

# **Organisational ambidexterity and sustainable value co-creation in a social enterprise: The case of Social Bite**

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## **Abstract**

This case focuses on the concept of organisational ambidexterity, its relevance to social entrepreneurs, and its contribution to sustainable value co-creation. It examines how social enterprises must adapt to newly emerging challenges whilst simultaneously delivering upon their core mission. A Chief Executive Officer recalls how he reacted swiftly to capitalise upon unanticipated opportunities without being deflected from vital routine operations. He was successful in significantly raising the profile – and consequently the economic and social sustainability of his social enterprise – by harnessing a sudden Public Relations opportunity. The case considers how organisational ambidexterity and ‘agility’ can contribute to social entrepreneurship. The concept is explored in the context of Social Bite, an Edinburgh-based social enterprise which provides housing, employment, food, and support to individuals facing homelessness. Finally, the case also considers the relationship between organisational ambidexterity and sustainable value co-creation.

## **Keywords:**

Organisational ambidexterity; sustainability; value co-creation; social enterprise, social entrepreneur

## **Learning Outcomes**

- 1: This teaching case study constitutes a platform from which student groups can undertake evidence-based conversations about the role of organisational ambidexterity in entrepreneurship.
- 2: The case study also facilitates student exploration of how social enterprises co-create value for their core stakeholders.
- 3: The case study also enables students to discuss how social entrepreneurs must simultaneously accommodate alignment and adaptability strategies.
- 4: The case invites students to analyse the impact of organisational ambidexterity on value co-creation in the context of a social enterprise.

## **Introduction**

This case introduces two core concepts which are prevalent within entrepreneurship theory – ‘organisational ambidexterity’ (Raisch et al., 2009) and ‘sustainable value co-creation’ (Singh et al, 2022). Organisational ambidexterity is an organisation's ability to seek and explore new opportunities while continuing to exploit existing ones. Achieving ambidexterity demands innovation, curiosity, flexibility, and willingness to take risks. One approach to organisational ambidexterity is structural ambidexterity, where discrete business units and innovation team - typically created by large, well-resourced organisations like those in the high technology sector - are separated from core business functions and tasked with identifying and exploring new opportunities. Another approach is contextual ambidexterity, involves adopting behaviours and practices that enable organisations to adapt to emerging situations and explore new opportunities without losing focus on their core objectives. Sustainable value co-creation means generating business outcomes that deliver social, environmental, or economic benefits without harming the planet, populations, or resources. It represents a collaborative effort between stakeholders, such as a business and a charity, to create mutually beneficial outcomes. When collaboration prioritises sustainability, it ensures that the outcomes serve social, environmental, ecological, as well as business outcomes.

These concepts are explored through the experiences of a prominent ‘social entrepreneur’ – the leader of a ‘social enterprise’ - a business that generates income to fund activities with a positive social impact, such as tackling homelessness or addressing fuel poverty. Leaders of such organisations are called social entrepreneurs. They drive the mission of creating meaningful social change through entrepreneurial efforts. This case presents an example of organisational ambidexterity in a social enterprise, to explore its rather paradoxical characteristics, and to analyse its importance to organisations. The case focuses on the need for entrepreneurs to exploit existing opportunities while simultaneously exploring new ones

(Pattinson et al., 2021). In particular, the case explores how enterprises must simultaneously adopt strategies of alignment (toward the organisation's core mission) and adaptability (toward unanticipated opportunities). This presents a tension which entrepreneurs may find counterintuitive, and which is likely to demand diametrically opposed mentalities or skill sets.

Additionally, it differentiates between structural ambidexterity and contextual ambidexterity, exploring how entrepreneurs combine proactive strategies with reactive improvisation. Much of the extant entrepreneurship literature on contextual ambidexterity focuses on innovative technology start-ups, and many publications on structural ambidexterity focus on large multinational enterprises. Consequently, smaller organisations with social sustainability as their primary missions are underrepresented. This case demonstrates the applicability of ambidexterity concepts to social enterprises, the importance of understanding their nuances, and their potential to underpin value co-creation.

### **What is a social enterprise?**

A social enterprise is a business or organisation that operates with the primary goal of addressing social, environmental, or cultural issues while maintaining financial sustainability (Ridley-Duff, 2008). Unlike traditional businesses that focus solely on maximising profit for shareholders, a social enterprise seeks to create a positive impact on society alongside generating revenue (Pattinson, 2020). At the heart of every social enterprise is its purpose-driven mission; the core objective being to tackle societal challenges, such as reducing poverty, improving education, promoting environmental sustainability, or addressing health inequities (Zeyen and Beckmann, 2018). Unlike businesses that primarily focus on profit margins, the financial gains of social enterprises are often reinvested into their social causes. For instance, profits may be channelled back into programs which serve marginalised communities or into

initiatives which aim to reduce environmental harm. This commitment to a social cause distinguishes social enterprises from purely profit-driven entities.

Despite their social focus, social enterprises function within a business model (Pattinson, 2020). They engage in commercial activities by selling products or services, generating revenue just like any conventional business. However, the significant difference lies in how they allocate their profits. For example, a social enterprise may sell eco-friendly products and use the proceeds to fund environmental conservation efforts. This combination of business operations and social objectives allows them to remain financially stable while achieving their mission (Brown and Thompson, 2022). In contrast to traditional businesses which primarily evaluate success through financial performance, social enterprises consider both their social impact and financial health (Babu et al., 2020). This means that metrics such as the number of people helped, environmental improvements, or changes in social behaviour are often given more importance than mere profit margins (Brown et al, 2024). The dual focus on social and financial performance allows social enterprises to remain true to their mission while also ensuring their continued survival. However, it also requires entrepreneurs to be able to use ambidexterity to navigate the tension between profit and social aims (Farquhar et al., 2024).

### **Understanding organisational ambidexterity**

Organisational ambidexterity is the ability of an organisation to exploit pre-existing opportunities whilst simultaneously exploring new and unforeseen opportunities (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013). A rather paradoxical construct, it demands that the organisation aligns itself to pre-planned strategic outcomes whilst simultaneously being adaptable enough to orient itself towards emerging and unplanned opportunities (Raisch et al, 2009). As such, it implies the necessity of combining a laser-like focus on an organisational mission with a peripheral vision of the commercial environment (Birkinshaw, Zimmermann and Raisch, 2016). Organisational

ambidexterity enables entrepreneurs to navigate, and even harness, tensions that support value creation (Pattinson et al., 2023).

To be successful, an organisation must enhance its execution of planned and existing strategies and tasks (Crick and Crick, 2023). This is termed 'exploitation'. However, they must also 'search' for new ideas, alliances, and opportunities, and 'experiment' to ascertain which ones to pursue, and how – this is termed 'exploration' (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). To achieve both these ends, an organisation must allocate resources – such as time, money, and staff – to both strategies (March 1991), which presents the risk of committing insufficient resources to either. Moreover, there is disagreement amongst theorists whether the two strategies should be in equilibrium or combined (Joensuu-Salo and Viljamaa, 2024), or if they constitute the extremes of a bipolar construct upon whose continuum organisations should decide upon an optimum position (e.g. – Junni et al, 2013). Indeed, the efficacy of organisational ambidexterity is thought to depend upon factors such as the organisation's life-cycle stage (Balboni et al, 2019) and size (Choi et al, 2022), and to impact outcomes such as profitability, sales growth, and market share (Kassotaki, 2022).

Because social enterprises pursue a primary social or environmental mission which is funded by their revenue-making activities (Apostolidis et al, 2021) a tension often emerges between the organisational mission that constitutes, for example, sustainability goals that are for the benefit of people, planet and profit (Elkington, 2006), and profit being generated to fund the socio-environmental aspirations of the entrepreneur (Brown et al, 2024). Social enterprises, therefore, need to seek ways to reduce costs, increase return on investments, and deliver increased benefits to their primary stakeholders (Brown and Pattinson, 2024). These goals feed into a sustainability mission common amongst social enterprises (Pattinson, 2020). As structural ambidexterity is often used to co-create value proactively (Hochstein et al, 2021),

and because value co-creation is suited to addressing sustainability goals (Singh et al, 2022), organisational ambidexterity is potentially useful to social enterprises.

However, even if a social entrepreneur has decided to leverage organisational ambidexterity as a sustainable value co-creation strategy, they still face a dilemma. The concept of organisational ambidexterity is often divided into structural and contextual ambidexterity (Hochstein et al., 2021). In creating a successful co-creation strategy, social entrepreneurs need to employ structural and contextual ambidexterity to successfully navigate the tensions between alignment of the organisation's core mission and their adaptability in co-creating sustainable social enterprises (Pattinson, 2020).

Ambidexterity improves innovation performance and is essential for balancing diverse viewpoints (Pattinson et al., 2023). Structural ambidexterity usually entails larger, better-resourced organisations creating discrete business units which are spun out at arm's length to the main part of the organisation and populated by innovation teams working on large projects (Junni et al., 2013). This approach enables risks to be ringfenced, and ensures that actors have enough resources – particularly time and the presence of collaborators - to undertake exploration properly (Boakye et al., 2022). Contrastingly, contextual ambidexterity is the adoption of behaviours and practices which enable organisations, their leaders or staff to adapt to emerging situations – and specifically to seek and explore previously unapparent opportunities – without being deflected from pursuing the fulfilment of their core objectives (Ramdan et al., 2022). This approach provides support and security to individuals who need to spend a proportion of their time ideating and exploring new ideas, but demands that they retain their disciplined focus on delivering. As such, it is an ideal approach for facilitating small side projects which may later require scalability, and for enabling innovation within smaller or less resourced organisations (Amankwah-Amoah and Adomako, 2021). Neither type of ambidexterity is 'better' than the other, and many organisations legitimately employ both



approaches simultaneously, sequentially, or on a more ad hoc basis. Also, ‘context’ - such as a social entrepreneur possessing commercial entrepreneurial instincts (Zahra et al, 2009) or culture-specific management traits (Dey et al, 2023) - shapes all social entrepreneurship (Stirzaker et al, 2021). The choice may nonetheless pose a dilemma to strategic decision makers within social enterprises as they strive to co-create sustainable value.

## **Social Bite**

Josh Littlejohn (MBE) is one of the UK’s best-known social entrepreneurs, having drawn international acclaim not only for his tireless efforts to address the scourge of homelessness, but for the innovative and disruptive ways in which he generates awareness of social issues and motivates others to join his mission. Born in 1986, Josh is a media-savvy Millennial who graduated in Economics and Politics from Edinburgh University. He was recognised by Ernst and Young as the 2015 Young Social Entrepreneur of the Year, and later by Debrett’s as one of the 500 most influential people in the UK. His humanitarian contributions to society have been acknowledged with Member of the British Empire (MBE) status, a Pride of Britain award, and numerous honorary degrees.

Josh is most closely associated with Social Bite<sup>3</sup> and its initiatives. Social Bite is an Edinburgh-based social enterprise which provides “homes, jobs, food, and support to empower people to transform their own lives” (Social Bite, 2024), and which has a mission to help eradicate homelessness (OSCR, 2025). As a consumer-facing brand, Social Bite is a small chain of coffee shops operating in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and London, but one which is differentiated from other food and drink retailers by its prominent mission, its mass-participation events, its engagement with funders and policymakers in the field of

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<sup>3</sup> More details of the organisation can be found on its website: <https://www.social-bite.co.uk>  
More information on Josh Littlejohn can be found on his website: <https://www.joshlittlejohn.co.uk>

homelessness, and its endorsement by prominent public figures. Through its collaborations with multiple stakeholders and partners, Social Bite co-creates sustainable value – it works with other entities to achieve more favourable outcomes collaboratively than each entity could have achieved in isolation (e.g. - Toby Carvery, 2025). It does this primarily by sharing knowledge, expertise – and certain supply chain efficiencies and routes to market (e.g. – Matthew Algie, 2025) - but, as we shall see, Social Bite increasingly contributes benefits arising from its public awareness and engagement (Scottish Ensemble, 2025).

### **Organisation background and a significant initiative**

Starting as an Edinburgh coffee shop in 2012, the charitable work, campaigning, and social mission of Social Bite stem from a homeless man called Peter entering the premises to ask for employment. Social Bite introduced a system called ‘Pay it Forward’, in which customers can pay for a meal or drink which is later donated to a homeless customer, and distribute nutritional food and drink to those in need (The Herald, 2024) – typically over 180,000 items of food and hot drinks annually. A company target is to recruit people with homelessness backgrounds to at least a quarter of its jobs. Early in the development of Social Bite, Josh faced a challenge as he realised that, to maximise the impact of Social Bite and bring greater benefits to more people in need, he needed to raise its profile – and that organisational ambidexterity would be required to achieve this. He did so by attracting A-list celebrities and influencers who would help to promote the enterprise. These included George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio, The Princess of Wales, Jeremy Corbyn (then Leader of the UK Labour Party), Nicola Sturgeon (then Scottish First Minister), and Olympic athlete Sir Chris Hoy (Third Force News, 2021).

### **Josh talks about the initiative, how it occurred, and the impact upon Social Bite**

As Josh explains, he needed to show agility to respond to an opportunity which presented itself:

*“Prior to setting up Social Bite, I'd set up an events business and organised the Scottish Business Awards. We got Bill Clinton because we were able to use the revenues generated from selling tables at this dinner to pledge a really big donation to the Clinton Foundation.”*

Even at this early stage of his development as an entrepreneur, Josh was exploring ways in which to generate – but also reinvest – income. He would later apply this principle into a social enterprise – Social Bite. His quote also demonstrates that he was alert to opportunities to gain eye-catching publicity.

Having gained this expertise, Josh built upon it:

*“The next year we did Richard Branson...So in 2015 we started to look for speakers that had their own foundation or charity that they were affiliated with that might be a motivating factor. ‘What about George Clooney? He's got his foundation.’”*

At this point, an unanticipated opportunity arose with the potential to benefit Social Bite:

*“We struck a deal to make a big donation to Not on Our Watch [George Clooney's charitable foundation], but we had George Clooney for the day and could create an itinerary. So we said, ‘Look, we've got this little thing called Social Bite - this little café. Do you think we could put it into the itinerary - come into this cafe for ten minutes?’ And they said yes.”*

In dealing with the media, Josh was able to gloss over the fact that the primary purpose of George Clooney's visit was the Scottish Business Awards, portraying instead a remarkable event in which George had *“flown across the world just to come in for a sandwich for me. And then that became the whole story - the bizarreness of this Hollywood megastar coming into this little café for a sandwich. It just caught fire as a PR moment.”* Moreover, the quotation demonstrates Josh's ability to pivot from the day-to-day management of Social Bite to focus on an opportunity which was unforeseen, arose quickly, and had the potential to enhance his

social enterprise strategically – to make a fundamental change to its method of operating, which would enable it to increase its social impact exponentially.

Seeing the success, Josh repeated the trick:

*“Twelve months later we did the same thing. We managed to do the same thing with Leonardo DiCaprio through his phone. Over the space of those 12 months, between November 2015 and November 2016, we had these two megastars come. It was just insane really, for what was a tiny little social enterprise.”*

It appears that, as Josh could replicate his success by returning to the same type of strategic opportunity, he gained sufficient expertise and experience to ‘exploit’ it more routinely rather than consuming more time ‘seeking’ and ‘exploring’ such opportunities. In short, a previously extraordinary approach becomes consolidated into a core approach which is absorbed into Josh’s entrepreneurial repertoire, thereby freeing him to pursue fresh incremental opportunities.

The benefits reaped from this ability to explore new opportunities were significant:

*“It undoubtedly gave us a massive platform and made us able to achieve many of the things that we went on to achieve since then – the fundraising, the more ambitious projects that those two visits generated, I think, gave us the platform to do that. I think if you remove those visits from our history, then I don't think we would have been able to do the Sleep Outs or the village or anything that we went on to do. I think we just struggled to make that happen because they just gave us so much momentum and so much goodwill and made people open doors to us much easier than we would.”*

Despite Josh having previous experience of recruiting A-list celebrities to events, the opportunity for George Clooney to visit Social Bite presented itself quickly. Josh was able to pivot quickly away from his core activities and identify how a fresh input might contribute to his core mission. Furthermore, because he arranged substantial charitable donations to the

foundations of visiting celebrities through his other business activities and fundraising, benefits accrued both to beneficiaries of Social Bite and those of the foundations – a clear form of sustainable value co-creation.

As discussed earlier, sustainable value co-creation entails two or more partners or stakeholders collaborating to achieve a specified outcome which is beneficial to each party and adheres to the principles of sustainability – it avoids depleting valuable resources, does not inflict social or environmental damage, and is respectful of the needs of all stakeholders. By collaborating with homelessness charities, local authorities, universities, and other social enterprises, Social Bite has recognised areas in which these entities can pool expertise, knowledge and more tangible resources to magnify their benefits while reducing the investment required and therefore saving income for additional initiatives or to reach incremental beneficiaries.

Social Bite has been praised for its bold, impactful societal contributions by partners - including suppliers of coffee (Matthew Algie, 2025), retail partners (Toby Carvery, 2025), governmental departments (e.g.- OSCR, 2025), charity consortia (e.g. – Scottish Ensemble, 2025), and both general (The Herald, 2024) and specialist (Third Force News, 2021) news publishers. Amy Brewer, Social Bite’s Communications Manager, commented that the main facilitator to sustainable value co-creation is “when you’ve got a shared goal or you’re aligned in what you are trying to achieve.” She went on to provide one such successful example:

*“Social Bite partners every Christmas with Itison, a voucher deal company. They run a voucher deal. £5 will buy someone a Christmas dinner, and we get all of the profits, and I think that works well because it is a great deal for Itison – people who sign up to their platform might remain members for the rest of the year – and it’s good for us because they don’t charge us any fees and it’s a good way to get eyeballs on a thing. It’s a very simple call*

*to action. I guess the difficulty is when there is an uneven weighting between you and the person you're collaborating with".*

This observation mirrors a common observation within theoretical literature on value co-creation and cooptation – that goal congruence between partners is vital to collaborative strategic efforts.

### **Enabled by the initiative: What came next?**

By securing visits by these prominent figures, Social Bite gained widespread media coverage via broadcast, print and digital media. Additionally, as the celebrities and influencers have millions of online followers, each made a huge new audience aware of Social Bite by sharing photographs of their visit on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter and Snapchat. In turn, many followers on these platforms shared or forwarded content relating to Social Bite, thereby generating additional 'Electronic Word of Mouth' (EWOM) communications. These peer-to-peer communications are invaluable to organisations such as Social Bite as they are highly credible, modern, interactive, cost-efficient, measurable, and can transcend geographical boundaries and market segments.

To attract and engage such high-profile endorsers required significant effort, time and money. As these quickly emerging opportunities placed short-term demands on Josh and Social Bite, diverting them from certain day-to-day concerns, we may consider the efforts to be demonstrations of organisational ambidexterity, insofar as Social Bite had to retain its long-term focus on its core mission, values and activities, but it simultaneously needed to be attentive to, and capitalise upon, fleeting opportunities which presented themselves from the periphery. However, despite demanding agility and innovation, Josh had decided to explore these extraordinary opportunities because he realised that the results would enable Social Bite to

broaden its mission and to deliver upon it more emphatically – to enhance the power of his social enterprise as a force for social justice.

From 2016 to 2018, Social Bite “organised mass participation fundraising sleep-out events called ‘Sleep in the Park’” (Social Bite, 2024), in which over 18,000 people protested homelessness whilst empathising with its victims, thereby raising over £8 million which was reinvested in anti-homelessness initiatives. As ‘Sleep in the Park’ itself generated huge amounts of publicity, it helped to boost awareness of, and engagement with, Social Bite yet further – but such participation would have been unthinkable without the initial celebrity endorsements. In 2019, Josh established ‘The World’s Big Sleepout’, taking his initiative to 52 cities globally, with events in New York City’s Times Square and London’s Trafalgar Square (Littlejohn, 2023). Each success enabled Josh to create an even larger, more impactful success.

With the money raised from ‘Sleep in the Park’, Social Bite built a Social Bite Village of 11 two-bedroomed prefabricated homes and community hub in Edinburgh – delivering upon its mission in the most demonstrable manner. It then launched Scotland’s Housing First program, securing 830 apartments in five cities to address rough sleeping, and collaborated with the Scottish Government to home renters who were suffering uncertainty and precarity due to insecure tenancies. The initiative has helped at least 1,333 people and its practices have been adopted by all of Scotland’s local government authorities.

From 2014, Social Bite shops have opened every Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to welcome people who have nowhere else to go, and since 2020 a ‘Festival of Kindness’ has collected Christmas gifts and donations for the homeless and vulnerable. From 2021, Social Bite has raised more donations through their ‘Break the Cycle with Chris Hoy’, in which over 1,500 people have pedalled across Scotland, and it launched the UK-wide ‘Jobs First’ program to support people from homelessness backgrounds and other excluded people into work.

## **Two strategic choices: Whether to embrace organisational ambidexterity and, if so, which form of ambidexterity to adopt**

Thus far, Josh has adhered more closely to the concept of conceptual ambidexterity than structural ambidexterity – for instance, by quickly recruiting George Clooney and harnessing the resulting publicity to organise ‘Sleep in the Park’ and other events. Structural ambidexterity would have entailed setting up separate business units populated by discrete taskforces for the purposes of identifying and pursuing non-core strategic opportunities. This is prevented not only by a relative lack of income and staff resources (compared to, for instance, heavily funded hi-tech start-ups in Silicon Valley, which often use the approach), but also by the characteristics of nascent and youthful social enterprises such as Social Bite, which must remain small enough to ringfence profits for reinvestment into social initiatives. Many social entrepreneurs like Josh also enjoy nimble improvisation and seem to revel in their underdog status. Indeed, it flows through the personality and stories of the Social Bite brand, positively differentiating it in the marketplace from longer established enterprises and increasing its public profile.

However, as Social Bite grows, Josh may be able to adopt structural ambidexterity alongside, or instead of, contextual ambidexterity – perhaps if he can leverage upon large bequeathments as a financial resource or business graduate interns as a source of expertise. By deciding to build the first Social Bite Village, Josh certainly scaled up his organisation’s social impact, but it cannot truly be considered an example of structural ambidexterity as the strategic decision developed organically without the input of a discrete business unit. Given the benefit of hindsight, it seems almost unthinkable that Josh might have chosen not to adopt a strategy of organisational ambidexterity, and therefore not achieved the scale and breadth of success which Social Bite has subsequently enjoyed. However, we must remember that Josh is an extraordinary social entrepreneur with a unique mix of skills, talents and attributes, and that his



exact strategic choices would not have been absolutely replicable by other social enterprises, or by other entrepreneurs if they had been at the helm of Social Bite.

We must also remember that adopting organisational ambidexterity is not without its risks and costs. Like other new strategies, it demands the allocation of resources – in particular, the investment of time and expertise by entrepreneurial leaders and their teams, and the diversion of funds from other parts of the business. Moreover, there are less obvious costs and risks, such as the burden placed upon leaders and their staff by being forced ‘outside their comfort zones’, core routines and areas of expertise to adopt a new organisational mindset (Brown et al, 2019). While many people find such fresh challenges invigorating, they nonetheless entail what may be considered ‘emotional labour’ (e.g. – Richards et al., 2019), and this may induce stress and burnout in some leaders and employees, potentially hindering staff productivity, satisfaction and retention. Furthermore, the implementation of a new work culture and working practices requires organisational know-how, especially in terms of internal marketing, communication, and process management (Brown, 2017; 2020). For these reasons, many social entrepreneurs who are less bold and ambitious than Josh may shy away from adopting organisational ambidexterity.

Nonetheless, let’s transport ourselves back to 2015 and put ourselves in Josh’s shoes to consider the strategic choices with which he was confronted and to understand better the potential consequences of those decisions. Josh is the co-founder and CEO of Social Bite and had been enjoying considerable success within the Scottish localities where he operated – Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee. Five years into trading, he ran four coffee shops across those locations, in which he trained and employed staff who had been affected by homelessness, helping them to gain independence, security and confidence. He was working with Scottish charities and government to help address homelessness and to lobby government

authorities to adopt more ethical socioeconomic policies and practices. These activities were essential if Social Bite was to pursue its mission, but also very time-consuming and demanding.

Social Bite had garnered admiration within the Scottish media and, to a lesser extent, within UK-wide media, increasing its coverage within newspapers, on television and radio, and in online media. Even at this stage, Social Bite is a notable success amongst Scottish and UK social enterprises, making a tangible difference to the lives of excluded people, and delivering upon its mission. However, Josh seems to sense that the organisation may be approaching its maximum potential unless he can find a way to significantly raise its profile and therefore its donations and bequeathments – a sea change which could be extremely difficult and risky to achieve, but which would increase Social Bite’s potential exponentially. Undoubtedly, many leaders would moderate or downgrade their ambitions and accept that their organisation may start to plateau.

## **Summary**

Having transported Josh back to 2015 and a critical juncture in the development of Social Bite, he is now faced with an important decision regarding his strategic approach to running a social enterprise:

- 1: He could decide to adopt structural ambidexterity. This would probably entail forming a break-out team whose members would be freed of their everyday duties to focus upon an emerging opportunity.
- 2: He could decide to adopt contextual ambidexterity. This would probably entail allocating certain staff a small percentage of their daily time to exploring a new opportunity so that the remainder of their time could remain dedicated to undertaking their core tasks.

3: He could decide not to adopt any form of organisational ambidexterity. This would constitute the low-risk option, because he could continue to focus on his core mission and objectives, free from any short-term distractions or resource investments.

### **Questions**

1: To what extent did Josh's recruitment of celebrity endorsers represent organisational ambidexterity?

2: How suitable is structural ambidexterity as a strategy for a social enterprise such as Social Bite, and why?

3: What were the potential advantages and disadvantages – benefits and risks - of Josh adopting a strategy of contextual ambidexterity in his management of Social Bite?

4: How might he maximise those potential advantages and mitigate the potential disadvantages?

5: How might a decision not to adopt organisational ambidexterity have impacted upon Social Bite?

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## **Teaching Notes**

### **1: Summary of the case**

Social Bite is an Edinburgh-based social enterprise which seeks to help eliminate homelessness. This case study focuses on the entrepreneurial mindset adopted by its co-founder, Josh Littlejohn, in his approach to strategic decision-making. He describes a critical point within the organisation's development when possessing organisational ambidexterity enabled him to explore a new, unplanned opportunity which would significantly enhance Social Bite's ability to address its mission.

### **2: Teaching objectives and target audience**

The key issue in this case study is whether a social entrepreneur should adopt an approach which embraces organisational ambidexterity. A secondary issue is whether, if a social entrepreneur adopts organisational ambidexterity, they should adopt structural ambidexterity or contextual ambidexterity as their preferred approach. This case study will enable students to evaluate different approaches to organisational ambidexterity, to explore their applicability to social enterprises, and to analyse the extent to which they can contribute to sustainable value co-creation strategies. The case study is intended by use by both undergraduate and postgraduate students of strategy and entrepreneurship. There are four learning objectives:

- 1: The case study provides a platform from which students can engage in evidence-informed discussions about how entrepreneurs – and specifically those within social enterprises – approach organisational ambidexterity.
- 2: The case study also allows students to consider how structural ambidexterity and contextual ambidexterity differ in their suitability to social enterprises.

3: The case study enables students to engage in a broader discussion about how social entrepreneurs might align their strategic mindsets to the pursuance of sustainable value co-creation strategies.

4: The case challenges students to reflect upon the impact of organisational ambidexterity upon sustainable value co-creation in social enterprises.

### **3: Teaching approach and strategy**

This case study may be used as a springboard for student discussions of different approaches to organisational ambidexterity. It facilitates classroom-based theory to be applied into an authentic situation and encourages active participation in the learning process (Brown, 2023). The major theoretical points to highlight when utilising the case study centre around the concepts of organisational ambidexterity, structural ambidexterity, contextual ambidexterity, and sustainable value co-creation. The case study places organisational ambidexterity within the context of Social Bite, a Scottish social enterprise, and provides an opportunity for students to participate within a wider discussion about entrepreneurial approaches to agility and improvisation.

Wherever actionable, the classroom should be arranged with desks in a semi-circle (i.e. – an ‘auditorium’ layout) or similar configuration which enables students to face each other and collaborate in small groups. Such a layout facilitates a direct exchange of ideas between students (Brown et al, 2022), and enables them to engage with the lived experiences of entrepreneurs in the critical manner increasingly demanded of university Business Schools (Higgins and Refai, 2017). Before teaching the case, start by requesting that students first read and reflect upon the case – either prior to class or at its commencement, depending upon the length of the seminar/workshop/tutorial. It may be useful for the lecturer to provide a 5-10-minute introduction to the case before beginning any discussion. This introduction should

present the strategic choice made by Josh Littlejohn – whether to adopt structural ambidexterity, contextual ambidexterity, or no form of organisational ambidexterity as a strategic mindset. The goal of the case is not to select the ‘correct’ choice for Social Bite – indeed, we argue that there is not necessarily a ‘correct’ choice, and entrepreneurs are not compelled to select one choice. Instead, the goal of the case is to understand the implications inherent to organisations and their stakeholders – particular on the ability of social enterprises to undertake sustainable value co-creation.

Upon completion of the introduction, the lecturer may wish to split the class into groups of three to five students, according to the cohort size. Each student group should agree and summarise answers to each of the questions presented in the case study and nominate one group representative to summarise their answers to the class. The lecturer should encourage students to move beyond a basic discussion of the organisational challenges to a more analytical identification of the potential implications associated with the available choices. As a concluding plenary to the session, the lecturer may consider requesting students to summarise to the class, in groups or individually, what they consider to be the main learning outcomes of the session and ways in which the intended learning objectives have been fulfilled.

Alternatively, the lecturer could request that students reflect upon the content before summarising their own opinions and experiences of the main points covered within the case. It is also important to ask students to evaluate the usefulness of the case as a learning tool in their own development, thereby helping students to develop their metacognitive skills, and providing the lecturer with valuable feedback on the effectiveness of the case so that they can make any necessary adjustments to future classes (Pattinson, 2019).

## **Analysis**

Lecturers should assure students that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, and that the case study is simply intended as a platform from which they can explore and discuss the main issues presented by the case. Indeed, most theorists and practitioners do not believe either structural or contextual ambidexterity to be superior to the other, or even that one must be adopted to the exclusion of the other. However, students are challenged to consider an authentic scenario in which organisational ambidexterity, experienced by the protagonist, Josh, may be analysed in detail. To be more specific, students should contemplate the following points in their answers to the provided questions:

1: To what extent did Josh’s recruitment of celebrity endorsers represent organisational ambidexterity?

Students should be able to identify that organisational ambidexterity was a factor in Josh’s ability and willingness to explore a rapidly emerging opportunity – in this instance, to invite George Clooney to the Social Bite coffee shop and derive valuable PR exposure from the visit. From the case material, students should also be able to recognise that other factors than organisational dexterity may have been at play – such as Josh’s creativity, ability to improvise, and propensity for measured but entrepreneurial risk-taking.

2: How suitable is structural ambidexterity as a strategy for a social enterprise such as Social Bite, and why?

When deciding which strategy to adopt or reject, an entrepreneur should consider the potential benefits which might be achievable from, and the associated costs or risks associated with. its adoption. Any new strategy is likely to place demands upon resources (i.e. – time, money, staff, machinery/equipment, and consumable items). The ‘staff’ costs are not to be underestimated,

as orienting employees to adopt a specific mindset or practice can entail cultural resistance, internal marketing expertise, and the ‘emotional labour’ incurred when tasked with going outside one’s comfort zone.

Students should be able to recognise that structural ambidexterity is demanding of resources (e.g. – staff availability, time, money) which may be more prevalent in larger and better-established organisations (such as multinational enterprises). They may also deduce that it is a strategy often better suited to industries which are primarily ‘creative’ or ‘innovative’ (such as branding agencies or tech developers) in which discrete teams of specialists can be spun off from the main flow of the organisation’s core duties for an extended period. However, these are not hard and fast rules, and challenging them opens opportunities for classroom debate and for students to practise critical analysis of a real-life case.

3: What were the potential advantages and disadvantages (benefits and risks) of Josh adopting a strategy of contextual ambidexterity in his management of Social Bite?

Students should be able to recognise that contextual ambidexterity – the proportional allocating of people’s time to specific non-core tasks – is likely to be more applicable to a social enterprise, and especially one which has only been trading for 5-6 years. Additionally, students may observe that the characteristics of many social enterprises (e.g. – limited budgets, and a high degree of income uncertainty) often necessitate a more cautious approach to opportunity exploration. The main advantages of contextual ambidexterity to Josh are (i) being able to identify the potential of new opportunities, (ii) being able to capitalise upon them, and (iii) being able to do so without neglecting his core objectives. The potential risks include the stretching of resources (i.e. – from their use on core objectives), and the possibility of key employees being less adaptable than Josh.

4: How might Josh maximise those potential advantages and mitigate the potential disadvantages?

Students should be able to identify potential benefits and risks arising from adopting either structural or contextual ambidexterity, both generically and then in the context of Social Bite. Thereafter, they should be able to suggest measures which Josh could take to mitigate the risks (whilst perhaps reducing the associated costs) and to maximise the potential for capitalising upon the opportunities. Students may wish to explore Josh's book available as hardback, paperback, Kindle book, or audiobook, and the details are as follows: Littlejohn J (2023) *Paying it forward: How to be a social entrepreneur*. London: Heligo.

5: How might a decision not to adopt organisational ambidexterity have impacted upon Social Bite?

It appears that, had Josh and Social Bite operated in a less ambidextrous manner in 2015, it would not have explored opportunities to recruit prominent personalities such as George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio as visitors. Consequently, Social Bite would not have benefitted from a huge uplift in media PR coverage, Word Of Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word Of Mouth (EWOM) peer-to-peer communications, brand/mission awareness, and the consequent rise in donations and participation. As Josh suggested, this would have prevented Social Bite from pursuing such sizeable initiatives as building Social Bite Villages or spearheading Sleep in the Park. However, Social Bite would still have achieved numerous successes and changed many lives for the better.

## **Feedback**

Please allow some time to reflect upon the case and consider how well it worked in different situations (e.g. – across different student cohorts or on different modules). The case has been

trialled and found to be effective as a teaching tool on strategic management and entrepreneurship modules within a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including MA Marketing, MSc Business with Entrepreneurship, and BA(Hons) Strategic Business Management. More specifically, it has been used as a supportive learning tool within small seminar groups on modules such as Social Entrepreneurship, Managing Change, and Marketing Communications. The case could also be utilised on other programmes such as Master's degrees in International Business Management, MBA programmes, or with doctoral students.

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