

Making Responsible Innovation Work: A Sensemaking Model for Market-Driven Small and Mid-Sized Firms (SMEs)

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Abstract

As innovations can help or harm society and environment, for-profit firms must manage them responsibly. While related scholarship grows, little is known about how managers enact it in daily innovation, especially in SMEs. To address this gap, we examine sensemaking of responsible innovation by decision-makers in sustainability-oriented SMEs, based on 42 interviews in 36 firms, using a problematizing lens to analyze how they navigate responsibility-competitiveness tensions in innovation processes. Our analysis yields a model of responsible innovation sensemaking showing how decision-makers test assumptions and choose responses shaped by cognitive and emotional dynamics, making responsibility actionable without sacrificing competitiveness. Our findings reconceptualize responsible innovation as an ongoing sensemaking process rather than a fixed framework, advancing theory on responsible innovation in for-profit firms and innovation management amid normative complexity.

Track: Innovation Management & New Product Development