# Sustainable Business Continuity: Early Warning Systems and Succession Planning as Instruments for Organisational Resilience

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**Abstract**

The long-term sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) depends not only on financial performance or strategic planning, but on an often-overlooked dimension: the preservation and transfer of knowledge embedded in people. While textbooks can convey structured frameworks and formal management principles, much of what keeps a business alive and adaptive lives elsewhere: in the intuition of a founder who has navigated a crisis, in the unspoken judgment of a key manager who knows when something is about to go wrong, in the relationships that hold a company together across generations of leadership.

This paper examines two interconnected mechanisms through which entrepreneurial support ecosystems can address this challenge: early warning systems for businesses in distress, and structured succession planning programmes. Drawing on the experience of Early Warning Slovenia and the CEED network, a community of over 1,200 SME founders built around peer-to-peer learning and mentoring, the paper argues that the most effective interventions in both crisis and transition scenarios are those that facilitate the transfer of tacit knowledge: through trusted relationships, honest peer exchange, and guided mentoring.

The paper explores how peer groups, mastermind formats, and mentor-supported processes create conditions for knowledge that would otherwise be lost, at the moment of crisis or at the moment of ownership change, to remain within and benefit the organisation. In this framing, sustainability is not merely an environmental or governance concept, but a human and organisational one: the capacity of a business to carry forward the knowledge, values, and relationships that make it viable across time and circumstance.

The findings suggest that structured entrepreneurial communities, when designed around trust and honest dialogue rather than formal instruction alone, can serve as a meaningful infrastructure for sustainable business continuity, and that this model has relevance well beyond Slovenia.

Keywords: tacit knowledge, SME resilience, early warning systems, business succession, peer learning, entrepreneurial ecosystems

## 1 Introduction

Across Europe, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for the vast majority of businesses and a large share of employment and value added, yet a high proportion do not survive their first decade. Each year, more than 200,000 EU businesses face insolvency, with an estimated loss of 1.7 million jobs (European Commission, 2024). Attitudes towards failure differ sharply across regions: 43% of Europeans say they would not start a business if it might fail, compared with 19% in the United States (Early Warning Europe, 2020). Behind these figures lies a less visible phenomenon. When a business fails, or when ownership changes hands without preparation, a body of accumulated knowledge about customers, suppliers, internal processes, early warning signs, and the relationships that hold the organisation together is frequently lost along with it.

This paper starts from the premise that SME sustainability is, in an important sense, a knowledge-continuity problem. Formal management frameworks, business plans, and accounting systems capture only part of what makes an enterprise viable. Much operational know-how remains tacit, held in the habits and judgment of founders, managers, and long-serving employees, and transmitted, if at all, through relationships rather than documents (Polanyi, 1966). Two moments in the life of an SME place this tacit knowledge under particular strain. The first is a crisis: financial, market, or personal difficulties that threaten the survival of the business while the owner-manager's attention narrows to immediate survival, often at the expense of reflecting on or transferring what they know. The second is an ownership transition, whether through planned succession, sale, or the sudden incapacity of the founder, when the accumulated experience of one generation must somehow reach the next.

Both moments are addressed, in different ways, by entrepreneurial support ecosystems that have developed across Europe over the last decade. Early warning (EW) systems, of which Early Warning Europe and its national chapters including Early Warning Slovenia are a prominent example, connect business owners in distress with experienced volunteer mentors who help them assess their situation and chart a way forward, whether that means restructuring and survival or an orderly closure (European Commission, EISMEA, 2024). Peer-learning networks such as CEED address a related but distinct need: helping founders navigate growth and transition, including succession, through structured peer exchange and mentors who have themselves been through similar moments.

This paper examines early warning systems and structured, mentor-based succession support as instruments for organisational resilience, focusing on their shared underlying logic: both rely on the transfer of tacit knowledge through trusted relationships rather than formal instruction. It connects with the conference themes of sustainable entrepreneurship and organisational practices, inter-generational and future-oriented collaboration, and sustainable governance and management, and proposes a human-centred reading of "sustainability" that complements environmental and reporting-oriented perspectives.

Section 2 reviews the literature on business resilience, mentoring, and family business succession, and introduces the Adizes organisational life-cycle model as a framework for understanding when tacit knowledge transfer becomes critical. Section 3 describes the method, based on two related programmes active in Slovenia. Section 4 presents the results: aggregate findings on Early Warning Slovenia and two illustrative cases from CEED's 1:1

Connect mentoring practice. Section 5 discusses implications, originality, and limitations, and offers concluding remarks on the relevance of this model beyond Slovenia.

Against this background, the paper addresses the following research question: How do mentoring-based early warning and succession-support programmes facilitate tacit knowledge transfer and strengthen SME resilience? The question is examined through programme-level data from Early Warning Slovenia and two illustrative cases from CEED Slovenia's 1:1 Connect mentoring practice.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Tacit Knowledge and Organisational Sustainability

The distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, introduced by Polanyi (1966) with the observation that "we know more than we can tell", helps explain why business continuity is not simply a matter of documentation. In SMEs this tacit dimension is especially pronounced: strategic decisions, customer relationships, and crisis responses are often shaped by the founder's accumulated judgment rather than codified procedures. When sustainability is framed only in environmental or governance terms, as is common in much of the ESG and reporting literature, this human dimension is easily overlooked. Yet the capacity of an organisation to carry forward its knowledge, values, and relationships across time and across changes in leadership is itself a condition for any other form of sustainability to be meaningful, since an enterprise that does not survive cannot sustain anything.

### 2.2 Business Resilience and the Role of Mentoring

Business resilience has been defined as the capacity of a system to "absorb disturbance and reorganise while retaining essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks" (Walker et al., 2004), and, in entrepreneurship-specific terms, as the ability to "anticipate, avoid, and adjust to shocks" (Ortiz de Mandojana & Bansal, 2015). A recurring theme in this literature is the role of social capital, that is, trust-based networks and support from peers, mentors, or family, in helping entrepreneurs face crises (Bowey & Easton, 2007; Hedner et al., 2011). Mentoring itself has a long history, tracing back to the Mentor figure in Homer's Odyssey, and is now understood as a relationship between an experienced businessperson and a business owner that can be personalised in a way generic training programmes cannot be (Kram, 1985; Deakins et al., 1998). The European Commission's 2024 good-practice guide on mentoring companies in distress, produced under the Early Warning Europe Mentor Academy project, synthesises evidence from 78 mentor-training programmes across more than 20 countries and concludes that mentoring "can play a crucial role in fostering SMEs' survival and growth" precisely because it offers a flexible, personalised transfer of experience that formal training cannot replicate (European Commission, EISMEA, 2024).

### 2.3 Early Warning Mechanisms

Early warning mechanisms for businesses in distress originated in Denmark and were subsequently rolled out across multiple European countries through the Early Warning Europe project (2016–2019) and successor initiatives such as ResC-EWE and the EWE Mentor Academy. These mechanisms typically pair a distressed business owner with a volunteer mentor, often a former entrepreneur, who helps diagnose the underlying problem (financial, marketing, organisational, or personal) and co-develops a realistic action plan oriented towards either restructuring or an orderly exit (European Commission, EISMEA, 2024). The approach aligns with the EU's broader policy direction on insolvency and second chances, most notably Directive (EU) 2019/1023 on preventive restructuring frameworks, discharge of debt, and disqualifications, which promotes early warning tools as a means of helping otherwise viable businesses avoid insolvency (European Parliament and Council, 2019). Evidence from the original Early Warning Europe project across Greece, Italy, Poland, and Spain shows that the leading causes of business distress are not primarily financial in a narrow sense: marketing and visibility issues accounted for nearly 29% of cases, followed by a bad or non-existent business model (19%), unmanageable debt (12%), and a mixture of personal and business finances (10%) (European Commission, EISMEA, 2024). This pattern supports the view that what is often missing in distressed SMEs is not capital alone, but the kind of strategic and operational judgment that mentoring is well placed to supply.

## 2.4 Succession Planning in Family Businesses

Succession is widely regarded as the greatest long-term challenge facing family businesses, which in Slovenia contribute an estimated 67% of value added among Slovenian enterprises and account for around 70% of employment (Antončič, Auer Antončič & Juričič, 2015). A survey-based analysis of Slovenian family businesses found that 58% are still led by their founding generation, while only 37% have completed a transition to a second generation and just 3% to a third (Jereb, 2016, drawing on Antončič et al., 2015). The same study identifies the central paradox of succession: although most owners eventually wish to transfer the business to a family member, successful transitions depend less on bloodline than on the timely preparation of the successor, the quality of relationships among family members, and the existence of a written, shared transition plan (Jereb, 2016, citing Glas & Pšeničny, 2000). Where succession is left until a health crisis or death forces the issue, the result is frequently conflict, loss of institutional knowledge, and sometimes the unravelling of the business itself, which is precisely the scenario that structured, mentor-supported succession planning aims to prevent.

## 2.5 The Organisational Life Cycle as a Framework

The Adizes corporate life-cycle model (Adizes, 1979, 1988) helps situate both early warning and succession within the broader trajectory of an SME. Adizes distinguishes "normal" from "abnormal" problems at each life-cycle stage, from Courtship and Infancy through Go-Go, Adolescence, and Prime to decline, and argues that many organisational crises arise not from the problems themselves, which are often predictable and even healthy, but from a lack of managerial depth and an over-reliance on the founder. The Adolescence stage in particular is characterised by the founder's reluctance to delegate and by conflicts that arise as the organisation builds the systems and middle-management capacity it has previously lacked, a description that maps closely onto the dynamics of succession. Several of the "abnormal problems" Adizes associates with Infancy and Go-Go, such as management by crisis, unanticipated negative cash flow, and premature sales orientation, correspond closely to the distress factors identified by Early Warning providers. Read together, the resilience, mentoring, and succession literatures, combined with the life-cycle perspective, suggest that early warning and succession support are not two unrelated services but two interventions addressing the same underlying vulnerability, an over-concentration of critical knowledge and judgment in a single individual, at two different and broadly predictable moments in an organisation's life.

## 3 Method

This paper adopts a practitioner-based, qualitative case-study approach, drawing on the operational experience of two related programmes active in Slovenia: Early Warning Slovenia and CEED Slovenia's 1:1 Connect mentoring programme. Both are part of broader European networks, EWS within the Early Warning Europe family of national mechanisms and CEED within an international community of over 1,200 SME founders, and both rely on structured, voluntary mentoring relationships as their core delivery mechanism. The two cases discussed in Section 4.2 were selected from a set of ten anonymised 1:1 Connect case summaries on the basis of representativeness: one illustrates the crisis-intervention scenario (Early Warning) and one illustrates the succession scenario (CEED), together covering the two organisational moments that the paper argues share a common underlying logic.

Data sources include participation and case records from Early Warning Slovenia, which to date has involved 87 entrepreneurs supported by a pool of 97 volunteer mentors; a set of ten anonymised case summaries from CEED's 1:1 Connect practice covering a range of crisis and transition situations; the CEED 1:1 Connect operating methodology, which structures the mentor-mentee relationship around the Adizes life-cycle framework; and European-level evaluation data on the Early Warning programme in Denmark, the country with the longest-running and most thoroughly evaluated EW mechanism, used as a comparative benchmark. The Slovenian sample is too small to support its own statistically robust outcome evaluation, so the Danish and broader European findings are treated as indicative of the impact a mature mechanism can achieve, while the Slovenian and CEED material provides qualitative, illustrative evidence of how tacit knowledge transfer occurs in practice. Readers should note that Denmark's programme has more than fifteen years of operational history and a substantially larger case volume than Slovenia's; Danish outcome data are therefore used as a benchmark of what a well-established mechanism can achieve, not as a direct prediction of Slovenian results, and all inferences drawn from the Danish data are presented accordingly.

The analysis first describes, in aggregate terms, the scale and reported impact of the early warning mechanism (Section 4.1), then turns to two CEED 1:1 Connect cases, a liquidity crisis and a family-business succession, to illustrate how mentoring facilitates tacit knowledge transfer in practice (Section 4.2). This combination of programme-level data and illustrative cases supports the paper's central argument: that crisis intervention and succession support, although administratively distinct, operate through the same relational mechanism.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Early Warning Slovenia: Scale and Indicative Impact

Early Warning Slovenia has to date supported 87 entrepreneurs in financial or organisational distress, drawing on a pool of 97 trained volunteer mentors, a ratio that reflects the programme's emphasis on careful matching between mentor expertise and the mentee's sector and situation rather than on processing large volumes of cases. Because the Slovenian programme is comparatively young, this paper draws on the long-running Danish Early Warning evaluation, covering more than 10,000 businesses supported since 2007, as an indicative benchmark, on the assumption that the underlying dynamics of distress, mentoring, and recovery are broadly similar across the two national contexts even allowing for the difference in absolute numbers.

The Danish evaluation for 2020–2024 found that 43% of supported companies survived despite being in serious financial difficulty, with survival rates lowest in construction, information and communication, and trade and transport, sectors where more than 40% of supported companies ended in bankruptcy (Teknologisk Institut, 2024). The benefits were not confined to surviving companies: 72% of all participating entrepreneurs said they would recommend Early Warning to others, and among those whose companies ultimately went bankrupt, a majority reported that the programme helped them make difficult decisions earlier, reduced the personal and financial fallout of bankruptcy, and reduced feelings of shame and stigma. Entrepreneurs who had received EW support before a bankruptcy were also more likely to start a new business afterwards, 20% compared with 17% in a control group (Teknologisk Institut, 2024).

Two findings are particularly relevant here. First, the most frequently cited benefits were not narrowly financial: entrepreneurs reported gaining greater clarity about their financial position, a better overview of their options and the consequences of different decisions, reduced personal and business stress, a sense that they were not alone in the crisis, and a clearer action plan. The programme's value lay substantially in restoring the entrepreneur's capacity to access and apply their own judgment under pressure, with the mentor acting as a sounding board and a source of perspective drawn from experience (Teknologisk Institut, 2024). Second, timing mattered: companies that joined earlier, before their situation became irreversible, had substantially better outcomes, and several entrepreneurs said they wished they had sought help sooner. This is consistent with the Adizes framework discussed in Section 2.5, since many "abnormal problems" associated with crisis become progressively harder to resolve the longer they are left unaddressed, as the gap between the founder's remaining capacity to act and the scale of the problem widens over time.

### 4.2 CEED 1:1 Connect: Tacit Knowledge Transfer in Practice

The CEED 1:1 Connect programme matches SME founders facing a specific challenge with an experienced mentor, typically a fellow entrepreneur who has navigated a comparable situation, for a structured series of one-to-one sessions. A review of ten anonymised case records shows a recurring pattern: in almost every case, the core contribution of the mentor was not new technical knowledge in accounting, marketing, or law, which is in principle available through formal training or professional services, but the application of that knowledge to the specific situation of the mentee's business, informed by the mentor's own experience of a similar moment. Across the ten cases the issues addressed ranged from liquidity crises following a major investment, over-dependence on a single customer, founder burnout, loss of a key client, and supply-chain disruption due to geopolitical events, to family-business succession, sales-process design for a technical start-up, margin erosion despite revenue growth, and a first-time entrepreneur with no prior business training. Two cases are presented below, chosen because they correspond to the crisis and succession moments identified earlier.

Case A, a liquidity crisis following investment. A family-owned metalworking company with eight employees had completed a significant investment in a new production line shortly before the onset of COVID-19 restrictions. Revenues fell sharply while loan repayments remained unchanged, and the company received a formal notice from the Slovenian tax authority (FURS) for late payment of social security contributions. Working with the mentor, the owner reviewed the company's cash flow in detail, identified which payments could realistically be reprioritised, and negotiated a moratorium with the company's bank. The company is now operating profitably. The technical steps involved, cash-flow analysis, payment prioritisation, and negotiation with a lender, are in principle standard advisory tasks. What the mentoring relationship appears to have added was the owner's willingness to act on this analysis under pressure, consistent with the Danish finding that mentoring's principal value lies in restoring decision-making capacity rather than supplying information alone.

Case B, succession in a family business. The founder of a family company retired, and his daughter took over leadership. She encountered resistance from a longer-serving team accustomed to the founder's way of working, alongside operational processes that had not been updated for some years. The mentor assigned to her had personally been through a comparable generational transition. Rather than addressing the technical content of the outdated processes directly, the mentoring relationship focused on the leadership transition itself: how to introduce changes without provoking open conflict with the existing team, and how to communicate new expectations in a way that respected long-serving staff while establishing the new leader's authority. This illustrates a point made in the Slovenian succession literature, that the most consequential risks in family-business transitions are rarely about whether the successor has the necessary technical competence, but about relationships, trust, and communication within the existing team, which is precisely the tacit, relational dimension that a peer mentor who has "been there" is best placed to address (Jereb, 2016).

Taken together, the Early Warning Slovenia data and the CEED 1:1 Connect cases point to the same underlying mechanism operating at two different organisational moments. In the Early Warning context the moment is an acute financial or operational crisis, often arising from the causes identified in Section 2.3: marketing problems, an unsuitable business model, debt management, or personal circumstances. In the CEED context the moment can be a similar acute crisis or a planned but unprepared transition of leadership. In both settings the mentor's contribution is less about supplying new information than about helping the entrepreneur access, apply, and sometimes pass on the tacit judgment the situation requires, whether that judgment belongs to the entrepreneur themselves, as in Case A, or needs to be transferred from one generation of leadership to the next, as in Case B.

*Table 1: Comparison of Early Warning and Succession Support as Tacit Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms (source: own)*

| **Dimension** | **Early Warning / Crisis Support** | **Succession Support** |
|---|---|---|
| Trigger | Acute financial or operational distress | Planned or unplanned ownership or leadership change |
| Primary knowledge at risk | Founder's crisis-navigation judgment; decision-making capacity under pressure | Accumulated operational, relational, and strategic knowledge of outgoing leader |
| Transfer mechanism | One-to-one mentoring by experienced entrepreneur; confidential, trust-based diagnosis | Peer group exchange; structured mentor-mentee sessions; extended transition overlap |
| Role of mentor | Sounding board; restores capacity to act; supplies pattern recognition from own experience of crisis | Guide for relational dynamics; models leadership transition from lived experience |
| Slovenian evidence | 87 entrepreneurs supported; outcomes benchmarked against Danish EW data (indicative) | CEED 1:1 Connect cases; Next Generation Initiative launched 2025 |
| Shared logic | Tacit knowledge transfer through trusted relationship at a predictable moment of vulnerability | Tacit knowledge transfer through trusted relationship at a predictable moment of vulnerability |

# 5 Summary and Discussion

## 5.1 Originality and Contribution

This paper’s main contribution is to bring together two strands of practice, early warning mechanisms for businesses in distress and mentor-supported succession planning, that are typically treated as separate policy areas, and to argue that they share a common underlying logic. Both function as infrastructures for the transfer of tacit knowledge through trusted relationships at two predictable moments of vulnerability in an SME’s life cycle. The literature on early warning systems emphasises financial and operational diagnosis, while the literature on succession emphasises governance structures and family dynamics; this paper suggests that both are, at root, describing the same phenomenon, namely the risk that arises when critical knowledge is concentrated in a single individual, and the value of mentoring relationships in mitigating that risk, whether the individual is a founder facing bankruptcy or a founder preparing to retire.

## 5.2 Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

For theory, the paper suggests that sustainability frameworks applied to SMEs would benefit from explicitly incorporating a tacit-knowledge-continuity dimension alongside the environmental and governance dimensions captured by frameworks such as ESRS or VSME. This proposition is grounded in the Slovenian case material and the broader European literature reviewed in Section 2, and should be understood as a direction for further theoretical development rather than an established conclusion, given the scale of the evidence presented here. For practice, the CEED 1:1 Connect cases suggest, on the basis of the Slovenian data, that mentor-matching criteria, specifically matching mentees with mentors who have direct lived experience of a comparable situation, may be as important as matching on sector or technical expertise. For policy, drawing primarily on the Danish benchmark, the paper supports the European Commission's emphasis on early intervention in both crisis and succession contexts. The Danish evaluation data indicate that timing is a significant determinant of outcomes; this finding is treated here as an indicative pointer for Slovenian and broader European policy rather than a conclusion directly established by the present Slovenian data. The proposition that structured, peer-based mentoring may be among the more cost-effective instruments available for SME resilience is offered as a promising hypothesis for future systematic evaluation, not as a conclusion of this study.

### 5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This paper has several limitations. The Slovenian early warning sample of 87 entrepreneurs is too small to support a statistically robust outcome evaluation, and the use of Danish and broader European data as a benchmark, while reasonable, cannot substitute for a dedicated evaluation of the Slovenian programme once a larger sample is available. The CEED case material, while illustrative, was not collected through a structured research instrument designed for this paper, and the selection of two cases out of ten for detailed discussion involves an element of researcher judgment; a more systematic qualitative analysis, for example through structured interviews with mentors and mentees across a larger number of cases, would strengthen the evidence base. The paper has also not directly examined the perspective of mentors themselves, who according to the broader EWEMA evidence base also derive benefits from participation, including networking opportunities and a sense of social contribution (European Commission, EISMEA, 2024). Future research could combine a longitudinal evaluation of Early Warning Slovenia, once its case volume grows, with a structured comparative study of mentor-matching practices across CEED and similar peer-learning networks, to test more rigorously the proposition advanced here: that crisis intervention and succession support are, at root, the same kind of intervention applied at different points in an organisation's life.

### 5.4 Concluding Remarks

The long-term sustainability of SMEs depends on more than financial health or formal governance structures. It depends on whether the knowledge, judgment, and relationships that keep a business viable can be accessed when most needed, in a crisis, and carried forward when leadership changes. Early Warning Slovenia and CEED's 1:1 Connect programme, despite operating in different administrative frameworks and addressing nominally different problems, both function as mechanisms for this kind of knowledge continuity, built on trust-based mentoring relationships rather than formal instruction. For entrepreneurial ecosystems seeking resilient SME populations, investment in well-matched, peer-based mentoring, available both in moments of crisis and in moments of planned transition, may be one of the most cost-effective and broadly applicable instruments available, with relevance well beyond Slovenia.

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