2021

# Strategies to Improve Survival Rate among Small Businesses in the Construction Industry

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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Abstract

Small businesses are the backbone of the U.S. economy, yet only 50% of all small business establishments survive beyond the first 5 years of operation. Survivability is a concern for small businesses owners, as the construction industry experiences the lowest survival rates compared to other sectors. Grounded in entrepreneurship theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond the first 5 years of operation. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with six small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and five themes emerged: financial planning, meeting customer expectations, brand management, maintaining a competitive edge, and customer-centric culture. A key recommendation is for small business owners in the construction industry to have a dependable source of income to sustain their business operation, deliver quality work on time and within budget, and have decent product knowledge. The implications for positive social change include the potential to increase business profit, offer job opportunities that provide a better quality of life to employees, and increase sales and tax revenue contribution to local authorities to improve local community services.

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# Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my wife, Everlyne, and children Samwel, Sylvia, and Shirley. Without their support, achieving this monumental task could have been more challenging. My hope is that this achievement will be a source of inspiration for my kids and those who follow.

## Acknowledgments

With sincere gratitude I would like to thank my dissertation committee members for support and guidance. Your direction and mentorship made me a better scholar, writer, and researcher. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Edward Paluch, Dr. Jonathan Schultz, and Dr. Brenda Jack for their contributions to the Doctor of Business Administration program. Lastly, I would like to thank my family who stood by my side as I worked through this endeavor.

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# Section 1: Foundation of the Study

In the United States, the small business sector continues to lead to innovation and job creation, being a backbone of the U.S. economy. Small businesses accounted for 54% of all U.S. sales, provided 55% of all jobs, and 66% of all net new job creation since 2000 (Campbell & Park, 2017; Small Business Administration [SBA], 2020). Even though new business establishments make an important contribution to the U.S. economy, it is inevitable that some small business establishments close (Perry, 2012). Approximately half of all small business establishments survive 5 years or more and about one-third survive 10 years or longer (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the key success factors to improve the survival rate of small businesses beyond the first 5 years of operation in central New Jersey.

## Background of the Problem

Small businesses produce half of all private gross domestic product (Chow & Dunkelberg, 2011). Despite the contribution of small businesses to job creation and economic growth, the failure rate of small business establishments continues to be high. Between 2004 and 2014, an average of 78.5% of new small business establishments survived 1 year, nearly seven out of 10 new small businesses survived at least 2 years, and nearly half of new small businesses survived 5 years or longer (SBA, 2016). When compared with other industries, small businesses in the construction industry have recorded the lowest survival rate at 36.4% when compared with mining (51.3%), manufacturing (48.4%), services (47.6%), wholesaling and agriculture (47.4%), retailing

(41.1%), finance, insurance, and real estate (39.6%), and transportation, communications, and utilities (39.4%; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Thus, in this research, I explored successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry utilized to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years of operation.

## Problem Statement

In the United States, small business establishments that fail hurt the economy because small businesses make up 99% of all employer firms, employ half of the private sector workforce, and create 66% of the new jobs (Memili et al., 2015; SBA, 2020; Scott, 2015). Approximately 30% of all new small business establishments fail during the first 2 years, and nearly 50% fail within the first 5 years of operation (SBA, 2018; Warren & Szostek, 2017). The general business problem is that owners embark on small business initiatives without defined strategies for success and adequate knowledge about associated costs for business sustainability. The specific business problem is that some small business owners in the construction industry lack successful strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The targeted population for this study was six small construction business owners in central New Jersey who had sustained their business for a minimum of 5 years. The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change by reducing the psychological, social, and financial impact of business failures to the small business owner, family, and employees. The findings may also enable improving business practices to increase survivability rates of small business ownership, thereby increasing jobs, sales, and tax revenues to local economies for contributing to the prosperity of business owners, their families, employees, and communities.

## Nature of the Study

A qualitative research method was the appropriate choice for this research study because my goal was to explore, in depth, successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Researchers use the qualitative method to conduct an in-depth exploration to gain a deeper understanding from participants' perspectives within the context of the study (Park & Park, 2016). Using a qualitative research approach, a researcher can develop comprehensive, rich research data through a variety of lenses and data sources for inductive data analysis (Bernard, 2013; Yin, 2014). A qualitative approach involves an open-ended interview, content analysis, quality document analysis, and literature synthesis to understand business phenomena (Holt & Goulding, 2014).

A quantitative method was not appropriate for this study, as it involves collecting and converting data into numerical form so that statistical calculations can be made, hypothesis tested, and deductive conclusions drawn (Landrum & Garza, 2015; Venkatesh et al., 2013). A quantitative research method is appropriate for examining relationships or differences among variables (Barnham, 2015) and not an appropriate research method when a researcher's goal is to gain a deeper understanding beyond finding evidence of variables' relationships or differences (Veltri et al., 2013). Further, a mixed method is a hybrid approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative methods into a single research study (Miller & Cameron, 2011). Since the purpose of this study required no variables to examine or compare, quantitative and mixed research approaches are not suitable research methods for this research study.

As part of the qualitative approach, I used a multiple case study design. Using a case study design, a researcher can focus on a particular or small group to explore a case's setting in order to understand it (Tsang, 2013). A case study design allows a researcher to ask *what*, *how*, and *why* questions to address a contemporary set of events of which the investigator has little or no control (Petty et al., 2012; Smith, 2018; Tetnowski, 2015). Using a case study design, a researcher can collect and process data through a variety of techniques to allow a wider exploration of research questions and theoretical evolution (Hadidi et al., 2013; Hlady-Rispal & Johnson-Laffitte, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). When compared with a single case study, researchers use the multiple case study design to gain a deeper understanding by analyzing the similarities and differences of the phenomenon under investigation among multiple cases (Harrison et al., 2017). Multiple cases offer greater opportunities to augment and validate the information gathered from various sources and perspectives than in single cases (Ridder, 2017). Given possible variation in experience from different small business owners in the construction industry, a multiple case study design was the appropriate. By using a multiple case study design, I conducted semistructured interviews to explore successful strategies six small business owners in the construction industry utilized to sustain their business beyond 5 years of operation.

I did not select ethnography or phenomenological research for this study. Ethnography is used to explore the beliefs and feelings of people in a cultural interaction (Bass & Milosevic, 2018; Cruz, 2013; Hallett & Barber, 2014). Ethnography was not an appropriate research design for this study because I was not exploring the beliefs and feelings of people in a cultural interaction. A phenomenological research design was not an appropriate research design for this study because a phenomenological approach requires the application of multiple perspectives of multiple individuals with similar lived experiences of the participants to understand the shared meanings of experiencing a common phenomenon (Finlay, 2013; Roberts, 2013). The goal of this study was not attempting to understand the perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a situation but to explore the successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Thus, a phenomenological approach was not suitable for the research study.

## Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was “What strategies do small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years?”

## Interview Questions

There were eight open-ended interview questions that I used to answer the research question.

1. What strategies did you use to start your business?
2. What strategies have you found most effective in your business success?

3. Based on your experiences, what key strategies do you believe enabled you to sustain your business for more than 5 years?
4. What internal business strategies gave you a competitive advantage in central New Jersey, and how do you know?
5. What were the most significant challenges you experienced while implementing your strategies in the first 5 years of opening your small business operation?
6. How did you overcome challenges you experienced while implementing your strategies in the first 5 years of opening your small business operation?
7. If you were to start the business again, what different strategies would you use to avoid challenges of sustaining your businesses beyond 5 years?
8. What additional information, not discussed, can you share that contributed to the sustainability of your business beyond 5 years?

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this qualitative study was entrepreneurship theory. The theory of entrepreneurship has its beginnings in Richard Cantillon's *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général* (1755). As a banker and economist, Cantillon's experience as an entrepreneur enabled him to develop a theory of entrepreneurship. Beginning in 1755, Cantillon began using the entrepreneurship theory and viewed small business owners as risk takers to balance the markets and the economy (as cited in Bula, 2012, Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014; Sanchez, 2013). Cantillon presented entrepreneurship theory as a tool to predict and explain phenomena related to small business, Schumpeter (1934) advanced the theory of entrepreneurship (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). Schumpeter (1934) considered innovation, foresight, and creativity as key factors in entrepreneurship success, defining an entrepreneur as an individual who innovates even against social opposition. Others have described an entrepreneur as someone who is motivated, takes advantage of opportunities, does things in a new and better way, and makes decisions in times of uncertainty (Casson, 2014; McMullen & Sheperd, 2006). An entrepreneur' skills, capabilities, and characteristics affect the success and survival of small businesses (Frid et al., 2015). A small business needs a combination of factors to succeed including, identifying opportunities, risk-taking abilities, resource management, and strategies vital for business sustainability (Robinson & Stubberud, 2015). The theory of entrepreneurship provided a useful conceptual lens for exploring and understanding the strategies small business owners use to survive beyond the first 5 years of operations.

## Operational Definitions

*Entrepreneurship:* Entrepreneurship is the process of creating a new business, introducing new products, or ideas to a market (Szeman, 2015).

*Successful small business:* A business that is profitable enough to sustain the small business owner (Losapio, 2012).

*Small business administration (SBA):* The U.S. SBA is an independent agency of the federal government that assists, counsels, aids, and protects the interests of small businesses (SBA, 2020).

*Small Business:* A small business is a firm with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2020).

## Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are potential research restrictions described by researchers (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Assumptions and limitations of the study are weaknesses or factors out of a researcher's control. Delimitations are in the researcher's control and address the bounds of this study.

### Assumptions

An assumption is a fact believed to be true but cannot be verified (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Schoenung & Dikova, 2016), which can affect subjective interpretation of the data (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). To avoid misrepresentation, an investigator must identify and address possible assumptions (Fisher & Stenner, 2011). In this study, I assumed that a qualitative research method—specifically a multiple case study—would provide the best way to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry utilized to sustain their business for 5 years or more. I also assumed that central New Jersey was a sufficiently large geographical area to locate small business owners and reach data saturation. Further, I assumed that the participants would provide honest and unbiased responses to describe their lived experiences. Finally, I assume that this study will help small business owners in the construction industry to sustain their business for 5 years or more.

### Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses of a study that the researcher cannot control that may affect the methodology and conclusions (Kaefer et al., 2015; Miles, 2013; Morgado et al., 2017). Researchers should ensure that the limitations of a study, the implications of the shortcomings for the research at hand, and the interpretations of results are clearly communicated (Brutus et al., 2013). In this study, a limitation was the sample size associated with descriptive study designs, as researchers who conduct small samples limit their possibility of generalizing research findings (Yilmaz, 2013). The geographical focus of the study was central New Jersey, which may not be a representative to apply to the entire group of small business owners in the construction industry under study or outside the sampled region. Another limitation is including only small business owners who have sustained their business for a minimum of 5 years. The study was limited due to time restrictions available to meet the participant pool to collect data that adequately and accurately reflected the view and experiences of all small business owners under study. Other limitations relate to depending on participants to recall events accurately as they originally occurred in the past 5 years (see Perry, 2012). Perceptions and beliefs might limit what a research needs to know (Gioia et al., 2013). But researchers are unable to control a participant's lack of knowledge as well as controlling the participant's bias and the validity of the answers provided.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations of a study refer to restrictions or characteristics that a researcher imposes to limit the focus of a study (Nelms, 2015; Newman et al., 2015; Snelson, 2016). Delimitations considered in this study were related to participants, the geographical area, and a business's size and length of operation. The population focus for this study was small business owners with less than 500 employees (see SBA, 2020). The participants were small business owners in central New Jersey. This research study was also limited to only small businesses who had sustained their business beyond the first 5 years of operation. The findings from this study may not be applicable to all states in the Unites States because small businesses in the construction industry could vary from state to state. However, since the focus of this study was not to generalize the research findings, a narrow focus in scope and boundary was appropriate (Foss & Hallberg, 2014). The final delimitation considered in this study included the expected time allowed by Walden University to conduct the study adequately after receiving Walden University's Institutional Review Board approval.

## Significance of the Study

The results of this study have the potential to increase the success rates of small businesses. Nearly 50% of all new small business establishments fail within the first 5 years of operation (Wagner, 2013), which could affect small business owner's psychological, social, and financial status (Ucbasaran et al., 2013), thereby decreasing jobs, sales, and tax revenue for local economies. The potential business benefits of conducting this research were to compare and to understand strategies that might provide new insights to aspiring small business owners to make informed business decisions to increase success rates. The findings from this study may contribute to effective business practices by providing small business owners with a better understanding of the business strategies that increase survivability rates of small business ownerships beyond the first 5 years of operation. The results of this study may also reduce gaps in literature by adding knowledge on successful strategies to sustain a small business establishment beyond the first 5 years of operation.

## Contribution to Business Practice

The findings from this qualitative descriptive multiple case study may be valuable to small business owners looking to understand the factors that affect the survival of small businesses. The results from this study could contribute to improvement of business practice by identifying key strategies small business owners in the construction industry utilized to increase survival rates of their enterprises beyond 5 years. Discoveries from this research study may add new knowledge and insights to enable aspiring individuals embarking on small business initiatives to make informed decisions to build, grow, and sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of business operation.

## Implications for Social Change

The findings in this study may contribute to positive social change by improving business practices to increase survivability rates of small business ownership, thereby reducing the psychological, social, and financial impact of small business failures to the small business owner, family, and employees. When a small business owner succeeds, their business viability may lead to financial prosperity leading to economic and social benefits to the small business owner, family, employees, and communities. Sustained small business ownership beyond 5 years could contribute to increasing in job creation and an increase in sales and tax revenue to local economies. Thus, there is a need for small business owners to employ successful strategies to increase small business initiatives beyond 5 years of business operation through the development of new knowledge (Score, 2014). Successful small business initiatives can reduce the psychological, social, and financial impacts associated with small business failures.

## A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. In the United States, small business owners are critical to the health of the economy (Dahmen & Rodriguez, 2014; Memili et al., 2015). Small business establishments make up 99% of all employer firms, employ half of the private sector workforce, account for 54% of all U.S. sales, 41.2% of total private sector payroll, and generate more than 50% of all domestic sales (Scott, 2015). However, 80% of all new small business establishments fail within the first 2 years, and nearly 50% fail within the first 5 years of operation (Sarasvathy et al., 2013; Wagner, 2013). Though the types of business and the rates of failure may vary, identifying strategies that contribute to the survival of small business more than 5 years is important to assure the continuing vibrancy of the U.S. economy. The purpose for this literature review is to summarize and compare various sources related to the research topic. A literature review is used to explore knowledge on the study topic as well as support the topic of study (Gandy, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014).

This section presents literature related to the research topic under study. Within this literature review, I will include an extensive analysis of the literature related to entrepreneurship theory and key concepts identified. An extensive analysis of current strategies for sustaining small business establishments beyond 5 years is included. The review of the professional and academic literature section of this research study will contain six main subject categories that include entrepreneurship theory, small business, small business owners, small business effect on the economy, perceived small business success strategies, perceived small business failure factors, and small business owners in the construction industry. Subsections under the small business section will be small business owner and impact of small businesses in New Jersey.

## Entrepreneurship Theory

I selected the theory of entrepreneurship as the conceptual framework for this study. Cantillon is considered the founder of the theory of entrepreneurship, suggesting that small business owners are risk takers as entrepreneurs who take opportunities for growth (Carlsson et al., 2013). Cantillon referred to individuals who recognize inconsistencies in supply and demand and decide to buy at inexpensive prices and retail at greater rates as entrepreneurs (Carlsson et al., 2013).

Throughout the evolution of entrepreneurship theory, scholars have portrayed different characteristics of an entrepreneur. Cantillon’s 1755 original framework associated an entrepreneur as a specialist taking a business risk to make a profit and a driver of economic growth and sustainability (Carlsson et al., 2013). In the 1980s and 1890s, entrepreneur and small business owner became common terms (Yang, 2016). But entrepreneurship is a multidimensional concept that depends on the focus and the perspective the definition is approached from. In general, there is no single definition of entrepreneurship. Some scholars have defined entrepreneurship from the economics view, others through the sociology and psychology lens; others apply entrepreneurship from the management perspective, and others approach entrepreneurship from the social perspective. Researchers including Joseph Schumpeter have expanded the interpretation of entrepreneurship with a view of an entrepreneur as an agent of change inside an economy. For example, Say (1985) emphasized that entrepreneurs are agents of production. In addition, researchers have suggested that innovation is a main part of being an entrepreneur, seeking opportunities to introduce new ideas and minimize costs (Marshall, 1949; Schumpter, 1934). Further, entrepreneurs create opportunities (Hlady-Rispal & Laffitte, 2014), developing plans for achievement and profitability (Canter & Dopfer, 2015).

Entrepreneurship requires action, whether creating a new product or process, entering new markets, or creating new ventures. The decision of an individual to engage in entrepreneurial activity is affected by different motivators. One specific motivator for entrepreneurial activity and success is the need for achievement (McClelland, 1961). People with a high need for achievement perform better than those with a low or moderate need for achievement (McClelland, 1965). Individuals are also most attracted to activities that offer the environmental characteristics that match their personality, with the better career fit leading to better performance and satisfaction (Holland, 1961). In essence, individuals with high need of achievement are more likely to pursue occupations in entrepreneurial environments that allow them more control over outcomes, provide more opportunities to take advantage of the characteristics related with high achievement. However, personality alone cannot be the only factor involved in the success of new business ventures and growth. Entrepreneurial activities are deeply embedded in a cultural, social, and economic context (Reynolds, 1992). Entrepreneurs succeed by taking advantage of opportunities created by social, technological, and cultural changes

(Drunker, 1995), leveraging different types of resources: access to capital, social networks, information, and human resources to get entrepreneurial efforts off the ground (Paauwe, 1998). The ability of a business to develop distinct capabilities improves its ability to adapt to the changing competitive environment and improves its survivability (Paauwe, 1998). Thus, it is important for a business owner to have idiosyncratic traits and generate logical externalities (Kuechle, 2013).

Entrepreneurs and small business owners play a role in seeking economic growth (Brown & Thornton, 2013). Entrepreneurship contributes to new opportunities and innovation (Carsrud & Cucculelli, 2014; Zhang, Duyesters, & Cloodt, 2013), impacting the economic development in the United States and the rest of the world (Andersson & Evers, 2015; Khosa & Kalitanyi, 2015). Both innovation and entrepreneurship create new knowledge and its commercialization (Sahut & Peris-Ortiz, 2014). Entrepreneurship creates hope for a new way of dealing with old problems as well as presenting a new way of thinking to create new opportunities (Jain, 2013). Entrepreneurship facilitates innovation that contribute to new opportunities and jobs (Carsrud & Cucculelli, 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, entrepreneurship has powerful influences on U.S. and global economic development (Andersson & Evers, 2015; Khosa & Kalitanyi, 2015). Small businesses accounted for 54% of all U.S. sales, provided 55% of all jobs and 66% of all net new jobs since 2000 (SBA, 2020).

The key to a successful small business owner is education, talent, and continuing training (Alrhaimi, 2015); problem-solving abilities, self-direction, and innovative thinking as factors that that contribute to the success of small business owner (Lin &

Nabergoj, 2014). The purpose of this research was to identify successful small business owners in the construction industry to explore successful strategies utilized to sustain their business beyond 5 years of operation. The theory of entrepreneurship was the most useful conceptual lens for exploring the different factors, elements, decisions, and challenges small business owners experience in sustaining a small business.

**Small Businesses**

There is no mutual definition of small business. However, the term *small business* was first defined in 1942 by the Smaller War Plants Corporation, who saw a small business as a manufacturer or enterprises with fewer than 500 employees, independently owned and operated (Hooper, 1972). The Selective Service Act of 1948 similarly identified small businesses (Dilger, 2021). However, the U.S. Census Bureau in 1952 identified firms with fewer than 100 employees and an annual sale of less than 2,000 as small businesses (Dilger, 2021). It was not until 1953 when an Act of Congress created SBA to stimulate the economy through small business that a comprehensive definition of a small business was developed. The act characterized the definition of a small businesses using number of employees, net worth, revenues, and industry size (Dilger, 2021). Initially, SBA characterized a small business as one operated and owned by an independent entrepreneur, actively operating in the field, and having fewer than 250 employees (Hooper 1972). Throughout the years since its creation, SBA has provided several different definitions of a small business and also revised its standards for small business definitions. SBA later considered a small business as an entity with fewer than 500 employees and an income of less than 21.5 million for small businesses in the service and manufacturing (Ragland, 2007). By 2014, the SBA defined small businesses by considering profit orientation, ownership, size in the industry or annual revenue for 3 concurrent years. However, due to the wide diversity of small businesses and the industry in which they compete and operate, a technical and a conceptual problem existed with seeking a universal definition of a small business. As a result, what constitutes a small business varies within different industries and scholars.

For decades, theorists and scholars have also attempted to define small businesses. For instance, in the 1980s, Nappi and Vora (1981) determined that the definition of small businesses differed from state to state and suggested a need to set a basic national criterion to be used by each state to create standards by which government agencies could identify small businesses. In 1981, the Securities Exchange Commission brought a definition of a small business based on income to create compliance with the Regulatory Flexibility Act. The definition assumed that a company or person has assets totaling less than 2.5 million; however, for businesses such as an investment company, the net assets are to be 50 million or less to be considered a small business. But this attempt to clarify misunderstandings of small business seemed to create more confusion. In 1986, Peterson et al. proposed a new definition that identified a small business to be an entity with fewer than 100 employees with gross receipts of one million or less. Ang (1991) then defined a small business as a private, undiversified, lacking limited liability, and entrepreneurial. Another attempt to define small business was presented by Drinan (1995), who stated that a small business should have less than 100 employees in manufacturing and less than 20 in construction or service industries. With every attempt to provide a definition of a small business, there seemed no universal agreement.

Lack of a viable definition of a small business led researchers to continue introducing new definitions. Osteryoung et al. (1997) extended the definition of a small business by stating that a small business must meet three basic criteria: (a) be measurable and observable, (b) be congruent with the market system, and (c) be meaningful. In 2001, Valker et al. defined a small business as any company that has limited access to funding beyond personal savings, family, and local banks, questioning the concept of defining a small business based on the number of employees because this would be irrelevant in a case where a company with 100 employees could have higher profits than a company with 200 employees. In essence, defining a small business based on profit, whether public or private, access to funding, and size of employees would inadvertently limit some small businesses from accessing government resources and financial assistance.

The development of a universal definition of a small business could help guide private and government entities in designing service delivery to small businesses such as requirements to qualify and access loan facilities, investment opportunities, and available grants. However, adopting a universal definition of a small business was hindered by decades of varied technical and conceptual explanations from theorists and scholars. As a result, the attempts throughout the years to clarify misunderstandings of what constituted a small business seemed to create more confusion. A universal definition is difficult because of the different dimensions of various industries and countries (Chhabra & Pattanayak, 2014). Each small business is unique and diverse in size, industry, and legal status (Ciubotariu, 2013), and it is not clear what criteria should be used to decide what constitutes a small business (Devins, 2009; Mohmood & Hanafi, 2013; Muhammad et al., 2010). Due to complexity of defining a small business in practice, banks, and other organizations tend to define small businesses to fit their strategic purposes. Even professional institutions such as The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants do not provide a definition of a small business (Okabe & Suez-Sales, 2015).

Despite the various criteria to define a small business, SBA has been the authority on defining a small business. Researchers at the SBA defined a small business as a firm independently owned, organized, and operated by a proprietor with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2020). This definition extends across all U.S. businesses but may not be satisfactory for the small businesses in the construction industry. The ASCE Task Committee on small businesses in the construction industry proposed that small businesses in the construction industry be defined as those with fewer than 20 employees (Bashford, 1996). For instance, of 683,352 construction industry firms in 2016, about 92% or 682,292 had less than 20 employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Using the definition of a small business by using the employee sizes in the construction industry as a standard across all U.S. businesses and industry would conflict with other industries in achieving a universal definition. But using the construction industry's definition of a small business as a standard would hinder the efforts by entities that provide small business assistance and access to resources based on other criterion than size and industry.

The confusion in defining small businesses using number of employees, revenues, net worth, and any other factors was eliminated when Congress passed the Small Business Act, which was a crucial turning point for small businesses. SBA qualify a small business as an entity when it has a place of business in the United States, is organized for profit and operate principally in the United States (SBA, 2020). In 2015, there were 30.2 million small businesses in the United States representing 99.9% of all U.S. employers' firms, employ nearly 50% of the private sector employees, and 40% of private sector payroll (SBA, 2020). For this study, a small business referred to a privately-owned small business in which the owner takes financial risks in seeking profits and employs 50 or less employees.

**Small Business Owners**

Small businesses play a significant role in the U.S. economy. In the United States, small business owners are drivers of innovation, job creation and tax revenue generators to local and federal governments (Dahmen & Rodriguez, 2014; Gale & Brown, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand who small business owners are (Osborne et al., 2013). Defining who small business owners are would help to understand the needs of an individual business owner and the underlying processes, strategies, and sacrifices that shape or affect their business operations across the business cycle.

A small business owner is often in charge of multiple positions. The owner is typically in control of all business operations and decision making (Barnes & Westrenius, 2015), implementing different ideas (Lobontiu & Lobontiu, 2014). A small business also acts as a human resource director, finance director, and a manager (Garavan et al., 2016).

As a result, a small business owner must demonstrate extraordinary entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors such as adaptability, flexibility, speed, and aggressiveness in their business operations (Murmann & Sardana, 2012). In essence, small business owners are guided by entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors to be effective in making business decisions.

A small business owner should have access to an extensive pool of knowledge to help understand customer needs, the business environment, or the skills and experience of staff members. The success of a small business depends on the small business owner's ability to gain information (Dahmen & Rodriguez, 2014). Additionally, small business owners have financial challenges when they come from a technical background with limited knowledge about finance and accounting (Karadag, 2015). As a result, small business owners typically make financial decisions on personal opinions rather than through data (Lopez & Hiebl, 2015), and they may be unwilling to adopt accounting and financial systems to assist in decision making (Chhabra & Pattanayak, 2014; Mazzarol, 2014). Thus, a small business owner with inadequate accounting knowledge and skills exposes their business operation to inefficient accounting information to support and monitor financial performance.

Further, a key competitive advantage a small business owner should maintain is a vibrant and effective knowledge management. Knowledge management is important for improving resource alignment for a small business success (Seleim & Khalil, 2011). Small business owners should continue acquiring knowledge and skills through continuing education the increase their standard of excellence and market competition

(Atamian & VanZante, 2010; Fahed-Sreih & Morin-Delerm, 2012). Small business owners who adopt greater levels of technological advancement are better equipped for competition for business success (Fadahunsi, 2012). One way for small business to expand production and remain competitive is to seize technological opportunities through innovation and by increasing training opportunities for the use of new technology.

***Impact of Small Business in New Jersey***

Small businesses are a critical component of New Jersey's economy. Small business owners in New Jersey play a significant role in the state's economy (SBA, 2020). Small business establishments make up 99 % of all businesses and employed nearly 50% of all private sector workforces (SBA, 2020). In 2015, of the 3.6 million total private workforce in New Jersey, 1.8 Million or 50% were employed by small business establishments with the largest share of employment represent by firms with fewer than 100 employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). For instance, in 2015, small business leaders created a total 33,072 net new jobs out of which 22,698 net jobs were added by firms employing fewer than 20 employees (SBA, 2018). Of the 19,970 companies that exported goods from New Jersey in 2015, 18,304 or 91.7% were small businesses who generated 43.1% of the state's 28.2 billion total exports (SBA, 2020). Small businesses in New Jersey are certainly a lifeblood of the state's economy but also a creator of job opportunities to certain segments of the population. It is therefore important to develop strategies to enable small business sustainability given the important contributions small businesses make to New Jersey's economy

**Small Businesses Effect on the Economy**

Small businesses have a huge impact on the economy of the United States. Small businesses are a driver of economic growth and development (Eijdenberg et al., 2015; Halabi & Lussier, 2014; Preisendoerfer et al., 2014). Small businesses represent a large portion of the world's economic growth, job creation, innovation, new product development (Ciubotariu, 2013). Job creation lowers unemployment rates and poverty levels (Chhabra & Pattanayak, 2014). In the United States, small businesses account for 54% of all sales (Campbell, 2017; Criscuolo et al., 2014), generate about 39% of the country's gross domestic product (Boyd, 2015), provide employment to 50% of the private workforce (Campbell & Park, 2017) and represent more than 99% of all employer companies (Dahmen & Rodriguez, 2014). Therefore, identifying strategies that contribute to the survival of small businesses is crucial to assure the continuing vibrancy of the U.S. economy.

Small businesses bring growth, innovation and create employment opportunities to local economies. Small businesses are incubators of innovation, job creation, community development, contributors to the gross domestic product and entrepreneurship (Gale & Brown, 2013; Haron et al., 2014; Karadag, 2015). In the United States, small businesses sustain the technological lead with one-third of all new patents issued coming from small businesses technologies (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Worldwide, small business enterprises comprised more than 90% of businesses and accounted for more than 50% employment opportunities and contributed 50% of the world's gross domestic product (Criscuolo et al., 2014; Haron et al., 2014; Inyang, 2013. Therefore, the stability of a local economy or nation is in part derived from the stability and financial strength of small businesses. However, when a small business fails, the impact could render damaging consequences.

Growing a small business over time requires the right intellectual capital and a strong operational foundation. However, Turner (2015) noted that small businesses fail after launching. For instance, from 2004 to 2014, 78.5% of new establishments survived 1 year, whereas 50 % of small businesses closed their business establishments by the fifth year (Tanej et al., 2016). To achieve higher business performance and business success, Kraus (2013) considered entrepreneurship as an important driving factor. Stevenson et al. (1999) described entrepreneurship as the process of creating value to exploit an opportunity by bringing together a unique package of resources. Entrepreneurship is a means of economic growth and global competitiveness (Kraus, 2013; Kuratko, 2009). Entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors such as adaptability, flexibility, speed, aggressiveness, and innovativeness are key determinants for a business to survive and prosper in turbulent environments that confronts businesses today (Morris & Kuratko, 2003). Theory of Entrepreneurship assumes that an entrepreneur can anticipate and build a credible business vision by willing to bear uncertainty and specific cognitive abilities (Farmer et al., 2011). Since small businesses play a crucial role in the U.S. economy, appropriate strategies to reduce small business failures and its impact are significantly important for long term economic growth and prosperity.

Factors that contribute to small business failure vary. Factors that contribute to small business failure include lack of financial resources and poor leadership (Bishop, 2015; Campbell & Park, 2017). Lack of practical strategies and resources contributes to small business failure (Taneja et al., 2016). The survival of small businesses is crucial for the vitality of the U.S. economic growth (Dahmen & Rodriguez, 2014). High failure rates of small businesses affect unemployment, reduce tax revenue for local and federal governments and reduce gross domestic product to the national economy (Baptista & Preto, 2011). Considering the high percentage of small business that fail within the first 5 years of operation, it is important to explore successful strategies small business owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

**Perceived Small Business Success Strategies**

Different definitions exist about business success. Existing research focuses business success largely on a business level despite the individual nature of entrepreneurship. As a result, research on the definition of business success remains scarce (Fisher et al., 2014; Fisher et al., 2014; Gorgievski et al., 2011; Wach et al., 2016). For individual business owners, the predominant approach of defining business success has been identifying the most common criteria entrepreneurs use to define success and then quantifying the variation in the importance that the entrepreneurs place upon the identified criteria (Wach et al., 2016). For instance, Shin et al. (2015) referred success as a business' overall financial performance. Success is a subjective concept leading some small business owners to come up with their own definition (Le & Raven, 2015). Business success is an achievement of goals and objectives of a company (Ngwangwama et al., 2013). Business success is a firm's ability to create acceptable outcomes and actions (Gaynor, 2017). A successful small business is an entity that is profitable enough to sustain the small business owner (Losapio, 2012). Though there is no universal acceptable definition of business success, Reijonen and Komppula (2007); Wang and Wang (2012) argued that in most management studies, business success is measured from the perspective of a firm's performance. However, Islam et al. (2011) argued that facets of a firm's performance are complex and multidimensional. As a result, Islam at al. (2011) categorized business success in two dimensions: (a) financial versus non-financial; and (b) short term versus long term success. There are various ways to measure business success including survival, profit, and number of personnel employed, happiness, corporate reputation, or sale growth (Schmidpeter & Weidinger, 2014). Since small businesses often aim to achieve a variety of financial and non-financial goals, a definition of business success among small businesses varies and cannot be easily generalized. However, using a criteria-based approach can help determine what small business owners indeed apply to determine whether they are successful.

Criteria-based approaches define business both at a firm level or individual level and assumes that a business owner interpret the meaning of success criteria the same way. Yet, business owners interpret common success criteria differently depending on their underlying understanding of business success. For instance, Kirkwood (2016) found that defining business success using personal satisfaction could signify different meanings including satisfaction from a good job done, intellectual satisfaction or being satisfied from achieving goals. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) pointed that business success can take different meanings and can be achieved in different ways depending on an entrepreneur's social identity, and personal satisfaction. For purposes of this study, business success refers to small businesses that have been in business beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Small business success factors have captured the interest of many scholars and practitioners. Onkelinx et al. (2015) conducted a study which revealed that a small firm's business performance is driven by entrepreneurial orientation. While Chen et al. (2006) considered human capital as a generally important factor; Khalique et al. (2015) argued that human capital does not play a significant role in determining organizational performance. However, both Chen et al. (2006), and Khalique et al. (2015) studies demonstrated that small businesses react differently based on their economic and environmental setting. Furthermore, Riquelme and Watson (2002) argued that it is impossible to attempt to understand a firm's performance using financial and accounting ratios because most small businesses do not have formal financial data reporting requirements. As a result, it becomes impossible to obtain enough reliable financial ratios and accounting data to measure a small businesses' success.

Business success factors among small businesses vary and cannot be easily generalized. This is because small businesses often aim to achieve a variety of financial and non-financial goals. It would be impossible to tap the essence of a firm's performance through other aspects such as customer service, innovation and operational efficiency using financial accounting measures (Wieder et al., 2006). Koufteros et al. (2014) argued that it could be misleading to rely on financial data as it limits the ability to explain future performance since they are historically oriented.  Abdallah and Alnamri (2015) noted the many non-financial factors that should be included in measuring a firm's performance more effectively due to recent political and social development. Because of these given arguments, this study will incorporate non-financial measures captured through a small business owner's managerial perception.

In determining the perceived small business success strategies, the content for this study will focus primarily on the internal aspects and less on external aspects. This is in recognition with Morrison and Teixeira (2004) who noted that while small businesses are affected by external macro environments such as political, social, economic, technology, and regulation, those factors are independent and hardly controllable by the management of small business owners. Internal factors reveal management preference and a firm's characteristics that influence decision making regarding resolving business issues or business expansion plans (Makhija, 2003). Moreover, Galbreath and Galvin (2008) considered internal factors such as a firm's resources and capabilities as unique factors that can be controlled. Internal factors explain main reasons why there are variations in a firms' performance despite being in the same industry with other firms (Hirsch & Schiefer, 2016). It is therefore important for a small business owner to recognize potential opportunities and threats in their business operations.

Internal factors can impact a business and the extent to which a small business owner controls them differs. However, managing the strengths of internal operations could be the key to business success. A small business' internal characteristics are key to improving business performance (Barney, 2001). Barney (2001) further argues that the differences in a firm's performance can be explained primarily by the existence of organization's resources. Schjoedt et al. (2013) noted that a business venture requires a satisfactory reserve, a combination of adequate finances and physical or tangible assets. Galbreath (2005) defined a satisfactory reserve as both tangible and intangible assets owned by a firm to determine its success. Tangible assets include financial resources, physical resources, human resources, and technological resources. Intangible assets refer to knowledge, skills, reputation, and capabilities. As noted by Barney (2001); when existing organization resources are valuable, rare, and not easily imitated and substitutable by rivalry and properly utilized a small business gains superior competitive advantage. Crook et al. (2011) observed that when a firm seek to acquire and exercise control over resources, that can offer competitive advantage over other competitors. It is therefore important for a firm to apply different levels of control over its products or services offered. Superior resources and capabilities in a small business establishment is key to building up a basis for gaining and sustaining competitive advantage. Equally important for business success is effective communication and developing strong relationships.

A small business owner’s personality trait is essential factors for business success. Lawrence (2015) considers proper planning, effective communication, and having a clear mission and goal as the most important factors contributing to a successful small business. Andries and Czarnitzki (2014) pointed that the new behaviors that are adaptable to change are essential to protect the steadiness of a small business operation. Frid et al. (2015) referred to entrepreneurship theory where a small business owner’s personal characteristics, skills, and capabilities have an impact on the sustainability of a business. Wang, Tsai, and Liao (2014) pointed leadership skills as a critical ingredient in the success formula of a small business. Postma and Zwart (2001) suggested organizational leadership as a skill to help a small business owner to survive and grow. Studies by Bowen et al. (2009); Kim et al. (2008) pointed that marketing capability is related to business success. Chowdhury et al. (2013) pointed to organizational assets such as human resources, management policies and capabilities used by small businesses to develop and implement strategies or innovation as key to having a positive impact on a firm. Chowdhury et al. (2013) recognized knowledge as necessary for a small business to succeed and argued that small businesses with educated and skilled workers have the propensity to succeed. Ngah and Jusoff (2009) recognized the importance of knowledge and recommended that small business owners should ensure analytical and critical skills of all workers is developed to sustain a competitive advantage. Another essential factor for a small business success is creating a unique brand that creates a unique customer experience.

A key aspect to business survival is offering a unique product or service better than that of the competitor. Zucchella and Siano (2014) noted that business survival is dependent upon a small business unique offering.  This uniqueness is developed over time by nurturing a firm’s core competencies. However, Phillipson et al. (2004); Zucchella and Siano (2014) argue that small businesses lack resources forcing them to operate under severe financial and expertise constraints. Because of inadequate resources, small businesses are forced to focus on short-term rather than long term goals thus inhibiting small businesses from developing competitive strategies to exploit opportunities existing in their environment. For instance, Jasra et al. (2011) cited how small businesses face restricted access to funds and as a result rely on personal sources of finance in place. Jasra et al. (2011) added that limited financial access is a barrier to a small business's growth and development as it hinders larger investments that require long term payback period. In essence, the inability to secure or access institutional financing renders small businesses unable to expand to new markets or adequately compete. Therefore, to increase the survivability rate of a small business, access to capital is a successful business strategy.

**Perceived Small Business Failure Factors**

Small businesses play a significant role to a nation's economic growth and a small business' success is beneficial to the continued health and long-term growth of a nation's economy. In the United States, small businesses are the backbone of the economy, yet nearly 50% fail within the first 5 years of operation (Artinger & Powell, 2015; SAB, 2018; Small Business and Entrepreneurial Council, 2016). Small business performance has been studied from a variety of approaches to better understand why some firms fail and why others succeed. Lussier and Halabi (2010) noted that no single theory existed to explain the cause of small business owner's failures after launch. Whether a small business will succeed or fail depends on a complex set of interrelated factors determining the potential to increase or decrease the probability of success or failure. The list of reasons why small businesses fail is lengthy and no comprehensive rationale in literature. As a result, providing a clear definition of business failure might be important to enable comparisons among numerous scholars across studies but also in identifying potentially valuable information from the entrepreneurs who found the failed businesses.

Understanding the concept of business failure is an enormous theoretical challenge due to the lack of an adequate definition of failure. Numerous scholars and researchers have defined business failure in various terms ranging from discontinuity of ownership, discontinuity of the business and bankruptcy. Early studies including Singh et al. (2007); Watson and Everett (1996) defined business failure broadly as a discontinuity of ownership including not only businesses that closed but also businesses that sold by owners who wished to retire due to age or health reasons. Discontinuity of ownership could include businesses sold by owners for profit or a case where the owner wished to move on to another business venture (Singh et al., 2007; Watson & Everett, 1996). Recent studies by Wennberg et al. (2010) argued that entrepreneurs exit their firms for more reasons than business failure. As a result, equating business failure with exit is problematic. Other scholars have considered financial prediction of business failure using bankruptcy as an indicator.

Inadequate knowledge about associated costs for business sustainability and an unrealistic expectation of incoming revenues can lead to financial failure leading to bankruptcy. Moulton and Thomas (1993) viewed bankruptcy as a clear indicator of a failing firm and a major step towards a business death. Studies by Shepherd and Haynie (2011); Zacharakis et al. (1999) used bankruptcy and an emphasis on poor economic performance relying on an observable, recorded event to define business failure. However, Watson and Everett (1996) argued against using bankruptcy and poor performance to define business failure noting that some businesses might recover from bankruptcy or might not provide a reasonable income or a fair rate of return to the owners but might continue to operate. Shepherd (2005); Coelho and McClure (2005) defined business failure as discontinuity of ownership due to insolvency or when performing below the threshold. Shepherd (2003); Coelho and McClure (2005) argued that a business failure occurs when a firm's revenue falls and / or a rise in expenses lead a firm to become financially insolvent hence unable to continue operating. Coelho and McClure (2005) defined a business failure as a state when a business' operational costs exceed the revenue to make business attractive. Ucbasaran et al. (2010) considered business failure not only the sale or closure of a business because of bankruptcy, but also when the financial, social, and psychological costs of failure are too high when compared to the revenue, an entrepreneur's performance expectations or personal thresholds of performance. The different definitions for business failure, each related to different causes and factors provide a challenge to justify a clear definition.

Factors that explain small business failure appear also as factors affecting small business success. Despite fragmented findings showing different relationships between factors affecting success and failure resulting in lack of comprehensive or unified explanation of small business failure, several common themes are evident. For instance, Mehralizadeh and Sajady (2006); Sullivan et al. (1998); Johnson et al. (1996) found different failure rates between small business owners who set-up their business from scratch and those who purchase existing businesses. Different failures rate was evident between small businesses that rely on one large customer base as opposed to those who develop relationships with a variety of small customers (Johnson et al., 1996; Sullivan et al., 1998). While factors related to failure can be recognized as interrelated, the common themes can be independent. As an example, poor financial management might be because of poor management skills while financial distress and failure may be due to poor asset allocation decisions. As a result, it is necessary for a small business owner to be knowledgeable about financial management and asset allocation. While a list of reasons for small business failures seems lengthy and interrelated, it is apparent a small business success depends on the small business owner's capability to acquire knowledge and skills but also develop and use successful strategies to differentiate themselves from competitors.

Other major causes of small business failure may include lack of capital, poor management, and marketing. While no small business leader starts a new venture preparing for failure, Clark (1997) recommends each small business owner to have a clear plan and strategy for success involving money, management, and marketing. In addition, Alstete (2014); Fan et al. (2014); Halabi and Lussier (2014); Haltiwamger et al. (2014); Maron and Lussier (2014) highlighted that the personal characteristics of the entrepreneur is critically important in determining the success of a small business. In contract, Demirtas and Akdogan (2015); Kovacevich (2014) argued that a business success or failure depend on independent factors such as management of technical skills, financial issues, economic issues, education and training, personnel skills, human relations and planning and organization skills. Barringer et al. (2005); Mateev and Anastasov (2010); Zhang et al. (2008); Henrekson and Johansson (2008) noted that factors responsible for a small business failure can be grouped into three categories; external, internal, and motivational.

Internal and external factors have a huge effect on the success or failure of a small business operation. While a small business leader has significant influence over internal factors impacting a business operation, external factors cannot be controlled. However, a small business owner must be able to anticipate and adjust to both internal and external business environments to keep their business on track from impact within or outside their business operation. Studies on internal factors including Mehralizadeh and Sajady (2006) focused more on a small business's personal characteristics, planning and organization skills and financial management. Hornday (1990) looked at personal characteristics of a small business owner such as class, educational background, age and gender. Bolton (1971) noted that historically, individuals entered business through existing family interest. In contrast, Miner (1997); Sullivan et al. (1998) noted that personality traits characterize a successful entrepreneur. McClelland (1987) argued that not all entrepreneurs have the potential for business success but four types: personal achievers, emphatic salesperson, expert idea generator, and the real manager. For instance, Mehralizadeh and Sajady (2006) described that a personal achiever's driving force is the need to achieve and tend to expand their business too quickly in their pursuit to success, but they lack enough knowledge to run an organization effectively. Low and MacMillan (1988) described that successful entrepreneurs shared common psychological characteristics including the need for achievement, propensity for risk-taking, personal, and interpersonal values and innovativeness. McClelland (1987) argued against attempting to characterize successful entrepreneurs based on personality characteristics. It is evident that there is no simple personality trait to explain whether a small business owner will succeed or fail but a complex set of interrelated factors that increase or decrease the probability that an individual will become the owner of a small business. Some studies focused on small business failures due to management mistakes.

Small business owners need managerial skills necessary to ensure business growth and development. To characterize entrepreneurs to understand reasons why 50% of new ventures fail within the first 5 years of operation, Mehralizadeh and Sajady (2006) pointed to the misfit between personality structure and task structure as one of the most frequent cause of business failure that should be considered. Ingram, Peake, Stewart, and Watson (2017) pointed to the emotional instability and interdependence as the needed ingredients to foster the skills necessary for business success such as courage for taking risks, having the flexibility and persistence to pursue goals. Cromie and John (1983) concluded that the skills necessary to ensure the growth and development of a small business cannot be the same at business conception, launch and throughout its operation. To elaborate, Hisrich (1990) argued that as a business operation enters a growth phase there is an increasing need for small business owner to have managerial skills necessary to ensure business growth and sustainability. However, Mehralizadeh and Sajady (2006) pointed to finding from Troy State University (2003) study reported which noted that nine out of ten business failures in the United States was caused by a lack of general business management skills and planning. In support, a survey by Dun and Bradstreet Statistics (1995) noted that 88.7% of all business failures in the United States were due to management mistakes. The reason why small business owners do not have adequate skills is because they are less likely to obtain management training due to financial constraints (OECD, 2002). Perry (2001); Sharma and Mahajan (1980) listed management mistakes that small business owners commit that lead to business failures such as entering a business venture for a wrong reason, advice from family and friends, lack of market awareness, lack of financial responsibility and awareness, and lack of a clear focus. In essence to survive dynamic business environments, a small business should adapt the best business and managerial practices that are conducive to their business environment to detect and exploit opportunities in the marketplace.

A small business's knowledge, skills and abilities achieved through education, training, and experience lead to business success. Turner and Endres (2017) noted that acquisition of business knowledge should largely remain the responsibility of a small business owner to deliberately engage in a variety of quality learning activities to be equipped with new skills to cope with changing environments. Empirical studies by Coleman (2007); Collins-Dodd et al. (2004); Eggers et al. (2013) established a relationship between a small business competency and business success. For instance, Perry (2001) noted that a successful business depends on an entrepreneur's knowledge and ability to collect and analyze data to develop a business plan. The business plan creates a vision of the future and lists the necessary objectives, resources, and procedures to achieve the set vision. Backer et al. (1988); Schwenk and Sharder (1993) showed strong positive links between planning and business success. In contract, Robinson and Pearce (1983); Sharder et al. (1989) did not find direct links between planning and business success. Since there are a lot of reasons why a business failed, it is hard to know for sure the cause of business failures unless each case is analyzed. With most researchers agreeing that planning can be beneficial, Castrogiovanni (1996) noted that the value of planning depends on context and benefits differs from one context to another. However, Castrogiovanni (1996) found that the failure rate among small businesses particularly start-ups was higher due to lack of formal business planning. Kevill et al. (2017) noted that due to changing market environments, technological developments and customer demands, a small business owner must consider expanding their knowledge as a potential competitive advantage to their business sustainability. In essence, for a small business establishment to increase its rate of business success and achieve sustainable competitive advantage, the owner must continuously expand existing knowledge base but also create new resources and capabilities in response to new market conditions.

Having enough capital and access to financial assistance is critical to launching and sustaining a business. However, Karadag (2015); Osei-Assibey et al. (2012) noted that most small businesses fail due to limited access to capital. Xiang et al. (2014) pointed that small businesses often face restricted access to funds and instead rely on personal sources including savings, mortgaging a family home, or borrowing from relatives to start a business compared to accessing credit from lending institutions. For instance, Cheng (2015) published bank lending reports for small businesses which showed many financiers used governance as one criterion to determine the credit worthiness to a small business lending. Because of the difficulty of obtaining external financing, Arslan and Staub (2013) noted that new small- business owners face a challenge in accessing funds related to a new business launch. Lack of enough funds hinders a small businesses owner from establishing a sound and stable financial business footing.

A financial management knowledge and experience of a small business owner could affect their business success rates. Wichmann (1983) noted the importance of accounting and management capabilities and how it affects small business success and failure. Weitzel and Jonsson (1991) pointed to crises management and lack of planning as contributing factors for small business failure. Studies by Haswell and Holmes (1989); Peterson et al. (1983), Wichmann, (1983) reported poor management as a common theme in small business failure. Karadag (2015) added that small businesses fail due to poor financial performance and poor financial projections. Mazzarol (2014) described that many small businesses owners lack accounting and financial management skills as contributing factors to small business failure. SBA (2016) added that small business failures are due to insufficient funds, and poor marketing strategies. Schiff et al. (2010) pointed that that due to poor financial planning and budgeting skills, small business owners tend to underestimate the amount of capital needed and the income to be generated to sustain a small business operation. Salazar et al. (2012) recommended a small business owner to maintain enough capital to cover not only start-up costs but also for maintaining and expanding operations. Patten and Patten (2014) noted the benefit of a small business owner understanding the key indicators of financial performance including sales, margin, operating profits, and sales revenue. Mazzarol (2014) advised small business owners to seek expert advice on implementing an accounting system to improve financial control. It is evident that the success or failure of a small business could be determined by a small business owner’s competency in management and accounting but also a function of strategic leadership.

Leadership is a variable that could cause success or failure of a business. Mom, Fourne, and Jansen (2015) noted that leadership was a factor in the success or failure of a business. Studies by Fahed-Sreih and Morin-Delerm (2012); Sakiru et al. (2013) stressed lack of leadership skills in producing efficient organizations as a contributing factor to a small business failure. Kalleberg and Leicht (1991) recognized that small business owners succeeded best when they adapted to fit the opportunities and the constraints inherent in the external and contextual environments in which they operated. Miettinen and Littunen (2013) posited that a failed business point to a business owner’s lack of experience in addressing competition, economic factors, crises, shift in priorities, and varying external expectations. O’neill and Duker (1986) examined the role of quality management in small businesses and noted that poorly managed firms tended to hold greater debt loads, relied less on the advice of accountants, and offered more inferior products when compared with better performing competitors. Arguably, small business owners who are competent in business management skills are more likely to succeed in business.

Government policies and regulations are essential to a small business success. On the other hand, government policies and policy reforms could impact the economic environment of small businesses and thus hinder business growth. In O’neill and Duker (1986) study, respondents cited government and government related policies as important factors affecting business failures. In evaluating the impact of the federal government and its policies Edmunds (1979) found failure rates were increased due to heavy burden of taxation and regulation. Paldino and Herath (2020) added that accessing information about regulations and compliance could hamper the flexibility of a small businesses. Dawson et al. (2017) pointed that the consequence of navigation complexities of regulation and compliance divert scarce resources and time away from business productive investment needed for competitive capacity building. In contract, Clute and Garman (1980) identified higher supply of money decreased failure rates and higher volume of bank lending reduced business failures. Bagchi and Pal (2003) noted the role of the government in helping entrepreneurs to start new business and in promoting them to continue by fostering an enabling economic environment such as minimum regulations and helping to create a financial sector with easier access to funds for all businesses. However, Blavin et al. (2012) study found 65% of small business owners had serious challenges in maintaining profitability due to government regulations such as the health insurance costs mandated under the Affordable Health Care Act. In contrast, Kücher et al. (2020) tied failure rates to the stage of organizational life of a small business. While new firms predominantly fail due to internal challenges, mature enterprises struggle more due to increased competition and economic slowdowns (Kücher et al., 2020). Evidently, small businesses tend to be poorly equipped to navigate through the complexities of government regulations and bureaucratic networks if compared with larger firms. As a result, the complexities of government regulation, compliance procedures and the associated administrative costs entailed in compliance could affect the success rate of a small business. Reducing the cost of compliance and improving information access has a greater potential of reducing administrative and regulatory burdens that hinder small business growth and even ability to survive.

Common themes in explaining small business failures relates to small business owners embarking on small business initiatives without adequate knowledge, training and preparation about associated costs, revenues, and business longevity. Haswell and Holmes (1989) reported managerial inadequacy, incompetence, inefficiency, and inexperience as consistent theme explaining small business failures. Ibrahim and Goodwin (1986); Peterson et al. (1983) reported poor management conditions, inadequate accounting records, limited access to necessary information, and lack of good managerial advice as issues related to business failure.  Studies by Ibrahim and Goodwi (1986); Lumpkin and Ireland (1988); Montagno et al. (1985); Sandberg and Hofer (1987); Susbauer and Baker (1989) pointed that factors that explain small business failures were related with factors that explain small business success such as managerial planning, managerial skill development and financial planning. Larson and Clute (1979); Weitzel and Jonsson (1989) argued that small business failures are directly related to the owner's personal decision characteristics, managerial deficiencies, and financial shortcomings. Hayes et al. (2015) pointed to lack of insight, inflexibility, emphasis on technical skills, lack of management skills and appropriate managerial training, lack of accounting and financial management background as factors related to small business failure. Peterson et al. (1983) conducted a survey of small business owners and noted the most cited factors of small business fail were related to lack of management expertise and financial management. In essence, the competitive nature of a small business environment requires a small business owner with entrepreneurial competent traits, skills and knowledge for business success and growth.

**Small Businesses in the Construction Industry**

In the Unites States, small businesses play a significant role in the construction industry. In 2017, the U. S. Bureau of Statistics listed the construction industry with over 6.5 million employees of whom more than 5.4 million were small businesses with less than 500 employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). In 2017, the United States Census Bureau listed 701,477 firms in the construction industry, of which 700,393 (99.8%) were small businesses with less than 500 employees. New Jersey had 21,518 construction firms in 2017, of which 21,419 (99.5%) were small businesses with less than 500 employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Even though the outlook of small businesses in the construction industry seems impressive in terms of business formations, data shows they are less impressive in terms of survival.

When survival rates are compared with other industries, businesses in the construction industry recorded one of the lowest survival rates. Knaup and Piazzi (2006) research study monitoring the survival rates of businesses in different industries found that the construction industry showed the 2nd to last survival rate of businesses when compared to other industries. Knaup and Piazzi (2006) study looked at businesses launched in the second quarter of 1998 and noticed that only 30 percent of construction companies survived after seven years. In Knaup and Piazzi (2006) study, the construction companies ranked second last while businesses in the information sector ranked last with a 25 percent survival rate. Similarly, Choudhury (2018) conducted an analysis of data spread obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 1977 to 2014 on survival rates for business establishments by industry. Choudhury (2018) found that the construction industry had the least business survival rate among the nine industrial sectors taken into consideration in the study. In general, small businesses in the construction industry have a high mortality rate. It is therefore important for small business owners in the construction industry to be knowledgeable about successful strategies to sustain their businesses, but also understand the necessary entrepreneurial competencies to overcome challenges that contribute to business failure.

The contribution of the construction industry to the economic growth of the U.S. economy and impact to the daily lives of small business owners is significant. Like all other small business owners, small businesses in the construction industry transform and develop communities by creating ways to connect resources and growth across cultures, economic conditions, and political situations (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Research on the contributions of small businesses in the construction industry to the economy consistently shows that the creation and sustainability of small business ownership drives economic prosperity and social development (Rambe & Mosweunyane, 2017; Sycheva et al., 2018; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). Small businesses in the construction industry play a crucial role in increasing competition of emerging market sectors, innovative capacity building, job creation and poverty reduction (Aksoy, 2017; Mbuyisa & Leonard, 2016; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Identifying successful strategies to increase the participation and to reduce small business failures in the construction industry for long term economic growth and prosperity is essential. The application of successful strategies for small businesses in the construction industry would help increase survival rates of small business ownership. And as a result, improve the quality of life of the small business owners, families, employees, and the economy of the local communities where the businesses are located.

In entrepreneurship theory, a small business owner’s mindset is a vital requirement for any business to succeed. However, not many studies have explored the entrepreneurship theory in relation to the search for success factors for small businesses in the construction industry. Like all small businesses in other industries, small businesses in the construction industry require the ability to pay their obligations when they are due. Failure for small businesses in construction would be a consequence of a sharp decline in sales, a result of recession, the loss of an important customer or client, shortage of raw material or deficiencies of management (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2018; Bushe, 2019). Bhandari et al. (2019) defined failure when a company realizes the rate of return on invested capital, with allowances for risk considerations, is significantly and continually lower than prevailing rates on similar investments. In general, failure in the construction industry is insufficient revenues to cover construction expenses and organization costs. Assaad and El-Adaway (2020); Kücher, et al. (2020) argued that when a business fails, that business should never have been started in the first place, that business owner was not competent to operate the business, or the failed business left a significant unpaid debt. Chirico et al. (2020) attributed business failure to different situations including discontinuance for any reason, or sale to prevent further losses. Chirico et al. (2020) described business failure when a business ceases operation with losses to creditors, voluntarily withdraws leaving unpaid debt, voluntarily compromised creditors or involved in court actions resulting in receivership, reorganization or rearrangement. In essence, failure of a business is an outcome of a complex process and rarely dependent on a single factor. Organizational ecologists favor environmental determinism and attribute business failure to environment forces (Habersang et al., 2019; Kücher & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2019; Poulis et al., 2020). Strategic management scholars emphasize that the fate of a business is affected by managerial decisions and actions (Durand et al. 2017; Hitt & Duane, 2017; Ritter & Lettl, 2018). Hitt and Duane (2017) acknowledged the interactions between the environment and managerial decision affect business success or failure. Understanding knowledge areas that could contribute to the success and survival of small business in the construction industry is beneficial for their continued health and long-term growth.

Identifying best business practices and successful strategies for small businesses in the construction industry would increase their survival rates and competitive advantage. Wai et al. (2013) pointed out that the construction industry's business environment is highly competitive, complex, and compounded with uncertainties. Elwakil et al. (2009) noted that achieving success in the construction industry is based on many factors which directly affect the performance of construction organizations. Trinh and Feng (2020) pointed out that due to the diversity and complexity of construction organizations; it is difficult to measure performance. However, researchers from previous studies have attempted to measure the factors that contribute to construction business success from the outcome of executed projects (Banihashemi et al., 2017; Tripathi & Jha, 2018; Radujković & Sjekavica, 2017). Weerasinghe and De Silva (2017) noted that although executed projects have strategic implications on the success and profitability of a construction business, the emphasis is on short term objectives in relation to effective project implementations. Beleiu (2020); Mir and Pinnington (2014) argued that despite advances in project management processes, tools, systems as well as efforts to enhance the project management culture, the rate of project success and survival of small businesses in the construction industry was not significantly improved. Acharya et al. (2018); Gunduz and Abdi (2020); Mantha and de Soto (2019) described that small businesses in the construction industry are also vulnerable to internal challenges and external business climates. As a result, an emphasis should shift from short-term success objectives in relation to project implementation to long-term objectives focused on the overall business success for a small business establishment.

The construction industry is compounded with uncertainties and these characteristics seem to be consistent with entrepreneurial activities. Puteri Fadzline et al. (2017) pointed that the nature of a construction business demands a small business owner with the competencies to work successfully in an environment that is frequently complex and compounded with uncertainties. In essence, small business owners in the construction industry require a host of entrepreneurial competencies to ensure their construction activities deliver successful project outcomes. Small business owners in the construction industry must have the ability to detect and exploit early signs of change and take into account the potential impact of anticipated risks and problems in order to develop necessary actions to suit the detected changes (Dakhil et al., 2019; Omran & Suleiman, 2017). Roundy et al. (2017); Sebestyen (2017) recommended alertness as a trait construction entrepreneur should have to aim, create, and capture economic value through the exploration and exploitation of construction businesses. In essence entrepreneurship is a key success factor for small businesses in the construction industry. As a result, construction entrepreneurs must be willing to bear uncertainty and be more knowledgeable about overcoming challenges that contribute to business failure in the construction industry. Basically, entrepreneurial activities should take place in small business establishments in the construction industry and be considered most important drivers for success and survival.

Failure of small businesses in the construction industry could be a function of environment-dependent factors and strategic-dependent factors. Arditi et al. (2000) noted that internal environments represent events under management control while external environment represent events that are beyond management control. Outcomes from internal and external environmental events may depend on administrative responses to address the short-term operational activities and the strategic responses for long-term business planning (Arditi et al., 2000; Awang & Iranmanesh, 2017). Internal administrative factors that could affect business outcomes include budgetary and human capital while internal strategic factors could be issues of adaptation to market conditions such as sales, competitiveness, growth, and expansion (Bala & Feng 2019; Mafundu & Mafini, 2019; Zidane & Andersen, 2018). External administrative factors exposes business issues that cover management characteristics and business conflicts while external-strategic factors covers natural factors such as occurrence of natural disaster and macroeconomic issues such as interest rates and industry weakness (Alaghbari et al., 2019; Selyutina, 2018). In essence, small businesses in the construction industry need to be aware and knowledgeable about the complexities of internal and external environmental factors affecting business outcomes. Understanding environment-dependent factors and strategic-dependent factors would help small business owners make informed managerial decisions on the strategic adaptation aimed at ensuring the competitive advantages of their operations but also managerial decisions for strengthening their positions within internal and external environments.

Internal factors affecting small businesses in the construction industry vary. Budgetary issues especially access to finances is a factor that would determine a small business success (Dainty et al., 2017; Dixit et al., 2017). When larger firms in the construction industry are compared to small businesses, the greater variance in profitability, survival and growth is attributed by problems in financing (Cortés et al., 2020; Song et al., 2018). Cortés et al. (2020) pointed that financial institutions assess small businesses as being inherently more risky than larger firms. Even when small business access institutional finances, Song et al. (2018) noted that they generally tend to be confronted with higher interest rates and credit rationing due to shortage of collateral. The difficulty of small businesses in the construction industry obtaining or accessing finances would not only impose barriers on their growth. Also, constrained access to lending to small businesses in the construction arising in times of financial stress could further increase the risk of failure.

Financial management provides a core capability for small business success in the construction industry. Sinesilassie et al. (2018) attributed small business failure in the construction industry to lack of financial data to monitor financial performance and for predicting the trend of failure. Karagiorgos et al. (2020) explored the relationship between financial data against firm sizes in the construction industry and found that small businesses do not pay much attention to financial ratios compared to larger businesses. Whereas small firms hire private accountants when needed, larger firms have established accounting departments that publish financial reports on a regular basis making monitoring financial ratios easier (Mohagheghi et al., 2017; Shash & Qarra, 2018).

Small businesses in the construction industry require appropriate financial management systems and organizational capacity to manage outcomes of the contracted projects for their survival, growth and adequate generation of profit. Insufficient profits and heavy operating expenses are among the budgetary issues affecting small business owners in the construction industry (Yismalet, & Patel, 2018). Tunji-Olayeni et al. (2016) noted that the exposure of small businesses in the construction industry to a harsh competitive environment in the bidding process, the fact that bids are submitted based on estimates, the culture of claim and counterclaims that is pervasive during the construction process, all expose a small business to low profit margins. Coupled with uncertainty of productivities and unit costs being far from accurate at the beginning of a construction project, further exposes a small business to low profit margins (Tunji-Olayeni et al., 2016). Reeves-Latour and Morselli (2017) also noted that in the construction industry, contractors face a constant danger of insufficient profits looming over their business operations due to the harsh competitive environment in the bidding process. Peters et al. (2019) added that in the construction industry, contractors receive periodic payments for work that has been carried out and financed by the contractor. In some cases, Kantianis, and Liapis (2018) pointed out that client retains a certain percentage of the payment against potential defects and omissions. This cash flow conditions limits a contractor from recovering their expenses including realizing their profits until the entire construction project is complete to recover their accumulated retainage. With a negative cash flow, insufficient capital, institutional debt, and the inability to secure or access institutional financing, a small contractor will not be able to cover operating expenses including financing work through the entire construction period of a project. Solutions to budgetary issues require a business owner to establish and implement sound and well thought out policies. Including on bidding strategies, how to control overheads and its costs, borrowing, and specify mark-ups (Kantianis & Liapis, 2018; Tunji-Olayeni et al., 2016). The danger of sufficient of profits is increased especially when a small business owner lacks in-depth industry knowledge and is integrated with the market hence unable to estimate their business' true abilities (Hudáková & Masár, 2018). To expand and shrink in the construction job market cycle under competitive conditions and low profit margins, small businesses in the construction industry could be unable to invest on heavy operating expenses. Larger firms may be able to manage heavy operating expenses because of their wider range of production which balances any variations in operating expenses against low profit margins. As a result, larger construction firms are expected to experience higher survivability compared to small construction firms under the same job market, competitive conditions, and low profit margins.

Lack of business knowledge, lack of managerial experience and lack of line experience are issues that can affect businesses in the construction industry. Small business owners in the construction industry learn through a combination of formal and continual study and on-the-job experience (Rosman et al., 2018). Rosman et al., (2018) noted that learning to enable small business owners identify profitable markets, develop strategies how to forge a good partnering relationship with subcontractors, suppliers, and financial institutions, and how to take advantage of technological innovation.  Equally important, small business owners must pay attention to human resources and innovation that is strongly relate to small business growth (Anwar & Ali Shah, 2020). Small businesses in the construction industry that innovate grow faster than no-innovators (Ghaben & Jaaron, 2017). It is possible that some small businesses in the construction industry may have the technical know-how of completing a construction project but lack business knowledge to ensure long term survival. To survive competition, small business in the construction industry must embrace innovation, training, hire skilled employees, and balance their capabilities in different areas of their business to compete.

In some small business establishments in the construction industry, the owner dominates business operation and is the chief executive officer but also double up as the chief estimator, and project manager. Putra and Cho (2019) noted that small business owners are to act as leaders and not to be overly involved in the day-to-day operational activities that can be delegated to sub-ordinates. Putra and Cho (2019) added that delegation of duties allows owners to spend more time formulating mid- and long-term strategies for future company growth. During the early stages of a small business operation, the level of excitement, enthusiasm and emotion of the management team could be dependent on the founder. However, with time, the leader should allow subordinates the ability to provide advice, counsel, and independence to influence organizational decisions and performance to keep the company growing (Huy & Zott, 2019). In essence a small business owner in the construction industry should build a high level of commitment that allows subordinates to be action-oriented, opportunity-driven, highly responsive, and flexible. If the commitment is not substantial, the owner / founder will become a barrier to the business's transformation in response to new market conditions and environments but also effective implementation of day-to-day business activities.

Business conflict could be a contributing factor for small business failure. Business conflicts occur due to several factors including, the fragmented nature of the construction industry organization, the ambiguity in contract language and administration, project risks and uncertainty, and the management of relationships of the many parties involved (Gamil & Rahman, 2017). Gamil and Rahman (2017) found that in the construction industry, conflict occurred in great numbers in organization systems, at the design stage and during quality and control. Given the fragmentation nature of the construction industry, the complex interrelationships of the parties and project stakeholders involved, it is hard to eliminate conflicts (Maiti & Choi, 2018). Lyiola and Rjoub (2020); Tabassi et al. (2019) argued that constructive conflicts, claims, and disputes end up in healthy reconciliation, and can lead to synergistic strategy scenarios that optimize design, construction methods and operation efficiencies. However, a business owner must always anticipate, discourage, and diffuse destructive conflicts. In essence, a small business owner in the construction industry should always be prepared for conflicts and strategies for conflict resolution.

Family problems could expose a small business owner to emotional exhaustion that may affect business success. Family problems including long-term injuries, fatalities, and divorce are possible extended factors for small business success or failure (Ungerer & Mienie, 2018). Family problems will have a negative impact especially if they take place in the family of a small business owner who is responsible with the day-to-day running of constriction activities. It is arguable that the negative or positive impact of family problems on the survivability of a small business depends on the management and power structure of the small business organization (Chirapanda, 2019). Ismail and Fathi (2018); Vidal et al. (2017) cautioned that since a small business owner enjoys great power and influence, the owner’s leadership styles, human resources management, personal characteristics and education have a greater impact on small business survivability. Ungerer and Mienie (2018) noted that the complicated dynamics in a family small business between family members who are directly or indirectly involved in the operation not only have an impact on business operation but also on its growth, development, growth, and performance over time. Family problems could include the intentions to maintain business under a family control which may increase the risk of failure due to high levels of ownership concentration which may influence decisions to take on growth opportunities. A small business may also be affected by a family expansion which may lead to an increase of their lifestyles thus becoming difficult for the family business to grow fast enough to satisfy expanded family needs. In essence, small business owners are exposed to a complicated dynamic from family members that does not only to influence business performance but also a business growth.

Globalization, privatization, and the reduction of trade barriers may affect the survivability of small businesses in the construction industry. Inadequate sales, not being competitive and overexpansion are additional market conditions that may also affect the survivability of small businesses in the construction industry. Ameyaw et al. (2017) noted that small businesses in the construction industry base their production on the number of successful project bids. A higher rate of award in bidding assures continued production and growth. In some construction projects, corruption, excessive sole sourcing of construction projects and lack of commitment by construction companies in addressing corruption creates unfair playing ground for small businesses to compete (Ameyaw at el., 2017). The outcome of a small business in construction not being able compete resulting inadequate bid awards, would affect their survival. To secure contracts, Olatunji et al. (2017) advised that a small business contractor should consistently bid for specific types of construction work, be inconsistently competitive and have high bidding variability. In essence to be competitive, Alsaedi at el. (2019) pointed out that a small business owner in the construction industry should have a unique advantage over its competitors. Bageis et al. (2019) added that a during bidding, a small business owner must have knowledge and an agenda of action to address competitive pressure. In construction, competition is provided by threat of new entrants, bargaining power of suppliers, bargaining power of customers, threat of substitute products and services, and jockeying for position among current competitors (Bageis at el., 2019). To be successful in bidding, a small business owner should also have knowledge and understanding of the market environments, economic conditions and level of service and product demand in the construction industry (Chen et al., 2015). Small businesses in the construction industry should apply strategic planning as a factor to increase a business' adaptation capability to the market conditions to create a competitive edge (Nebritov, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In essence, since a small business owner is mostly involved in all decision-making roles in the organization, the owner need to be an expert in all fields of management. This means a small business owner should acquire knowledge and training on effective competitive bidding, quality awareness as well as being familiar with and having access to procurement systems.

A small business owner's lack of effective training or lack relevant expertise for business operation in the construction industry allows other small business in other fields to fill in the gap to offer construction-related consulting services. Pham and Kim (2019) noted that small businesses underperform thus affecting business survival due to lack of relevant expertise for business operation. One way for small businesses in the construction industry can expand their business landscape is to seize technological and market opportunities through innovation (Tripathi & Jha, 2019). Consistently and rapidly innovative businesses tend to employ more workers, attract higher skilled employees, pay higher wages, and offer a more stable prospect for their workforces which are ingredients of small business success (Owusu-Manu et al., 2020; Yusof et al., 2017). For a small business in the construction industry to be innovative, the owner must encourage an entrepreneurial culture, have a supportive and technical business infrastructure, and provide access to key resources.

Overexpansion can increase the chances of business failure by driving a business establishment to higher risk-investments with financial debt. As construction projects become larger and more complex, small businesses in the construction industry can benefit from cooperation and by forming an alliance with other competitors. Small businesses who may take larger and complex projects risk expanding beyond their potential project delivery abilities. Overexpansion may mean too many projects that are undertaken requiring hiring additional workforce and investment in tools and equipment which the organization may not have capital to finance. As a solution, Javanmardi et al. (2018) noted that a small business may decide to invest with financial debt or enter into a partnership or a business joint venture with other contractors to enrich their construction portfolio. However, Nevstad et al. (2018) advised that partnering with other subcontractors or entering a business joint venture with other contractors further jeopardizes a small business' survival because absolute control over the schedule, quality and cost of operations may be lost. Alternatively, expansion into new markets and seeking to fill a different niche such as shifting from one construction trade to another without adequate preparation may also expose a small business to unusually high risk leading to small business failure (Pheng & Hou, 2019). In essence, it is advisable for small business owners in the construction industry to be knowledgeable and strategic in their decision making.

The construction industry is a volatile industry susceptible to the influence of the ups and downs of the global markets. Microeconomic issues such as industry weakness, high interest rates and natural factors such as natural disasters are factors that can contribute to small business failure in the construction industry (Chang et al., 2012; Chang-Richards et al., 2017). Danforth et al. (2017) pointed that construction investments are heavily influenced by global markets, interest rates and growth prospects. For instance, Danforth et al. (2017) observed that during a recession, construction demand is low and under fierce competition. As a result, contractors are forced to submit unrealistic low bids or bid for projects that are beyond their specialty or competence increasing their risk of business failure.  It would therefore be the government's duty to implement policies aimed at adjusting construction demand implemented on time to avert an economic crisis or recession periods. The alternative would be for small businesses in the construction industry to decrease reliance on government spending but push for more private investments.  In cases of natural disasters, small businesses in the construction industry should be prepared and have emergency plans in place.

The challenges small businesses face in the construction industry may be contributed by the industry's fragmentation and regulatory burdens. Small businesses in the construction industry are subjected to various permit-issuing jurisdictions and government agencies that regulate construction through the issuance of building permits (Mohd Nawi et al., 2014). Small businesses tend to be poorly equipped to deal with the problems arising from regulations when compared to larger firms. As a result, small businesses have less capacity to navigate through the complexities of regulatory and bureaucratic networks (Giordano & College, 2013). For instance, the design and construction process itself is highly fragmented with many different parties such as the owner, designer, general and subcontractors, insurance and bonding companies, labor financiers, manufacturers and suppliers of materials, and regulators. The interactions and collaborations of these fragmented parties with each holding a different view, goal and objectives can create a complex delivery process for small businesses in the construction industry to manage without adequate resources. The highly competitive and regulatory environments created by fragmentation within the construction industry put small businesses under enormous pressure to invest in research and acquire new technology to compete. The challenge would be enormous when a small business lacks adequate capital and constant cash flow, hence forced to reduce costs. As a result, small businesses would not participate in research and development of new technology within the industry to increase their competitive advantage. In essence, small business operators in the construction industry are threatened by competition from larger firms due to industry fragmentation, a decline of profit margins, and the inability to implement quality programs. As a recommendation, small businesses in the construction would greatly benefit and be more competitive despite industry fragmentation by implementing a more unified approach. Including increased training opportunities for the use of new technology in management but also increase opportunities to network with other small businesses.

## Transition

In Section 1, I introduced the topic and outlined the foundation of this research study, its purpose, background, significance, the nature of the study, the research questions, the conceptual framework related to the problem researched, limitations of the study, assumptions, significance of the study as well as an overview of the small business literature that exists. In section 1, the focus was to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5-years.

In Section 2, I will discuss the methodology and details of how I constructed the case studies to achieve the goals of the study including (a) the purpose statement, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) research method and design, (e) population and sampling, (f) ethical research, (g) data collection, (h), data analysis technique, and (i) reliability and validity.

# Section 2: The Project

Section 1 provided the basis for this study, describing the background and current literature about strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years in central New Jersey. In this section, I reemphasize the purpose of this study, explain my role in the research process, and introduce the research method and design. I also include the questions and protocol I used in interviewing participants as well as discuss issues related to ethics, reliability, and validity of data. My intentions were to collect and organize data that would ensure validity and reliability but also provide a description of the data collection techniques, the means of data collection, and data analysis.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The targeted population for this study was six small construction business owners in central New Jersey who had sustained their business for a minimum of 5 years. The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change by reducing the psychological, social, and financial impact of business failures to the small business owner, family, and employees. The findings may also enable improving business practices to increase survivability rates of small business ownership, thereby increasing jobs, sales, and tax revenues to local economies for contributing to the prosperity of business owners, their families, employees, and communities.

## Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative study design, the researcher is the main data collection instrument (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013), collecting, organizing, and interpreting data in an unbiased manner and presenting findings (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015; Patton, 2015).. Saunders et al. (2015) noted that the researcher's role also consists of developing criteria for identifying and selecting the participants as well as negotiating access to the identified organization and the participants to be interviewed (Saunders et al., 2015). In this study, I was the primary data collection instrument, collecting credible, reliable, and relevant data; selecting the appropriate research methodology and design; recruiting potential participants; and gathering and analyzing the collected data. The data collection process involved conducting semistructured interviews with small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey who have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years.

As a moderator during interviewing, a researcher's role includes managing the interviewer's response and behavior. To promote participant consistency during interviews, a researcher follows an interview protocol (Baskarada, 2014; Peters & Halcomb, 2015), which also helps reduce inherent biases in the interview process (Lee, 2014). An interview protocol helps a researcher to achieve consistency and to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study results (Foley & O'Connor, 2013). I used an interview protocol to standardize interviews with each participant to avoid skipping any necessary steps. By following the same interview protocol, I covered all relevant topics without deviation with every participant.

I do not have any interest in any small business ownership and never employed by any business leader in central New Jersey. My relationship with the research topic derived from my personal experience as a project manager overseeing construction companies assigned to perform construction activities in our corporate office in central New Jersey. A relationship between a researcher and a research area helps the researcher gain a better understanding of participant’s perceptions (Berger, 2015). The familiarity and professional experience overseeing construction companies in my current employment was a motivator that helped achieve an in-depth understanding to answer the overarching research question for this study.

The role of a researcher also includes protecting identified participants and their rights. It is a researcher’s responsibility to guard the rights of research participants and ensure that principles of ethical conduct are strictly adhered to (Miracle, 2016; Waycott et al., 2015). The Belmont Report summarizes acceptable ethical principles and guidelines for safeguarding and protecting human subjects of research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The principle of respect of persons involves recognizing participants as individuals capable of making decisions on their own, the principle of justice requires that researchers to provide the participants equitable and fair treatment in their study, and the principle of beneficence requires that the researcher treat individuals in an ethical manner, protecting participants from harm, respecting their decisions, and ensuring the well-being of each participant is secure throughout the research process (Schrems, 2014; Wessels & Visagie, 2015). My role as researcher this study ensured this research study adhered to strict ethical principles and guidelines to protect participants through three necessary steps: (a) informed consent, (b) fairness in selecting participants, and (c) assessing benefits and risks for the participants. During the interview process, I explained to the participants the purpose of this study, its potential risks, incentives, consequences, and benefits.

As the primary research instrument, a researcher is also a potential source of bias which can occur during study design, study implementation, during data analysis, interviewing or even during publication. A researcher's bias can affect the credibility and reliability of a study as well as the results (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Roulston & Shelton, 2015; Yin, 2014). Researchers' bias may include (a) selection bias, which happens when the factors that influence the selection of participants can affect the study's outcome; (b) information bias, which happens when selecting the method of collecting data and may result in misclassification of study cases; and (c) outcome bias, which happens when a researcher consider questionable procedures to be acceptable if the outcome is favorable to the researcher or participant (Sezer et al., 2016; Sica, 2006). A researcher must take deliberate actions to minimize bias in the interpretation (Cope, 2014). To mitigate bias, researchers should avoid including their viewpoints into the research but rather view data through the lens of the participants (Malone et al., 2014).

To reduce bias, I used bracketing, methodological triangulation, and member checking. Bracketing is the process of reducing personal influence and bias involving the researcher setting aside any personal judgments, values, and biases during the research process such as data collection (Hammersley, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Yin, 2014). A researcher should be openly aware of self, not be overly self-critical, and must understand the self as a defective and unique instrument (Schmidt, 2016). It also recommended to engage in epoche, which is an interview strategy that requires a researcher to suspend judgement and preconceived notions that may rise during the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Field notes and video or audiotaping the interview can reduce the subjective interpretation when used as a comparison (Potter et al., 2014; Sorsa et al., 2015). In this study, I bracketed my viewpoints when listening to participants, asked clear and concrete questions, took brief notes of pertinent information, and audiotaped the entire interview for each participant. I also practiced epoche during my interviews by controlling my reactions to the participants' responses.

I also used methodical triangulation to compare findings from different types of data sources. Methodical triangulation involves gathering data from more than one approach to answer the research question but also to enhance the validity of the research findings (Baskarada, 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Further, an audit trail also provides a clear rationale for researchers' interpretations and conclusions (Houghton et al., 2013). In this study, I maintained an audit trail to ensure dependability and confirmability of the research. During the entire research process, I kept a journal to help reduce any perceived, potential, personal or professional bias. Finally, I used member checking to control quality and to ensure validity, creditability, and accuracy of research findings.

## Participants

The participants for this study were six small construction business owners in central New Jersey who had sustained their business for a minimum of 5 years. I used purposeful sampling to select participants, which involved using judgement to select participants based on the study criteria and their knowledge of the topic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Naderifar et al., 2017). This ensures that the population and the selected sample will yield valuable information that addresses the overarching research question (Losapio, 2012). Purposeful sampling enables a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences (Ginsberg & Sinacore, 2013; Prendergast & Maggie, 2013; Suri, 2011). Purposeful sampling is also one of the most cost-effective and time-effective sampling methods available to yield valuable information that addresses the overarching research question (Saunders et al., 2012; Suri, 2011). Purposeful sampling allowed me to identify and select individuals based not only on their knowledge and experience but also on availability and willingness to participate.

The criteria for selecting participants included (a) the participant is an owner of the small business in the construction industry; (b) the small business had existed for more than 5 years, (c) the small business was in central New Jersey, and (d) the participant was at least 18 years of age. To identify participants, I procured a database of small business from the Chamber of Commerce in several counties in central New Jersey with a list of active small business owners. The chamber membership list is available to the public and includes names, address, city, county, phone number and year established of business owners. I randomly selected six small business owners in the construction industry whose businesses had operated for a minimum of 5 years and employed fewer than 500 employees. I contacted each small business owner by phone and email to introduce myself as well as explain the context of my study. To ensure I followed proper ethical procedures and avoided human rights violations, I gained approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (approval no. 0542287).

## Research Method and Design

The three types of research methods are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. A quantitative research approach involves collecting and converting data into numerical form so that statistical calculations can be made, hypothesis tested, and deductive conclusions drawn (Landrum & Garza, 2015; Venkatesh et al. 2013). A quantitative research method is appropriate for examining relationships or differences among variables (Barnham, 2015) and not an appropriate research method when a researcher's goal is to gain a deeper understanding beyond finding evidence of variables' relationships or differences (Veltri et al., 2013). A mixed method is a hybrid approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative methods into a single research study (Miller & Cameron, 2011). Since conducting this research study required no variables to examine or compare, the appropriate choice was a qualitative research method to explore strategies that small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

### Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Qualitative research was the best research method because it involves an open-ended interview, content analysis, quality document analysis and literature synthesis to understand human phenomena (Holt & Goulding, 2014). Using a qualitative research approach, a researcher can develop a comprehensive rich research data through a variety of lenses and data sources for inductive data analysis (Bernard, 2012; Yin, 2014). In this study, the qualitative research approach allowed a one-on-one and anecdotal information that helped me gain information that would not be identified through other research methods.

**Research Design**

A research design is a logical sequence connecting empirical data to a study's initial research questions and subsequent conclusions (Yin, 2014). In this qualitative research study, considered designs included ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Yin, 2014). Ethnography was not appropriate because I was not exploring the beliefs and feelings of people in a cultural interaction (Cruz, 2013; Hallett & Barber, 2014). A phenomenological research design was not considered for this study because it requires multiple individuals with similar lived experiences related to a phenomenon (Finlay, 2013; Roberts, 2013). But the goal of this study was not attempting to understand the perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a situation; the goal was to explore the successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Therefore, a case study design was a viable design (Petty et al., 2012). A case study design approach enables a researcher to gather data from a variety of sources for data analysis and interpretation (Hadidi et al., 2013; Hlady-Rispal & Johnson-Laffitte, 2014; Moustakas, 1994), focusing on an individual or group (Tsang, 2013). Given possible variations in experiences from different small business owners in the construction industry, a multiple case study design was the appropriate choice for this study.

Researchers aim to reach data saturation. Data saturation in qualitative research supports validity and failure to accomplish data saturation affects the quality of a research study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Maxwell, 2012). Data saturation is the point where no new data or themes will emerge, so data collection can stop (Hancock et al., 2016; Walker, 2012; Yu et al., 2014). A qualitative study does not have a set number of participants required to reach saturation, and a small number of participants may provide sufficient and quality data; thus , sample size in majority qualitative studies follows the concept of saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Kornbluh, 2015). In this research study, the sample size to achieve data saturation was six small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey. To reach data saturation in this research study, I continued to collect additional data from the same cases until no new information or theme emerged.

I used interviews and member checking to ensure data saturation (see Fusch & Ness, 2015; Houghton at al., 2013). Triangulation also confirms the data collected from sources and increases the accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness of a case study (Hanson et al., 2017). In this research study, I ensured data saturation is achieved by reviewing and comparing interview audio recordings, and interview notes in confirming that no new data or themes were emerging. I structured interview questions to facilitate asking multiple participants the same questions to achieve data saturation. I conducted member checking to allow participants to add new information. If during the member checking process new data emerged, I would continue to interview participants by asking follow-up questions until no new information or a theme emerged.

## Population and Sampling

The targeted population for this qualitative multiple case study was small business owners in the construction industry primarily engaged in construction and engineering projects in central New Jersey. Thus, I interviewed small business owners who possessed experience relating directly to the central question presented in this study. Adequate sample size in qualitative research is based on the quality of the information collected (Sandelowski, 1995). To reduce bias and improve validity, the sample size for this research study was a purposeful selection of six small construction business owners using maximum variation and criterion sampling. Researchers use maximum variation sampling to achieve representativeness within the selected sample while using criterion sampling allows a researcher to target special or unique cases (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Eligibility criteria of potential participants included a small business owner who has led a company that remained in operation for a minimum of 5 consecutive years. I used purposeful sampling methods to select participants. The use of purposeful sampling was to ensure the population and the selected sample provided experiences and information that addresses the overarching research question (Losapio, 2012). Purposeful sampling enables a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a participant’s lived experience (Ginsberg & Sinacore, 2013; Prendergast & Maggie, 2013).

## Ethical Research

For a qualitative multiple case study to be successful, a researcher must conduct a study guided by strict ethical standards (Haahr et al., 2014). Ethical behaviors are essential to research as they demonstrate the acceptable practices of inquiry (Mikesell et al., 2013). To guard against research misconduct, The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) established three guiding principles a researcher should consider. The three guiding principles are (a) ensure participants are treated with respect and provided necessary information to make an informed decision about their involvement, (b) researchers to avoid unnecessary harm or mistreatment to participants by carefully evaluating the risk that might be involved in the research, and (c) the researcher to ensure any risk is spread across the entire sampling population and not solely with one group of people.

In this qualitative multiple case study, I first obtained institutional review board approval for my study from Walden University. Following this approval, I contacted each selected research participant by phone and e-mail to request consent for a meeting to explain the nature of the study, purpose, procedure of the research study and the possible benefits because of the study.  Once I got consent from a participant indicating they agreed to participate in the research study, I sent them an introduction letter and a consent form. A consent form included my contact information, my university as the sponsor, the purpose of my study, a detailed explanation of the participant's expectation, a statement of consent, a statement of confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the participation.

The goal of this qualitative multiple case study was to conduct open-ended interviews with 6 small business owners in the construction industry primarily engaged in construction and engineering projects in Central, New Jersey. The participants provided answers to the overarching research question about what strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5-years. Before the interview, I asked participants for permission to use a tape recorder to record the interviews for later analysis. I explained participants the research study was voluntary, and that a participant could withdraw from the study any time by notifying me verbally or in writing. I ensured participants understood that they would not receive any incentive in participating in this research study. I mentioned that the only incentive in participating was the contribution of their knowledge to help other small business owners to know how to sustain their business beyond 5 years. After the interview, I e-mailed participants the interview transcript to proofread and review for accuracy (Rowley, 2012; Moustakes, 1994). After the completion of the research, I sent each participant a summary of the research study report.

In this research study, I ensured ethical protection of participants. To ensure compliance with ethical standards of research, the protection of participants' privacy is essential (Yun et al., 2013). I ensured the notes and transcripts did not contain personal identifiers but applied the use of fictitious names to disguise the identity of participants and their organizations. I used data coding to maintain the confidentiality of all participants in the study and shared data with people that were part of my research study and those that have research ethics training (Yun et al., 2013). As per Walden University, ethical guidelines, and standards, I was transparent with participants with assumptions, limitations, and delimitations contained in my research study. I clearly listed any bias that was to exist and the processes to eliminate any perception of personal bias. To maintain anonymity, I ensured raw and processed data was in a secure locked file cabinet accessible only to me for 5 years. After the fifth year, I will destroy all electronic copies by deletion and hard copies by shredding.

## Data Collection Instruments

In this qualitative multiple case study, I was the primary data collection instrument.  The researcher is the data collection instrument in qualitative studies (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013; Marshall and Rossman, 2016). Researchers are main research instrument and that their knowledge and skills are essential to the quality of research findings (Rowley, 2012). Researchers play an important role in data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2008). Qualitative researchers use different data collection techniques to understand different perspectives on a given subject under study (Damianakis and Woodford, 2012). In this research study, I recruited small business owners to provide unique insights on how to sustain a small business in the construction industry beyond 5-years. I used semistructured, open-ended, and informal interviews as techniques to collect data. I used in-depth semistructured 30–60 minute interviews to collect data from 6 small business owners in the construction industry.

## Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique for this qualitative multiple case study was a semistructured interview with open-ended questions. The semistructured interview process is the most flexible interview method that enables a researcher to capture a participant's insight and experience related to the subject of study (Vogl, 2013). Interviews are instrumental for comprehending processes, attitudes, experiences, values, and opinions (Myers, 2013; Summer & Taylor, 2014). In this research study I sent the participants the research interview questions, interview format and timeframe two weeks before the interview to assist with preparation. An interview should be conducted in a quiet room to create a comfortable environment for a candid discussion (Haahr et al., 2014). In this research study, I conducted face-to-face semistructured interviews but also conducted interviews over the telephone at an agreed time and location of the participant's choosing. With the participant's approval, I recorded the conversation with a digital recorder. I created manual notes to capture the mood of the interview and to check against personal bias (Snook & Oliver, 2015). All data collected were saved in a flash drive that was confidential, password protected and locked in a cabinet for at least 5 years. After 5 years, the content in the flash drive will be erased and hard copies shredded.

Research conducted using the qualitative research approach has challenges and opportunities. When conducting qualitative studies, being aware that there are advantages and disadvantages provide opportunities for a thorough research (McDermd et al., 2014). In qualitative research, data collection through interviews can be time-consuming including recruiting qualified participants, arranging, and conducting the interview and a tedious transcription process of large amounts of recorded data (Doody & Noonan, 2013). When compared to surveys or questionnaires, Yin (2012) noted that interviews take longer, may be expensive to conduct, and may lead to extensive data that can be difficult to manage and analyze. However, face-to-face interviews offer participants an opportunity to express their lived experiences at length and in detail to help provide answers to the research questions (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Semistructured interviews afford the interviewer the benefit of observing nonverbal communications (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Nonverbal communication and suggestive comments are critical to understanding interview data (Comi et al., 2014). To augment the interview data Hyett et al. (2014), It is recommendable to review company documents as a standard approach in data collection involving methodological triangulation in a case study research (Hyett et al., 2014). The disadvantage of relying on documents for data collection in a research include the possibility of the documents being outdated, irrelevant, incomplete, unavailable, or biased. In this research study, I allowed each participant adequate time to prepare for the interview by sending each participant research interview questions, interview format and timeframe prior to the interview to assist in their preparation. I used purposeful sampling to select participants with experiences and information to address the research question. I reduced the duration of research and the frequency of interviews by reaching data saturation through more open-ended questions, follow-up and probing questions to address any data gaps, misinterpretations, or misunderstandings during each interview.

In a qualitative research, the use of semistructured interviews allows the best outcome when exploring a subject about which a researcher does not know much in advance. However, Marshall and Rossman (2016) outlined advantages of semistructured interviews, and they include (a) the interviews are in-person; (b) data is retrieved quickly; (c) an opportunity for immediate follow-up and further clarification is available; and (d) there are abilities to interview individuals with challenges including hearing. Similarly, semistructured interview process has disadvantages. Marshall and Rossman (2016) listed disadvantages including (a) the need to build trust and rapport with participants without ample time; (b) interviewing a participant who is uncomfortable with the interview; or (c) a possible lack of dialect. Elsawah et al. (2015) noted that one disadvantage of using semistructured interview process is the possibility of the interview straying away from the approved questions. However, Close et al. (2013) noted that during semistructured interviews, researchers can address any gaps, misinterpretations, or misunderstandings that emerge during the interview by asking additional probing questions. Symon, Cassell, and Johnson (2016) noted that the critical role the researcher as the primary data collection instrument is a disadvantage as it may lend to the interjection of researcher bias. Campbell et al. (2013) noted the advantage of conducting individual interviews is to eliminate any possibility that participants can consult one another before responding to the same questions. Also, individuals respond readily to requests for personal interviews as compared to filing out a questionnaire (Zhang et al., 2017). As the interview moderator in this research study, I controlled the interview process by rephrasing questions, keeping questions neutral, and by setting clear questions to reduce misunderstanding. I conducted face-to face interviews in a quiet room at the participant's premises and phone interviews at the time of their choosing to create a comfortable environment for a candid discussion.

During the face-to-face interview I was careful and self-aware of my facial expressions, body language, tone, manner of dress, and style of language to avoid producing bias.

A pilot study was not part of this multiple case study. Yin (2014) described a pilot study as a small-scale, preliminary study with an aim of investigating whether crucial components of the main study such as the questions, setting, scenario, and overall flow will be feasible. An advantage of conducting a pilot study relies on the researcher's knowledge on how to lay plans for a randomized control trial prior to an extensive case study is conducted (Doody & Doody, 2015). Case studies do not necessarily require a pilot study because the interview questions are semi-structured. Gustafson, Davis, Hornsby, and Bess (2015) noted that pilot studies allow the use of large number of participants. In this study, I interviewed 6 small construction business owners in Central, New Jersey who sustained their business for a minimum of 5 years. As a result, the scale of the intended participants within this study was smaller; thus, a pilot study was not feasible.

At the end of the interview, I sent back the interview transcripts and my interpretations to participants for member checking. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that member checking is the coordination and solidification of information derived from participants. Member checking enables a researcher to provide reassurance about dependability, credibility, and confirmability of the research data (Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). Birt et al. (2016) noted that member checking allows participants to review interview transcripts and a researcher's interpretations for accuracy and confirmation. Member checking is a way to ensure that the data captured is reflective of the participant’s accurate statements and viewpoint (Birt et al., 2016). Varpio et al. (2017) pointed that member checking ensures the accuracy of the data collected and minimizes misinterpretation on any part of the interview. In this research member checking was a crucial technique for establishing validity of an account, was an opportunity to correct errors but also an opportunity for a participant to volunteer additional information. Member checking allowed participants to review interview transcripts and my interpretations for accuracy and confirmation. Member checking ensured that the data captured was reflective of the participant’s accurate statements and viewpoint.

## Data Organization Technique

The overarching research question for this study is: What strategies do small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their business beyond 5-years. The primary data collection technique was semistructured face-to-face and telephone interviews with open-ended questions. I recorded each interview using a hand-held audio recorder and a computer-aided recorder. Thissen (2015) recommends the use of computer-aided recorded interviewing (CARI) to enhance the quality and ensure the reliability of the data collected.  To avoid loss of data during a face-to-face interview, Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) recommended the use of at least two audio recording devices. During an interview process, Mealer and Jones (2014) recommended taking notes of vital information. I used a research log to take brief notes of pertinent information and record the date, time, and location of the interview.

Data organization is important in a research process. Dagobert (2015) noted that knowledge organization facilitates learning and enhances the understanding of the real world in an orderly fashion. Kowal and O'Connell (2014); Skukauskaite (2012) noted the greater understanding of a study content when one individual collects, transcribes, and analyzes all data. Yin (2014) suggested transcribing recorded interviews make data analysis process easy. After the interview, I reviewed and transcribed all recorded interviews, field notes, and websites.

Data organization enables easy information retrieval whenever needed throughout the research process. Effective data organization enabled me to retrieve data for analysis, presentation, and reporting. Researchers must properly organize, format, and categorize all interview data (Brennan & Bakken, 2015; De Wall, Goedegebuuure, & Tan Akaraborworn, 2014; Korhonen, 2014). I created an electronic folder in a computer and transferred the hand-held audio recording and the computer-aided recording interviews. I created a folder for each participant and attached each participant's audio file, electronic files of their interview transcripts and all scanned written interview notes. I converted all other electronic documents such as email correspondences, the participant's web page information, and the consent form signed electronically into a Portable Document Format (PDF). Moylan et al. (2015) posited that new technologies enable a researcher to have easy access to otherwise inaccessible data. The use of technology has increased the ability to organize and manage data successfully (Johnson et al., 2010; Moylan et al., 2015; Paulus et al., 2013). However, Moylan et al. (2015) noted that researchers must be exhibit careful diligence when using technology in the research process to protect the privacy of the participants, identify the best technology fit for the chosen research method and the dissemination of data collected.

Collected research data must be kept in a safe and confidential place. Marshall and Rossoman (2016) recommended labeling and categorizing data for easy access, consistency and to protect the participant's confidentiality. I labelled each participant's electronic folder, file and documents with the participant's identifiers, and the date of the interview, document date of acquisition, and type of document. Labeling the electronic files to correspond to each participant's identifier allow easier access and retrieval of any specific information of the participant's interview. Mitchell and Wellings (2013) recommended protecting the privacy of the participants by ensuring the information that may be used to identify participants such as names, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and business names is kept confidential. To preserve the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, I assigned each participant codes such as Participant SB1 through Participant SB5. As noted by Anyan (2013); Beskow et al. (2014); Corbin and Strauss (2014), all recordings will be stored electronically on a password protected peripheral device. All data for this research is saved in a confidential flash drive and audio micro-SDHC card that are password protected for data safety and confidentiality.

I kept all hard copies of the data transcripts, transcribed interview notes, and archived records in locked storage cabinet. I also locked the audio micro-SDHC card and USB flash drives of the raw data used in the data analysis in a locked storage cabinet. In future, after the completion of this research study, I may need to access and retrieve the data to reconstruct my research project, or respond to an audit, or to use it to further research. As a result, all data collected will remain locked in a safe storage for at least 5 years to meet Walden University minimum requirements for preserving research records. After 5 years, I will shred all hard copies of collected data and erase all electronic data from my hard drive.

## Data Analysis

The use of software for data management has made data analysis process relatively easier. Researchers use various methods to analyze data. Data analysis involves reviewing collected data to search for relationships and to discover patterns and themes to help answer the central research question (Carter et al., 2014; Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014; Guo & Guo, 2016). Xu and Storr (2012) noted that a researcher plays a key role in analyzing and interpreting the data. Robson and McCartan (2016) described a researcher as responsible to process data in a meaningful and useful manner. When analyzing data, a researcher searches for patterns in the data, interpret identified patterns, and assign the meaning of the identified patterns (Bernard & Ryan, 2016). In this research study, I analyzed collected data to search for relationships, to discover patterns and themes to help answer the research question.

Data analysis process varies. Moylan et al., (2015) noted that data analysis depends on the research method and classification of data. In qualitative research, researchers use triangulation to aid in establishing a more accurate and credible analysis of data (Kern, 2016; van Dijk et al., 2016). Yin (2014) identified four types of triangulation (a) data triangulation; (b) investigator triangulation; (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. Heale and Forbes (2013); Yin (2014) recommended using methodological triangulation to strengthen findings from multiple data sources. Methodological triangulation involves the implementation of different data collection techniques and sources to enhance the validity of the research findings (Baskarada, 2014; Cairney & St. Denny, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Gorissen et al., 2013; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Yin, 2014). Using methodological triangulation, a researcher incorporates interview questions, and a review of organization documentation for verification of data (Kern, 2016). For this study, I used methodological triangulation to analyze data collected from semistructured interviews using open-ended questions to check and recheck the consistency of the collected information to ensure validity and reliability of the findings.

In data analysis, a researcher plays a key role in analyzing collected data to make sense. Data analysis includes examining, combining, recombining, and testing the evidence to achieve empirical findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) categorized data analysis in five steps; (a) arranging the facts in order; (b) categorizing the data; (c) interpreting single occurrences; (d) identifying patterns; and (e) synthesizing and concluding. Rowley (2012) outlined a similar method of data analysis as follows; (a) organize data; (b) gain familiarity with data; (c) code and interpret data; (d) write the results and indicate the positive elements by using software to assist in the coding process. Van Maanen (1990) developed a method of selection that employed a line-by-line data analysis to uncover themes from face-to-face interview experience (van Maanen, 1990). The uncovered themes become the objects of reflection and interpretation during follow-up interviews. To promote research analysis in this study, I used a four-stage data analysis process that Miles et al. (2014); Rowley (2012); Yin (2014) outlined for analyzing data: (a) review data, (b) organize data, (c) code the data, (d) develop themes from the data collected to draw inferences.

I emailed interview questions to participants to allow them time to prepare for the interview. I followed the approach outlined by Yin (2014) of recording interviews and creating a transcription of each interview. Edwards-Jones (2014) described concurrent data gathering and analysis as essential for attaining reliability and validity. In this study, I followed Edwards-Jones (2014) recommendation of concurrently gathering and analyzing data and correcting errors earlier in the process. I used audit trail and member checking techniques demonstrated by Koelsch (2013); Pandey and Patniak (2014) to analyze the collected data and to edit the transcriptions to remove filler words, off-topic discussions, and repetitive phrases.

After performing member checking to validate the accuracy and completeness of my analysis, I imported the interview transcripts into the NVivo software analysis program to help identify the central themes. I used NVivo 12 software program to organize unstructured data such as interview transcripts to identify emerging themes (QSR International, 2015). Researchers use an NVivo software program to assist in analyzing unstructured data and to identify themes because it is user friendly, compatible with Microsoft Word document, and yield professional results (Castleberry, 2014; Lensges et al., 2016; Sotiriadou et al., 2014; Zamawe, 2015). NVivo is an ideal data analysis software program with the capacity to compile and organize data of qualitative cases into words or phrases (Edwards-Jones, 2014; Zamwe, 2015). Yin (2014) pointed that by coding interview transcripts, researchers reliably identify the data and compartmentalize it into appropriate categories. Coding allowed data to be reassembled, segmented, and dismantled to draw inferences and to develop themes. In this research study, the coding process helped organize the interview data to help us identify emerging patterns and to reliably compartmentalized it into appropriate themes.

A researcher may use a software program for data analysis. The conventional content analysis uses the researcher's in-depth examination of data, forming themes and codes to identify trends without preconception of the data (Piazza-Bonin et al., 2015). As a data analysis tool, I will use NVivo 12 software to identify redundant themes within the transcribed data as an indication of data saturation (Doody & Noonam, 2013; Fusch & Ness, 2015). The information I put in the NVivo 12 software for this qualitative data analysis included (a) interview transcripts, (b) scanned relevant company documents that are public records, and (c) scanned interview notes.

Preparing and analyzing data requires a researcher to code the data into themes. The coding process is the application of labels to important information in a dataset to gather patters of meaning and the development of themes (Connelly, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Coding helps researchers to identify emerging themes, trends, patterns, and conflicting participants'' interpretations (Castleberry, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; Woods et al., 2016). Houghton et al. (2013); Ivey (2015); Woods et al. (2015) suggested that in coding, researchers reassemble, segment, and dismantle the data to draw inferences and to develop themes. In coding, I categorized and organized the coded interview data that helped me identify emerging patterns and themes.

In data analysis, a researcher identifies repeated patterns or themes and new keywords to gain insight and knowledge from the interview data gathered. Teruel et al. (2016) recommended that researchers use thematic analysis to identify, explore, examine, and record meaningful themes in the data. Thematic analysis involves identifying repeated patterns or themes and new keywords to gain insight and knowledge from the interview data gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Emmel, 2015; Johsson & Tolstoy, 2014; Pascoal et al., 2014; Percy et al., 2015). Researchers use thematic analysis to describe the entire data set in rich details and to provide a nuanced and more detail account of a group of themes or specific themes within the data (Chinta & Raghavan, 2015; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Jonsson & Tolstoy, 2014; Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Along with the NVivo 12 software program, in this research study I used thematic analysis technique to explore and analyze the key themes stemming from the interview data. I also used the conceptual framework and the literature to comprehend the themes' alignment with the existing literature and the study's conceptual framework.

During coding, I identified emerging patterns and reliably compartmentalized them into appropriate themes. As noted by Braun et al. (2014); Pascoal et al., (2014) that researchers must ensure the key themes directly address the research question; I classified all relevant data into topical themes for effective data analysis. Developing thematic codes enabled me to draw inferences and answer the central research question. As the themes were developed, I used inductive and deductive analysis technique to systematically apply the knowledge retrieved from data to answer the research question. I concluded the data analysis process by interpreting the findings.

## Reliability and Validity

Data reliability and validity are important in any research study. Reliability and validity are two concepts that help to identify the trustworthiness and consistency of the data in a study (Reilly, 2013; Yin, 2014; Kornbluh, 2015). In qualitative studies, researchers evaluate the reliability and validity of findings by assessing dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Harvey (2015) noted that data is trustworthy when it establishes transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Pandey and Patnik (2014) noted that researchers must establish the quality of the data to ensure their findings are credible. Researchers explore their participants' worlds by relying on semistructured interview protocols to interpret their experiences, and to strengthen the validity, consistency, and reliability of findings (Yin, 2014; Foley & O'Conner, 2013). I ensured data reliability and validity in this research study by conducting the initial interview, then then writing word-for-word what the participant said and then sharing the transcript with the participant for validation. I also continued to conduct additional interviews with participants to a point where no new data was obtained.

Reliability and validity are important methodologies for evaluating the quality of a research design. Reliability and validity are key measurement tools to collect, analyze and report research data (Kornbluh, 2015). To ensure trustworthy and reliable results, Kruse et al. (2015) suggested establishing, implementing, and maintaining a quality measure within a study. In a qualitative study, the researcher and participant are responsible to determine the accuracy of the results. To ensure authenticity of the collected data, researchers use respondent validation or member checking and triangulation (Kornbluh, 2015; Reilly, 2013). Validation allows the researcher to assess the consistency of results, distinguish the conditions to achieve trustworthy and reliable results, and define the limitations of the method (Yin, 2014). Triangulation is a way of assuring the validity of research by using more than one method to collect different samples of data on the same topic (Joslin, 2016). To assess reliability and validity for this study, I used dependability, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation to establish consistency, accuracy, and trustworthiness of this research study.

**Reliability**

Reliability plays a vital role in research. Reliability in research defines the consistency and the degree to which data collection procedures in the research study achieve the same results when using the same instruments (Bernard, 2013; Lakshmi & Mohideen, 2013; Mariotto et al., 2014). Yin (2017) described reliability as the consistency and dependability of the methodology for a research study. Reliability is the extent to which a research study can produce the same results when repeated using the same data collection procedures (Baskarada, 2014; Gheondea-Eladi, 2014). Hafeez-Baig et al. (2016) noted that both reliability and dependability relate to the quality of research. Thus, in this researcher study, I determined the accuracy of the results through validation, triangulation and member checking. Validation allowed me to assess the consistency of results, and to distinguish the conditions to achieve reliable trustworthy and reliable results.

A research study must yield credible and trustworthy results. A study is considered reliable when it yields the same results when repeated using the same data collection procedures (Baskarada, 2014; Polit, 2014). Yin (2014) recommended that a qualitative researcher could guarantee reliability by following an established protocol for the study and using multiple sources of data. To increase reliability, a researcher must pursue trustworthiness and dependability by accurately detailing the data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and outcomes (Battisti et al., 2014; Cronin, 2014; Webster et al., 2016). Elo et al. (2014) noted that dependability of a research study occurs when an audit trail exists hence enabling future researchers to repeat the same work and gain the same results. In this research study, I kept detailed notes during data collection and maintained an audit trail to ensure dependability and confirmability of the research.

To increase reliability in this study, I ensured the appropriate choice of diction for the interview questions.  I used the interview protocol as a guide for the interview to mitigate prejudices during participant interviews (see Appendix B). I used the interview protocol to ensure I remained focused on asking open-ended questions that are pertinent in answering the central research question. I ensured I consistently employed the same data collection process and analysis procedures. I also used member checking and methodological triangulation to enhance the reliability of the findings. Marshall and Rossman (2016) explained that member checking is a process where the researcher shares with participants the interpretation of the collected data. Andraski et al. (2014) explained that member checking improves accuracy of the interview information and thus adds reliability to a research. Member checking is a useful method to verify the accuracy of the findings, and to validate the researcher's interpretation (Caretta, 2016; Morse, 2015). Reilly (2013) noted that member checking increases the credibility of the collected data and thus decreasing misinterpretation of data. The member checking process allows a participant an opportunity to review and approve the accuracy of the summaries the researcher transcribed from their interview responses to ensure that the interview data were credible (Harvey, 2015). In this study, I provided participants a summary of their interview responses to validate interpretations of the data.

**Validity**

Validity in a research should be measured to test whether the results yielded by the research are credible and trustworthy. Shekhar (2014) defined validity as the accuracy of data. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that validity is how the collected data accurately represents the view of the participant in a study. Zohrabi (2013) referred to validity as the correct interpretation of data. Lawrence (2015) noted that validity refers to the appropriateness of the data, and the processes used to collect the data for analysis to achieve reliable results. Elo et al. (2014) recommended researchers to focus on consistency and accuracy to increase the validity of results. Accurately reporting data influences transparency thus increasing trustworthiness (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) noted that qualitative validity includes credibility, authenticity, and dependability. In this research study, I explored successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their business beyond 5 years by relying on collected data to interpret participant experiences, and to strengthen the validity of the research study findings.

In this research study, I used purposeful sampling when selecting participants to receive meaningful responses from participants. As a data collection instrument for this research study, I build relationships with each participant to increase trust and decrease incidences of a participant inclining to withhold information. I used an audio recorder to capture the participant's responses and a written journal entry of each participant. To validate of the accuracy of the information recorded, I used data triangulation and member checking to guarantee the accuracy of the participant's responses. To influence credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, I used NVivo software to compare and analyze collected data.

***Dependability***

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time, research personnel, and condition (Kornbluh,2015). Yin (2014) noted that dependable data in any study must be accurate and consistent. To ensure dependability, the process used to arrive at findings should be clear and repeatable. To assure dependability in this study, I will ensure the interview with participants is conducted in a quiet environment to minimize interruptions and avoid distractions. During the interview I recorded and documented all information accurately. After completing each interview, I performed transcript review to ensure the accuracy of the participant's responses. Cridland et al. (2015) recommended all recorded interviews to be transcribed to obtain relevant data that reflect the participant's responses. To assure trustworthiness and dependability of the study results, transcript review and members checking is paramount (Hussein, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). In this study I transcribed all recorded interviews and send the participants my analysis to request them to review for discrepancies or errors.

### ***Credibility***

The credibility of a qualitative study refers to the level at which participants trust the research conclusions (Munn et al., 2014). Credibility refers to confidence in the data and involves ensuring a match between the original data and the researcher's interpretations (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Shekhar, 2014). Kornbluh (2015) noted that credibility in research is achieved when a researcher has a prolonged engagement with participants, persistent field observations, researcher flexibility, member checks, validation, and analysis processes. Yin (2014) suggested a researcher to ensure credibility by carefully documenting the procedures used in the study during the development process to act as an audit to track and verify information when the credibility of the study is threatened. Pandey and Patnaik (2012) noted that researchers increase credibility though thorough descriptions of source data.

Member checking, and methodological triangulation are two techniques researchers use to increase a study's credibility (Houghton et al., 2013). Leedy and Ormrod (2014) recommended member checking as a strategy to verify the credibility of a study. To allow a researcher to strengthen the credibility of a study, Yin (2014) stressed the importance of triangulation as a strategy. Yin (2014) explained that involving participants in research is key in judging the credibility of research results. By using member checking, participants have an opportunity to review and check the accuracy of the interview data (Koelsch, 2013) thus ensuring the credibility of the study findings.

Fusch and Ness (2015) supported methodological triangulation is a means of verifying the credibility of a study. During the process of methodological triangulation, a researcher compares results obtained from different sources to help ensure a study's validity (Harvey, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

To ensure credibility of this research study, I selected the appropriate participants, selected the appropriate data collection methodology, and ensured that the participants' responses were complete and truthful. To establish credibility, I followed interview protocols, used member checking and methodological triangulation of data sources. To ensure the data findings represent plausible information drawn from the participant's original data, I transcribed the audio recordings and compare the interview transcripts with my notes and interview protocols (see Appendix A). I emailed the interpretation of the participant's original views to the participants to review, correct, and approve the audio summaries to avoid misunderstanding of the interviewees' responses and to make any changes to any errors or discrepancies. I based the credibility of my research study on my interview protocol (see Appendix B),

***Transferability***

Transferability is the extent to which the findings of a research study is useful to others in similar situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Cope (2014) defined transferability as the degree to which qualitative study methods and research findings can be applied to other comparable situations or settings. Weis and Willems (2017) described transferability as the ability to transfer findings to other contexts without changing the findings. Findings are considered transferable when they apply to similar individuals in similar circumstances or situations. Findings are transferable when the researcher provides enough information about a research context; setting, study design and methods, and participants to enable the reader or other researchers determine a study's transferability (Loh, 2013; Noble & Smith, 2015). Houghton et al. (2013) noted that transferability occurs when researchers can transfer findings to comparable situations while preserving the meanings found. Baker (2016) noted that transferability of a study is based on the careful judgement of a properly informed reader. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) also noted that it is the prerogative of the reader and future researchers to determine the extent of transferability of the research finding.

Researchers should offer a thorough description of the study's context and framework to enable readers to assess similarities to other settings (Cope, 2014). In this research study, I strictly followed the interview and data collection protocols designed for this study. To enhance transferability of the findings, I provided a thick, rich, and detailed description of the steps involved to enable future researchers who participate in a similar study to form judgements regarding the study.

***Confirmability***

Confirmability refers to the quality of the results and the degree to which the results of the study might apply to other populations (Yin, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that confirmability means another researcher or study can confirm or support the results of my research study. Houghton et al. (2013) defined confirmability as a term that refers to the degree to which others can confirm results. As far as humanly possible, the findings should represent the situation the researcher is studying rather than beliefs, theories, or biases. Maxwell (2013) described confirmability to be related to the characteristics of the data based on the findings of the study and not the researcher's assumptions and preconceptions. Confirmability is a concept that researchers rely on demonstrate the integrity of findings by presenting data, analysis, and results in a way that enables the reader to confirm the adequacy of the findings (Pandey & Patniak, 2012).

Researchers ensure confirmability by verifying findings to ensure that the results accurately reflect the participants' experiences and understandings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015; Williams, 2015). To enhance confirmability, Cope (2014) noted that researchers may use interviews, follow-up questions, methodological triangulation, and member checking. In this study I used interviews, follow-up questions, methodological triangulation, and member checking to enhance confirmability. As cautioned by Shane and Nicolaou (2015), I ensured the results of this study emerged from the data collected and not from predispositions. As noted by Leedy and Ormrod (2013), carefully documenting results ensures that the data is the product of the experiences and ideas of the participant, and not personal impressions or preferences of the researcher. I ensured confirmability of the findings of this study by using an interview protocol to minimize the risk of researcher bias emerging in the interview.

Cope (2014) recommended researchers to describe how conclusions were formed and to provide examples of how themes emerged from the data. In this study, I used NVivo 12 software program to identify themes that emerged from the data. An essential aspect of an effective conformability is the maintenance of an audit trail (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015; Shirazian et al., 2016). To ensure confirmability, I maintained an audit trail of the entire research process. The audit trail comprised of documents for my logical inferences and interpretations in detail to enable my analysis to make sense to another person. To increase confirmability, I used additional process steps such as member checking, and triangulation increase confirmability (Biesch, 2013). In this study, I used member checking and triangulation increase confirmability.

### ***Data Saturation***

Data saturation occurs when the researcher notices no new data or themes emerge from additional data collection (Marshall et al., 2013). Cleary, Horsfall, and Hayter (2014) defined data saturation as a point at which even if a researcher continues to collect additional data from the same case, no new themes emerge. Marshall and Rossman (2016) described data saturation as the point when the researcher sees the same patterns repetitively and notices that there is no new data, no new themes, no new coding to gain from further data collection. Fusch and Ness (2015) noted the various techniques researchers may use to collect data from participants until data saturation is achieved. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that a researcher might require additional interviews until data saturation is achieved. Onwuegbuzie and Byers (2014) recommended data saturation that occurs when probing and follow-up questions no longer add any new information.

There is no specific number of interviews a researcher can conduct to gain enough data for a research study to reach data saturation (Hennink et al., 2017; Malterud et al., 2016). Houghton el al. (2013) noted that a researcher’s goal is to continue collecting data until no new concepts emerge. Morse et al. (2014) noted that a researcher must use a large enough qualitative sample to uncover most or all the perceptions that might be significant. However, Hennink et al. (2017) pointed that since there is no specific sample size recommendation for qualitative research studies, experiential or rule of thumb method is most often used.  Experienced researchers use analysis of previous comparable studies to calculate the approximate numbers of participants needed for their research studies (Malterud et al., 2016).

In this study, I interviewed six small business owners. I used interview questions, probing questions, and follow-up questions to repeatedly interview all participants until data saturation was reached. I reserved the option of including more participants as would have been necessary until saturation was reached. As Yin (2014) noted, I discontinued the interview once I found that further questioning was exposing any new concepts or themes. I also performed document reviews and utilized member checking strategy and methodological triangulation until no new data or theme emerged from each of the data sources.

## Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5-years. In Section 2, I provided a comprehensive discussion about the details of the project which includes a description of purpose statement, the research population and sampling, the criteria for selecting participants, and a description of the researcher’s role in data collection. I also provided an overview of research methods and design with the reasoning for selecting the qualitative research method and the justification for using a qualitative multiple case study research design to explore successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5-years. I provided an overview of data collection techniques used to analyze the collected data, the process through which the research adheres to ethical research standards and the procedures to guarantee the validity and reliability of the research study.

In section 3, I focused on the presentation and analysis of the study findings. The presentation of the findings includes a discussion on data collection and analysis. I discuss the findings and its applicability to professional practice and its implications for social change. Lastly, I discuss recommendation for action and further study, reflections, and the researcher's conclusions.

# Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I collected data from six semistructured interviews of small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey who have been in business for more than 5 years. Each participant answered eight open-ended questions. My secondary data sources included interview notes, local newspaper articles, the owner’s business websites, and social media platforms. I conducted member checking and used triangulation method during data analysis to ensure data saturation, reliability, and validity of the study results. During data analysis, five themes emerged: (a) effective financial planning, (b) meeting customer expectation, (c) branding, (d) maintaining a competitive edge, (e) customer-centric culture.

## Presentation of the Findings

The goal of this qualitative multiple case study was to answer the overarching research question “What strategies do small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years?” To answer this question, I conducted semistructured interviews with six small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey who have sustained their business for a minimum of 5 years. After coding and conducting triangulation, five themes emerged: (a) effective financial planning, (b) meeting customer expectation, (c) branding, (d) maintaining a competitive edge, (e) customer-centric culture. The participants discussed the five themes from different perspectives and experiences that helped their small businesses survive beyond 5 years in the construction industry.

## Emergent Theme 1: Effective Financial Planning

The first theme that emerged during data analysis was effective financial planning. After analyzing the data collected, I identified three subthemes associated with effective financial planning: cash flow management, billing and debt collection, and overhead cost planning and management.

### *Cash Flow Management*

Cash flow management was a subtheme I identified from my interviews with the participants. Small businesses with regular cash flow patterns are more likely to survive, and those with irregular cash flow patterns and erratically timed revenues are most prevalent and least likely to survive (Farrell, Wheat, & Grandet, 2019; Farrell, Wheat, & Mac, 2018). Participants acknowledged that having a dependable source of money or income was a critical factor that enabled them start, grow, and sustain their business beyond 5 years of operation.

Participants noted that small businesses in the construction industry usually get paid once a project is complete; however, before and during the construction, available money is used to pay employees, vendors, material suppliers and equipment renters. P1, P4, P5, and P6 confirmed that in the construction industry, having a continuous flow of cash or income to cover direct and indirect business expenses is a critical factor in sustaining a small business operation beyond 5 years. Unless a small business owner has enough available cash flow to keep their business running, the project will be derailed with major consequences. Research has indicated that having access to financial resources or capital is a critical factor for small business success (Rahman et al., 2017). Participants expressed that having a reserve of capital or obtaining a line of credit or having dependable creditors for financial support was a factor that sustained their small business operations. P1 noted that having an open business line of credit or cash buffers to cater for expenses before a project is complete and its invoice paid is a strategy for a small business survival. P1 and P6 also acknowledged that they had to use personal savings to cover business expenses to sustain their small business operation. P1 stated,

> You better have a financial capital to start and sustain your business. When I started my company, I didn't get a paycheck for 2-1/2 years. I got my expenses and all that stuff … so my savings took a major hit. You better have enough money up front. … I can't tell you how much money that is because that is different for each company.

P1 further acknowledged that

> You have to accept to be paid last. … not that you don't want to be paid but it was that all my people that worked for me, all my vendors, all suppliers had to be paid first … and then you find there was nothing left for me.

P1, P4, P5, and P6 noted that in the construction industry, income involves periodic payments by the customer for work that has been carried out and financed by a small business owner. Furthermore, all participants noted that in some contracts, a certain percentage of the agreed payments is retained by the customer against potential defects and omissions and agreed to be released upon a successfully completion and handover of a project. This procedure means that a small business owner cannot recover their expenses, let alone realize any profits, until the entire project is completed, and the accumulated retainage is recovered. Participants confirmed that when payment from clients was delayed, they used personal funds or a line of credit to deal with their financial crisis; thus, having a reserve of capital or access to capital was a successful strategy that helped them sustain their operation beyond the first 5 years.

Lack of sufficient capital forces some small business owners into using varied forms of funding to support business operations and growth (Yeboah & Koffie, 2016). P6 noted that to ensure they had sufficient capital "The next thing we had to do was establish a credit line. … my partner and myself, was we went out and got a second mortgage on our houses." P1 stated,

> Money! Money! … trying to keep enough money coming into the door to be able to pay money going out of the door. So I mean you cannot want to work for me if I can't pay, my suppliers are not going to supply me any material if I cannot pay them back. So money is key. Sometimes that means taking short term loans from the banks. … Even if you got your personal funds, when you get a big project, you will need to get a loan for that project. … The biggest challenge now for small businesses is money.

Participants also agreed that in the construction industry, large projects have a higher profit margin than small projects. As a strategy, small business owners must have enough capital in reserve or a dependable cash flow to be able to bid big projects. P4 noted that "The reason why we don't bid on large projects comes down to finances."

Participants noted that the competitive environment in the bidding process between contractors in the construction industry and the fact that bids are based on estimates, which can generally be far from being accurate, requires small business owners to have sufficient fund before bidding for a project. The pervasive culture of conditional payments between subcontractor and the main contractor in the construction industry renders a small business operator with insufficient cash to compete (Rostiyanti et al., 2020). The danger of insufficient profits constantly looms over small businesses, limiting a small business' ability to expand with the job market and competitive conditions. Small business operators tend to suffer more from insufficient profits while larger companies do not because their wider range of production balances the variations in operating expenses and the already small profits (Shan et al., 2020; Yee et al., 2020).

Participants expressed having sufficient savings or access to credit is a factor to be able to compete for work. P6 expressed how a consistent negative cash flow over the course of a project and the wait time to be paid in the construction industry is a factor that may contribute to a small business unable to compete. P6 stated,

> don't forget, the industry that we are involved in, you know, it is very unusual to be paid in 30 days. So you get on a job, you have to work for whatever time - so let us say you start a job at the beginning of march, and work for 30 days, then you fill and then you are lucky to get paid in 30 days. So you will be working for 60 days before you even get the first payment. And that is in a good situation. A lot of companies now are paying up to 60–90 days. So you have to spend your own money while waiting to be paid and that is why a lot of companies go out of

> business in the first 5 years because of lack of—what I call—a war chest, a credit line or lack of funds

Participants also expressed how the long wait time to be paid for work done limits a small business owner’s financial ability to bid on large projects. A survival strategy is to bid on projects that do not need a lot of financing. The larger the financial reservoir, the less the chances of operational failure (Farrell, Wheat, & Mac, 2018). P4 stated,

> The reason why we don’t bid on large projects comes down to finances. Big corporations … take 90 days to pay. The construction managers, depending on who it is, could be 90 day pay. So you are asking us, as a small business scale entity to send out an invoice on say, January 1, and don’t expect a check until sometime in April. We are not a bank. We don’t have $1 MM floating around. You need a lot of people for a big job. And if you are paying them $100/hr for 40 hours, you are talking $200,000 a week. For a month plus benefits, it could be more than $1MM in one month. Small businesses do not have $1MM. And if I go out and get a small business loan for 5% and I am only putting 5% on the job, that means I am getting 5% profit if the job goes well, and I am paying my 5% loan off. I am not making any money. So a big job is too expensive financially. So we focus on small and medium jobs and I pick and choose.

Participants confirmed that they secure most of their subcontract work directly with main constructors who have long term construction management agreement with clients or by bidding for work directly with a client under a service agreement. However, participants indicated that the duration to be paid for work done through a main contractor is longer when compared to when work was done directly for a client. A problem of late payment by a client to the main contractor directly impacts the subcontractor (Rostiyant, 2020). Participants also pointed that some companies transfer all their site construction and projects management services to a general contractor under a contract. As a result, all new work is to be bid directly with the new general contractor instead of directly with the client. Under this new arrangement, the wait time to be paid through a general contractor than directly from a client is usually much longer making it harder to have enough cash ready to bid on new projects.

P4 and P5 noted that other challenge small business owners in the construction industry face is when a client changes their facility management leadership or hire a new property management service company or general contracting company. In such cases, the existing small business owners lose the advantage of working directly with the owner but instead must work for the new facility property management company. As a result, the new property management company or general contractor might consider reviewing and reversing existing contractual agreement to determine if the existing small business subcontractors are necessary or favorable to continue bidding for future work. P4 and P5 added that for a small business owner, the new facility property management company or general contractor becomes an added layer that leads to a longer wait time for an invoice to be paid because a subcontractor gets paid after the main contractor is paid by the owner or client. P4 stated,

> When a new property management company takes over a site, the existing preferred contractors become less favorable and are not needed anymore. They

> have to work under the new facility property management company instead of working directly with the main company. So we work for a contractor who when billed, it takes them 90 days to be paid by the main company and them then a small contractor has to wait for another 90 days to be paid. So it takes us 6 months to be paid under the new circumstances. All this time, the work was completed, employees have been paid, the supplier has been paid, and the Union benefits have been paid because if you don't pay the union benefits, you lose the men working for you. However, working directly for a company or construction company is better because you are sure you will be paid. But when working for a general contractor on construction site you don't know, pay is mostly unpredictable.

Based on this subtheme, for a small business in the construction industry to compete and survive, the owner must have an additional source of funding and cannot depend entirely on revenue from completed work, which usually takes some time to be received. P1 noted that "the biggest challenge for small businesses is money." P1 argued that a small business owner "better have multiple sources of funding. … for me, it was my savings. … I took out all my savings plus additional people who were willing to invest in the business." As a source of financing projects, P6 stated, "we went out and we established a credit line." P6 added, "like I said before, you have to have money – war chest. You have to have monies that you can get to and use to carry you." It is evident that without enough cash flow, a small business owner in the construction industry cannot bid larger projects due to their heavy operating expenses thus ending up bidding for small projects where the profit margins are low. Therefore, having a larger the reservoir of funds, or access to a source of funding, plus receiving a larger cash flow from work done is a strategy to increase the survival rates of a small business operation in the construction industry.

***Billing and Debt Collection***

Participants expressed the importance of on time billing and debt collection as a strategy to ensure a constant cash flow for business operations. P4, P5 and P6 noted that in the construction industry, depending on the contractual agreements, the billing cycle can take weeks or months for work done to be paid. As such, timely submission of invoices for payment is critical to ensure a constant cash flow. P4 stated,

> So if all that falls into place and you are lucky enough to get the job, when you are done you get your bill out and collect on that bill. There is a lot of guys I talk to and they say, “My God, I can’t believe how many customers owe me money.” Once or twice a month we print the accounts receivable report and I am on the phone to say “Hey, our report shows this is unpaid—was there a problem, do you have questions, can I come to pick up the check?

P6 stated,

> When I went into business, an accountant told me “if you are determined to go into business you have to remember one thing; bill! bill, bill.” A lot of companies are not diligent in their billing. I have seen a lot of times; we go out we do a job, we do it right, as soon as it is time, I am sending the bill out. And it is not just

> enough to send the bill out. You have to send the bill out and then you have to track your account receivables.

On time billing and collection of debt is a strategy to enable small business owners maintains a constant flow of cash. A constant stream of cash enables a small business owner to bid on more than one project of any size and be able to finance work through the entire construction period, plus have extra to pay third parties from whom funds may be borrowed to compensate for any negative cash flow.

***Overhead Costs***

Participants noted that effective management of company overhead costs was a factor in their survival. Lack of business knowledge, managerial experience, and poor human resource management can contribute to a small business's failure (Garcia Martinez et al., 2019). In this study, participants noted that maintaining a small number of skilled and qualified employees was a sustainable strategy. P6 noted that to reduce the high cost of maintaining a huge workforce in a business that depends on competitive bidding to win a project contract, having a small number of company employees and hiring temporary skilled workers when needed was an effective strategy for survival. P2 also noted that being the company's sales representative than hiring sales manager was a strategy for survival:

> And if you are going to hire a sales person in an industry that is very entrepreneurial where you have to create demand and know that the sales cycle was going to take a little longer … which means then I have to take money and instead of investing in other parts of the business, I will have to invest it in the

> startup for a new sales rep. while knowing that, that sales rep. might not be profitable for about 2 years. So as a strategy, staying lean is a better option.

P2 also noted that by being lean, a company avoids overhead costs.

Larger companies prefer not to retain a large employee base but instead prefer to subcontract work to smaller subcontractors (Tezel et al., 2020). As a result, small subcontractors are forced to adjust their outlook to remain competitive. This may include increasing their employee pool and acquiring more tools and equipment. Overexpansion can drive a small business operation to high-risk investments with financial debt, hence increasing its chances of failure (Alsaaty & Makhlouf, 2020). P6 noted that “the biggest expense in this industry is labor. … It seems as you grow, your overhead is alike a monster. So, you have to control overhead and make sure it doesn’t get out of hand.” As an option P2 stated,

> I would just say the internal business strategy is that I am very lean with my expenses. So, when I go against or I have a competition and they have a lot of high labor expenses or a lot of other expenses – whether be their warehouses or office space, by staying a little bit lean that gives me an advantage in term of the best solution.

In the construction industry, a company’s organization structure and working environment is not like other ordinary teams found in other industrial and commercial settings (Seng et al., 2020). For typical construction companies, the project team constitutes employees, and subcontractors working together with subject matter experts. Some team members are considered borrowed resources; they come to the project site, do their work and then return to their homes and when the project is done, they are either reassigned to a new project or their contract is ended. The challenge for small businesses in the construction industry is how to employ a stable team in an environment where companies need to shrink and expand in cycle with the job market and its competitive conditions (Assaad & El-adaway, 2020). Participants acknowledged that they maintained a small workforce of employees and hired subcontractors where additional manpower was needed. This strategy helped them to manage the cost of human resource. P2 stated,

> Staying very lean. … it might not be the best strategy in terms of making tones of money but it is the best strategy in terms of surviving. So to be able to get past the first 5 years, it is to stay lean and frugal and to do a lot on your own. So, there are some who do a top-down type of strategy where they hire a lot of people and they pass along, but I give approval to a bottom-up strategy. And the bottom-up strategy was, me knowing every aspect of the business I can do. So that if all over a sudden the business takes a slip, I still know I am going to be standing.

In management, the accumulation of business knowledge and skills increases as an organization ages hence increasing the reliability and consistency of organizational behavior (Singh et al., 2019). Gaining business knowledge expands in-depth industry knowledge, market savvy, and certain practical knowledge of how to find and attract clients, suppliers, and distributors (Turner and Endres (2017). The success or failure of a small business depend on the decision-making ability and interpretation of environmental intelligence (Mutairi et al., 2017). However, Bushe (2019) argued that small businesses are vulnerable to business failure because some small business owners lack in-depth industry knowledge, lack production experience, and lack managerial experience because they operate under a one-man rule. Under one-man rule, the small business owner is the chief executive officer and may also double as the chief estimator, human resource trainer, and the lead accountant and project manager. As result, a small business owner is involved in the day-to-day operational activities hence has less time focused on formulating strategies for company growth. In this study, participants either got partners with field experience or hired and trained employees to take added responsibilities to break the one-man rule. P1 also stated,

> When I started the company, it was myself and then got a partner and one guy. My partner handled the financial and all that money stuff. I was the operations manager. Then we had 2 more, then 4. So I had to train one guy to become a project manager so that both of us can go out and do twice as many projects.

P6 stated,

> So, when I decided to go into business, one of the first things I said to myself is, I am going to need a partner. Somebody that has a lot of field experience. The first thing that I did was to find a partner that I felt comfortable with and had those expertise, the welding and supervising of the field projects.

Participants acknowledged that in the construction industry, more time and resources is invested in the field to enable employees acquire on-the-job experience. P1 and P2 noted that even though their workforce was small, they succeeded in meeting their human resource needs by tasking themselves and employee additional company roles and responsibilities. For example, P1 confirmed that company employees were asked to take additional company roles and responsibilities than hiring more dedicated staff. P1 stated:

> I am a strong believer in cross training. One of the best salesman I ever had in my company started off as an installer and he learnt from the ground up and got to a point where he wanted to take the responsibility of a salesman, but you have to have the right people, they have to buy into what you are doing, they have to believe they have a future with your company.

**Emergent Theme 2: Customer Satisfaction**

All six small business owners I interviewed described customer satisfaction as a factor in their small business survival. All participants acknowledged ensuring their service and project outcomes met and exceeded their customer’s expectations was a factor in their small business survival. Customer satisfaction is a factor contributing to the success or failure of a business (Hawkins & Hoon, 2019). Customer satisfaction is a measure of how a product or service rendered by a business meets customer expectation (Basari & Shamsudin, 2020). Customer satisfaction is an important indicator of consumer purchase intentions and loyalty (Hawkins & Hoon, 2019). The construction industry being a service industry, all participants noted that meeting and exceeding their customers’ expectation not only kept their customers calling them back for new construction projects but also spread their quality service through social media and referrals. Since the construction industry is a mix of one-off projects and continual partnerships, small business owners building a relationship focused on meeting and exceeding customer expectations is one way of creating repeat customers.

Participants noted that the way a project is executed may determines whether their business can find referrals from a customer or retain a client as a potential for future projects. A happy and satisfied customer tend to stick as a future client (Suchánek & Králová, 2019). When a small business owner meets and exceeds a customer's expectation, the experience sets them apart from competition (Kusumawati & Rahayu, 2020). All participants expressed actions that helped them succeed in meeting and exceeding their customer's expectations.

***Deliver Quality Work***

All participants acknowledged that delivering projects that met their customer's expectations gave them an edge when bidding for the next job with the same customer. P4 noted that delivering quality work in a project was the most effective business strategy for survival for a small business owner in the construction industry. P5 noted that customers in the construction industry are comfortable repeating the same company for future work when the quality of completed work met or exceeded their expectation. P5 added that former clients have rewarded them new contracts because "we did our work, we never had a problem with it. So, they really could not criticize it." P6 stated "I always took the position that once I am awarded a job that I was to do a good job no matter what."

Quality work has implications to the client and the construction company. Quality work reduces any additional costs and delays for work that has to be redone, repairs to defects or increased maintenance costs or disruption of client operations while defects are repaired.  P6 noted that poor quality of work attaches a contractor to a poor reputation. Participants acknowledged that it is their responsibility as construction experts to deliver client projects that met construction standards and specification. To deliver quality work, participants expressed the importance of understanding what a client want in a project and the expected outcome. P5 acknowledged that meeting and exceeding customer expectation required paying special attention to what the client wants. P5 stated "If you say you are going do something, do exactly what you say and don't stray away from what you promised." P1 noted that as a subject matter expert in the construction industry, a small business owner should guide a client on technical decisions to meet the expected outcome. P1 stated,

> Sometimes you have to tell the customer what they want or sometimes you will have to tell the customer what they don't want to hear. Sometimes it is just important how you go about telling the customer. You can say "I don't think that, that is what you want" than it is to tell the customer that "no problem, I can have that done for you."

### *Timely Completion of a Project*

In the construction industry, time on construction projects is the anticipated duration of planned work completed per the agreed specification. Time overrun is the delay beyond planned completion dates. Project delays can lead to time and cost overruns, disputes, arbitration, and even total abandonment (Rashid, 2020). P3 and P6 noted that completing a project on time and within budget was a key factor that contributed to their company getting the same customers calling them back for a new project. Completing a project on time and within budget is a good business practice, a sign of professionalism and good work ethics (Johnson & Babu, 2020; Simushi & Wium, 2020). P6 stated, “I always took the position that once I am awarded a job, that I was to do a good job no matter what. … and get it done on time. … that is how you maintain a good reputation and a lot of times, your business to make it to your next job.” P3 stated, “clients don’t want to overpay for work. So, you have to find that balance between stuffing a project correctly so that you can do everything and get the job done on time and under budget”.

***Product Knowledge***

Participants acknowledged that to meet a customer’s expectation, a small business owner should have decent product knowledge.  P4 stated “this industry is always changing, and it is difficult to keep up with different products out there but you need to have decent product knowledge.” P5 advised that a small business owner has to “stay on top of current products and strategies for its preparation and use.” P2 noted that it could be difficult to effectively sell a customer a product without demonstrating how that product will address or meet the customer’s needs. Having a thorough understanding of the products can allow a small business owner to know how to present the product to customers. P5 stated,

> I am very skeptical when it comes to new products. I like to look at them first, try it first and then bring it to my customer and say, “Hey this is a new product. I tried it and it works. Do you like to go with it?” It has always worked.

**Emergent Theme 3: Brand Management**

The third theme that emerged during data analysis was brand management. Branding is a company's values, mission, and how it treats its customers (Maldonado-Guzmán et al., 2019). Small businesses can beat competition is by providing a superior product or service than competitors (Sabug & Pheng, 2018). A point of difference in business makes a customer choose one company to do business with over the other competitors (Gilboa et al., 2019). Sales promotion and advertising propel a small business enterprise to achieve competitive advantage (Farhikhteh et al., 2020). I identified three subthemes related to branding: company reputation, customer service, and trust.

***Company Reputation***

All participants acknowledged that in the construction industry, a business's brand is their reputation on the level of product or service a company delivers. Participants noted that maintaining a good company reputation was a major factor in the survival of their small business operation. A good reputation opens doors to reliable customers and insurance for steady work resulting in a steady income stream enough to keep a business running (Wikaningrum et al., 2020). In this study, participants agreed that a good reputation was the most valuable asset in their survival. P6 stated,

> one of the key elements for survival in this industry as far as I am concerned is reputation. reputation! reputation! reputation! It is not really that big of an industry when you come down to it and people get to know you, know your company etc., and not every job, but there is a number of jobs that you get

> preference because either you have done for them before and gone smoothly or you have a very good industry reputation. So I will say reputation.

Small business's reputation is a competitive advantage. A company's reputation can make or break a business (Motoc, 2019). It is clear from the participants that a good reputation can distinguish a small business owner from competitors, attract loyal supporters and can create growth opportunities.

***Customer Service***

Participants confirmed that providing a quality customer service was key to their small business survival. Providing good customer service to existing customers generates referral activities to prospective customers (Muhammad et al., 2016). Maintaining a good working relationship with customers is one of the best sources of new customers (Juanamasta et al., 2019). P1 acknowledged that "you have to have a good working relationship" with customers. P6 added getting work done on time "is how you maintain a good reputation and a lot of times, your business to make it to your next job."

Poor customer service is a contributing factor to a small business failure. Some business brands have earned a bad reputation because of their poor customer service and become unable to recover (Diekmann & Przepiorka, 2019). Keeping a stellar customer service is rewarding (Astono et al., 2020). P3 noted that "making sure that our client knows that they do not need to follow-up with us and that we will get our jobs done" is a strategy they found most effective in their business success. P5 stated,

> Basically, treat your customer fair, be honest with them. If you say you are going do something, do exactly what you say and don't stray away from what you

> promised. Guarantee your product. Keep a good relationship with them. Those have always worked. … don't lie to him—don't ever lie, if you get caught one time, there goes your credibility.

***Trust and Reliability***

All participants confirmed that being truthful, honest, and reliable was a key factor in their small business survival. Trust is a psychological state involving vulnerability, where a belief exists that an individual or organization depended on will meet positive expectations rather than fears (Gad & Shane, 2014). Trust is developed through communication, reliance, and reputation (Cuong & Khoi, 2019). Reliability and dependability are qualities in building trust (Yang & Mossholder, 2010). P5 explained that one way a small business owner can build trust is by remaining true to their word and fulfilling their work commitments as promised. P5 stated "if you say you are going to do something, do exactly what you say and don't stray away from what you promised."

P6 pointed that the easiest option for a small business owner in the construction industry to damage their credibility and reputation is to take work and then don't deliver as promised. P6 stated that "You never want to get into that position and I never got into it. That is probably the easiest way to lose your reputation." P5 added that being capable to deliver on commitments is a factor in a survival of a small business in the construction industry. As an example, P5 narrated that

> when my partner was running the business, a lot of engineers did not like him because he seemed like "shystar." And then when I took over the business, I went to Engineering and I said I wanted to work. They said "you know, you are not big

> enough. You cannot be able to handle it”. I sat down with the head of Engineering at the time and he just said he really didn’t trust my partner and that is why he never gave him any work. I got in there and got their trust and we have been together ever since! I just think, what impressed everybody when I started working there was that I was the owner, and I was there every day. I stayed on top of everything and just got it done.

An option to building trust with a client is being honest. P5 expressed that lying and covering up a mistake is a fast way to earn a bad reputation. P1 and P3 advised that keeping an open channel of communication with customers and being honest including in times of confusion and chaos increases trust. Participants acknowledged that being honest to their clients gave them a good company reputation. P3 noted,

> being truthful and honest … goes a long way in this business for repeat customers. Once you proved to them that you are honest, and you will treat them fair, you have their trust, you got a good business relationship.

Trust is known to decrease the adversarial environment, increase cooperation, and reduce inefficiencies in construction projects (Gad & Shane, 2014). Trust, cost efficiency, and communication are key drivers for successful projects (Hasanzadehnet al., 2016; Strahorn et al., 2017).

## Emergent Theme 4: Competitive Edge

All participants acknowledged that in the construction industry, having a competitive edge is a strategy for survival. In a  tough market, a company must be different enough to have a unique advantage over its competitors (Widyanty et al., 2020).

Participants noted that competition in the construction industry is based on which company offers the lowest bid price for a project. And the ability to meet and beat rivals by winning a bid and securing contracts is a factor in a company's survival. In construction, the more bidding awards assures continued production and growth (Wang et al., 2020); Sinesilassie et al., 2019). I identified subthemes related to competitive edge; identify a void in an industry, fair pricing, discounts, and free services, knowing competitors, management experience.

***Identify a Void in an Industry***

Participants acknowledged that before they went into business, they spent time to identify a void in the construction industry to fill. Rather than struggle with a new idea, first time entrepreneurs should look a target industry and see where the voids are to be filled. And then reinvent the best strategy to service the need and run with it. P6 noted that from the time they decided to go into business, it took 1 year of planning before they opened their business doors. Participants agreed that a key strategy that enabled them to sustain their business for more than 5 years was entering into business with knowledge of the niche their business was to fill in the construction industry. P1 stated,

> Number one, you better know who your customer is, starting off. You better know that there is plenty of work out there. That there is a void that you can fill and you can do better than anybody else. So, know your customer, know the niche that you are going to fill. If you got other people out there that you are competing against, know how much they are charging because you should be prepared to do a job for less money or you are not going to be successful.

A small business owner’s skills and knowledge in the construction industry before starting their small business operation contributes to knowing which void to fill. A small business owner’s prior experience in the same industry which they later open their business operation, is an asset for business success (Angel et al., 2018). P2 and P6 were employed in the construction industry prior to opening their small business in the same industry. P2 and P5’s prior work experience in the construction industry enabled them to know the gaps their small business was to fill.  P2 stated,

> I was already with the company, an ergonomics company, and at that time, there were only a few ergonomics companies out there. And so it was not like there was not a lot of companies out there and so there was not a lot of competition.

P5 stated, “at the time when I went into business, I had 21 years of industry experience; 6 years of the 21 years were in the field and the rest was basically either project management or executive position.”

P4 and P5 worked in the same construction companies they later bought, took over as new owners and continue its operation. Prior managerial experience to a small business owner is an added advantage to sustain a small business operation (Kyriakidou et al., 2017). Business knowledge and managerial experience or industry line of experience is among the top human and organizational factors affecting small business success and failure (Al-Tit et al., 2019). Small businesses in the construction industry are vulnerable to operation failures because people who start the company may have a technical know-how to complete a project but lack the business knowledge to ensure the survival of their company (Kawimbe, 2020).  P3 noted that after their small business had operated for a while in the construction industry, their company looked at the need of their clients and noticed a gap in marketplace for pharmaceutical industry and that is where they decided to start and put their efforts. P5 also stated that “we got working with commercial companies and that is where we found to make the most money. We stayed with commercial instead of doing residential.” P1 had managerial experience from a different industry. P1 stated “I wasn’t in the construction industry … But then again I had that management background when I actually went into construction.” P2 worked as a top salesman for a company in the construction industry before opening a small business.

### *Fair Pricing*

Participants noted that in the construction industry, the bidding process to secure a project contract is driven by price. Participants acknowledged that one strategy that helped them to win a project award against competitors was offering fair prices. P4 stated that offering fair pricing for proposed work was an effective strategy for their business survival. P4 expressed “if I go to an ice cream parlor or a big corporation … if it is a $1000 job, and I quote them $5000, you don’t stand a chance. That is why I said fair pricing.” P6 noted that fair pricing keeps customers coming back. Small businesses should find that optimum price point to appeal to customers (Jaśkowski & Czarnigowska, 2019).

Participants acknowledged that fair pricing gave their business a competitive advantage. Being competitive reduces threat from new entrants to the market, increases the bargaining power, and reduce the competitive position among current competitors (O’Dwyer & Gilmore, 2019). P5 stated that “being competitive with your pricing” was a strategy most effective in business success. P6 stated that as a strategy to win a bid, "there is a number of jobs that you have to be low, you just have to have the right price." P4 stated,

> I can't tell you how many times I have done legwork in engineering and submitted a bid and all over a sudden I see somebody else doing the same job up there. And I go, "What happened ? Oh! You were high."

To be able to offer fair pricing, a small business owner should know what their competitors are offering. Participants noted that in the construction industry, different contractors are invited to bid on a project. Participants acknowledged that knowing who the competitors are and what they are offering is a competitive advantage to help them know how to set their price. Understanding business competitors enables a small business owner to develop competitive strategies in pricing and in responding to marketing campaign initiatives (Sawczuk, 2019). Understanding competitors and their offering equips a company with knowledge to be used in creating marketing strategies to improve business performance (Kuch, 2019). P1 stated that "if you got other people out there that you are competing against, know how much they are charging." Advice to small businesses is that fair pricing is a good strategy at the beginning of their business operation to undercut competition on price to attract customers and compete in the industry. However, the strategy that is most effective is to reposition from competing on price to competing on service (Chen et al., 2019).

### *Contractor Discounts and Incentives*

Participants acknowledged that in the construction industry, customers do not want to pay more for work. As a result, going the extra mile by giving customers discounts and incentives is a strategy for winning contracts. Customer loyalty programs have a potential to drive differentiation and sustain a competitive advantage (Nastasoiu & Vandenbosch, 2019). Businesses owners should leverage the knowledge they already have about their customers to tailor offers and consider giveaways that are unique, relevant, and appealing. To create a competitive advantage and be paid faster than waiting for 30 or more days, P5 stated, “I was willing to sacrifice something to keep the work and I did. … I gave them back 2% of the net and so they made money back and I got paid fast.

Small businesses should provide additional services that bring value to customers with minimal costs to business operation (Nastasoiu & Vandenbosch, 2019). Small businesses have an opportunity to use available client information to provide rewards that fit with each customer’s situation or preference (Khairawati, 2019; Sulaiman & Musnadi, 2018). To remain competitive, P5 added,

> The other thing I did was also, they wanted to go with a national contractor … And they wanted to see how, or who is giving better pricing. So, what I did was I used my cost and only mark up on top of my cost. Not what the average customer will get. So, when accounting went and looked at that, they called me in and said, “boy you save us a lot of money!” and I did because I gave my price plus mark up. So, they saved a lot of money that way.

Business owners should consider long-term product knowledge, relationship building and other qualitative benefits in addition to short-term sales spikes when considering incentives and discounts to customers (Nastasoiu & Vandenbosch, 2019).

***Innovation***

In the construction industry, introducing innovative solutions is a strategy to survive in a competitive market. The intense competition and the industry's susceptibility to changes in market circumstances force businesses to continuously take actions to enhance their competitiveness (Staniewski et al., 2016). Innovation is a necessity for an enterprise to survive and maintain a competitive advantage (Van de Vrande et al., 2009). Participants noted that to survive in the construction industry, a small business owner must reevaluate, invent, and reinvent their business operations. P1 stated,

> You also have to invent and reinvent yourself. Ok let us say my plan of attack was to do better than anybody else but when you go out, you find out that the plan is not working. You have to come up with something different. You have to constantly reevaluate, which means you have to constantly looking forward and ask "what am I doing now, what have I done that has been successful in the past and compared to what I am doing now and am I heading the right path. Do I need to fork off and go a different way?"

Entrepreneurs must accustom themselves to change and uncertainty (Deng et al., 2019). A lot of business practices are considered risky leading to business failure mainly because few of those who engage in business are not innovative to compete during industry and market changes (Nair & Blomquist, 2019). P4 noted that the construction industry "is always changing, and it is difficult to keep up with the different products out there, but you need to have decent product knowledge." P2 noted that when the business started, they had to create demand when even a lot of their customers were not familiar with their products and solutions. P3 noted that one key driving factor that enabled their business to survive beyond 5 years of operation was "continuing to change with the time … technology changes, the way we do business, who we are doing business with, and the need to continue to evolve with the times."

P6 noted that the biggest expense for small businesses in the construction industry is labor and efficient equipment. As a result, investing in good tools is a strategy for business success because inefficient or broken equipment delays timely completion of a project thus increases labor and maintenance costs to a small business owner. P6 stated,

> And when you have tools and equipment that are broken or breaking down, and you have a laborer standing around, that really impacts your cost quickly. So, I will say investing in good tools and equipment, and controlling overhead.

P3 noted that after being in the construction business for many years, if he was to start again "I am sure there are things I would do differently." P3 stated,

> when we first started, we kept things local. We kept things close to the chest internally and now as we have been here longer, everything now out there in the open. If we had started out that way, we wouldn't have changed processes along the way.

An entrepreneurial spirit is a key attribute for small business owners in the construction industry to maintain profitability, gain a competitive advantage and for long-term functioning of their business operation. To succeed in winning bids, reducing the cost of overhead, participants noted that they had to adapt to new business practices or innovated on existing business practices to survive industry competition. An entrepreneurial spirit stimulates innovation (Olivari, 2016; Rodríguez-López & Souto, 2019). P1 noted that a small business owner "has to have an entrepreneurial spirit." P6 added "I won't want to go into business unless you have a lot of stamina. It is not a 9-5 pm job. When I first went I to business, I was working 6 days a week, 10-14 hours a day." P1 stated, "know what your market is, what your market potential is and what the market potential is to expand. Because you are not successful if you are not expanding your market."

### *Agility and Flexibility*

In today's constant market changes, a business must have a huge degree of adaptability and flexibility at every level of its operation (Ahmed et al., 2019; Chen, 2019). A business owner must adopt an operational mindset that evolves with the market trends by thriving to become agile (Ahammad et al., 2020). In the construction industry, a company's agility allows an operational structure the tools to react quickly and efficiently. P1 stated that a customer is like "an aircraft carrier, sometimes it takes them 2 weeks to decide which way they gonna turn. We are little BG boat. We have to be more agile. We have to be able to move here, go over and fix that location and all that stuff. We need to be able to do that." Becoming agile should not be limited to one part of a business but rather be a mindset that determines how people work in every aspect (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019). P5 acknowledged that having a small crew increased company operational agility. P5 stated,

> My partner and I split up because we had a 20 men crew. It was too hard to manage, too much to maintain, we couldn't really control it because he would tell the guy one thing, and I will say something and the guys will say "Greg promised us this." And I wouldn't leave it to him. And so, he wanted a big company of 20 men crew plus and he said let us go union and I didn't want to go Union because I wanted to keep a small crew and control over my business. And it has always worked. Having 5 employees, we always got the jobs done!

**Emergent Theme 5: Customer-Centric Culture**

All participants acknowledged that putting the needs and expectations of their customers as a priority was a strategy that helped them survive in their business. Participants expressed a constant open dialogue with their clients to share updates and insights about a project was a method that enabled them to have a smoother and faster project execution. Participants agreed that striving to make clients or customers happy was a survival strategy because they considered unhappy clients equal no referral and no return job. To meet customer expectations in the construction industry, a service provider must be sensitive to the needs of a customer (Astono et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2016). P1 stated:

> One of the strategies that I have kept all this time is customer first. No matter what, I try to put the customer first every time and try to instill that in the people that work with me. Sometimes the customer doesn't know what they want. Sometimes a customer may ask something that I cannot provide. I explain to them

> that, that is not something that I can provide or it is not standard, or not up to safety standards or anybody else. So I have always told everybody “go out of your way to make sure that the customer is happy. That is a philosophy I have used since early on and it has worked for me for decades.”

P2 stated “We did our work. We never had a problem with it. So, they really could not criticize it. Kept my price competitive and was available 24/7.” P5 added “I just think what impressed everybody when I started working there was that I was the owner and I was there every day.”

Participants considered good customer service as one method of maintaining a good relationship with their client. A happy and satisfied client is more likely to recommend received service to others, increase the likelihood of coming back as a return client resulting in more business and a competitive advantage (Ilias & Shamsudin, 2020). Participants acknowledged that being at the construction site rather than delegating work from a remote office played a role in succeeding in their business. P2 noted, “It is very tempting to be able to stay inside and be able to just market products that way. But I think the most effective strategy is always being out in the field. And it is not only with decision makers, but it is all the different compacts that are part of a decision. I am not afraid to go out in the field all the time. I am not afraid to be hands on and to roll-up my sleeves”.

Participants noted that having constant communication with a client especially about a project and its progress was a strategy that helped them survive. Participants expressed that talking to customers is one way of taking the pulse of the market, to understand customer needs and how a company is doing. P3 stated he does “constant communication with the client, talking with them often, giving them project information that they can report back that is truthful, up-to-date and current.” The secret to a successful project is constant communication between the client and the contractor (Safapour et al., 2019). The contractor can share updates, issues, and insights about the project while the client can give recommendations or opinion. In this arrangement, project approvals are smoother and done faster.

Participants noted that interacting with a client leaves them with a positive feeling that a contractor understands the importance of their project and you value their business. Effective communication with a customer improves customer royalty and reduces the likelihood of customers leaving to competitors (Sulaiman & Musnadi, 2018). Constant communication with a client is a positive value because it creates in a customer a feeling of trust, transparency, and honesty about everything that may affect their experience (Kharouf et al., 2018). P3 stated that they made “sure that our client know that they do not need to follow-up with us and that we will get our jobs done.”

It is through constant communication that a contractor can bring any project issues to the attention of the client for clarification before they negatively impact project outcomes. Customer communication allows two parties listen to each other. P4 stated that availability to the customers was a factor in the survival of a small business in the construction industry. P4 stated “The reason why I said availability to the customers is key is if someone calls you and you don’t call them back for 30 minutes, then you probably not going to have that customer.” P5 noted that communicating with customers “keep a good relationship with them.” As a communication strategy, P1 expressed the importance of having good interpersonal communication skills. P1 noted that having direct conversation with a client is a better strategy than texting or through email. P2 observed, “So it might be, you know … you stop by and you see the person at the front desk … the admin. assistant. Business is a lot of people … but the strategy is to constantly make those contacts.”

## Applications to Professional Practice

I explored strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. My findings provide useful information on strategies small business owners who participated in this study used to remain in business beyond 5 years. The themes identified through interviews provide current and future small business owners in the construction industry strategies to increase the sustainability of their small business operations. The five themes in this study provide recommendations and suggestions for application to professional practice including practical solutions current and future small business owners in the construction industry can use to improve their business operation, performance, and sustainability.

The applicability of the findings from this study provides valuable knowledge and insights for professional practice to small business owners on effective strategies for business growth and sustainability. The results from this study provide valuable information to aspiring small business owners on factors that affect the survival of a small business operation. Discoveries from this research study provide valuable information to aspiring individuals embarking on small business initiatives to understand the factors that affect the survival of a small business operation and effective strategies that can offer a competitive advantage to sustain a small business beyond 5 years of operation. The results of this study could transfer knowledge to help small business owners formulate best policies and develop strategies to increase their success rate by exploring the experiences of small business owners in the construction industry operating in central New Jersey. Turner and Endres (2017) found that strategic planning contributes to small business sustainability. Small business owners improved survival rates of their business operations when they obtain new knowledge (Anning-Dorson, 2017).

Findings from this study indicated effective financial planning to be important strategy for small business owners to sustain operation beyond 5 years. Effective financial planning helps small business owners to ensure they have sufficient capital to start, grow and sustain a business beyond 5 years of operation. Effective financial planning allows small business owners have a clear picture of their business cash flow to sustain their business operations. Small business owners having a reserve of capital, obtaining a line of credit and a continuous flow of cash or income to cover direct and indirect business expenses is an effective financial planning strategy of sustaining a small business operation beyond five years. Having access to financial resources or capital is a critical factor for small business success (Rahman et al., 2017).

Findings from this study showed that meeting customer expectation was an important strategy that keeps a customer happy, increases customer royalty but also spread a small business owner’s quality of service to potential customers through social media and referrals. Customer satisfaction is a measure of how a product or service rendered by a business meets customer expectation (Abror et al., 2018). Customer satisfaction is an important indicator of consumer purchase intentions and loyalty (Alnaser et al., 2017). Small business owners in the construction industry who deliver quality work, complete projects on time and within budget are best positioned to maintain customer relationships that will lead to repeat business. Being sensitive to the needs of all customers and providing a full array of services that meet their expectations is one way a small business owner can keep customers coming back to them in future construction projects.

Findings from this study showed that effective brand management helps small business owners establish a good company reputation that open doors to reliable customers and insurance for steady work. Maintaining a good company reputation, providing honest, reliable, and superior customer service enables a small business owner to expand their marketing opportunities. A point of difference in business makes a customer choose one company to do business with over the other competitors (Gilboa et al., 2019). A good reputation opens doors to reliable customers and insurance for steady work resulting in a steady income stream enough to keep a business running (Wikaningrum et al., 2020). Good customer service to existing customers generates referral activities to prospective customers (Muhammad et al., 2016).

Findings showed that maintaining a competitive edge helps a small business owner hold a unique advantage over competitors. Small business owners who identify a void in the market and offers unique services can maintain a competitive advantage over industry rivals. A tough market, a company must be different enough to have a unique advantage over its competitors (Widyanty et al., 2020). Application to professional practice could include encouraging small business owners to identify a void to fill in a market and then reinvent the best strategy to service the need. Effective strategies including being innovative and entrepreneurial, agile, setting fair pricing, and offering customer discounts and incentives are applications to professional practice small business owners can adopt to increase their business opportunities.

Findings showed that prioritizing the needs and expectations of customers helps small business owners maintain a good relationship. Small business owners who offer quality products and services makes a customer happy and satisfied, improves customer royalty, expand marketing opportunities through referrals and reduces the like hood of customers leaving to competitors. Application to practice could include constant communication with a customer to share project updates and insights. A happy and satisfied client is more likely to recommend received service and product experience to others, increase the likelihood of coming back as a return client resulting in more business and a competitive advantage (Ilias & Shamsudin, 2020).

Owners of new and established small businesses could use the findings from this study to formulate best policies and develop strategies to increase their success rate. The small business owners in this study have been in business for over 5 years. This study’s participant business experience and proven success in their operations beyond 5 years could be relevant to new and established small business owners to understand the factors that affect their survival. Implementing sustainable strategies increases a small business owner’s chances of survival thus reducing the impact of a small business failure.

## Implications for Social Change

Even though the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their business beyond 5 years, this research has implications for social change. Applying the knowledge gained from this study may contribute to positive social change by improving a small business practices to increase survival rates of small business ownership in local communities. Small businesses that remain productive reduce the psychological, social, and financial impact of small business failures to the owner, family, and employees.

Communities and society could benefit from the results of this study. Lussier and Halabi (2010) noted that continued small business high failure rates are a threat to the local, state, and national economy as well as instability to small business owners, their families, employees, and the surrounding communities. When a small business owner succeeds, their financial prosperity leads to economic and social benefits to the small business owner, family, employees, and community. When a small business owner fails, jobs are lost, and the economy suffers. Sustained small business ownership beyond 5 years could contribute to increasing in job creation and an increase in sales and tax revenue to local economies (Decker et al., 2014). The tax contributed by small businesses to the local governments is in return used to boost service delivery to residents including maintaining roadways, police, parks and other community services.

## Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry utilized to sustain their business beyond 5 years of operation. All small business owners and aspiring small business owners should pay attention to the finding and results in this study. I am very excited about sharing my findings with small business owners and organizations that support small business development and growth. Applying the results derived from this study can help current and future small business owners with new knowledge to increase their attention to the dynamics of small business formation, operation, and survival. Using results from this study, small business owners in the construction industry have workable steps that can increase their competitive advantages to sustain and grow their small business operations. I identified five recommendations that could benefit current and aspiring small business owners. Existing and aspiring small business owners in the construction industry should focus on (a) financial planning, (b) meeting customer expectation, (c) name recognition, (d) maintaining a competitive edge, and (e) customer centric culture.

The participants in this study were able to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years because they had sufficient startup capital and access to multiple sources of funding to cover business expenses. I recommend that anyone who is thinking about starting a small business should have sufficient capital or a dependable source of money to start and keep business operations up and running. A small business owner should ensure their business operations generate a steady cash flow to cover direct and indirect business expenses. If not, I would suggest a small business owner to have multiple sources of funds including access to a line of credit or short-term loans to cover operational expenses to offset direct company expenses. I would suggest having access to multiple sources of funding as a contingency measure to cover operational expenses when payment from work done is delayed or the business is not bringing in sufficient income. To ensure sufficient capital or to guarantee a constant flow of cash to cover business operations, I recommend a small business owner to send and track invoices for payment on timely version to ensure there is constant cash flow to cover business expenses.

The participants in this study ensured the expectations of their customer were met. Meeting customer expectation not only kept their customers calling them back for new construction projects but also spread the quality service received through social media and referrals. Small business owners who intend to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years must ensure their products, services and project outcomes meet and exceed their customer's expectations. I suggest a small business owner to invest capital in good tools, deliver quality work on time and within budget and have decent product knowledge.

Small businesses known for their superior product and services have an advantage over competitors. Good company reputations generate interest to potential customers and become an insurance against competition. I would encourage existing businesses to ensure their small business reputation is associated with providing reliable superior product and services and to offer superior customer service experience. To survive a small business operation in the construction industry, an aspiring business owner must diligently identify a business void their operation will fill. To create and maintain a competitive edge, I would suggest existing small business owners to offer customers fair pricing and extend contractor discounts and incentives to customers.

Participants in this study continuously reevaluated, invented and reinvented their business operations to maintain a competitive advantage. Small business owners must innovate and adapt continually to the changing business environment. Small business owners must cultivate a customer centric culture in their business operations. I would encourage small business owner to put the needs and expectations of their customers as a priority. Great customer service not only leaves a customer happy, satisfied and more likely to return, but also increase the like hood of recommending received product and services to friends and family.

## Recommendations for Further Research

I chose a qualitative multiple case study and design to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their operations beyond 5 years. Future researchers can use other research methodologies and designs to identify strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their operations beyond 5 years. I limited my study to small business owners in the construction industry in central New Jersey and the results may not reflect the experiences of all small business owners in the construction industry in New Jersey. Future researchers should consider expanding the geographical location beyond central New Jersey. I only interviewed six small business owners. Increasing the sample size may strengthen the transferability of the research findings. All small business owners interviewed in this study were in the commercial sector of the construction industry. Future researchers should consider further research exploring small business owners in the residential sector of the construction industry.

## Reflections

My doctoral experience at Walden University has been profoundly humbling, challenging, exhaustive, and rewarding. Walden University departments, faculty and staff have been a reliable and consistent support system in my doctoral journey. As a novice researcher, conducting this research has expended my knowledge on the tools required to produce a quality research study. The research process and extensive writing have strengthened my writing skills for use in future inquiry and scholarly publications.

Conducting interviews was enjoyable and a great life and educational experience. During this research process, the interactions with participants were inspirational especially the challenges small business owners face and sacrifices made to overcome for business continuity. During the research process, I remained objective to avoid injecting my personal views or preconceived ideas about factors affecting small business ownership. Interviews with participants increased my understanding about internal and external issues affecting small business owners in the construction industry. In the interview, data collection and analysis process, only the views of participants and supporting documents contributed to the research findings and results. The experiences during the research process expanded my knowledge on data collection and analysis in future research inquiry. The expansive knowledge and transferable skills gained from conducting this research study will complement my career in project management.

## Conclusion

The application of entrepreneurship theory and the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5-years. This qualitative multiple case study was to answer the overarching research question: What strategies do small business owners in the construction industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? I conducted semistructred interviews and collected data from six small business owners in central New Jersey that were in business longer than 5 years in the construction industry. I limited my focus on small business owners in the commercial sector of the construction industry. After data collection and analysis using NVivo 11 qualitative software, five themes emerged: effective financial planning, customer satisfaction, brand management, competitive edge, and customer-centric culture.

In this study, I provided practical strategies that small business owners in the construction industry can use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The findings from this study indicated effective financial planning allows small business owners have a clear picture of their business cash flow to start, grow and sustain their business operations. Data from this study verified that small business owners must meet customer's expectation by providing quality products and superior service. Participants revealed that keeping a customer happy by delivering quality work, completing projects on time and within budget increases customer royalty but also spread a small business owner's quality of service to potential customers through social media and referrals. Findings from this study showed that effective branding helps small business owners establish a good company reputation that open doors to reliable customers and insurance for steady work. Small business owners who identify a void in the market and offers unique services can maintain a competitive advantage over industry rivals.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Call each participant at the time/date he or she designated.
2. Thank each participant for volunteering his or her insights.
3. Introduce self to participant(s).
4. Answer questions and concerns of participant(s).
5. Remind each participant that he/she may withdraw from the study at any time via telephone call, e-mail or verbal notice and that all data will remain confidential.
6. Turn on the recording device.
7. Introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification, note the date and time.
8. Start the interview from question 1 to question 8.
9. Follow up with additional questions.
10. End interview sequence; discuss member checking with participant(s).
    a. Thank the participant(s) for their contributions,
    b. Emphasis on the contact numbers in case of questions or concerns.
11. End protocol.

# Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to start your business?
2. What strategies have you found most effective in your business success?
3. Based upon your experiences, what key strategies do you believe enabled you to sustain your business for more than 5 years?
4. What internal business strategies gave you a competitive advantage in Central New Jersey, and how do you know?
5. What were the most significant challenges you experienced while implementing your strategies in the first 5 years of opening your small business operation?
6. How did you overcome challenges you experienced while implementing your strategies in the first 5 years of opening your small business operation?
7. If you were to start the business again, what different strategies would you use to avoid challenges of sustaining your businesses beyond 5-years?
8. What additional information, not discussed, can you share that contributed to the sustainability of your business beyond 5-years?