

2023

## Effective Strategies for Small Business Sustainability

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kathleen Watson-Wilkin

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Effective Strategies for Small Business Sustainability

by

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MS, St. Joseph's College New York, 2005

BS, Metropolitan College of New York, 1999

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2023

## Abstract

Small businesses in the United States experience a higher failure rate than medium-sized and large corporations. Small business owners without successful strategies to sustain their businesses may fail. Grounded in the McKinsey 7S model, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies small general construction contractor business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The participants were three small general construction contractor business owners within Miami, Florida, who sustained businesses for 5 years. Data were collected using semistructured and audio-recorded face-to-face interviews. Through thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (a) creating strategies for a solid customer base, (b) employee skills training, (c) creating leadership strategies, and (d) creating strategies for financial stability. A key recommendation for small general construction contractors is to develop emergency fund strategies to increase their cash flow in case of a business emergency, pandemic, or economic crisis. Small business leaders should also maintain ongoing training and development to develop employees with the skills necessary to produce quality work and seek entrepreneurial prospects. The implications for positive social change include the potential to create job opportunities and establish training programs for unskilled workers, which may enhance the quality of life within the local community.

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## Dedication

I want to dedicate my doctoral study to my family. Mom and Dad, thank you for being the best parents anyone could ever dream of; you are my inspiration. Mom, your wisdom and unconditional love have made me the woman I am today. Dad, you are a superhero. You never left your children and were there for Mom and the entire family for 67 years until her passing in 2019. Your dedication and love for Mom during her last days continually inspire me to be a better person.

Rolando Jr. and David, thank you for choosing me to be your mom, growing up and becoming kind, caring, and loving young men, and allowing me to mother you even as adults. You guys are my gift from God, and I love you both unconditionally. To my grandson Denzel, you changed my life for the better when you came into this world in 2014. I love you, love you, and love you. To my future grandchildren, I look forward to meeting, loving, and spoiling you.

Boris, thank you for being the best stepfather to my sons and granddad to my grandson. Thank you for giving me the time, space, and encouragement I needed to stay afloat throughout the many challenges I faced on this journey. I genuinely love and appreciate you.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Innovation and business strategies are essential, regardless of size, for enterprises to remain competitive in a global market where change and flexibility are keys to success. A successful business strategy is an organization leader's principal concern and plays a key role in business sustainability (Blattner et al., 2021). Business sustainability results from an organization's conscious effort and business actions to continuously survive and make a profit (Olubodun & Agbaje, 2021). Small businesses operating and engaging within their community affirm that business sustainability is their focus and materializes in the organization's economic, environmental, and social performance (Olubodun & Agbaje, 2021).

### **Background of the Problem**

Small businesses provide jobs, innovation, products, and services to the economy (Edwards, 2018). The establishment of small businesses within the United States continues to increase. Some small business owners lack strategies to sustain profitability for more than 5 years. In most countries worldwide, including the United States, small businesses comprise 95% of the total companies, contribute to job creation, and provide social and economic stability (Mohamad & Chin, 2018). The Small Business Administration (SBA, 2021) reported that less than one-half of new small businesses survive beyond 5 to 10 years.

### **Problem Statement**

Small businesses in the United States have an over 50% failure rate (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). Only 30% of small businesses are successful and survive by their 10th year in business (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020). The general business problem

is that some small business owners lack the knowledge necessary to sustain a successful business. The specific problem is that some small general construction contractor business owners lack strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore strategies small general construction contractor business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The population targeted for this study comprised three small general construction contractor business owners within the southeastern region of the United States who sustained their business beyond 5 years. The findings from this study may identify strategies that could assist other small businesses in remaining viable beyond 5 years within this region. The implications for social change include creating jobs and small business resources for future small business establishments within the community.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three choices for research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). I selected the qualitative method to use open-ended questions. Qualitative research is firsthand research in which data are nonnumerical, realistic, robust, well informed, and generates findings not attained by statistical measures or quantification (Nassaji, 2020). Qualitative methodology was the appropriate approach for this study as I wanted to explore strategies relying on interview questions, and the data gathered were not numerical. This study's main idea was to explore by using open-ended interview questions focusing on the most effective strategies small general construction contractor business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. In contrast, research using the quantitative method allows the

investigation of many factors, some of which may be related to or influence each other, allowing the researcher to analyze varying factors related to the research question (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Mixed-method research design combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques within a single study (Yin, 2018). Quantitative and mixed methods were not appropriate for this study, as the purpose of this study was not to test hypotheses, and I did not use variables or numerical data to test research data on small business owners' strategies for sustainability. A research design links the data to be collected and analyzed to answer the initial question of the study research question (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015; Yin, 2018). The following are primary qualitative research designs: (a) case study, (b) ethnographical, (c) phenomenological, and (d) narrative. The three qualitative research designs inappropriate for this study were ethnographical, phenomenological, and narrative. Researchers using the ethnographical research design concentrate on a group's culture or social world (Hod et al., 2020; Schlieve, 2020). The ethnographical design was not appropriate for the focus of this study as I was not exploring the lives and culture of a group.

Researchers using the phenomenological research design focus on uncovering and researching the accuracy of human life experiences through the perceptions, interpretations, and recollections of those lived experiences (Fieck et al., 2020; Idrees et al., 2021). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study as the focus of the study was not the interpretation of lived experiences of the participants. Narrative inquiry research requires the researcher to understand personal stories from individual voices (Liu & Tseng, 2021).

The narrative research design was not appropriate for this study as I did not explore a personal account by interpreting an event or sequence of events. A case study is an empirical inquiry in which a contemporary phenomenon illustrates events and their specific context within its real-life context (Yin, 2017). I used the multiple case study method to explore the contemporary phenomenon of small general construction contractors' business owners sustaining their business beyond 5 years.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do small general construction contractor business owners use to stay profitable beyond 5 years?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies do you use to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
2. What challenges did you encounter when implementing strategies to sustain your business?
3. What do you do to address the challenges when implementing new strategies for your business?
4. How do you determine the proficiency of your strategies for the sustainability of your business?
5. How do you measure the effectiveness of those strategies' proficiencies to sustain your business?
6. What leadership strategies do you find most effective to sustain your business?
7. What additional information do you want to share regarding strategies to sustain a small general construction contractor business for more than 5 years?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The McKinsey 7S model framework identifies the following seven elements: (a) strategy, (b) structure, (c) systems, (d) style (management style), (e) staff, (f) skills, and (g) shared values (culture; Waterman et al., 1980). The first three elements, strategy, structure, and systems, are often considered concrete, measurable, and easier for management to control. The other four elements, style, staff skills, and shared values, are intangible and more challenging to manage directly (Cox et al., 2019). McKinsey's 7S framework is a model for analyzing an organization's effectiveness and involves determining the issues that contribute to achieving its strategic objectives (Singh, 2013). Implementing successful strategies is essential for small business owners, as the strategic approach can affect the sustainability and profitability of their business. McKinsey's 7S model provided the conceptual framework lens for understanding the role using the seven elements of the model, its effect on small business success, and sustainability for more than 5 years. Small business owners may use McKinsey's 7S model variables together as a system to increase long-term performance benefits within their organization (Mateja, 2016). A small business owner's awareness of long-term sustainability strategies may provide insight into sustaining their business beyond 5 years.

## **Operational Definitions**

*Thinking qualitatively:* The individual's intertwined cognitive and emotional mental processing of something that stimulates personal interpretive relevance and generates personal understanding (Saldaña, 2018).

*Corporate social responsibility:* The combination of an organization's environmental and social practices strategy (Dey et al., 2020).

*Environmental sustainability practices*: An organization's policies and actions aimed to promote the natural environment's sustainability (Arora & De, 2020).

*Gentrification*: The transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and commercial use (Wells, 2022).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Theoretically not proven, an assumption refers to taking something for granted (Schoenung & Dikova, 2016). An assumption was that participants in this study provided honest and truthful responses during their interviews. Assumptions are beliefs in a research study proposal that are crucial to conducting the study and cannot be proven. The initial assumption I had was that the leadership strategies incorporated by each business owner were primary to sustaining their business for 5 or more years. The second assumption was that participants' data accurately reflected their leadership strategies. Further assumptions in this study were that the honest and truthful responses from the participants would validate and answer my research question. I based all assumptions on the participants viewing the results of this study as a helpful resource that might add value to their businesses.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are outside uncontrollable threats to the internal validity of a study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). This qualitative study's primary limitations were the small sample size and the research method used for data collection. Addressing transparent research limitations may help readers and stakeholders understand and apply research findings more effectively (Parviz & Behrooz, 2020). This qualitative study was limited to three

business owners within the southeastern region of the United States and did not include other districts within the United States. The potential limitations of this study included the accuracy of participants' responses to the interview questions and how they applied them to their success as small business owners.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to the scope of a study and encompass the intended boundaries used in the research study analysis and process (Bartoska & Subrt, 2012). The delimitations of this study were small business owners with leadership roles within their organizations who had sustained their businesses for over 5 years. Delimitations of the study included the geographical location of small retail business owners in the Southeastern United States. Another delimitation of the study was the inclusion of only businesses with fewer than 500 employees.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Contribution to Business Practice**

The findings from this study are significant to owners of small general contractor businesses and may assist future small business owners in their business's growth and developmental stages. Prospective small business owners could consult with successful small business owners to empower and assist with the development and growth of their small businesses within their communities. The results of this study can be a valuable resource for implementing successful strategies that can assist in the training of future small business owners, thereby increasing the sustainability success rate of small businesses for more than 5 years.

## **Implications for Social Change**

Positive social change may arise from this study, in that it may help strengthen small businesses that can increase local communities' financial security and stability. Small businesses that have sustained operations for more than 5 years have the opportunity to positively impact the community by creating jobs and providing services for homeowners and residents. Small business activity can stimulate communities' competitive and entrepreneurial environment, enhancing productivity growth and positive social change (Daugherty, 2021).

## **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

In the literature review section, I explored strategies that small general construction contractor business owners used to sustain their businesses and stay profitable beyond 5 years. Statistics reflect that less than one-half of new small businesses survive beyond 5 to 10 years (SBA, 2021). According to the BLS, 20% of small businesses fail in their first year, 30% fail in their second year, and 50% fail after 5 years. Usually, 70% of business owners fail in their 10th year (BLS, 2020).

Entrepreneurs must be knowledgeable about specific activities vital to the sustainability of their business ventures. Mwepu Mbuya et al. (2016) posited that entrepreneurs must become knowledgeable in specific activities, leadership, networking, human resources, financial management, and marketing skills to increase business sustainability. McKinsey's 7S model framework identified the following seven elements—(a) strategy, (b) structure, (c) systems, (d) style (leadership style), (e) staff, (f) skills, and (g) shared values (Waterman et al., 1980)—and was used to answer the

following research question: What strategies do small general construction contractor business owners use to sustain their business and stay profitable beyond 5 years?

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by small general construction contractors to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The literature review is divided into sections reflecting the seven elements of McKinsey's 7S model framework.

### **McKinsey's 7S Framework**

The McKinsey 7S model served as the analytical framework for this study. The successful operations of small businesses are evolving and require business leaders to successfully implement strategies that are beneficial to the survival of their business. Strategy and successful strategic planning can influence the sustainability and growth of an organization. The business strategies of an organization serve as a valuable framework for understanding its interdependencies related to its data and environment (Bentley-Goode et al., 2019). An organization leader's ability to achieve corporate sustainability is a goal for business leaders across all industries (Meuer et al., 2019). Some factors limit a small business owner's ability to implement strategic changes, such as costs, knowledge, and a lack of awareness regarding outside forces (Midgett et al., 2019). An organization leader must possess social, interpersonal, hard technical, and soft people skills to fulfill their business's complex and straightforward goals (Leonard & Green, 2019).

McKinsey's 7S outline is a model for analyzing organizations and their effectiveness (Singh, 2013). Since its proposal, many researchers have been using the 7S model in many research frameworks (Cox et al., 2019). Two consultants, Tom Peters, and

Robert Waterman, working at the McKinsey and Company consulting firm, developed McKinsey's 7S framework in the early 1980s (Waterman et al., 1980).

### ***Strategy***

The challenges facing small business owners are developing new business models that stress sustainability, effective leadership styles, and employee job satisfaction (Kader & Tang, 2016). Small businesses provide jobs, innovation, products, and services to the U.S. economy (Edwards, 2018). The small business owner's strategy for survival is to identify the firm's goals and objectives, take action, and allocate the resources required to achieve the organization's objectives (Saidi et al., 2021).

### ***Structure***

Structure refers to organizational systems and procedures: workflow, formation of departments, responsibilities, and delegation privilege (Javied et al., 2019). The structure also describes the organization's arrangement to fulfill and perform its roles, functions, and responsibilities (Masilela & Nel, 2021). Small business owners' organizational structures are usually less formal than those of large corporations. Companies that invest heavily in office space are slowly diminishing, with technology being an organization's highest investment. Most business models are amassing services, such as transport and deliveries (Nagini et al., 2020).

### ***Systems***

An organization leader's inability to keep up with rapid technological changes can cause the organization's quick demise. A system refers to the business technical infrastructure employees use daily to accomplish their aims and goals (Singh, 2013).

Using online tools in business startups effectively increases sales and ensures sustainability (Tatpuje & Ganbote, 2019).

Increasing social media presence in small businesses can decrease the probability of income loss and recovery time during a pandemic, natural disaster, or displacement (Katare et al., 2021). Social media is one primary driver in providing small business owners the tools necessary to heighten their knowledge of sustainability and allows the spread of information and misinformation on small business sustainability (Dovleac, 2015). Dovleac (2015) theorized that organizations are encouraged to increase the impact of their messages to clients using social media to deliver material intended to amaze, stimulate, and entertain.

Virtual teams in existing organizations have grown steadily because of technological advances and the need to gain global access to expertise (Eisenberg et al., 2019). Using the quantitative research method, Eisenberg et al. (2019) conducted a study to examine the impact on business leaders and the relationship between employees working remotely, team communication, and team performance. According to Eisenberg et al., despite continuous improvements in communication technology, employees' geographical dispersion remains challenging to effective workplace interactions and, particularly, teamwork. As working from home offices increases, it becomes more difficult for team members to have periodic face-to-face gatherings that facilitate teamwork and camaraderie.

Online entrepreneurs run their businesses using a creative business plan and an effective organizational structure (Phonthanukitithaworn et al., 2019).

Phonthanukitithaworn et al. (2019) conducted a study to identify the success factors of

online entrepreneurs. Phonthanukitithaworn et al. found the following factors that contribute to successful online entrepreneurs and budding entrepreneurs: (a) networking, (b) risk-taking, (c) reliability, (d) product price, (e) product, (f) quality, (g) staff, and (h) employees. In addition, starting an online business involves risks and requires a risk-taking attitude to start up and sustain. According to Phonthanukitithaworn et al., entrepreneurs need to be more willing to take risks than to view their online businesses as necessities for the success of online startups.

### ***Style (Leadership Style)***

Style refers to the organization's leadership management style (Liu, 2020). The company leader's leadership style contributes significantly to success or business failure, especially in small businesses. Leadership qualities may be measured by honesty, integrity, confidence, excellent communication skills, decision-making capabilities, accountability, and empathy while maintaining a vision and purpose. A leader must possess the social, interpersonal, technical, and soft skills required to engage constructively with others (Leonard & Green, 2019).

Leadership is a vital factor for organizational success. The fate of an organization and its employees' achievements may solidify the competence of the organization leader's management style. Although no leader always uses a single leadership style, business leaders lead and adopt leadership styles as their roles and needs within the organization change. All leaders, including small businesses and corporations, may use a range of leadership styles, sometimes within a single day.

A leader is an individual who inspires, influences, and guides an individual or team for efficient performance toward achieving specified objectives of the organization.

Employees view their leaders' leadership styles differently under rapid organizational change (Yaghi, 2017). A business leader may engage in the following leadership styles to allow and offer the best leadership, depending on the circumstances as the need arises throughout the existence of the organization: (a) a leader may use transactional leadership style when dealing with an employee project or vendor issue, (b) a leader may engage in authoritarian leadership when implementing procedures and policies regarding several topics within their authority, and (c) a leader may act as a transformational leader when addressing the need for employee training and productivity.

### ***Staff***

Staff refers to the organization's human resources system's structure, employee involvement, and demographics. The establishment of small businesses recognizes the importance of creating jobs and facilitating the growth of most economies (Putra & Cho, 2019). Putra and Cho (2019) studied small business leaders' characteristics from an employee's perspective. Putra and Cho's findings revealed many traits, such as being respectful, compassionate, and effective communicator, which were the three most important behaviors that a leader needs to demonstrate effectiveness from their employee's perspective. Putra and Cho posited that sociable leaders who can control emotions have characteristics required for small general construction contractor business owners to become influential leaders.

One of the challenges that businesses face is leadership communication (Miftari, 2018). Miftari (2018) studied how leadership communication in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can influence employees and how positive communication can motivate employees to work. Miftari's findings indicated that changes in the business

environment and the economic system significantly impact transforming communication inside SMEs. Petrou et al. (2018) posited that when leaders communicate organizational changes clearly, employees focused on advancement are motivated. The importance of employee job satisfaction and commitment to an organization has increased within the past few years, as the leadership and culture of an organization have a significant impact on employees' commitment, trust, and satisfaction (Bose et al., 2020).

Empowerment among employees acts as a motivational tool that illustrates the accomplishment of organizational goals (Bose et al., 2020). Employees develop a sense of pride and importance within an organization, developing a unique sense of identification with the organization. Empowered employees tend to be more loyal to their leaders and employers (Bose et al., 2020). Business leaders using transformational leadership traits may lead employees to perform beyond expectations within their organizations.

### **Alternative Theories**

Transformational and transactional leadership theories are alternative theories. Transformational leaders focus on inspiring, challenging, and developing followers using coaching, mentoring, and support (Qian et al., 2020). Transactional leaders focus on individual task performance (Afsar et al., 2017). In the following paragraphs, I describe and discuss both theories, and I justify not selecting them for the framework of this study.

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Burns put the theory of transformational leadership in writing in 1978. Bass and Avolio (1993) extended the theory of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership theory is viable for supporting business leaders' innovations and successful

employee engagement. Burns (1978) described transformational leaders as those who build strong teams by empowering their followers and inspiring these followers to achieve their personal goals, and in doing so, help the entire organization achieve complete success. Researchers who have studied leadership consider transformational leadership a pragmatic phenomenon that can be measured and tested (Spoelstra, 2019).

A business leader's leadership style is essential for motivating an organization's members and mobilizing resources to fulfill company objectives (Abelha et al., 2018). Trained transformational leaders are likely to elevate their employees' level of work and engage in organizationally beneficial behaviors that directly or indirectly enhance their organization's effectiveness (Lai et al., 2020). Transformational leaders offer subordinates a chance for responsibility, decision opportunities, and challenges that involve their associates feeling further significant and secure, which may psychologically empower their employees (Bose et al., 2020).

Transformational leadership has a significant amount of influence on work motivation, which positively affects employees' performance. Abelha et al. (2018) reviewed the impact of organizational contextual factors and individual characteristics on the relationship between transformational leadership and job satisfaction. Abelha et al.'s research review findings disclosed a positive relationship between transformational leadership and job satisfaction. According to Abelha et al., transformational leaders strongly influence employees' attitudes and behaviors and inspire by engaging in effective communication that encourages trust, commitment, and job satisfaction.

El Toufaili (2018) conducted a research study to identify antecedents contributing to the formation of the transformational leadership style. El Toufaili's results revealed

that transformational leadership positively correlates with various organizational outcomes, producing positive results for organizations. In a small business, most employees look toward the organization's leader for directions and guidance on the business operations' structure, operations, and daily roles.

### ***Transactional Leadership Theory***

Transactional leadership theory's primary focus is on economic exchanges between leaders and followers, whereby leaders establish goals and objectives; structure, organize, and resource work; and establish rewards for followers who meet assigned task standards (Hannah et al., 2020). Developed by Bass (1985) and further developed by Bass and Riggio, a transactional leader provides followers with recognition and rewards contingent upon meeting specific firm objectives, avoiding taking risks, and being conscious of time and productivity. Transactional leaders are practical and resistant to change, discourage independent thinking, and always reward performance (Roibu et al., 2019).

Leaders who use the transactional leadership approach focus on outcomes and work well within organizations where the structure is necessary and not fit for organizations where creativity is encouraged (Roibu et al., 2019). In contrast to transformational leadership, transactional leadership promotes motivation driven by rewards and punishments, harming employee creativity. Transformational leadership is one of the most effective leadership styles for encouraging team creativity and inspiring employees to perform beyond expectations (Van Dijk et al., 2021). The goal of business leaders is to meet the basic needs of their organization.

### ***Transformational Versus Transactional Leadership***

**Transformational.** Transformational leaders may inspire, encourage, assist, and support their followers to accomplish organizational goals, achieve personal growth, and explore interests. Not all individuals are vulnerable to similar leadership styles. The effect of business leadership depends on the behavior of its leaders; the impact of business leadership depends on the personalities of employees, the environment, and the organization's characteristics (Renko et al., 2015). The transformational leadership style consists of charisma, motivation, and influence between leaders and followers.

**Transactional.** In contrast, transactional leadership involves style and operates as a social exchange between leaders and followers. The concept of positive leadership styles is the newest leadership concept that originated from transformational leadership and focuses on (a) entrepreneurial spirit, (b) optimistic attitude, (c) the existence of an atmosphere of trust between leaders, and (d) followers (Wegner, 2017). The leadership style in which a business leader engages is an essential factor that influences leadership effectiveness.

Effective communication is one of the most significant characteristics of a successful supervisor, manager, and business leader (AIOqlah, 2021). AIOqlah (2021) posited that for small business leaders, establishing their leadership style, forming positive relationships with workers, engaging in effective communication, and determining which circumstances best motivate their staff is important to the sustainability and success of their business.

### **Safety Leadership—Small Business**

Construction workplaces are multifaceted and physically unique, with the physical layout of the workplace changing daily. The constant physical change and volatility make the construction industry one of the most dangerous (Oswald et al., 2022). Safety leadership is behaviors that positively impact employees' safety behaviors (Cheung et al., 2021). Cheung researched how job characteristics and personal resources could affect safety-specific transformational leadership using the Job Demands-Resources model as the framework. According to Cheung et al., psychological capital (PsyCap), an individual's positive psychological state of development that can be cultivated and improved through training, social support, work autonomy, and risk perception, contributes significantly to safety-specific transformational leadership.

### **Small Business Strategies**

Small businesses comprise 99.9% of all firms in the US ( SBA, 2018b). Implementing a business strategy impacts small business performance, and small business owners' strategic choices influence the performance of their small businesses (Quang-Huy, 2021). Strategies for personal and professional success are needed when owning a small business. Most small successful business owners take the initiative to advance their product or service and avoid stagnation at all costs. Individuals starting a business need to understand the risks associated with business failure (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). Small business owners cite early recognition of the elements of business failure and acquire variable resources to improve the probability of their business success. (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). Regarding startup and business growth barriers, entrepreneurs operating in a city with a relatively small ethnic minority population suffer from many of

the same issues found in previous national or city studies where larger ethnic communities reside (Gupta, 2015).

### ***Small Business Adjustment Strategies***

Depending on business type and location, some small business owners may need to incorporate long-term sustainability strategies into their organization's business plan to survive demographical changes brought by gentrification, and economic disasters brought on by the pandemic. (Katare et al., 2021) conducted a study to determine how a financial disturbance caused by a pandemic can impact small businesses' resilience and adjustment strategies to survive. Katare et al. research results disclosed that small businesses adjusted their business operations to adapt to the changing times by changing how they serviced their customers, obtained supplies, and increased their social media presence. Katare et al. also noted that businesses with less capital liquidity are more likely to endure income losses and require a longer recovery time. Katare et al. concluded that the adjustment strategy of changing to online sales did not affect the results for some businesses, and increasing their social media presence decreased the likelihood of income loss and recovery time.

Williams and Needham (2016) studied how small business leaders can compete with demographical changes brought by gentrification. Williams and Needham found that many business owners within the small business community have to relocate or go out of business because of the rise in rent prices due to gentrification. A small business owner must have an adaptable plan to help adjust to the community's unforeseen changes. According to Williams and Needham, being unprepared and not planning for the

unexpected can impact the survival of a small business. Small business owners should have an adaptable plan to adjust to unforeseen changes within their business community.

Small business owners and their ability to plan long-term affect the success and sustainability of their organization. Small business owners, who emphasize sustaining their businesses past the 5-year failure threshold, must desire to adopt and integrate sustainable practices that align with their organization's goals. Leading change for sustainability requires new competencies, and business owner strategies and systems are important factors for changes needed for organizations to become more sustainable (Haney et al., 2020). Business owners implementing successful sustainability practices may lead their organizations to brand recognition, reputable goods, services, and increased business performance.

A small business owner's ability to learn from their failures before starting a new business is a significant driver of the character and success of a new venture (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018). Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2018) studied how an entrepreneur's experience with failure influences successive entrepreneurial business engagements. Amankwah-Amoah et al. found that entrepreneurs who draw lessons from business failure experiences could devise more proactive strategies to anticipate and respond to changes in the business environment. According to Amankwah-Amoah et al., the sequence of the four following dynamics offers a new logic for entrepreneurs wanting to start companies following prior failures: (a) grief and despair, (b) transition phase, (c) formation phase, and (d) founder's legacy phase.

In an era in which innovation, creativity, and pace of change fuel organizational success, leaders rely increasingly on followers to initiate change-oriented behaviors

beyond their role descriptions to improve the workplace (Li et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs set the direction that steers innovation, creativity, and sustainability within their organization (Stincelli, 2016).

### ***Small Business Customer Retention Strategies***

Customer retention is a key construct for any size business's survival and long-term success (Han et al., 2020). Small business owners' ability to build trust and maintain a positive customer-employee relationship creates a high repurchase rate that encourages customer retention in their small businesses (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). The origins of research regarding customer retention began in the early 1920s. (Copeland, 1923).

Copeland posited that the attitude of the consumer may be that of (a) recognition- having a favorable impression on the consumer, (b) preference – the strength of the brand depends on the degree of consumer preference, or (c) insistence – when the consumer will not accept a substitute brand only in cases of emergency.

Customer retention may affect the profitability of a small business in many ways. Farley (1964) researched why brand loyalty varied over products and discovered that consumers are brand loyal with a wide distribution and market concentration in the leading brand. Customers satisfied with their post-purchase decision are willing to repurchase the company's products and services and encourage their family, friends, and others to use them (Lee et al., 2020). Small business owners need to ensure they have strategies to retain customers. Small business owners may not retain customers and remain competitive without these strategies.

### **Marketing—Small Business**

The operations of a business are changing, and as a result, implementing changes is becoming more challenging for business leaders to remain competitive in their industry without marketing. Daugherty (2021) theorized that poor marketing strategies are a potential cause of the failure of over 50% of small businesses within their first 5 years of operation. Social media is a platform businesses use to create brand awareness and support. Small business owners may use social media as a marketing tool to establish communication and better understand the needs of their customers (Omolloh & Lao, 2020).

Small business owners using social media strategically create a competitive advantage for their small businesses. (Tarisai et al., 2020). While large corporations are valuable to the economy and can provide stability, small businesses offer tailored goods and services within their market segments (Long et al., 2016). Many business owners have received great benefits from social media to build broader and closer relationships with other businesses and their customers (Li et al., 2020).

### **Knowledge-Based Resources—Small Business**

Knowledge-based resources are imperative for new business ventures' survival and growth (Miaomiao & Asghar, 2018). Miaomiao and Asghar (2018) conducted a research study to gain insight into the relationship between a social network and knowledge-based resources by focusing on network size. Miaomiao and Asghar demonstrated a curved relationship between social network size and knowledge-based resources under low-trust conditions. Miaomiao and Asghar posited that a firm's ability to achieve competitive advantage is contingent on collecting, accumulating, integrating,

and using knowledge from the market to develop new products, services, and processes. Knowledge-based resources typically refer to the firms' tangible input resources. The accumulation, combination, and use of this knowledge are prerequisites for pursuing entrepreneurial and innovative activities.

### **Diversity and Inclusion—Small Business**

Initiating ways to increase an organization's clientele and discover practices to maximize diverse workforce benefits may be challenging for some small business owners. All organizations need appropriate leadership to oversee daily business activities. Madera et al. (2018) defined diversity management programs as executive programs that develop and maintain a diverse and inclusive workplace. Diversity management programs are human resource policies that focus on increasing and retaining a diverse workforce at all organizational levels.

Madera et al. (2018) conducted a study to uncover how organizational attitudes impact organizational investment in diversity management. Madera et al. found that investing in diversity management affects organizational attraction. Diversity management can be considered a strategic human resource likely to provide firms with a competitive advantage. According to Madera et al., the changes in the demographics of the American workforce have made a multicultural workforce a reality. As a result, many companies have developed diversity management programs from a growing multicultural workforce.

### **Minority-Owned Businesses—Small Business**

Culture may influence women entrepreneurs, motivation, and desire to start a small business within their community. Women may experience several threats to their

leadership ability from within their organizations if their ability to lead is questionable, and challenges from outside the team may come from investors or customers who may have lost faith in the business (Yang & del Carmen Triana, 2019). Yang and del Carmen Triana's (2019) research study explored how probable businesses led by women are more likely to fail than businesses led by men addressing three questions: (a) whether the leadership assignment is consistent with merit, (b) whether the business operates in a female-dominated industry, and (c) whether a spousal team operates the business. Yang and del Carmen Triana's research results disclosed that new businesses led by males are more likely to survive than female-led companies. The results were the same when a more competent team surrounded the male entrepreneur than in predominantly female and spousal teams. Yang and del Carmen Triana's findings suggested that female entrepreneurs receive less support than their male counterparts.

The establishment of black-owned businesses is a relevant thread running through the fabric of urban economies in emerging cities, producing economic strength through job creation and developing urban neighborhoods (Harper-Anderson, 2019). According to Harper-Anderson (2019), although the number of black-owned professional service businesses has grown, their performance lags in comparison to their counterparts of other races. Harper-Anderson conducted a research study using the empirical qualitative method to explore the factors influencing the outcome of black professional service business entrepreneurs in a large urban city. Harper-Anderson indicated intersections of structural changes in the economy, including the rise of the professional service sector, contemporary translations of entrepreneurship, and persistent racial barriers that shape the performance of black businesses. In addition, Harper-Anderson's results displayed the

need for transparency and accountability regarding policy and implementation of programs designed to create opportunities and inclusion for black-owned businesses.

### **Strategic Organizational Management—Business Model Concept**

The business model concept has become an acceptable unit of analysis in strategic management and entrepreneurship and is subject to change and innovation (Schneider & Claub, 2019). Business leaders use business models in strategic management to formulate a competitive strategy (Baláz, 2021). A suitable business model is essential for businesses to successfully establish themselves in the market and become competitive (Baláz, 2021).

Wiesner et al. (2018) conducted a research review to develop a model for managing change toward environmental sustainability within SMEs. Wiesner et al.'s model represents SMEs' first comprehensive environmental sustainability change management model. The change management model offers guidance on how to effectively manage and engage human resources in the pursuit of environmental sustainability, identifies critical areas to be successful with environmental sustainability initiatives, and provides clear themes in the environmental sustainability journey of SMEs. According to Wiesner et al., concepts such as a sustainability department, a designated sustainability manager, and a separate budget for sustainability are prevalent in most large organizations but are absent from most SMEs.

### **Organization Design—Small Business**

The effectiveness of an organization is contingent on the design to fit within its environment and goals (Ingrams 2020). The global demand for business leaders to achieve sustainability is rising in an increasingly globalized workforce. A foremost challenge for small business leaders today is the need for their businesses to evolve

continually to meet the community's expectations. A business with a climate for creativity is a representation of its culture. Organizational attractiveness can result in employees having a positive attitude toward the organization, which potential applicants can perceive as a great workplace (Maier et al., 2022).

### **Innovative Strategies—Small Business**

Successful innovative strategies of quality leadership are essential in any organization and business environment. According to Kader and Tang (2016), leadership roles within an organization are important as the organization's leaders are the organization's soul. The success of any organization is contingent on the leadership styles leaders apply within the organization and the business environment (Kader & Tang, 2016).

Kader and Tang (2016) conducted a quantitative research review to examine the relationship between leadership styles and the business performance of multinational companies. Kader and Tang indicated that transactional leadership styles influence business performance positively as employees are clear about their goals and rewards and encouraged to meet organizational goals and supervisor expectations without confusion. Additionally, employees who receive supervision from a transformational leader are motivated, confident, and optimistic about their future. Employees with authentic leaders encourage transparency and encourage everyone to contribute their thoughts and communication as elements. Employees with spiritual leaders focus on the workgroup to efficiently maximize their output, while integrity and consideration are necessary for performance success.

## **Supporting and Contrasting Theories**

### ***Servant Leadership Theory***

Greenleaf (1970) created the term servant leadership from Hesse's novel *The Journey to the East* and theorized the idea of a servant leader as servant first, which implies that one wants to serve first prior to becoming a leader (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2020). Langhof and Guldenberg (2020) inferred that from Greenleaf's viewpoint on the servant leadership theory, servant leadership philosophy applies to individual leaders, institutions, and organizations.

According to Langhof and Guldenberg, servant leadership is a comprehensive philosophy relevant to the populace in contrast to other leadership styles. The core concept of servant leadership theory defines leaders as servants first and places followers' interests over their interests as leaders. When servant leadership theory in comparison to transformational leadership theory, the following were some of the components and similarities between both methods: (a) awareness, (b) building community, (c) conceptualization, and (d) commitment to employee growth and communication (Thompson et al., 2019).

The foundation of servant leadership is the reliance that leaders express themselves openly and honestly while ensuring that every follower's highest priority needs are met (Thompson et al., 2019). Thompson et al. (2019) researched to investigate the moderating role of a span of supervision in the association between servant leadership and multiple outcomes such as job satisfaction and follower performance. Thompson et al.'s research uncovered that servant leaders do not operate similarly within different degrees of supervision. An increased span of control creates distance between leaders and

followers. According to Thompson et al., servant leadership results in positive and ethical work outcomes when leaders communicate concisely and meet their employees' main concerns.

### ***Laissez-Faire Theory***

Laissez-faire leadership is associated with low job satisfaction, leader effectiveness, and satisfaction with the leader (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Laissez-faire leaders avoid their leadership responsibilities and are not involved with their followers. An element of leadership is attracting workers and encouraging them to invest in achieving the organization's goals. The size of a business startup may have a significant, positive moderating effect on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and startup performance. Leaders tend to engage in transformational leadership more often than laissez-faire leadership (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019).

Breevaart and Zacher (2019) conducted a research study to examine the use of both transformational and laissez-faire leadership. Breevaart and Zacher's findings showed a reduction in perceived leader effectiveness when leaders showed lower transformational and higher laissez-faire leadership. Zaech and Baldegger (2017) posited that among transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership, there were no significant, direct effects on startup performance for transactional leadership or laissez-faire leadership. Business leaders engaging in a laissez-faire leadership style engage in a less modeling form of effective leadership, resulting in informal leadership and team task performance (Wellman et al., 2019). Though leaders' use of transformational leadership is a dynamic and efficient form of leadership, laissez-faire leadership, in contrast, is a passive and ineffective way to lead.

### ***Social Exchange Theory***

Social exchange theory originates from sociological studies in which the following four researchers, (a) Homans, (b) Thibaut, (c) Kelley, and (d) Blau, examined information exchange using groups of people and individuals (Emerson, 1976). Emerson, through the social exchange theory, emphasized the differences and similarities of each individual work as follows: (a) Homans focus was the psychology of instrumental behavior, (b) Thibaut and Kelley's view was the psychological concepts, and (c) Blau's emphasis was on the technical-economic analysis launching the exchange approach. Emerson posited that using resource exchange can explain an individual's behavior; a person's behavior is contingent on another person's actions. Emerson asserted that resource exchange could explain an individual's behavior; a person's behavior is contingent on another person's actions.

The social exchange theory identified the following four reasons why individuals engage in social exchange: (a) direct reward, (b) an expected gain in reputation and influence on others, (c) altruism, and (d) anticipated reciprocity on the part of others (Omolloh & Lao, 2020). According to social exchange theory, individuals supported within an organization will have a more outstanding work commitment, which promotes in-role behavior conducive to the organization's successful operation (Tan et al., 2021).

### ***Adaptive Leadership Theory***

Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership theory revealed how individuals change and adapt to new circumstances, contrasting with transformational leadership theory. The critical components of adaptive leadership theory are that adaptive leaders engage in activities that mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus the attention of others. The

most significant characteristic of adaptive leadership is preparing and driving followers to deal with change. Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership theory revealed how individuals change and adapt to new circumstances, contrasting with transformational leadership theory. The critical components of adaptive leadership theory are that adaptive leaders engage in activities that mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus the attention of others. The most significant characteristic of adaptive leadership is preparing and driving followers to deal with change.

Yaghi's (2017) study on adaptive leadership disclosed that while transformational-transactional leadership theory presents a continuum of practices, adaptive leadership style was found not to be a continuum but rather a unique leadership style that managers exercise depending on their needs. Baig et al. (2019) defined everyday leadership as when leaders and employees work together toward a shared vision and use daily calculated interaction to promote better connection, communication, and community. Studies examining leadership styles and employee performance show that managers' leadership style significantly influences employees' performance (Baig et al., 2019).

### **Charismatic Leaders and Business Performance**

Charismatic leaders can inspire, motivate, stimulate, and significantly impact their followers' motivation, values, and performance (Hansen et al., 2020). According to Hansen et al. (2020), charismatic leaders' followers will go beyond their interests to fulfill their organization's goals. Hansen et al. studied the impact of charismatic leadership on firm performance and recruitment development. When theorized and

calculated applicably, Hansen et al. found that charismatic leadership may drive an organization's performance.

Factors like compensation, work environment, and a leader can influence employee job satisfaction (Bazawi et al., 2019). According to Bazawi et al. (2019), leaders and their leadership styles play a pivotal role within an organization, and engaging in a charismatic leadership style can improve organizational performance. Bazawi et al. conducted a research study and analysis using a Structural Equation Model to determine the influence of charismatic leadership on job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Bazawi et al. revealed the following: (a) charismatic leadership has a positive influence on employee job satisfaction, (b) high job satisfaction reduces turnover intentions, (c) job satisfaction positively influences organizational citizenship behaviors, and (d) charismatic leadership significantly affects turnover intentions, and (e) charismatic leadership positively influences organizational citizenship behaviors.

### **Small Business Sustainability and Leadership**

The 7S model framework involves many elements, including leadership style, a vital factor for organizational success and sustainability, and aligns with numerous leadership theories and conceptual frameworks. Avolio and Bass (2001) described business leaders in the full range of leadership models, including transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Using a transformational leadership style, business leaders use charisma and communication to share organizational goals and employee creativity. Business leaders adopt this leadership style in fast-changing competitive markets that are more present in a modern economy (Oubrich et al., 2021). In contrast,

business leaders using the transactional leadership style reward their employees for achieving goals and use corrective measures to make employees follow safety measures (Oswald et al., 2022). Business leaders adopt this management style in a stable, less turbulent environment. In the laissez-faire style, leaders make few decisions and allow their staff to choose solutions they deem appropriate Bass and Avolio, 1993 describe four elements of transformational leadership style: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) individual consideration, and (d) intellectual stimulation (Bass and Avolio, 1993). The leadership model is changing and requires a more creative position by incorporating multiple perspectives rather than single-pointed or one-dimensional (Gheerawo et al., 2020). COVID-19 has shown us that leadership styles must evolve, and creativity in leadership is essential.

### **Transition**

Section 1 states the problem statement, purpose statement, the nature of the study, and the conceptual framework for the research. In Section 1, I included information significant to the foundation of the study: the background of the problem, research questions, interview questions, operational definitions, definitions of assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study. The professional and academic literature review includes a critical analysis and synthesis review of leadership concepts, sustainability, and similar and contrasting leadership theories. In Section 2, I provided discussion details on the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, and reliability and validity of the study. In Section 3, I presented the research findings, the applications to business

practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further research, reflections, and a conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

Size, nature, and business type can impact innovation and business strategies within an organization. Change is a factor in the long-term survival of any firm (Ng & Kee, 2018). In this qualitative multiple case study, I aimed to identify what strategies have the most influence on small business sustainability. The success of any organization is contingent on the effectiveness of the strategy implemented by the business owner, the leadership styles that leaders apply, and the business environment. Innovation and business strategies are essential, regardless of size, for enterprises to remain competitive in a global market where change and flexibility are keys to success. Business leaders create strategies to maintain a competitive edge above the competition and achieve long-term success.

### **Purpose Statement**

Through this qualitative multiple case study, I aimed to explore strategies for small general construction contractor business owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The target population for this study was three small general construction contractor business owners within the southeastern region of the United States who had sustained their business beyond 5 years. The findings from this study may create a continuance of successful small business sustainability and profitability within the southeastern United States region. The implications for social change may include creating jobs and small business references for future small business establishments within the community.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The traditional role of the researcher is data collection and analysis (Bergmark, 2020). My role as the researcher was to recruit participants and collect, analyze, and

interpret the data collected. The role of the qualitative researcher is to interview, observe, and validate the participants' contributions by documenting their words and action in written reports (Saldaña, 2018). The qualitative researcher relies on the participants' knowledge of the research topic while maintaining the participants as essential to obtaining the meaning of their lived experiences (Simonovich & Spurlark, 2021).

My role as the researcher was to use the most effective data collection method in the process of collecting data for this multiple case study. I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix A) that served as a guide to address all questions without deviation with every participant. As the researcher, I served as the interviewer and conducted semistructured interviews with the questions I developed and outlined in this study.

During the interviews, I asked each participant the questions I had outlined in this study and expected each response to reflect the participant's lived experiences. As the researcher, I collected, analyzed, and excluded any biases from the responses to each participant's interview questions and questionnaires. My relationship with the research topic and geographic area reflects my interest in starting a small business within the geographical area of this study and my knowledge and educational background in operating a small business.

My professional experiences include 30 years of working in the financial services sector. My work has included stock trading analysis, market analysis, sales practice, market performance, supervising, interviewing, training less experienced regulators, team building, and motivating employees. My most recent work experiences have been as a teacher, counselor, and auditor. My past work experiences did not involve a personal

relationship with small business contractors in the Southeast region of the United States. My interest in conducting a study on strategies for small business sustainability beyond 5 years originated from small businesses' role within the community in the Southeast region of the United States.

The Belmont Report, created by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979), provides guidelines for ethical practices in research involving human subjects. It was my responsibility in the role of the researcher to conduct ethical research and adhere to and use all principles set within the Belmont Report, specifically the principles of respect for persons. The Belmont Report's three general principles are respect for human subjects, beneficence, and justice. Additionally, I completed the required National Institutes of Health training course, Protecting Human Research Participants.

### **Participants**

Participants met the criteria for inclusion in this study by being profitable small general contractor business owners for at least 5 years. The study population consisted of three small general construction contractor business owners in the Southeast region of the United States. The small business owners sustained their businesses for a minimum of 5 years of operation and have fewer than 500 employees. Participants must possess the knowledge, background, and characteristics to answer questions that only the participants could answer accurately (Chandler et al., 2020).

Approximately 11,200 small businesses with fewer than 500 employees were in the targeted geographic location for this study (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). As a homeowner within my local community for over 10 years, I was familiar with most of the

small general contractor businesses within the area. I collected eight business cards to obtain contact details for each potential participant. Additionally, I extracted data from the SBA within the Southeast region of the United States. I obtained a list of company names to identify possible participants who met the eligibility criteria if my initial method did not provide the needed participants. Then I emailed the business owners an invitation letter (see Appendix B) to introduce myself. Inviting participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experience, thoughts, and feelings about the target phenomenon and making them comfortable during the interview process is advantageous in receiving valid information for a study (Qambar & Waheed, 2021).

When I made contact and received responses from business owners stating their willingness to participate in my study, I emailed a letter of consent. The letter included an introduction, a brief version of my doctoral study, a consent form, and instructions for each participant to follow. Participants had to solidify their voluntary participation in this study by responding “I consent” to my invitation letter, followed by confirming a date, place, and time for our first meeting. Participant willingness is a factor to consider when selecting participants who meet the participant selection criteria (Jiaying et al., 2022). Leading up to our initial meeting, I established a working relationship of trust with participants by verbally communicating and responding to their queries on an as-needed basis to reassure them of the privacy and confidentiality of the study.

### **Research Method**

The three choices for research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative research is firsthand research in which data are nonnumerical, realistic, robust, and well informed and in which data

generate findings not attained by statistical measures or quantification (Nassaji, 2020).

The qualitative method was the correct approach, as the data gathered were not numerical. This study's main idea was explored using open-ended interview questions to determine the most effective strategies small business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The qualitative method was the most suitable method for this study because the qualitative method was in alignment with my research goals and the research question. In contrast, researchers using the quantitative method investigate many factors, some of which may be related to or influence each other, allowing the researcher to analyze varying factors related to the research question (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

Quantitative research generates numerical data. Quantitative researchers use hypotheses to examine variables' relationships (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study. In this study, I aimed to gather insights on successful strategies that small general construction contractor business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years, not to conduct hypothesis testing, analyze numerical data, or measure or compare data relationships. A mixed-method research design combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques within a single study (Yin, 2018). Researchers use the mixed method to incorporate both the quantitative and qualitative research methods when neither method alone substantiates the purpose of a study (Headley & Plano Clark, 2020). The mixed method was not appropriate for this study. The mixed methods approach involves using elements of both quantitative and qualitative research. Similar to quantitative methodologies, the mixed method was not

appropriate because addressing this study's purpose did not require testing statistical hypotheses about variables' relationships.

In this study, I aimed to gather insights into small general construction contractor business owners' successful strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Quantitative and mixed methods were not appropriate for this study, as the purpose of the study was not to test hypotheses or examine variables but to gain insights into successful strategies used by small general construction contractor business owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

### **Research Design**

A research design links the data to be collected and analyzed to answer the initial question of the study research question (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015; Yin, 2018). The following are primary qualitative research designs: (a) case study, (b) ethnographical, (c) phenomenological, and (d) narrative. The three qualitative research designs inappropriate for this study were ethnographical, phenomenological, and narrative. Researchers using the ethnographical research design concentrate on a group's culture or social world (Hod et al., 2020; Schlieve, 2020). The ethnographical design did not support the focus of this study because I was not exploring the lives and culture of a group. Researchers using the phenomenological research design focus on uncovering and researching the accuracy of human life experiences, the perceptions, interpretations, and recollections of those lived experiences (Fieck et al., 2020; Idrees et al., 2021). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study as the focus of the study was not the interpretation of lived experiences of the participants. Narrative inquiry research requires the researcher to understand personal stories from individual voices (Liu & Tseng, 2021). The narrative

research design was not appropriate for this study as I was not exploring a personal account that interpreted an event or sequence of events.

The concept of research quality and the method reliability by which the data are collected, analyzed, and tested are all in line with the proper procedures for achieving accurate results, including any limitations to the research study. According to Morse (2015), the strategies recommended to achieve rigor and evaluate qualitative research studies are prolonged engagement; persistent observation; thick, rich description; negative case analysis; clarifying researcher bias; member checking; and triangulation. To achieve the research quality of my doctoral study, I used in-depth interviews with small business owners who had sustained profitability and sustainability past 5 years.

### **Population and Sampling**

Small businesses created 9.6 million new jobs, accounting for 64.9% of new job creation, from 2000 to 2018 (SBA, 2019). This doctoral study target population was three small general construction contractor business owners within the southeastern United States who sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. As of 2016, there were 30.7 million small businesses within the United States (SBA, 2019). The industries with the highest share of equally owned firms are real estate and rental and leasing, and about 1 in 10 are family owned and equally held (SBA, 2019).

Several methods are available for determining population sampling. A fixed-size sampling design is present if all sampling design samples have the same sample size (Hedayat et al., 2019). In research, the population will comprise the complete set of individuals, events, or objects that exhibit the behaviors and possess the researcher's characteristics of interest (Berndt, 2020). Sampling techniques in processing research

data play a significant role in determining the research outcome (Alim & Shukla, 2020).

This study's selection criteria comprised participants knowledgeable about leadership and small business sustainability beyond the 5-year failure threshold.

Data adequacy guides sample sizes in qualitative research to provide a rich and nuanced account of the phenomenon studied (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The small sample size in this study was adequate to aid in identifying themes and sampling until data saturation was reached. The sample size for qualitative research is smaller than for quantitative analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

I selected the three general construction contractor business owners with businesses that had survived beyond 5 years. When choosing the sampling methods for this qualitative study, I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Using purposive sampling for this study guided the selection process and complied with the empirical and theoretical portions. Snowball sampling data collection is a survey sample enrichment approach for hard-to-reach populations (Kennedy-Shaffer et al., 2021). Using the snowball sampling method, I identified potential participants in the population. The selected research participants who met the criteria for this study had the opportunity to recruit other qualified participants interested in participating in this study.

Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, I selected participants with knowledge and experience within the business phenomenon. Participants had the opportunity to recruit other participants with equal or greater knowledge and expertise for this study. The information discussed with potential participants in a research study needs to align with the participants' abilities and interests (Xu et al., 2020).

## **Ethical Research**

The qualitative researcher identifies participants who can answer the research question (Gill, 2020). The researcher must identify any potential harm to participants and allow them to decide voluntarily whether to participate (Kawar et al., 2016). The guidelines, protocols, and processes essential to conducting authentic, ethical research are key values for researchers to understand. The core principle of ethical research practice is voluntary informed consent (Brear, 2018). Brear (2018) further stated that voluntary informed consent refers to providing potential study participants with unbiased information about the foreseeable risks and benefits of being involved in research and allowing the participants to decide without undue coercive influence with incentives to participate.

Informed consent is essential to any research study and helps ensure better understanding and voluntariness to participate in research (Mathur et al., 2019). Informed consent forms were prepared with the request for participants to sign and return after the participants' acceptance to participate voluntarily in the study. In the informed consent, participants received information on the essential steps contributing to this study. Ethical research should require the researcher to protect the rights and identity of the selected participants. An appropriate ethical framework should address the researcher's responsibilities in protecting the rights of participants (Koutsombogera & Vogel, 2017).

Protecting the participants' rights and identity in ethical research is vital. Researchers' investment of time, the need to respond to issues that arise during the project, and the energy put into relationship building with participants are critical for self-determination and research ownership (Stout et al., 2020). To build effective, genuine

relationships, I ensured that participants' trust was built and respected with the assurance that the results of this study would assist future business owners with effective strategies for business sustainability beyond 5 years. Participation must be voluntary, with an opportunity to discuss participation, agree to participate, or disagree (Mathur et al., 2019). Participants received information that their participation was voluntary before and during the interview. Participants had the right to withdraw from this study, with no explanation required. No incentives were offered or given to participants for participating in this study

The participants' rights were protected by following *The Belmont Report* verbatim on ethical principles and guidelines with respect for person, beneficence, and justice. I ensured that ethical protection for participants was adequate by complying with the ethical standards set by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and U.S. federal and civil regulations on ethical standards. I requested permission from the Walden University IRB for the ethical protection of the participants in this study. In addition, I completed the National Institutes of Health training course, *Protecting Human Research Participants*, to meet the IRB requirements for approval.

Once I received IRB approval, I emailed invitations to each participant identifying myself as a Walden University Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) candidate with the approved IRB number 07-08-22-0379798 assigned. I maintained participant confidentiality and anonymity by assigning each participant an alphabetic identifier using letters and numbers. The alphabetic identifier assured confidentiality by protecting the identity of each participant (i.e., P1 for the first participant, P2 for the second, and P3 for the third). I recorded all related participants, data, and materials, including interview

recordings, transcripts, and informed consent forms from this study. I stored this information safely on a password-protected computer, on a universal serial bus (USB) flash drive, and in paper format. All data and materials associated with this study will remain locked in a cabinet and destroyed after 5 years.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The traditional role of the researcher is data collection and analysis (Bergmark, 2020). As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument responsible for collecting and analyzing data for this study. Semistructured interviews using open-ended questions during face-to-face meetings were the primary data collection technique using an interview protocol (see Appendix A). The organization of questions in qualitative interviewing establishes that open-ended questions influence the data collection quality (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Using open-ended questions allowed the participants to detail their experiences and provide an in-depth understanding of what strategies small general construction contractors business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Data collection is necessary for ethical practice, accountability, and clinical decision-making (Schultz et al., 2022). I started the data collection process by conducting face-to-face semistructured interviews with each small business owner. I used the same open-ended questions (See Appendix A) with each individual I constructed for this case study during each interview for the data collection. I used my smartphone (Apple IX) as an audio recorder and notepad during face-to-face interviews to take raw notes throughout the data collection phase of my research. Responses to participants' questions were audio-recorded. Using Microsoft office .com, the audio-recorded data was transcribed, and I used NVivo 12 software to identify common themes.

Member checking is commonly used to verify data accuracy once the researcher has completed the collection and analysis of the data (Thirusha et al., 2018). I completed my final entry in my notepad when all data was collected using other data collection instruments. I closed each interview with gratitude and offered to share the research findings with the participant after completing my study. I conducted a member checking interview meeting with each participant to discuss and clarify their audio-recorded response and handwritten notes gathered during interviews. Through my interviews, audio-recorded data, handwritten notes, and member checking, I achieved data saturation for this study. I reviewed, analyzed the collected interview data, and reported the findings and conclusions with each participant.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Interviewing is a common data collection tool in qualitative research (Patkin, 2020). Interviews are a valuable source and an important process to collect case study evidence (Yin, 2018). I used my smartphone (Apple IX) to create audio recordings during the semistructured interviews to collect data for this study. The role of the researcher is to collect and interpret data (Cluley et al., 2020). As the primary researcher for this study, I arrived promptly at each participant's agreed-upon location, date, and scheduled meeting time. I had a notepad, a smartphone (Apple IX) fully charged, and the interview protocol questions I developed (see Appendix A) printed to interview participants, take notes, and record data. Observation in qualitative research is one of the original most fundamental research methods approaches (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018).

Conversely, observations can create bias or deception, as observing participants may modify their behavior because of other distractions. Using audio recordings during

interviews provides a researcher with a more precise interpretation of the interview than taking notes (Yin, 2018). I had the questions outlined in the interview protocol (see Appendix A) printed out, leaving space to add notes. My smartphone (Apple IX) functioned as a time tracker and audio recorder.

Several advantages and disadvantages apply to data collection techniques. The benefits and advantages of data collection are: (a) a contextual learning experience for the researcher, (b) gaining knowledge and insight into the research study from the participants, and (c) developing participant learning and motivation. Conversely, the disadvantages are (a) time-consuming for both participant and researcher, (b) logistics and financial costs, and (c) susceptibility to biases (Haghani & Sarvi, 2018; Wahyu & Putu, 2020). The data collection process took approximately three weeks. I audio-recorded participants during the interviews using my smartphone (Apple IX) as a voice recorder. Then, I emailed each recording to my private email address, created a folder, and saved each file on a password-protected USB mass storage device. Qualitative researchers use member checking, a technique that aims to increase the trustworthiness and, more specifically, the credibility of the research study (Iivari, 2018). Member checking in research is a technique that confirms the accuracy and trustworthiness of the collected data. After the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and the data analysis was completed, I emailed each participant within 5 days to schedule a member-checking meeting. Meeting with the participants allowed for sharing the interpretations of the data analyzed and allowing each participant to provide feedback, follow-up questions, and clarify, add, or remove any information not interpreted correctly in my perception of their responses.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Data organization techniques to track and collect data are essential during data collection. To create a clear audit trail, data organization began at the inception of the data collection process. Each participant's file includes the alphabetic identifier assigned (i.e., P1 for the first participant, P2 for the second, and P3 for the third), the location, the date, the time of the interview, the informed consent form, and a transcription of the interviews.

Researchers can create a reflexive journal to document the daily logistics of the research process, rationales, and personal reflections (Nowell et al., 2017). I used NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to support and transcribe the analysis of the raw data collected through interviews and audio recordings. The confidentiality of the three participant files was stored following Walden University IRB requirements.

Preserving raw data records, written notes, audio transcripts, and a journal will help keep data organized. As the primary researcher, I maintain the data collected on a USB, a password-protected digital storage device with a coded labeling system to protect the participants' identities. I saved the data collected for this doctoral study for 5 years on audio and electronic devices. After 5 years, the data will be shredded and destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis requires the researcher to review notes and code data for categorization (Renz et al., 2018). Analyzing qualitative data involves coding, verifying, and exploring the data collected is the most important component of qualitative research

(O'Kane et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers begin with raw qualitative data from notes and audio recordings to begin data analysis (Watkins, 2017).

As the researcher, I began data analysis once all data was collected and organized. There are five steps to analyzing data in qualitative research: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling the data, (c) reassembling the data, (d) interpreting the data, and (e) reassembling the data using identified themes to draw conclusions (Yin, 2018). I started by compiling data by similar patterns. During this step, I compiled and grouped data on content similarities. I used NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to support and transcribe the analysis of the raw data collected through interviews and audio recordings.

NVivo software allows researchers to store data and perform an in-depth analysis of uploaded data resulting in the emergence of codes, patterns, and themes during the research process (Elliott-Mainwaring, 2021). Using NVivo 12 software, I organized, identified, and grouped repetitive themes within the data. Coding in qualitative research connects themes back to the data and the data back to the themes and enables researchers to identify, organize, and build theory (Parameswaran et al., 2020). I created codes and a codebook using the interview transcripts in NVivo 12 based on each participant's responses to the interview questions. I then reassembled the data and grouped them into core themes for a direct relation to the research questions.

Grouping into core themes narrows any themes developed while disassembling the data (Lochmiller, 2021). Lochmiller (2021) stated that coding aims to identify relevant passages of text for further analysis in subsequent coding cycles. I developed codes for grouping and organizing data, allowing for efficiency when taking steps in the

data analysis process. I used codes that form a relationship to identify an adequate number of categories to articulate a theme. Using NVivo 12 software helped to identify patterns and themes.

I interpreted the data by reviewing the sources to identify patterns from participants' interview recordings. I used thematic analysis to identify themes from the research data. Braun and Clarke (2022) posited that thematic analysis is a good choice for researchers who feel confident they know what they are trying to achieve. Thematic analysis in qualitative research identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns and themes within data analysis (Castleberry et al., 2018). Using thematic analysis helps the researcher identify elements that need to come together for successful qualitative analysis and demonstrate how they connect and build on each other.

Researchers using thematic analysis can define participants' reports and aggregate these understandings into identifiable patterns (Lochmiller, 2021). Identifying and using a theme, as the basic unit of textual analysis, describes repeated examples of a concept as it appears in speech or some other medium of communication (Snodgrass et al., 2020). I reviewed and drew conclusions relating to the research questions and core themes using the participants' perceptions of the research questions. When communicating the results of a thematic analysis, it is essential to structure findings as they relate to themes to substantiate statements drawn from the data collected (Lochmiller, 2021).

### **Reliability and Validity**

The results of the validity and reliability of qualitative research are crucial elements that provide evidence to the quality of the research conducted (Hayashi et al., 2019). Hayashi et al. (2019) further disclosed that validity in qualitative studies assures

the quality and influence of the results. The purpose of reliability is to minimize any preconceived notions and errors found in a study (Yin, 2018). Validity in research is a conclusion based on evidence that researchers can achieve by detailing the procedures and methods that led to a study's findings (Roberts et al., 2019).

### **Reliability**

Reliability assesses the consistency of results over time (Hayashi et al., 2019). Reliability includes the researcher's ability to document the accuracy of the results from the data collected. The interviews in this study were video, audio-recorded, reviewed, and transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the participant's responses to the interview questions to construct reliability. Reliability also refers to the number of times the research procedures can be performed under the same circumstances and achieve the same results (Yin, 2018). To minimize biases as the researcher, I followed the interview procedures methodically by asking each participant the same questions and not interjecting any new questions that may lead to conflicting results and decrease the reliability of the study. Reliability measures the consistency of the study results, which results will be repeatable over time (Hayashi et al., 2019). The interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to ensure that the participant's experiences of the phenomenon under investigation were accurate.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the stability of data. An evaluation of the quality of the data collection, data, theory, and theory generation is essential in a study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Member checking is a technique used in qualitative research that aims to increase the trustworthiness and, more specifically, the credibility of the

research study (Iivari, 2018). To ensure dependability, the interviews were audio-recorded, the responses were transcribed, and I used NVivo software to analyze the data collected. To ensure future researchers achieve similar results, the data analysis for this study was based on the audio-recorded and written data collected.

### **Validity**

Validity is one component of trustworthiness in qualitative research and is established by exploring the following three main aspects: (a) content, (b) criterion-related, and (c) construct validity (Roberts et al., 2019). Validity determines whether the research truly measures what it intended to measure (Roberts et al., 2019). The validity of the results in a qualitative design is an interpretation influenced by the lens through which the researcher has interpreted the data (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Roberts et al. (2019) noted that determining validity can be achieved by specifying the methods and procedures that lead to the research conclusion. The types of validity essential to qualitative studies are descriptive, interpretative, and theoretical validities (Hayashi et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers can establish research trustworthiness, reliability, and validity using the following four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985 as cited in Nowell et al., 2017): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Nowell et al. (2017) noted that qualitative researchers establish credibility using observation, data collection triangulation, and member checking. To increase the credibility of this study, I implemented member checking by emailing each participant a summary of the results of the data analysis after transcribing and analyzing the audio data collected. Participants had the opportunity to review the results of the data analysis within 5 days of email receipt to ensure proper discussion during member-checking meetings.

Member checking is necessary for credible qualitative research (Motulsky, 2021). I used multiple data collection triangulation to triangulate data I collected from audio-recorded interviews, raw data notes, and member-checking reviews.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability measures a study's generalizability and how it applies to people and situations. Establishing confirmability is the accomplishment of credibility, transferability, and dependability. Transferability offers evidence that the study research findings can apply to other frameworks, settings, and situations (Essa et al., 2019). To ensure transferability, I provided information about this study's geographic limits, the number of participants, and the research method and design. I used triangulation to increase transferability, and sufficient evidence from the results of this study provided limitations designed for future scholars using the same approach to reach similar conclusions.

### ***Confirmability***

The data collected was reviewed for accuracy. I used member checking to review the validity of the data analysis. To establish confirmability, I emailed participants a synopsis of the data analysis results and requested feedback at the member checking meeting to ensure proper data interpretation. Confirmability deems whether the analysis of the data was logical and whether the interpretations based on data analysis were unbiased (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). The data collected were analyzed and interpreted to certify credibility, and an explanation of how the study conclusions were established was documented.

### ***Data Saturation***

Qualitative research researchers often have collected enough data to reach saturation (Gill, 2020). Data saturation is the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no changes to the research study (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). Data saturation occurs when no further information from interviews and observations is achievable during a research study. Qualitative researchers often use data saturation to justify a sample size (Gill, 2020). Identifying knowledgeable participants who can provide data in response to the research question, participants willing to spend the time necessary to share their experiences was an essential part of the recruitment process when selecting participants for this study. Sample sizes in qualitative research are purposive and relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Studies with a range may not need many participants (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

To achieve data saturation for this study, I focused on obtaining quality data using three small business owners. The sample size was small enough to allow for an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the data collected but was large enough to attain data saturation. To ensure data saturation, I analyzed the data collected from multiple data collection sources, audio recordings, and raw data notes until no new findings or themes emerged. If data saturation were not achieved after the data analysis of the initial interviews, additional participants would have been solicited from the list of companies I extracted from the SBA within the Southeast Region of the United States until data saturation occurred. However, I reached data saturation with the data collected and analyzed when my initial participants were interviewed.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I included the purpose statement for this study. I presented a review of the research design, methodology, criteria for participant selection, and sampling. I used a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study design to explore leadership strategies and small business sustainability. In Section 2, I justified ensuring alignment with the research question, purpose statement, and specific business problems and discussed criteria for collecting, managing, storing, and interviewing. The final part of Section 2 includes ethical research, data collection techniques, instruments, analysis, and reliability and validity to ensure the doctoral study meets quality standards.

In Section 3, I presented data analysis and findings from the data review and analysis. I included a discussion and a presentation of the application of the results. Finally, I included a report of recommendations for further research on the sustainability of small businesses beyond 5 years and the implications for achieving positive social change.

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

#### **Introduction**

Through this qualitative multiple case study, I aimed to explore the strategies used by small general contractor construction business owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The data came from three small general construction contractor business owners who had successfully used strategies to extend their business beyond 5 years in the southeastern region of the United States. The findings showed methods that small general construction contractor business leaders used to motivate employees, build a customer base, and sustain their business beyond 5 years.

The results of my data analysis include a discussion observing how the themes relate to McKinsey's 7S framework and other conceptual frameworks. In Section 3, I discuss these themes and offer my perspectives regarding applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and further research. I conclude my doctoral study with a reflection on the doctoral study process.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching question for this study was the following: What strategies do small general construction contractor business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years? I used the following seven open-ended questions relating to the strategies that small general contractor construction business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years to conduct the interviews:

1. What strategies do you use to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
2. What challenges did you encounter when implementing strategies to sustain your business?

3. What do you do to address the challenges when implementing new strategies for your business?
4. How do you determine the proficiency of your strategies for the sustainability of your business?
5. How do you measure the effectiveness of those strategies' proficiencies to sustain your business?
6. What leadership strategies do you find most effective to sustain your business?
7. What additional information do you want to share regarding strategies to sustain a small general construction contractor business for more than 5 years?

There were three participants, each owning their small general construction contractor business for over the 5-year threshold. Once the participants consented via email to participate in my doctoral study, I scheduled a meeting with each participant for an interview. The data collection process took approximately 3 weeks. Using my iPhone as a voice recorder, I recorded participants during the interviews.

I emailed each recording to my private email address, created a folder, and saved each file on a password-protected USB mass storage device. A transcription for each recording using the transcribe feature in Microsoft Word accessed from Office.com was created. A summary review of the data analysis findings was created, followed by member checking to confirm the accuracy of the data analysis with each participant. All participants had the opportunity to clarify or add information during the member-checking stages.

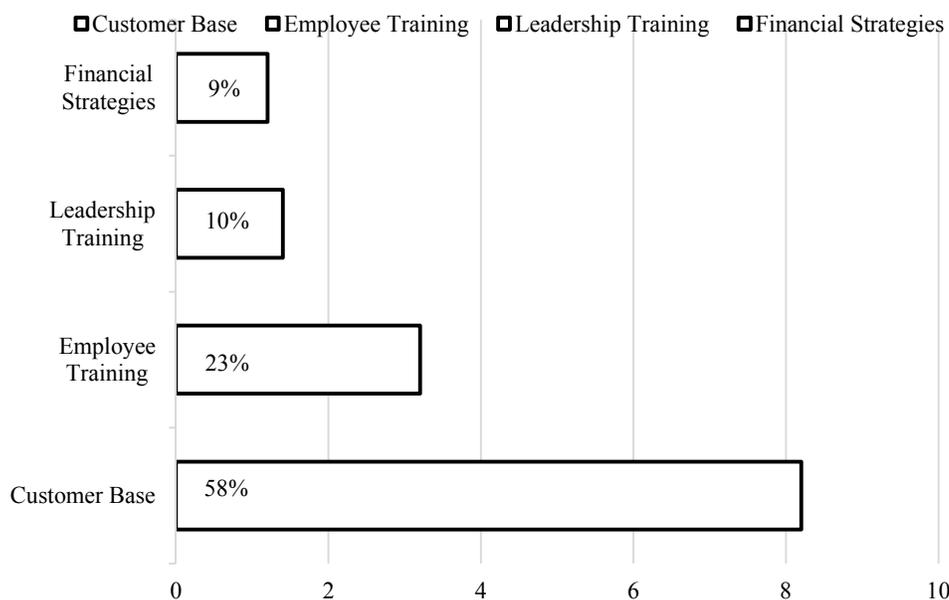
I used NVivo 12 software to organize, identify, and code repetitive themes within the data once each participant confirmed the data's accuracy. Codes and a codebook were created using the interview transcripts in NVivo based on each participant's responses to the questions. I then determined the number of participants with the same or similar responses and coded recurring themes. To protect the participants' identities, I assigned each an alphanumerical code from P1 to P3. The themes came directly from the participants' responses to the interview questions.

**Table 1**

*Eligibility Requirements for Participants*

Requirement	P1	P2	P3
Small general contractor business owner for over 5 years	> 5	> 5	> 5
Experience in implementing strategies to sustain a small business	Yes	Yes	Yes

After the analysis, the following four themes emerged: (a) establishing a customer base strategy, (b) employee skills training, (c) creating leadership strategies, and (d) small business funding strategies for financial stability.

**Figure 1***Data and Thematic Analysis Themes Chart*

*Note.* This chart is based on themes developed from the responses of small business leaders (P1, P2, and P3) to interview questions (see pp. 54–55).

The following review summary reveals the consistency with the themes identified in the interviews. Achieving data saturation meant that I did not identify any additional themes; therefore, I achieved data saturation.

### **Theme 1: Establishing a Customer Base Strategy**

All participants in the study mentioned that as small general construction contractor business owners, establishing a solid customer base was the key to the survival of their organization. Using NVivo, I performed a word search for frequency, eliminating irrelevant or redundant words. Table 2 provides key terms for creating a solid customer base from all interviews; the words and variants in Table 2 include terms that relate to creating a solid customer base strategy.

The following theme emerged from analyzing the semistructured interviews and methodological triangulation: establishing a solid customer base. The subthemes under establishing a customer base strategy were creating strategies for building a customer base, creating strategies for maintaining customer relationships, and creating strategies for increasing customer loyalty. The words and variants referring to establishing a solid customer base and the frequency of terms equaling 1.33% of all participant responses are in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Establishing Customer Base*

Reference	Frequency	Weighted percentages	Similar words
Customer	54	.87	customer, client, residents
Referral	11	.18	referral, referrals
Relationship	9	.15	relationship, repeat, reliable
Family	5	.08	family, family members
Friend	3	.05	friends

Small business owners' ability to build trust and maintain a positive customer-employee relationship creates a high repurchase rate that encourages customer retention in their small businesses (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). Small business leaders build a solid customer base through friends, family, customer referrals, and residents within the community who know that these are the stakeholders in their businesses. Creating customer loyalty, being honest and trustworthy, and providing quality work and artistry

lead to substantial brand equity superior in quality and reliability for small business leaders (Sürücü et al., 2019).

Without a solid customer base sustaining their small business, the chances of business survival for small general contractor construction business leaders become slim. To help sustain their small general contractor construction business beyond 5 years, participants mentioned implementing strategies for building a solid customer base, creating strategies for building customer relationships, and creating strategies for customer loyalty.

The McKinsey 7S model served as the analytical framework in the study. McKinsey's 7S model framework identifies the following seven elements: (a) strategy, (b) structure, (c) systems, (d) style (leadership style), (e) staff, (f) skills, and (g) shared values (culture) (Waterman et al., 1980). Participants noted that creating strategies for building relationships with customers and a solid customer base is key to the sustainability of their small businesses. P1 said, "My strategy for building a customer base was to present myself as a professional and build positive relationships with residents and businesses within the local community." P2 stated, "Once the customer is satisfied, the job will speak for itself. The customer will then spread the word, increasing my customer base." As business leaders develop ideas and build a customer base, small businesses create jobs and drive innovation critical to the economy (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020).

P3 stated, "I built a solid customer base, with most of my customers often satisfied with the quality of my work." P1 stated, "My satisfied customers would refer me to potential customers, their family, and friends, which increased my customer base." P1

also stated, “During the pandemic, I attained new clientele through social media from online referrals from my current customer base.” Participants acknowledged that customer referrals went a long way and were an excellent advertising form as they saved their businesses a large sum of money on marketing and advertising.

### **Theme 2: Employee Training**

Training and rewards are some of the many factors that can affect an employee's performance (Octavia et al., 2022). The benefits that small business leaders gain from training employees include increased employee motivation, profitability, confidence, and work performance, which can positively impact their organization (Oktavia et al., 2022). The words and variants referring to employee skills training and the frequency of terms equaling 1.92% of all participant responses are in Table 3.

**Table 3**

#### *Employee Skills Training*

Reference	Frequency	Weighted percentages	Similar words
Work	35	.56	work, job, project
Employee	26	.43	employee, employees, reliable
Training	21	.34	training, on-the-job, online,
Goals	11	.18	short-term, manageable, specific
Skills	9	.15	skills, carpentry
Team leader	9	.15	team, leader, senior, trainee
Communication	8	.11	communicate, communication, meet, meeting

Participants stressed that finding and keeping skilled workers was challenging as there was not a large pool of skilled workers available. P1, P2, and P3 acknowledged that hiring and retaining employees included performing background checks on all new employees to assist with implementing and retaining a reliable workforce. P3 stated,

To meet the needs of my business, I have implemented an ongoing training program training employees and others to learn carpentry skills. As a result of this training program, I saw my employees' skills improve, producing quality work from my workers, resulting in increased customer and job referrals. Two of my former employees have started their businesses due to the ongoing training program I established within my organization.

Employees who feel comfortable communicating with their supervisor and believe their ideas are valued are more content than employees who miss such a relationship with their supervisor (Kelly & McDonald, 2019). P2 stated, "Incorporating the ideas from senior employees, feedback from various team members, and continuous employee motivation increased the strength of our teams. Incorporating ideas from employees made implementing other changes more manageable, resulting in work performance and quality work production." One of the challenges businesses face is leadership communication (Miftari, 2018). P2 stated that communication with customers is essential when unable to meet deadlines. They continued by saying that setting up good communication guidelines helps in determining whether team communication has improved and in managing communication between different teams and their dispositions.

Increasing social media presence in small businesses can decrease the probability of income loss and recovery time during a pandemic, natural disaster, or displacement (Katare et al., 2021). P1 stated, “Using online tutorials helped develop new skills during the pandemic, increasing job expansion, employee performance, and performance and work quality.” Accessing online tutorials using YouTube allows users to participate and contribute by uploading videos while discussing their content by utilizing the interactive features on the website (Putro & Govindaraju, 2021). McKinsey's 7S model includes systems, staff, and structure in its framework (Waterman et al., 1980). Systems refer to the business technical infrastructure employees use daily to accomplish their aims and goals (Singh, 2013).

Using online tools in business startups effectively increases sales and ensures sustainability (Tatpuje & Ganbote, 2019). Staff refers to the organization's human resources system's structure, employee involvement, and demographics. The establishment of small businesses reflects a recognition of the importance of creating jobs within communities and facilitating the growth of most economies (Putra & Cho, 2019). Structure refers to the organizational systems and procedures: the workflow, formation of departments, responsibilities, and delegation privilege (Javied et al., 2019).

Small business owners' organizational structures are usually less formal than those of large corporations. Construction workplaces are multifaceted and physically unique, with the physical layout of the workplace changing daily. The constant physical change and volatility make the construction industry one of the most dangerous (Oswald et al., 2022). Safety leadership is leadership behaviors that positively impact employees' safety behaviors (Cheung et al., 2021).

### Theme 3: Leadership Training

The words and variants referring to leadership skills training, the frequency of terms equaling .99% of participant responses, are in Table 4.

**Table 4**

#### *Leadership Skills Training*

Reference	Frequency	Weighted percentages	Similar words
Compensation	14	.29	compensate, bonus, rewards
Motivation	11	.22	motivate, motivation, encourage
Leader	9	.18	leader, leaders, leadership
Professional	9	.18	professional, professionally
Performance	4	.08	performance, strength, plans
Compassionate	2	.04	compassion, compassionate

Leadership styles indicate behavior reflecting how business leaders manage tasks, and people are determined by an individual's behavior when leading a team (London & Sherman, 2021). Leadership qualities may be measured by honesty, integrity, confidence, excellent communication skills, decision-making capabilities, accountability, and empathy while maintaining a vision and purpose. A leader must possess the social, interpersonal, technical, and soft skills required to engage constructively with others (Leonard & Green, 2019).

Leadership qualities may be measured by honesty, integrity, confidence, excellent communication skills, decision-making capabilities, accountability, and empathy while

maintaining a vision and purpose. Participants stressed that meeting deadlines, producing quality work, being trustworthy, and maintaining a professional relationship with their customers is essential to their small businesses' sustainability. P1 stated, "As a business leader. I lead by example. That is by being reliable, producing good work, rewarding my employees for good work, and completing projects on time." P1 stated,

My most effective leadership strategies are being compassionate to my employees and their needs within and outside my business. I celebrate the milestones of each employee within the business by compensating them for a good job overall. I also celebrate their milestone within the business with bonuses and compensate them for a good job overall.

P2 stated, "I set specific, manageable short-term goals for myself and my team to accomplish within the business as a business leader. Setting short-term goals allows me to track my business growth and sustainability throughout the years." McKinsey's 7S model includes style in its framework (Waterman et al., 1980).

Burns (1978) described transformational leaders as those who build strong teams by empowering their followers and inspiring them to achieve their personal goals. In doing so, they help the entire organization achieve complete success. P2 stated,

I am compassionate with my employees and compensate for motivating and encouraging them to work. I monitor for workplace incidents, whether team communication has improved, and overall improvement in the different teams and their dispositions. I compensate them with bonuses and their salaries. Employee motivation is the key to my small business.

Transactional leadership theory developed by Bass (1985) and further developed by Bass and Riggio, a transactional leader provides followers with recognition and rewards contingent upon meeting specific firm objectives, avoiding taking risks, and being conscious of time and productivity. Transactional leaders consistently reward performance (Roibu et al., 2019). P3 stated,

As a business leader being knowledgeable in my field of work, producing quality work, and exhibiting good artistry based on my skill was important to my business. Initially, there was not a large pool of local skilled workers to hire, and I was on job sites for most projects performing tasks.

P2 and P3 shared that, as business leaders, professionalism and clear communication between you, employees, and customers are essential to increasing work performance and productivity.

Greenleaf (1970) created the term servant leadership from Hesse's novel, *The Journey to the East*, and theorized the idea of a servant leader as servant first, which implies that one wants to serve first before becoming a leader (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2020). P3 stated, "There was not a large pool of skilled workers in the field of carpentry and, as a result, went to the job site for most projects and did the actual work." Business owners who desire to become more effective leaders incorporate training programs committed to leadership development (Kelly & MacDonald, 2019). In businesses where leadership is crucial, knowledge sharing within an organization makes knowledge available to others (Charman et al., 2021).

#### **Theme 4: Financial Strategies**

The participants discussed the financial strategies used to obtain funding during the different stages of their businesses. The funding options and strategies theme includes the following subthemes: Small Business Initial Funding Strategies and Acquiring Small Business Loans For Growth. The words and variants referring to small business funding method strategies and the frequency of terms equal to 1.69% of participant responses are in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Small Business Funding Method Strategies*

Reference	Frequency	Weighted percentages	Similar words
Finance	7	.91	finance, financial institution
Credit	3	.39	credit, bank, credit union
Loans	3	.39	loans, bank

Small business owners are less likely to have access to bank loans due to the inconsistencies associated with the smallness and newness of their businesses (Nguyen & Canh, 2021). Participants stressed that securing a low-interest line of credit or small business loan from a local bank or credit union can be difficult without excellent credit. An entrepreneurial opportunity cannot be successful without financial resources, as capital is necessary for your business to survive, grow, become profitable, and remain viable (Dyer, 2021). P1, P2, and P3 shared that it was necessary to receive financial funding from family members and financial institutions to start and fund their businesses.

P1 stated that the initial small business startup had to borrow funds from family, friends, and a local credit union. P2 stated that although some initial funding was received from the SBA, relying on family members to financially fund the business in the early years was necessary. Nguyen and Canh (2021) posited that formal finance is financing capital sourced from banks and other formal financial intermediaries.

In contrast, informal finance is the capital sourced from friends, family, relatives, or private moneylenders. P3 stated that using funds from one project to fund another was necessary for sustaining the business until securing a business loan. Small business owners' external financing enables businesses to invest in new technology, acquire equipment, and reduce internal spending without jeopardizing existing operational objectives (Incekara, 2022). McKinsey's 7S outline is a model for analyzing organizations and their effectiveness (Singh, 2013). The information attained from the participants in this study aligns with the seven elements: (a) strategy, (b) structure, (c) systems, (d) style (leadership style), (e) staff, (f) skills, and (g) shared values (culture) of the McKinsey's 7s model (Waterman et al., 1980).

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The study findings will contribute to developing future small general construction contractor businesses within the local community. This study will assist prospective small business owners seeking to start, develop or sustain their small businesses and may gain insights from the strategies used in this study for business sustainability. The goals of the business leaders and strategies used to sustain businesses are common goals among small general contractor business owners. Common goals ensuring and creating a solid customer base, communication, professionalism, and producing quality work must set the

tone when sustaining their businesses. The business leader's ability to execute strategies to satisfy existing customers and acquire new clientele determines the organization's level of financial success, as the measurement of success for any organization is its customer base (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020).

The needs and wants of customers are a priority to the business leaders in this study, who in this case are businesses and residents within the local community, family, and friends. The findings from this study may be valuable to owners of small general contractor businesses and may assist future small business owners in their business's growth and developmental stages. Building a solid customer base and meeting the customers' needs efficiently through their artistry, trustworthiness, and professionalism were some of the strategies used by interviewed leaders to sustain their businesses.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change within the local communities. Small businesses constitute 99.9% of total firms in the United States, the pillars on which most businesses worldwide rest. Small businesses are an important part of economic activity in developing countries, especially in creating jobs and reducing poverty (Najib et al., 2021). Small business owners who succeed within their local communities contribute to the community's sustainability, employability, and wealth. The implications for positive social change include the potential to create job opportunities and establish training programs for unskilled workers in the community.

Sustaining a small business is essential because a flourishing economy means businesses and community residents spend money to build, repair and remodel homes and businesses. Small businesses contribute significantly to every country's economic

growth, development, employment, and social cohesion (Gyimah et al., 2019). Small business owners generating revenue within their communities contribute to the economic growth within that community by providing jobs in the local communities.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Creating strategies for creating and building solid customer base relationships with employees may enable small general contractor business leaders to sustain their businesses because of the importance of having strong relationships with customers and employees. Business leaders that understand their customers' needs, produce quality work, and retain skilled employees are strategies that can sustain their businesses. The customer retention theory developed by (Farley, 1964) stated that consumers are brand loyal. Small business owners can increase their customer base and the loyalty required to sustain their business by being trustworthy, honest professionals and producing quality work. Customers satisfied with their post-purchase decision are willing to repurchase the company's products and services and encourage their family, friends, and others to use these products and services (Lee et al., 2020). Customer retention may affect the profitability of a small business in many ways.

Small general construction contractor business leaders may want to develop emergency fund strategies to increase their cash flow in case of a business emergency, another pandemic, or an economic crisis. Business leaders with an emergency fund and solid cash flow would meet financial obligations to operate and sustain their businesses. The prolonged market restrictions due to the pandemic have adversely affected small business owners' preparedness to meet financial emergencies (Chhatwani et al., 2022). Small business leaders should increase their communication skills through ongoing

training programs to articulate their plans and enhance employee communication. Small general contractor construction business owners should continue to train and develop employees with the skills necessary to produce quality work and to seek entrepreneurial prospects.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The limitations of this study resulted in boundaries or a restricting cap or ceiling on the study. I restricted study participation to three small general construction contractor business owners who successfully implemented strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years in South Florida. Because this study focused on successful strategies for small retail businesses, future researchers could expand the breadth of their research by increasing the population to include large organizations.

To address the small targeted population and the number of participants, I recommend that future researchers build on the research findings pertaining to profitable small general construction contractor businesses by selecting different industries and geographic locations. For future research, I recommend that researchers consider factors beyond sustainability and include the profitability of small business strategies and small businesses in governmental organizations.

### **Reflections**

This doctoral study process was both challenging and enlightening. The commitment to my study wavered a few times due to the program's intensity, other life-changing factors, and the challenges faced in completing this program. The program was much more difficult academically and took longer than I expected.

In this research study, I explored the strategies used by small general construction contractor business owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years. This research study taught me that the three participants have different practices with main similarities to ensure sustainability and long-term growth. Participants were glad to share their successes. I followed the interview protocol to minimize error and research bias, and I was extremely pleased with the eagerness the participants portrayed to participate in and learn from my study. During the interviews, I controlled my reactions to the responses, so I would not influence the participants to answer questions differently. Each business owner confidently and willingly responded to the interview questions, and each shared a similar passion and desire with succeeding in business, even though they all operated the same type of small general construction contractor business differently.

During this doctoral journey, I learned more about effective strategies for sustaining small general construction contractor businesses. This journey enabled me to identify strategies that small general construction contractor businesses in Florida use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. I can confidently share my research findings with small general construction contractor business owners. I stand behind my recommendations to help each small business owner develop effective strategies for sustaining their small general construction contractor businesses.

Perhaps the most significant achievements I have gained through my doctoral study have built my character, determination, and self-confidence. The self-confidence I gained through my doctoral study solidified that I can achieve anything. Despite many obstacles and life-changing circumstances, the support of my family and the Walden University team have helped me reach this pinnacle. What has been consistent and

extremely positive in my doctoral study is the support from my doctoral study chair, Dr. Musil, and advisor, Dr. Hay. Their guidance has allowed me to catapult through the final phases of my program.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative multiple case study explored strategies for small general contractor business owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years. Research indicates that small businesses in the United States have an over 50% failure rate. (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). Only 30% of small businesses are profitable and survive by their 10th year in business (BLS, 2020). For a small general construction contractor business to ensure sustainability, owners must implement successful strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

I used McKinsey's 7S conceptual framework as the foundation for my doctoral study. I used semi-structured interviews to collect data, and an analysis of the data resulted in four themes: (a) creating strategies for building a solid customer base, (b) employee skills training, (c) creating leadership strategies, and (d) creating strategies for financial stability. This study could fundamentally and positively enhance the strategies implemented by future small general contractor business owners. Successful strategies may lead to greater customer satisfaction, employee motivation, financial stability, and community development. The success and sustainability of a business depend on the success of the strategies implemented for business sustainability.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

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**Interview Protocol**


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Hi. I am Kathleen Watson Wilkin, a candidate for a DBA at Walden University. I am researching strategies that small general construction contractors business owners use to stay profitable beyond 5 years.	This qualitative multiple case study explores strategies small general construction contractors' business owners use to stay profitable beyond 5 years. I will be recording this interview and will, in the end, allow you to listen, add or take any information out that is inaccurate.
<b>Interview Questions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What strategies do you use to sustain your business beyond 5 years?</li> <li>2. What challenges did you encounter when implementing strategies to sustain your business?</li> <li>3. What do you do to address the challenges when implementing new strategies in your business?</li> <li>4. How do you determine the proficiency of your strategies for the sustainability of your business?</li> <li>5. How do you measure the effectiveness of those strategies' proficiencies to sustain your business?</li> <li>6. What leadership strategies do you find most effective to sustain your business?</li> <li>7. What additional information do you want to share regarding strategies to sustain a small general construction contractor's business for more than 5 years?</li> </ol>
Wrap up the interview by thanking the participants	Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today to learn more about your organization and any strategies used to sustain your business for over 5 years.
Schedule follow-up member-checking interview	To ensure the accuracy of the data collected, each participant will receive a summary of the results via email within 5 days after the data

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collected is analyzed and will have the opportunity to make additions, corrections, and deletions to the summary provided.

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## Appendix B: Letter of Invitation

### **Doctoral Research Study**

My name is Kathleen Watson-Wilkin, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. My field of focus is a Doctor of Business Administration degree.

The remainder of this email will provide information so you can make an informed decision concerning participation.

### **Purpose of the study?**

This study explores strategies small general construction contractors business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

### **What does participation in this research study involve?**

Participation in this study is limited to three small business owners. You can withdraw from the study anytime if you initially agree to participate. The expected time for this interview is 30 - 45 minutes.

### **Guarantee of Confidentiality**

All information obtained in this study is confidential unless required by law. None of the individual interview results are available to participating organizational leaders or the organization. The study results may be used in reports, presentations, and publications at an aggregate level. Individual participants will not be identified.

I am happy to respond to any questions or concerns about the research.

Respectfully,

Kathleen Watson-Wilkin  
Doctor of Business Administration Candidate