and Technology, providing the technical expertise needed to address modern industrial challenges (Quarato & Salvato, 2025; AIDAF, 2024).

Data indicate that approximately 28% of NextGen members spend at least one

year working in external organisations before the handover (AIDAF, 2024), a practice that allows them to acquire objective work methods in a detached context and establish their own professional standing (Romano & D’Allura, 2025). This professionalisation is further enhanced by international exposure. Having at least six months of significant study or work experience abroad positively moderates the relationship between strategic change and company performance (Baltazar et al., 2023; AIDAF, 2024). Such an external perspective is vital, as it empowers the successor to identify new entrepreneurial opportunities and global market trends that the senior leader might otherwise overlook (Rondi et al., 2019).

A fundamental pillar for the success of the transition is the shift from a logic of “belonging” to one of meritocracy, where competence prevails over birthright (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; Deloitte, 2023). Overcoming the so-called “primogeniture trap”, often an arbitrary choice aimed at avoiding conflict but lacking meritocratic foundations, allows the firm to identify the most suitable leader (Calabrò, 2021).

The integration path culminates in a socialisation period of approximately four to five years, an essential phase that allows the successor to internalise the company’s practices and develop the confidence necessary to assume top responsibilities (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; Morosetti, n.d.; AIDAF, 2024).

2.7.4 Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer and Mentoring

This fourth determinant of a successful transition is a nuanced socio-cognitive process that goes beyond a simple technical act of information sharing (Romano & D’Allura, 2025). It is defined as a dynamic socialisation between generations in which both explicit business knowledge and tacit, experiential wisdom are bidirectionally transmitted through interpersonal interactions (Romano & D’Allura, 2025; Romano & D’Allura, 2025; Baltazar et al., 2023). The ultimate objective of this preparation is not the simple transmission of a role, but the development of true stewardship: the transformation of the heir from an “entitled owner” into a “responsible steward.” In this role, the new leader does not merely reflect family values but actively engages in rigorous performance analysis, thereby ensuring the long-term longevity and competitiveness of the firm (Morosetti, 2019; AIDAF, 2024).

Modern best practices suggest that the success of succession does not lie in a sudden handover but in a structured generational overlap (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). This model of gradual coexistence, or “joint reign,” sees the senior leader and the NextGen successor operating simultaneously at the head of the firm (Marler et al, 2017).

Empirical data on successful Italian SMEs indicates that the average duration of this mentoring period is approximately nine years (AIDAF, 2024). Typically, the process involves the successor entering top management roles around the age of 35 in order to work side by side with the senior leader, reaching full leadership around the age of 45 (AIDAF, 2024). This time span is not only a phase of technical learning but a strategic process of transferring trust and both internal and external legitimacy. Data collected by the AUB Observatory supports that successions preceded by mentoring achieve significantly higher results compared to those without it.

Beyond technical skills, this structured mentoring period is essential for bridging the “credibility gap” that often affects new leaders. Under the senior leader’s guidance, the successor can gradually establish legitimacy with key stakeholders, ensuring that the firm’s social capital remains intact during the change of leadership (Valencia & Pratama, 2024).

2.7.5 Innovation Strategies and Professionalisation

Family-owned SMEs are not simply smaller versions of large enterprises. They are organisations shaped by an entirely different logic, one where economic goals coexist with emotional attachment, where strategic decisions are filtered through the preservation of family identity, and where the most critical moment in the firm’s lifecycle is also the one most frequently approached without preparation. This chapter has mapped that world in depth: its structures, its dynamics, its paradoxes, and the specific conditions of the Italian and Piedmontese context in which this project operates.

What emerges is not only a picture of complexity, but of a specific kind of gap. The literature on family SME succession exists, is rich, and in many places is genuinely useful. But it is fragmented, scattered across disciplines and perspectives, written in a language that is inaccessible to the very people it concerns, and rarely translated into tools that a firm owner could actually use. The owners themselves are often unaware of the dynamics governing their own organisations. The researchers studying them rarely reach them. And the gap between what is known and what is practiced remains vast.

Understanding this domain was a prerequisite, not just for this thesis, but for any meaningful intervention. Without knowing how succession works, what makes it fail, what the literature identifies as the conditions for success, and why those conditions are so rarely met, it would be impossible to design something genuinely useful. The following chapter returns to strategic design, no longer as an abstract discipline, but as a concrete response to the specific challenges this chapter has uncovered.

Chapter 3

Synthesis

The first two chapters of this thesis have built their respective foundations in parallel, one exploring strategic design as a discipline, the other mapping the organisational world of family SMEs. Taken separately, each represents a coherent and self-contained body of knowledge. This chapter brings them into dialogue for the first time.

This is the convergence point of the thesis. Having diverged across two extensive literature reviews, one tracing the evolution and principles of strategic design, the other examining the structure, dynamics, and critical challenges of family firms, the work now shifts from exploration to synthesis. The objective is no longer to understand each domain in isolation, but to ask what happens when they are placed in direct relation to one another.

The chapter proceeds in three movements. The first identifies and categorises the problems and gaps that characterise family SMEs during succession and innovation, not as a list of isolated difficulties, but as an interconnected system of challenges whose complexity makes them resistant to linear solutions. The second examines what strategic design has to offer in response to each of these challenges, mapping its guiding principles onto the specific needs and friction points of family firms. The third draws these two movements together into a set of concrete benefits, the capabilities that strategic design would develop within a family SME that chose to adopt it, and the difference those capabilities would make during the critical and often mismanaged process of generational transition.

It is important to note that what emerges from this chapter remains theoretical. The framework developed here is grounded in literature and informed by the synthesis of two extensive reviews, but it has not yet been tested against real organisational contexts. That validation, through field investigation, expert evaluation, and direct collaboration with a case study company, is the work of the chapters that follow. What this chapter produces is the conceptual foundation that makes that work possible: a clear articulation of why strategic design and family SME succession belong together, and what the combination could produce.

3.1 Defining and Categorising Friction

The previous chapter, through a rigorous literature review, made it possible to outline a comprehensive picture of family SMEs and their distinctive organisational dynamics. It facilitated a deeper understanding of their relevance and density within the European and Italian entrepreneurial landscape, where family-owned firms constitute the backbone of the economy, representing over 60% of all European companies and between 85% and 90% of Italian ones (European Commission; AUB Observatory; Acosta Prado et al., 2017).

The objective now is to bring into dialogue the intrinsic dynamics of family businesses with the paradigms of Strategic Design, identifying in it the key lever to support these organisations during the delicate phase of generational transition. Before integrating these two domains, it is essential to systematise the emerging critical issues and opportunity spaces. This process categorises the variables influencing innovation and succession by leveraging the designer's unique ability to synthesise fragmented information and extract meaning from diverse, complex bodies of knowledge (Hill, 2012; Micheli et al., 2018).

Family SMEs, when facing critical phases such as innovation and generational transition, find themselves immersed in a network of systemic challenges whose complexity often appears disproportionate to their organisational size. Although structurally smaller than large enterprises, these organisations must manage the weight of Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) and familiness, variables that introduce highly delicate relational and emotional dynamics where strategic decisions are often motivated by the preservation of family legacy rather than purely economic gain (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012; Kallmuenzer et al., 2018). Moreover, the lack of resources, specifically restricted budgets, time, and human capital, combined with market volatility, creates a critical gap between the need to evolve and the tools actually available to survive (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021; Le et al., 2025).

In the 21st century, especially after COVID, all companies, regardless of their size and available resources, have been forced to face complex challenges within an environment of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) (Corà et al., 2023). Therefore, SMEs have encountered the same problems as much larger companies, but with completely different means at their disposal. Finding themselves in a disadvantaged position at the intersection between the family sphere, business, and societal challenges, often resulting in strategic rigidity and resistance to necessary change (Gast et al., 2018; Calabrò et al., 2018).

A cross-cutting issue in these organisations is the lack of awareness: many family SMEs face systemic challenges without a clear perception of their internal condition or of the strategies needed to overcome them.

The majority of SMEs continue to rely on "gut feeling" rather than performance indicators (Calabrò, 2021; Micheli et al., 2017). This is compounded by the inaccessibility of sources and a deep gap between the world of research and the operational reality of businesses (Calabretta, 2016). Academic literature often remains out of reach due to linguistic and cultural barriers, making the adoption of evidence-based practices difficult for owner-managers who may lack formal management education (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021; MATCHIN, 2025). Knowledge is also fragmented and presented with heterogeneous terminology and varying levels of complexity, making the retrieval of structured information a demanding and not immediate process for family SMEs (Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Buchanan, 2020).

After a thorough literature review that explored the problems faced by SMEs,

it was possible to develop a framework that synthesises and interrelates these diverse challenges. By organising this complexity, the framework facilitates deeper analysis and the formulation of targeted solutions, ultimately creating a fertile ground for strategic design intervention.

This framework is based on different hierarchical levels. The first part of the framework is constituted by problems, referring to all those aspects that generate friction during innovation and succession processes within family SMEs (Calabrò, 2021). Innovation and succession are two critical moments for family SMEs that were purposely bounded, as succession can act as a catalyst for innovation (Hauck & Prügl, 2015; Rondi et al., 2019; Baltazar et al., 2025). The two are therefore inherently linked, and for companies to successfully face succession, they must evolve and innovate both their product portfolio and their management (Calabrò, 2021; Baltazar et al., 2023). This shift toward management innovation consists of optimising organisational systems and processes to improve resilience in turbulent contexts (Jing et al., 2022; Auernhammer, 2024). Design serves as an indispensable intangible resource in this process, acting as a strategic weapon for differentiation and a tool for connecting family tradition with market modernity (Micheli et al., 2017; Rondi et al., 2019; Calabrò et al., 2019).

By embedding this innovation culture, dynamics and decision-making mechanisms can become quicker and more efficient, so that when succession occurs, the company is ready to face it ("succession-ready") (Marler et al., 2017; Rondi et al., 2019; Calabrò et al., 2019). The problems presented below derive from the literature; they are a synthesis of what is addressed in a fragmented and misaligned way across different papers. The intent is to create a common terminology that could place all the different challenges on the same level. Adding further complexity to this system of problems in family SMEs is the fact that companies often face many of them at the same time; this overlap creates additional complexity. The interrelatedness of problems means that they are all connected and intertwined; therefore, it is extremely difficult to address them individually, as each problem both causes and is caused by others. This domino effect makes it essential to adopt a strategic design approach, taking a step back and acknowledging this interdependence by looking at the bigger picture and understanding how everything is connected, even when it may not seem so (Auernhammer, 2024; Hill, 2012; van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Therefore, addressing a single problem may create temporary relief, but it will inevitably reoccur because improvement in the performance of parts taken separately usually does not improve the performance of the system as a whole (van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020; Hill, 2012).

The identified problems have been grouped into different categories for methodological clarity. These categories should not be viewed as isolated silos, but rather as interconnected dimensions of the family SME's internal ecosystem. In practice, these dimensions constantly overlap, where friction in one area, such as family relations, inevitably triggers a ripple effect across the others, as small changes in one part of a complex system can ramify throughout the entire structure (Irwin, 2015; Rondi et al., 2019). Within this system, each problem acts as a node in a network. This interconnection among the different problems confirms how succession and innovation are two inseparable and mutually conditioning processes, which cannot be addressed individually (Hauck & Prügl, 2015; Rondi et al., 2019; Baltazar et al., 2025).

The concluding section of the previous chapter dedicated to SMEs focused on identifying the determinants of a successful succession process. It emerged that these elements do not have a unified representation in the scientific literature: the many sources analysed propose heterogeneous perspectives and often misaligned

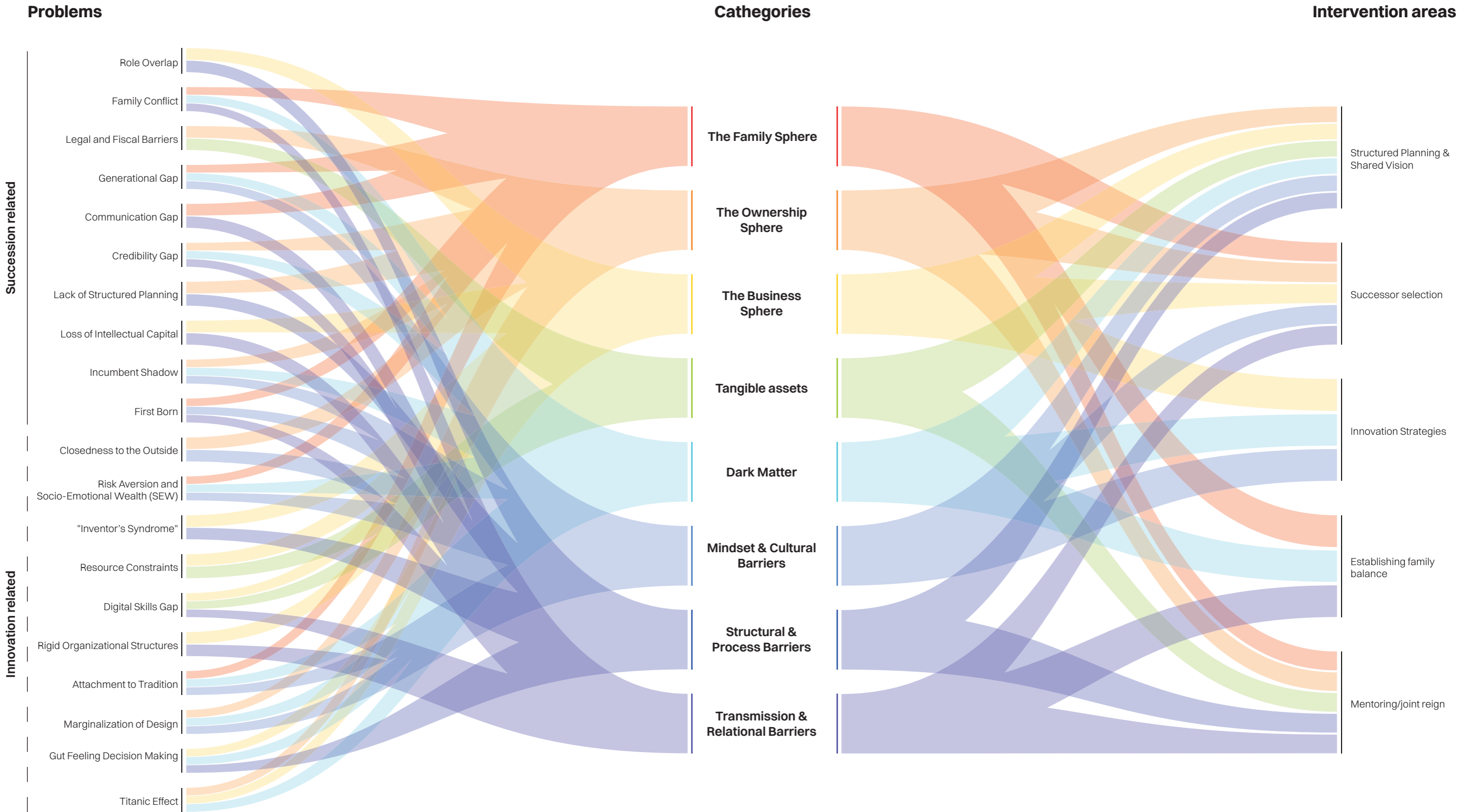


Fig. 18 — From problems to solutions: a synthesis framework for family SME succession

The diagram maps the systemic challenges that family SMEs face during succession and innovation across three levels. On the left, individual problems identified through the literature review. In the centre, the categories that group and connect them. On the right, the five intervention areas, or solution spaces, that the literature identifies as the conditions for a successful generational transition. The flow between levels makes visible what fragmented sources rarely show: that the problems are interconnected, that they share underlying causes, and that addressing them requires a coordinated response rather than isolated interventions.

classifications, echoing a broader lack of a shared vocabulary and fragmented methodology within the discipline (Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Buchanan, 2020). Therefore, a process of synthesis was carried out also in this case, combining all the retrieved information so that it would be coherent and complete. As a result, five determinants of a successful succession emerged, defined in the framework as Intervention Areas (or needs). They represent, according to literature, the key aspects for the proper execution of succession and innovation within family SMEs. Although only marginally addressed, these opportunity spaces do appear in the literature. The issue is that they are rarely connected to the different problems.

The final part of the framework, therefore, aims to create an explicit link between the identified categories of problems and the outlined opportunity spaces. Each category of problems can be tackled and mitigated through different solution spaces. The combination of these areas of intervention represents, for family businesses, a complete and comprehensive framework capable of enabling successful succession, problem resolution, and innovation (Caliskan & Wade, 2022).

3.2 What Strategic Design has to offer

The developed framework constitutes the methodological basis for defining a structured process to support SMEs in generational succession. Although the identified “opportunity spaces” may appear intuitive, their strength lies in their systematisation: in the current literature, such solutions are typically fragmented, partial, and difficult to access. This framework fills this gap, offering an organic overview that connects problems with their respective areas of intervention. In this sense, the work of synthesis represents in itself a valuable contribution for SMEs, concretely demonstrating the potential of Strategic Design as a discipline capable of organising complexity and bringing order to fragmented information and diverse bodies of knowledge (Hill, 2012; Micheli et al., 2018).

The systemic nature of these critical issues makes them extremely complex to understand and, consequently, to resolve; indeed, the challenges of succession are quintessentially “wicked problems” as they are shapeless, emotionally charged, and governed by an invisible mass of family dynamics and heritage (Caliskan & Wade, 2022).

It is reasonable to assume that many companies are partially aware of their limitations or of the areas requiring intervention; however, empirical data contradict the effectiveness of autonomous management, as approximately 70% of global family businesses do not have a formal succession plan (Calabrò, 2021). Statistics on generational succession in Italian family SMEs are unequivocal: only 30% of firms survive the first transition, a figure that drops to 12% by the third generation (Baltazar et al., 2023; 2025; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). This loss of enterprises confirms that awareness alone is not sufficient: a paradigm shift is imperative, allowing SMEs to approach succession not as a traumatic event, but as a guided process of generational overlap and stewardship, reversing a trend that would otherwise continue to worsen (Baltazar et al., 2025; Marler et al, 2017; Hill, 2012).

The criticality of the situation lies in the fact that the issue does not concern only the knowledge of challenges or response strategies, but the ability to act within contexts characterised by complexity, ambiguity, and layered social dynamics (Hill, 2012; Caliskan & Wade, 2022). It is precisely here that Strategic Design comes into play, a discipline oriented toward managing uncertain scenarios influenced by human variables and wicked problems (Buchanan, 1992; Caliskan & Wade, 2022). Although its role may have appeared marginal so far in the SME chapter,

it is quite the opposite. It is precisely through the guiding principles and tools of Strategic Design that it was possible to synthesise and structure the fragmented information related to succession. The very creation of this framework represents an explicit manifestation of the discipline.

The achievement of this synthesis was only possible through the rigorous application of the guiding principles of Strategic Design, analysed in the first chapter.

First of all, this refers to systems and integrative thinking, a principle according to which the strategic designer takes a step back in order to observe the bigger picture (Auernhammer, 2024; Hill, 2012). In this case, this figurative step back made it possible to identify and understand how extensive and diverse the problems were, and then to realise how interconnected they are (van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).

It also refers to scenario building. The suggested approach consists of postponing the resolution of the immediate symptom to first focus on understanding the systemic context (Reframing Studio, n.d.; Calabretta et al., 2016). The objective is to understand the hidden forces that will shape the future, and then to concretise them and identify viable solutions, as in the transition from problems categories solution spaces (Calabretta et al., 2016).

Abductive reasoning has also been fundamental. Rather than solving the problem as presented in a brief, this logic focuses on “questioning the question” to allow a strategy to emerge as the process moves forward (Hill, 2012; Dorst & Watson, 2023). In this sense, the framework took shape progressively. Throughout the development, aspects and relationships that were not apparent at the beginning gradually emerged.

Facilitation and stewardship is also fundamental, characterised by a deep process understanding that is both traceable and accountable to the organisation and its broader stakeholders (Calabretta et al., 2016). As a steward, the designer remains integrated within the system to guide the complex, long-term reality necessary to transform abstract strategy into tangible action (Hill, 2012; Boyer et al., 2013). The practitioner is also responsible for translating the identified terminology and challenges into a simpler form, converting information between different organisational languages to enable effective knowledge sharing (Calabretta et al., 2016; Hill, 2012).

This is clearly also a matter of visual thinking. Communicating this framework without a graphical representation would have been significantly more complex and less effective (Micheli et al., 2018). Transforming ideas into something tangible is a central task of the strategic designer, allowing opportunities to move from the theoretical plane to the practical one (Calabretta et al., 2016; Simonse, 2014).

Co-creation, while not yet applied at this stage of the thesis, is the one principle whose contribution will become fully visible in the chapters that follow. This helps the practitioner to gain a much more complete understanding of the situation, capturing both explicit and latent needs, and fosters widespread organisational commitment to the outcomes (Brown, 2008; Calabretta et al., 2016).

This first point of contact between the two domains will then be extended to the development of a process grounded in strategic design that leverages its tools to activate and implement these solution spaces effectively. The outcome will be a structured and comprehensive process tailored to family SMEs, enabling them to proactively and successfully navigate generational succession.

3.3 How SD can be beneficial for SMEs

At this stage of the thesis, the potential of strategic design as a support tool for SMEs becomes increasingly evident; it has the potential to enable the conditions under which the solution spaces identified at the end of the framework become actionable. SMEs find themselves in a fragmented and complex situation, from which it is difficult to emerge. Strategic Design represents the discipline par excellence for addressing sense-making and complex problems. If properly shaped and structured, a process based on strategic design could fit with family SMEs; an apparently unlikely yet entirely natural combination. For this integration to occur, it will be necessary to smooth the edges of strategic design so that it can effectively align with the problems of SMEs.

After having thoroughly synthesised the problems and needs of SMEs, it is now appropriate to ask: in what way can strategic design support these firms? Is it actually possible? What does a discipline developed for entirely different contexts, characterised by abundant human, temporal, and financial resources, have to do with family-owned businesses? What capabilities are required for SMEs to translate strategic design into tangible benefits?

In order to understand the actual contribution that strategic design can provide to family SMEs in supporting them during succession processes, it is necessary to take a step back and return to how, in the first chapter, the discipline was defined as an attitude through a set of guiding principles: Abductive Reasoning, Co-creation, Visual Thinking and Materiality, Systems and Integrative Thinking, Facilitation and Stewardship, Scenario Building.

Each of these represents a component that defines the nature of strategic design as a discipline. Therefore, to claim that strategic design constitutes a key resource for SMEs and that it can help them address their needs and intervention areas, it is necessary to explore how each of these principles individually generates benefits. Thus, although each benefit will be analytically isolated here, in practice, they emerge from the intersection of multiple practices and principles, forming a systemic mechanism rather than a linear process. These principles are therefore interdependent: systems thinking and abductive reasoning form the foundation of everything; co-creation processes require the use of visual thinking, and both of these principles underpin scenario building. A scenario identified through a shared vision will then require facilitation and stewardship to be consistently pursued over time.

Guiding Principle	Abductive Reasoning
Practices	Problem framing/reframing; Iterative prototyping; Hypothesis testing; Exploration of multiple directions
Capabilities Generated	Co-evolving problem and solution; delaying premature decisions; exploring without full information; learning through action.V
Benefit	Dealing with ambiguity

Family SMEs undergoing generational succession operate in conditions of profound ambiguity, inevitably facing wicked problems. This ambiguity does not depend solely on complex market dynamics but also on factors internal to the firm itself; unclear leadership trajectories, overlapping roles, and conflicting expecta-

tions between family members are among them. It can be perceived through the absence of a clear and shared vision of an ideal future, resulting in survival and innovation strategies that are rarely planned and governed by a formal roadmap (Calabretta, 2016). The most evident result is that decisions are often based on implicit assumptions and gut feeling rather than on explicit variables.

Strategic Design contributes to solving this by introducing a set of practices where problem and solution co-evolve through iterative exploration. This type of approach would allow SMEs to focus on understanding the systemic context and the hidden dark matter before addressing the apparent and immediate problems (Hill, 2012; Englert Corrêa Meyer, 2019).

Another characteristic aspect of abductive reasoning is iterative prototyping, a practice through which SMEs could explore many scenarios and preferable futures in a short time (Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Graicer et al., 2022; Hesselgren et al., 2017). These prototypes could be used as learning devices, used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of an idea early in the process (Hatchuel, 2001; Brown, 2008; Buchanan, 2020).

Referring specifically to the solution spaces identified at the end of the diagnostic framework, this type of approach in the case of successor selection, would allow avoiding rigid cultural constraints that so far determine the heir based on gender or primogeniture. Another aspect that connects linearly to this principle is precisely the selection of innovation strategies, which, through abductive reasoning, can be chosen more consciously.

It is finally important to specify that the goal is not to convey that constant ambiguity is a positive thing, far from it. While the ability to navigate ambiguity is beneficial, excessive openness can lead to decision paralysis, especially in organisations that already struggle with governance clarity. For this reason, the role of strategic design is not to maximise ambiguity but rather to contain and structure it.

Guiding Principle	Co-creation
Practices	Co-design sessions; Participatory decision-making; Strategic dialogue facilitation; Conflict mediation through structured interaction
Capabilities Generated	Shared understanding across actors; Alignment of expectations and interests; Collective sensemaking; Increased trust and engagement
Benefit	Aligning stakeholders

Family SMEs are characterised by a multitude of diverse stakeholders that coexist within the same system. This overlap, defined as the Three-Circle Model (Tagiuri & Davis, 1982), often tends to create situations of confusion due for example to diverging perspectives, misaligned expectations or implicit tensions. These dynamics are also further intensified by the strong influence that SEW has on decision-making, leading to their internalisation and limiting the involvement of actors that are external to the family (Berrone et al., 2012; Jing et al., 2022). In this context stakeholder engagement and alignment represent an urgent necessity for navigating the systemic and ambiguous nature of succession and innovation (Hill, 2012; Caliskan & Wade, 2022).

And it should be clear that alignment is not to be understood as the elimination of differences among stakeholders, but rather as the capability to create

shared understanding and coordinated action among actors that may hold diverse interests and perspectives.

From this perspective, strategic design can contribute to stakeholder alignment through the application of the guiding principle of co-creation, thus shifting decision-making from a rigid top-down structure toward a participatory and dialogic one (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Manzini, 2015). By involving a broad range of stakeholders co-creation stimulates widespread organisational commitment (Calabretta et al., 2016; Buchanan, 2020) and fosters a shared interpretation of how the future might look (Meroni, 2008). In SMEs, where strategic decisions are often driven more by intuition than by performance indicators, this approach helps fill the lack of user research and analysis (Micheli et al., 2017).

For decision-making phases involving multiple stakeholders, including employees and successors, reduces frustration and also creates a sense of ownership over the business's direction (Poccia, 2015). This in particular is especially beneficial for innovation as it allows the senior generation to consider a successor's identified opportunities at "eye level" (Calabrò, 2021). Moreover, when employees are treated as important stakeholders and their suggestions are implemented both their motivation and loyalty increase (Peters & Kallmuenzer, 2018). Involving stakeholders early in the process also reduces resistance to innovation, as they perceive changes as opportunities rather than threats (Micheli et al., 2017; Calabretta et al., 2016).

During the selection of a successor, alignment ensures that choices are based on meritocracy and shared among multiple internal stakeholders. In relation to mentoring and joint reign, co-creation fosters continuous interaction between incumbent and successor, supporting knowledge exchange and mutual adjustment. Finally, in structured planning and shared vision, stakeholder alignment ensures that strategic direction is not imposed but co-constructed. The objective is to maximise alignment and participation, but in a structured and efficient way.

Guiding Principle	Visual Thinking and Materiality
Practices	Canvases and visual frameworks; Mapping of processes, roles, and relationships; Storyboarding; Prototyping intangible concepts
Capabilities Generated	Externalisation of tacit knowledge; Increased clarity of abstract dynamic; Shared reference points for discussion; Reduction of misinterpretation
Benefit	Making the invisible visible

Family-owned SMEs are notoriously averse to the discipline of design. This friction is particularly strong within the context of manufacturing firms. In this context, design is perceived only through its aesthetic dimension, typically associated with products (Bianco & Rampino, 2017; Carneiro et al., 2021). This marginalisation prevents the recognition of design as an organisational and strategic variable, relegating many of these firms to the lowest step of the Design Ladder, namely non-design (Danish Design Center, 2001).

Family firms, however, are governed by a multitude of extremely complex dynamics that are difficult to map and are often intangible or not measurable. The result produced by this dark matter is that most of the aspects influencing succession remain unarticulated, making them difficult to address, discuss, or challenge

(Hill, 2012; Caliskan & Wade, 2022; Englert Corrèa Meyer, 2019).

This is where the materialisation of these dynamics becomes imperative and necessary, making visible what is often hidden from the eyes of these firms. As already explored in the first chapter, strategic design is strongly grounded in the principles of visual thinking and materiality (Buchanan, 2020; Calabretta et al., 2016).

This process makes it possible to develop, within firms and more generally among all stakeholders involved, a series of proven benefits that are essential for the success of a project. Some of these include , process understanding, commitment, a shared vision, and most importantly increasing trust (Hill, 2012; Caliskan & Wade, 2022).

To actively collaborate with stakeholders and make their reasoning tangible, it is essential to rely on canvases and worksheets, which are particularly effective in creating a shared space for discussion (Corà et al., 2023). These tools make it possible to observe firms and organisational contexts, translating intangible complexity into propositions that are clear, relevant, and testable (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Auernhammer, 2024). This, in turn, shows how the problems that appear disconnected within a firm are in reality inevitably connected and interdependent (Micheli et al., 2018).

Through these practices, organisations are able to externalise elements that would otherwise remain implicit, transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. This is a fundamental aspect in generational succession, especially during the joint reign and mentoring phase, a moment during which the successor must learn forms of knowledge that are not always tangible and therefore risk being lost before they can be transmitted (Calabretta et al., 2016; Merigliano, 2015).

Guiding Principle	Systems and Integrative Thinking
Practices	Stakeholder mapping; Ecosystem and value network analysis; Identification of interdependencies; Multi-level analysis
Capabilities Generated	Ability to see interconnections between problems; Holistic understanding of organisational dynamics; Recognition of root causes instead of symptoms; Ability to prioritise interventions systemically
Benefit	Understanding complexity

It is now clear that family SMEs are constantly facing complex dynamics that are sometimes disproportionate to their size and their resources. They are often involved in systems where multiple strategic dynamics are intertwined (Tagiuri & Davis, 1982; Costa et al., 2023).

Despite the systemic nature of these challenges, the approach of SMEs is often linear and logical, attempting to isolate problems and address them individually (Buchanan, 1992; van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Due to this way of approaching problems, only temporary relief is achieved. This, results in organisations not being able to develop a coherent understanding of their internal dynamics, consequently limiting their ability to navigate critical transition moments such as succession (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021; Calabrò et al., 2019; Jing et al., 2022).

Strategic design can support this through the guiding principle of systems and integrative thinking. This helps organisations to adopt a holistic perspective

allowing them to observe the broader configuration of relationships and dynamics (Calabretta et al., 2016; Zurlo, 2012), helping them to stop focusing on individual elements and instead emphasise patterns, interactions, and feedback loops, recognising that the behaviour of the whole cannot be understood simply by looking at its individual parts (Capra, 1997; Micheli et al., 2018).

This new perspective makes it possible for organisations to look at themselves through new lenses, as part of a larger interconnected system (Auernhammer, 2024). It is precisely this awareness that facilitates phases such as mentoring and growth, where the successor builds an understanding of the entire system and of the stakeholders that populate it (Romano & D’Allura, 2025).

This perspective also enhances the ability to perceive perturbations within the organisational system. Once it is fully understood, it becomes possible to appreciate even the smallest changes; often, intervening on a single stakeholder generates an extended impact across the entire system.

The impact on the needs of family SMEs is broad. It enables a clear understanding of the situation, allowing for the development of long-term planning for succession. It makes explicit the relationships and hierarchies that govern familiness. Furthermore, through accurate mapping of the market and stakeholders, this approach allows the identification of blue oceans, uncontested market segments where competition has yet to be defined (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005), supporting the development of innovative strategies based on parameters rather than intuition.

Guiding Principle	Scenario Building
Practices	Development of multiple future scenarios; “What if” explorations; Future personas and use cases; Translation of trends into strategic options
Capabilities Generated	Ability to anticipate change; Reduced dependence on a single vision; Strategic flexibility; Proactive rather than reactive decision-making
Benefit	Future orientation

Family SMEs are notoriously operating with a short-term vision as they are in survival mode, bounded by resource constraints and operational urgency. This is often accompanied by a lack of a shared vision of the future of the firm (Calabretta, 2016). This limitation becomes critical during the generational transition phase, where the absence of a vision translates into reactive decision-making, strategic drift, or conflict between incumbent and successor regarding the direction of the firm. The future is often treated as a linear extension of the present, rather than as a set of multiple possibilities to be explored.

Future orientation does not refer to the ability to correctly predict the best future scenario, but rather to the capability to explore, structure, and navigate a plurality of possible futures. This shift from prediction to exploration enables organisations to move beyond immediate constraints and to construct alternative visions of how the future might unfold, based on the interpretation of weak signals, emerging trends, and latent user needs (Calabretta et al., 2016; Meroni, 2008; Zurlo, 2012).

Strategic design has the potential to give SMEs the power to shape their future instead of passively reacting to it. It encourages these firms to explore and imagine multiple potential futures and scenarios (Reframing Studio, n.d.).

SMEs are notoriously conservative, they rarely think outside the box and often follow tradition as the safest option. In terms of innovation, this mindset is typical of late entrants, minimising the possibility of gaining a competitive advantage. These educated predictions would allow companies to act as first movers, positioning themselves in blue ocean markets (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). The implementation of a culture of exploration and speculation of future scenarios would facilitate the development of more bold and out-of-the-box ideas. Knowing that they can rely on rapid prototyping, companies could experiment more, conceiving ideas that they would have never thought of in an ordinary setting where strategic design is not involved.

Scenario building, if not properly grounded, can remain a purely speculative exercise, exploration must be continuously linked to feasibility and implementation.

After having explored the impact that strategic design would have if implemented in family-owned SMEs, it is now possible to outline the final list of benefits: Dealing with ambiguity, Aligning stakeholders, Making the invisible visible, Understanding complexity, Long-term engagement, and Future orientation.

The combination of these benefits is able to support SMEs in the generational succession process. Compared to the diagnostic framework, as analysed in this section, the benefits do not correspond in a 1:1 relationship with the identified needs. They are obviously invaluable in terms of support, but what is even more valuable is their synergistic combination, through which SMEs would be able to create a structured succession plan; select the successor in the most appropriate way based on meritocracy while avoiding conflicts; innovate through the exploration of multiple scenarios and the prototyping of different opportunities, thus positioning themselves as first movers in blue oceans; establish family balance through a shared vision and clarity among the various stakeholders involved; and facilitate the mentoring phase through a strong willingness and a well-defined and structured vision.

The first version served as a blueprint, that is, to establish the foundations through a clear and structured strategic design process. The next step is to visualise the intersection that is created between the strategic design process, the needs and problems of SMEs, and the benefits just analysed.

The objective of the final output is to empower SMEs and family-owned organisations, helping them navigate the challenging phases of succession. This takes the form of a toolkit, or more precisely a management system, defined as “an integrated set of processes and tools that a company uses to develop its strategy, translate it into operational terms, and monitor and improve the effectiveness of both” (Millers & Gaile-Sarkane, 2021, p. 2). Its implementation involves building a design culture within organisations; it represents a shift from viewing design as a series of discrete, aesthetic tasks to an inclusive way of thinking and doing that is deeply embedded within the firm’s “DNA” (Auernhammer, 2024; Corà et al., 2023).

Naturally, this is inherently linked to and dependent on the tools, practices, and methods that characterise the discipline. However, it is important to remember, as previously stated, that attitude also has a significant impact, both on the successful outcome of a project and on the overall functioning of an organisation. Therefore, adopting these attitudes within the organisation, across all its members, will be a fundamental aspect for successful implementation and for the development of a design culture.

Strategic design

Fig. 19 — From principles to intervention areas: how strategic design's guiding principles translate into benefits for family SMEs

Principles

Abductive Reasoning

Co-creation

Visual Thinking and Materiality

Systems and Integrative Thinking

Facilitation and Stewardship

Scenario Building

Practices

Problem framing / reframing - Iterative prototyping - Hypothesis testing - Exploration of multiple directions

Stakeholder workshops and co-design sessions - Participatory decision-making - Strategic dialogue facilitation - Conflict mediation through structured interaction

Use of canvases and visual frameworks - Mapping of processes, roles, and relationships - Storyboarding and scenario visualisation - Prototyping intangible concepts (e.g., governance models)

Stakeholder mapping - Ecosystem and value network analysis - Identification of interdependencies - Multi-level analysis (family, ownership, business)

Continuous facilitation of the process - Governance design and role definition - Capability building within the organisation - Monitoring and iterative adjustment

Development of multiple future scenarios - "What if" explorations - Future personas and use cases - Translation of trends into strategic options

Capabilities

Ability to co-evolve problem and solution - Ability to delay premature decisions - Ability to explore without full information - Ability to learn through action

Shared understanding across actors - Alignment of expectations and interests - Collective sensemaking - Increased trust and engagement

Externalisation of tacit knowledge - Increased clarity of abstract dynamics (e.g., power, culture) - Shared reference points for discussion - Reduction of misinterpretation

Ability to see interconnections between problems - Holistic understanding of organisational dynamics - Recognition of root causes instead of symptoms - Ability to prioritise interventions systemically

Organisational ownership of change - Continuity beyond single interventions - Embedded decision-making structures - Internalisation of design mindset

Ability to anticipate change - Reduced dependence on a single vision - Strategic flexibility - Proactive rather than reactive decision-making

Benefits

Dealing with ambiguity

Aligning stakeholders

Making the invisible visible

Understanding complexity

Long-term engagement

Future orientation

Intervention areas

Structured Planning & Shared Vision

Successor selection

Innovation Strategies

Establishing family balance

Mentoring/joint reign

Chapter 4

Field Research

The theoretical foundations developed in the previous three chapters, strategic design, the world of family SMEs, and the synthesis connecting them, were built entirely through literature. Two extensive reviews, drawing on academic papers, expert frameworks, observatory reports, and professional practice documentation, produced a coherent conceptual picture. But a picture built from literature alone carries an inherent limitation: it describes how things should work, not necessarily how they do.

This chapter documents the field research that ran in parallel with and after the theoretical work, grounding the project in the direct experience of those who live and work within the contexts it addresses. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with fewer than twenty participants across multiple sessions, spanning the entire duration of the project. The format was chosen deliberately: a set of pre-determined questions made it possible to compare responses across participants, while the flexibility of the format allowed conversations to develop naturally and surface insights that a rigid questionnaire would not have captured. The sample was deliberately diverse: professors of family business, strategic design researchers, succession consultants, accountants, business advisors, and owners of family manufacturing firms in Piedmont. Some sessions were brief and focused; others extended into long conversations that covered ground no academic paper had prepared for. Many interview requests were rejected, and the process of gaining access to companies willing to discuss succession openly proved more difficult than anticipated.

The interviews did not all take place at once. They were distributed across three distinct rounds, each serving a different purpose and each building on what the previous round had produced. The first round ran simultaneously with the literature reviews, before any theoretical position had been formed, and was aimed purely at understanding whether the problem was real and how it looked from the inside. The second round followed the completion of the two literature reviews and the synthesis chapter, and was directed at testing theoretical understanding against operational reality. The third round came after the first iteration of the succession process had been developed, and was focused on evaluation, identifying what worked, what didn't, and what needed to change.

Presented together in this chapter, these three rounds may appear closer to each other than they actually were. In practice, each was separated by weeks of writing, synthesis, and iteration. They are gathered here not to compress that timeline but to preserve the methodological coherence of the research, showing how each round informed the next, and how the cumulative picture that emerged shaped every design decision documented in Chapter 5.

4.1 Interviews

To fully understand the topics addressed, validate the results obtained, and to develop a final solution, interviews were conducted throughout the entire project. They were carried out at different moments and with professionals from different fields, depending on the objective.

In the preliminary phase, during the literature review, it was important to fully understand the context of family SMEs, a world that was initially distant from the discipline of strategic design.

At a second moment, the goal was to understand from the inside how family-owned businesses function and operate.

Subsequently, with the aim of validating what was developed during the thesis, thus obtaining valuable feedback on the constructs developed, on the perception of organisational dynamics, and on what was produced, so as to be able to iterate and refine it.

4.2 Contextualise - first round

The first round of interviews took place during the preliminary phase of the thesis project, simultaneously with the beginning of the literature review. The main purpose was not to validate or collect feedback, but rather to understand the problem from the inside, even before formulating a solution. These were the key questions:

- Is this problem real and relevant?
- What does it look like from the inside?
- What gaps exist that the literature doesn't address?

Three professional figures were consulted: a design researcher with direct experience in design integration within SMEs; the person responsible for a support initiative proposed by the Piedmont Region; a major national observatory specialising in family firm data.

Together, these three perspectives confirmed the relevance of the research question, revealed a critical gap in existing approaches, and shaped the direction of the entire project.

By confronting experts in the field, it was possible to fully understand the relevance and urgency of this topic. Succession, an inevitable moment for family-owned businesses, is a structural, wicked, and critical problem affecting the Italian entrepreneurial landscape. As demonstrated by the observatory through its data, most companies approach it unprepared and fail to overcome it successfully. Furthermore, they often do not possess the adequate tools and knowledge required to evolve and innovate. The purpose is to help companies develop new competencies and new knowledge through the introduction of a highly qualified professional figure within the company. The region confirmed the structural relevance of the problem at the territorial level. Piedmontese SMEs have strong operational capabilities but lack strategic and innovation competencies, which are crucial for succession.

It also emerged through the observatory that the qualitative dimension is never deeply investigated. The focus is exclusively on numbers and quantifiable values, which is completely understandable given the scale of their research. However, this means that the problem is analysed only partially, often neglecting the

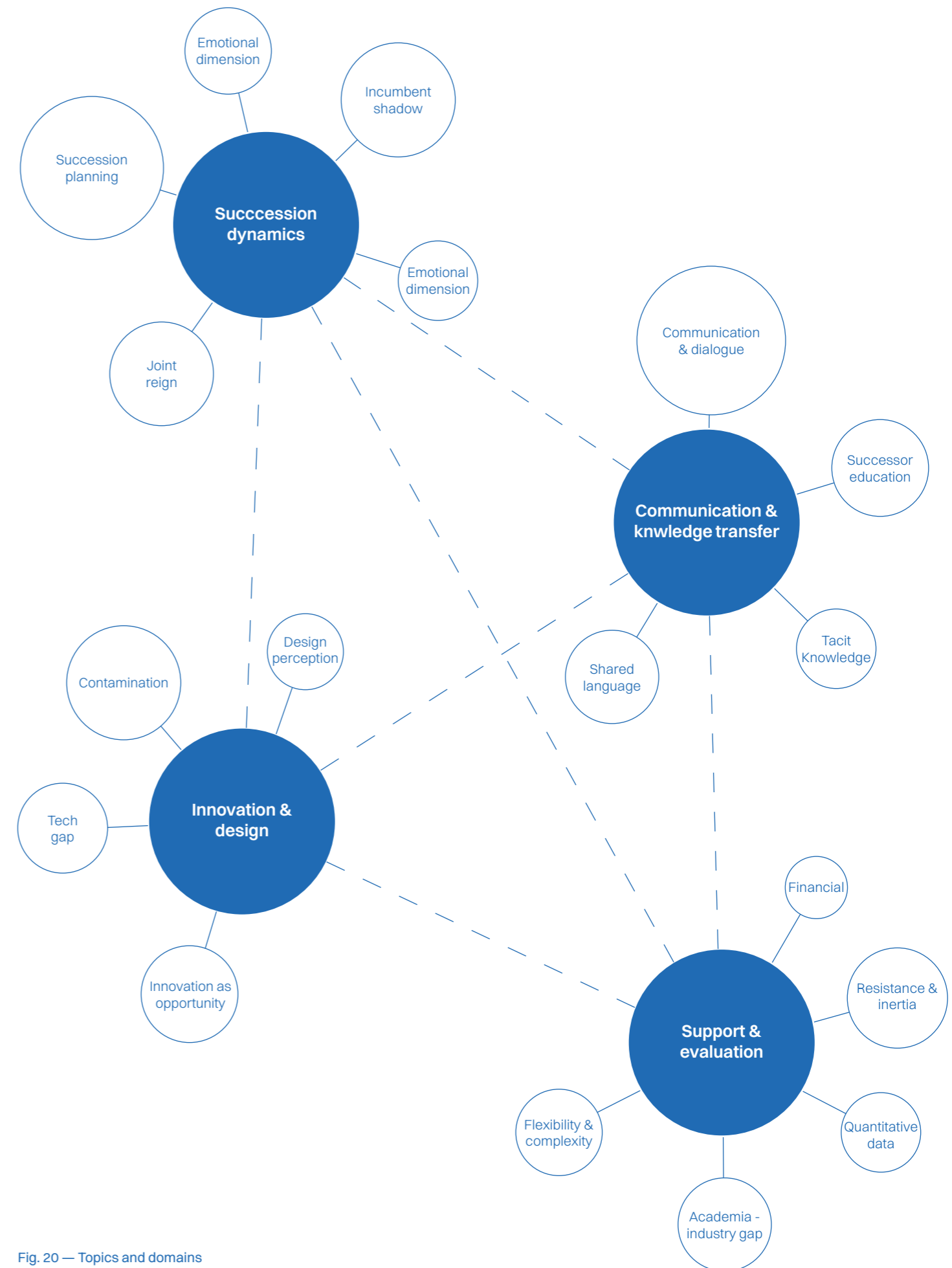


Fig. 20 — Topics and domains covered across the three interview rounds

social, relational, and emotional dynamics that govern succession. Aspects such as SEW, incumbent shadow, or communication gaps are invisible from a quantitative perspective. Furthermore, this results in findings that are difficult for companies themselves to interpret, making the understanding of the topic and the eventual structuring of a succession plan even more complex. Strategic design's qualitative, human-centred approach could therefore complement the current research conducted on the topic. Moreover, an intervention focused on these qualitative aspects could prove effective and provide a new perspective on the issue.

The researcher confirmed that introducing strategic design into SMEs could be particularly difficult. It is a language unfamiliar to that kind of audience and therefore needs to be translated and adapted. However, she also stated that succession moments could represent a key moment for introducing this new approach into companies. More generally, the region also confirmed the existence of a cultural and linguistic barrier between academia and businesses. Although there is a large amount of literature on the topic, it remains inaccessible and is rarely explored or studied by companies themselves. Piedmont specifically aims to break down this wall through the introduction of professional figures. This directly confirmed one of the central research questions of this thesis. For this reason, the thesis aspires to position itself as a bridge.

4.3 Investigate - second round

The second round of interviews was conducted after completing the literature review, during the writing phase of the second chapter. In this case, the objective was to understand the functioning of the dynamics that characterise family-owned businesses. After studying and understanding them through the literature, namely from a theoretical perspective, it became necessary to investigate the topic concretely. For this reason, owners of family businesses were interviewed with the aim of understanding their operational and organisational dynamics, their approach to innovation and design, but above all, their approach to succession. Professionals such as accountants and business consultants were also involved. During this phase, the relationship with the case study company began, with more in-depth interviews, field visits, and workshop sessions to evaluate the understanding of strategic design and succession.

Some manufacturing companies were involved in the interviews. The sample was decidedly heterogeneous, both in terms of turnover and number of employees (micro, small, and medium enterprises) and from the perspective of succession. Some are approaching an imminent succession phase, some do not yet perceive the issue because it still feels distant, while others have decided to sell the company or transfer it to a non-family member. Although small, this highly varied sample made it possible to explore different scenarios, understand multiple cases, and therefore provide a clearer timeline of this process. This second round made it possible to extract many interesting insights useful for understanding the real role of succession within these companies.

4.3.1 Lack of planning

A total lack of planning was the first thing that emerged. Not all companies were close to succession, but as has now been explored throughout the previous chapters, it is completely wrong to wait for a sense of urgency before planning. Often, in these companies, succession occurred quite naturally, almost by osmosis.

This represents both something positive and something negative. It is certainly positive that companies are able to manage this difficult process autonomously, but it is equally dangerous to face it completely without planning or support tools. These companies themselves admitted that, in some respects, they had been fortunate because they had never encountered major obstacles or critical difficulties during their journey, and this is also what allowed them to still be operating today. By interviewing only companies that are still operating, survivor bias (Wald, 1943) inevitably occurred, a statistical phenomenon according to which the conclusions of a study are distorted because only the subjects who "survived" a selection process are analysed, while those who failed are ignored. These are companies that are still active today, therefore in one way or another, they must have done something right. Precisely for this reason, professionals were involved. In this phase, they were fundamental for obtaining a clear and truthful representation of the dynamics related to succession. Consultants and accountants deal daily with multiple companies and, throughout their long years of experience, have observed situations of every kind. Interviewing them made it possible, during a single session, to collect information that would otherwise have required dozens of additional interviews with different companies. Furthermore, it was valuable to understand and analyse case studies of companies that experienced failure or severe losses following an unsuccessful succession. Since they were external and expert parties, they also expressed objective opinions not conditioned by the emotional aspect (SEW) that may have influenced the responses of other interviewees.

The experts, therefore, confirmed that the lack of planning constitutes one of the most common reasons behind failed successions.

4.3.2 Incumbent shadow

The founder's willingness to step back, or as it was previously called, the incumbent shadow, is a decisive variable when it comes to succession. It is among the risks most frequently cited in the literature. Business owners, at least those belonging to the second generation who experienced succession firsthand, confirmed the relevance of this variable. Each successor child described an extremely positive experience with the previous generation, maintaining a good relationship with the father throughout the process. Precisely for this reason, they recognise the importance of an incumbent who proves proactive and open-minded rather than obstructing the successor's entry. They all spoke about how they managed to enter the company and achieve excellent results precisely because of this. The father proved willing to listen, welcome suggestions, and place a great deal of trust in the children by giving them responsibilities from the very beginning.

The experts also confirmed this point. They described many cases in which the owner does not involve the successor as they should, and this always results in drastically reduced business performance or failure. When the heir is not provided with the correct teachings and is not given responsibility and the possibility to make mistakes, it is extremely unlikely that they will develop the competencies needed to lead a company.

Furthermore, if they are not legitimised by the father, they will never be legitimised by the rest of the company and stakeholders, and therefore will not be accepted as a worthy successor.

Succession was the catalyst for the firm's most significant strategic pivot.

In many interviews, succession emerged as a turning point. Almost always, as affirmed by the literature, with the new generation comes a breath of fresh air.

"Companies need a model, a process to follow. Having a method, even a rigid one, can help firms enormously. Today there is no ideal succession process that companies can consult when needed."

"As long as the old owner is present and doesn't take a step back, the successor remains like a seed that cannot fully bloom. They cannot take the reins or exercise full control."

"The founder who centralises power when they perceives inadequacy creates a vicious cycle, the heir doesn't grow because they are given no space."

Successors bring with them a completely new baggage of knowledge, skills, and perspectives that the company had never adopted before. In some cases, the successor's entry triggered innovation processes, investments, or expansion into new markets, a series of initiatives that differentiated the company from competitors and positioned it above the others.

One interviewee in particular told how, purely by chance, two competitor companies had gone through succession at the same time as his own company. In those other cases, however, no steps forward were taken, and no investments or changes of any kind occurred. In the long term, this placed the competitor companies at an extreme disadvantage, leading one of them to close permanently shortly after succession. The interviewed company, on the other hand, managed to distinguish itself by taking some risks that proved successful in the long term. This demonstrates how succession can be a pivotal moment; it becomes essential to seize it as an opportunity to innovate. This often happens thanks to all the new ideas and perspectives that successors bring with them into the company.

The experts used a term that was then included in the system: contamination. They repeatedly used this term to describe how important it is for the company to be influenced by external factors. The most fundamental contamination concerns the successors themselves.

They must study and work in different contexts in order to understand different ways of doing things from those of their own family business, thereby developing a mentality that can improve the company once implemented. In almost all companies, successors stated that they had pursued a field of study completely disconnected from the domain of the family business. Yet it was precisely this difference that gave value to their entry into the company. By studying something distant from the firm's area of expertise, they were able to contaminate it with something new and different.

This contamination also extends beyond the family. Introducing external figures such as managers, consultants, or experts of any kind always brings benefits. Introducing a new method or a new perspective will almost always produce advantages. Through contamination, it becomes possible to grow as a company, increase complexity, and acquire a competitive advantage.

The absence of tools was felt in hindsight, not in the moment.

Often, in the case of business owners, the absence of tools and support instruments was perceived only in retrospect. With the exception of one company, none of the others used specific governance tools or structured systems during succession and regular operational processes. However, all of them, looking back, were able to identify key moments during which a structure would have helped. Although these are companies that are currently thriving, they admitted that if they had done things differently, with more support and specific tools, they would now be in a significantly better situation. One company managed to structure both succession and organizational routines in a clear and efficient way without becoming excessively rigid, establishing specific protocols, regular meetings, and a well-defined decision-making structure. Another company, having recognized this lack during the previous succession, imposed on itself the task of writing rules for the next generation and defining a structure capable of guiding the next succession.

Experts also highlighted this aspect, attributing enormous importance to the preliminary phase of the succession process. During this phase, the "rules of the game" must be established; a series of parameters, structures, and dynamics must be defined that can facilitate the future development of events and prevent conflicts of any kind.

"My dad had the capacity to trust me and open his mind to new business ideas, not staying focused on the original model. This is what made us grow"

"Contamination is extremely valuable. Successors absolutely must grow outside the company before entering it permanently."

"The language problem is one of the main issues, the owner has everything in their head but lacks an instrument for dialogue."

"Two things are fundamental, the willingness to learn from both sides, and the ability to communicate: to speak, to teach, and to listen."

4.3.3 Communication as substitute for structure.

Communication is another fundamental aspect of succession. It is crucial to establish a relationship based on clear dialogue and communication among all family members. According to the experts, owners often do not communicate enough, thereby omitting key information. Especially owners belonging to the older generation, who are approaching succession, are accustomed to delegating nothing to anyone; they are convinced that no one is as competent as they are, and precisely for this reason, they do not communicate. In their minds they possess a clear image of the company, projects, stakeholders, and everything else. However, this becomes an enormous problem when that knowledge must be transferred to the next generation. It is important that everything be transmitted so that the company can continue operating under new management.

The business consultant agreed with the principles of strategic design, specifically visualisation and co-creation. Making these dynamics and this knowledge visible, which at the moment exist only in the owner's mind, facilitates understanding for everyone. It also helps the owner by relieving them of the burden of managing all this information without ever documenting it, while simultaneously allowing the other members of the family and company to fully understand the business system. Good communication among the different parties involved in succession is non-negotiable. Without structure, it is still possible to survive succession, but without communication it is almost impossible. One cannot expect to transfer knowledge, skills, and know-how without discussing them clearly, explicitly, and constantly. It is necessary to find a common shared language between generations in order to bridge not only the age gap, but also the gap in mentality and culture.

Multiple successors across different roles is more common and more effective than assumed.

Until this moment, succession process was perceived as a large funnel capable of accommodating multiple individuals and returning only one at the end. The idea was that there had to be a process resulting in "the" successor; but it was wrong. Through discussions with experts and companies, it emerged that it is not always true that the only path is that of a single successor.

Often, family businesses have multiple potential heirs: direct children of the owner, partners, or more distant family members such as cousins or spouses. Nothing prevents multiple people from succeeding simultaneously. As experts pointed out, and as some professors mentioned in other interviews, the circles that constitute the model of Tagiuri & Davis (1982) are three: family, ownership, and business. This therefore, creates a tripartite system capable of accommodating multiple successors, each specialised in different tasks, positioned at different points in the hierarchy but with equal succession rights.

By speaking with companies, it was possible to see firsthand how, almost always, with the exception of one case, the company was managed by siblings or relatives. Often by two brothers, but in more than one case even by three brothers. This revealed how broad the family system can be. Each sibling handled different tasks: some were operational directors, others marketing directors; some entered immediately after high school, while others joined after years of work in other companies. By keeping multiple heirs involved, many conflicts were avoided. From the very beginning, the incumbent gave several family members the possibility to participate, thereby eliminating any competitive dynamics that could have created conflict.

Furthermore, the experts suggested an approach capable of minimising friction between successors. In cases where members of the same family are simultaneously involved in a mentoring phase, especially siblings, it is very common for them to disagree simply because they are siblings. They recounted many occasions in which siblings contradicted each other without a valid reason, simply to oppose one another. They therefore recommended limiting situations during the training phase in which siblings are instructed simultaneously or aligned on exactly the same path. In their experience, they found it far more productive to discuss future steps or the direction of the company together with the whole family in a general way addressed to everyone, and then privately discuss aspects concerning the specific individuals involved. For example, the owner may establish a target for the company and then discuss specific tasks and opinions privately with the directly involved parties rather than in front of everyone. This reduces the feeling of being judged and leads to more sincere, subjective opinions that are not driven by emotional variables. However, as the process progresses, it is important that the paths of the various successors gradually align and overlap, because once the incumbent steps back, they will have to manage the company collaboratively.

4.3.4 Innovation & Design

Other aspects addressed during these discussions were design and innovation. In the case of design, it became clear how it is still a discipline and a world that is distant, especially from an organisational point of view, from the context of manufacturing SMEs. They often act on the basis of intuition and tradition, and it is rare for them to rely on processes and methodologies such as those the thesis aspires to introduce in order to support succession. This result was initially unsettling, as it raised concerns about potential reluctance to adopt design. However, further exploration of the topic revealed that firms were more open and willing than initially expected. The perceived distance was often terminological rather than substantive. When presented with tools and methods characterised by anglicisms or complex names, firms frequently did not recognise them, but after a brief explanation it emerged that they were already familiar with the underlying concepts. This agrees with what is stated in the first chapter on strategic design: design often acts undercover; its tools are used without even realising it. The hypothesis of structuring a support tool for succession based on design therefore does not represent an unrealistic goal; rather, there is a good starting foundation and a willingness to learn.

As for innovation, although it was already considered a fundamental dynamic, the feedback was surprising. Even apparently conservative companies surprisingly stated that innovation and evolution in terms of machinery, products, and processes are essential, especially in companies of this type. Within an entrepreneurial landscape that is often flat and homogeneous, it is crucial for companies to distinguish themselves precisely through innovation. Through the introduction of something new, it is possible to acquire a competitive advantage, and it is impossible to remain in the market without innovating.

The companies demonstrated a strong willingness to innovate. It became more realistic to think that succession can actually represent a good moment to do so.

At the end of this second phase of interviews, the actual distance between the academic world and the practical one became clear. Listening to real stories from companies that experienced succession, and from experts who structured dozens of them, allowed the understanding of the key points, namely identifying the most common mistakes and gaps together with the fundamental aspects for success.

The research also confirmed how succession can act as a strategic opportunity rather than a threat. The relevance of structured planning was strongly confirmed by experts and, to a varying degree, by the companies themselves. The major problem remains awareness. In fact, even after discussing the topic for almost an hour with different business owners, at the end they still stated that they do not understand the point of planning far in advance, proving themselves more inclined to adopt a strategy only when driven by a sense of urgency.

4.4 Evaluate & validate - third round

This round of interviews had the purpose of evaluating the results produced throughout the thesis work. Professors, industry experts, and company owners were involved in order to assess, through different perspectives, the approach, the identified problem, and the potential solutions proposed. This round represented a key moment in the process: during a phase of exploration, incorrect or unsuitable directions were ruled out in favour of paths more aligned with the perspective of those who study and experience the world of family firms on a daily basis. Interviews and sessions with the case study company also continued, in order to deeply understand how realistic and applicable the proposals actually were within business contexts.

More specifically, the sample involved in these interviews once again included company owners. The first session, or first part of the session, focused on the understanding of their business context. Each session followed a semi-structured outline, collecting observations without intervening. In a second moment, parts of the work developed throughout the thesis were presented, specifically the first iteration of the process, in order to collect useful feedback.

Accountants and consultants contributed again in the same way as the companies: whereas the previous round had been focused on gathering information, this round was focused on presenting solutions and evaluating them. Three professors specialised in family business were also involved, one of whom was particularly relevant because of his contribution to the topic of succession. They provided not only guidance regarding the work carried out so far, but also with perspectives that had not been considered. They therefore validated and questioned some aspects of this first iteration, while also proposing alternative approaches and means to support companies. The working process was also presented, showing how the problems had been synthesised and visualised, both in relation to SMEs and to strategic design.

By comparing the information obtained from interviews with experts to that obtained from company owners, the strong distance separating the two worlds became evident. When expert ideas were presented to business owners, they often proved unrealistic. The difference in language and mentality used to approach problems was striking. On one side, the experts, just like the project at the beginning, proposed highly theoretical, sometimes complex and utopian solutions. On the other side, manufacturing companies demonstrated that they needed support and appreciated some aspects of what was proposed, but it became evident that simplification, translation, and adaptation were necessary.

The structure of the succession process represented in the first iteration originates from the way in which literature was interpreted, but it nevertheless remains academically supported. In fact, the experts expressed positive opinions regarding this division into five phases. They appreciated the external structure, while expressing more negative opinions regarding the internal steps. The internal

"It is impossible to maintain a competitive advantage in the long term without innovation."

"Define a core adaptable process rather than a completely standardised framework. A model that is too rigid or universal risks losing effectiveness."

organisation was considered correct, but excessively complex and structured.

Since this is a process lasting around ten years, it is difficult to think that a company could follow it 100% while maintaining such a high level of complexity. They therefore suggested reducing the number of steps in order to lower the perceived complexity. Approaching such a rich representation could have discouraged companies. For the same reason, they suggested introducing the various tools and steps gradually.

Companies confirmed that they could see their personal experiences reflected in the process. Before showing a representation to each interviewee, they were asked to outline their ideal process. These were often very similar, both to one another and to mine. However, in this case too, the problems emerged below the surface level. It was therefore confirmed that the phases themselves were correct, and attention shifted to annotating the various issues identified within the steps, the specific conversations, decisions, and tools that make each phase actually work.

Another aspect that attracted much criticism was the linearity of the process, which was considered far from reality. Many companies described long processes characterised by ups and downs, moments of clarity and moments of confusion; they described a reality that was anything but linear. This made it clear that they truly needed guidance, but at the same time, that such guidance had to be more malleable and less rigid.

One professor, within his research work, proposed a system that does not see the succession process as defined by an impenetrable boundary, but rather as an open structure. Within his process, successors can enter and leave the process; they are not permanently tied to the company.

Furthermore, the process, as it was originally structured, would not have been suitable for companies that had already started the process or skipped some steps, since it had been designed to be followed from beginning to end. The phases can remain fixed and unchanged, but their boundaries and those of the internal steps must change, balancing flexibility with a clear structure.

The first of the five phases was well received by both experts and companies, who expressed unanimous appreciation. Everyone stated that a moment of alignment was indispensable. Experts recommend it because, theoretically, it is a fundamental aspect; companies recommend it because, through their experience, they were able to appreciate its benefits. Those who had introduced a similar phase before important projects or before succession itself perceived tangible benefits. The only issue was that, until that moment, the aspect of awareness had not been considered, namely, making companies understand the importance of structured planning even before beginning the process itself.

This aspect was later integrated. This requires lowering perceived complexity, making the entry point non-threatening, and framing the tool as an optimisation rather than a crisis response.

Communication is crucial. The owner has everything in their head but lacks an instrument for dialogue. The toolkit must make information visible, decisions discussable, and intuitions translatable. Without a shared language between generations, even the best process fails. Only by creating moments of sharing and dialogue throughout the entire process is it possible to maintain a constant shared commitment.

The context of manufacturing SMEs is particularly rooted in tradition and often not very open to external interventions. Although all companies demonstrated a willingness to innovate, many declared that they would be distrustful of external

“Present the process in a simple and gradual way, especially in the early stages. Excessive complexity risks compromising adoption.”

“The process cannot be linear. It needs to be more natural and free. You can make it linear now to test where you can open it, where things can be done differently, where it is acceptable to reiterate, repeat, or step outside the process and return.”

“Successors can enter and leave the process, they are not permanently tied to the company.”

“The phases as you have them are pretty good and could remain fixed. What can be moved around are the steps within, ideally, the family should be able to define what is important to them.”

“Companies don’t understand the point of planning far in advance. They are more inclined to act only when driven by urgency.”

“Instead of approaching companies by saying you are failing, try to make them understand that they have built something worth protecting. This approach is almost always effective.”

“Without psychological willingness, even the best process risks failing. The emotional blockers, fear of failure, difficulty letting go, fear of losing identity, must be addressed before any planning can begin.”

“As an owner: ask for opinions, leave decisional space, allow mistakes, and intervene afterwards to correct, not before.”

“The exchange of knowledge and skills will be bidirectional. The owner must transfer everything they know, but at the same time the successor must transfer their explicit knowledge to the owner and the rest of the firm.”

support. Only two companies had resorted to external consultants during their journey. They recognised that they had problems and gaps, but above all, they understood that they did not possess the means to act independently. In the case of another company, the son said that he had repeatedly tried to propose a consultant to his father, but each time the offer was rejected. The other companies excluded this possibility entirely.

This strongly resembled the Titanic effect discussed in the literature: a series of behaviours driven by the belief that one’s company is unsinkable. “We have always done it this way; I do not see why we should change our approach.”

In this case, professionals were significantly helpful. Their job is precisely to support companies, and sometimes they deal with rescuing them from critical situations. Therefore, they have often had to convince owners or boards that their intervention was necessary. To do so, they try to present their intervention differently. In addition to lowering perceived complexity, as already mentioned, they reframe their entry point.

The key point is that structured planning and support for succession are not only necessary in critical situations. It makes just as much sense to adopt them when the company is operating correctly, precisely in order to ensure that it continues to do so with future generations.

They also suggested never becoming involved in supporting companies that are not fully convinced and committed. There must not be any kind of resistance throughout the process, which is precisely why the first phase of alignment is extremely important. Obviously, resistance is not entirely irrational but is often influenced by SEW.

Education is a fundamental aspect of this process. Everyone involved in succession must learn the correct way to approach it. The founder is often the hardest person to reach and the most important one to engage. They need their own formation process, not just as a gatekeeper who approves the successor’s entry, but as an active learner who must externalise their tacit knowledge, confront their resistance to letting go, and understand that the toolkit is designed to help them, not to challenge their legacy. Consultants often identified the owner as the most resistant actor among all parties involved. They have managed their company for decades and, precisely for this reason, they are extremely sceptical when someone from outside tries to tell them how to act better. They are often convinced that they are the only ones capable of managing the company properly. Overcoming this resistance is extremely important.

Still speaking about education, the education of successors is particularly delicate. Professionals were clear: owners who explain everything in advance produce successors who learn nothing. Those who remain silent produce the same result.

The most effective approach, which was also adopted in all the interviewed companies, is to give successors real responsibilities, allowing them to make mistakes and consequently learn from them. Sharing responsibilities and real tasks allows heirs to act autonomously and understand the correct way of operating. It is therefore fundamental to create moments of delegation, failure, and reflection rather than lecture or observe.

Furthermore, the exchange of information must be reciprocal. As already mentioned when discussing contamination, successors are often carriers of novelty. The heir must learn from the incumbent, but at the same time, the heir must educate and transfer knowledge to the incumbent and the rest of the company. In this way, new knowledge is created while the successor legitimises themselves as the future leader.

Finally, it is important that the support system I am trying to design can function in different modes, both autonomously and with the support of professionals. Some companies showed openness toward adopting a tool independently, while others expressed the need for support from qualified professionals, at least during the most critical and complex phases.

Consultants also confirmed this. One of them specifically explained the different service plans offered by his consulting company. They offer three services: an introductory session during which they explain the process to follow and then provide the necessary tools so that the company can proceed autonomously; the provision of tools integrated with periodic meetings, calls, or workshops; or direct integration into the company for about one year as ordinary employees.

The last option is the one that produces the greatest number of successful results. In fact, the consultant effectively becomes an employee of the company, requiring support, working alongside the family and the rest of the organisation for an extended period while ensuring that they learn and adopt the new methodologies and processes proposed. However, the consultant agreed that imagining this type of intervention for a ten-year process would be unrealistic. It would require an enormous amount of time from the consultant, preventing them from dedicating themselves to other companies, and it would also require a major expenditure of resources from the company. For this reason, this option was discarded.

This third round of interviews made it possible to reach a solid foundational output, ready to be further defined and tested through the case study. Starting from an attempt to understand the relevance of the topic, the research progressively refined the succession process and identified the ideal form of support. The feedback confirmed that the process was structurally sound but still needed to integrate the perspective of the real world, becoming more flexible, more accessible, and more open to the emotional dimension of succession. Above all, this round confirmed that succession cannot be addressed through structure alone. What is necessary is to create better conditions for the right conversations to happen.

Three rounds of interviews, conducted across the entire duration of the project, progressively closed the gap between what the literature describes and what succession actually looks like from the inside. The first round established that the problem was real, relevant, and structurally underserved. The second brought lived experience into the picture, the stories, mistakes, and intuitions of owners who had navigated succession without a map, and professionals who had watched others fail to do so. The third tested the theoretical work against the judgment of those who know the domain best, revealing where the process was sound and where it needed to become more flexible, more human, and less academic.

What consistently emerged across all three rounds was the same fundamental gap: between the polished frameworks of research and the messier, more emotionally charged reality of family firms. The literature knows what succession requires. The firms rarely do. And even when they sense that something is missing, they lack the language, the tools, and the structure to address it. Bridging that gap is what the following chapter attempts to do.

"It is almost impossible to give a process that fits everyone, but you can definitely help everyone find their own process."

Chapter 5

Process development

The previous chapters established the theoretical and empirical foundations of this project. Strategic design was defined as a discipline and a way of thinking. The world of family SMEs was mapped in depth, with its dynamics, its vulnerabilities, and the critical moment of succession. The two domains were brought into dialogue, identifying what strategic design has to offer and what family firms need. The field research tested these ideas against reality, through interviews, expert validation, and direct collaboration with practitioners. What this chapter does is translate all of that into something concrete.

This is the chapter where the project stops describing and starts building. Its purpose is to document the development of an ideal succession process, a structured, literature-grounded, and reality-tested framework that maps generational transition in family SMEs from beginning to end. This process is not the final output of the thesis. It is the foundation on which the final output is built: the content before the container, the map before the platform.

The process was developed through three distinct iterations, each building on the previous one and incorporating a new layer of knowledge and validation. The first iteration was constructed entirely from literature, combining the strategic design process established in Chapter 1 with the succession processes identified in the family business literature of Chapter 2. It was dense, detailed, and deliberately ambitious, functioning as a blueprint that captured everything the process needed to contain before any simplification or adaptation could take place. The second iteration integrated the feedback from the third round of interviews, the evaluation round, which revealed that the first version, while structurally sound, was too complex, too linear, and too distant from how succession actually unfolds in real organisations. The third and final iteration emerged from the deepest phase of the project: an extended collaboration with Ferro S.r.l., a manufacturing family firm in Piedmont, through interviews, co-creation sessions, workshops, roleplay, and field visits conducted over the course of a month. This collaboration made it possible to stress-test the process step by step, tool by tool, against the lived experience and practical needs of a real incumbent navigating an approaching succession.

The result is a process that no longer exists only in academic terms. It has been reframed in the language of those who will use it, refined through the friction of real organisational context, and structured in a way that a family firm owner can navigate without design expertise. Understanding succession, mapping it clearly, making it visible, and providing a structured path through it, is the prerequisite for any meaningful support. Literature does not currently offer this in an integrated and accessible form. This chapter is the attempt to fill that gap.

5.1 First process iteration

The ultimate aim of this thesis project is to develop a tool that can support small and medium-sized enterprises during the generational succession process. Before reaching that point, however, it is essential to build a solid foundation. This was first achieved through the first three chapters. This first iteration of the succession process emerges directly from the two literature reviews. By combining the strategic design process established in Chapter 1 with the succession dynamics and determinants identified in Chapter 2, it was possible to produce a first integrated framework, one that relates what the former has to offer in order to address the gaps and criticalities of the latter.

As widely discussed during the literature review and as confirmed through the various interviews, the topic is often neglected, gaining relevance only when a sense of urgency arises due to an imminent succession. This tendency to postpone generational succession is supported by studies showing that approximately 70% of family businesses do not have a formal succession plan (Calabrò, 2021; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). Furthermore, the issue of information is also critical. The few entrepreneurs who want to inform themselves and prepare independently must navigate through a vast amount of information, often difficult to access, complex, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory. Added to this is the cultural distance that separates the highly practical world of family SMEs from the partially abstract world of academia. Structuring a succession process independently proves to be complicated, and companies cannot always afford to rely on consultants or external experts. During the interviews, it emerged that in small contexts like these, it is difficult to allocate budget for external support. There is often a general sense of urgency that determines the allocation of resources. Formal planning is perceived as unnecessary and excessively bureaucratic as the majority of family SMEs tend to prioritise short-term survival over long-term growth (Muriithi & Mwangi, 2023).

The literature itself acknowledges the existence of a wide dispersion and a lack of studies specifically focused on succession approaches (Baltazar et al., 2025). The intention is to highlight how these representations aren't easy to overlap and individually insufficient. The objective is to create a unified and shared vision that can align the different perspectives.

The way in which various sources structure the process may initially appear similar, but a closer analysis reveals that some neglect aspects that are instead explored in depth by others. This is likely because the reference systems used to define them are different. Given that these firms are so heterogeneous, it is inevitable that the way they approach succession is highly context-dependent and varies from one company to another. Research confirms that “there is no single model suitable for all SMEs,” since the effectiveness of each strategy depends closely on contextual alignment and the specific interdependencies between family and business (Le et al., 2025; Ciambotti, 2005).

Researchers often limit themselves to proposing a superficial structure, outlining the phases of a process without the operational details. This aspect was considered fundamental by most interviewees, who stated that having a clear and precise direction would make them more confident in a moment dominated by uncertainty. Current research is not suited to being used as a support tool; it does not take the form of roadmaps, toolkits, or actionable processes to follow. As a result, entrepreneurs find themselves without a concrete guide (Micheli et al., 2018).

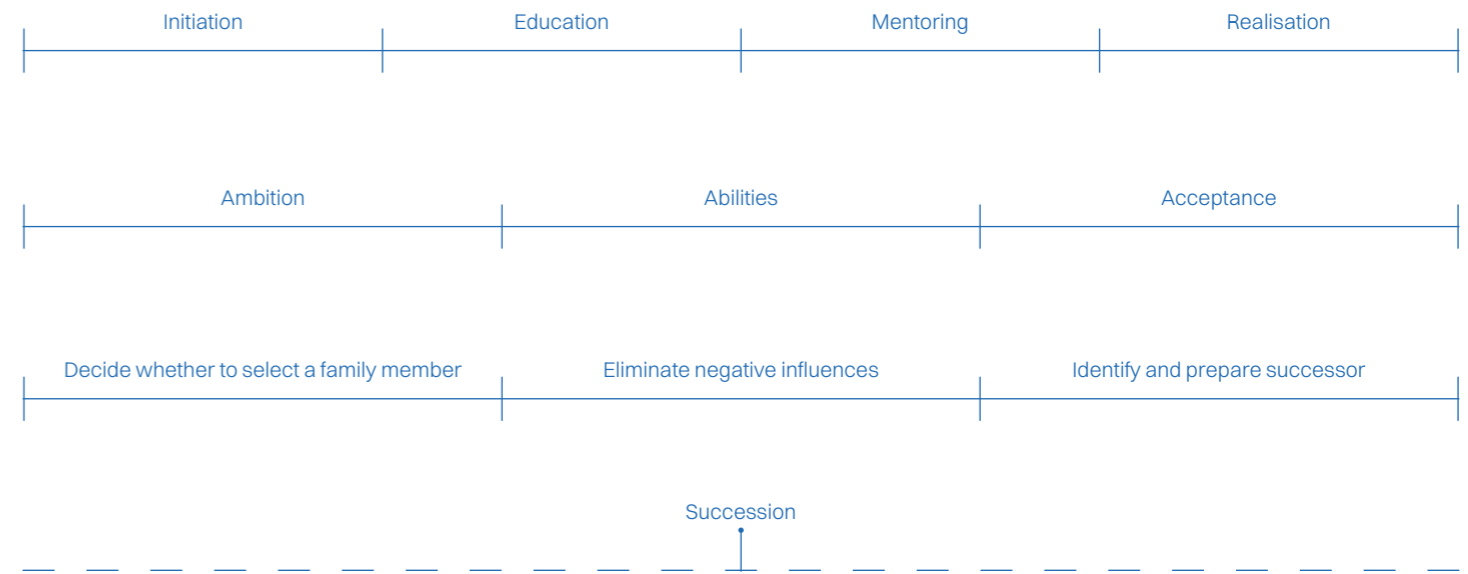


Fig. 21 — Succession processes identified in the literature

5.1.1 Process

The process developed in this first iteration is based on the literature. Specifically, regarding the phases, it was necessary to overlap the different processes identified within the collected material. The most frequent ways in which succession was represented were selected and then synthesised into three scenarios. The fourth process, identified as much more common than one might think, sees succession as a point along the timeline of a firm's life cycle. This representation refers to all those companies in which the transition is not structured in any way and the successor, for various reasons, finds itself taking control of the business and becoming responsible for its destiny. The most common cause is an unexpected and/or premature death that catches the family unprepared. A moment that seemed distant from everyday concerns suddenly confronts them with succession. As for the other processes, these represent the unfolding of events that enable the transfer of power and responsibilities from the incumbent to the successor. All these timelines share an initial phase of alignment and dialogue, and a final moment of consolidation.

This first iteration is developed across multiple levels in order to accurately represent the complexity of succession and potentially serve as a support tool for companies. As in the case of the processes identified in the literature review, here too everything is framed by a preliminary phase of alignment focused on developing awareness and dialogue around the topic, and by a final phase of stabilisation and consolidation, with a focus on monitoring. In between, there are three phases, for a total of five main phases. Each of these is further divided into steps and sub-steps to detail the process.

These steps are not all on the same level; each is positioned on a different layer depending on its main focus. The six layers are: Alignment, Education, Selection, Mentoring, Innovation, and Transition. This structure was subsequently revised in the third iteration based on feedback from field research and co-creation.

It is also important to keep in mind that this entire process must overlap and

be aligned with the normal operational activities of the company. It is implicit that the business must continue to operate normally, following its regular organisational routines.

The entire process is based on the three circles that define the dynamics of family firms (Tagiuri & Davis, 1982): family, ownership, and business. To these three fundamental circles, the key aspect of succession is added, an additional element that helps organise the different layers. Maintaining balance among these four key aspects is essential.

Regarding duration, there is no predefined timeframe. It varies depending on the size of the company and its complexity; some may take five years, while others may take up to twenty-five. There is no exact or optimal duration. It is also important to consider how family dynamics can further increase the complexity of these processes. For this reason, the duration is highly subjective and context-dependent. However, the process mustn't be approached with urgency.

The contribution of strategic design was necessary to provide a certain level of depth and complexity. It is also important to emphasise that, as with all previous results, strategic design is not only embedded in the final output, but also in the processes that made its development possible. Without the key principles of strategic design and its methodologies, it would not have been possible to develop this first iteration of the succession process for family SMEs. Therefore, strategic design is both explicit and tangible, as can be seen in certain steps and sub-steps, but at the same time, it is latent and implicit, as it constitutes the force that connects all the steps, enabling their formation and justifying their order, interconnections, and positioning across the different layers. There is no one-to-one relationship between the two processes. Some steps of strategic design underpin multiple steps within the succession process, while others are not directly connected. However, it is precisely through the integration and synergy between the two domains that this process could take shape.

As already mentioned, this first iteration does not represent a definitive solution, but rather serves as a blueprint for the support tool that will be developed at the end of the project. It has already been built on top of the strategic design process; therefore, it represents an additional step in terms of complexity and completeness.

5.1.2 Alignment

Succession represents a critical and inevitable moment within the life cycle of firms, especially family-owned ones (Calabrò, 2021; Baltazar et al., 2025). For this reason, it should be considered a central and timeless topic; indeed, the inefficiency of this process has serious repercussions not only on the family but also on business partners and on the economic development of the country (Baltazar et al., 2025). It is therefore appropriate that conversations regarding succession, heirs, and the future direction of the company become part of everyday life, without being driven by a sense of urgency due to an imminent transition.

This preliminary phase does not have a precise temporal placement. However, it is of vital importance that this topic is addressed and introduced before the actual succession process begins, in order to avoid situations of haste, chaos, or sudden conflicts that could compromise the integrity of family relationships (Ciambotti, 1991; Dentella, 2025). Ideally, planning should take place throughout the entire life-cycle of a firm, gradually loosening the bond between leader and firm in advance, so as to make the transition less traumatic (Deloitte, 2023; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020).

In this alignment phase, all steps are positioned within the family sphere, one of the three fundamental aspects of the system that characterises family firms (Tagiuri & Davis, 1982). The objectives of this phase are multiple: to create awareness on the topic of succession, define hierarchies and governance, work on family relationships both within and outside the business, and identify a shared vision that can guide the future steps of the company (Calabretta, 2016; Valencia & Pratama, 2024). This vision must be shared by all members, helping to bridge the “generational” and communication gaps that often hinder alignment (Valencia & Pratama, 2024). At the end of this first phase, a direction will be established for both the family and the business to prepare for future events, thereby preventing failure or conflict.

At the beginning, the focus is on creating awareness and mapping the current system of the firm. This involves facilitating conversations to introduce the topic, while at the same time ensuring an understanding of the current system of the company. A useful way to achieve this is by structuring meetings according to the “rule of thirds” (Morosetti, 2025): 1/3 enjoyment, to maintain harmony; 1/3 development of family identity, to strengthen a shared culture; 1/3 sharing of information regarding the business and assets (Morosetti). This first step of the preliminary phase is the ideal moment to implement a design culture. At this stage, the focus is on mapping and open dialogue, two aspects that can be supported by practices of co-creation and visual thinking (Calabretta, 2016). The use of maps, storyboards, and the materialisation of ideas helps to give form to the organisational “dark matter” (Hill, 2012; Micheli et al., 2018). Through the visualisation of future scenarios (foresight), it is possible to reduce the perceived risk for managers, providing them with tools to assess the validity of different paths (Calabretta et al., 2016; Corà et al., 2023), with the aim of both promoting collaboration within the firm and the family and facilitating understanding of the system through the visualisation of the involved actors.

It is then important to define both willingness, as the favourable disposition or intention of the family to engage in distinctive behaviours guided by non-economic goals (Chrisman et al., 2015; De Massis et al., 2014), thereby identifying the preferable future, and ability, understood as the power, discretion, and latitude that the family has in directing, allocating, or disposing of business resources (Chrisman et al., 2015; De Massis et al., 2014). These two dimensions are necessary but individually insufficient conditions: only their coexistence allows the firm to translate potential into concrete action (Chrisman et al., 2015; De Massis et al., 2014). Defining ability, therefore, means establishing the direction, that is, “how we can get there,” and mapping the resources, that is, “what do we need to get there.”

This leads to two possible approaches: a causal one (formal logic), which consists of focusing on a predefined objective by selecting the best means to achieve it through rational analysis and formal task planning (Valencia & Pratama, 2024); or effectuation (intuitive logic), which starts from a set of available means and explores the possible effects that can be created. This logic is particularly effective in managing uncertainty and contingencies typical of generational succession (Bloemen-Bekx et al., 2021).

The organisation must balance rational planning with intuition to set goals that are both ambitious and achievable (Bloemen-Bekx et al., 2021; Lafley et al., 2013).

Finally, it is necessary to define the structure of both the family and the business, deciding the distribution of power, both in the present and in the future. To ensure stability, the literature suggests a “three-pillar” architecture that clearly separates spheres of influence (Morosetti, 2019). It is also necessary to determine the

structure through which the company's performance will be monitored, through management control systems that facilitate the legitimacy of the successor and mutual trust between generations (Ciambotti, 2005).

All of this will be formalised in a Family Pact, a written and documented representation that establishes the future of the firm and the path required to achieve it, codifying the rules of the game (merit criteria, remuneration, and transfer of ownership) to prevent conflicts before they arise (Lozzi, 2025; Morosetti, 2019).

5.1.3 Growth & Education

During this phase, the focus shifts from planning the future of the firm to the concrete development and education of future generations (Valencia & Pratama, 2024). Whether they are firstborn children, sons or daughters of the current owner, or other younger family members. As already stated previously, the only criterion whose effectiveness is proven is meritocracy, avoiding the so-called "primogeniture trap," which often leads to an arbitrary choice based solely on tradition and to a consequent decline in post-succession performance (Calabrò, 2021; AUB Observatory, 2026). This long training phase aims to identify, according to a set of objective and competence-based criteria, the best successor (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; AIDAF, 2024).

A good practice often recommended and promoted in the literature concerns the early involvement of potential successors (Baltazar et al., 2025). Those who appear to be tangible candidates for the future of the firm should be involved already during adolescence, approximately between 16 and 18 years old (Morosetti, 2025). It is indeed of utmost importance that these individuals are exposed to the family business and entrepreneurial context from a young age, involving them in decision-making processes, organisational routines, meetings, and practical aspects of work (Morosetti, 2025; Romano & D'Allura, 2025).

This has two fundamental benefits: first, it allows the different heirs to learn how the firm operates even before becoming an integral part of it, giving them an advantage and facilitating the future mentoring phase (Valencia & Pratama, 2024). A solid knowledge base developed over time accelerates learning at a later stage. Another key aspect concerns credibility in relation to company members. The involvement of an heir who has never had anything to do with the family business can be poorly perceived and trigger a "credibility gap" difficult to overcome (Romano & D'Allura, 2025). Without early involvement, the successor risks being perceived only as an entitled owner rather than a responsible steward who has earned leadership in the field (Morosetti, 2019; AIDAF, 2024).

Furthermore, a sense of belonging and an emotional attachment to the firm develop, which the literature defines as Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2019). This affective endowment represents the emotional value that owners derive from the business and is fundamental for ensuring transgenerational continuity (Gast et al., 2018; Maseda et al., 2025). This attachment provides a high level of ability to innovate (Chrisman et al., 2015). Through willingness, that is, the family's intention to engage in distinctive behaviours driven by non-economic goals, this ability can be converted into real outputs, transforming the successor into a true "catalyst of change" capable of modernising the firm (Chrisman et al., 2015; Calabrò et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of involvement in the firm, it mustn't become all-encompassing. Potential successors have both the right and the duty to develop outside the firm, building their own independent professional identity (AIDAF, 2024).

It is therefore important that they study, graduate, and ideally pursue both a bachelor's and a master's degree. It is equally important that they gain work experience in environments external to the family business for at least one year (AIDAF, 2024).

At the end of this long and varied training process, potential successors will have acquired numerous skills and developed their own personality and values. This education allows successors, once reintegrated into the business environment, to possess a substantial cultural background that is essential for fostering growth and innovation (Hauck & Prügl, 2015). This will be transferred later in a phase of bidirectional knowledge exchange.

5.1.4 Selection & Visioning

This phase perhaps constitutes the real beginning of the actual succession process, the moment in which heirs are reaching the end of their individual training path in order to return to the company (Marler et al, 2017). All the experiences and studies they have undertaken in the years prior to this moment have contributed to making them who they are. The organisation, therefore, enters the critical phase of Successor Selection (Valencia & Pratama, 2024). Potential successors will be evaluated on the basis of some previously defined criteria with the aim of identifying the best fit for the company on a meritocratic basis. The studies completed, such as obtaining a Master's degree or MBA (AUB Observatory, 2026), the results achieved, the work experiences gained outside the family firm (Valencia & Pratama, 2024), and other criteria will compose the evaluation system, tangible and objective.

The key contribution of strategic design in this phase lies in the exploration of future scenarios through the practice of "foresight" (Corà et al., 2023). For this and many other decisions, creating future visions represents a fundamental resource for the firm, as it allows the exploration of different scenarios without an immediate commitment of resources (Calabretta et al., 2016). It is therefore possible to estimate what the impact of each individual might be following their entry into the company, by evaluating the different characteristics and potential of each in relation to the values and current direction of the firm.

Once the final successor has been identified, a more detailed definition of the scenarios developed in the preliminary phase will begin; these will be tailored to the skills, knowledge, and experiences of the selected successor.

At the end of this selection process, the actual insertion of the heir into the company begins, determining their role and defining their skills and competencies. The intention is to avoid any type of conflict; for this reason, it is fundamental that a shared commitment is developed by the family and the firm, since the satisfaction of all stakeholders is a pillar for a successful succession (Baltazar et al., 2025; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2019). This choice must, in fact, be positively received from all points of view. There must be no resistance from employees and staff, nor from the rest of the family; this will likely be possible when, by following the rules of the game defined in the first phase, the most meritorious candidate is selected, favouring their acceptance as a legitimate leader (Marler et al, 2017; Romano & D'Allura, 2025).

At this point, the successor will have to complete their training path within the company. If the previous phase has been followed rigorously, the candidate should already possess a considerable body of knowledge derived from early involvement in the firm (Baltazar et al., 2025). Having a solid base, learning will now be easier. It is essential that a deep and thorough understanding of the business and family system takes place; these steps are the equivalent of the first phase of

Systemic Comprehension in the strategic design process (Auernhammer, 2024). To fully understand the context, the successor will have to study the business context, the family context, the market, the customers, and all the stakeholders involved. Everything will then be mapped and structured in a concrete way that can facilitate understanding and provide a clear picture of the current situation of the firm, which will be equally fundamental for the owner and the rest of the members. This mapping constitutes an important milestone, the moment in which the successor begins to be concretely integrated into the company.

The transfer of tacit knowledge from the owner then gradually begins, a process that will continue for a long time during the so-called “joint reign” or period of coexistence, which on average lasts nine years (Marler et al, 2017; AIDAF, 2024).

5.1.5 Mentoring

This phase within the literature and the research world is often labelled as the most critical one that cannot be dispensed with (Calabrò, 2021). This period of “generational overlap” is in fact a physiological and inevitable moment that marks the future and the very survival of the firm (Baltazar et al., 2025; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). As can also be observed from the analyses of the AUB Observatory (2026), the period of “joint reign” or mentorship, if carried out correctly, produces tangible increases in company performance and revenue once the successor takes power: the data in fact indicate an increase of 8.5% in ROA and as much as 29 percentage points in the annual revenue growth rate compared to successions that occurred without overlap (AUB Observatory, 2026). This step is essential because, without a good period of coexistence between owner and successor, it is difficult for information, know-how, and skills to be transmitted effectively and then translated into good future performance (Romano & D’Allura, 2025; Ciambotti, 1991). Furthermore, if the heir is not properly educated in this phase, learning everything necessary, they will then face great difficulties when they find themselves ruling independently: the concentration of power in the founder and the lack of effective delegation are, in fact, among the main causes of failure in generational transition (Deloitte, 2023; Ciambotti, 2005).

It is also a fundamental period for the successor to build a reputation and legitimacy within the company and among stakeholders, bridging the “credibility gap” through the transfer of trust in the strategic relationships historically built by the founder (Romano & D’Allura, 2025; Valencia & Pratama, 2024). In this phase, the successor will initially take on a marginal role as an advisor, since they do not yet hold full responsibility; the outgoing leader still retains full authority (Marler et al, 2017).

As already mentioned several times, it is extremely important that the successor has gained substantial experience outside the family firm before being involved (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; AIDAF, 2024). This is because during this mentoring phase, the exchange of knowledge and skills will be bidirectional (Romano & D’Allura, 2025). The owner, to ensure the continuity of the firm, will have to transfer everything they know (tacit knowledge, intuition, and historical values), but at the same time, the successor will have to transfer their explicit knowledge to the owner and to the rest of the firm (Romano & D’Allura, 2025; Baltazar et al., 2023). During their individual development, they will have acquired a series of modern competences, such as digital awareness and ICT, which are necessary for the firm to achieve a long-term competitive advantage (Maseda et al., 2025; Romano & D’Allura, 2025). These new skills, if implemented, will allow the company to evolve, innovate, and keep up with the times. The bidirectional exchange of

information is therefore a critical point of mentoring: it is necessary to avoid the “incumbent’s shadow,” that is, the visceral identification of the founder with the firm that leads to reluctance to relinquish control (Song et al., 2022; Marler et al., 2017). The owner must, in fact, show authority as an instructor, but must be equally humble, as they too will have much to learn from the new generation. Although the successor does not yet hold the primary role, their opinions, advice, and ideas must be listened to and tested (Hauck & Prüggl, 2015; Romano & D’Allura, 2025). The goal is to help them understand which ideas are correct and which are not, thus building the appropriate mindset. Through prototyping or other methods, ideas can be tested quickly. In this way, the successor will develop a culture of testing and exploration, based on tangible parameters and experiments rather than on “gut feeling” (Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018). Power dynamics will gradually evolve, shifting from the incumbent to the successor through a process of socialisation, until they are reversed in the final phase (Valencia & Pratama, 2024).

The actual integration of the successor into this whole process is the key moment to innovate and to exploit this overlap to seize new opportunities (Hauck & Prüggl, 2015). The literature highlights how the NextGen can act as a “catalyst for change,” introducing that “youthful freshness” necessary to relaunch company values in a modern key (Calabrò et al., 2019; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). It is therefore appropriate to explore future scenarios, carry out diagnosis and scanning of the problems characterising the current context, and then act accordingly. In this phase, the quintessential iterative design process is introduced, namely design prototype test and repeat. Strategic design enables effective resource allocation, thus identifying the most effective and efficient way to evolve and to solve various problems (Micheli et al., 2018). Through the implementation of its principles and methods, the firm is able to experiment and explore without taking unnecessary risks, using pilots and small-scale prototypes before committing substantial resources (Calabretta et al., 2016; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018).

In parallel, the involvement and commitment of the family towards the succession and the future direction of the firm remain constant (Baltazar et al., 2025). Since this is a dynamic process unfolding over time (Marler et al, 2017; Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004), it is essential to maintain constant moments of dialogue, according to what was defined in the alignment phase. It is demonstrated that the level of preparation of successors and the quality of relationships among family members positively impact company performance (Baltazar et al., 2025).

5.1.6 Transition

This final phase of the long succession process represents a moment of testing and consolidation, identifiable as the final stage of the “intergenerational transfer” in which the handover of management and ownership is fully realised (Valencia & Pratama, 2024). It is also the phase that could probably last the longest, since, once power balances are reversed, nothing prevents the former leader from remaining involved in the long term. This tendency is confirmed by demographic data, which show how many Italian leaders remain at the head of the firm well beyond retirement age, often transferring full control around the age of 75 (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; AUB Observatory, 2026).

By now, all the necessary knowledge and know-how have been transferred from the owner to the successor through a process of socialisation and learning that has lasted for years (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; Romano & D’Allura, 2025); it is therefore time to reverse the balances. If previously the successor held a marginal role as an advisor, now it will be the former owner who takes on a role of advisor

and support, often assuming the respected role of “symbol” or “ambassador” of the firm (Cadieux, 2007; Marler et al., 2017). Most of the responsibilities and powers are, in fact, transferred to the successor, who must now demonstrate operational initiative and the ability to make decisions independently (Marler et al., 2017).

This transition is, of course, gradual and slow, to prevent the heir from being caught unprepared and the owner from being abruptly excluded, resulting in a destabilisation of the organisation (Ciambotti, 1991; Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). It is also essential that the leader remains present in the firm to continue providing important advice and guidance, without, however, overriding or overshadowing the heir. The ultimate goal is still to let go. From this moment on, the successor becomes the point of reference also for all external stakeholders; they are, in fact, introduced to clients, partners, and suppliers as the new “leader,” definitively bridging the “credibility gap” and inheriting the social and trust capital built by the predecessor (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; Romano & D’Allura, 2025).

As long as the incumbent is alive, it will be almost impossible to achieve a complete and detached withdrawal; ultimately, the company represents a part of themselves and their family. What is important is to avoid resistance to relinquishing control. For this reason, taking on marginal roles can provide the opportunity to remain involved without an abrupt interruption, but excessive involvement must be avoided, as it could hinder the successor and confuse internal and external stakeholders through the creation of conflicting “voices of authority” (Marler et al., 2017). The emotional attachment to the firm (SEW) developed by entrepreneurs during their working life can become a major obstacle in this phase, making them reluctant to leave their position due to the fear of losing their identity and the social status derived from the business (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2019). That is why the change must be gradual, allowing the senior to find new stimuli in extra-work or social activities (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; Morosetti, 2025).

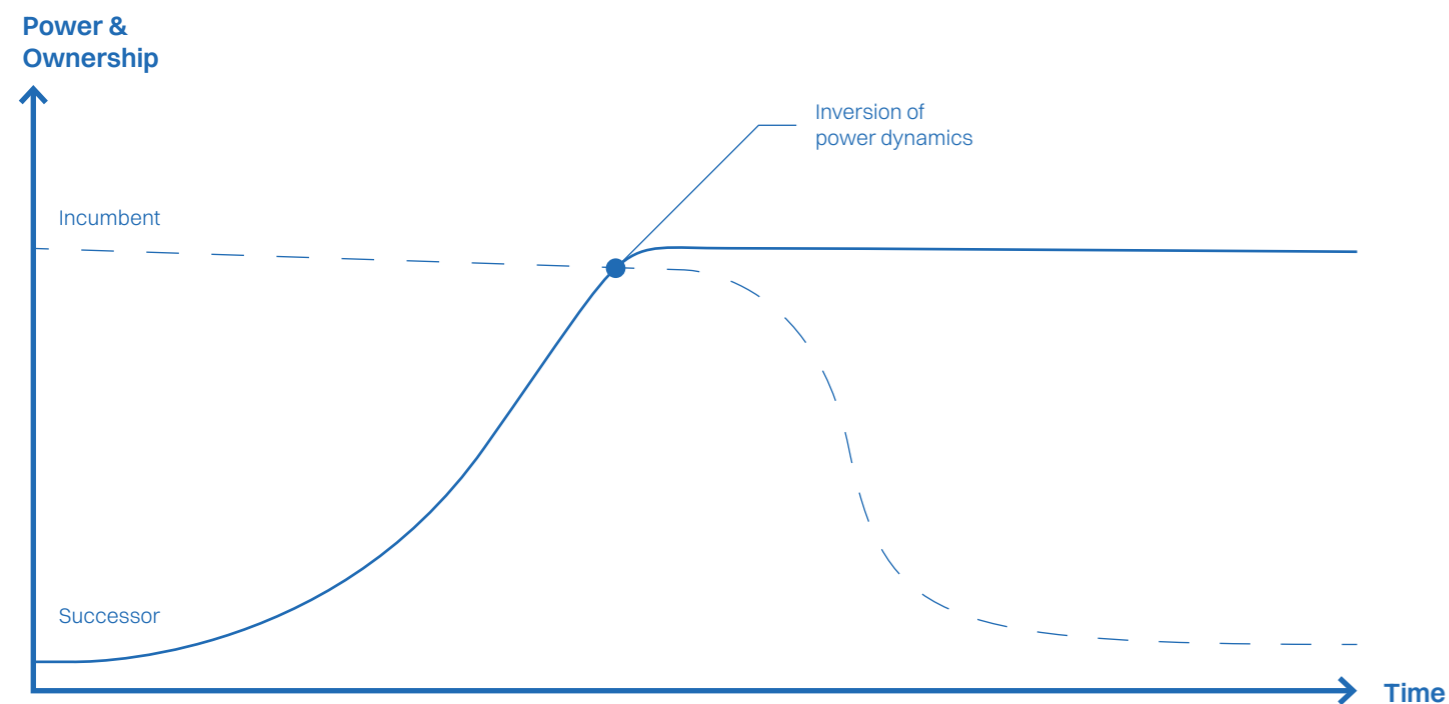


Fig. 22 — Authority and involvement of incumbent and successor across the succession process

Family support is extremely important, both towards the successor and the incumbent, as the first will be formally in charge of the entirety of the firm for the first time, and the second will gradually begin to step away from the company and its routines. Dialogue is, in this phase as in all others, an essential tool to support the maintenance of a shared commitment, ensuring that the future vision of the firm is supported by all members and that the family identity remains linked to the long-term survival of the business (Valencia & Pratama, 2024; Maseda et al., 2025).

5.2 Second Iteration

These three rounds of interviews contributed to a significant improvement in the understanding of succession, guiding me toward the development of a solution grounded in academic literature, expert knowledge, and lived owner experience.

The first iteration emerged at the conclusion of the synthesis phase, grounded entirely in the two literature reviews and informed by the preliminary understanding developed during the first round of interviews. The second and third rounds then provided the field-based feedback and expert evaluation that made it possible to rework the process into a second iteration, more flexible, more accessible, and more aligned with how succession actually unfolds in real organisations.

Following the subsequent rounds, I developed a deeper understanding of both the actual dynamics within manufacturing SMEs in the Piedmont entrepreneurial context and succession processes more broadly. Feedback from experts and business owners helped me refine the work, removing certain elements while incorporating new ones.

After a substantial amount of information was collected, the succession process was reworked, producing a second iteration. The aim was to represent real-world contexts more accurately, integrate all feedback received, and reduce the perceived complexity of the model.

The first iteration was structured into five phases distributed across six different layers, rich in content but undoubtedly too dense in terms of information. The perceived complexity was very high. Especially in a preliminary phase where the process is presented to the companies involved, showing such a dense representation risks discouraging engagement before the process even begins.

The second iteration therefore maintains the same five phases, as they are aligned with both experts’ opinions and business owners’ perspectives. However, these are now distributed across five layers. In addition, the total number of steps was reduced from 33 to 18. This is a drastic reduction that does not reflect a decrease in depth or structural complexity at all. Some steps were removed as they were redundant, while others overlapping were merged. Macro steps containing sub-steps were also introduced. Each group reduces the step count while preserving the underlying substance.

The possibility of involving an expert in the process was also introduced. Companies often operate independently, but this is not always the best approach. As experts confirmed, the support of a professional can significantly increase the success rate. For this reason, I identified specific steps where external support is strongly recommended. This helps companies better understand the journey they are about to undertake and guides them throughout the process.

First iteration

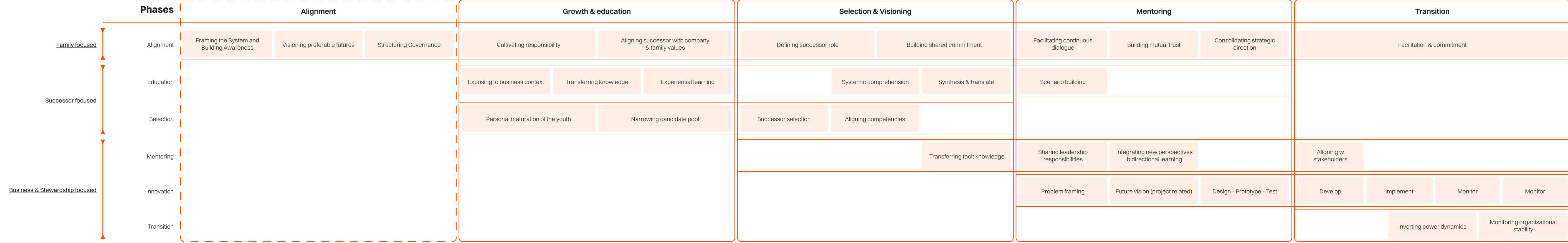


Fig. 23 — Succession process: first iteration

Second iteration

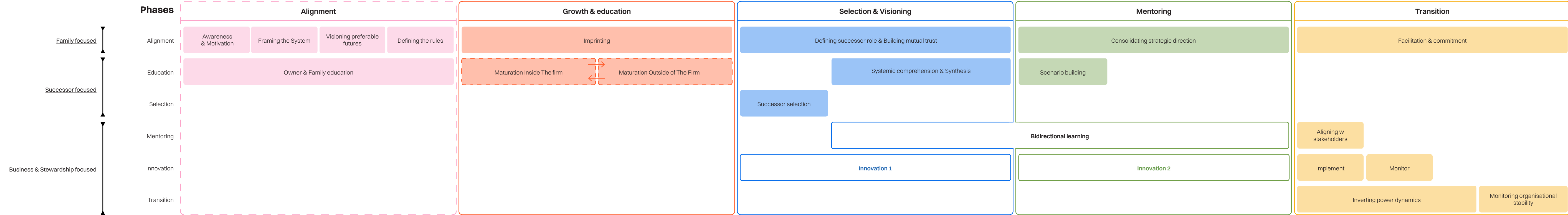


Fig. 24 — Succession process: second iteration

5.3 Case Study - The company

Once the theoretical foundation of succession within family-owned businesses was consolidated, it was possible to approach the real world. The literature reviews made it possible to understand how the academic world addresses the topic, and by analysing the current state of the literature, various gaps were identified. The three rounds of interviews documented in the previous chapter made it possible to test and progressively refine the theoretical framework against real-world perspectives. However, interviews alone could not provide the depth of contextual understanding that the development of the final tool required. To gain an even deeper understanding, it was necessary to involve a company in a more long-term and collaborative way. For the purpose of the research, it came down to a manufacturing company in the target region, Piedmont, that could dedicate a significant amount of time to working together towards the development of a solution capable of supporting firms in succession. The company in question emerged based on a series of factors, first among these its proximity to succession. Secondly, for reasons of familiarity that facilitated the collaboration.

The first part consisted of fully exploring the company's history, its roots, its path, its evolutions and failures. Then it came to learning how the succession from the first to the second generation, which currently manages the company, developed, to then shift the focus to the next generation and its entry. On these occasions, there were interviews, but also discussions and teaching moments during which these sessions also provided instruction on the specific functioning of the company and, more generally, on the territorial entrepreneurial landscape. The company owner was in turn instructed, sharing concepts and notions from the literature, both related to strategic design and succession studies. This reciprocal exchange of information allowed for a further refinement of what had been produced, leading to the development of a third iteration of the process and to the identification of a final output for support.

The aim of the case study is multiple. First, to understand in depth the history, structure and dynamics of the involved company, in order to evaluate how the developed succession process applies to a specific and real context. Second, to collect direct feedback on the second iteration of the process, identifying what works, what appears excessively complex or abstract, and what is missing. Third, to use this feedback to develop a third iteration of the process, more aligned with the reality of manufacturing micro-enterprises in the territory. But above all, to develop an actual support tool for this critical phase of the lifecycle of family SMEs.

The focus of the thesis is on family-owned businesses in the Piedmont region, specifically manufacturing ones. A context, according to the literature (Carneiro et al., 2025), particularly resistant to the implementation of new processes such as those of strategic design. It is, in fact, documented how these companies are often rooted in tradition and frequently fall into the category of late entrants or laggards (depending on the classification system) when it comes to innovation. Even in the interviews with experts, it emerged that, especially companies of this category, with older owners, are not inclined to include consultants, external managers or practices such as design. Although in the interviews, an openness to change was found, this trend persists on a larger scale.

For this reason, this category of firms was the most interesting to investigate. Moreover, it is highly likely that by intervening and designing for the most resistant sector, it may become easier to involve other types of companies as well.

The case study was developed over the course of several weeks. During this period, multiple interviews were conducted: with the previous firm owner, the

current one and members of the family. They shared the company's history, then moved on to the previous succession. Feedback related to tools and personal ideas was gathered as well through several workshops and co-creation sessions. This made it possible to consolidate knowledge on the topic of succession and to proceed towards the development of a solution.

Company	Ferro S.r.l.
Sector	Metal carpentry - metal structures, buildings, gates, and general metal-working
Size	7 (micro-enterprise)
Generation	Second generation (Ezio)
Succession stage	Advanced pre-succession. The children have had early involvement and understand how the company functions, but no formal successor has been identified; the future direction depends on their choices.
Succession type	Not yet defined
Operations	Mainly regional (Piedmont), with national and international projects across neighbouring European countries
Business model	Custom metalworking and manufacturing (B2C and B2B)
Family involvement	2 operationally involved - Ezio and his wife; 0 non-operational family shareholders
Governance	None structured - no corporate governance tools, no family constitution or protocol
External support	Financial consultant involved in recent years, with recognised contributive value

Tab. 3 — Company profile: Ferro S.r.l.

5.3.1 Birth

The company originated in the second half of the last century. Renato, the father of the current owner, worked in a small sheet metal stamping company made up of three people. In 1967, when the owner retired, Renato took over the business together with a partner. At that time, the company mainly focused on maintenance and small iron structures, operating mainly in the local area and relying on a few large clients. Following an unfortunate event, there was a break with one of the main clients on which a large part of the work depended, leaving the company without orders for several months. Looking back, this experience marked the first major lesson for the company, highlighting the importance of always diversifying clients to avoid critical dependency situations.

After the partner left, Renato continued on his own and struggled to keep the business alive. In the 1980s, it was reopened under a new name, with new partners and a new organisational structure, with the aim of recovering from the difficult period. However, once again, the collaboration did not succeed, and he remained on his own.

1967

Renato takes over the company with a partner

1980s

Company reopened under new name after difficult period. Renato continues alone.

1988-89

Ezio joins permanently after high school. Simple employee, no decision-making power. Start of Growth and Education phase.

Early 1990s

Renato gradually begins to trust Ezio. Ezio starts being involved in decisions. Incumbent shadow begins to loosen.

1993-1998

Staff grows from 2 to 4. Mentoring phase intensifies.

1996-97

Ezio takes operational control. First power shift. Start of Selection and Transition overlap.

2002

New facility built. 80% shares transferred to Ezio. Formal transfer of ownership. Peak of Transition phase.

2014-15

Renato retires. Transition complete.

In this difficult context, the role of the current owner in the family business began. Ezio, the eldest male child, found himself having to make a difficult choice at a very young age, a choice that over time proved to be the best one for the future of the company. Around the age of 15, while completing his diploma, he began working in the company during the summer periods. Once he finished high school, the situation was still critical for the company; help was needed. Ezio's sister was still too young at the time, and, furthermore, there was no financial possibility to fund Ezio's university studies. Thus, shortly after graduating, between 1988 and 1989, he joined the company permanently.

In the early years, Renato still did not fully trust the boy and often fell into the negative behaviours identified in the literature. He did not assign important tasks, did not give responsibilities, and did not fully train his son. Over time, however, the situation evolved. Ezio began to earn his father's respect and trust by proving himself to be a good worker and a capable successor. After a few years, he therefore began to be involved in decision-making processes.

Despite the good family dynamics, Ezio and Renato were still the only ones working in the company, often at an intense pace and even during weekends. With the increase in workload, this situation was becoming unsustainable. Large clients were acquired that ensured a constant flow of work, allowing them to increase staff in the workshop and continue to grow.

At the time of his entry, Ezio was a simple employee, assigned to perform tasks without any decision-making power. Over time, however, he began to take on more and more responsibility, growing in credibility and experience, until in 1996 he finally took control of the family business.

The father was by then exhausted; he had spent years struggling to keep the business alive, and now that things were improving, it was finally time to rest. Ezio, on the other hand, proved increasingly hungry, proactive and willing. In the early 2000s, with a further increase in workload, the need to expand became clear. The shed where his father had worked for more than 40 years no longer allowed the company to meet the ever-growing demand. Finding a new space was particularly difficult, but after a long search, Ezio managed to build a new facility around 2002.

This step forward was vital for the company, representing the biggest turning point since Ezio's entry. The space increased from 100 square meters to well

over 1000, making it possible to expand both the number of employees and machines. Obviously, this was a very costly and risky investment. From that moment on, the company was once again restructured organizationally; the company was divided between father and son, with 80% of the shares owned by Ezio.

After this transfer, constant growth began that continues to this day. Investments were made in machinery and technology in order to keep up and remain up to date. The number of employees increased to over 10, and clients became larger, more diversified, and located outside the local territory.

5.3.2 Second generation

During his time in the company, Ezio confirmed that working alongside his father was essential, which in the literature is defined as mentoring. This allowed him to develop fundamental skills, both from an operational and from a financial management perspective. By adding his modern vision, he enabled the company to evolve; he has always pushed for the purchase of new machinery, for the achievement of ambitious goals, and for hard work. This led to excellent results over time.

He says he strongly identifies with what is presented in the literature, especially regarding incumbent shadow. In the early stages, due to his strong proactiveness, he constantly had to fight to make his voice heard. He repeatedly proposed improving and speeding up company processes, but the father was often reluctant to change the way he had always worked, especially on the advice of a young man who had just joined the company. The "we have always done it this way" mindset is a common phenomenon, analysed in the literature and confirmed during the various interview rounds. A significant example was the arrival of computers; Ezio was one of the first to introduce them in the company, but he had to argue extensively with his father.

This tendency toward innovation and updating was maintained over the years and delivered strong results. Despite the low rate of technological obsolescence typical of the sector's machinery, he believes the company must continuously evolve in order to remain competitive.

In parallel with technological growth, the operational structure also evolved. Initially, there were only two of them; then in 1993, a third employee joined, in 1998, they became four, and in 2002, with the relocation, five. In 2014, the company reached nine employees, and then gradually decreased to the current six. This reduction was a strategic choice linked to the difficulty of finding qualified personnel and the desire to maintain high-quality standards. Ezio preferred to work with fewer but more competent people rather than increasing quantity at the expense of quality.

Renato retired between 2014 and 2015. Until that moment, the transfer of power had occurred gradually, without abrupt breaks. Between 2000 and 2002, the main shift in decision-making balance took place, with Ezio taking on increasing responsibility. Initially, there was a lack of trust, but thanks to his capabilities, Ezio was able to gain credibility and overcome it. In the final years of his presence in the company, Renato mainly played a supporting role as an advisor.

5.3.3 Succession

Through an initial extended session, the company's history and its evolution

Fig. 25 — Company timeline and key milestones

over the years were explored in detail. The following session focused on an in-depth analysis of the succession process, starting from the very first moment in which Ezio became part of the family business.

The analysis of the succession process will be carried out based on the five phases identified following the literature review and consolidated during the interviews. An ideal succession process should follow a structure divided into five main phases: alignment, growth and education, selection and visioning, mentoring, and transition. The following section will examine how the process developed in comparison to the ideal model in order to identify both the mistakes and the strengths. The aim is to identify how the company should move in the future in order to evolve and welcome the next generation while avoiding repeating past mistakes.

5.3.4 Alignment

Starting from the beginning, the company was in a particularly complex and fragile situation. During the years in which Renato was trying to survive, there was no planning for the future of the business. As often happens in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises, the focus was exclusively on the present, characterised by urgencies and critical situations that prevailed over the development of a structured path. The goal was to survive, not to grow.

This sense of urgency inevitably led the company to neglect some fundamental aspects. There were, in fact, no moments of dialogue, planning, or visualisation. The first alignment phase of the ideal model, dedicated to creating awareness, defining a shared vision, and structuring the rules of the game, never took place. The involvement of the son did not emerge from a structured conversation about the future direction of the business, but rather from the practical need for a second pair of hands in the workshop.

The results of this major gap were concrete and measurable. First of all, there was no definition of a family pact, no formal entry criteria, and no definition of roles between family and business. Governance has remained informal until today; just as Ezio did not have dialogues about succession in the past, he is not having them now either. Growing up in a company that completely ignored those kinds of dynamics did not allow him to develop and integrate them, meaning that the mistakes of the past are still influencing the present. Strategic decisions are taken by Ezio with the occasional involvement of his wife, without any structured mechanism defining who decides what and according to which criteria.

The most significant result of this absence is that the entire succession process from the first to the second generation depended almost exclusively on the quality of the personal relationship between Renato and Ezio. The success of the business was subordinated to their relationship. When the relationship was solid, the process moved forward. When the father resisted change, the process stalled. There was, and still is, no formal mechanism capable of compensating for relational tensions or guaranteeing the continuity of the process independently from personal dynamics. Their succession worked because father and son, despite the resistance, maintained a positive relationship. However, this is a fragile foundation. In a family context characterised by deeper tensions, with multiple heirs competing, or with an incumbent less willing to give up space, the same structureless process would almost certainly have failed.

Comparing this situation with the ideal model, the gap is evident. The alignment phase not only serves to produce a document formally stating the rules,

but rather to establish the psychological and relational conditions that make the development of the entire process possible. Without shared awareness, without a jointly defined vision, and without preventive rules, every subsequent phase of the process depends on random and unplanned variables. In the Ferro case, these variables happened to work in favour of the company. However, the literature and the interviews confirm that this is an exception.

5.3.5 Growth and education

This phase is characterised by an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, Ezio's early involvement constitutes one of the reasons why he has been able to carry the company forward throughout all these years; his maturation within the company therefore happened successfully. On the other hand, the part concerning maturation outside the company was missing, meaning that the aspect of contamination was never realised. Ezio, therefore, had the opportunity to develop a series of fundamental competencies from a young age, but at the same time, he was not able to study or undertake work experiences elsewhere.

Although early involvement was the correct move, it is important to remember that it happened out of necessity rather than through deliberate choice. This confirms what was previously stated. Often, due to fortunate circumstances, the right thing is done, but it remains a fragile system. Renato had not planned to involve Ezio at the age of 15; he simply needed help. Yet, accidentally, he replicated one of the practices most recommended by the literature and confirmed by the interviews. Ezio learned the business from the inside at a moment when he was still young enough to do so without role-related pressure. He understood how processes worked, got to know the clients, and developed a sense of belonging that motivated him even during the most difficult moments. This also helped the maturation of internal credibility, which contributed to Ezio becoming a respected leader today.

The phase of maturation outside the company, fundamental for the aspect of contamination, was completely absent. Ezio did not study beyond high school, did not work elsewhere, and did not develop a professional identity independent from the family business. This absence is often interpreted as a missed opportunity for the individual, but the repercussions also affect the company.

During the interviews with other business owners, the importance of this step emerged. Some current owners explained how, despite having studied something distant from the company's area of expertise, they were able to provide a concrete and essential contribution. In some cases, there was a shift into another market or a specialisation in a specific direction. This involved a modification of business dynamics and processes, starting from the stimulus provided by the contamination brought by the new generation.

In this case, the company evolved along a predetermined path. The type of work, the reference market, and the operational model remained almost unchanged. Only in recent years has a slight shift started to occur. However, Ezio himself recognises that things could have gone differently. Nevertheless, he has no regrets of any kind; the company was able to fully seize the opportunities it had available and make the best out of them. There has always been incremental growth. Having now developed this awareness, it will be fundamental not to repeat the same mistake with the future generation.

This is not a negative judgment on Ezio's actions, since he made rational decisions under difficult conditions. Rather, it is an empirical confirmation of one of

the founding principles of the ideal succession process. External contamination is a structurally necessary element to catalyse innovation processes during succession. Otherwise, continuity is produced without transformation.

Looking at the next generation, this gap paradoxically offers an extraordinary opportunity. It gives the company the possibility to make a significant step forward by implementing the new knowledge brought by the younger generation.

5.3.6 Succession & Selection

The selection and succession phase in Ferro represents an interesting case to analyse because it apparently contradicts some of the fundamental principles of the ideal process, yet it still produced a positive outcome.

The selection did not actually take place. There was no evaluation process, no meritocratic criteria were defined, and no pool of candidates was created for comparison. Renato had two children, Ezio and a sister who was still too young to be involved in the company, which is why the choice fell on the only available option. Primogeniture, which the literature identifies as one of the factors most frequently associated with problematic successions, was in this case the only criterion applied, not because of ideological conviction, but because there were no alternatives.

All the elements that the ideal process considers non-negotiable in this phase were therefore missing. No evaluation of competences. No meritocratic audit. No definition of roles in relation to the three circles of the model by Tagiuri & Davis (1982). No collective commitment was built through a structured conversation. The succession developed naturally rather than in the structured way it ideally should have.

A second critical element must also be added: Ezio's initial motivation was not passion for the business, but economic necessity. This is exactly the risk that experts and the literature identify as potentially harmful, since a successor who enters the business out of inertia tends to replicate the past without renewing it.

And yet, the process worked. Ezio progressively developed a genuine sense of belonging, an attachment to the company that over time became intrinsic motivation. The initial necessity transformed into a retrospective choice; looking back, Ezio recognises that this forced situation ultimately proved to be the best decision for the future of the business. This is an interesting phenomenon that the literature on SEW helps explain: prolonged exposure to the company, participation in its growth, and the sharing of difficult moments generated an emotional attachment that did not exist at the moment of entry but gradually consolidated over time.

This represents an interesting discovery for the ideal process. Motivation does not necessarily need to precede involvement in the company, but can instead mature over time, ideally during the growth and education phase.

Ezio was given the right space to grow, to develop a sense of responsibility, and to cultivate a passion for this work, factors that allowed the company to find itself today in a significantly better situation compared to its starting point. This also happened thanks to his father, who, although stubborn, slowly granted his son freedom and responsibility. If Renato had maintained full control until the very end, Ezio would probably not have developed these characteristics.

The difference compared to the ideal process, however, remains significant. In the absence of explicit meritocratic criteria, the risk is that selection depends entirely on availability. In this case, it turned out to be the winning choice. It is not possible to apply this system to other companies while expecting the same result.

It was Ezio's determination that guaranteed success.

In contexts with multiple heirs, moreover, this approach generates conflict. Choosing the oldest heir instead of the most suitable one risks creating dissatisfaction within the rest of the family. It would instead be preferable to involve multiple people and base the choice on quantifiable parameters. Thinking about the future generation, Ezio sees both heirs as deserving and responsible figures, and therefore does not exclude the possibility of collaboration rather than having a single successor.

5.3.7 Mentoring

In the case of Ferro, the mentoring phase was not limited to the moment that, in the ideal process, is positioned as phase number 4, between succession and transition. It was instead a long-lasting process that extended from the moment of early involvement throughout all the following years, until the early 2000s. This aspect also motivated the choice, in the second iteration, to extend this process of bidirectional information exchange across two phases.

Among all the phases, this was the longest within the company. In terms of duration, it was a process perfectly aligned with the literature, which suggests a duration of at least nine years. Ferro largely exceeded this threshold. The quality of the mentoring was excellent, although there were some criticalities along the way.

Especially in the initial phase, the transfer of knowledge followed a predominantly unidirectional model, unlike the ideal system, which suggests reciprocal exchange. Renato transmitted operational competencies, and Ezio absorbed them through direct shadowing. This produced a solid base of tacit knowledge. At the beginning, the father worked alone and therefore had to take responsibility for every task and role. In the same way, Ezio learned how to carry out every activity within the company; he became skilled in the manufacturing aspect, the design aspect, and above all, the financial and entrepreneurial side. Mentoring, therefore, effectively worked.

Reflecting on this process together with Ezio, he is satisfied that it developed in this way. Looking at other competitor companies, he also noticed a clear difference. In many cases, the children simply stood watching their father work; this only trained their observational capacity because, without directly engaging themselves, they were unable to truly learn the profession.

Ezio's situation was different. Out of necessity, his father genuinely needed concrete help. This led to actual involvement from the very beginning. Ezio personally took part in the company's work in a practical and direct way, and therefore had the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them, an aspect considered fundamental according to the experts. Moreover, this direct involvement from the start facilitated his legitimisation, making him, within a few years, a reliable person others could count on.

Regarding the bidirectional aspect of mentoring, it did not function properly. However, through conversations with Ezio, it emerged that this was probably caused by the lack of contamination. Since he had not followed a university path and had not worked in other companies, he did not develop external competencies. He did not acquire a cultural background of knowledge, ways of thinking, and skills that he could then transfer to his father.

The only moments of bidirectional exchange were attributable to Ezio's mentality itself, something innate and intrinsic to his personality. He always had an

entrepreneurial vision and, over the years, managed to transmit his point of view to his father. Thinking about the future, he declares himself extremely open to welcoming the contribution of the younger generation, describing himself as ready to learn.

This initial phenomenon is, in every respect, incumbent shadow, although not in its most critical form. The father mainly proved to be distrustful in the beginning, doubting that a young boy could know more than him, a common thought among business owners. However, by continuing to propose valid and productive ideas, Ezio soon gained his father's trust and respect. In an ideal process, the incumbent should demonstrate openness toward the successors' opinions without requiring them to earn the right to express themselves. Moreover, it is precisely by saying the wrong thing that people learn.

When the company expanded in 2002, Renato started learning a great deal from Ezio. By that point, the world was moving too fast for the father. New technologies, new processes, and new opportunities were emerging, and Ezio was able to seize them.

Looking at the ideal process, this phase is highly aligned. The only mistakes were the initial lack of trust and the absence of structure within the process. There were never any predetermined moments for dialogue, discussion, or planning. Mentoring happened through daily osmosis, through working side by side, eating lunch together, and informal discussions in the workshop. This worked because the context was favourable: a small company with a positive father-son relationship.

5.3.8 Transition

The transition phase in Ferro was the one that came closest to the ideal model, not because it was designed that way, but because the circumstances favoured it in a way that was extraordinarily aligned with what the literature recommends.

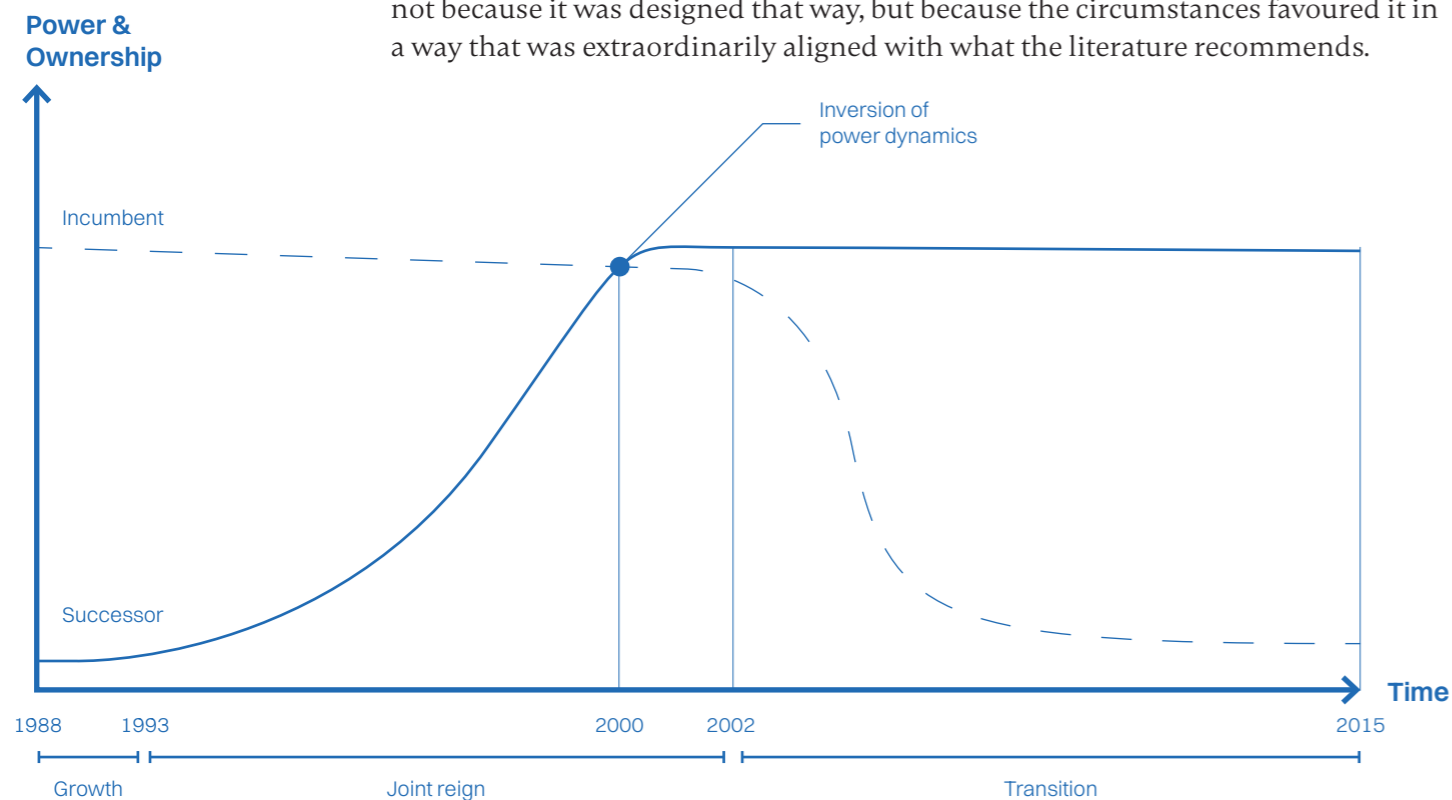


Fig. 26 — Succession phases as they actually occurred

The inversion of the power dynamics did not happen at one precise moment, but through three distinct milestones which together define a time span of almost twenty years. The first signal arrived around 1996–1997, when Ezio began taking operational control of the company. This was not a formal decision but the natural development of events; Renato was by then losing energy and motivation after decades of struggle to keep the business alive. The second signal came in 2002 with the expansion of the workshop and the corporate restructuring. 80% of the shares were transferred to the son, thus formalising the effective transfer of power. The final decisive moment was in 2014, when the father felt ready to leave the company.

This span of almost twenty years is exactly the type of transition that the ideal process recommends. There was no abrupt handover, no traumatic rupture, and no leadership vacuum. The incumbent withdrew slowly, progressively reducing his presence, responsibilities, and decision-making weight, giving Ezio the time to consolidate his authority without pressure. This allowed the company to continue operating normally throughout the entire transition phase, without the organisational instability that often accompanies unplanned transfers of power.

The factor that made these dynamics possible is perhaps the same one that accompanied the entire succession process: the quality of the relationship between father and son. Renato was certain that he was leaving the company in solid hands. Ezio had demonstrated over the previous years that he was capable, determined, and ready to grow. This awareness made it easier for Renato to accept his own withdrawal. He was not afraid; on the contrary, he knew Ezio would do better than him, and the subsequent results confirmed this intuition.

Many founders struggle to leave the company not because of selfishness, but because of fear that the successor will not be capable enough, that long-standing clients will be lost, and that the values built over decades will be abandoned. This fear generates the incumbent shadow in its most persistent form: the founder who remains involved beyond what is necessary, who interferes in the successor's decisions, and who creates ambiguity within the organisation regarding who truly holds authority. One of the entrepreneurs interviewed during the project described exactly this dynamic: a father who was unable to trust the next generation and continued interfering even after the formal transfer of shares, obstructing the evolution of the company instead of supporting it.

In Ferro, this did not happen because Renato possessed something that many founders do not have at the moment of withdrawal: certainty, based on the evidence of years of working side by side, that the successor was ready.

Renato withdrew gradually and without resistance, but there does not appear to have been a structured moment in which he reflected on what his identity would become after the company, on what new stimuli he would cultivate, or on how he would redefine his role within the family and the community. In this specific case, the transition succeeded regardless, probably because Renato was genuinely tired and ready to rest. However, in many other cases, the absence of this step can make detachment much more difficult.

Overall, Ferro's transition phase is the one that comes closest to the ideal model: gradual, controlled, based on trust built over time, and free from incumbent shadow in its most damaging form.

The analysis of the succession from the first to the second generation in Ferro reveals a consistent pattern across all phases: the right things often happened, but for the wrong reasons. Early involvement worked out of necessity. Mentoring worked through osmosis. Transition worked through trust. In no case it resulted from deliberate design. The outcome is a company that successfully navigated

succession without having developed the capacity to reproduce that success in a controlled way. This is precisely the gap that the following section aims to address.

	Ideal process	What happened
Alignment	Awareness, shared vision, family pact, and rules of the game defined before urgency arises.	Never took place. No pact, no entry criteria, no defined roles. The process rested entirely on the quality of one father-son relationship.
Growth	Early involvement from age 16–18, combined with external contamination through study and work outside the firm.	Early involvement occurred, but out of necessity rather than design. External maturation never happened. Continuity without transformation.
Selection & visioning	Meritocratic evaluation of candidates against explicit criteria, with scenarios tailored to the chosen successor.	No selection took place. Entry was driven by primogeniture and economic necessity. Motivation developed only afterwards.
Joint reign	Structured joint reign of approximately nine years, bidirectional knowledge exchange, real responsibility, and room for mistakes.	Exceeded nine years. Real tasks and real mistakes from the start. But unidirectional and unstructured: learning happened by osmosis, never by design.
Transition	Gradual inversion of power, incumbent shifts to advisor and ambassador, no leadership vacuum.	Three milestones across twenty years: 1996, 2002, and 2014. Gradual, trust-based, and free of incumbent shadow. The closest to the ideal.

Tab. 4 — Actual succession versus ideal process

5.3.9 Today

After having discussed the company's past in depth, the following session focused on analysing the current context. Who is involved today, what each person brings, and how the firm is currently positioned relative to the next succession.

Ferro is today led entirely by Ezio, who manages all operational, strategic, and commercial decisions. His wife plays a central role in the company's day-to-day functioning, managing administration, finances, client communication, and accounting. She acts in practice as an operational backbone, allowing Ezio to focus on production and project management. Her involvement is primarily functional rather than strategic. Her involvement in the company began recently, less than 10 years ago. Her commitment is inevitably connected to Ezio's presence; if he were to step back, she would likely do the same. She does not consider herself part of the company in the long term and does not feel involved in the future succession.

The company's financial management has been strengthened in recent years thanks to a collaboration with an external consultant who helps Ezio manage taxes, cash flow, and financial planning more effectively. Ezio initially approached this consultant with scepticism, a reluctance rooted in concerns about cost and a degree of distrust toward external figures telling him how to run a business he has managed for decades. Over time, however, he has recognised the value of this support and acknowledges that had he accessed it fifteen years earlier, the firm would have evolved more rapidly. He remains cautious about consultants who lack real competence, but his attitude has shifted from resistance to selective openness, a meaningful change for someone whose father refused consultants entirely.

Despite this progress, the firm has significant gaps on the strategic and digital side. Ezio is deeply rooted in tradition, and in the technical quality of the work, his competitive advantage has always been craftsmanship, reliability, and relationships. He is less comfortable with anything that requires stepping outside this

comfort zone, digital presence, brand identity, aesthetic positioning, and market expansion. He recognises these gaps but has not yet found the energy or the direction to address them. Importantly, he acknowledges that he would pursue these things with the support of a successor; the motivation and direction are contingent on having someone to move forward with.

The most telling detail is the absence of a shared vision. Ezio does not lack intelligence or ambition; he lacks a conversation partner. He has never discussed the future of the firm with his children in any structured way, which means that the vision he carries remains entirely in his own head, unshared and untested. This is the same dynamic his father had, the owner who has everything in his mind but no instrument for dialogue. The difference is that, after all conversations, Ezio is aware of it.

The most significant development in the current situation is the profile of Ezio's two children, whose formation and interests position them as highly complementary potential successors, not rivals for a single role, but natural occupants of two distinct domains.

The son, 23, is studying strategic and industrial design. His involvement in the firm has been primarily on the production side: welding, metalworking, building, and managing projects in the workshop. He understands the craft from the inside, which gives him credibility with the workforce, but his orientation is fundamentally strategic. He thinks about reorganising the company, entering new markets, rebranding, and innovating the product range. One concrete direction he has already identified is furniture, moving the firm's metalworking expertise toward designed objects with aesthetic value, opening a market the firm has never touched. This is precisely the kind of blue ocean thinking that external contamination makes possible, and it mirrors the pattern that other interviewed companies followed during the succession process.

The daughter, 20, is studying architecture. Her involvement has been on the office side: learning the financial and administrative dimensions of the firm, but also contributing to project design and technical drawings. She is more attached to the tradition of the firm and its established identity. Her architectural training would allow Ferro to develop projects entirely in-house, eliminating the current gap between Ezio and the external professionals who handle the design and project management side of larger commissions. This is an incremental but significant evolution, not a transformation of the firm's identity but a deepening of its capabilities within its existing domain.

Together, they represent the three-circle model applied to a micro-firm. The son brings the business circle perspective with strategy, innovation, and market positioning. The daughter brings the operational and family circle perspective with continuity, technical and project rigour, and the capacity to internalise design and architectural capabilities that the firm currently outsources. Neither of them alone would fully cover what the firm needs. Together, under the right conditions, they could produce exactly the kind of succession that transforms a firm without losing what made it valuable.

Currently, the conditions for a successful succession are stronger than they have ever been. At the moment, Ezio is still at an ideal age that keeps a window of opportunity of around 10 years open. He is currently 55 years old, an age that can be considered optimal. According to the literature, it is generally discouraged for a company owner to remain fully responsible for operational management beyond the age of 65. Assuming the process begins in the near future, this would allow the succession dynamics to develop naturally and without urgency, ensuring a stable

process both in terms of educating the next generation and supporting the gradual withdrawal of the incumbent (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020; AIDAF, 2024; Quarato & Salvato, 2026). The children possess excellent complementary skills that could effectively help the company evolve. Given that their competencies do not overlap, it is much more likely that conflicts will not arise (Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020). In addition, dividing the management of the company among multiple people reduces the workload that currently falls entirely on Ezio (Corbetta & Quarato, 2018, 2023).

What is missing is not willingness, capability, or interest; it is the conversation. This requires a structure that the company currently does not possess. Ezio is not fully certain about his children's intentions; they know that he has started thinking about the future of the company, and they know they are interested. But the explicit discussion about roles, criteria, timeline, and mutual commitment has never taken place. Without a structured succession planning process, the risk is to waste the current potential, once again basing the future of the company on luck.

5.3.10 The next ten years

Ezio's vision for the next ten years is not defined by a clear strategic ambition but by a fundamental uncertainty, one that is not paralysing but that conditions every significant decision the firm makes. His outlook on the future depends almost entirely on a question that has not yet been answered: will his children choose to enter the firm?

This uncertainty has a direct and concrete consequence. Ezio does not consider it reasonable to take on significant debt for new machinery or major investments if there is no generational continuity to justify them. The succession question is therefore not a distant planning exercise; it is an active constraint on the firm's present-day strategic behaviour. The firm is essentially in a holding pattern, maintaining and incrementally improving what exists, without committing to the transformations that would require a longer time horizon and a clearer vision of who will carry them forward.

Ezio operates primarily in an effectuation logic; he makes decisions based on the means currently available rather than working backwards from a defined goal. He is aware of this. He explicitly recognises that if he could define a clear objective, he would be more inclined to plan strategically. But without a shared vision, without a conversation partner who has committed to the firm's future, the goal remains undefined, and the planning remains reactive. This is not a personal failing; it is the structural consequence of approaching succession without a process.

If the children decide to enter, Ezio is prepared to invest, to step back gradually, and to build something that extends beyond his own tenure. If they do not, his preference is to consolidate the firm's value over the next ten years and prepare it for a possible sale. If he were to decide to sell the company, it would be preferable to improve it from an operational perspective, making full use of the available machinery and maintaining a solid customer base to transfer to a potential buyer. This scenario does not represent failure for him. Ezio maintains a pragmatic view of the company, describing it as something extremely important. After having built it over all these years, he sees it as a child, but he insists that it is right to perceive it as a source of income and a means to sustain a satisfying lifestyle. The company should not become a prison; it has never been one for him, and he does not want it to become one for his children.

What Ezio wants to preserve above all is the firm's reputation for quality, reliability, and the depth of its client relationships. This is what makes his com-

pany truly valuable beyond its tangible assets. These are the things that cannot be replaced by a new owner who does not know the firm's history and its clients' expectations. They are also the things most at risk in a poorly managed succession.

His primary concern about the succession is financial and economic, the complexity and cost of the transfer, the tax implications, and the question of whether a successor would be capable of sustaining the firm's performance without his direct involvement. He believes many succession failures stem from decisions made too quickly and without sufficient experience. Looking back at his own entry into the firm, he identifies the absence of entrepreneurial and managerial education as one of the factors that slowed his development, and he does not want his children to face the same gap unprepared.

This combination of emotional attachment, pragmatic realism, financial caution, and the absence of a shared vision describes a founder who is ready to begin the succession conversation but has not yet found the structure to do so. The conditions are present. The willingness is present. What is missing is exactly what this project set out to design: a structured process that transforms an unspoken mutual interest into an explicit shared commitment, and an undefined future into a navigable plan.

5.3.11 Co creation

Before the actual co-creation process could take place, a foundation of trust and shared understanding had to be established. Convincing a family firm to engage with succession planning can be quite difficult, as it is a topic that feels distant, uncomfortable, and unnecessarily complex when the firm is functioning well. This required more than presenting a process. It required demonstrating that the process was grounded in reality, that the problem was genuinely relevant to his specific situation, and that the proposed approach could actually help.

The sessions dedicated to reconstructing the company's history proved to be the most effective tool for this. By first listening without intervening, allowing Ezio to tell the story of the firm in his own words, and then returning to the same events together, interpreting them through the lens of the succession literature and the process developed in this thesis, it became possible to show concretely what structured planning might have changed. Moments that had been experienced as fortunate or accidental were reframed as the result of specific dynamics, dynamics that can be designed for. This reframing, supported by the principles of strategic design and in particular by the practice of making the invisible visible, created both awareness and motivation. It is precisely the awareness and motivation that the first step of the Alignment phase is designed to generate. It was therefore possible to create a sense of trust toward the project and the researcher, legitimising both strategic design and succession planning.

One of the guiding principles of strategic design, as established in the first chapter of this thesis, is co-creation. It is a collaborative process where professional designers and non-designers work together, for brief moments or across the entire span of a project (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Piller & West, 2014). Co-creation stimulates widespread organisational commitment (Calabretta et al., 2016; Buchanan, 2020) and fosters a shared interpretation of the future (Meroni, 2008; Calabretta et al., 2016). This participatory approach is essential for uncovering hidden information, such as latent needs, beliefs, and emotional experiences, which are often absent in these types of environments (Buchanan, 2020; Price & Wrigley, 2016).

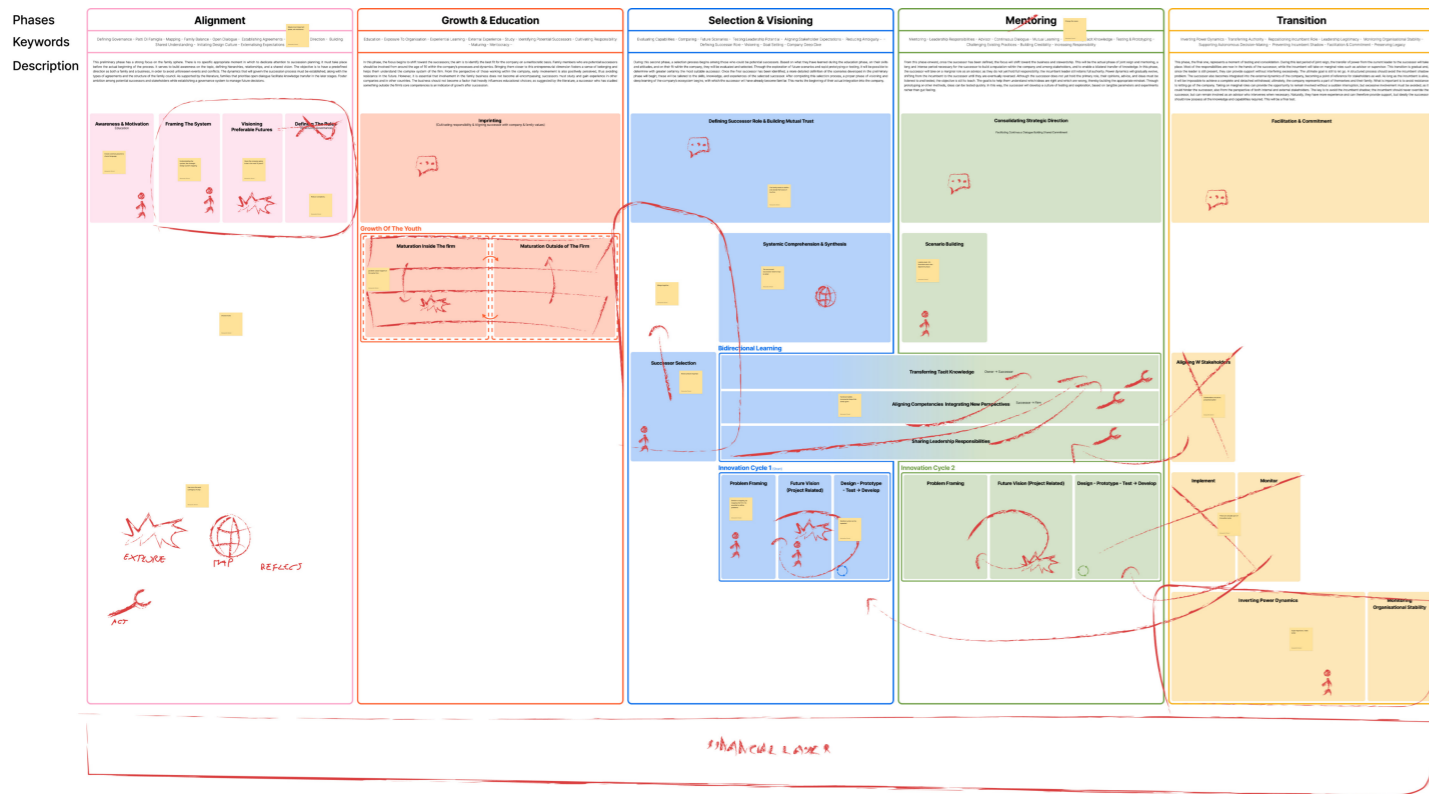


Fig. 27 — Co-creation session with the case study company: annotated second iteration process used to develop the third iteration

More generally, throughout the entire development of this thesis, but especially during this phase of collaboration with the company, co-creation was fundamental in order to deeply understand the context. Like many manufacturing companies, this company also has little affinity with design, especially with its deeper strategic dimension.

Through co-creation, the company, specifically the owner and the family component, were involved in exploring strategic design methodologies and in deepening the complex dynamics of succession. Several sessions were conducted to discuss these topics; project findings and various elements were presented, while the company provided feedback.

Ezio had never turned to a succession consultant and had never explored the topic independently. For this reason, it was necessary to establish a common ground, explaining to him and the other members how a succession process is effectively structured and how I intended to develop an intervention through the support of strategic design.

In this phase, having a visual representation of a succession process was fundamental. As explored in the first chapter, transforming ideas into something tangible is a central task of the strategic designer. Creating physical or visual models allows opportunities to move from the theoretical plane to the practical one (Calabretta et al., 2016). By making strategies visible, the perceived risk for managers is reduced, giving them the tools necessary to judge the validity of different

scenarios and their consequences (Calabretta et al., 2016; Boni et al., 2009). Thanks to what emerged during the literature review, the first iteration of the ideal succession process was developed. Later, during the numerous interviews with experts and business owners, the system was further refined, precisely with the aim of obtaining a result aligned with reality and close to being considered complete. The production of the second visualisation of the process made it possible, during this collaboration phase with the company, to show succession in a tangible way, in all its complexity and extension. This created understanding regarding both design and the importance of planning, and became the foundation for the joint development of an actual support tool. This visualisation was initially presented in digital format, in order to freely move the elements, and later in printed format, allowing for drawing, sketching, and attaching Post-it notes.

Co-creation and visualisation are two fundamental guiding principles when trying to inspire the interlocutor. This context is characterised by strong scepticism: firstly, toward the discipline of design when it moves beyond the boundaries of industrial design; secondly, toward a practitioner, in this case myself, who attempts to give advice on how to manage a company to a person who has managed it for decades.

In addition, one aspect that until this moment had only been marginally addressed during the interviews is that of strategic design tools. These tools and methods, the same ones used by large companies characterised by substantial resources, are precisely the means through which SMEs can be supported during this long succession journey. The process is divided into phases and steps, but it is through the everyday application of these tools that it becomes possible to undertake a gradual and incremental path toward a successful succession. This aspect was explored further during the following sessions with the company, during which, once the context of the project had been understood, it was possible to explore details such as these. Initially, a set of tools was selected starting from a vast collection, then the most suitable in terms of difficulty and adaptation to the context were selected. After a brief explanation, the owner could try them in order to see whether he was capable of using them autonomously. Once some of them had been selected, they were integrated into the various steps according to their specific function.

The insights gathered throughout these sessions directly informed a third and final iteration of the process, which is presented in the following section

5.4 Third Iteration

After the first sessions dedicated to exploring the company's history, the focus shifted toward planning the upcoming succession. Before discussing the actual future of the company, however, it was necessary to further explore the means and tools through which that future could be achieved.

Ezio participated in a session aimed at analysing and understanding the system developed during the second iteration. The outcome produced up to that point was the visual representation of an ideal succession process. It included a structure composed of phases and steps, but it still lacked concrete content, namely, the tools. These were later defined according to the specific characteristics of the company.

During the first co-creation session, Ezio could look at the digital version of the process, navigating it independently and reading the various descriptions. The intention was to observe how far he would be able to go on his own and how clearly

he would understand the system without any explanation. Ezio is an attentive and observant person who speaks little and analyses carefully. After several minutes spent examining the system in detail, he spontaneously began asking questions. First, he wanted to understand the reasoning that had led to this type of structure and why the steps and phases were positioned in that specific order. He then moved on to more specific questions regarding certain steps and their functions.

He focused especially on the first two phases, alignment and growth. This was particularly interesting. During the analysis of the previous succession within his company, it had clearly emerged that there had been a strong lack of structured planning, alignment, and external growth or contamination outside the company. All elements are addressed precisely within these first two phases. It wasn't surprising that they attracted his attention, and it was also motivating because it demonstrated genuine interest and recognition of their importance, especially in relation to his own past experience.

His questions about the process continued. He wanted to know the purpose of this project, why was succession within SMEs was presented as a highly critical moment, and why he, someone who had lived within the business context for decades, would have to listen to any advice on this topic given by a student.

These were all extremely relevant and meaningful questions, and they presented the opportunity to explain in depth everything about the project. Personal interests and background studies were discussed along with the critical data regarding generational transition within the Italian context. Despite being directly involved in this entrepreneurial landscape, he appeared rather surprised once he understood the actual relevance of the issue. Looking together at the statistics and data, it became evident that he had not previously perceived succession as such a risky and difficult process to navigate successfully.

Before actually explaining the process, we revisited the succession between him and his father. Initially, he recounted the development of events in great detail, then answered more targeted questions in order to understand specific dynamics. He proved extremely open to dialogue and to sharing the story of both his company and his relationship with his father. This became a recurring theme across all interviews. Surprisingly, manufacturing SMEs, a context that is often

imagined as closed and resistant to collaboration, happened to be quite the opposite. Ezio, like all the other owners interviewed, was extremely collaborative. They willingly spoke at length, sharing their stories without needing to be constantly prompted. For some of them, it was probably the first time they had ever openly spoken about these experiences. Some owners explicitly said that they had never even discussed these matters with their own children.

This further reinforced the importance of communication. It was evident that they were genuinely pleased to recount and transmit their story and that of their company, often characterised by hard work and sacrifice. This willingness to share demonstrated their desire to pass on these values and this knowledge, especially to the future generation. Ezio himself admitted that he had not spoken about these topics for years, which is precisely why he was particularly available and pleased to do so.

Once the story of his company and how it had been transferred from the first to the second generation was discussed, the sequence of events was jointly analysed. Initially, in a rather free and spontaneous way, trying to identify possible mistakes and strengths; later, overlapping his story onto the ideal succession process. This became a fundamental turning point, as it allowed Ezio not only to reflect on his past but also to understand how it had actually been structured. It was possible to explain how some phases had not been properly followed, how certain steps had been entirely absent, and how other aspects had instead aligned almost perfectly with the literature. Through this process, further credibility was gained. Observing, for example, the correct way to approach succession helped him understand the importance of communication, planning, and alignment. He also recognised the importance of external contamination, sometimes directly relating it to the future role of his children.

Then it came to explaining each phase in detail, analysing its purpose before exploring its content and examining each step more deeply.

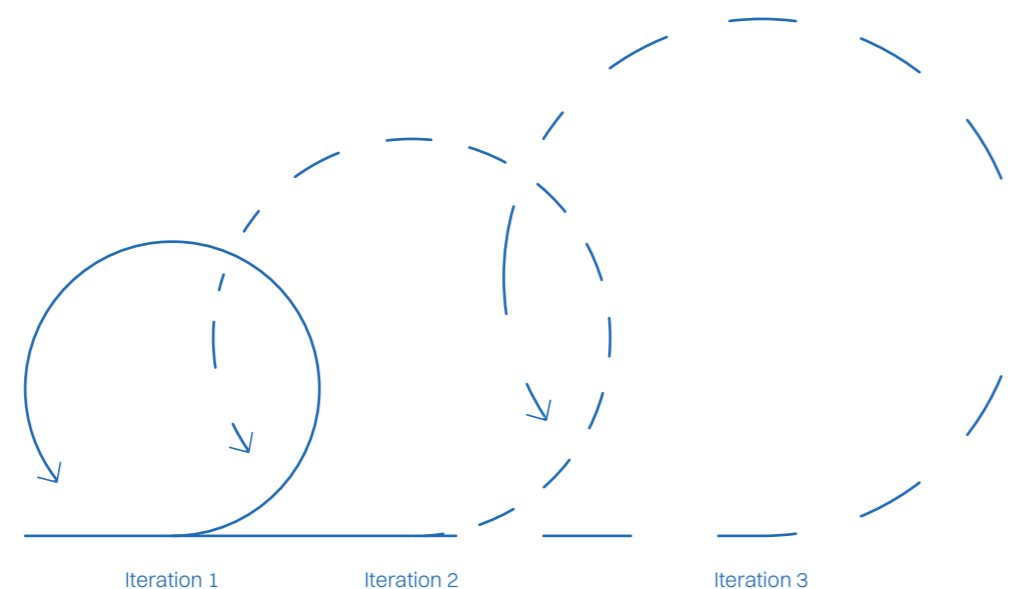
Starting from the alignment phase, the one furthest from his personal history, the analysis gradually moved through the entire process until reaching mentoring and transition, two phases that he had managed particularly well in the past and whose structure and importance he was now able to fully understand.

While the first collaboration session focused primarily on understanding succession, planning, and his company's history, the second session was aimed at modifying and intervening directly on the process itself. During this second moment, he was given a printed version of the process as the main communication medium. The digital version had been useful for navigation, rearranging steps, and observing details, whereas the physical version allowed us to observe the entire system as a whole.

This time, a brief recap was sufficient for him to reorient himself within the system. He remembered the overall logic, the sequence of phases, and the purpose of some steps. This was in itself a meaningful signal; one of the fundamental requirements of the process is that it be navigable by a family firm owner without design expertise. The fact that Ezio had internalised the structure between sessions, without any additional support, suggested that the clarity and accessibility goals of iteration 2 had been at least partially achieved.

The process was then analysed a second time, with the specific objective of highlighting both its criticalities and its potential. Through the use of markers, post-its, and sketches, the entire process was revisited.

This review process, divided across multiple sessions, made it possible to develop an even more realistic representation of the succession process. The result



Each iteration built on the previous one. The first emerged from literature. The second was refined through expert and professional feedback. The third was validated through direct co-creation with the case study company.

Fig. 28 — The three iterations of the succession process

was therefore grounded not only in literature related to strategic design and succession, but also in the perspectives of experts and business owners, as well as in the concrete experience and needs of the collaborating company.

An academically coherent framework, capable of bridging the worlds of design and family entrepreneurship was initially developed. It then got validated through real feedback, to finally produced a result that could realistically be applied within a company context.

As already mentioned previously, the second iteration already represented a significant improvement over the first and was undoubtedly much more realistic. For this reason, the changes introduced at this stage were not radical transformations, but rather refinements and adjustments.

5.4.1 Step purpose clarified through co-creation

During this co-creation phase, a series of issues emerged, but the most recurrent one concerned lexical complexity. The process appeared structurally sound, but it was not explained clearly enough. Some steps generated misunderstandings because they were not as intuitive as initially assumed, and both the titles and descriptions were not written effectively. This mainly concerns steps such as Awareness & Motivation, Successor Selection, Systemic Comprehension, and the Innovation Cycle. Ezio, despite having engaged seriously with the process in the previous session, required an in-depth explanation before grasping the function and necessity of each. This was not a failure of comprehension on his part but a design gap in the process itself: the step descriptions had been written with a degree of assumed familiarity that a family firm owner without design or succession expertise cannot reasonably be expected to bring.

Awareness & Motivation presented the most significant challenge. Ezio initially could not understand why this step was necessary. If a firm is functioning well, why dedicate formal effort to building awareness of a problem that does not yet feel urgent? The explanation came through the analysis of his own succession history. By showing how the absence of this step in the first generation had produced a process entirely dependent on relational luck, where the right things happened for the wrong reasons, the necessity became concrete and personal. The step was not abstract anymore; it was the thing that would have changed his own experience. A similar dynamic emerged with system mapping and visioning preferred futures. Ezio initially perceived scenario building as a waste of time, speculative rather than productive. Once connected to the effectuation logic he already uses intuitively, and reframed as a tool for converting available means into defined goals, it became immediately relevant.

The Innovation Cycle presented a different type of confusion, not resistance but unfamiliarity with the language. Once Ezio reflected on how he actually manages projects, he recognised that he already follows a version of problem framing, future vision, and iterative testing without naming it as such. This confirmed one of the core arguments of the thesis: strategic design principles are already present in these firms, operating under different names. Ezio was already following this logic in practice; what the Innovation Cycle offered was not a new method but a conscious framework for something he had been doing intuitively.

In response to these observations, the step descriptions across the process were rewritten to be more explicit, more contextually grounded, and less reliant on assumed familiarity. This also reinforced the rationale for expert support at specific steps, not because the process is too complex, but because a professional

can provide the contextualisation and explanation that a written description alone cannot always achieve.

5.4.2 Steps removed

While some steps proved unclear or excessively complex in their explanation, others turned out to be redundant or superfluous because they were already implicit within the process. Three steps were removed from the process in iteration 3, each for a distinct reason.

Aligning with stakeholders was removed as a standalone step from the Transition phase after Ezio observed that stakeholder involvement should not be concentrated at the end of the process; it should begin from the very start of the successor's involvement. He reflected that his own father had involved him with clients and stakeholders from early in his journey, and that if he had an heir today, he would do the same immediately. Keeping it as a final phase step suggested that stakeholder introduction is something to defer, when in reality it should begin as soon as the successor enters the firm. The concept is preserved within the process; it runs continuously through the Mentoring process, but it no longer appears as a discrete final step.

Implement and Monitor were removed because both are implicit within the Innovation Cycle rather than standalone activities. Once a project is designed, prototyped, and tested, implementation and monitoring are the natural continuation of the same cycle, not separate steps to be completed afterwards. Presenting them as distinct steps added apparent complexity without adding real content. More importantly, monitoring is not something that happens only in the final phase; it runs throughout the entire succession journey. Removing it as a standalone step and distributing the monitoring logic across the process as a continuous practice is more honest about how it actually works.

5.4.3 New categorisation system

Perceived complexity has always been a fundamental aspect of this system. It is important that it remains easy to understand and navigate. The fact that all steps appeared to be on the same level created a certain sense of confusion. The various steps were extracted from the different phases and placed in a single list; from there, together with Ezio, we sorted them in what we considered the most coherent way based on the content of each one.

This change was driven by two converging observations. First, Ezio's difficulty in immediately grasping the purpose of several steps suggested that the process needed a faster orientation mechanism, something that tells the user what kind of work a step requires before they read its full description. The category tag serves this function. Second, the system required a consistent organisational logic for the tools library. Without a categorisation method, tools would need to be organised by phase alone, which does not help a user who is looking for a specific type of activity rather than a specific phase.

Four activity categories were introduced to tag every step in the process: Map, Explore, Reflect, and Act. Each category describes the primary mode of thinking and activity required in that step, making the current situation visible, projecting forward into possible futures, engaging in active dialogue and decision-making, or executing concrete changes with real consequences.

The four categories also align directly with the strategic design principles established in the first chapter of the thesis, making the invisible visible (Map), scenario building and foresight (Explore), co-creation and facilitation (Reflect), and abductive reasoning and prototyping (Act). The categorisation system is therefore not an organisational convenience but a theoretical statement about what strategic design contributes to the succession process.



Fig. 29 — Activity category icons

5.4.4 Layer structure

The process was initially structured across six layers based on the content of the steps included in each: Alignment, Education, Selection, Mentoring, Innovation, and Transition. Already during the second iteration, this system appeared to be not effective, as it created a significant amount of repetition. Alignment would function both as a layer and as a phase, and the same applies to Education, Selection, Mentoring, and Transition. This overlap generated a certain level of confusion.

During the interviews conducted for the development of the second iteration, there wasn't enough time to explore this aspect in depth, and it was therefore set aside until the company sessions. Then it quickly became evident that this was not the most effective way to organise the different steps. What was the point of having phases and layers sharing the same name but not the same content?

Together with Ezio, during the physical workshop session, it emerged that the layers were naturally structured according to who is involved in each step. This insight came directly from a question posed by Ezio, who asked which members of the family and the company were actually involved in each point. By addressing this aspect, it became clear how layers were already following a categorisation.

A family firm owner who wants to begin using the process needs to know immediately which steps involve them alone, which require the whole family, and which are the successor's responsibility. Without clear layer labelling, this requires reading every step description in full before understanding the structure. Formalising the layers reduces this cognitive load and makes the process more navigable for a non-expert user.

The layers were therefore divided into the following five levels:

- Family layer: steps mainly focused on dialogue and reflection, characterised by the constant involvement of the entire family participating in the business, and possibly other responsible managers.
- Successor layer: these steps concern the maturation of the heirs both inside and outside the company; therefore, the successors are the main actors involved.
- Successor & incumbent layer: these include moments of collaboration and bidirectional exchange of information between the two generations.
- Whole firm layer: the innovation steps are grounded in both the successor and the owner, but ultimately affect the entire company, extending beyond the family component.
- Incumbent layer: these steps are mainly directed at the company owner, specifically his role in the final phase of the process.

This type of structuring further reduces perceived complexity. After assigning these layers together with Ezio, he was able to understand that the entire burden of the process does not fall solely on him. Instead, efforts are distributed across all members of the family and the business. By assigning steps more specifically, the perceived load is reduced, and overall complexity decreases accordingly.

5.4.5 Expert support

During the second iteration, it became evident that the support of an expert could be necessary. Some professionals support companies for an entire year, others conduct targeted sessions when needed, while others allow the company to operate independently. From that moment the process offered companies the possibility to receive support, in order to navigate the process, understand it, and analyse the results of what has been done.

Ezio himself expressed this need. He currently collaborates with a financial consultant with whom he holds periodic meetings, and he mentioned that, in his view, a similar system would be necessary in this context as well. In particular, when some of the tools were presented to him, he felt that expert feedback would be required to fully understand their correct application and interpret the results.

This observation led to the identification of steps where support is advised. Navigating a succession process for the first time, especially one that integrates strategic design principles that are unfamiliar to most family firm owners, can be disorienting without guidance. Expert support at key moments does not replace the firm's autonomy but creates the conditions for the process to be understood, correctly executed, and genuinely useful. Moreover, this aspect significantly influenced the definition of the final support tool.

The steps in which the support of a professional figure is strongly recommended are: Awareness & Motivation, Framing the System, Successor Selection, Scenario Building, Problem Framing, Future Vision, and Inverting Power Dynamics.

These steps share a common thread: they either require the impartiality that only an external figure can provide, the interpretive expertise needed to translate tool outputs into actionable decisions, or the emotional safety that makes difficult conversations possible. It is precisely in these moments that the presence of a professional transforms the process from theoretical to effective.



Fig. 30 — Suggested expert support icon

5.4.6 Optional financial support layer

Ezio described the financial and tax implications of succession as one of his most immediate concerns. Decisions about investing in new machinery were directly constrained by the unresolved succession question; it did not make sense to take on significant debt without knowing whether there would be generational continuity to justify it. More concretely, he expressed uncertainty about the actual cost of a generational transfer, the notarial acts, the share transfer, and the tax implications, aspects that felt intimidating because he had never had to navigate them before.

This revealed a gap in the process. Iteration 2 addressed the relational, strategic, and organisational dimensions of succession but did not explicitly integrate financial planning. For a micro-firm owner, the financial dimension is not peripheral; it is often the most immediate and concrete concern, and one that conditions every other decision in the process.

Given that Ezio already collaborates with a financial consultant on a periodic basis and recognises the value of that support, he immediately understood the logic of extending this model to the succession journey. It was suggested to introduce financial support as a complementary layer to the current development of the process, helping to monitor the economic impact of decisions and also clarifying the specific costs of succession procedures. This also opens the opportunity to introduce KPIs to track company growth and financial health throughout the process, so that each phase is informed by measurable evidence rather than intuition alone.

In response, iteration 3 introduced an optional financial support layer that integrates economic planning with strategic direction, rather than treating these as separate concerns managed in isolation. This remains a recommendation based on the company's feedback. This contribution could be highly beneficial for the development of the succession process. At the same time, however, the financial component does not fall within the scope of this thesis, nor within the competencies of a strategic designer. It therefore represents an aspect that could be further explored in the future.

5.4.7 Tools selection

Once the structure of the third iteration had been finalised together with the case study company, the next step was to select and assign the tools that would provide concrete support within each step. The process itself is a powerful instrument as it makes succession visible, navigable, and measurable. But the content is equally important. Without specific tools to guide each moment, the process risks remaining abstract. The tools are what transform a framework into a daily practice.

Three criteria guided the selection. First, relevance: each tool had to produce an output that directly served the specific objective of the step it was assigned to. Second, accessibility: each tool had to be navigable by a family firm owner with no prior design background, either independently or with the expert support flagged at that step. Third, adaptability: each tool had to be applicable to the specific dynamics of family firms, including emotional complexity, informal governance structures, and multi-generational involvement.

The tool selection began with the four activity categories: Map, Explore, Reflect, and Act. Tools were first assigned to categories based on their function and

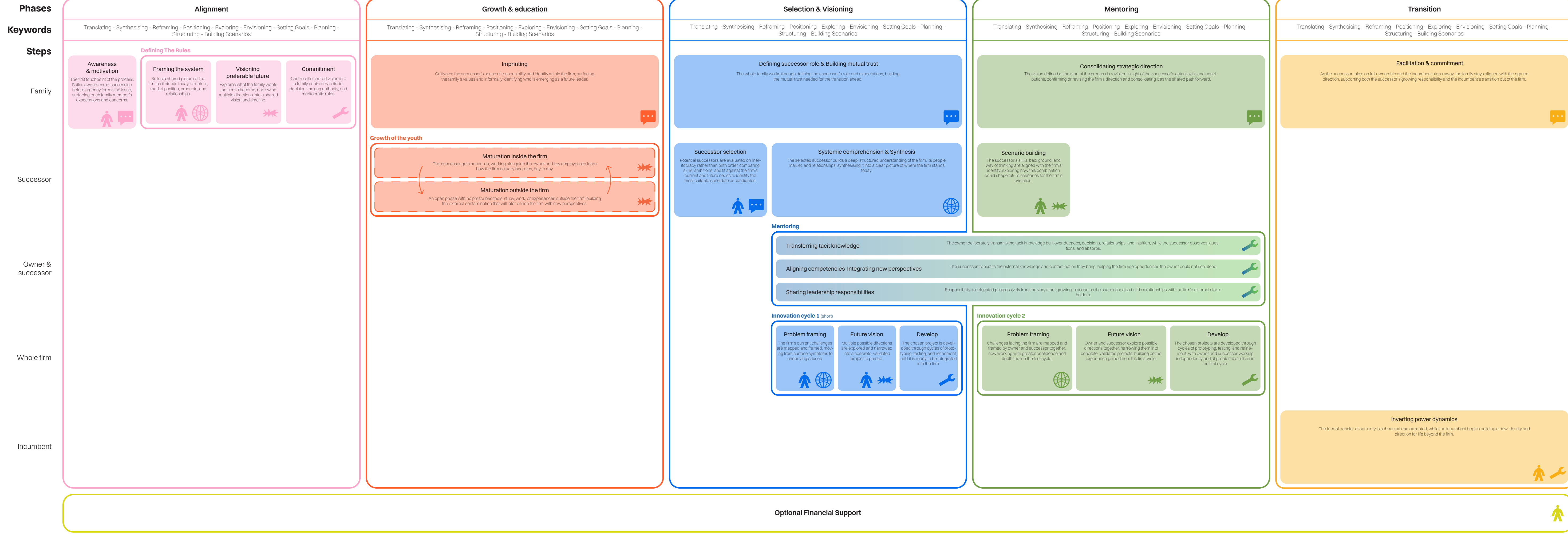
the output produced. From there, they were distributed across the individual steps according to their fit with each step's specific purpose. The full set was then tested with the case study company owner, exploring each tool's function and removing those that proved too technically complex, too detailed, or too distant from the operational reality of a micro-firm. Several tools required significant translation and simplification before they could be presented in accessible form, and this work of adaptation is reflected in the descriptions and templates available in the platform's tool library.

It is important to note that because tools are categorised by activity type rather than by phase, they can be used flexibly beyond their assigned step. A mapping tool remains effective in any context where making the current situation visible is needed, regardless of where the firm is in the succession journey.

Three iterations, each grounded in a different source of knowledge and each more refined than the last, produced something that did not exist at the start of this project: a structured, accessible, and reality-tested succession process designed specifically for family-owned SMEs. The first iteration mapped the territory through literature. The second corrected its blind spots through field research. The third brought it into contact with a real firm, a real owner, and the irreducible complexity of an approaching succession, and shaped it accordingly.

What made this progression possible was not a linear application of method but a sustained use of strategic design principles throughout. Systems thinking made the interconnectedness of problems visible. Abductive reasoning allowed the process and its solution to co-evolve rather than be fixed in advance. Co-creation ensured that the language, the tools, and the structure were not imposed but built together with those who will use them. Visual thinking made succession tangible enough to discuss, question, and redesign.

The result is the content, the process, its phases, its steps, its tools, its categories, and its layers. What the following chapter addresses is the container: the platform through which all of this is delivered to the firms that need it.



- = Explore
- = Map
- = Reflect
- = Act
- = Expert support

Fig. 31 — Succession process: third iteration

Chapter 6

Platform

The previous chapter documented the development of an ideal succession process through three successive iterations, each grounded in a different source of knowledge.

The result of that process is a structured, accessible, and reality-tested framework that maps generational transition in family SMEs from beginning to end. It is grounded simultaneously in academic literature and operational reality. It speaks a language that firm owners can understand. And it is specific enough, in its phases, its steps, its layers, and its tools, to function not just as a theoretical model but as a practical guide.

What this chapter addresses is how that content reaches the people it was designed for. A process, however well-constructed, remains inert without a medium through which it can be delivered, navigated, and used. This chapter documents the transition from content to container, from the succession process developed in Chapter 5 to the digital platform through which it is made accessible. It describes the design decisions behind that transition, the architecture of the platform, and the features through which a family firm owner can engage with the research, navigate the process, access the tools, and connect with professional support. The final output is not a document to be read but an instrument to be used.

6.1 From book to digital platform

Once the support instrument had been identified, it was time to determine the medium through which to deliver it; the container for everything developed throughout this project. Until this point, a book had always seemed the best option to instruct and guide owners of family firms. A series of volumes, one for each phase of the process, each structured according to its steps and proposing the relevant tools within each one. Speaking with the company owner, however, it quickly became clear that this was actually a poor and limited option on multiple fronts. The identification of these numerous limitations made it clear that a physical instrument such as a book was entirely unsuitable for this context. For this reason, the project took a different direction regarding the development of the final output. The solution that best responds to the needs of both the firms and the project is a digital platform.

	Book	Platform
Access	Physical, requires purchase, fixed location	Digital, any device, any time, no purchase required
Navigation	Linear and fixed, difficult to enter at the right point	Non-linear, enter at any phase, explore based on immediate need
Tools	Single use, cannot be replicated once filled	Downloadable, reusable, unlimited copies
Feedback	None, firm interprets results alone	AI advisor, expert connection, structured guidance
Collaboration	One reader at a time	Multiple family members simultaneously, shared and living document
Expert connection	Firm must independently find and engage a consultant	Integrated booking, structured support at advised steps
Personalisation	Identical experience for every reader	Adapts to firm profile, phase, challenges, and goals
Process tracking	No memory of where the firm stopped	Dashboard tracking completed steps, current position, next actions
Updates	Requires a new edition	Continuously updated as literature and tools evolve
Reach	Limited to those who actively seek and purchase it	Freely accessible, shareable, no geographic barriers

Tab. 5 — Differences between book and platform as final outputs

6.2 Platform Architecture & Features

The platform is organised across six interconnected pages, each responding to a specific need that emerged from the research. The architecture reflects the core argument of the thesis: that succession support must be simultaneously structured and accessible, comprehensive and navigable, grounded in literature and usable without design expertise. The pages do not function in isolation, they are designed

to route the user progressively through the platform depending on where they are in their succession journey, from first contact with the problem to active process navigation, tool use, and expert connection.

The homepage serves as the entry point and orientation layer. Rather than presenting the platform as a tool to be adopted, it opens by confronting the visitor with the reality of the problem: the survival statistics, the proportion of firms without a plan, the social consequences of failure. This framing is deliberate. One of the most consistent findings across all three interview rounds was that awareness precedes engagement, firms that did not perceive succession as urgent were unlikely to adopt any support instrument, however well designed. The homepage is therefore designed to create that urgency before introducing any solution. It also includes a diagnostic section, nine clickable challenge cards representing the most common friction points identified in the literature and confirmed through interviews, each of which generates a tailored tool suggestion. This functions as a lightweight, non-intimidating entry point into the platform for users who are not yet ready to commit to the full process.

Click any image to open the platform!

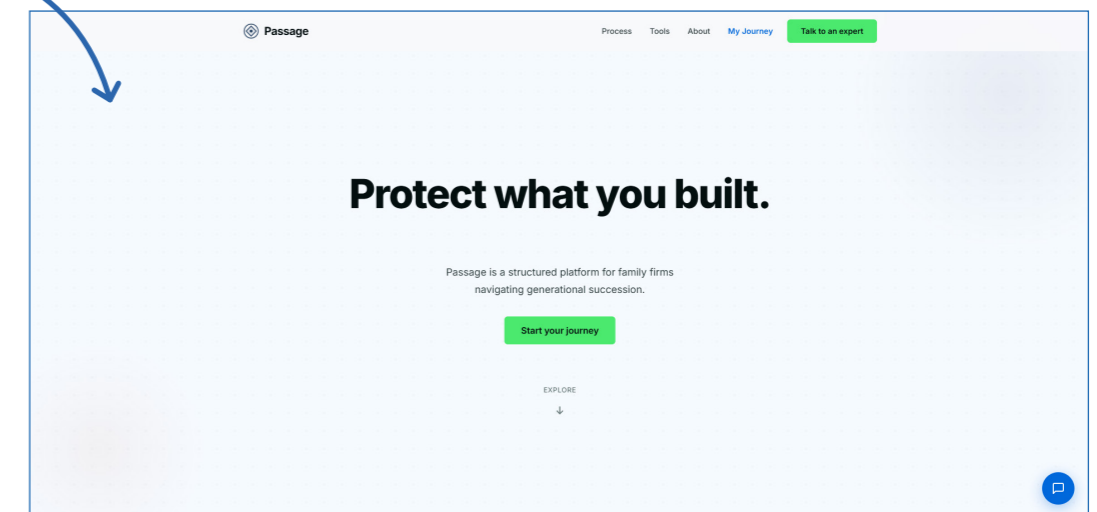


Fig. 32 — Platform: homepage, hero section

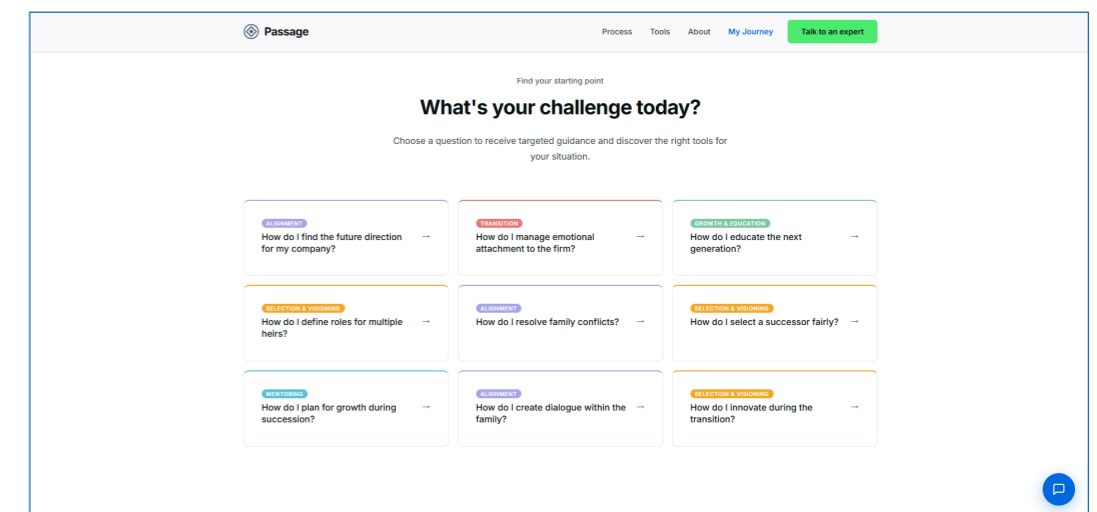


Fig. 33 — Platform: homepage, diagnostic section

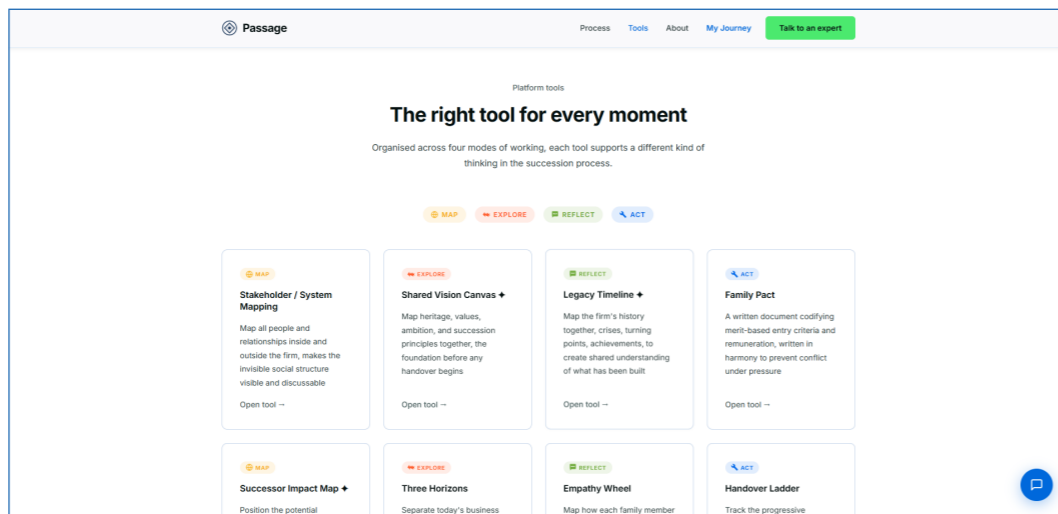


Fig. 34 — Platform: homepage, tool library

The succession process canvas is the structural core of the platform. It presents the five-phase succession process developed through three iterations as an interactive, pannable canvas, in which phases can be expanded and collapsed, steps can be explored individually, and tools can be accessed directly from within each step. This format was chosen in response to one of the most significant findings of the co-creation phase: a linear document-based representation of the process created the impression of a rigid, sequential obligation, which discouraged engagement before the process even began. The canvas format preserves the full complexity of the process while making it feel navigable rather than prescriptive. Each step is tagged with one of four activity categories, Map, Explore, Reflect, Act, which immediately communicate what kind of thinking and engagement the step requires, reducing the cognitive load for a user with no design background. Steps where expert support is strongly advised are flagged explicitly, acknowledging that certain moments in the succession journey require the kind of impartiality and interpretive expertise that a platform alone cannot provide.

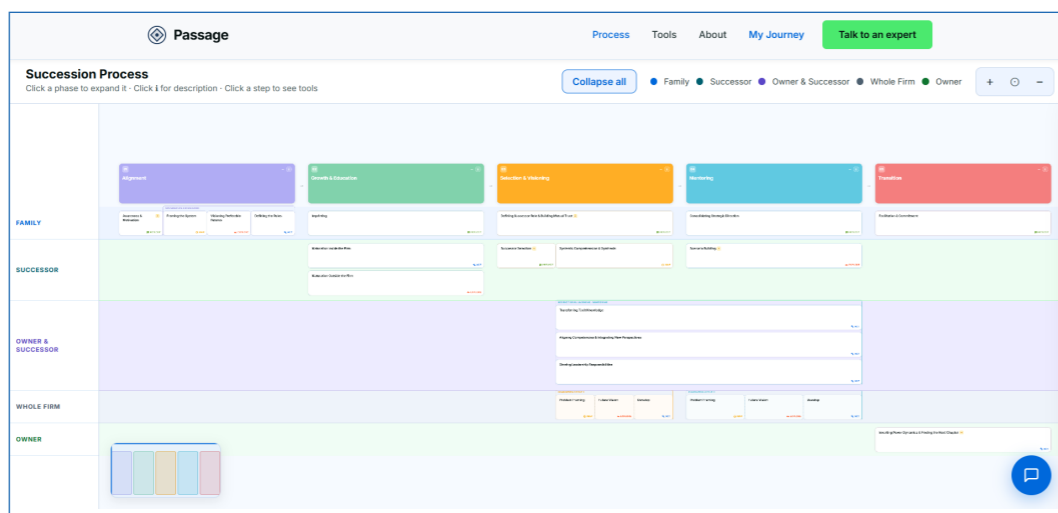


Fig. 35 — Platform: succession process canvas

The tool library contains eighty-nine strategic design tools, each adapted and described in language accessible to a non-design audience. Tools are filterable by activity category, succession phase, and challenge type, and each entry includes a description of its purpose, the steps in which it is recommended, and a downloadable template where applicable. The breadth of the library reflects one of the central contributions of the thesis: the work of selecting, categorising, and trans-

lating a diverse body of strategic design tools into a form that a family firm owner can understand and apply independently. The categorisation system, developed through the co-creation sessions with the case study company, is not purely organisational. It is a theoretical statement about what strategic design contributes to succession: making tacit dynamics visible, building shared direction, structuring long-term processes, and enabling action under uncertainty.

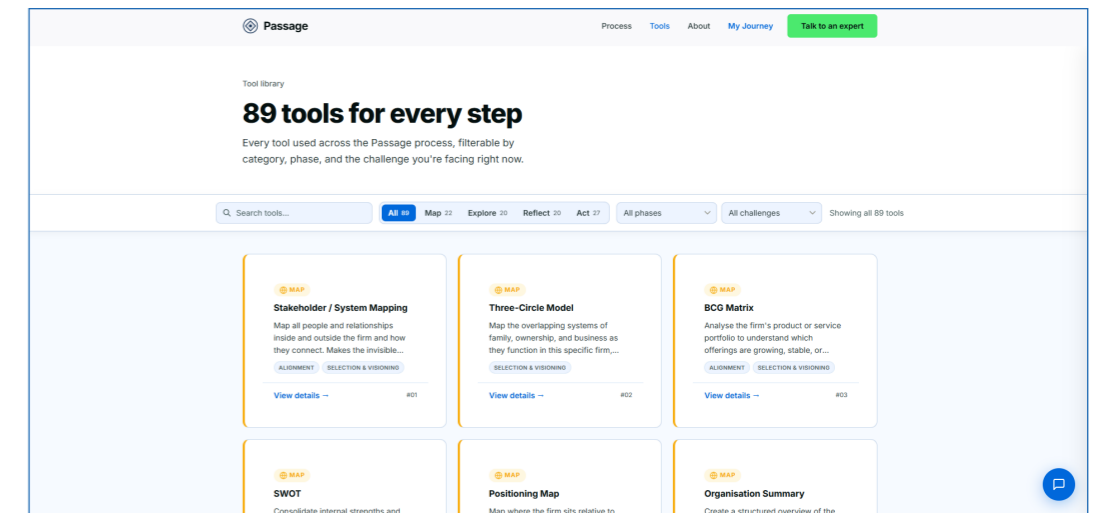


Fig. 36 — Platform: tool library

The personal dashboard functions as the user's operational interface with the platform. The entry point is a structured checklist that serves as both a profiling and screening tool. Rather than a simple registration form, it functions as a diagnostic funnel: by collecting information about the firm's profile, sector, size, current generation, succession phase, and preferred working mode, it builds a contextual picture of the user's specific situation and needs. Based on this profile, the platform redirects the user toward the most relevant starting point in the process, surfaces the tools most appropriate for their current phase, and, where applicable, suggests a specific expert whose background and experience are best matched to the challenges the firm is likely to face. A firm approaching a first-generation transition with no governance structure in place will be oriented differently from one that has already begun the mentoring phase but is struggling with knowledge transfer. The onboarding sequence is therefore not a bureaucratic prerequisite but the mechanism through which the platform becomes personalised rather than generic.

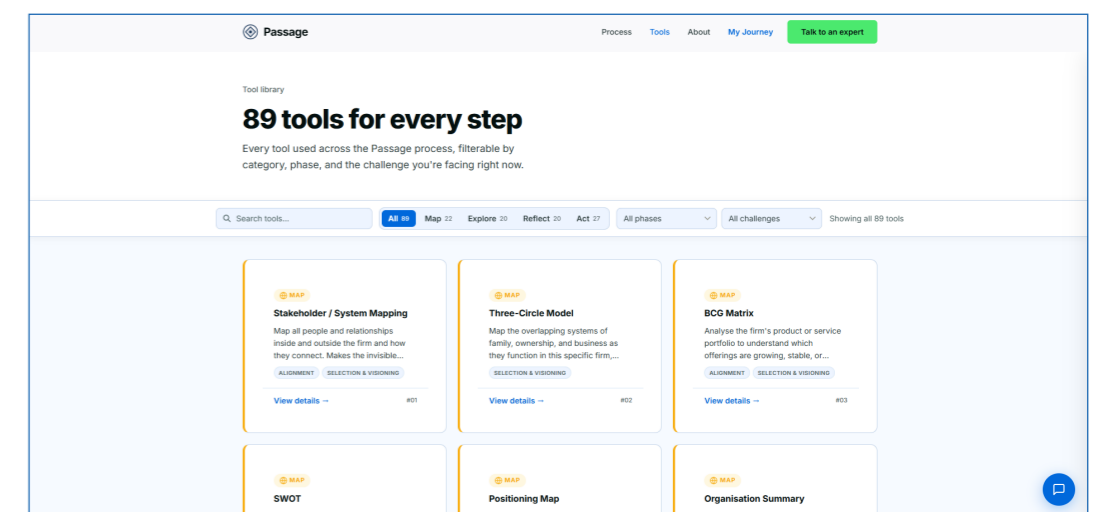


Fig. 37 — Platform: tool library

Once onboarding is complete, the dashboard presents a continuously updated view of the user's journey: current position within the process, next tasks to complete, phases already finished, and tools recommended for the current step. A document upload feature allows users to share materials directly with the AI advisor or with a connected professional, and a session scheduling interface connects the user to the expert connection page when professional support is needed.

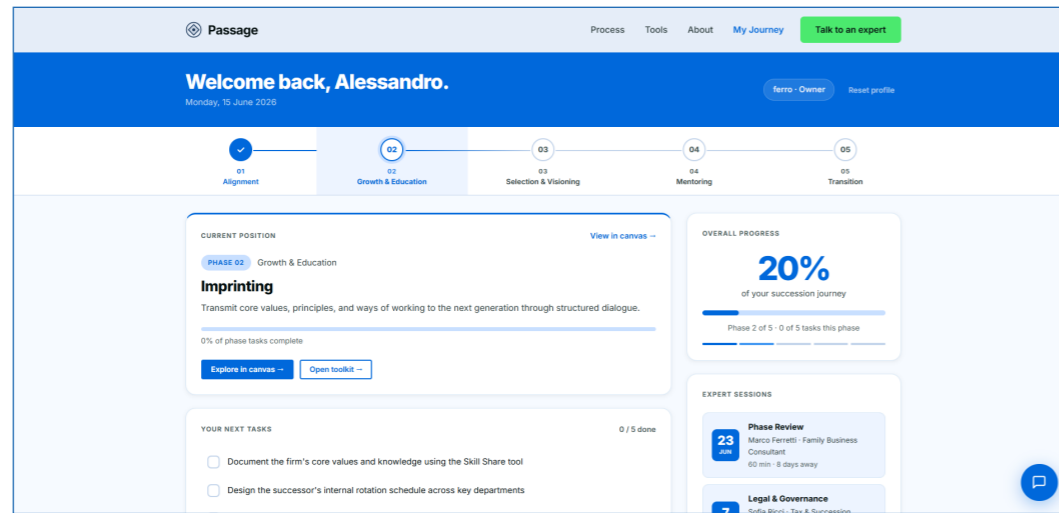


Fig. 38 — Platform: Personal dashboard

The expert connection section addresses one of the structural limitations of any self-guided instrument: certain moments in the succession journey cannot be navigated without the intervention of a neutral, experienced professional. The platform identifies the specific steps where expert support is strongly advised, offers three modes of engagement ranging from a single diagnostic session to an extended facilitation programme, and provides a direct booking interface. This feature is not incidental. It reflects an explicit design decision to avoid overpromising what a digital platform can deliver, and to position Passage not as a replacement for professional support but as a structured complement to it.

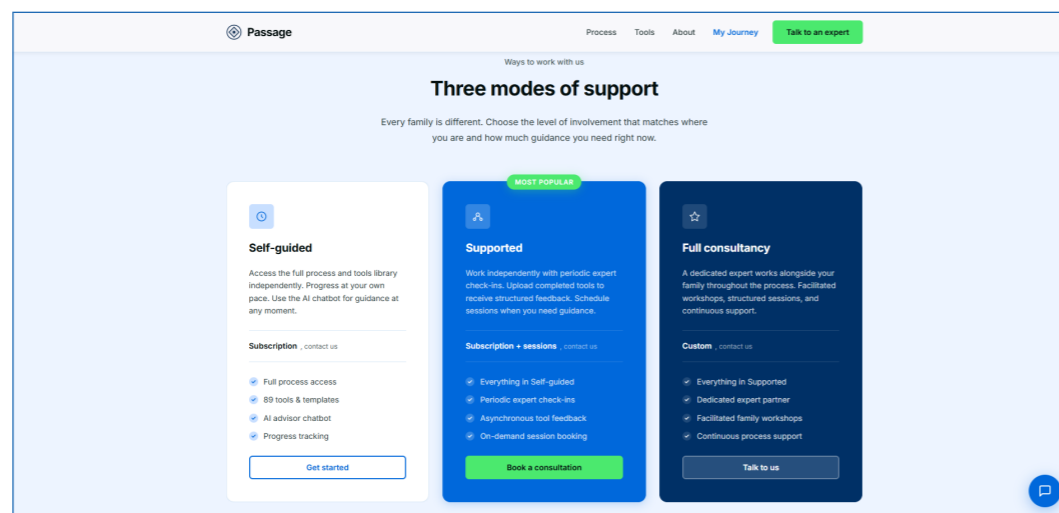


Fig. 39 — Platform: Expert connection, different plans

Finally, two editorial pages, one dedicated to strategic design and one to the family business research underpinning the platform, make the intellectual foundations of Passage accessible to users who want to understand why the platform

is structured the way it is. These pages translate the academic content of the first two chapters of this thesis into language and format appropriate for a family firm owner, closing the loop between the research and its application.

A persistent AI advisor, accessible through a fixed interface on every page of the platform, provides real-time guidance throughout the succession journey. Users can ask questions about specific steps, request tool suggestions, discuss documents they have uploaded, or seek clarification on any aspect of the process. The chatbot is not a standalone feature but an integrated layer of support that runs beneath the entire platform, available at any moment without interrupting the user's current activity. Its presence reflects one of the core findings of the field research: that family firm owners often need to ask questions before they are ready to act, and that the absence of an accessible response mechanism is one of the most significant barriers to engagement with structured support instruments.

Taken together, these sections constitute a management system in the sense established in the third chapter of this thesis: an integrated set of processes and tools that allows a family firm to develop a succession strategy, translate it into operational terms, and monitor its progress over time. What distinguishes Passage from existing succession resources is not the content alone, but the integration: the process, the tools, the personal tracking, the expert connection, and the research foundation are not separate instruments but components of a single, coherent system designed to work together.

Access platform !

6.2.1 Architecture

The homepage functions as the primary routing layer, connecting to every other section of the platform. The process canvas and the tool library are mutually connected, as tools are accessible directly from within each step of the canvas. My Journey is the operational hub, linking outward to the process canvas, the tool library, and the expert connection page. The research foundation pages are entry points into the platform for users seeking contextual understanding, both closing with a direct link to the process canvas. Expert connection is the terminal destination, reached from My Journey or from flagged steps in the canvas. The AI advisor runs as a persistent layer beneath all pages, accessible at any point without leaving the current view.

The pages are connected through a navigation logic that reflects the different entry points and needs of a family firm owner. A first-time visitor typically arrives on the homepage, encounters the problem data, explores the process overview, and routes toward either the process canvas to understand the succession map or My Journey to begin tracking their progress. A returning user navigates directly to their dashboard, checks their current position, accesses the process canvas or tool library for the specific step they are working on, and routes toward expert connection when professional support is needed. A user seeking contextual understanding before engaging with the platform operationally can access the research foundation pages from the homepage and arrive at the process canvas through their closing link. Regardless of entry point, the AI advisor is available throughout, providing guidance without interrupting the flow of navigation.

Conclusions

This thesis set out to investigate three interconnected questions: whether strategic design can be introduced into organisations that are distant from design culture, how that introduction can be made possible, and whether the result can concretely support family-owned SMEs during the process of generational succession. All three were answered positively, though not without nuance.

The first question proved to be the most complex in practice. Strategic design can communicate with contexts far from design culture, but it cannot do so on its own terms. The language must be translated, the tools must be simplified, and the entry point must be carefully constructed so as not to trigger the resistance that these firms instinctively direct toward anything that feels external or academic. During the case study, the role played was essentially that of a design intern embedded within the organisation, someone whose sole task was to bridge the gap between a body of knowledge that firms need and a world they have never encountered. Without that mediation, it is unlikely that the owners would have been able to independently understand and navigate either the complexity of succession or the logic of strategic design. The platform takes into account the perspectives of owners, experts, and practitioners and is designed to be as accessible as possible, but the presence of an expert remains, in most cases, necessary at least at key moments. Embedding design culture into the daily routines of manufacturing family firms is a much longer project, and one that falls outside the scope of this thesis. The new generation of successors, shaped by more diverse educational backgrounds and greater exposure to design thinking, may make this more realistic in the future. For now, it remains a possibility rather than a certainty.

What the research confirmed is that strategic design does not need to announce itself in order to work. Explicitly labelling the management system as a strategic design product might, in a context as distant from design culture as this one, generate more suspicion than trust. The firms do not need to know what made this possible. The goal was never to convert them to design. It was to test whether design was the right instrument to help them, and it was.

It proved to be more than that. Strategic design was not only the subject of this thesis but its instrument throughout. It provided the disciplinary lens through which two fragmented bodies of literature were synthesised and made coherent in Chapter 3. It supplied the methodological logic through which the synthesis was translated into a process, the process into tools, and the tools into a platform. It structured the field research, guided the co-creation sessions, and shaped every design decision from the categorisation system to the choice of a digital platform as the final output. Without it, none of this would have been possible. Strategic design demonstrated that it is an exceptional discipline not only for applying knowledge but for generating, organising, and translating it.

Three outputs follow from this. The synthesis framework in Chapter 3 connects two literatures, family business succession and strategic design, that had not previously been brought into dialogue, structuring their relationship as a progression from problems to categories to intervention areas. The three-iteration process in Chapter 5, together with the categorisation and layer systems developed with Ferro S.r.l., offers a method for translating the tools and language of a specialised discipline into a form a non-design audience can navigate. And the platform shows that this translation can take operational form: a working five-phase process, a library of eighty-nine adapted tools, and an AI advisor, rather than a theoretical proposal alone.

Something that emerged across several interviews was that the distance

between manufacturing family SMEs and strategic design is often more terminological than cultural. Some firms were already doing things that resembled design logic in practice, approaching problems iteratively, testing ideas informally, building direction through conversation, without any awareness of design as a discipline. This did not mean they were close to strategic design in any structured sense. They lacked the frameworks, the vocabulary, and the intentionality. But the gap was smaller than expected, resistance dissolved once the terminology was set aside, and the underlying concepts turned out to be already familiar. The most significant barrier to introducing strategic design into a resistant context was not cultural but linguistic, and translation proved a more effective entry point than conversion. For any discipline entering a context that perceives itself as distant, this suggests that the perceived distance is not a reliable measure of the actual one, and that identifying which form of distance dominates should precede the choice of how to enter.

The result of the thesis is not a definitive answer. It is a demonstration. One case study, one regional context, one sector, one hundred days. The scope is honest, and the limitations are real. But what this system shows is that the problem is solvable, that the tools exist, that the language can be translated, and that family firms, when approached with patience and respect for the reality they live in, are more open to this kind of support than the literature might suggest.

The broader contribution extends beyond the platform. Given the scale of the Italian entrepreneurial landscape, constituted overwhelmingly by family-owned firms, generational succession is not merely an organisational challenge but a social one, and one that falls squarely within the domain that strategic design was built to address. The intervention proposed here works from the bottom up, one firm and one family at a time. But scaled across the thousands of firms approaching succession in the coming years, this kind of support could begin to transform what is currently one of the most passive and risk-laden moments in a firm's life-cycle into what it has the potential to be: an opportunity to evolve, to innovate, and to carry forward what generations of work have built.

Limitations and Future Developments

This research project, however ambitious, was inevitably shaped by the constraints of a master's graduation project. From the beginning I invested considerable effort into every aspect of the work, from the literature reviews to the field research, the iterative development, and the co-creation sessions. I am satisfied with what was produced. The depth reached in exploring the literature on family-owned firms, generational succession, and strategic design, combined with the direct involvement of practitioners, experts, and firm owners, allowed the development of a result that is solid both theoretically and practically. It must be acknowledged, however, that the project has precise temporal boundaries. There are aspects that could not be fully explored, others that had to be set aside, and for others it was only possible to speculate.

Fewer than twenty participants were actively involved across all three rounds of interviews. While this number may appear limited, the contribution of each participant was substantial, and the recurring patterns that emerged across such a small and heterogeneous sample suggest that a larger group would likely have produced similar findings. The sample was deliberately diversified to capture different stages of succession, different firm profiles, and different professional perspectives within the Piedmontese manufacturing context.

A more significant limitation concerns survivor bias. By interviewing firms that are currently active, it was inevitable that some things had gone right, whether through deliberate planning, fortunate circumstances, or the quality of the personal relationships involved. None of the firms interviewed had directly experienced a failed succession. To partially compensate for this, accountants, business consultants, and succession specialists were included in the sample. Their professional experience provided access to cases of failure and difficulty that firm owners alone could not have offered. Given more time, it would have been valuable to directly involve firms that had failed during a generational transition, in order to understand that experience from the inside.

The case study with Ferro S.r.l. was extensive and productive, involving multiple sessions of interviews, co-creation, workshops, roleplay, and field visits conducted over more than a month. This depth of collaboration was invaluable for grounding the third iteration of the succession process in a real organisational context. However, this level of engagement could realistically only be sustained with one firm within the timeframe of the project. Processing and interpreting all the material generated across those sessions was itself a substantial undertaking.

As a consequence, the platform has not been subjected to in-depth user testing beyond the case study. Before the conclusion of the project, it was possible to validate the platform, primarily its architecture and the functions it offers, through brief sessions with a small number of participants. This sample, however, remains too limited to claim that the platform is free of flaws. A structured testing process across multiple firms at different stages of succession would be necessary to rigorously validate the platform's effectiveness as an operational instrument.

The optional financial support layer emerged as a relevant and valuable addition to the succession support system during the co-creation sessions. However, it falls outside both the competencies of a strategic designer and the direct scope of this project. It is acknowledged here as a gap that future development should address, ideally in collaboration with financial and legal professionals.

The current platform assigns tools to steps based on their activity category and phase relevance, but does not yet adapt this assignment to the specific config-

uration of the firm, the family dynamics, or the particular relationship between incumbent and successor. A more dynamic and context-sensitive tool assignment system, potentially supported by an expert or an algorithm, could significantly increase the relevance and effectiveness of the platform for each individual case.

Several directions for future development emerge from this project. The first and most immediately relevant concerns the business model. The platform currently exists as a research output. Multiple viable paths could be explored: a direct subscription model for family firms, a white-label licence made available to existing consulting or advisory firms, a marketplace model connecting firms with independent succession consultants, or a partnership with regional institutions such as the Piedmont Region or industry associations that already run succession support initiatives. Each model implies a different relationship between the platform, the firm, and the expert, and each carries different implications for how the tool reaches the people who need it.

A second direction concerns the time dimension of the process. The platform does not currently communicate how much time a firm should realistically expect to invest at each phase. Based on what emerged from the interviews, firms of this type operate under constant time pressure and cannot dedicate significant blocks of time to planning. One firm described a monthly meeting of approximately three hours, used to review progress, discuss direction, and assign tasks. A similar rhythm, consistent and periodic rather than intensive and occasional, seems well suited to the demands of a ten-year succession process. Future development should include realistic time estimates per step and per phase, helping firms understand what is being asked of them before they commit.

A third direction concerns the labelling of strategic design. This thesis applies strategic design on two levels simultaneously: as the analytical and synthetic instrument through which the research was conducted, and as the operational methodology embedded within the succession process itself. The platform deliberately uses accessible language throughout. Future research could investigate whether explicitly naming strategic design as the underlying methodology increases or decreases adoption among family firm owners who may associate design with aesthetics rather than strategy, or who may be resistant to anything that feels external or academic. Design frequently operates most effectively when it does so without announcing itself.

Finally, and most significantly, the only way to assess with certainty whether this system works is to test it longitudinally, observing the evolution of firms that use it over the course of a real succession. A ten-year process cannot be evaluated within a hundred-day project. Future research should also explore the generalisability of the framework beyond Piedmont, beyond the manufacturing sector, and beyond the Italian context, identifying what would need to be adapted for different cultural, sectoral, and regional conditions.

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