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Key Strategies for Small Business Information Technology Consulting with Sustainability Beyond 5 Years

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Christopher A. Lassiter

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Key Strategies for Small Business Information Technology Consulting with
Sustainability Beyond 5 Years

by

Christopher A. Lassiter

MBA, Ashford University, 2014

BBA, Miles College, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

February 2021

Abstracto

Scentro comercial negocios tecnología de la información los propietarios de consultoría carecen de estrategias para sostener sus negocios más allá de 5 años financieramente. Los propietarios de pequeñas empresas están preocupados por mantener sus negocios, ya que su sustento y sus empleados están en juego. Basado en la teoría de las cinco fuerzas de Porter, el modelo de vista basado en recursos, y el modelo delta de Hax y Wilde, el propósito de este estudio cualitativo de múltiples casos fue explorar estrategias que los propietarios de consultoría de tecnología de la información para pequeñas empresas (TI) utilizand para lograr la capacidad de sostenimiento financiero más allá de 5 años. Datos recopilados por entrevistas semiestructuradas de 5 propietarios de consultoría de tecnología de la información de pequeñas empresas. Los documentos de rendimiento y éxito financiero aumentaron la recopilación de datos de las empresas. El procedimiento de análisis temático de seis pasos de Braun y Clarke reveló cuatro temas: planificar cuidadosamente los gastos y limitar los costos, empoderar y recompensar a los empleados, el marketing a través de las redes sociales y las redes sociales y el boca a boca, y cultivar buenas relaciones con los clientes. Una recomendación clave para los propietarios de consultoría de TI para pequeñas empresas es convertir nuevos clientes en clientes a largo plazo y obtener referencias de clientes existentes. La implicación de un cambio social positivo incluye el potencial de fortalecer la viabilidad financiera de las pequeñas empresas, comúnmente el mayor proveedor de empleos y servicios, y la fundación de la base impositiva en muchas comunidades.

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Dedication

The current study is dedicated to my first born, Christian, my inspiration.

Dedicated to my youngest son Chancellor, my strongest intellectual competition. To my only Daughter, my Destiny, the wind to my sail. To my Mother Annette Gamble, no words will do justice. To Sweets. To my FATHER...APTTMH!

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Thank you to military services. To all my family and to Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, I owe credit to my foreparents for the strength to endure this level. And finally, to Miles College and Ms. Kennibrew, whose words help power me top the peak of education!

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Table 1. Data Analysis Themes 57	iv
Section 1: Foundation of the Study.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Problem Statement	2
Purpose Statement.....	3
Nature of the Study	3
Research Question	5
Interview Questions	6
Conceptual Framework.....	6
Operational Definitions.....	7
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations.....	8
Assumptions.....	8
Limitations	8
Delimitations.....	8
Significance of the Study	9
Contribution to Business Practice.....	9
Implications for Social Change.....	9
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	9
Three Strategic Frameworks	10
Entrepreneurship and Small Business	14

Business Strategies.....	20
Transition	35
Section 2: The Project.....	37
Purpose Statement.....	37
Role of the Researcher	37
Participants.....	39
Research Method and Design	40
Research Method	41
Research Design.....	42
Population and Sampling	43
Ethical Research.....	44
Data Collection Instruments	45
Data Collection Technique	46
Data Organization Technique	48
Data Analysis	49
Reliability and Validity.....	50
Reliability.....	50
Validity	51
Transition and Summary.....	52
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change	54
Introduction.....	54
Presentation of the Findings.....	55

References	79
Appendix A: Consent Form	99
Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Script.....	102
Appendix C: Recruitment Letter.....	104

List of Tables

Table 1. Data Analysis Themes.....	57
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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses are a significant component of both local and global economies (Dias & Teixeira, 2017). However, it is common knowledge that a majority of new small businesses fail within the first five years (Akinyemi & Adejumo, 2017; Dias & Teixeira 2017; Koyagiolo, 2016). Turner and Andres (2017) explored the strategies that small business utilize for success and found that small businesses must be open and willing to change according to the demands of their industry. However, Turner and Andres (2017) recommended further research regarding the strategies that successful business owners utilize. There is a need to understand the strategies that successful small business owners employ to help more small businesses achieve success. The main objective of the research study was to explore key strategies small business owners use to remain operable beyond five years. To investigate the study, I employed a multiple case study design to understand the successful strategies that may be replicable for future businesses as well as inform future researchers.

Background of the Problem

Each year, U.S. small business owners start over 500,000 new businesses, but fewer than half of startups remained operational beyond five years (Fadahunsi, 2012). More research is needed to understand how the business strategies employed by small business owners affect the success rate of their businesses (Fadahunsi, 2012). Particularly, there is little research on the strategies of small business information technology consulting firms (Ramaswamy, 2019).

Information technology (IT) firms did not originally need to worry about catering to customers on a day-to-day basis, but as the IT industry changed, IT employees increasingly needed to interface with customers (Burke, 2002). Some information technology professionals move into consulting without knowledge of how to engage with and attract clients (Luftman, Zadeh, & Dersken, 2012). Thus, bringing on new clients and developing marketing strategies are significant challenges for information technology consultant firms (Stone, Hobbs, & Khaleeli, 2002). However, few studies have focused on small information technology consulting firms, and therefore, few strategies are understood for the success of information technology consulting firms (Nguyen, Newby, & Macaulay, 2013). The focus of the current study was to explore proven strategies for small business information technology consulting firms. The results of this study could help the success of small businesses by providing pertinent data related to marketing, leadership, competition, and motivation strategies that can be used to promote successful small business strategies.

Problem Statement

Despite efforts on the part of small business owners to remain profitable and grow their businesses, some small businesses will fail within five years of their start-up (Artinger & Powell, 2015). In 2017, more than 50% of small business start-up owners failed within the first five years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). There is little academic research related to information regarding business strategies used by small information technology consulting owners (Nguyen, Newby, & Macaulay, 2013). Research regarding successful small business strategies are proven be useful for the

success of other small business owners (Nguyen, Newby, & Macaulay, 2013). The general business problem is some small business information technology consulting owners are negatively affected by a lack of information to remain profitable and sustain their businesses beyond five years. The specific business problem is some small business information technology consulting owners in the United States lack key strategies to sustain their business beyond five years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore key strategies some small business information technology consulting owners in the United States use to sustain their new businesses beyond five years. The target population of participants was five information technology consulting company owners in the United States who successfully managed their information technology consulting business for more than five years. For the purpose of this study, I defined successful as being profitable. A review of literature suggested the potential impact of identifying key strategies that information technology consulting owners used to sustain their businesses as models for other small business owners. Improved sustainability and stimulated organizational growth may lead to new employment opportunities and promote positive social change as well as stability within local communities.

Nature of the Study

Three types of research methodologies include case study research, participant observations, and interviews. A qualitative case study provides instruments explicit to the study in the context of their own real-life environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2016).

Participant observations establish validity in research by providing a rounded understanding of the case being studied (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). By acting as participant-observers, researchers observe a phenomena or event in a real-life setting and described in interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The interview data collected increases the confidence in the findings (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004).

A qualitative, multiple case study approach was chosen for this study to assess the key strategies of small information technology consulting businesses. A qualitative research methodology is a systematic empirical investigation that exists to explore and develop an identified problem or phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The qualitative approach was appropriate because my intent was to explore strategies employed by some small business information technology consulting owners to achieve business success beyond five years.

Other research methods include quantitative research methods and mixed-method research. I did not choose a quantitative method because the quantitative methodology is best suited to understanding the variables that influence outcomes (Yin, 2014). The current study does not focus on variables as there are innumerable factors that may contribute to the problem, and therefore, a quantitative approach was eliminated. A mixed-method design was not appropriate for the current research study because a mixed methodology utilizes both qualitative data and quantitative to make inferences regarding a specific problem or phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

Qualitative, multiple case study approach was to provide strategies for small information technology consulting business owners to sustain their businesses beyond five years. A case study design is used for the production of knowledge to provide

conclusive outcomes (Stake, 1995). I aimed to provide conclusion towards the issue of failed business enterprises. The findings of this research also provide insights regarding optimal strategies to overcome the problem of failed business start-ups. The use of a multiple case study design allowed for the exploration of the problem statement through multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995), and expanded the opportunity for in-depth exploration of the strategies.

The use of phenomenological design would focus data collection solely on the conduct of the interviews (Groenewald, 2004) and nullify information collected from document reviews, and lower the quality of the study. Phenomenological design highlights what an experience means and gives a description of the meaning of lived experience, so that the researcher may discover a depth of meaning for such an occurrence (Moustakas, 1994). I eliminated phenomenological design from consideration because the current study should discover processes that may be duplicated rather than looking for the meaning behind a phenomenon. The ethnographic design is based on an inquiry in which the researcher studies patterns of behavior, language, and actions within a cultural group. Ethnography does not provide an in-depth exploration of business strategy because it is appropriated for the examination of belief and culture shaping (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Research Question

The research question was: What key strategies do some owners of small business information technology consulting firms in the United States use to sustain their businesses beyond five years?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to compete against rivals in your industry?
2. What customer service strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
3. In what ways does your leadership style impact organizational performance?
4. What financial strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
5. What strategies did you use to enhance employee motivation?
6. What marketing strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
7. What internal processes or systems do you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
8. What resources do you find most helpful in the success of your business beyond five years?
9. What additional information would you like to share concerning strategies you used to sustain your business?

Conceptual Framework

To guide the current study, I used the following three established frameworks: Porter's (1979) five forces theory; Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) resource-based view model; and Hax and Wilde's (2003) delta model. In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers relied on one of two main theories to understand companies' performance: Porter's

(1979) five forces theory; resource-based view model (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). Porter (1979) focused on the external driving forces of competition as the biggest influence on a business's profitability. Porter's (1979) five forces include (a) potential of new entrants into the industry; (b) competition in the industry; (c) bargaining power of suppliers; (d) bargaining power of customers; and (e) threat of substitutes. In contrast, Prahalad and Hamel (1994) believed that internal factors or resources were the most crucial factors for the business's profitability. Prahalad and Hamel (1994) viewed resources to be both tangible or physical assets and intangible or assets without physical form.

However, in the early 2000s, Hax and Wilde (2003) introduced the delta model, which drew on both the five forces theory and the resource model. However, Hax and Wilde (2003) also introduced the perspective of the customer as a major factor in determining a business's profitability. The combination of all three frameworks provided failure rates are so high that there is a need to identify sustainability strategies to increase business success rates beyond the five year mark. Because a conceptual framework helps shape the strategy of the researcher and enhances the quality of the data, I chose to utilize all three frameworks for this research.

Operational Definitions

Business success: For this research study, business success referred to a business with profitability and longevity of five or more years (SBA, 2016).

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship defines an individual with an innovative personality and ability to embark upon new business ventures (Gartner, 1990).

SBA: The United States Small Business Administration is an independent federal government agency, whose representatives assist, counsel, and protect the interests of small businesses (SBA, 2016).

Small business: A small business is a firm with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts considered to be true but that cannot be formally verified (Yin, 2014). The primary assumption within the current study was that participants will be truthful in their interview responses. One disadvantage to interview data is that the data cannot be verified to be factual and are subjective to the participants (Alshenqeti, 2014; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2014). The assumption that participants are truthful in their responses cannot be avoided but should also not be forgotten.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses within the design of the study (Yin, 2014). The small sample size of this study was limited with regard to the generalizability of the findings (Yin, 2014). Interviews are subjective in nature and thus were another limitation of the current study. However, the interviews were supported by company documents and member checking to help ensure accuracy.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the bounds or scope of a study (Yin, 2014). This study was delimited to successful small IT consulting businesses in the United States. Despite this

delimitation, the findings of this research study are helpful in providing insight into successful business strategies for small businesses, that can be replicated in other locations and with other businesses.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this research contribute to our understanding of the strategies used by small business owners in the information technology consulting industry to successfully sustain their businesses beyond five years. Developing business owners' knowledge of successful strategies may contribute to effective business practices by helping owners lead and sustain their information technology consulting businesses. The findings may also help IT consulting industry owners accomplish difficult tasks and take advantage of opportunities to enhance small business success.

Implications for Social Change

The contributions to small businesses could help the IT consulting industry owners and managers grow their businesses, which could positively affect the local communities by increasing employment. As small businesses grow and achieve sustainable practices, more income could flow into local economies.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of the professional and academic literature review was to summarize, compare, and contrast business success strategies related to the research topic. Torraco (2005) noted the literature review is a synthesis of published documents on a given topic.

Academic literature reviews are also limited to peer-reviewed journals (Leiras, De Brito, Peres, & Yoshizaki, 2014).

I found publications by searching the following business databases within Google Scholar and the Walden University Online Library: SAGE Premier, Business Source Complete, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, government databases including the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) and U.S. Census Bureau, and Emerald Management Journal. The journals I searched focused primarily on business and management and aimed to expand organizational, administrative, and customer research.

Key search terms used in the publications search included combinations of the following: *small business owner, small business failure within five years, and small business success beyond the five-year mark, small business managers, small business, and small IT consulting the business in Texas, systems theory, and entrepreneurship*. This review of the professional and academic literature is made up of the following five main subject categories including three strategic frameworks, entrepreneurship, and small business, small business owners, customer service, and information technology consulting industry.

Three Strategic Frameworks

Porter's five forces as a conceptual framework. In 1979, Porter identified five competitive forces within an industry: (a) entry of new competitors into the arena, (b) threat from substitutes based on other technology, (c) bargaining power of buyers, (d) bargaining power of suppliers, and (e) competition between companies already established on the market. These forces relate to profitability and sustainability. The

potential impact of new entrants into industry may result in price cutting or inflation of cost for the other companies within the same industry and a smaller profit margin (Porter, 1979). Competition among existing companies follows well-known procedures such as customer service, warranties, like offers, and product campaigns to gain an auspicious position (Besen & Farrell, 1994). The bargaining power of buyers results in pressure to decrease prices by creating buyer choice (Porter, 1979). Buyers use each competitor against the other to negotiate buyer advantages. The bargaining power of suppliers resulted in pressure on businesses to conform against self-interest by the threat of an increase in cost or price and a decrease in quality or service (Porter, 1979). Porter (1979) defined substitutes as goods or services that can be replaced by another company. However, companies that produce unique items that cannot be substituted are more likely to be successful due to reduced competition (Porter, 1979). Substitutes that can be replicated by other companies cap the potential price and reduce profitability (Porter, 1979).

The five forces framework was established as a technique for analyzing business techniques in multiple industries (Porter, 1985). Over the years, Porter's (1979) distinction between cost leadership and differentiation strategies, as well as the related typology, is perhaps the best-researched strategy in the strategy literature (Karagiannopoulos, Georgopoulos & Nikolopoulos, 2005). Technological change was one of the principal drivers of competition (Porter, 1985). Such strategies yield competitive benefits for survival and profitability (Wang & Chang, 2008) Porter (1979) noted a range of good to vicious natured intensity that is capable in resulting competition.

Porter highlighted seven factors that determine intensity including: (1) many competitors or competitors of compatible strength, (2) slow growth rate in the industry, (3) high fixed manufacturing or inventory costs, (4) no differentiation (no conversion costs), (5) quantum leaps in capacity, (6) competitors of different kinds, and (7) high strategic value.

Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) resource-based view. Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) resource-based view model (RBV) focused on a firm's internal resources as well as the individuals. The RBV model conceptualizes the internal and individual resources of a firm as components of firm sustainability (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). According to Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) RBV model, two types of resources are tangible and intangible. Tangible resources are described as physical assets owned by the firm, such as land, machines, and plants (Galbreath, 2005). In contrast, intangible resources are characterized as assets without physical form. Examples of intangible assets are intellectual property, reputation, and culture (Galbreath, 2005). Intangible assets usually required a certain amount of time to acquire and are not easily bought (Galbreath, 2005).

Resources are valuable and rare according to the RBV theory, and can, resources can also be gained and lost. The value of these resources was subject to environmental and technological change (Galbreath, 2005). The RBV theory is most effective if a firm's resources meet the VRIO (Valuable, Rare, Hard to Imitate and Organize) framework (Galbreath, 2005). The Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) RBV theory assumed that firm control of resources and capabilities lead to the sustainability

The Delta model. Porter's (1979) taxonomy and Prahalad & Hamel's (1994) RBV model regarding competitive positioning frameworks were influential throughout

the 1980s and 1990s (Hax & Wilde, 2003). However, in the early 2000s, a paradigm shift in business strategy had a significant influence on organizational economists (Hax & Wilde, 2003). The introduction of the delta model by Hax and Wilde (2003) established effective ways to improve new positioning among a firm's activities. The delta model drew on Porter's five forces framework and the resource-based view as a foundation, but enhanced the earlier theories by adding the perspective of the customer (Hax & Wilde, 2003). Hax and Wilde (2003) argued companies could enhance sustainability by shifting their foci from competitors to the customer.

The delta model lays out a strategic framework for effective marketing and customer service management (Hax & Wilde, 2003). When properly applied, the delta model enables managers to articulate and implement effective business strategies (Hax & Wilde, 2003). The delta model specifically addressed the link between customer bonding and competitive position. The basic tenets of the delta model are operational effectiveness, customer targeting, and innovation (Hax & Wilde, 2003). The delta model is a relatively new strategic framework focusing on effective marketing and customer service management. Hax and Wilde (2003) developed the delta model based on Porter's (1979) five forces concept, which helped to understand the forces driving value division within the marketplace and why different industries maintained different stratum of profitability (Hax & Wilde, 2003). Hax and Wilde (2003) introduced the delta model to show company executives they could enhance sustainability by focusing their strategies on customer service rather than on competitors.

Entrepreneurship and Small Business

Small businesses in the United States are major contributors to employment creation (Davis, Haltiwanger & Schuh, 1996). Some small business owners contribute to local employment numbers as well as promote the advancement of individual skills (Bartik, 1989). The knowledge and networks of some small business owners can play an important role in impacting the strategic orientation and performance of their businesses (Bartik, 1989). As such, any effort to understand the innovation levels of small businesses must also consider the characteristics of the company founders (Carland, Carland, & Carland, 1995). The critical role owner/managers play in fostering informal learning in small businesses places emphasis on learning through strategic choices (Bartik, 1989).

Entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is a relative term that can refer to a start-up business or a state of perpetual free enterprise (Campbell & Witcher, 2015; Perriot, Hussain & Windsperger, 2015). However, the definition of entrepreneurship remains in question especially regarding franchising (Perrigot et al., 2015; Mloi & Nkhahle, 2014) According to Perriot et al. (2015) the terms *business independence* and *entrepreneurship* are synonymous. In the following section, I identify some different scholarly perspectives and possible definitions of entrepreneurship and conclude the subject is broad and without definitive boundaries.

Mloi and Nkhahle (2014) defined an entrepreneur as an individual who has specific personality traits. Campbell and Witcher (2015) defined entrepreneurship by ongoing business creation and activity. According to Mloi and Nkhahle (2014), lower-income earning individuals may have a greater disposition for entrepreneurship compared

with higher income earning individuals. Furthermore, individuals who earn higher incomes have a reduced tendency to become entrepreneurs because of the high risk of financial loss. In addition, unemployed individuals may have a greater disposition for entrepreneurship compared with low income earning individuals because of the greater comparable risk of financial loss. However, Moloi and Nkhahle's (2014) study was focused within South Africa and therefore is a representation of entrepreneurship that is not directly applicable to the United States.

Campbell and Witcher (2015) described entrepreneurship as the human capacity to perceive personally gainful opportunities and to organize productive resources to take advantage of the perceived gainful opportunity and bear the risk. Campbell and Witcher (2015) stressed that entrepreneurship is also a general feature of human behavior. Campbell and Witcher (2015) noted that entrepreneurship is labeled as action in the face of uncertainty. Entrepreneurs' decisions often involve doing something new or doing something in a new way. Thus, in an environment of uncertainty, the entrepreneur sees a way forward where others do not (Campbell & Witcher, 2015).

Types and sizes of small businesses. Small businesses in the United States provide an average of 60% of all new jobs, including existing companies and start-ups as of 2013 (Nelson, 2015). During 2013, there were over 3.7 million microbusinesses in the United States, which accounted for more than 75% of the private sector (Nelson, 2015). Business size varies; approximately 6 million U.S. businesses have less than 500 employees, 5 million have less than 20 employees, and 27 million are nonemployee firms or self-employed individuals creating over 115 million jobs in the United States (Nelson,

2015). Researchers at the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) defined a small business as a firm with less than 500 employees (SBA, 2016). The SBA Development Center, trade shows, and degree programs are all resources provided by the SBA to increase success in small businesses' start-up and sustainability; the SBA is a federal agency whose primary purpose is to help Americans start, build, and grow businesses according to its mission statement (SBA, 2016).

In 2011, a small business in New Zealand employing less than 20 individuals was defined as a microbusiness (Greenbank, 2000). In New Zealand, microbusinesses employ more than 16.6% of all private (nonfarm) employment (Greenbank, 2000). Samujh (2011) posited microbusinesses aid in a more stable and sustainable economic and social community; however, these findings are specific to the studied region of New Zealand.

Samujh (2011) conducted a qualitative study in New Zealand to explore which support options entrepreneurs and owners of microbusinesses believed were necessary for success and survival. The interviewees expressed insufficient time and a lack of psychological support as notable challenges of self-employment (Samujh, 2011). The leading cause of not being able to take control of their time was the unpredictability and uncertainty of their daily work. For example, customers can keep the owners on the phone for longer periods of time than was expected (Samujh, 2011). Their main sources of support came from bankers, family, friends, and accountants. However, owners felt the lack of community support and at times felt isolated (Samujh, 2011). These results are specific to the region of New Zealand and further research is needed to assess how the findings of Samujh (2011) are applicable to the United States.

Role of small business owners. A small business owner's behavior plays a critical role in business sustainability. The use of professional consultation, through a business coach or personal business research, aids in the support and sustainability of small businesses (Lee, Bartkus, & Lee, 2015). This is an important consideration for the purpose of this study because it indicates that research related to small business owners contributes to the success of small businesses. According to Lee et al. (2015), family-owned businesses account for about 75% of new jobs and add approximately 57% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the United States. It is important to understand the type of factors that may contribute to small business success. Markman & Baron (2003) emphasized the importance of the entrepreneur in the process of entrepreneurial success (Markman & Baron, 2003). A study from Unger, Rauch, Frese, & Rosenbusch, (2011) noted human and financial capital are necessary for the creation, success, and survival of small businesses (Unger, Rauch, Frese, & Rosenbusch, 2011).

Some small business owners who promote and provide organized hiring processes and certified training programs should present them to all new hires (Ntalianis et al, 2015). Additionally, small business success is attributed to owners' abilities to explore and exploit opportunities including social networks, innovation, and technology (Ntalianis et al, 2015). Human capital in considerable amounts may be as effective in small business success as financial capital (Omri, Frikha, & Bouraoui, 2015). Omri et al. (2015) also noted human capital is one of the top three most important factors for small business success because human capital opens an easier path to discover and exploit a positive opportunity.

Minority small business owners face additional sets of challenges regarding the hiring pool, various financial institution interactions, and potential clients (Lee, Bartkus & Lee 2015). Minority business enterprise is characterized as owned and operated by one or more social or economically disadvantaged persons, deriving from a cultural, racial, or severe economic circumstance (Gagnon, Michael, Elser, & Gyory, 2013). Political and economic climates continue to have a negative impact on the economies of the minority population (Gagnon et al., 2013; Lee, Bartkus & Lee 2015). Female business owners also face additional challenges (Lee et al, 2015). Despite challenges, in 2015, women-owned businesses made up approximately 30% of small businesses in most countries and created contributions on a global scale faster than male small business owners (Hodges et al., 2015). However, female small business owners remain under-studied in literature as of late 2015 (Hodges et al., 2015). Small business owners are drivers of innovation, which may lead to more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable outcomes, especially for minority populations (Gagnon et al., 2013).

Entrepreneurs entering the market via start-up differ from entrepreneurs entering by acquisition. New ventures are faced with time-consuming and risky activities, and new liabilities (Baik, Chae, Choi, & Farber, 2013). It is important to note that Baik et al. (2013) focused on novice first time business owners, which represent the majority of small business failures (Baik et al., 2013). Baik et al. (2013) summarized that a business exit from the market was not always a result of a negative outcome. Therefore, Baik et al. (2013) accounted for the different reasons why novice small business owners leave their

businesses and analyzed which factors explained their exit mode. Baik et al. (2013) posited that job losses due to firm closures led to an increase in start-up business owners.

The effects of small businesses on local economies. Small business entrepreneurship has a history of building local and sometimes national economies throughout the world (Baptista, Lima, & Preto, 2013; Omri et al., 2015). Organized IT consulting firm owners have advantages within local economies. Small business owners that are well prepared for entering the local and national economy often will employ individuals within the local community and installing producers and urban consumers (Anastasia, 2015). The growth of organized IT consulting businesses participates in tax receipts for the central, state, and local governments (Joseph, 2008).

Hyder and Lussier (2016) claimed that contribution to economic growth through government revenue and employment opportunities is important for the government with helping small businesses be successful. The U.S. federal government supports small businesses through the SBA, which acts as a gap lender for small businesses (Gale & Brown, 2013). U.S. policymakers write policies to reduce perceived business failure; additionally, policymakers also produce policies to increase business creation (Clark & Moutray, 2004). The small business sector of an economy serves a critical role by facilitating potential business growth (Clark & Moutray, 2004).

Small business effects on global economies. Businesses and governments have been importing and exporting as far back as history has been recorded (Jones, 2013). Since the Internet boom, the need for global presence has increased for small businesses

(Lituchy & Rail, 2000). Small business growth through offshoring makes up the foundation of many nations' economies (Roza, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2011).

Business Strategies

Competitive business strategy. Businesses are exposed to competitive challenges as well as the growing complexity of markets and threats to economic systems (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). There are three tenants essential to successful strategy implementation, these include: value, profit, and people propositions (Tsai & Yang, 2013). For any strategy to be successful and sustainable, it must create offerings to attract buyers, enlist a business model by which to make money from the offering, and it is imperative that the people who help execute the strategy are rewarded (Tsai & Yang, 2013). The successful strategy may be based on value or profit, but sustainable strategy execution is in the motivation of people in small business competitive strategies (Tsai & Yang, 2013).

Motivational theory. Motivational theory is centered on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which are biological. Maslow's theory of self-actualization described what highly effective people do to reach top-level performance. Motivation is one's ability to respond to grow into a self-actualizing person (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs begins with (1) basic needs, which are needs usually taken as the starting point for motivation theory are the so-called physiological drives, (2) growth needs are defined as affection, belonging, and relationships make up the second tier. This tier includes belonging to a group, caring, companionship, recognition, friendliness, and appreciation, (3) self-esteem and self-respect: Desire for confidence, competence,

adequacy, achievement, mastery, respect from others, desire for acceptance, recognition, reputation, appreciation, status, and prestige, (4) self-actualization includes the need for growth, development, utilization of potential, becoming all that one can be, creativity, knowledge, and understanding the need to satisfy curiosity, explore, discover and find solutions. The final tier, tier five, self-actualization, is one in which the person desires to reach their full potential. Self-fulfillment also involves relationships and meaning, seeking intellectual challenges, and the need to be surrounded by beauty, including great literature, art, and music.

Maslow's hierarchy and theory of humanistic psychology can be useful, especially for growth needs, drawing gainfully from humanistic concepts, which may serve well for employee motivation (Oleson, 2004). Maslow (1943) stated, self-actualization as a person's need to be or exist. An individual can only achieve self-actualization after all required needs are met (i.e., physiological, safety, social, and esteem) (Maslow, 1943). The self-actualization period can lead towards a person's acceptance that his/her life is important and also find meaning in his/her daily activities (Maslow, 1943).

Alderfer's (1989) existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG) theory is an extension of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. However, Alderfer (1989) constructed three categories for separation: existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs. However, Alderfer (1989) diverted from Maslow's (1943) theory by emphasizing that the needs established by Maslow (1943) should instead be reversed and provided in the three categories mentioned above. Alderfer (1989) has correlations with Maslow's (1943) theory, but Alderfer (1989) considered these to be more efficient categories. The

categories for Alderfer (1989) existence shares characteristics with physiological and safety needs found within Maslow's theory (Alderfer, 1989). Relatedness needs to correlate with aspects of Maslow's belongingness (Alderfer, 1989). Maslow's esteem and self-actualization needs are categorized under Alderfer's growth needs. The growth needs relate to the utilization of potential, becoming all that one can become (Alderfer, 1989). Each theory (Alderfer, 1989; Maslow, 1943) was formulated as a means to explain motivation and behavior. Maslow's (1943) theories when employed may result in high performance and achievements for employees and organizations alike (Berl, Williamson, & Powell, 1984).

Customer service strategy. Customer service is key to maintaining vital customer relationships. Customer service strategies must observe customers as the driving force. In 1952, brand loyalty accounted for the largest percentage of total sales (Farley, 1964). Repeat business and loyalty towards specific products are considered significant factors to consider when assessing the ideal customer service strategy (Farley, 1964). McConnell (1986) conducted research towards the development of brand loyalty using fieldwork trials. The test trial relevant to the current study was Trial 25 where subjects were offered a penny at a time to change from the brand of current choice to the least chosen brand available within the test, until the subject agreed to switch patronage (McConnell, 1968). The research of McConnell (1968) is relevant to the current study as it indicated that customer service strategies are important considerations for the small business success strategies.

During the 1990s, the advent of the Internet and business model strategies

increased, and scholarly writing evolved significantly (Vukanović, 2018). Business models provided solutions via the use of technological innovations. Having realized the rising prominence of the business model, there was a large increase in academic articles published on the subject between 1998 and 2002 (Vukanović, 2018). Also, between 2000 and 2005, master theses and doctoral dissertations followed the trend (Vukanović, 2018). Bouwman, Zhengjia, Van der Duin, & Limonard (2008) described the definition of a business model as the description of roles and relationships of a company and its affiliates, as well as the flows of goods, information, and money between parties involved, in particular, but not exclusively the customer (Bouwman, Zhengjia, Van der Duin, & Limonard, 2008).

Service relationships between employee and customers continually evolve. Such evolution can lower the need for emotional labor and cultivate positive rapport and customer loyalty (Medler-Liraz, 2016). Emotional labor refers to employee emotional display. Emotional labor within service organizations includes the social interaction between a customer or potential customer and employee (Medler-Liraz, 2016). Medler-Liraz (2016) suggested customer emotions strongly influence customer satisfaction and experience (Medler-Liraz, 2016). Customers are bound to change. Therefore, the needs of the customer will change. According to Medler-Liraz (2016), it is critical to maintain innovative efforts to adapt to the changing needs of customers.

Kaura, V., Durga Prasad, C. S., & Sharma, S. (2015) hypothesized all dimensions of service convenience have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. Karua et al. (2015) performed their assessment of customer satisfaction within the context of bank

customers in India. The authors argued that their hypotheses were validated based upon their assessments (Kaura et al., 2015). Kaura et al. also found that customer dissatisfactions with customer service led to a decrease of customer satisfaction with customer services. For example, dissatisfied customers do not repeat purchasing chances and are more likely to search for other alternatives and feed competitors (Kaura et al., 2015). These findings, however, were conducted in India and may not be applicable to industries or countries outside of the studied country (Kaura et al., 2015). Furthermore, increasing customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer loyalty thus leads to repeated purchases (Kaura et al., 2015). Customer satisfaction showed also increased post benefit convenience (Kaura et al., 2015). Post benefit convenience is a great feeling of wanting to return for lack of hassle and thus is linked to repeat purchasing (Kaura et al., 2015).

Customer satisfaction positively led to the customer citizenship behaviors of feedback, advocacy, and helping (Yeh, 2015). Furthermore, a high-level of satisfaction provides the customer with repeated positive reinforcement, thus creating commitment-inducing emotional bonds (Yeh, 2015). The highest returns in business are related to customer loyalty (Yeh, 2015). Customer loyalty is also critical to wealth management in small businesses. There is a positive correlation between relationship value, customer loyalty, customer advocacy, and corporate social responsibility (Yeh, 2015). According to Yeh (2015) Individuals who use the above strategies can create a strong relationship between customer support and high-quality products/services (Yeh, 2015). Yeh's (2015) research was conducted in Taiwan and focused on the financial services industry; thus, it

is important to consider that Yeh's findings may only be applicable within the financial services industry and Taiwan.

Some firm owners have chosen social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as part of his/her communication strategy with customers (Rossmann, Wilke, & Stei, 2017). Analyzing customer social media posts, concerning specific products, can indicate service identify customer service experiences. Social media platforms also allow customers with a direct and convenient way to share their opinions (Rossmann et al., 2017). Rossmann et al, research evidence suggests companies that employ social media systems in their customer service strategy are more successful (Rossmann et al., 2017). Still, comparing the performance of social media against traditional channels (e.g., word-of-mouth recommendations) remains open for conclusive research (Rossmann et al., 2017).

Leadership Strategy. Early leadership strategies focused on the personal qualities of a leader such as personality, confidence, and assertiveness (Stodgill, 1974). Social skills were also qualities of a strong leader. Later, Stodgill (1974) shifted research focus toward the behavior of leaders and the concerns were more about what successful leaders do rather than what leaders represent (Burns, 1978). As research progressed, the merging of both the qualities leaders possess and their behaviors gave rise to *situational theories* (Burns, 1978). Situational theories suggest that an approach or style of leadership vary in effectiveness dependent upon the situation.

Transactional leadership is characterized by the leader's effect on day-to-day operations and the power to influence within it (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987).

Transformational leadership is classified as a type of motivational or inspirational model of leadership that motivates followers through the leader's charismatic actions (Burns, 1978) and in purest form transforms followers into leaders (Burns, 1978). Visionary leadership is the articulation of a vision that appeals to the common values and needs of the members of an organization (Nanus, 1992). Visionary leadership captures the hopes, beliefs, values, and goals of followers (Nanus, 1992). The vision empowers people, generates strong emotions, and inspires performance; thus, the visionary leader influences with the power of vision (Nanus, 1992).

In addition, there are business-based leadership strategies such as cost and differentiation strategies. Cost leadership strategy may be most effective for necessity entrepreneurship (Porter, 1997). Porter (1997) developed a cost leadership strategy. It is characterized by the lowest cost operation in the industry and required less planning and resources than differentiation strategies, which requires the development of unique products or services.

Financial Strategy. This section addresses the issue of financial bootstrapping as a potential financial strategy for small businesses. Financial bootstrapping is a resource management strategy (Mac, Bhaird, & Lynn, 2015). The ability of technology firm founders to acquire adequate financing for start-ups is essential, especially for founders lacking a track record in entrepreneurship (Mac et al, 2015). These firms are seldom financed from formal external sources. Firm founders, therefore, often make optimal use of minimal resources in starting and developing their businesses (Baker & Nelson 2005). Harrison, Mason, and Girling (2004) identify two principal aspects to bootstrapping: (1)

acquiring resources through social relationships at minimal cost, and (2) minimizing the amount of external capital required through traditional debt and equity contracts. One possible disadvantage of using bootstrapping techniques is minimizing resource inputs that may negatively impact the expansion and development of firms in the technology sector (Mac et al, 2015).

Excess cash is considered a competitive advantage (Calandro, 2015). There are four steps for cash strategy leading to a competitive advantage:

1. Implications of the balance sheet: Executives must consider both sides of the of competitive strategies to achieve strong cash position outcomes.
2. Assess competitors' balance sheets: Executives must observe their competitors and examine opportunities to advance their competitive positioning.
3. Scenario analysis: Executives run scenario analysis of competitive situations to identify existing possibilities for unfavorable events which may affect either of both sides of the balance sheet.
4. Competitor scenario: Competitor scenario involves executives identifying existing conditions that may prove unfavorable for competitors, and then position their organizations to take strategic advantage of the competitor (Calandro, 2015).

Marketing Strategy. Some key marketing strategy areas for small IT consulting firms are quality products, good use of space, decent prices, and impeccable customer service (Waheed, Yang, Ahmed, Rafique, & Ashfaq, 2017). Waheed et al. (2017) noted

there are advantages and disadvantages to small businesses. The main advantages of small business are proximity to customers, customer-familiar atmosphere, and the opportunity to establish close relationships with buyers (Waheed et al., 2017). The main disadvantages noted by Waheed et al, 2017) are higher prices, reduced areas of sales and exposure, low diversity of supply, poor financial background, crowded merchandising, and a small staff. Not all advantages and disadvantages apply directly to IT consulting firms (Waheed et al., 2017).

Social media is a major part of cultures around the world and most consumers are avid users of such (Coursaris, van Osch, Balogh, & Quilliam, 2014). Social media marketing is one strategy used by small business owners. Brand awareness, corporate social responsibility (CSR), promotion, and customer service are some of the social media marketing typologies (Coursaris et al., 2014). Customer service may also benefit from emotional background stories (Coursaris et al, 2014). Promotional messaging relates to product support, no matter the depth of content (Coursaris et al, 2014). Coursaris et al.'s (2014) findings proved informational messaging rank higher regarding purchasing decisions for the needs of small business owners . The best strategy is to maintain customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Coursaris et al., 2014).

Systems. Von Bertalanffy (1950) explained how system thinking transfers the knowledge of a specific system or process in the front line as a guide to think critically. The system thinking theory is defined as a network of singular business resources (e.g., marketing) that when interconnected to the larger objectives of the organization increase profitable and business success. The basic tenets of systems theory are the continuous

input, processing, and output of information (Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Von Bertalanffy (1950) further redefined the system thinking theory indicated that openness created an environment of survival and growth. Systems thinking theory has remained pertinent to organizational and business research (Peters, 2014). Researchers exploring small business systems should reveal whether an opened or closed system is in place (Peters, 2014).

Profitability. A firm's profit is based on a simple business formula; revenue minus expenses equal profit or loss (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). A firm's ability to remain operable is linked to profitability (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Since the term is sometimes future based, the opinions and projections of profitability remain debatable.

Pecking-order theory suggests a firm will tap into internal funding before seeking outside funding (e.g., bank funds) (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Whereas trade-off theory suggests that a profitable firm will first utilize tax shields (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Xiang & Worthington (2015) noted profitability as a key touchstone for measuring small business performance (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Van Caneghem and Van Campenhout (2012) concluded both the quality and quantity of information positively relate to small business success. Xiang and Worthington (2015) suggested there was a negative correlation between small businesses' profitability and success. Furthermore, Xiang and Worthington (2015) noted a positive relationship between small businesses the ability to obtain assets and increased business success.

Small enterprises that focus on direct financing and alternative financing (e.g., joining a franchise chain) are noted to have increased probability (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Xiang and Worthington (2015) also noted that joining a franchise chain relies on

the image and reputation of the franchisor resulting in implications concerning profitability. However, Xiang and Worthington (2015) noted a negative association between a small business profitability and a lack of willingness to seek to finance.

Xiang & Worthington (2015) basis for capital structure theory explores finance decisions and demand-side determinants of financial availability while accounting for specific small business factors, to include business objectives (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Xiang and Worthington, (2015) examined the determinants of finance seeking as well as the factors affecting finance unavailability within small businesses. Xiang and Worthington, (2015) also examined other profitability measurements including operational and innovation measures (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Xiang & Worthington (2015) noted small business leaders who focus on quality services are less likely to that apply for additional financing, which may expose the firm to possible failure (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). However, the positive and / or negative impacts of the factors that lead small business leaders to pursue financing are inconclusive (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). This suggests more research is needed to investigate the factors that lead small businesses leaders to consider financing as a way to increase profitability.

Working Capital Management (WCM) practices affect Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) profitability, which justifies the attention for awareness and control of working capital being relatively low compared to large firms (Afrifa, 2015). Working capital includes current assets, liquidity, volatile cash flows, and short-term debt. Working Capital Management is very important because it determines the level of working capital available, which influences profitability (Afrifa, 2015). More precisely,

not having proper management for WCM may increase external pressure from suppliers and customers and lead to a decrease in profitability (Afrifa, 2015). Factors such as proper management and customer retention are factors where profitability may increase or decrease, and more research is needed on profitability factors especially in small businesses (Afrifa, 2015). Notably, the work completed by Afrifa (2015) was not conducted in the United States and the research was targeted towards SMEs. Thus, the findings are limited to outside of the U.S and towards the understanding of WCM toward SMEs.

Marketing may also hold potential avenues for increasing profitability for small business owners. Specifically, branding has been shown to increase profitability (Coursaris et al, 2014). Research concerning new opportunity identification may lead to valuable insights for SMEs ability to differentiate and manage the success of their brands (Osakwe, Chovancova, & Ogbonna, 2016). Osakwe et al. (2016) noted the *interconnectedness* of resources is key to potential financial opportunities for growth. According to Osakwe et al. (2016) these firm-based strategic resources include *invaluable and rare resources* (p. 32) that are difficult for other companies to replicate. These can include dynamic capabilities of a firm and specific business strategies developed to the unique needs of the organization (Osakwe et al., 2016). In theory, having a highly motivated workforce is an essential condition for an organization's financial profitability; therefore, it is beneficial to ensure that the workforce is motivated to increase the profitability of the business (Osakwe et al. (2016).

Perceptions of small business success strategies. Success is often defined by a broad range of ideas and left to interpretation. Small businesses' success and failure are often relative; however, a commonly accepted area to look is a firm's profit and loss (PL) statement (Enquist, Johnson, & Rönnbäck, 2015). Firms must identify the most profitable services and cultivate resources for successful service implementation, which can prove critical in uncovering opportunities for the firm to offer higher quality services (Enquist et al, 2015). Business excellence models refer to specific business strategies that guide the organization towards increased performance and profitability (Enquist et al., 2015). Business excellence models must gain relevance in the changing business landscape (Enquist et al, 2015). Quality management is essential, and according to Enquist et. al. (2015) quality management within organizations included the following: (1) invisible control through values and not explicit control, (2) leadership establishes the vision and values to guide the organizations, (3) quality management innovation in customer satisfaction creating the wow factor, (4) vision as the motivator, (5) quality management self-control by managers and employees (within boundaries or parameters), (6) interactive communication and organizational dialogue, (7) longer-term financial success, (8) employee commitment and engagement with quality, and (9) likely to adapt and succeed with the whole of organizations approaches such as using a business excellence framework.

Utilizing a business plan has been linked to business success and education amongst some small business owners (Hormozi, Sutton, & McMinn, 2002). Moloj and Nkhahle (2014) considered success a relative and immeasurable term, but business

success could be measured in financial terms. Furthermore, business owners who started as partnerships had a higher success rate (Moloi & Nkhahle, 2014). However, Moloi and Nkhahle (2014) assessed their findings within the country of South Africa and their findings are limited towards this region and industry.

According to Enquist et al., (2015) a key part of the business excellence model is the self-assessment, which is used to help organizations identify their current strengths and weaknesses. In addition to highlighting areas for improvement, self-assessment promotes an organizational cultural transformation, including systemic and holistic thinking which facilitates a broader understanding of the organization's processes (Enquist et al., 2015). The process of conducting a self-assessment and establishing improvement plans requires commitment from all levels of management, which has proven critical for obtaining lasting improvements. The most notable drawbacks to self-assessments are the resource-demanding and time-consuming work involved in researcher and/or consulting firms' evaluations of self-assessments (Enquist et al., 2015).

Coleman, Koelling, and Geller, (2001) argued participation in a third-party evaluation might negatively affect the organizations' improvement work. Furthermore, some company owners with limited experience had difficulties beginning improvement processes based on improvement plans (Enquist et al., 2015). Conversely, the company owners with more experience showed more success implementing the improvement plans (Enquist et al., 2015).

Both public and private sector globalized economies are increasing in complexity. Furthered research is required to evaluate the connection between excellence models and the lasting success of globalized economies (Enquist et al., 2015). The fundamental concepts and criteria of the business excellence

models must attune with the triple-bottom-line thinking consisting of social, environmental, and ecological features (Enquist et al., 2015). Many organizations' leaders have developed strategies and processes concerning sustainable development (Enquist et al., 2015; Xiang & Worthington, 2015).

Omri et al. (2015) found that business success is achieved through an entrepreneurs' social network. Omri et al., (2015) suggested that some small business owners may benefit greater from accessing personal networks rather than professional contacts. However, few studies have empirically tested the influence of networks on small business success. The reason for the success of some entrepreneurs remains open for interpretation.

Perceptions of small business failures. The point of view of small business failures may be derived from small business owner's perception (Omri et al., 2015). Yallapragada and Bhuiyan (2011) found that the most frequent causes of failure of small business entrepreneurship were: (a) poor work relationships and interpersonal skills; (b) inability to develop teamwork and cooperation; (c) person-job mismatch; (d) inability to lead and motivate personnel; (e) failure to provide direction and performance expectations; (f) ineffective communication skills and practice; (g) breakdown in delegation and empowerment; (h) lack of personal integrity and trust; (i) failure to break old habits, and (j) poor planning and operational practices. Poor or careless Working Capital Management (WCM) is also a major cause of SME failure (Afrifa, 2015). Furthermore, because of the unequal access to finance, the WCM practices of SMEs are different from their larger counterparts (Afrifa, 2015). However, it should be noted that

the research of Afrifra (2015) was conducted outside of the United States and the results are not necessarily applicable within the United States.

Hyder and Lussier (2016) identified 15 variables linked to small business failures. The 15 variables included topics such as capital, record keeping and financial control, years of industry experience, years of management experience, planning, advisors, education, staff, product stage (introductory, growth, mature, decline), economic stage of the current market, age, partner, parents, minority, marketing skills and number of employees (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). Hyder and Lussier (2016) noted extreme difficulty when providing a prediction concerning venture success or failure. Thus, there is room for continued research into the success and failure of small businesses.

Transition

Section 1 contained the problem statement and purpose statement, as well as the nature of the study, and justifies the use of a qualitative method and descriptive multiple case study design. Section 1 also included the (a) interview questions, (b) conceptual framework, (c) assumptions, (d) limitations, and (e) delimitations of the study. Section 1 concluded with the significance of the study and a review of the professional and academic literature.

Section 2 contains (a) the purpose statement, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) a description of the research methodology and design, (e) population and sampling, (f) ethical research, (g) data collection instruments and technique, (h) data organization technique, (i) data analysis, and (j) reliability and validity. Section 3 begins with an introduction including the purpose statement, research question, and findings.

Section 3 includes application to professional practice, implications for social change/behaviors, recommendations for action and further study, and concludes with my reflections.

Section 2: The Project

Small business growth is the foundation of many nations' economies (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). Knowledge and awareness of successful strategies for small businesses may better prepare owners to survive five years or more (Turner & Endres, 2017). Section 2 includes the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participants, and selected research method and design.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the current qualitative multiple case study was to explore key strategies some small business information technology consulting owners in the United States use to sustain their new businesses beyond five years. The target population of participants was comprised of five IT consulting company owners in the United States who successfully managed their IT consulting business for more than five years. For the purpose of this study, I defined successful as being profitable. The findings may impact business operations and viability by identifying key strategies IT consulting owners use to sustain their businesses. Improved sustainability and stimulated organizational growth may lead to new employment opportunities and promote positive social change as well as stability within local communities.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher included selecting the appropriate research methodology and design, recruiting the potential participant(s), and collecting and analyzing the data (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In qualitative research studies, the researcher serves as the data collection instrument (Sutton & Austin, 2015). As the researcher for the

current study, I also served in the role of observer. I interviewed owners of small businesses concerning key strategies for business success. My relationship as a researcher with the topic was as follows: I am a small business owner with less than five years of operation. I hold Bachelor and Master degrees in business administration and was working towards my education of small business success strategies. I have no prior relationship with the participant(s); however, I spent more than 20 years in the area where the participants live and work. I was neutral to establish trustworthiness. Regarding ethical considerations, I ensured the process of data collection began after receiving Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval #01-16-19-0538944, which ensures the study adheres to ethical principles, including principles prescribed in The Belmont Report protocol to protect human subjects. The Belmont Report protocol was critical to the protection of vulnerable research participants (McLaughlin & Alfaro-Velcamp, 2015). I asked open-ended questions and allowed the interviewees to answer the questions uninterrupted to ensure my own bias did not influence their responses.

As the primary data collection instrument for the current study, I ensured accurate data collection through the development of an interview protocol that included the interview questions to help guide the data collection process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). An interview protocol was used to guide the interview without limiting participant responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Furthermore, an interview protocol involves using flexible, open-ended questions, and additional probing questions when necessary for more in-depth responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The role of the researcher also involved note-taking during the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I took notes by hand instead of using a computer to be less obtrusive to the interview process. Note-taking involves gathering and preserving important information during interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I typed up all handwritten notes and checked them against the interview transcriptions for accuracy.

Participants

The participants for the study were small business owners in the United States who have been operating in the information technology consulting firm industry for five or more years. Participants were screened to ensure alignment with eligibility requirements. The strategy for gaining access to the participants was through a personal learning network (PLN). I gained approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) # 01-16-19-0538944. Random sampling was an option in the qualitative design; however, for the multiple case study, I used random purposeful sampling. Random purposeful sampling adds credibility when the purposeful sample is larger than one can handle. Moreover, it reduces judgment within a purposeful category. However, it is not for generalizations or representativeness (Patton, 1990). In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects participants who have knowledge about a specific group or culture to which the participants belong (Gentles & Vilches, 2017). Upon gaining access, I established a working relationship with participants by emailing them weekly up to five business days before the scheduled interview. Five business days prior to the interviews, I spoke with participants on the phone to inform and confirm face-to-face interview details, to include date, time, and specific location. Because I sought strategies

from a specific group of people with a particular experience, random purposive sampling reduced judgement within a purposeful category.

Research Method and Design

For the study, I employed a qualitative research method. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore key strategies some small business information technology consulting owners in the United States use to sustain their new businesses beyond five years, which required collecting and analyzing multiple qualitative data sources such as interviews, company documents, and field notes. A quantitative method was not appropriate for addressing the current study's specific business problem because, according to Yin (2014), a case study is an in-depth study of a circumstance rather than a statistical survey.

I employed a multiple case study design. Case study research was a suitable method for assessing a phenomenon within a single organization from a qualitative perspective (Yadav, Taticchi, & Sushil, 2015). Other possible qualitative designs for the current study were phenomenology and ethnography inquiry. Researchers use phenomenological designs to study how participants experience and distinguish phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Phenomenological design was not the most appropriate design for this research because I sought specific business strategies, which may include outside factors. Ethnography is the study of human cultures and did not fit for the current study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Research Method

For the study, I employed the qualitative research method. I selected the qualitative research method for the study because it was best suited to investigate key strategies related to successful business start-ups that surpass the five-year operational mark. The primary types of research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Yin (2014) indicated qualitative researchers use exploratory processes to (a) study, (b) identify, (c) assess, (d) uncover, and (e) understand a phenomenon. In contrast, quantitative researchers require detailed numeric data about a subject and seek to evaluate, examine, and validate a study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The purpose of the current study was to identify key strategies, which required collecting and analyzing multiple qualitative data sources such as interviews and company documents. For the purpose of the study, content analysis gathered through other data resources using only numbers as input was insufficient due to the lack of distinction between the data collection and analysis phases (White & Marsh, 2006). Therefore, a quantitative method was not appropriate for addressing the study's specific business problem. The principal rationale for using a mixed-method approach is to merge qualitative and quantitative methods; researchers use qualitative and quantitative data to reinforce the study and minimize potential flaws in the study (Vekatesh et al., 2013). A mixed-method approach was not required for the study because I did not need both quantitative and qualitative data to examine and explore business strategies some small business owners in the United States use to sustain new informational technology consulting industry businesses.

Research Design

For the study, I employed a multiple case study design. Other possible qualitative research designs include phenomenological, and single case study (Astalin, 2013). In a phenomenological study, a researcher explores a phenomenon that is often unique or rare through the lived experiences of individuals (Polkinghorne, 1989). I eliminated a phenomenological design because I was looking for business strategies that could be used beyond a single phenomenon. A case study design was the preferred method when (a) a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events; (b) the principal research questions are how or why questions; or (c) the focus of the study was a current, not historical phenomenon (Yin, 2014). There are three primary types of case study research: (a) descriptive, (b) explanatory, and (c) exploratory (Yin, 2014). Descriptive case studies are appropriate for events and context. Explanatory case studies are appropriate for investigating causality and intend to link an event with its effects (Yin, 2014). Exploratory case study researchers seek to define research questions and hypotheses (Yin, 2012). A multiple descriptive case study design will assist me in exploring success strategies through interview data and company documents from small business owners. Data saturation refers to a specific number of individuals or measurements that are used to obtain enough information; however, for qualitative studies, there was not a standardized number of participants that are required for a study. A study has reached data saturation when no new information is presented, confirming emerging themes, yielding similar results and alerting a researcher that the data collection process may conclude. For qualitative studies, saturation was considered complete when enough

information was gathered regarding the research questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I ensured data saturation by ensuring that sufficient information was gained from the participants in this study. Repetitive interview questions were used until the data proves repetitive (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Population and Sampling

The population selected for the qualitative study was five small business owners, a sample size that meets recommendations for random purposive sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Random purposeful sampling is a sampling method that researchers use judgment to select participants based on the study criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). I chose purposive sampling because it allows me to narrow the participant population down to individuals who are most likely to have the most in-depth knowledge needed to address the research question in a meaningful way. An essential part of the design of both analytic and descriptive studies was determining the appropriate sample size for the study (Rao, 2012). The sample size should reach the number of participants sufficient to meet data saturation standards (Dworkin, 2012) Data saturation is the point when additional data does not meaningfully contribute to the study and becomes repetitive (Dworkin, 2012). A sample size of five or more participants, while utilizing methodological triangulation with member checking, facilitates data saturation for the current study (Dworkin, 2012). Saturation was used to ensure quality and adequate data to support the study (Gentles & Vilches, 2017). The criteria for selecting participants included those who: (a) are between the age of 21 and 50; (b) are small business technology consulting business owners in the United States, and (c) have been profitable in business by the end

of the first five years of operation. The interviews took place where it was convenient for the participants, at their business location in a private room with the door closed. Turner (2010) noted it was easier to conduct interviews with participants in a comfortable environment, where the participants are not likely to be distracted and may share more information.

Ethical Research

I conducted my study after receiving approval #01-16-19-0538944 from the IRB at Walden University. I followed the basic ethics of research involving human subjects, including (a) the principles of respect of persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (see National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). The e-mail included a Participant Consent Form sample (Appendix A) for the participants to review and sign electronically by replying to the e-mail, "I consent." The Participant Consent Form included a sample of the interview questions and explained the purpose of the study and my intent to audio record the interviews. The Participant Consent Form clarified participation in the study was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were given my contact information if he or she wished to withdraw from the study. Participants could contact me via email or phone for their convenience. The Participant Consent Form also informed participants that there was no compensation or incentives for their participation in the study, and I would disseminate the results when available to participants. Upon consent, participants were contacted by phone to schedule an interview date and time.

There are specific ethical issues a researcher must consider when conducting interviews (Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, & Khodyakov, 2015). I used the utmost care during data gathering, data storage, and data analysis to protect the rights of the participants and preserve their privacy (Yin, 2012). The data was stored electronically on a personal, password-protected, external hard drive after the completion of the study, and will be stored for five years and then properly deleted. I stored all the written data and findings in a locked cabinet drawer. Written data will be properly shredded after five years to protect the privacy of the participant. I ensured participants knew the purpose of the study and guaranteed the confidentiality of both the participants and their respective organizations. The participants were labeled Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 5 to protect their anonymity.

Data Collection Instruments

In my qualitative multiple case study, I was the primary data collection instrument. To collect data, I conducted semistructured interviews using an interview protocol as a guide. I took handwritten notes and asked open-ended questions and checked by observation, nonverbal cues from body language and facial expressions to assist with extracting maximum information for the study (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) argued that in qualitative data collection, the use of multiple data sources was beneficial. Multiple data sources can include informal semistructured interviews, company documents, and observation (Yin, 2014). Embracing data collected from different sources and encouraging transparency may lead to highly detailed findings that assist in obtaining transferable and credible results (Wilson, 2014). Yin also noted, for a case study research

design, data are collected from at least two of the following six available sources: (a) archival records; (b) direct observations; (c) documentation; (d) interviews; (e) participant-observation (i.e. site visits); or (f) physical artifacts (Yin, 2012). Therefore, I included company documents as another data source for the study. Company documents included organizational data verifying profitable success of the business strategies employed by participants. The organizational data supported the interviews by providing empirical evidence of the success of the business strategies used by the participants (Yin, 2012; Yin, 2014). I enhanced the reliability and validity of the data collection process with member checking. Member checking was a validation technique used for checking the credibility of the data in a study (Leydens & Moskal, 2004) and involved transcribing and analyzing member response (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014).

Data Collection Technique

The data collection techniques for this study were semistructured, face-to-face interviews and company documents. During a semistructured interview, a researcher may introduce additional questions in addition to a fixed set of questions to further explore or address lived experience providing participants maximum opportunity to express their viewpoints fully (Polkinghorne, 1989). Deakin and Wakefield (2014) described face-to-face interviews as a preferred way of collecting qualitative data.

I took handwritten notes as a data-collection tool. Data collection tools can either be electronic or paper-based, but the advantage of electronic instruments is, in some instances, electronic instruments can eliminate the need for transcription into an electronic database and may also decrease transcription errors (Patton, 2015).

Disadvantages include the requirement of computer access, which may not be readily available to all researchers (Patton, 2015).

The interview protocol was conducted as follows: (a) I introduced myself to the participant, (b) I presented a consent form and answered questions if any, concerning the consent form, (c) I gave a copy of the consent form to participants, (d) I brought my pen and field notes (e) I began each interview with question #1 and follow through to the final question, (f) I followed up with additional questions, (g) I asked for additional questions, and (h) I ended the interview sequence. Upon completion, I then discussed member checking. I asked for additional questions from the participants and upon conclusion, ended the interview. After the protocol for data collection, all steps were completed.

Qualitative interviewing was a powerful tool used in the data collection process and consists of the following six stages: (a) selecting the type of interview; (b) establishing ethical guidelines, (c) crafting the interview protocol; (d) conducting and recording the interview; (e) crafting the interview protocol; and (f) reporting the findings (Rabionet, 2009). There are several advantages to face-to-face semistructured interviews, including: (a) participants, may have the freedom to respond to probing questions (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Doody & Noonan, 2013; Yin, 2014); (b) the researcher can explore unknown and hidden issues by observing nonverbal communication (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2014); and (c) a high response rate is made possible when the interviewer and interviewee can face each other to ensure confidentiality and built trust (Comi, Bischof, & Eppler, 2014; Jamshed, 2014). However, there are inherent disadvantages to the interview process. Specifically, I had to assume that the participants

are speaking truthfully and accurately about their experiences and strategies.

Additionally, the data regarding business strategies are subjective according to the participants' perceptions and experiences (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2014). To ensure the accuracy of the data obtained through the interviews, I used the process of member checking suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Byers (2014).

Member checking involves returning interpretations of the interviews to the participants for any necessary clarification (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014).

Company documents in the form of organizational data regarding the performance and financial success of the companies helped support the interview data through empirical evidence of the success of the business strategies used by the participants (Yin, 2012; Yin, 2014). However, organizational documents do not provide an explanation of the numbers (Yin, 2012; Yin, 2014). Using both exploratory interview data and organizational data helped to ensure accuracy and a complete interpretation of the success of various business strategies employed by participants.

Data Organization Technique

I used pen and notepad paper to record the day, time, and location of each interview as well as took notes during the interview process (Yin, 2014). I collected company document data and performed data cleansing by removing all irrelevant data that I determined did not align with the search criteria (Yin, 2014). After data cleansing, I entered data into NVivo software for organizing and coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014). The collection and storage of all data aligned with IRB requirements. I maintained sole access to all data. I stored electronic data on a personal, password-

protected, external hard drive, to be deleted after five years. All written data and documentation was stored in a locked cabinet drawer and will be shredded after five years (Yin, 2014).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to explore the collected interviews and company data. After completion of the data collection process, the recordings from the interviews were transcribed into text format. The transcribed interviews and company documents were loaded into NVivo software. This software was used to store and organize the data for review. To ensure accuracy, I executed all actual analysis.

Sequential Process for Data Analysis. I obtained IRB approval #01-16-19-0538944 from Walden University via a standard application for research ethics review by Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I requested approval to conduct research through the IRB board. Then, I waited to receive consent from the organizations willing to participate in the study. I gained permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board to begin research. Following permission from Walden University Institutional Review Board, I scheduled and conducted interviews with participants to collect data via semistructured, face-to-face interviews. Once completed, I transcribed my handwritten notes of the interviews and later processed interviews through member checking to ensure proper definition and intended context. Lastly, I imported transcripts into Microsoft Word for the commencement of data analysis. I read each text file was carefully, commented on, labeled with codes, and sorted for themes

that contributed to a more profound understanding of the research. Coding is a technique used to organize and interpret data to extract meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I used the specific technique of thematic analysis to derive meaning from the data. Thematic analysis consists of six phases: (a) familiarizing of the data, which includes transcribing data and taking notes on emerging themes; (b) creating the initial codes, which involves coding specific characteristics across the data set; (c) searching for themes, which includes organizing the data into potential themes relevant to the study; (d) reviewing and grouping themes together, which includes double-checking that themes are relevant to the selected date and consistent throughout the data set; (e) defining and naming themes, which includes the refinement individual themes and placing the themes within the overall context of the data; and (f) creating the final report, which includes excerpts from the data that provide meaningful insights from the data collection process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has the necessary flexibility for the exploratory research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis was appropriate for case study research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of the data, which includes the ability of a study to be replicated and the strength of the connection between the actual data and the researcher's interpretation of that data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014). The concept of dependability aligns with reliability through ensuring the consistency of measurements (Munn, Z., Porritt, K., Lockwood, C., Aromataris, E., & Pearson, A.,

2014). I addressed dependability through member checking of data interpretation. Member checking helps to ensure the reliability of the data by ensuring the consistency between the source data and the researcher's interpretation (Munn et al., 2014). I cross-referenced the data with the information identified in the literature review. The use of triangulation of data also assisted in helping to ensure dependability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1990).

Validity

Quantitative validity differs from qualitative validity as qualitative validity involves credibility, transferability, and confirmability as well as trustworthiness (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). To increase the validity of the study and to provide greater insight with more comprehensive information added, interview data and company documents were collected. The methodological triangulation of two data sources enhance the credibility of the study results (Houghton et al., 2013). Because I was the data collection instrument in the current qualitative study, the credibility of the study relied on an interview protocol, IRB standard procedures, and the application of self-awareness techniques during the research process.

Transferability refers to whether particular findings can be transferred to another comparable situation or context while preserving the meanings found (Houghton et al., 2013). To enhance the transferability of the study, I provided the reader with a written presentation of findings to include direct quotes from participants.

Houghton et al. (2013) explained confirmability was similar to dependability in the process. Confirmability refers to the neutrality and accuracy of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). To ensure confirmability, I followed the interview protocol for each interview with each participant. Also, utilizing the NVivo analysis software tool enhanced the confirmability of the data interpretation. Specifically, I ensured the confirmability of the data by running frequencies of the themes to produce an accurate analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016 Yin, 2014). Furthermore, I determined data saturation at the time data becomes repetitive and no new information appears to add new information to the case study design (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A sample size of five or more participants, while utilizing methodological triangulation and member checking facilitates reaching saturation and increased the credibility of study results (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014).

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I stated the purpose statement of my research study, addressed the role of the researcher, discussed the selected participants, and detailed the research methodology and design. Next, I described the population; ethical research practices; data collection instruments, technique, and organization; and data analysis techniques. Section 2 concluded with a discussion of the methods and techniques for assuring the reliability and validity of my study. Section 3 will begin with an introduction including the purpose statement followed by the presentation of findings. Section 3 will also include the following sections: (a) application to professional practice, (b) implications for social

change, (c) recommendations for action, (d) recommendations for further research, (e) researcher reflections, and (f) a conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore key strategies some small business information technology consulting owners in the United States use to sustain their new businesses beyond five years. The target population of participants was five information technology consulting company owners in the United States who successfully managed their information technology consulting business for more than five years. For this study, I defined successful as being profitable. A review of literature suggested the potential impact of identifying key strategies that information technology consulting owners used to sustain their businesses as models for other small business owners. Improved sustainability and stimulated organizational growth may lead to new employment opportunities and promote positive social change as well as stability within local communities. The sample included five IT consulting company owners in the United States area whose IT consulting businesses earned profits for more than five years. Data were collected through one-on-one, semistructured interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12 software and I analyzed thematically, using the six-step procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Triangulation was accomplished by comparing the results from the four case organizations in this multiple-case study. Findings indicated that key strategies some small business IT consulting owners use to sustain their new businesses beyond five years included carefully planning expenditures and capping costs, empowering and rewarding employees, marketing through social media and word of

mouth, and cultivating good relationships with customers. Evidence for these findings was included in the presentation of findings, followed by a discussion of the implications of and recommendations based on these findings.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question used to guide this study was: what key strategies do some owners of small business information technology consulting firms in the United States use to sustain their businesses beyond five years? Four themes emerged during data analysis to answer the research question. I used the specific technique of thematic analysis to derive meaning from the data. Thematic analysis consists of six phases: (a) familiarizing of the data, which includes transcribing data and taking notes on emerging themes; (b) creating the initial codes, which involves coding specific characteristics across the data set; (c) searching for themes, which includes organizing the data into potential themes relevant to the study; (d) reviewing and grouping themes together, which includes double-checking that themes are relevant to the selected date and consistent throughout the data set; (e) defining and naming themes, which includes the refinement individual themes and placing the themes within the overall context of the data; and (f) creating the final report, which includes excerpts from the data that provide meaningful insights from the data collection process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following presentation of findings was organized by theme. Table 1 indicates the emergent themes and their frequencies in the dataset.

Table 1

Data Analysis Themes

Theme	<i>N</i> of data units included in the theme
Carefully planning expenditures and capping costs	19
Empowering and rewarding employees	16
Marketing through social media and word of mouth	11
Cultivating good relationships with customers	8

Note. A *data unit* was defined as a phrase or group of consecutive phrases expressing an idea or theme relevant to answering the research question (Chenail, 2012).

Data associated with these themes were drawn from responses to interview questions 4, (What financial strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?) 7, (What internal processes or systems do you use to sustain your business beyond five years?) 8, (What resources do you find most helpful in the success of your business beyond five years) and 9, (What additional information would you like to share concerning strategies you used to sustain your business?). Some participants indicated that the use of strategic planning towards business expenditures and capped costs to extend their firm beyond five years. Carefully planning expenditures involved budgeting for expenses in advance and managing risks by setting growth goals that were perceived as modest. Costs were capped by keeping expenses lower than revenue and by never using business funds for personal expenses.

Participant 1 had capped costs by taking loans from PayPal in amounts based on the projected growth of their business, such that debt was controlled by and kept within expected revenue:

[PayPal] extends the loan, they extend the funds to you commensurate on the income that your business brings in over a period of months. So, they may take an eight-month or nine-month slice of your business, and they say, "Okay. Now according to what you generated in the last nine months, we can extend thus and so to you," because if you, for the next nine-months, generate this business, you'll be able to financially return what was extended to you and grow, so therefore, you'll be a better client for those PayPal services. And in the e-commerce business, PayPal is essential. (Participant 1)

Participant 4 financed the business directly with revenue: "as far as financing, generally speaking, the money I bring in through the consulting covers expenses and keeps me going." Participant 2 stated that an essential strategy in keeping their business profitable had been,

Keeping costs low. I, for many years, had a home office and because I did not have large overhead expenses, that was a financial strategy that really helped to build the business as it was getting off the ground in the first couple of years. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 stated that budgeting had helped to control costs:

You've got to control your costs and spend wisely. You've got a budget and those are the kind of things that will help you because there are some things that are unforeseen that will come in the business. But if you don't know how to manage your costs and control it, you're going to find yourself into trouble. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 also stated that keeping business and personal expenses separate was an essential part of controlling and capping costs:

You've got to balance your business and your personal goals. You know, you can't mix them. Make sure you separate them, you're on the payroll. You're disciplined. You stick with the plan and it's different in that you control your cost. You just don't keep spending, spending, spending. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 talked about the strategy of managing risks by setting modest goals for the growth of the business:

I started the business with one other person. The original philosophy was, we wanted to make enough money to live off of. And anything extra, we'll just give away and we'll take a month of vacation and month of doling out and making the world a better place. And I've been able to stick to that for all 30 years. And I've done a lot of projects in a lot of different countries. And never been hungry and always had enough for Christmas presents, so it's worked out pretty well for me. (Participant 4)

Although it constituted an additional expense, Participant 2 had found it cost-effective to hire a financial expert to assist with financial planning:

A financial strategy that I used was hiring a Chief Financial Officer, a remote Chief Financial Officer to handle all the financials for the company, which has really paid off... [that was] a strategy that many people don't take advantage of and should. So that's really helped my company grow and to be able to take a

look at what it is that comes into the business, what it is that gets expensed from the business and where I can see a profit. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 reported that the CFO assisted with capping costs and planning expenses in two ways. The first form of assistance the CFO gave was to monitor projections for income and expenses:

For an organization to be sustainable, we have to constantly look at our projections. We have to constantly look at where we were bleeding if we were. Where we were spending the most money, if we didn't need to and whether or not we were performing and getting in the clients that we needed. (Participant 2)

The second service the CFO provided was to track the market, to ensure that Participant 2 was not under-charging for services: “also rechecking the market in terms of what our services were costing and making sure we stayed aligned with that and not underbidding some of the projects that we took on.” Lastly, Participants 3 and 4 stated that they had planned expenditures and capped costs by accepting small loans, advice about financial planning, and instructional materials from the Small Business Administration.

Participant 3 said of the SBA: “The Small Business Administration. There are tons and tons of available resources you can use on how to grow your business, how to make your company very successful.”

These findings confirmed similar findings found in the literature about the means IT entrepreneurs use to finance their startups. Financial bootstrapping is a resource management strategy considered essential to the growth and survival of technology firms (Mac et al, 2015). The ability of technology firm founders to acquire adequate financing

for start-ups is essential, especially for founders lacking a track record in entrepreneurship (Mac et al, 2015). Technology firms are seldom financed from formal external sources, so firm founders often make optimal use of minimal resources in starting and developing their businesses (Baker & Nelson 2005). Harrison, Mason, and Girling (2004) identified two principal aspects to bootstrapping: (1) acquiring resources through social relationships at minimal cost, and (2) minimizing the amount of external capital required through traditional debt and equity contracts.

Findings in the present study indicated that participants tended to rely more on minimizing the amount of external capital required than on acquiring resources through social relationships. Although minimizing resource inputs has been found to negatively impact the expansion and development of firms in the technology sector (Mac et al, 2015), participants in the present study reported modest growth goals for their businesses, such that they were able to create a sustainable enterprise with minimal external resources. When participants accepted loans, the amounts were small and were repayable within a short time frame from projected revenues. Participants preferred to finance their businesses directly from revenues and indicated a higher likelihood of curbing growth goals to keep expenses within projected revenues than of seeking additional funding to finance additional growth. In Porter's (1979) focused on the external driving forces of competition as the biggest influence on a business's profitability. Findings in the present study indicated that the profitability of IT startups was determined more by internal conditions (e.g. decisions relating to expenses and capital sources) than external conditions such as competition. Thus, findings in this study were more consistent with

Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) resource-based view model, which is focused on a firm's internal resources by individual resource as the fundamental determinant of sustainability.

Theme 2: Empowering and Rewarding Employees

Data associated with this theme were drawn from responses to interview question three, in what ways does your leadership style impact organizational performance, and question five, what strategies did you use to enhance employee motivation? Four out of five participants contributed data to this theme. Participants reported empowered employees by trusting them and giving them autonomy, and that participants rewarded employees with generous compensation, bonuses, and recognition. Participants added that employees were likelier to deserve trust and use their autonomy appropriately when the employees were passionate about the business.

Participant 3 stated, "If you give [employees] things to do, don't try to micromanage them. Trust them that they will get the job done. First of all, when you hire, people with passion, you won't have an issue trusting them." Participant 3 added that it was appropriate to, "trust [employees] to do what they are supposed to do. And even if employees don't, if the passion is there, it's easy to correct them." Participant 2 agreed that empowering employees by trusting them and not micromanaging them was an effective strategy for building a sustainable business:

My leadership style is one where I trust that the folks that work for me know exactly what it is that's needed for the company. So, because I give that level of

trust and I don't micromanage, that's a strategy that I've used that I know really works. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 discussed empowering employees by leading them with a vision and passion, citing the concept of transformational leadership:

If you're able to lead through a vision, then you empower your employees. And they follow you because they can believe in what you believe in. . . . you lead with a transformational style of leadership . . . they see you by example, and they are inspired, and they follow you . . . You've got to show passion through the way you lead. (Participant 3)

Participant 1 also described having passion for the business as an effective leadership strategy for small business owners:

Any strategy than an individual [small-business owner] has must be coupled with a level of passion that has an undying will to win, and to grow, and to succeed. The strategy has to be coupled with passion, and when the two meet, you have a winning combination. (Participant 1)

Participant 1 added that an effective leadership strategy was to empower employees by treating them as colleagues and encouraging them to take pride in the business:

I impact through my leadership style with all those that work with me, not for me. Inside of your employee pool lies your greatest asset. And if they are made to feel as though that simple pride quenches their thirst, they will open up and reveal to you the true talents that they have, which in turn magnifies your organization. (Participant 1)

With regard to rewarding employees, Participant 1 indicated that the most important characteristic of a compensation package was that it should be satisfying to employees: “To enhance employee motivation compensation plans must be very, very well plotted and laid in and satisfactory [to employees].” Participant 2 agreed that competitive compensation was necessary, and added that pay bonuses were an effective strategy for making employees feel appreciated:

One of the key strategies that I use is bonuses. People, they'll tend to tell you that they come to work because they believe in the mission. And that is a motivating factor, but what I do understand is that a motivating factor is one that you can feed your family. So, I, on top of paying folks what they're worth, but to also give that extra bonus to show my appreciation for the work. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 showed appreciation to employees by giving them gift cards:

You've got to put a reward system in place. We can't just say, "Oh, we have the passion, so we are going ignore to what they give." . . . we have a reward system in place, whereby, we get to give them gift cards. To show our appreciation for what you've done. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 also used recognition as a strategy to motivate employees: “In the same way, recognition. Giving them some sort of, like, an employee of the month. Showing them recognition among their peers. All those help them, and it motivates them.”

Participant 4 employed contractors, and rewarded them by paying them at a higher rate than the industry standard:

I do have some contract workers working for me once in a while. We split everything 20/80. Like if I hire them out to somewhere, they'll get 80 [percent] of whatever I collect. And that's a pretty good deal in the industry. Normally it's like 40/60. (Participant 4)

Findings in this study, therefore, indicated that participants used transformational, transactional, and visionary leadership styles. Transactional leadership is characterized by rewarding performance with money or other benefits (Stogdill, 1974).

Participant 5 showed the importance of leading by example:

I'm confident in myself. I'm very inspirational. I'm a very transformational and servant leader, I would say. The way you carry yourself, that's the way people treat you. The way you act, the way you react to things, that's the way people perceive you. (Participant 5)

Transformational leadership is defined as an inspirational style of leadership that motivates followers to excel beyond expectations through sharing a vision for the organization, leading by example, and helping followers to fulfill their potential (Kunannatt, 2016). Visionary leadership is the articulation of a vision that appeals to the common values and needs of the members of an organization, capturing the hopes, beliefs, values, and goals of followers (Nanus, 1992).

In stating that they shared a vision with followers, empowered followers through trust and autonomy, and attempted to inspire passion and a shared vision in followers, participants were describing themselves as utilizing transformational and visionary leadership styles, as described by Nanus (1992) Participants therefore indicated that an

effective strategy for building a financially sustainable IT small business was to blend transactional, visionary, and transformational leadership styles, thus confirming the findings of previous researchers who have described these leadership styles as effective (Kunnanatt, 2016). As with findings related to Theme 1, findings in the present study related to Theme 2 were more consistent with Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) resource-based view model than with Porter's (1979) five forces theory, indicating that internal resources of a firm (in this case, the quality of its leader) were among the most salient determinants of a firm's sustainability.

Theme 3: Marketing Through Social Media and Word of Mouth

Data associated with this theme were drawn from responses to interview question one (What strategies do you use to compete against rivals in your industry?), question six (What marketing strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?), and question eight (What resources do you find most helpful in the success of your business beyond five years?). Some participants contributed data to this theme. Participants reported that they marketed their services through social media and word of mouth. Marketing through these means involved creating a demand for their services, differentiating their services from those of competitors, and generating word of mouth and a social media presence. Another essential aspect of marketing was building a strong reputation by cultivating good relationships with customers, but this is discussed as a separate theme, below.

Participant 1 said that an effective strategy had been to create a demand for their business or to "create the need for the business for the customer whether they knew or did

not know that they had a need for the product. Put it together in such a way that it reaches the masses.” An additional marketing strategy that participants utilized was to understand how their own business’s services differed from those of competitors. Participant 2 stated that their business was differentiated from its competition by the exceptional depth of their own expertise:

As the CEO of this company, having to be the subject matter expert in the services in which I deliver and my company delivers, puts me above the competition because most companies their educational background isn't as extensive as mine. So, that gives me a competitive edge over other companies in the industry. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 had made their company competitive by researching the weaknesses of rivals and developing their business to surpass them in those areas:

The first strategy that we use is to find out who our competitors are, and what are they offering. Once we know what they are offering, we have to now look for the kind of weaknesses that they have. That's the only way we can identify areas we need to compete in to be better in what we do in our industry. (Participant 3)

Three out of five participants (Participant 2, Participant 3, & Participant 4) marketed their businesses through social media. Participant 1 stated, “marketing strategies were the social media, . . . which has turned the word of mouth into the world of mouth.” Participant 2 had used social media marketing successfully to reach a larger client base and grow their business:

I finally moved into the world of social media. My logos were redone. I had to rebrand. As I grew, I had to find different ways to reach a larger scale of customers and clients . . . and moving past kind of the word of mouth, mom-and-pop's type of marketing. So that really helped bring my business into the forefront and the limelight to get more clients into the company. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 had used a variety of social media outlets to market his business, but he preferred LinkedIn, and he considered a social media presence beneficial for a growing business:

LinkedIn is one of the most powerful tools businesses can use because unlike Facebook, it's not all casual and business. It's strictly professional on LinkedIn. So, social media is a business. It's here to stay, and the sooner businesses starting to work and create accounts to use for the benefit of their company, the better for them. You can recruit, you can impact your business. (Participant 3)

Regarding word of mouth outside of social media, Participant 2 reported that they had built their business at the beginning through a word-of-mouth marketing strategy:

In my own community, that's what helped me gain a lot of the customers that I was working with and clients that I was working with [when the business was new]. It was basically using one or two and then getting the clients to actually give feedback on their experience as a customer. And so, from that, from word-of-mouth travels, if you do a good job other people who have a need for the service will come to you. (Participant 2)

Participant 4 continued to market their business exclusively by word-of-mouth:

“everything's been word of mouth or through people, I've worked with, a couple of other customers.”

Findings related to Theme 3 indicated that, in devising their marketing strategies, participants took a resource-based view of their businesses. Prahalad and Hamel's (1994) resource-based view model (RBV), one of the conceptual frameworks in this study, was focused on a firm's internal resources as the fundamental determinant of sustainability. According to the RBV model, the two types of resources are tangible and intangible. Intangible resources are assets without physical forms, such as intellectual property, reputation, and culture (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). Intangible assets usually require a certain amount of time to acquire and are not easily bought and are most effective when they meet the VRIO criteria [Valuable, Rare, Hard to Imitate and Organize] (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). In the present study, participants had focused their marketing strategies to capitalize on intangible resources that met the VRIO criteria, such as a rare depth of expertise, an established reputation for excellent service, or the capacity to meet a demand that competitors were unable to meet. When participants' businesses did not have adequate VRIO intangible resources, they worked to develop them by researching competitors to identify opportunities for differentiation of services, and by working to establish a strong reputation in the community. Thus, findings in this study confirmed that VRIO resources are a fundamental determinant of sustainability, as stated by Prahalad and Hamel (1994) extended previous literature on the RBV model with the

finding that some owners of small, sustainable IT businesses develop and advertise intangible VRIO resources as a primary marketing strategy.

Theme 4: Cultivating Good Relationships with Customers

Data associated with this theme were drawn from responses to interview question two (What customer service strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?), question six (What marketing strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?), and question nine (What additional information would you like to share concerning strategies you used to sustain your business?). Participants indicated that they had kept their businesses profitable for over five years by cultivating good relationships with customers, which participants did by maintaining a good reputation and providing individualized customer service. Participant 3 described individualized customer service as the best strategy for an IT firm to remain sustainable:

Gather customer information and treat every individual with respect. Don't treat them like a number. And that is adding value to your customer base, and that's the best strategy that you'd be able to use to stay in business because there are so many competitors out there. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 also described customer service as an essential strategy for making an IT firm sustainable, because it contributed to the creation of long-term relationships with clients:

I always go the extra step for the customer. I mean, even if I had to take a loss or come in on the weekends or put in a lot of extra hours, at the end that always pays

for itself. You want to have good, long term customers and that's how to sustain a business like that. (Participant 4)

Participant 4 added that it was essential for small IT business owners to provide excellent customer service even when this meant accommodating a difficult or unreasonable client:

Just take care of the customer. You just have to do that. And even if they're bad customers, which we occasionally get, you just suck it up . . . I find you're less free as an independent contractor [than in a corporation] because you have to suck up to the customers. You got to do what they want. And if they need you, you got to be there. (Participant 4)

Participant 2 stated that providing the customer service of personal accessibility (on the part of the small business owner) was a critical strategy for business sustainability: “I'm approachable. I'm reachable. I'm accessible. And I think my customers really appreciate that and that's allowed me to have some longevity in the industry and to be able to have repeat customers come through.” Participant 2 had also cultivated relationships with customers by being a part of the community in which they and their customers lived: “people want to do business with folks from the community, people that they can trust, somebody who has a stake in the community. It's really about being able to give them a level of comfort.” Participant 4 reported that word-of-mouth was so important to small businesses that an exploitative pursuit of short-term advantages would probably preclude sustainability:

If you start out good and you make a good impression, then it'll be easy [to grow a firm through word-of-mouth]. If you're trying to maximize your profit and take

advantage of people, you might get away with it for a while, but for the long term, that's not sustainable. (Participant 4)

A benefit of establishing a good reputation, according to Participant 2, was that it allowed business to gain new customers through their relationships with former or current customers. Participant 2 described references from satisfied customers as key to sustainability:

References as a resource are huge and I think that's probably been one of the main successes of the sustainability. Just tapping into those resources. Somebody always knows somebody that knows another person, that knows another person that needs the services that you provide. And if they have nothing but really good things to say, they'll come. (Participant 2)

Participant 4, who often worked for nonprofits, made donations to the organizations they served to maintain a good relationship with them:

One thing I do is I'll make donations or get my name in different programs. So, I have my customers, all of my customers are nonprofit organizations. And so, if they have some gala or something like that, I'll give some money and get my name on the program. (Participant 4)

Findings in this study confirmed Porter's (1985) finding that intensity of competition is negatively associated with the differentiation among competitors. Participants indicated that when they had competitors who provided similar services, they made extraordinary efforts to gain an advantage by differentiating themselves through factors such as customer and community relations. Findings in this study also confirmed

findings associated with the delta model, one of the conceptual frameworks in this study. The introduction of the delta model by Hax and Wilde (2003) indicated effective ways to improve new positioning among a firm's activities. Specifically, Hax and Wilde (2003) argued that companies could enhance sustainability by shifting their focus from competitors to the customer. The delta model specifically addressed the link between customer bonding and competitive position, to show company executives they could enhance sustainability by focusing their strategies on customer service rather than on competitors (Hax & Wilde, 2003). Participants in the present study confirmed the findings of Hax and Wilde (2003) by stating that a focus on customer service was among the most important strategies for sustaining a small IT firm. As discussed above, participants' strategies for enhancing customer service included accommodating difficult clients, investing in the community, contributing to clients' fundraising efforts, being personally accessible, being fair with clients, and building a good reputation by satisfying customers' needs. The two outcomes of a focus on customer service that contributed to the sustainability of participants' businesses were referrals from former or current customers, and the development of new customers into long-term customers.

Applications to Professional Practice

Findings in this study have a number of applications for improving business practice. First, findings indicated that small IT businesses could achieve sustainability in part by moderating growth goals to keep costs lower than projected revenues. Participants 2, 3, and 4 set modest goals for growth and participants were still able to grow their businesses without excessive cost: by advertising through low-cost means

such as social media and word-of-mouth. Thus, the first application of the findings to business practice is that small IT business owners can contribute to the sustainability of their firms by moderating growth goals to make them achievable through social media and word-of-mouth advertising.

The second application of the findings to business practice concerns the optimal leadership style for small IT business owners. All participants in the present study indicated that participants had used a mixture of transformational, transactional, and visionary leadership styles. Effective elements of transformational and visionary leadership included encouraging subordinates to take pride and a sense of ownership in the collective endeavor, sharing a vision for the common good, and allowing autonomy. Effective elements of transactional leadership included monetary rewards and recognition for employee performance, in addition to competitive basic compensation. Small IT business owners may, therefore, contribute to the sustainability of their firms by encouraging employees to have a stake in a vision for the business, by granting reasonable autonomy to employees, and by rewarding good employee performance with monetary rewards and recognition.

The third application of the findings for business practice concerns marketing and was related to the first application regarding moderate growth goals. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4 indicated that part of their strategy for achieving sustainability included advertising by low-cost means such as a social media presence and word-of-mouth. Additionally, participants' responses indicated that participants marketed by advertising intangible firm resources that met the VRIO criteria, such as a good reputation, a high level of expertise,

and a capacity to provide services that competitors were unable to provide as effectively. Small IT business owners may, therefore, contribute to the sustainability of their firms by developing intangible assets such as expertise, a good reputation, and specialized service capacities, and advertising these assets through social media and word-of-mouth.

The fourth application of the findings to business practice concerns the cultivation of good relationships with customers. Converting new customers into long-term customers and getting referrals from existing customers were important or necessary strategies for sustaining a small IT firm. Participants 2 and 3, therefore, made every effort to cultivate strong relationships with customers, such as by accommodating difficult clients, donating to clients' fundraising efforts, being always personally accessible, working long hours, and even taking a monetary loss on certain contracts if this was necessary to satisfy the customer. Small IT business owners may, therefore, contribute to the sustainability of their firms by making excellent customer service their paramount strategy.

Implications for Social Change

Small businesses are a significant component of both local and global economies (Singer, 2015). Samujh (2011) noted deficiencies in the strategies employed by some small business owners, and Enquist, Johnson, and Rönnbäck (2015) highlighted the need for small business owners to change their business models to increase their success rate. The applications to the professional practice of the findings in this study, if adopted by owners of small IT startups, may contribute to the sustainability of those firms by furnishing viable business strategies that have been used successfully by other, similarly

positioned small IT business owners. Bringing on new clients and developing marketing strategies are significant challenges for IT consultant firms (Chei Sian & Watson-Manheim, 2014), and the findings document marketing and customer acquisition strategies that have been used successfully by small IT business owners. The findings from this research will contribute to the sustainability of small IT firms and enhance the already significant contribution of those firms to local and global economies.

Recommendations for Action

The applications to the professional practice of the findings in this study have the potential to benefit owners of small IT startups and to organizations that assist those business owners, such as the Small Business Administration. The findings and recommendations of this research to organizations that assist small business owners, for distribution with other written educational materials designed to provide guidance to owners of IT startups. Additionally, the findings will be provided to professional associations for owners of small IT businesses for distribution via electronic mailing lists or display in online forums. I will also provide the findings to educational institutions for presentations in courses that are designed to instruct new entrepreneurs.

Recommendations for Further Research

The small sample size of the current study was a limitation to the transferability of the findings (Yin, 2014). Additionally, interview responses are subjective in nature and thus may not be perfectly representative of objective conditions. To address this limitation, it is recommended that future researchers utilize the findings in this study to develop a quantitative survey instrument to assess business owners' application of the

strategies recommended in this study. Such a survey instrument can also be designed to collect data regarding metrics of business success and sustainability, such as the number of employees, age of the business, revenue growth rate, and advertising expenses. A quantitative study with a sufficient sample size may be used to objectively determine the strength of the association between the application of each of the strategies recommended in this study and the success and sustainability of small IT businesses. The same survey may also be administered to samples from other industries, to determine the efficacy of the recommended strategies across industries. This study emphasized positive approaches regarding strategies for success. However, it may be equally informative to explore the barriers/challenges experienced and how owners overcame these obstacles. In addition, the random purposeful sampling did not establish criteria for the size or growth of the organization, and it may be interesting to explore and produce findings using samples for which these criteria are specified, to determine whether findings will vary by business size or growth rate.

Reflections

When I began collecting data in this study, I realized I had a preconception that owners of IT consulting small businesses startup founders would be avid about growing their businesses to the greatest possible extent. With the extensive media coverage of spectacularly successful IT companies such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook and their founders, it was difficult not to develop an impression that the owner of every IT startup was consciously or unconsciously striving to become the next influential business owner. Entrepreneurship in the IT industry has been presented to the public to create immense

amounts of wealth from a comparatively small initial investment of capital, simply by operationalizing an innovative idea. Although the IT consulting small business services on which my study was focused do not exhibit the same potential for hyperbolic success, I tended, like many people, to associate the founding of an IT firm of any kind with grand ambitions of the founder.

I was therefore surprised when I began interviewing owners of small IT businesses and learned that participants attributed the sustainability of their firms, to some extent, to the moderation of ambition and to settling for a modest but dependable level of success. Every startup founder is to some extent gambling time and money, but the participants I interviewed were highly conservative in the risk participants took. Participants were more interested in sustainability than in growth. Rather than feeling disappointed by business practices that might appear unambitious, I found myself admiring the owners' realism, responsibility, and modesty. The grandiosity and social irresponsibility of large IT firms are beginning to receive almost as much attention in the press as the firms' superlative success, but in speaking with the small business owners in this study I was given a forceful and immediate impression of the truth of the stump-speech cliché, that small businesses are the backbone of the U.S. economy. I came to realize that the values that guided these small business owners--of working hard, dealing fairly, investing in the community, and doing their work well--were the economic backbone of the United States.

Conclusion

To keep their firms sustainable, owners of small IT businesses contain costs, utilize diverse leadership styles that appeals to employees' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, rely on low-cost marketing methods such as word-of-mouth and social media, develop and advertise intangible resources such as reputation and expertise, and cultivate positive, long-term relationships with customers. The strongest strategic focus should be on satisfying the customer because this practice contributes to sustainability by generating word-of-mouth advertisement, and by converting new customers into long-term customers.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study. This research study is being conducted to better understand what key strategies your organization uses for sustainability. The title of the research is *Key Strategies for Small Business IT Consulting with Sustainability Beyond 5 Years*. The researcher is inviting owners such as CEO's, CFO', COO's, Director of Development or data personnel with direct experience.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Christopher Lassiter, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of the current study is to explore key strategies some small business IT consulting owners in the United States use to sustain their new businesses beyond 5 years.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-time voluntary 30-minute interview.
- The interviews will be audio recorded.

Here are some sample questions:

- What strategies do you use to compete against rivals in your industry?
- What customer service strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
- What financial strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. No one at your organization will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study will not pose a serious risk to your safety or wellbeing. The primary risk of this study is the possibility of experiencing discomfort or fatigue during the interview process, but not any greater than that experienced in similar situations in everyday life. Benefits may include improved sustainability and stimulated organizational

growth which may lead to new employment opportunities and promote positive social change as well as stability within local communities.

Payment:

There will be no payment for your participation in this study.

Privacy:

Reports coming out of this study will not share the identities of individual participants or organizations. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also will not be shared. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. The researcher will ensure each organization's privacy by referring to each agency's service delivery area, role or position for identification purposes. All non-digital data such as such as interview notes or audio tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet located in a locked office only accessed by the primary researcher. All digital data collected will be stored on a computer encrypted, password protected, and only accessed by the primary researcher with password protection. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university. After 5 years' time the data will be permanently deleted/destroyed.

Accuracy Verification Procedure

To ensure the information collected from each interview is correct, I will send each interviewee a transcript of the interview to verify accuracy. The accuracy verification procedure includes inviting participants to comment on the interview transcript. Should interviewees find any discrepancies, my contact information is listed below. The accuracy verification process is 15 minutes. Each participant will have (7) days from receipt of the interview transcript to make the researcher aware of any discrepancies.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at christopher.lassiter@waldenu.edu or at 205-243-2949.

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is #01-16-19-0538944 and it expires on January 15th, 2020.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by signing below.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Script

Interview Protocol

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. My name is Christopher Lassiter, and I am a student at Walden University.”

“The purpose of this interview is to focus on the key strategies for small business information technology consulting firm with sustainability beyond 5 years.”

“I will now review the consent form. The consent form establishes that the subject has (a) been informed about the study; (b) is participating voluntarily; and (c) may exit the study at any time.” “The interview will last about 30 minutes and I will audio record the interview to make sure that your responses are recorded accurately.”

“Your answers are not going to be attributed to you by name, I will allow you to review a transcript of the interview before I incorporate it in my research. I will also make a copy of my findings available to you if you are interested.”

“I have open-ended questions to ask the interviewees as well as for the single case study. I will follow Yin’s (2014) five keys to a successful interview:

- a. Ask good questions
- b. Be a good listener
- c. Stay adaptive
- d. Have a good grasp of the issues
- e. Avoid biases.

“I will reduce bias by asking the questions without personal insight. In addition, I will reduce bias by not adding personal insight into the answers or comments associated with participant’s interviews. The questions are:

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to compete against rivals in your industry?
2. What customer service strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
3. In what ways does your leadership style impact organizational performance?
4. What financial strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
5. What strategies did you use to enhance employee motivation?
6. What marketing strategies did you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
7. What internal processes or systems do you use to sustain your business beyond five years?
8. What resources do you find most helpful in the success of your business beyond five years?
9. What additional information would you like to share concerning strategies you used to sustain your business?

I will thank the participant and confirm with the participant the accuracy of the interview data. I will inform the participant after analyzing the data, I will conduct member checking of the analysis.

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Greetings,

My name is Christopher Lassiter, and I am a DBA student at Walden University. This research study was being conducted to better understand what key strategies your organization uses for sustainability. The title of the research is Key Strategies for Small Business IT Consulting with Sustainability Beyond Five Years. I am reaching out to you to ask if you would like to participate in a 30-minute interview for this research project. I will provide you with the nine interview questions prior to our scheduled interview. Participation was completely voluntary, and your answers will not be attributed to you by name. I will allow you to review a transcript of the interview before I incorporate it into my research. Interviews will take place on-site at each institution in a quiet and private setting, preferably the office of the participant.

I will also make a copy of my findings available to you if you are interested.

If you are interested, please email me your response. I will also follow up with a phone call to see if you are interested.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at email christopher.lassiter@waldenu.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Christopher Lassiter
DBA Student
Walden University