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Strategies for Competitive Advantage in Small Construction Businesses

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Syheed Fields

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Strategies for Competitive Advantage in Small Construction Businesses

by

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MLD, The Pennsylvania State University, 2010

BS, Bloomsburg University, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

February 2022

Abstract

Small and medium enterprises' failure to maintain competitive advantage has the potential for adverse business outcomes. Small business owners are concerned with failure to maintain a competitive advantage, as 50% of SMEs do not survive for a full 5 years. Grounded in the strategic planning process framework, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. The participants were nine small construction business owners in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who implemented successful strategies to gain a competitive advantage. Data were collected using semi structured interviews and a review of company documents. Through thematic analysis, four themes were identified: (a) strategies to gain competitive advantage, (b) measuring business strategy effectiveness, (c) barriers to implementing strategies, and (d) modifying strategies to maintain competitive advantage. A key recommendation is for small construction business owners to understand their competition and customer needs to improve services and business strategy development. The implications for positive social change include the potential to benefit local communities by creating more jobs, decreasing unemployment, and enabling citizens to provide for themselves and their families.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my lord and savior, Jesus Christ, and my family for your unwavering support. Thank you for your understanding, patience, kindness, and encouragement from start to finish. This study is also dedicated to my parents for showing me that anything is possible if you put your mind to it.

Acknowledgments

In all things, I give glory, honor, and praise to Christ, who strengthens and provides beyond measure. It seemed that this day would never come to pass, but my faith was strong, and I continued to do the work regardless of circumstance. My Doctoral journey has been a long and challenging experience, but today I claim the victory.

I acknowledge my first chair, Dr. Brandon Simmons, for believing in me and providing that extra push to dig deeper and become a better scholar-practitioner. To Dr. Michael Lavelle, my current chair, thank you for simplifying the process, encouraging me to strive for more, and guiding me safely to completion. Thank you to my extended family, and Walden classmates for your support and encouragement throughout my Doctoral journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of the U.S. economy, creating the majority of new jobs (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2017), contributing significantly to the GDP by comprising 65% of the U.S. GDP as of 2013 (Robu, 2013), and to innovation (Harel et al., 2019). However, new SMEs are especially prone to failure (SBA, 2019). One specific strategy that some SME owners have used to survive beyond 5 years is to meaningfully differentiate themselves from competitors (Turner & Endres, 2017), which is to say, developed a competitive advantage. Furthermore, low sales or low cash flows are the leading reasons for SME failure (SBA, 2018), indicating a failure to attract market share. A competitive advantage is a crucial requirement for attracting the necessary market share to survive in an industry (Miller et al., 1989). Hence, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage.

Background of the Problem

SMEs are a risky proposition in the best of times. SMEs represent 62% of new jobs created since the Great Recession of 2009 (SBA, 2017). SME owners are drivers of innovation and a force that renews the economy as a whole through new ideas (Harel et al., 2019). However, many of the jobs and other benefits of SMEs to the broader economy are immediately lost; approximately 50% of SMEs do not survive for a full 5 years (SBA, 2019). Market differentiation or another type of competitive advantage is a

common characteristic of businesses that survive past 5 years (Turner & Endres, 2017), meaning that competitive advantage may be vital in avoiding failure.

SME owners need a competitive advantage to thrive and grow. New SME owners seeking to compete with rivals may require a competitive advantage over more prominent, more established firms (Liu & Liang, 2015). Wingwon (2015) contended that achieving a competitive advantage generally requires a strategy. Business strategies are often developed to pursue a competitive advantage and are a significant predictor of competitive advantage for small firms (Lestari et al., 2020). Asrar-ul-Haq and Kuchinke (2016) supported the importance of leadership and leadership style in businesses of any size. SME owners are essential because the small business format concentrates power in the owner instead of other figures such as a board of directors (Ahmad, 2020). Hence, the competitive advantage strategies of SME owners are highly relevant to the success of SMEs.

Problem Statement

Competitive advantage is one of the keys to a successful business (Kajanus et al., 2019). Approximately 50% of U.S. SMEs do not survive beyond 5 years (SBA, 2019), suggesting that some SME owners fail to gain a competitive advantage (Turner & Endres, 2017). The general business problem was that SME owners often do not gain a competitive advantage to remain in business. The specific business problem for this study was that some small construction business owners lack strategies to gain a competitive advantage.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. The target population was nine small construction business owners in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who had implemented successful strategies to gain a competitive advantage. The implications for positive social change include assisting members of the local communities in need of employment through providing increased and more stable employment opportunities. Furthermore, successful business owners can give back to society through philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, enhancing community betterment.

Nature of the Study

The three research methods which researchers use are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Yin, 2017). For this study, I chose a qualitative method. Qualitative researchers ask open-ended questions and conduct descriptive studies to explore and understand phenomena through a subjective, human lens (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Quantitative researchers examine the relationships among variables and answer research questions by testing hypotheses about relationships or group differences (Leppink, 2017). Mixed-methods researchers combine qualitative and quantitative aspects in a single study (Hayes et al., 2013). A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study, as strategies are not numeric; therefore, a researcher could not easily understand strategies by comparing groups or the relationships among variables. Thus, the quantitative method would have been a poor fit for this study. Similarly, the hypothesis-focused portion of

mixed-methods research would not have addressed my research question. The qualitative research method was a better fit for this research because of the need for inductive reasoning.

The case study design was appropriate for exploring a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2017). I chose a case study design because the case study approach is deeply contextual. The contextual nature of the case study research design means that it addresses a phenomenon and the specific circumstances in which it occurs (Yin, 2017). A multiple case study research design allows a researcher to add a level of contextualizing analysis across multiple cases (Yin, 2017). By examining multiple contexts, the researcher may explore the similarities and commonalities between them and how and why they differ. Phenomenologists focus on the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences (Willis et al., 2016). Phenomenological research was not optimal for this study as I did not seek to explore the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences. Another alternative design would have been ethnography to identify and explore an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged time (Pink, 2016). As I would not be studying an intact cultural group, ethnographic design research would not have been appropriate to address my research question.

Research Question

What strategies do successful small construction business owners use to achieve a competitive advantage?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to gain a competitive advantage?

2. How did you measure the effectiveness of your business strategies to determine if they were successful?
3. How would you describe these strategies as being relevant to the construction industry's competitive advantage?
4. What were the key barriers to implementing your competitive advantage strategy?
5. How, if at all, did your organization modify these strategies to maintain a competitive advantage?
6. What, if any, additional strategies for competitive advantage can you address as a small construction business owner?

Conceptual Framework

The framework was the strategic planning process framework (SPPF). The SPPF was developed by Cohen and Cyert (1973) in the early 1970s, drawing on earlier strategic planning literature such as the work of Penrose (1959). The SPPF functions on the premise that business success and survival rely on creating and implementing strategic goals by top management and business owners (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Per Cohen and Cyert (1973), the SPPF has nine steps. Later scholars, such as Alalwan (2012), expanded on this concept to suggest a broader, more cyclic SPPF in which the nine steps loop into an iterative process. The nine steps in the SPPF posited by Cohen and Cyert (1973) are (a) developing goals; (b) environmental analysis; (c) quantifying targets; (d) strategy formulation; (e) analysis of the gap between the present situation and the objectives; (f) searching for strategies to bridge the gap; (g) selecting strategic

alternatives; (h) implementation; and (i) measurement, feedback, and control. Business owners base their resource decisions on acquiring or divesting business resources—on strategic goals, where owners provide direction, focus, and consistency for the business's operation (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). The SPPF applied to the study as I sought to explore strategies for gaining a competitive advantage to understand the role of context and competition. I also drew on Porter's (1989) theory of competitive advantage as a critical supporting theory to address the integration of competitive advantage into the SPPF.

Operational Definitions

Competitive advantage: Refers to a firm's approach to achieving a competitive edge relative to competing organizations in the same or similar fields (Kajanus et al., 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An assumption is a fact on which the study is premised and cannot emerge as proven or disproven explicitly (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The first assumption was that successful construction business owners gained a competitive advantage. The second was that these business owners would have strategies to gain a competitive advantage. The third assumption of the study was that participants would share truthful and accurate accounts of their experience with strategies that gained a competitive advantage. Fourth, I assumed that using the qualitative method could provide meaningful data regarding competitive advantage strategies.

Limitations

Limitations are a study's weaknesses. These weaknesses typically arise from the research methodology, meaning that the researcher cannot control them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Examples of methodological components that give rise to limitations include the analysis, self-reported data, or self-selection bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). One limitation was a lack of ways to ensure participants responded truthfully. Another limitation could have emerged as the extent to which the findings apply to successful strategies more generally, as the strategies identified may have only worked for reasons specific to the participants. A final limitation was the participants' unwillingness to share successful strategies that might compromise their competitive advantage.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the researcher's limits set upon the study to focus on the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study's delimitations include small construction businesses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. I made sure the study was delimited to obtain strategies that apply to a specific industry and geographic area. I excluded business owners who are not in the construction industry. I delimited the study to those owners who had gained a competitive advantage to help ensure their ability to answer the research questions.

Significance of the Study

The study may hold significance in multiple regards. The two most important contributions are those to business practice and positive social change. By improving practice and promoting positive social change, the study created value.

Contribution to Business Practice

The study's findings could contribute to business practice because it provides an in-depth exploration of successful small construction business owners' successful strategies to gain a competitive advantage. The findings might be valuable to similar business leaders because they could improve their competitive advantage by offering successful strategies for establishing themselves and remaining competitive. A competitive advantage improves the success and efficiency of a business. It also allows an SME to meet its customers' needs (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). The study's findings may also be valuable to prospective business owners because the results may serve as a framework for individuals contemplating small business startups to gain a competitive advantage better.

Implications for Positive Social Change

Besides providing benefits to the businesses, improving small construction businesses' competitive advantage could bring broader social benefits. The study's findings may create social value through promoting successful entrepreneurship for more individuals, thus boosting the economy as a whole. The study's findings may also benefit local communities by creating more jobs, decreasing unemployment, and enabling citizens to provide for themselves and their families. Also, the findings may benefit society by promoting more successful businesses; successful business owners tend to engage in corporate social responsibility and give back to the community through philanthropy and other socially beneficial actions.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Although business strategies exist for gaining a competitive advantage, researchers have called for additional research to explore competitive advantage in the construction industry across a more comprehensive array of contexts (Liu & Liang, 2015; Wingwon, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. The literature review includes sources from ProQuest, JSTOR, and EBSCO Host databases. The following phrases and keywords helped to perform the literature search: *competitive advantage strategies, small business competitive advantage, remodeling business strategies, construction business strategies, and competitive strategies, determinants of competitive advantage, competitive advantage factors, predicting competitive advantage, construction business models, and successful small business models*. The entire study contains 125 sources. Of these sources, 117 (93.6%) are peer reviewed, with the remainder being seminal works, scholarly books, dissertations, and government websites.

Table 1*Sources Used in the Proposal*

Sources	Outside of 5-year range (2016 and earlier)	Within 5-year range (2017- 2021)	Total of all sources
Peer-Reviewed (PR)	54	63	
Non-PR Total	2	6	
Non-PR: Book	2	2	
Non-PR: Working Paper	0	4	
Totals	56 (44.8%)	69 (55.2%)	125 (100%)

Strategic business management and the SPPF are first in the literature review, including a subsection concerning construction businesses' strategic planning. The review then presents strategies for gaining a competitive advantage for SMEs in several industries. Subsections discuss successful strategies for a sustainable competitive advantage among SMEs across several different industries and determinants that facilitate or deter competitive advantage. Additional subsections highlight three factors commonly discussed in existing literature relating to competitive advantage, organizational learning, engagement, and innovation. The literature review contains a critical analysis and synthesis of the existing literature, focused on the theoretical foundations of the study and the relationship between those foundations and the literature.

Strategic Planning Process Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was the SPPF. Cohen and Cyert (1973) developed the SPPF as part of the emerging literature of strategic planning since the 1950s. Early research on business strategy, such as Thune and House (1970), demonstrated the benefits of adopting a formal planning process instead of an informal or

ad hoc strategic planning process. Thune and House, for example, posited that firms that engaged in formal planning outperform organizations that used only informal planning across five different economic metrics. The same underperforming firm typically exceeds its previous benchmarks for those metrics by changing from ad hoc planning to formal planning. These insights would give rise to the broader theoretical discipline of strategic planning. Strategic planning is developing and implementing organization-level goals by executive leadership (Panwar et al., 2016). The SPPF represents the vital elements of how business leaders can develop strategic plans to achieve almost any goal (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). The strategic planning process consists of nine steps: (a) developing goals; (b) environmental analysis; (c) quantifying targets; (d) strategy formulation; (e) analysis of the gap between the present situation and the objectives; (f) searching for strategies to bridge the gap; (g) selecting strategic alternatives; (h) implementation; and (i) measurement, feedback, and control. In their study, Cohen and Cyert (1973) referred to the first seven steps as the formulation phase. Therefore, in alignment with Cohen and Cyert's (1973) use of the word phase to collapse the first seven steps into one, Alalwan's (2012) developed a three-phase formulation of the SPPF consisting of (a) strategy development, (b) implementation, and (c) evaluation. This simplified formulation does not change the essence of the SPPF, and it merely condenses the many parts of the developmental or formulation phase for ease of presentation. This study referred to both the original formulation (steps) and the condensed formulation (phases) as appropriate.

Strategy Development

The first phase of the SPPF is strategy formulation or development. Cohen and Cyert (1973) referred to this phase as the formulation phase. They defined it as constituting the seven sub-steps of (a) developing goals, (b) environmental analysis, (c) quantifying targets, (d) strategy formulation, (e) analysis of the gap between the present situation and the objectives, (f) searching for strategies to bridge the gap, and (g) selecting strategic alternatives (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). In the formation phase, business leaders look at the organization's overall goals set out by the owners, the leaders, mission statements and purpose, and financial necessities. The formulation begins with the initial step of *developing goals*. Next, organizational leaders must choose realistic goals aligned with their long-term objectives while assessing progress toward them.

After assessing and setting the goals, Cohen and Cyert (1973) assert the second step involves an environmental analysis of the firm itself and the surrounding business context, which is called environmental analysis. Understanding the environmental context is key to understanding appropriate strategic goals and how to achieve them (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Hence, *environmental analysis* is the second step of the SPPF. The environment here relates to the organizational and industry environment more than the physical environment. However, business leaders may also include aspects of the organization's physical environment in their environmental analyses.

By synthesizing these various strategic and environmental factors, the business owners may then fully identify their strategic goals. A key component of strategy development quantifies the organization's goals (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996).

Quantification was the third sub-step of the strategy development portion of the SPPF, the process of *quantifying targets*. Quantifiable goals allow for easier evaluation later in the process and determine how well the strategy has served to meet the goals intended (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Planning how to measure these goals throughout the strategy's execution represents a vital component of strategic planning (Cohen & Cyert, 1973).

The strategy development phase's primary thrust involves business leaders planning how to advance from their current position to its desired position. To use the SPPF to identify and close the gap, business leaders may need to engage with theoretical perspectives that researchers use to understand firms (Cohen & Cyert, 1973), such as the resource-based view (Burvill et al., 2018). In Cohen and Cyert's (1973) original formulation, the planning involves three steps: *analyzing the gap* between the present situation and the objectives, *searching for strategies* to bridge the gap, and *selecting strategies* to do so. These three steps are closely related, and business leaders may do them simultaneously or in tandem. The results of the goal-setting and environmental analysis should have directed the leaders toward the gap. Once Organizational Leaders identify the gap, the leaders must strategize how the gap gets addressed. Such strategizing leads to the consideration of which strategy is best in practice and atop that strategy. Together, these steps entail identifying other specific theories or techniques to allow the business leaders to bridge the strategic gaps and work meaningfully toward their established goals. Once they develop a strategy, organizational leaders can introduce the new strategies to their employees (Cohen & Cyert, 1973).

Implementation

Implementation is the second phase of the SPPF and consists of only a single step. An implementation may require adopting other specific approaches, such as organizational change theories (Lewis & Sahay, 2019). During the implementation phase, the business leaders use the strategic plan as a roadmap, shaping business decisions (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). For example, if a firm's strategic plan were to expand its customer base through better advertising and outreach, the implementation phase would likely draw upon marketing theories. A theory like the Ansoff matrix requires that the business hire more employees with marketing skills. Depending on the strategy's breadth and complexity, the implementation phase could consist of a single overarching focus or the interaction of efforts toward meeting a myriad of disparate strategic objectives (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). To some extent, the implementation phase should also exist concurrently with the third phase (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). The third phase allows leadership to develop a system of measurement for historical and real-time evaluation.

Evaluation

The third phase of the SPPF was the performance evaluation phase. The SPPF emphasizes quantifiable goals toward measurable progress can be made and also meeting goals in a practical sense (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Strategic objectives under the SPPF are not nebulous goals toward which a firm works blindly but rather concrete steps toward making measurable progress (Kajanus et al., 2019). The performance evaluation phase of the SPPF constitutes an ongoing effort to evaluate the success of the strategy (Kajanus et al., 2019).

The ongoing effort, in this context, can mean different things to different people. Profitability, for example, is a quantified goal that is measured and evaluated frequently. Other objectives, such as diversifying staff or skillsets, might only be assessed annually or over a more extended period. Regardless of the specific interval of evaluation, this reflexivity of strategy aligns with the tenets of the SPPF (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). As with the other phases of the framework, the specifics of evaluation are not indicated and likely require the utilization of a more discipline-specific or task-specific theoretical approach (Kajanus et al., 2019). For example, a construction business might evaluate workers' work quality and attendance, or a bank based on the number or quality of clients or loans they had signed. The use of ongoing evaluation keeps the organization focused on its strategic goals (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). However, only evaluating goal progress is not sufficient to achieve successful strategic planning.

Ongoing Evaluation

Strategic phases of the SPPF were, in Cohen and Cyert's (1973) original framework, presented as a one-time process. However, these steps can and should be applied cyclically, much like the Deming cycle of continuous evaluation and improvement (Aggarwal, 2020). When using the SPPF in this fashion, business leaders can harness it to evaluate progress toward specific goals that align with their overall strategy. As with specific outcome measures, the frequency of strategic reassessment can differ by context. In some cases, the organization's leadership may need to conduct a strategic reevaluation in response to outside circumstances, such as a broad shift in the economy, policy changes, or a change in ownership or leadership (Kajanus et al., 2019).

Strategic reassessment need not always indicate changes to the firm's current strategy and often includes only slight adjustments. In other cases, more significant changes are necessary if, for example, it becomes apparent that the strategy is not driving meaningful progress toward organizational goals. Effecting change reflects the original SPPF approach's gap identification phase (Cohen & Cyert, 1973).

SPPF in Practice

The actual practice of strategic planning within the framework is heterogeneous and affected by many factors. However, the SPPF is a suitable framework for such a formal, strategic planning process, giving businesses a broad set of tools to develop strategic plans (Chaffee, 1985). Such formal strategizing has demonstrated distinct benefits since the 1970s (Thune & House, 1970). Building on the insight that a formal strategy provides benefits, researchers use the SPPF to describe how business success and survival are achieved, made possible by top management and business owners (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Within the framework, business owners' determinations of acquiring or divesting business resources depend on the strategic goals that provide direction, focus, and consistency (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Since its conception, the SPPF has informed business models, strategies, and management theories (Kajanus et al., 2019). However, as of 2019, researchers were still seeking to determine which strategic management and planning approaches were the most effective for achieving specific business goals and outcomes (Kajanus et al., 2019).

Weaknesses of the SPPF

The generality of the SPPF means that it has relatively few specific weaknesses or drawbacks. However, one drawback may be that the generality and flexibility inherent in the framework allow for conflicting visions to arise from different parts of the organization's leadership (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). While these conflicting visions are reconcilable if noticed and the leaders are willing to compromise, the broad and fluid nature of the SPPF does not necessarily make it easy to recognize these disconnects or force their resolution (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Doing so may require applying other theories that address the specific problem in play, such as using transformational leadership theory to diagnose and address leadership failings (Aw & Ayoko, 2017). Thus, the generality of the SPPF is essentially both the framework's foundational strength and most significant drawback.

The SPPF is a very broad and general framework that may require the use of other theories to complement it. Other strategic planning approaches, such as the Balanced Scorecard metric (Hansen & Schaltegger, 2016), offer a much simpler and more straightforward way of addressing the imperatives and principles. These other strategic approaches may be adopted and enacted within the SPPF framework (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Using other approaches alongside the SPPF does raise the question of why one should apply both instead of just the other framework. Applying the broader framework makes the SPPF less prescriptive in specific solutions, which counter the prevailing trends and the desire for specific, concrete solutions in management, such as cultivating

transformational leadership (Banks et al., 2016). Overall, the weaknesses of the SPPF are not considerable enough to outweigh its strengths.

Theories Supporting the SPPF

Supporting theories for the SPPF include all of those that are integrable with it, including the resource-based view of the firm (Burvill et al., 2018), the balanced scorecard (Cooper et al., 2017), and the theory of transformational leadership (Aw & Ayoko, 2017). The SPPF is a broad framework that outlines strategic planning steps (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Within those steps, specific strategic approaches might be necessary to achieve the particular directives indicated by the SPPF, such as using the resource-based view to identify and leverage unique and valuable firm resources.

Resource-Based View

The resource-based view of the firm supports the SPPF. The resource-based view allows business owners to understand their firm's resources and determine which of these are most important to their success (Burvill et al., 2018). By adopting the resource-based view within the context of the SPPF, an owner may obtain more specific insights that allow them to advance through the development phase.

Theory of Organizational Change

In the implementation phase, organizational leaders may employ theories such as the theory of organizational change. The organizational change theory addresses how firm owners may achieve lasting organizational change (Lewis & Sahay, 2019). By invoking the theory of organizational change within the SPPF, the firm's owner may enact the change they have decided upon based on the SPPF and then ensure that the

change becomes the new standard operating procedure. The actual act of encouraging organizational change often represents a practical challenge than the notion would seek to imply, given the considerable inertial forces at play, such as existing policies or employees' experience with the existing methods.

Balanced Scorecard

In the evaluation phase of the SPPF, the organizational leaders can use other frameworks such as the balanced scorecard to evaluate the success or failure of its strategic posture. The balanced scorecard is a framework that allows firm owners to assess and balance performance across four areas of customer relations, education and growth, internal processes, and financial issues (Cooper et al., 2017). Within the SPPF, the balanced scorecard interprets the results of an enacted strategic plan. Using such approaches does not inhibit the use of the SPPF but rather accentuates it. The SPPF is not intended to be comprehensive but rather represents a framing approach. The user may insert domain-specific content, such as the various theories used as examples (Kajanus et al., 2019).

Theory of Competitive Advantage

In the specific context of this study, the theory of competitive advantage was another supporting theory I used in concert with the SPPF. Porter (1989), who developed the theory, was an important figure in studying strategic management and business strategy (Stonehouse & Snowdon, 2007). The theory of competitive advantage involves applying rigorous economic analysis to a firm's relative position within a given market (Porter, 1989). That is to say, Porter's key observation is that business leaders should not

only analyze their firm but how their firm compares to others. Through a careful economic analysis of these factors, a firm can gain a competitive advantage or a position that yields market advantage and economic success over competitors. The school of strategic planning that focuses on the relative position and competitive advantage is the dominant paradigm in business today (Stonehouse & Snowdon, 2007).

Porter's (1989) theory of competitive advantage supports the SPPF because a competitive advantage is a central consideration during the strategy development phase. The importance of competitive advantage means that organizational leaders must develop their strategies for achieving a competitive advantage. Competitive advantage has the most impact on the environmental analysis and gap identification steps of the SPPF. However, competitive advantage considerations also play a significant role in choosing the ultimate strategy in step seven. Competitive advantage can also serve as a key benchmark for goal setting in the first step and evaluation in the ninth step.

Alternative Theory

Any theory focused on a specific aspect of the strategic planning process rather than the process as a whole might compete with the SPPF. Other specific theories focus on a component of the process, such as resources, with the resource-based view. Implicit in this choice of focus is that the researchers who developed them considered that strategic component more important than a general framework. However, a few other theories of strategic planning offer similar broad frameworks. These theories are comparable with the SPPF in various ways.

Blue Ocean Theory

Another strategic planning theory, specifically concerning competitive advantage, is the blue ocean theory of strategic planning. The blue ocean model of strategic planning suggests that business owners strive to create an uncontested market space where their business can thrive (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The blue ocean model is much more unconventional than the SPPF and suggests a way for firms to create value through novel offerings in particular (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). However, the blue ocean approach is somewhat narrow in its applicability, given that not all firms can be deeply innovative. Moreover, the present study was concerned with a competitive advantage in the field of construction. Construction is a much more rote and by-the-book field than many, Kim and Mauborgne (2014) discussed using the blue ocean strategy. Hence, the blue ocean theory of strategic planning seems unlikely to be an objective lens to understand the strategic planning of small construction businesses.

Factors Affecting Strategic Considerations

One problem in addressing the strategic process of business planning has long been the lack of a universal definition of strategy. Chaffee (1985) noted that a clear definition of strategy is challenging to find in part because of the lack of a concise and universal definition of the multi-dimensional and industry-specific nature of strategies. Chaffee's (1985) sentiments reflected the array of recent literature on business strategies and strategic business management. Studies from the late 2010s have focused on strategic planning for a specific business element or process, such as human resource management,

supply chain management, environmental management, or safety management (Shibin et al., 2016).

The SPPF represents a solution to this longstanding problem of defining strategy in the sense that, rather than focusing on the specifics, the SPPF presents a framework in which a business can develop a strategy with the appropriate application of contingent information, such as domain-specific theories or technical information (Kajanus et al., 2019). Rather than developing a strategy applicable to any specific business, the developers of the SPPF created a broader way of thinking about business strategy issues (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Within the SPPF, there is conceptual space for different strategic modeling approaches, such as linear, adaptive, and interpretive strategic models (Shibin et al., 2016). These approaches operate within the SPPF, but none dominate or are used exclusively (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Instead, the SPPF offers a framework within which business leaders can determine the appropriate point in strategic planning to apply another theory best. This flexibility is a strength and a weakness. The SPPF applies widely within almost any context, which is a framework's strength (Kajanus et al., 2019). It is also a weakness because the SPPF cannot provide the same specificity of guidance regarding the domain-specific theories and approaches adopted (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Given the plethora of specific theories available and the paucity of other broad theories, the SPPF's flexibility is arguably more strength than weakness (Cohen & Cyert, 1973; Kajanus et al., 2019). Hence, the SPPF is the foundational framework for this study, and it provides a way of understanding many other key concepts that relate to the study and its context.

The three phases of strategy formulation in the SPPF inform a considerable body of research. Within the broader framework of the SPPF, researchers have examined specific components in greater detail. The first phase in using the SPPF is to formulate the strategy (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). When formulating a business strategy, several key components should be considered, including the organization's strategic goals. Kajanus et al. (2019) addressed a crucial complication in selecting and setting such goals: the rapidly changing business environments in which firms exist. This rapid rate of change complicates attempts to set goals in that swift changes in the organizational landscape can upend initially set goals, valid and appropriate for the business leaders' objectives (Kajanus et al., 2019). In addressing this challenge of doing business in quickly changing environments, some researchers have suggested that businesses might benefit from adopting more context-sensitive and adaptive strategic goal-setting processes (Eastwood et al., 2019). The value of adopting a context-sensitive approach is a critical insight from the SPPF in the literature, but far from the only such insight.

Another aspect of formulating strategic goals is to examine the extent to which the goals are industry-specific, context-specific, or broadly applicable. Many strategic goal formulation and measurement components are similar between different industries (Kajanus et al., 2019). Simultaneously, other aspects of strategy formulation are more specific (Malovrh et al., 2016). Differentiating between these aspects of strategy formulation is vital because if the strategic goal relates to a much broader business class, then there are likely more tools available to assess them. Per the SPPF, an essential aspect of formulating goals is quantifying them and determining how they will be measured

(Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Broad goals and strategies which transcend industry and contextual boundaries necessarily have more established traditions of measurement. For example, the strategic goal of managing finances and transactions is shared almost universally (Braam & Peeters, 2018).

As a result, research has addressed how to effectively conduct accounting practices (Braam & Peeters, 2018). A more specific strategic goal might be to provide a higher quality remodeling service to customers. This goal does not have a broad array of existing metrics available to assess it because it is both industry-specific and context-specific. It is context-specific in that different local contexts may have different perspectives on what constitutes adequate or quality remodeling (Struckmeyer et al., 2019). Such specificity is one of several context-specific factors considered when adopting the SPPF or any strategic planning.

Another example of how the context may shape the effectiveness of otherwise applicable strategies across industries appears in a study by Elbeltagi et al. (2016). Elbeltagi et al. compared business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce in manufacturing SMEs within the United States and Egypt's two different contexts. Increasing B2B e-commerce improved sales, and the resulting increases in sales and market share growth resulted in a competitive advantage gained in the United States and Egyptian business contexts. However, in the Egyptian context, it was complicated for firms to functionally access and utilize B2B e-commerce, meaning that the strategy was not practical for most Egyptian firms. Identifying this gap between theoretical applicability and practical utility is a part of the third phase of the SPPF, which is ongoing evaluation (Cohen & Cyert,

1973). The critical insight of the continuous evaluating phase is that the strategy and its implementation happen regularly. Identifying that a strategy is only effective under certain circumstances is the type of observation likely to result from the SPPF's third phase. It requires multiple evaluations to determine that the strategy is effective in one situation but ineffective in another (Zelt et al., 2019).

E-commerce can be a powerful driver of firm performance. However, other continuous evaluations of the strategy, such as that undertaken by Mutuku et al. (2019), support the idea that it is only contingently effective. In particular, it is only advantageous to a business if it provides a competitive advantage. Such contingency in the effect of strategies also supports the SPPF idea that it is essential to quantify and measure goals. Simply adopting a strategy because other businesses had used it successfully and not carefully monitoring if achieving the desired result would likely fail because of contingent conditions for effective strategy (Zelt et al., 2019). Therefore, the SPPF is necessarily broad, and individual firms must tailor it to their needs.

In alignment with the breadth of the SPPF, research has also more directly served to affirm the importance of the SPPF's emphasis on quantifying goals. Functionally speaking, implementing a new business strategy has a high rate of failure (Cândido & Santos, 2015). In reviewing the literature as a part of their study of failure rates, Cândido and Santos (2015) found significant variation in the cited failure rates for business strategies, ranging from 7-90%. Cândido and Santos (2015) noted in their research that further work is needed to understand better, clarify, and quantify the failure of business strategies. A better set of metrics for success or failure, as implicit in the SPPF's

formulation stage, may bring greater clarity to why a given business strategy failed or why it succeeded (Yuliansyah et al., 2017). Yet, even rudimentary metrics offer value in the sense that understanding *why* a strategy has failed is secondary to understanding *if* it failed. Continuing to pursue a failed strategy may result in increasingly significant financial losses for the firm (Zhao, 2017). Avoiding this outcome is crucial, especially in already volatile contexts.

Researchers have long supported the importance of careful strategic evaluation, especially in volatile industries. For example, Malovrh et al. (2016) argued that businesses involved in industries where organizational outcomes are significantly affected by unstable external factors should be prepared to monitor industry conditions and progress towards goals consistently, improving strategies when needed. For example, many firms in the tourism or hospitality industry depend strongly on interest in tourism, increasing or decreasing due to external factors such as terrorist attacks (Malovrh et al., 2016). As of 2020, however, events have demonstrated that unexpected circumstances can overcome almost any industry. For example, the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease it causes, which became a global pandemic, caused significant disruption well outside markets that would traditionally have lower volatility (Baker et al., 2020). While such a pandemic is likely to occur only once in a lifetime, other similar crises have occurred, such as the financial crisis of 2008, also known as the Great Recession (Giroud & Mueller, 2017). Therefore, businesses should not disregard planning for future large-scale disruptions.

Arguably, the Great Recession provided a case study in the need for firms to continually reassess their strategy to determine if it works as indicated by the SPPF. The financial collapse of several influential firms resulted in the Great Recession, despite the idea that they were too big to fail (Gertler & Gilchrist, 2018). By accepting this notion rather than evaluating the situation based on quantified and realistic metrics, these firms and those closely connected to them failed to see their strategies' failure. Instead, they put themselves in an untenable position that rippled through the broader economy through financial linkages between institutions (Cette et al., 2016). While no evaluation plan is perfect, such a catastrophic failure could have been foreseen and perhaps forestalled through the proper development and monitoring of strategic goals (Aikman et al., 2019). Beyond the specific example, it provides, however, the 12-year interval between the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic is small enough to suggest the need for all firms to include monitoring the broader environment and a key part of the ongoing evaluation of their strategic goals (Coibion et al., 2020). Such dramatic and catastrophic events can require an immediate shift in strategic goals along with the objectives for meeting them (Gertler & Gilchrist, 2018). Adapting to such shifts in the broader economy may be necessary to gain a competitive advantage.

Strategic Process Management and Competitive Advantage

Overall, the goal of most business strategy and planning is to make the business more successful. It is this insight that ties the SPPF together with the concept of competitive advantage. A competitive advantage constitutes the presence of one or more favorable conditions within a company that makes leading the market more likely (Delery

& Roumpi, 2017). A competitive advantage can result from many circumstances, factors, and strategies, as evidenced by the number of extant studies that center on different methods of establishing a competitive advantage (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). Establishing and sustaining a competitive advantage versus external competitors can be of particular importance for small firms because small firms typically lack other resources to compensate for losing business to competitors even in the short term (McDowell et al., 2016). When engaging with strategic planning within the SPPF, strategies are a means of getting from the firm's current position to a position that its leaders wish to reach (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Given that, by definition, a competitive advantage represents an advantageous position within the market, a competitive advantage is a frequent goal of business strategies (Glauner, 2017). The SPPF is a key tool for understanding how business leaders pursue a competitive advantage.

At least one prior study has examined the strategies used to gain a competitive advantage by businesses in different industries. Turner and Endres (2017) explored and compared strategies implemented at three small coffee shops in Florida. This exploration yielded one of the shop owners' key approaches to develop effective business plans that effectively identify challenges and opportunities (Turner & Endres, 2017). These coffee shop owners were following the formulation step of the SPPF, carefully identifying the issues. Using these plans as a practical guide, the shop owners also followed the implementation step of the SPPF, which entails using the strategy as a roadmap for practically moving toward the strategic goals (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Hence, the study

offered a specific instance of the broader ways the SPPF can guide the pursuit of gaining a competitive advantage.

Implementing a successful strategy for competitive advantage is, by itself, not sufficient. In the SPPF, the cyclic nature of the framework itself and the continuous nature of the evaluation phase point to the need to continually refine a strategy (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). In the literature regarding competitive advantage, some scholars have shifted their focus to incorporating a sustained competitive advantage into general business strategies (Miotto et al., 2020). Within the SME context, where a lack of a sustained competitive advantage can easily result in business failure, many successful firms now treat remaining competitive as a core facet of overall business strategy (Shams, 2016). Suppose a competitive advantage is advantageous relative to competitors and the market at any one point in time. In that case, a sustained competitive advantage refers to maintaining that position for an extended period (Maury, 2018). Though closely related, these strategic goals differ in key ways and may require different functional strategies.

Within the SPPF, the shift from obtaining a competitive advantage to sustaining a competitive advantage represents a new cycle of the framework's application. Once business leaders have determined, through the appropriate metrics, that they have met their goal, they should initiate a new round of strategic planning (Maury, 2018). In this round of planning, the new goal should be to sustain the advantage. The most effective strategies for sustaining a competitive advantage may differ depending on how the original competitive advantage was obtained (Whalen et al., 2016). For example, a competitive advantage obtained from a market position may require a shift in focus to

maintaining market changes. In contrast, a competitive advantage obtained by a technological edge ensures that innovation continues at the same rapid pace (Whalen et al., 2016). Determining the appropriate method of maintaining a competitive advantage may require the usage of other sub theories.

As discussed previously, effective utilization of the SPPF may require adopting other specific theories within the framework for carrying out the specific steps of the SPPF. The notion of incumbent firms helps illustrate the shift from gaining a competitive advantage to sustaining a competitive advantage. The idea of incumbent firms is that they are successful firms with dominance in a field (Frishammar & Parida, 2019). For example, large hotel chain such as Marriott represents incumbents in the hospitality industry (Roma et al., 2019). In becoming as successful as they have, these firms have effectively reshaped the market around them and become the standard (Roma et al., 2019). Simultaneously, their position opens them to a wider array of criticism and makes them a target for new entrants seeking to disrupt the market (Luoma et al., 2018). These firms were originally disruptive innovators, bringing new ideas and approaches to revolutionize an industry (Luoma et al., 2018). Yet, as revolutionary firms achieve success, their revolutionary approaches become standard. As a result, they must adopt a different set of strategies to maintain their advantage from that position to address challenges from new, disruptive rivals (van Mossel et al., 2018). The SPPF offers a framework for this shift as well.

Within the framework of SPPF, adapting to these new market conditions is, if not easy, at least a natural extension of the strategic planning process. Because it is cyclic, the

SPPF prevents business owners utilizing it from being blindsided by such seismic shifts in the market (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). The framework ensures that firms reevaluate their strategic goals on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, the evaluation phase of the SPPF is continuous (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Even if the initial strategy for creating a competitive advantage seems at first to hold but then begins to fail, a business acting within the framework is well-equipped to detect the failure and adapt its strategy quickly.

It is important to understand that the SPPF is a framework for all its benefits in terms of a competitive advantage. The SPPF does not contain the information necessary to gain a competitive advantage; rather, it offers a structure in which that information can be effectively evaluated and deployed. For example, a study by Campbell and Park (2016) found that the most influential resources in determining competitive advantage were firm capital, corporate social responsibility, and entrepreneurial orientation. Davcik and Sharma (2016) found that internal and external resources can play a key role in determining competitive advantage. None of these are directly aspects of the SPPF, but following the SPPF, a business can lay out a strategy to effectively build and apply these resources (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Effective utilization of the SPPF may be considered an intangible asset, and research has directly demonstrated the ability of intangible assets to drive competitive advantage (Khan et al., 2019). Ivanov and Mayorova (2015) found that intangible assets offered operating benefits such as reduced costs, increased productivity, and better customer attraction/retention. Perhaps more directly, Wingwon (2015) found that entrepreneurship and effective business strategies were closely linked. The business strategy also significantly affected business networking (Wingwon, 2015). Further,

business strategy and entrepreneurship both indirectly and directly influence competitive advantage.

Given that the SPPF is a framework for developing business strategies effectively, Wingwon's (2015) result is particularly relevant to the SPPF's utility. Such strategies may also utilize other theoretical perspectives within the SPPF. For example, the resource-based view of the firm (Hoskisson et al., 2018) is a theoretical perspective that helps to create success metrics by understanding the value of different resources available to the firm. Elshaer and Augustyn (2016) demonstrated using the resource-based view to measure competitive advantage in assessing hotels' quality management. Such research is vital to utilizing the SPPF because it helps better understand the appropriate ways of measuring progress toward strategic goals, which is an integral component of the SPPF.

Existing research indicates that many firms already have effective metrics in terms of self-evaluating market position. In Poland, Sipa et al. (2015) found that over 95% of firms demonstrated effective market awareness in their competitive position within the market. However, the accuracy of these assessments is harder to determine with any certainty. Market position can be measured in different ways, not necessarily pointing to the same firms as superior. For example, though Uber has a competitive advantage in the ride-sharing market based on market share and popularity (Tzur, 2019), it is a money-losing company. It has not always performed well in the stock market (Li, 2020). These conflicting metrics illustrate the need for business leaders who act within the SPPF to carefully evaluate which metrics they feel are the more effective and accurate

measure of what they wish to achieve. One way to ensure that the measures are appropriate is through organizational learning.

Organizational Learning

The importance of such determinations within the organization supports the use of organizational learning within the SPPF. Organizational learning refers to a means of improving and sharing existing information and processes and a means of diagnosing the causes of business phenomena (Namada, 2018). On its own, organizational learning is independently a predictor of competitive advantage (Namada, 2018). However, within the broader framework of the SPPF, organizational learning can also help improve developing and implementing strategy (Shams, 2016). Organizational learning is a useful tool within the SPPF because so much of the framework rests on effectively identifying and responding to information. The iterative nature of the SPPF also lends itself to organizational learning. Organizational learning, like other learning, often entails learning from past experiences, including both successes and failures (Azadegan et al., 2019). As an organization implements repeated iterations of strategic planning, each iteration builds a base of strategic business knowledge through organizational learning that the organization can apply to future iterations.

This effect may also compound, creating greater benefit because organizational learning builds a more innovative organizational culture. Abdul-Halim et al. (2018) found that facets of organizational learning related to behavior, cognition, and information acquisition significantly affected innovation culture at an organization. As the name suggests, innovation culture refers to how the employees of an organization tend to be

innovative in approaching problems (Abdul-Halim et al., 2018). Organizational culture also has important links to organizational leadership (Dodge et al., 2017). As an organization's culture becomes more innovative, organizational leadership may also become more innovative. Both organizational and leadership innovation may be valuable tools in further developing and pursuing strategic goals within the SPPF, especially for competitive advantage (Coccia, 2017). Since innovation is a key source of competitive advantage in many contexts, developing an innovative organizational culture through iterative organizational learning to better implement it, the SPPF may contribute more directly to a competitive advantage.

As was implicit in the discussion of incumbent firms above, innovation is especially important in creating a competitive advantage for certain firms. In particular, competitive advantage is key for smaller or newer firms such as SMEs (Leković & Marić, 2016). Aziz and Samad (2016) supported the idea that innovation may be a contingent source of advantage. They found that the age of a firm moderated the extent to which its innovativeness produced a competitive advantage. However, Whalen et al. (2016) indicated that innovation could be a source of sustained competitive advantage, creating a conflict in the literature. This conflict is likely resolved by further consideration of context, as Whalen et al. (2016) addressed innovation more generally, whereas Aziz and Samad's (2016) study was specific to the food sector. The distinction, therefore, represents another example of contingent strategizing within the SPPF, as well as the importance of carefully evaluating the extent to which a chosen strategy functionally produces results.

As further support for the contingent value of innovation, research has illustrated some of the specific conditions necessary to turn innovation into a competitive advantage. Quaye and Mensah (2019) found that marketing innovation positively and significantly contributed to a sustained competitive advantage for many surveyed businesses. However, Quaye and Mensah (2017) also found that this relationship only held so long as the firms possessed certain key resources and capabilities. The relationship under discussion connects to the SPPF in terms of strategy formulation. Formulating a strategy such as using innovative marketing within the SPPF should carefully analyze whether the firm's employees can execute the strategy. More broadly, linking innovation, the SPPF, and competitive advantage, research by Anwar (2018) illustrated a link between innovation in business plans and models and competitive advantage. The iterative nature of the SPPF means that it is a framework well-suited to creating innovation. Anwar's (2018) results support the idea that utilizing the SPPF as a strategic framework was appropriate for building and sustaining a competitive advantage. Innovation is not the only aspect of the organization that is important in addressing competitive advantage, however.

Engagement is another organizational aspect that links SPPF and competitive advantage. The SPPF's iterative nature necessarily requires engagement (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Without engagement in the iterative evaluation and development of strategic goals, the framework is unlikely to be employed in its intended cyclic fashion. Loss of engagement leads to more rote learning or half-hearted efforts within organizations (Kooij et al., 2017). The importance of engagement as a tool in human resource

management was illustrated in a conceptual review of the literature conducted by Albrecht et al. (2015), with conclusions that a loss of engagement would be highly likely to cause employees to fall short in their efforts to implement aspects of the SPPF. Simultaneously, researchers have identified organizational engagement as a key strategy for creating a competitive advantage (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). The types of engagement that are valuable for creating a competitive advantage may be more varied, as Eldor (2019) has also demonstrated that collective engagement—or the broader engagement of multiple organizational stakeholders collectively—is valuable for creating a competitive advantage. Overall, engagement is a valuable tool indirectly creating a competitive advantage and ensuring that the SPPF can be followed effectively within the context of the firm.

A final factor that may be key in developing a competitive advantage is the ability of businesses to synthesize different strategic approaches into a functionally useful whole. The SPPF requires such a synthesis to fill in the individual steps it indicates with domain-specific content or theories (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Yet, business leaders may opt to combine competitive strategies in other regards as well. For example, SME strategies combining European organizational learning and innovation models with Latin American business survival strategies are prevalent in many Latin American businesses may be particularly competitive (Bianchi et al., 2019). Combining strategies also aligns with the SPPF's principle of evaluating and adapting strategic goals. Per Jones et al. (2018), individual competitive strategies often lack the necessary flexibility to adapt to changes in the market or other key shifts in the business context. Adopting a combined

strategy may be more effective in creating the necessary responsiveness indicated in the SPPF approach and required by the omnipresent danger posed by catastrophes such as the Great Recession (Gertler & Gilchrist, 2018). The combination of strategies within the SPPF may draw upon the various strategies discussed in this section or a wide variety of strategies beyond.

Though this review offers insight into the factors guiding some of the most successful factors manifested in the present literature, such a list cannot by nature be complete. The domain-specific knowledge that business owners could employ within the SPPF is simply too vast for any such list to be fully comprehensive. Throughout the literature, many factors have been conclusively linked to a competitive advantage by at least correlational research. Some key factors correlated to a competitive advantage include engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016), innovation (Anwar, 2018; Whalen et al., 2016), and organizational learning (Abdul-Halim et al., 2018). These factors connect to the SPPF in complex ways. In all cases, the SPPF's factors are ways to envision better and enact a given strategic goal or evaluate it afterward. However, many of these factors can also improve the implementation of the SPPF itself. Simultaneously, some of the research on competitive advantage shows how intangible assets and good business strategy, such as implementing a strategy built within the SPPF, can themselves directly create a competitive advantage.

Strategic Planning in Construction Businesses

Scholars published a significant amount of literature pertaining to the U.S. construction industry before the 2008 financial crisis and housing market crash (Clark,

2019). However, many conditions and contextual factors associated with U.S. housing and real estate, and the remodeling industry by extension, have changed since then. For example, Chan and Ellen (2017) discussed how the aging U.S. populace would significantly affect U.S. remodeling businesses in coming years. However, the construction industry and its sub-industry, the remodeling industry have rebounded significantly since the housing crash (Danforth et al., 2017). As a result, the most relevant literature is somewhat sparse but reflective of modern trends.

One trend associated with the remodeling industry is the green construction movement. Increasingly, business owners and private residents seek to renovate or remodel their property to conserve resources such as water and electricity and improve air or living quality. Another reason for renovation is that many owners wish to enhance their space with sustainable and eco-friendly materials (Park & Kim, 2018). Green remodeling often compliments other strategies associated with corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability (Park & Kim, 2018). The idea of green remodeling aligns with Engert et al. (2016) on corporate sustainability. In the broader field of construction, the rise of green construction has rewarded those firms whose leadership became aware of and remained abreast of the environmental movement (Onubi et al., 2020). The development of green construction represents a prime example of how strategic planning is essential in construction (Wu et al., 2019). Green paradigms are significantly different from standard construction. Their adoption by construction firm leaders required significant foresight and strategic planning to change existing practices without disrupting the firm's operations too heavily (Onubi et al., 2020). Green

construction represents a more overarching, ideological goal, connecting such broad notions to real, specific issues through intermediate frameworks. For example, one such framework is Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. It involves a framework through which buildings can be certified on design, construction, and maintenance issues concerning environmental sustainability (Bernardi et al., 2017).

Existing research addresses the problems and business operations within the overall scope of construction business operations. For example, Al Nahyan et al. (2019) examined the role of strategic planning practices in everyday communication within construction projects. However, other researchers have taken a more expansive approach. Yoon et al. (2017) have provided tools or evaluation approaches to assess processes or individuals involved in construction. Yoon et al. sought to develop a model for calculating the length of the construction period necessary to finish apartment remodeling projects. Yoon et al. noted the importance of shortening the average time tenants spend in temporary housing to less than 2 years. This formula provides a means of estimating the required amount of time to complete a remodeling project: *Construction period = normal duration + correction value + risk attribute* (Yoon et al., 2017). Yoon et al. demonstrated how the traditional factors associated with a construction project (correction value) and risk factors (risk attribute) associated with the existing structure and requirements of the remodeling project affect the duration of a remodeling project. The various models addressing strategic aspects of remodeling take different focuses. Yoon et al.'s (2017) model can be used strategically within remodeling businesses to effectively track

remodeling progress and ensure effective resource use. The delimitation of the model to specific projects also illustrates a unique characteristic of the construction industry.

One distinction between strategic planning in construction and elsewhere is the project approach. The construction business flow consists of discrete, unique projects (Bosch-Sijtsema & Gluch, 2019). These projects entail assembling a temporary team that combines the necessary expertise to complete the given project (Demirkesen, & Ozorhon, 2017). The project approach is not unique to construction, but it and the related discipline of project management still differ considerably from the classical structure of most organizations (Bosch-Sijtsema & Gluch, 2019). Hence, the prevalence of the project approach makes the construction industry different from other industries in which competitive advantage is already better understood, making it worthy of study. The research gap is especially prevalent because the project approach in SMEs is relatively under-researched (Bishop, 2018). One prevalent type of smaller construction firm, more likely to fall under the SME category, is the remodeling business.

Remodeling Businesses

One subset of the construction industry is the remodeling industry. Remodeling businesses are interested in that remodeling is a narrower field than general construction (Kim & Lee, 2019). The remodeling industry is associated with considerable revenue and many job opportunities in the residential and commercial sectors. While residential remodeling for added space, amenities, or luxury has declined in recent years, homeowners over 65 have a significant need for home remodeling to improve accessibility and functionality. The number of aging U.S. households will continue to

grow in upcoming years (Jung et al., 2017). Many remodeling businesses will likely need to continue to adapt their target customers, remodeling services offered, and other business components in response to the shifting context, such as an increasing desire for green or environmental remodeling.

Businesses involved in industries where unstable external factors can significantly influence organizational outcomes should consistently monitor industry conditions about business goals, improving strategies as needed. Though the specific failure rate is in debate, the high failure rate associated with strategic business initiatives supports the need to evaluate business strategy effectiveness (Cândido & Santos, 2015). Corporate sustainability has become an increasingly common element within strategic planning literature. More businesses aim to ensure current actions and initiatives will not create new challenges when addressing future stakeholders' needs (Engert et al., 2016). Some strategic business management considerations have shifted in recent years to reflect changing public opinions and expectations, market conditions, and business contexts. In particular, the housing market crash may have had an important effect on the industry.

Transition

Section 1 provided the foundations for the study. It began with the background of the problem, leading to the specific business problem that some small construction business owners lack strategies to gain a competitive advantage. To address this problem, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. The target population was 10 small construction business owners in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,

who have implemented successful strategies to gain a competitive advantage. Section 1 also addressed the nature of the study, the research questions, the interview questions, the conceptual framework, key operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study in three key regards. Section 1 concluded with a review of the academic literature that addressed how the literature relates to the SPPF and the study.

Section 2 presented the project in its methodological aspects. Section 2 also included the key methodological issues that characterize how I carried out the study. Then, Section 3 addresses the results of the study. The results, as they relate to the literature and the specific business problem, are also discussed.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I present how I carried out the project in practice. Section 2 begins with a reiteration of the study purpose and my reflections on my role as the researcher. Next, I present a discussion of the study participants. I then addressed the research method and design for the study. Next, I present a discussion of the population and sample, along with related ethical issues. I then present the data collection instruments and discuss the data collection technique and data organization. Finally, I address data analysis, followed by issues of reliability and validity, after which Section 2 concludes with a summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners used to gain a competitive advantage. The target population was 10 small construction business owners in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who implemented successful strategies to gain a competitive advantage. The implications for positive social change included assisting local communities in need of employment through providing increased and more stable employment opportunities. Furthermore, successful business owners could give back to society through philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, thereby enhancing community betterment.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and collects data through direct interaction with participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, my role was the primary data collection instrument interacting with the

participants virtually through Zoom to collect data. In addition, as the primary researcher, it was my responsibility to ensure that research ethics met the Belmont Report principles. I achieved this by following the Belmont Report principles as laid out under the Ethical Research heading later in the chapter. I developed and validated an interview protocol to guide the interviews to support my role as the research instrument. While this qualitative research did not focus on objective, empirical conclusions, as does quantitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), scholarly distance and minimal bias were still important aspects. To this end, I engaged in reflective practice as a way to ensure confirmability. According to Evans et al. (2018), the reflective practice involved reflecting on individual beliefs, values, and biographical details.

I engaged in reflective practice by carefully considering my worldview and biases and how those biases could affect the research process. The reflective process involved carefully documenting these factors before conducting the study and reviewing them. I also conducted a careful review of my thoughts and research processes to be self-aware and limit bias to the extent possible by using reflective journaling to organize my thoughts. As a further measure to minimize bias, I made liberal use of quotations to give readers the participants' voices when reporting the study results. Using supporting quotations from the study participants, I demonstrated that my analytical conclusions were derived from the data. My first priority was to conduct ethical research and protect the participants; my second priority was to faithfully convey the participants' responses in analyzing and reporting data. I had no conflicts of interest concerning the study topic

or participants. The only preexisting relationship I had with the industry was using small construction services in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to complete home renovations.

Participants

Participants for the study were the owners of small construction businesses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The inclusion criteria were that prospective participants were the owners of small construction businesses that had gained a competitive advantage. Since the recruitment process could not assess these criteria directly, the population were the owners of SMEs that had been in business for at least 5 years. The choice of the population reflected the purposes of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The 5-year inclusion criterion was appropriate because, for SMEs, survival for 5 years represents a form of success, putting a business in at least the 50th percentile of overall business practice (SBA, 2019). Survival over this period indicated that they have likely gained a competitive advantage to some degree. I limited the participants to the geographic region of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Since I focused on SMEs, businesses outside the Philadelphia area that conduct business in the city were unlikely to be relevant to the study. Small construction business owners represent a population aligned with the research questions driving this study.

I identified the population through various public sources of data, including purposive sampling (see Etikan et al., 2016) with the Yellow Pages, Google results, and local chambers of commerce. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were used in locating small construction businesses headquartered within the greater Philadelphia

metropolitan area. I did not use social media groups but rather searched for their official social media accounts, such as their Facebook pages or Twitter feeds.

After I identified the small construction businesses using these various resources, I approached potential participants via e-mail or, in the case of social media, by the social media platform's messaging service. The e-mails included a greeting, a description of the study, a discussion of the participation requirements, and a request to participate. I asked those interested in participating or who had further questions to reply using my Walden e-mail account or the social media messaging service I used to initiate contact. I attempted to establish a working relationship with participants through politeness, well-written communications, appreciation, and accommodating to prospective participants' needs, questions, and concerns. Establishing a working relationship with participants was a key step in the qualitative research process (Kallio et al., 2016). I began the relationship-forming process with a polite e-mail to the participant. I expressed my gratitude for their time and consideration, even if they did not participate. I also clarified to participants that they may contact me at any point with questions or concerns regarding the study process and that the scheduling of interviews was to be at their convenience.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

The research method for this study was qualitative. A qualitative study is one of the three research methods; the other two are quantitative and mixed methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The qualitative method is subjective, descriptive, and exploratory because a researcher uses interviews to collect data regarding participants' experiences as

they describe those experiences. The qualitative method is also open-ended and exploratory because those interviews allowed a researcher to collect a full range of possible responses to the interview questions, rather than requiring participants to choose from a predefined set of responses. Exploration of this sort allows a qualitative researcher the ability to explore a wide array of the sentiments present within the population of interest, rather than needing to presume in advance what potential responses the participants might wish to provide (Yin, 2015). The qualitative research is also innately contextual because it explores a phenomenon within its context. This contextualization allows a researcher to explore how context affects the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A qualitative method was most appropriate, as the strategies I sought were not numeric; research could not easily understand them through comparing groups or the relationships between variables. The study aligned with the principles of qualitative inquiry.

Neither the quantitative method nor mixed methods were a good fit for this study. Quantitative researchers examine the relationships between variables and answer research questions by testing hypotheses about variables' relationships or groups' differences (Apuke, 2017). Quantitative research was insufficient for my study because it is closed-ended concerning the researcher's questions and the data collected. Quantitative research instruments would have allowed participants to indicate a choice from a predetermined list of possibilities which would have helped streamline the collection of quantitative data and limited what data the study can include. Although quantitative research would have effectively collected data from large sample sizes and analyzed those data powerfully

using statistical techniques, the method required variables that researchers in the existing literature had already explored and quantified (Leppink, 2017). The research questions guiding my study explored nonnumerical strategies. I did not seek to assess the relationship between these strategies and quantified measures of business success, such as sales figures.

Mixed-methods researchers combine qualitative and quantitative characteristics in the same study (Hayes et al., 2013). The quantitative, hypothesis-focused portion of a mixed-methods study would not have helped me address my research question. The primary benefit of mixed-methods research would have been addressing qualitative and quantitative issues together, either simultaneously or in sequence (Hayes et al., 2013). This characteristic is a benefit because it allows for the investigation of research topics and problems for which neither qualitative nor quantitative methods are individually adequate. Since this study did not have a component that quantitative methods would be a strong choice to address, mixed methods had no advantages over a qualitative method.

Research Design

The case study design was most appropriate for exploring a phenomenon within its real-life context (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2017). A case study design was appropriate for this study because of this research design's contextual strength, meaning that case study research focused on context and circumstance. When using a case study design, a researcher draws upon multiple data sources to create an in-depth, contextualized picture of subjective reality from several perspectives. Case study researchers investigate one or more specific instances of a phenomenon precisely and study those instances to draw

more general conclusions about the phenomenon (Yin, 2017). In this study, I adopted a multiple case study design. Per Yin (2017), a single case study was appropriate for examining a single case that was noteworthy either because it was representative or exceptional. By contrast, a multiple case study allowed for assessment across multiple contexts (Yin, 2017). The key advantages of a multiple case study were that a multiple case study allowed me to evaluate how different contexts have produced different outcomes. Small construction businesses are diverse, meaning that these businesses presented a myriad of potential contexts. I adopted a multiple case study design to better study how these different contexts shaped businesses' competitive advantage strategies.

There were other qualitative research designs, such as phenomenological or ethnographic, but these designs would be less appropriate for this study for several reasons. Phenomenologists focus on participants' lived experiences (Willis et al., 2016). Phenomenological research was not optimal for this study as I did not seek to exclusively explore the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences but rather included additional elements. Another alternative design would have been to use an ethnographic design to identify and explore an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged time by collecting long-term interview data (see Pink, 2016). I did not study an intact cultural group, so ethnographic design research was not appropriate to address my research question. As this study matches a case study's characteristics but not those of the other qualitative designs presented, I adopted a case study design. I ensured data saturation through an ongoing short-form analysis of each interview to determine when new key themes ceased to appear in the data.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was owners of small construction businesses in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Participants needed to be the owner of a small construction business that had gained a competitive advantage, a qualification that I proxied through the qualification of owning a business that survived for at least 5 years. The criterion of 5 years represented an age that less than half of all SMEs survive to reach (SBA, 2019). A business that reached the 5-year mark achieves a real measure of success. I required that all participants be the original owner of their businesses. Another inclusion criterion was that participants' businesses had successfully gained a competitive advantage. I used no additional demographic characteristics to include or exclude potential participants. The choice of participants who had run successful businesses would ensure that they represented a population capable of answering the research question.

I used purposive sampling for the study, but also included snowballing where necessary. Snowball sampling entailed recruiting further participants through existing social networks (Naderifar et al., 2017). Purposive sampling involved selecting participants whose specific experiences were relevant to answering the research questions (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling was appropriate to ensure that participants in my study met eligibility criteria and answered the research question (Etikan et al., 2016). I sought appropriate participants using public listings that included construction businesses, including the Yellow Pages, Google results, and local chambers of commerce. These businesses' social media pages served as sources of identification and

recruiting opportunities. Once recruited, I assigned each business owner a category code such as O1.

Qualitative research generally draws upon smaller sample sizes given the extensive data gathered from each participant. Data saturation, or the point at which new participants no longer contribute new ideas, determine qualitative sample sizes (Mason, 2010). Data saturation involves the identification of (a) themes, (b) thematic definitions, (c) categories, and (d) coding based on the participants' responses (Mason, 2010). As I collected data, I recruited fewer participants than initially expected. I recruited additional participants until I achieved saturation. I ensured data saturation through an ongoing short-form analysis of each interview data to determine when new key themes ceased to appear in the data. I conducted all interviews in the virtual setting, using Zoom teleconferencing software or another similar software with which the participant was more comfortable. The pandemic necessitated virtual interviews.

Ethical Research

I adhered to ethical practices at all stages of the study. Good ethical practice included adherence to the *Belmont Report* principles (Adashi et al., 2018; Miracle, 2016). Originally formulated in the 1970s, the *Belmont Report* included key principles of protecting and respecting the participants, justice, and adopting a stance of not harm while maximizing the research's benefit (Cassell, 2000). I followed informed consent procedures carefully. Before collecting any data, I provided participants with an informed consent form detailing the study, its purpose, and what participating in it would entail (see Appendix B). For example, the informed consent form included the expected length

of the interviews, the incentive for participation, and the withdrawal procedure. I then reviewed the form with participants by going over it with them at the start of the Zoom interview, and I answered any questions they had. I required that participants e-sign this form to participate in interviews or data collection. All study participants were volunteers. I collected all data confidentially and assign each participant a category code, such as O1. To ensure participants' confidentiality, I carefully reviewed the data to clean any identifying information before analysis and prior to reporting. Removing identifying information constituted reviewing the data to identify specific names, addresses, or other specific information that might allow a reader to identify a participant.

The three *Belmont Report* principles are justice, respect for persons, and beneficence. Justice ensures that the participants are informed and treated in an equitable, unbiased, and appropriate fashion. To ensure justice, I used informed consent throughout the research process, ensured that participation was voluntary and free of any coercion, and ensured that the study participants could be treated fairly and equally during the research process. Respect involves treating the participants with consideration and affording them the greatest protection possible. To this end, I respected participants' confidentiality. Beneficence refers to first doing no harm and second seeking to maximize the benefits to the participants and society (Miracle, 2016). I endeavored to both do not harm participants and to maximize the benefit from the research. Ensuring beneficence entailed avoiding disclosing the participant's personal information and providing them with a copy of the study results to reap any benefits from the strategies

uncovered. As a component of minimizing harm to participants, I conducted all interviews remotely because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The study entailed minimal risk for participants who choose to participate. So far as I am aware, the participants of the study were not an at-risk population. However, data collected in the study could be sensitive because competitive advantage strategies are important to business success. For example, if a strategy that has helped a business succeed is not publicly known, revealing it could potentially be harmful to the participants' business. However, participation is voluntary, and so any potential participants who fear such disclosure may hurt their business were free to decline participation. I avoided interviewing any participants with whom I had a preexisting relationship. Avoiding preexisting relationships included but was not limited to excluding those with whom I have a personal friendship and those I have done business in the past.

I stored the data in a locked desk drawer in my office or a password-protected folder on my computer based on physical data or digital data. I will keep all data for 5 years following the study's publication, then fully deleted for digital data or shredded for paper data. I will delete digital data by moving them to the computer's recycling bin, then emptying the recycling bin. Should a participant request to withdraw, I would remove their data from the analysis and delete it immediately. Withdrawing would entail contacting me via e-mail from the same address they agreed to participate and then submitting a formal request to withdraw in writing. At that point, I would remove the participant's data from the study and shred/delete them. IRB review and approval would ensure that these methods of protecting the participants are adequate for the task. I did not

plan to offer any participation incentives, although I may have opted to offer a small gift card if recruitment proves problematic. The IRB approval number for this study is 08-17-21-0664571.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher was the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative study, but I utilized an interview protocol to collect data. Per Kallio et al. (2016), interviews guided by an interview guide were the most commonly used source of qualitative data. Yin (2017) noted that case studies should utilize multiple data sources, selected from interviews, focus groups, document collection, object collection, archival data, direct observation, and participant observation. I used interviews and document collection (as detailed below). I collected and analyzed each source of data separately.

I used interviews as the primary source of data for the study. Semi structured interviews are a standard method of qualitative data collection (Kallio et al., 2016). In addition, interviews are ideal for collecting data regarding participants' experiences (Rabionet, 2011), such as the experience of developing and using competitive advantage strategies. An interview protocol guided the interviews (see Appendix A). I audio recorded each interview and transcribed it afterward. I recorded the interviews using a Microsoft Surface Pro-audio recording device. Consent to be recorded was part of informed consent documentation; for participants who did not agree to the recording process, I thanked them for their interest but did not interview them.

I used document collection as the second source of data. Document collection is one of the six data sources a case study researcher may use (Yin, 2017). Following the

interviews, I requested the participants provide documents about their business. These could have included copies of advertising materials, such as flyers, brochures, or other materials that manifest the strategies discussed in the interviews. Such documents were primarily public-facing materials rather than internal business content. Examining the advertising media used to attract customers or how the business owners have sought to present their businesses provided insight. If participants did not provide these documents, I used publicly available documents, such as websites or promotional materials.

Additional documentation included various public metrics of success, magazine lists that include the business, newspaper articles about the business, or other publicly available records demonstrating its success. These also fall under document collection or object collection as laid out by Yin (2017), and potentially archival records such as former company materials no longer in use. I asked participants if they were aware of such records. Regardless of their answers, I also searched the Internet for publicly available articles and relevant records. I enhanced the interviews' reliability through transcript review by the study participants once I have transcribed the interviews. I also offered participants the chance to review and correct their transcripts.

Data Collection Technique

The research question addressed in this study was: What strategies do successful small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage? To answer this question, I utilized interviews as the primary technique for data collection. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews are the most used method of collecting qualitative data (Wengraf, 2001). The common use of qualitative research made semi structured

interviews a strong choice for this study's data collection technique. However, the use of this technique had both advantages and disadvantages.

Semi structured interviews had the advantage of being thorough in collecting the necessary data (Kallio et al., 2016). Another advantage of semi structured interviews was their flexibility regarding what the researcher can explore as the interview develops and the advantage of capturing subjective data such as opinions and perceptions (Kallio et al., 2016). These advantages were why I chose the semi structured interview approach for this study.

Semi structured interviews also had disadvantages. These included requiring participants to invest significant time in the research process, risk of bias in terms of how the interviewer presented the questions concerning tone or body language, and risk of loss of data due to interpersonal friction or other failures to connect with the participants adequately (Rabionet, 2011). Also, semi-structured interviews bring the disadvantage of requiring a more subjective analysis than quantified data (Wengraf, 2001). However, these disadvantages are essentially unavoidable for any data collection technique that creates in-depth, qualitative data. Therefore, the disadvantages do not outweigh the advantages. I employed some secondary data collection techniques to strengthen the overall data collection.

Once a participant agreed to participate, I scheduled an interview with that participant by asking the participant what times and specific teleconferencing software worked for them, then set a date and time based on mutual availability. The interview protocol involved me asking participants a set of key interview questions. The interview

protocol used for the study is in Appendix B. I conducted the interviews online through Zoom or similar teleconferencing software because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Before collecting any data, I provided each participant with the informed consent documentation and reviewed it alongside them. Then, I read them the informed consent information and asked if they had any questions. By presenting informed consent in this fashion, I ensured that I had fully informed the participants of what participation in the study entailed. Many researchers have emphasized the importance of such efforts to ensure informed consent (Byrne, 2001; Corti et al., 2000; Marzano, 2007). Once informed consent was e-signed, I began audio recording and commence the interview. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes. After the interview, I asked the participant for documentation regarding public-facing aspects of the strategies discussed, such as advertising materials or brochures. Also, I requested the participant provide any further current documents or older archival records regarding the success of the participant's construction firm.

Finally, I included a transcript review as a strategy to enhance reliability. As an alternative to member checking, transcript review was a key strategy to achieve validity (Birt et al., 2016). I e-mailed the participants a copy of the interview transcript and asked them to review it for accuracy and add anything they wished to convey but did not during the interview.

Data Organization Technique

To help keep track of the data collection process, I utilized a reflective journaling procedure to document the ongoing research efforts using journal entries. Reflective

journaling is a standard technique in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008). I used this reflective journal as a tool for my self-improvement, documentation of the data collection process, and creating an audit trail. It included entries documenting all the actions I had taken concerning the study at each stage of the research and for each specific data collection day. I maintained physical and electronic data in a locked drawer in my desk for 5 years following the study's publication. I then destroyed these data by deleting virtual files, in which I deleted the file, emptied the recycling bin, and physically shredded the physical data.

Data Analysis

Before analysis, I prepared the data by scanning or photographing physical data from document collection to create virtual copies, then transcribing each interview during the 24 hours following the completion of the interview. The transcribed files were electronic. I made them using a word processor program such as Microsoft Word and then transfer the data into NVivo qualitative data analysis software for the analysis process. Before analysis, I stripped any identifying information from the interview data, including removing any reference to specific persons, places, or entities, assigning each participant a category code, and redacting any business names, individual names, or location names.

For data analysis, I employed qualitative thematic analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis is a six-step data analysis process for turning qualitative data into a set of essential ideas called themes (Belotto, 2018). I used the definition of thematic analysis offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). I undertook all analyses with the assistance of

NVivo qualitative data analysis software. I did not use NVivo to replace my role in the analysis but rather to make the coding process easier and better documented. NVivo does not change the overall thematic analysis process.

As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis process includes six key steps. The first of these is familiarity. The researcher should carefully examine and review the data repeatedly to create a strong familiarity with them as a foundation for the analysis. Familiarity comprised repeated, careful readings of the interviews' transcriptions in a structured fashion until I had a solid grasp of the content in each interview. Once I achieved familiarity, the second stage of the thematic analysis was assigning preliminary codes (Belotto, 2018). Coding involves identifying key ideas in the data, using a combination of an initial codebook of codes that I expected to occur based on the existing literature and a list of new, emergent codes from the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial codes included strategies or *goals* that I had identified based on the literature. Emergent codes repeatedly arose in the data but were not included in the initial codebook. These codes were therefore emergent because they emerged from the data during the analysis rather than being anticipated.

The coding process's key step was to identify sections of interviews that contain units of meaning related to the research questions. These units of meaning, or codes, may be derived from the existing literature, using a list of expected initial codes, and may be developed based on new ideas found in the literature or emergent codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes refer to the same idea expressed differently by different participants; the code represents the essential, underlying idea across all of these expressions. Once I had

assigned codes, the third stage of the data analysis searches for patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are the essence of the data and represent larger sentiments, often connecting multiple codes (Yin, 2017). The key insight in this step was that themes should represent codes across multiple interviews that touch on a similar concept while remaining relevant to the research question. These ideas reappear as themes across multiple interviews and hence represent the essence of the answers sought.

Once I had developed the preliminary list of themes in stage three, the fourth stage required that I review the themes. The review examined the themes' content and ensured that they matched the underlying data (Belotto, 2018). In addition, cross-checking served to help reduce bias and ensure that each theme was strongly grounded in the participants' original data and sentiments, not the researcher's preconceptions or biases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I then systematically cross-checked the list of themes I created in identifying the themes step back against the original data, ensuring that each theme was an accurate and complete representation of the underlying data from which I developed it. Once I had verified the themes, the fifth step was defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of defining the themes constituted examining the themes carefully, ensuring that each theme or pattern of ideas was complete and unique relative to the other themes. If they were not, I adjusted them and repeated step four with the new themes.

Finally, stage six of the thematic analysis compiled the themes and contextualized them within the problem, the case context, and the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I carried out the listing and contextualization of the themes through the later sections of

this study, which involved reporting and discussing the analysis results. I applied thematic analysis to each of the three data sets to the extent possible. I analyzed documents using a related form of thematic analysis known as qualitative content analysis (Assarroudi et al., 2018). Content analysis is a form of thematic analysis which can be more easily applied to textual sources but involves a similar set of steps to create thematic meaning (Assarroudi et al., 2018). Using an initial codebook based on the literature helped to correlate the codes and resulting themes with ideas in the literature. I also identified and appraise any relevant literature that I found published while conducting the study.

Once I had analyzed each set of data individually, I applied methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation uses the separate analyses of different datasets to confirm the findings of the primary dataset (Yin, 2017). Complementary data sources can be examined together through methodological triangulation to ensure that the ideas extracted from one data set are reliable and verified by examining other data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative analysis is known as dependability, which means that other researchers could repeat the study and that the findings would be consistent over time. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). First, I supported claims about the data with quotes from participants. Secondly, I invited participants to participate in a transcript review of

transcripts I had made of the interviews they have completed to help create dependability. This process is similar to member checking, and a researcher could use it to help ensure the reliability of qualitative data (Yin, 2017). The transcript review invited the participants to examine my understanding of what they had sought to convey and provide input on whether that interpretation was accurate.

Validity

In qualitative research, validity consists of credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to how confident a researcher is in the study results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I achieved credibility in several ways. First, I used transcript review, giving each participant the chance to correct the transcripts of their interviews. Second, I used multiple sources of data and compared them with one another through methodological triangulation. Triangulation is a common approach for improving validity in a case study, per Yin (2017). Using multiple triangulated data sources allowed the different data sources to confirm or illustrate low validity through contradictions.

Transferability is that the researcher conducting a study should carefully document the conditions under which they conducted it. Readers and future researchers may determine whether they can apply the results in other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, I achieved transferability through the careful documentation of the population. I presented such documentation in this section and provided it in a description of the final sample provided in a later section. The case study research design is innately contextual (Yin, 2017). Therefore, the study results necessarily included a thorough description of the study context, which aided transferability.

I utilized detailed descriptions by including contextual descriptions along with the results. For example, I discussed in detail if participants exhibited a particularly noteworthy tone of voice or other nonverbal cues in giving a response or offer any contextualizing data from elsewhere in the interview. Purposeful sampling also helped ensure that the data collected answered the research question in a meaningful way and helped future researchers understand how well they can transfer that answer to another context. Transferability is the second component of validity out of four, the next of which is confirmability.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers could validate the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Using specific quotations from the data to support the analysis helped confirmability in letting another researcher consider whether they would have interpreted the quote in the same way. I sought to create an audit trail within my presentation and management of the data and conclusions to the extent possible. I also carefully documented the research process in this section and presented results in Section 3. Through utilizing the same process, a future researcher could replicate the study. After confirmability, the final component of qualitative validity was data saturation.

I achieved data saturation through the careful collection of data. Although I did not conduct the full thematic analysis until all data was collected, I conducted a more informal ongoing review of each interview. The informal review involved a rough coding process and a very basic attempt to extract key themes without the same depth and cross-checking as in the full analysis. I used this analysis to determine if I have achieved data

saturation. Only once two or more consecutive interviews failed to yield new themes or categories in the analysis was saturation considered to be achieved.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. The owners of small construction businesses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were the population under study. I recruited a sample of roughly 10 participants, which I adjusted based on data saturation considerations. I collected data from these participants through interviews, document collection, and archival records. Then, I analyzed these data using thematic analysis and triangulation. Once I had completed the study described in Section 2, Section 3 of this document details the results. The results included evidence for the thematic analysis and triangulation results and an extensive discussion of the implications of those results. Also, Section 3 contains the discussion of results and the conclusions drawn from them, both individually and in consideration of the literature.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. Analysis of these interviews with the study participants uncovered multiple major and minor themes related to the overarching research question for this study. The first major theme, the strategies to gain competitive advantage, included participant descriptions of the strategies they believe gave them a competitive advantage in their field. Participants shared how they maintain their public appearance, understand their work environment, and approach service delivery as part of their strategy. The second major theme was measuring business strategy effectiveness. This theme included participant portrayals of their methods to assess the effectiveness of business strategies. Participants shared how they tracked growth over time and relied on customer satisfaction as measures of business strategy success.

The third major theme was barriers to implementing strategies and revealed some of the challenges participants faced in implementing business strategies. Participants identified the costs they faced and the environmental factors that hinder the implementation of different business strategies. The fourth and final major theme, modifying strategies to maintain competitive advantage, covers the participants' experiences adapting their business strategies to maintain their company's success.

Presentation of the Findings

Four major themes arose from this iterative, qualitative analysis. The major themes were: (a) strategies to gain competitive advantage, (b) measuring business strategy effectiveness, (c) barriers to implementing strategies, and (d) modifying strategies to maintain competitive advantage. Each major theme encompassed several minor themes and codes. These themes addressed the overarching research question by revealing the strategies that successful small construction business owners use to achieve a competitive advantage.

The first major theme, strategies to gain competitive advantage, was composed of four minor themes: strategies relevant to the construction industry, maintaining public appearance, services offered, and understanding the environment. This first major theme relates to participants' descriptions of the business strategies they have developed and implemented during their experience in construction. Participants described the factors that enable them to gain a competitive advantage in their profession. This theme directly addressed the research question by providing examples of strategies used.

The second major theme, measuring business strategy effectiveness, was composed of participants' examples of metrics they use. This major theme depicts the assessments and indicators of successful business strategies. Participants shared the outcomes they look for and how they track these outcomes to monitor strategy effectiveness. This theme addressed the central research questions by demonstrating how participants evaluated the extent to which strategies gave companies a competitive advantage.

The third major theme, barriers to implementing strategies, was composed of two minor themes: costs and environment. Participants described the types of barriers they faced when attempting to implement their business strategies. Participants discussed financial burdens that accompanied some strategies. They also shared how their competition influenced their implementation of these business strategies. This theme addressed the central research question, revealing how participants implement strategies to gain a competitive advantage.

The fourth and final major theme, modifying strategies to maintain competitive advantage, included information about how participants have adapted their strategies to stay competitive. Participants conveyed the importance of creating new relationships and maintaining relationships with their customers. This theme is discussed in greater detail in the section on strategies to gain competitive advantage. This theme addressed the central research question by portraying how participants modify strategies to gain a competitive advantage.

Theme 1: Strategies to Gain Competitive Advantage

Theme 1, strategies to gain competitive advantage, revealed participants' experience implementing business strategies. This major theme was composed of four minor themes: strategies relevant to the construction industry, maintaining public appearance, services offered, and understanding the environment. These minor themes include the reports from participants about how they attempted to gain a competitive advantage with their companies. The following sections provide all the minor themes and examples of quotes that motivated these minor themes.

Strategies Relevant to Construction Industry

All participants listed business strategies they felt were relevant to the construction industry. For example, Participant 2 shared, “I would say with being a preferred contractor you get that status, and you have that big manufacturing behind you, you're that big company everybody recognizes so it kind of helps in our competitive field when you have a big manufacturer backing you.” Similarly, Participant 3 also reported, “The competitive advantage I had was doing government work and the fact that the business model itself was set aside for specific companies that were designated as hubzone companies.”

Participant 6 commented on the importance of having business strategies in construction. This participant noted, “There are a lot of different construction businesses offering a lot of different services at different prices. A lot of construction companies charging different rates, so yeah strategy is pretty relevant.” Participant 7 described in greater detail strategies that were relevant:

Being competitive in any industry, I think. You have to understand your market. You have to understand your place in that market. You have to understand the type of business you're going after. And if you understand those things. You can understand how to strategize and how to plan and how to maintain a competitive advantage in any industry it is not just specific to the construction industry, but knowing your industry, understanding how big your company is very important. If you're too big, understanding if you're too small. And then gauging that by the

level of jobs you go after, I think that's just general competitive advantage for any industry.

These participants understood the importance of implementing business strategies for the construction field.

Maintaining Public Appearance

Most participants ($n=5$) reported the importance of establishing and maintaining a positive public appearance as a business strategy. These participants commented on the various ways they strive to keep up their public opinion. Participant 2 mentioned, "One of the things I've done is I've become an Owens Corning preferred contractor to elevate myself in a field. I also earned A+ status from the Better Business Bureau with no complaints."

Some participants also shared that they attempted to keep their existing customers using discounts. For example, Participant 6 described, "So let's say you have a referral, and we give signing bonuses to the customer that referred a new customer. Most people like getting money back or taking a percentage off their total bill." Similarly, Participant 7 noted, "Offering discounts when possible, doing what you can to maintain your customer base. Those are great ways to gain and sustain a competitive advantage."

Participant 8 also purported:

I guess being a little more inexpensive and giving people more. People want more for their money. So, for argument's sake, if everybody else is charging just to put in some windows I probably you know, let's just say \$200 a window I would

charge \$100 a window. It can be harder, but yeah, just being competitive with the price.

Other participants raised the importance of incentivizing their existing customers to get referrals for new customers. For example, Participant 2 shared, “I joined the referral group in which I get a very decent amount of business and my branding strategy. I branded my business by wrapping my truck, buying signs, jackets, and shirts things like that.” Additionally, Participant 6 noted, “We've used promotional items. So, let's say you have a referral, and we give signing bonuses to the customer that referred a new customer. Most people like getting money back or taking a percentage off their total bill. Yeah, that's basically one of the best strategies we have used to create a competitive advantage.” This participant went on to say:

Just being good with the people. Be very nice, go the extra mile to satisfy your customer, being very relevant. Try to help out by doing things that you're not supposed to be doing. If they ask for a favor and it's not part of the contract, you just do it for him. That extra effort might cost you some time, but that person will be happy. Happy people tell more people about your business, and referrals are the best business leads you can ask for. Just be nice. It goes a long way for a small business.

Lastly, Participant 5 succinctly stated, “Don't over promise and under deliver. If you can do that you will stay busy.” These participants identified the importance of relationship-building as a business strategy.

Services Offered

Most participants ($n=6$) indicated the importance of emphasizing the services they offered to customers. Some participants believed that companies needed to focus on specific services in which they specialize. For example, Participant 5 mentioned, “We have met with some of the largest businesses, management groups, and property firms in the tri-state area and we are uniquely certified. Basically, outline our specialty. Which is interior finishes.” Similarly, Participant 7 shared, “one of the best strategies I’ve used to gain a competitive advantage is to create a niche for myself by finding the one or two things I can do differently from most contractors doing similar work. In areas where I’ve worked.”

In contrast, other participants purported that it was important to provide a variety of services rather than specializing in a specific service. For example, Participant 9 denoted, “So In our line of business. The best thing that we do is we do it all. So, we are a one-stop-shop construction and restoration business. From soup to nuts which means the whole mitigation to reconstruction. Not everybody does that, so it gives us a major advantage over competition.” Similarly, Participant 8 described, “As a small construction business owner, we always have to do more and do it right, and I think we do that. You know, we pride ourselves in always giving people more than what they pay for. And believe That is what gives us the competitive edge.”

Understanding Environment

Several participants ($n=5$) believed that understanding the work and competitive environment was a critical business strategy. Some participants commented on the

importance of finding a good location for business. For example, Participant 3 reported, “I’ve tried to find areas in the country that were set aside for hubzone bids.” Additionally, Participant 4 shared:

I think that the main strategy that I use to create a competitive advantage is hiring in the neighborhood. So much of my work is being done in urban areas, so I’d like to go into the area...I like to know the area as well as I like to get the people in the area involved in the construction project. Whatever project that I’m doing.

Other participants emphasized the need to select good contractors as well. For example, Participant 1 stated, “We deal with a lot of contractors, and we are a smaller firm, so one of our biggest competitive advantage is that we design and build.” Similarly, Participant 4 said, “I like to hire local subcontracts.”

Participant 7 depicted the strategy of understanding the market. This participant mentioned:

One of the keys to maintaining competitive advantage is understanding your marketplace. Understanding your numbers. Numbers do not lie. You’ll know if you are staying at one level, or if you’re going to the next level by watching the numbers and understanding the strategies that you put in place. To try to grow or understanding the strategies that you put in place to maintain depending on where you are in your business, do I expand to a larger territory? Do I stay working in the rural areas?

Similarly, Participant 9 indicated that scaling decisions were critical to maintaining a competitive advantage. This participant reported, “The biggest thing that we’re working

on right now is scaling, and we're scaling at a very rapid pace and hired over 25 maybe 30 employees in the last like four months, so we're scaling and managing it carefully.”

Table 2

Frequency of Minor Themes in Major Theme 1

Minor Themes	<i>N</i>	Frequency of Occurrence
Maintaining Physical Appearance	5	55.6%
Understanding Environment	5	55.6%
Services Offered	6	66.7%
Strategies Relevant to Construction Industry	9	100%

This first major theme, strategies to gain competitive advantage, addressed the overarching research question by demonstrating participants' strategies in their businesses. Participants shared how they maintain their public appearance, understand their work environment, and approach service delivery as part of their strategy. The next section explains how these strategies align with the framework.

Alignment with the Conceptual Framework

This first major theme fits within the conceptual framework that guided this study, the strategic planning process framework (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). This framework purports nine steps to achieve business success: (a) developing goals; (b) environmental analysis; (c) quantifying targets; (d) strategy formulation; (e) analysis of the gap between the present situation and the objectives; (f) searching for strategies to bridge the gap; (g) selecting strategic alternatives; (h) implementation; and (i) measurement, feedback, and control. In the current study, participants described the importance of environmental analysis (step 2) as a strategy to maintain a competitive advantage. Several participants

($n=5$) believed that understanding the competitive environment was a critical business strategy. Participants commented on the importance of finding a good location for business and the need to select good contractors as well.

Alignment with the Literature

One example of environmental considerations previously identified in the literature is the uptick of green construction. The development of green construction demonstrates the importance of strategic planning in construction (Wu et al., 2019). Companies that conducted environmental assessments and remained aware of the environmental movement were rewarded for their efforts (Onubi et al., 2020). The adoption of green paradigms by construction firm leaders required significant foresight and strategic planning to change existing practices without disrupting the firm's operations too heavily (Onubi et al., 2020). Green construction involves a framework through which buildings can be certified on design, construction, and maintenance issues concerning environmental sustainability (Bernardi et al., 2017). Findings from the current study align with this component of the strategic planning process framework and reports in the existing literature. Participants in the current study understood the value of understanding their work environment to maintain or achieve a competitive advantage.

Theme 2: Measuring Business Strategy Effectiveness

Another major theme that arose from this analysis was measuring business strategy effectiveness. Measuring business strategy effectiveness was composed of participants detailing the methods they use to assess the effectiveness of the various

business strategies. The next section contains examples of quotes that motivated this major theme.

All participants shared their measurement approaches. Many participants ($n=7$) described measuring company growth over time. For example, Participant 2 stated, “we can track where business was coming from and then we could match the numbers from sales the year before check that against financial statements year to year and see if there was any growth.” Similarly, Participant 3 succinctly reported that they track strategy effectiveness, “By volume and return customers.” Participant 4 also commented, “Measurement for me really comes down to the profit on a per project basis as opposed to the typical measurement of monetary gain or monitoring the bottom line. My construction business looks closely at how we get to a completed project.” Participant 6 voiced, “By how much business is coming in.” Participant 8 also noted, “By looking at my overall numbers at the end of the year and actually monthly.” These participants all had methods for tracking their strategy effectiveness.

In addition, there were some participants ($n=3$) who monitored return customers as part of their measurement of business strategy effectiveness. For example, Participant 4 believed it was valuable to measure, “completed projects as well as customer satisfaction.” Similarly, Participant 6 identified repeat customers as a critical metric of effectiveness, “So the more recommendation or referrals we get, that's basically what we base it off. So, let's say we have done one house in that neighborhood, and we normally get one or two additional referrals off of it, and those referrals turn into jobs. That's what we base it on.”

Table 3*Frequency of Major Theme 2 and Key Terms That Motivated Theme*

Theme/Term	<i>N</i>	Frequency of Occurrence
Measuring Business Strategy Effectiveness	9	100%
Checking growth over time	7	77%
Return customers	3	33%

The second major theme, measuring business strategy effectiveness, included information about specific opinions of participants regarding how to assess the effectiveness of business strategies. This major theme addressed the research question by demonstrating the business strategies that are effective and methods to determine this effectiveness. Participants shared how they tracked growth over time and relied on customer satisfaction as measures of business strategy success.

Alignment with the Conceptual Framework

This second major theme also fits within the measurement, feedback, and control step of the strategic planning process framework (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). There has been research previously conducted on the measurement of strategy effectiveness in companies. This existing research indicates that many firms have established metrics that enable them to evaluate their market position. In Poland, Sipa et al. (2015) found that over 95% of firms demonstrated effective market awareness in their competitive position within the market. However, other firms are not always able to effectively capture their competitive position. For example, Uber, which has a competitive advantage in the ride-sharing market based on market share, has not always performed well in the stock market

(Li, 2020; Tzur, 2019). Uber has conflicting metrics of performance, demonstrating the need for business leaders who act within the SPPF to carefully evaluate which metrics they feel are the more effective and accurate measure of what they wish to achieve. This example demonstrates the necessity of defining metrics that reveal the success of the company in multiple ways.

Alignment with the Literature

In the current study, participants suggested several metrics that they use. Some participants ($n=3$) monitored return customers as part of their measurement of business strategy effectiveness. This method aligns with existing research on organizational learning as a metric to assess their competitive position. Existing literature terms monitoring return customers as a form of engagement. The SPPF's iterative nature necessarily requires engagement (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Furthermore, researchers have identified organizational engagement as a key strategy for creating a competitive advantage (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Eldor (2019) specifically described collective engagement—or the broader engagement of multiple organizational stakeholders collectively—as a valuable tool for creating a competitive advantage and ensuring that the SPPF can be followed effectively within the context of the firm.

One metric that participants described that diverged from the existing literature was evaluating company growth longitudinally. Many participants ($n=7$) described measuring company growth over time. They described tracking where their business comes from and the sales numbers each year to determine growth. This measurement method extends one of the steps in the conceptual framework in the quantifying targets

step. Quantifiable targets enable leaders to better evaluate and determine how well the strategy has served to meet the goals intended (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Planning to measure these goals throughout the strategy's execution represents a vital component of strategic planning (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). In the current study, participants described specific longitudinal methods to track their business strategy success.

Theme 3: Barriers to Implementing Strategies.

Another theme was barriers to implementing strategies, which contained participants' reports of the barriers they faced when attempting to implement new business strategies. This theme was composed of two minor themes: costs and environment. These minor themes include the participants' experiences with different barriers that hindered their strategy execution. All minor themes and examples of quotes that motivated these minor themes are provided in the following sections.

Costs

Most participants ($n=6$) provided descriptions of different costs that hampered their business strategy implementation. Some participants reported on financial costs. For example, Participant 5 noted, "Entry cost to the level of construction I am doing It's astronomical, so first thing is your insurance cost. On a lot of these larger jobs, they have AAA insurance behind you, travelers, or principle. Companies such as that you're not going to get on the job." Participant 6 purported, "everyone's charging different rates. So, I mean even if you offer up a promotion, there are still companies out there offering up lower prices for people that shop for better prices out there and you don't know that until you put out a bid." Participant 7 also shared, "think the biggest barrier would be working

capital or having a relationship with different financial entities.” Lastly, Participant 9 noted the costs that come at different stages of running a company, “Costs lots of upfront costs a lot of costs for Salesforce. And it takes time. So those were the barriers. Honestly, we had to make sure that everybody knew what they needed to do, how long it would take. We built that in. And then there's a lot of upfront costs.”

Other participants commented on the cost of time that comes with implementing business strategies. For example, Participant 1 shared, “The biggest barrier has actually been time and really determining what to focus on because what ends up happening when you can design build is you can get so caught up in the design portion or you might get too caught up in the build portion.” Similarly, Participant 2 further commented:

I would say not a challenge but just takes time relationship-building. Especially when you're doing your referral marketing. You know that takes time especially in the construction industry a lot of times there's a certain stigma with certain contractors and service industries so to be referred you have to have a better relationship and standing with people. Make the customer feel like they really know you and trust you and want to refer you to not only their friends, family, and business associates that they have. They will want you to do a good job for them so that's a challenge. Do great construction and you will be trusted and a good rating with the Better Business Bureau is a plus with no complaints is a big plus in our industry.

These participants understood the cost of applying different business strategies and reported on their experience with these costs hindering strategy implementation.

Environment

Many participants ($n=5$) described how the business environment, such as customer network, competition, and regulations, could also act as a barrier to implementing business strategies. Several participants noted the importance of establishing relationships and how a lack of relationships can hinder strategy implementation. For example, Participant 4 said:

Well, I think the key barriers would be going into a different area. So, when I move to different locations that would mean I will have to get to know that location. I immediately go to the area prior to any type of engagement to understand that environment and try to find a connection with an individual in that location. So, I believe a barrier might be the interpersonal connection within that community until I become established.

Participant 7 also said, “having a relationship with different financial entities. Banks don't always want to offer loans to small contractors?” Participant 8 noted the importance of being consistent with customers, “It's staying consistent. Consistency always wins at the end.”

In addition to describing the influence of establishing relationships, participant 6 shared that knowing your competition was crucial. This participant described, “Competition can be a challenge...and you don't know that until you put out a bid. So that's pretty much the main barrier.” Participant 3 also commented on the Small Business Administration guidelines that can create barriers for companies. This participant stated,

“the Small Business Administration and the guidelines that they set monetarily for what they consider to be a small business.”

Table 4

Frequency of Minor themes in Major Theme 3

Minor themes	<i>N</i>	Frequency of Occurrence
Cost	6	66.7%
Environment	5	55.6%

The third major theme, the barriers to implementing strategies addressed the research question by demonstrating some of the challenges that participants face in implementing business strategies. The primary benefits identified were costs and environmental factors. Participants shared costs they face, including financial and time costs. They also reported on the environmental factors that can influence the implementation of different business strategies.

Alignment with the Conceptual Framework

This third major theme also fits within the implementation step of the SPPF framework (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Previous research has demonstrated that implementation may require adopting other more specific approaches, such as organizational change theories (Lewis & Sahay, 2019). During implementation, business leaders use the strategic plan as a roadmap, shaping business decisions (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). This phase varies based on the complexity of the implemented process. It can consist of a single overarching focus or the interaction of efforts toward meeting a myriad of disparate strategic objectives (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996).

Alignment with the Literature

The findings in the current study extend this existing evidence. Participants described the barriers that they faced when attempting to implement a business strategy. One type of barrier that participants identified was specific costs to implementing business strategies. These costs included financial costs and time costs. Participants noted the entry costs for completing construction projects. They also described varying rates among companies as a barrier. Additionally, participants shared that time costs could also pose a barrier. Furthermore, participants reported that the environment, such as customer network, competition, and regulations), could also act as a barrier to implementing business strategies. These participants highlighted the importance of establishing relationships and how a lack of relationships can hinder strategy implementation.

Theme 4: Modifying Strategies to Maintain Competitive Advantage.

The fourth and final major theme was modifying strategies to maintain competitive advantage, which uncovered participants' descriptions of the adaptations they make to keep the business successful. Participants shared the importance of working with customers to maintain a competitive advantage. The next section contains examples of quotes that motivated this major theme.

Most participants ($n=6$) purported that looking to customers was critical for maintaining a competitive advantage. Several participants noted that creating new relationships was one method they used to adapt to new barriers their companies faced. For example, Participant 3 described, "I would have to say experience relationships and years of doing that type of business and services." Participant 6 reported, "Just being

good with the people. Be very nice, go the extra mile to satisfy your customer, being very relevant.” Participant 1 noted:

The biggest thing we've done is we've created some new relationships with different firms that now we can throw some of the things out so for example typical job need architectural drawings you also need mechanical drawings another engineer drawings some of those now I'm farming out. Farming out the architectural portion that's really the biggest change that we've made in terms of creating an advantage. When it comes to the construction portion of it one thing we've also modeled is taking certain things I'll done in house and sub it out to another contractor so that we can really control the process and also control our time.

Additionally, Participant 2 said, “Earlier in a career you might say that's not me or you know later on as you're growing and you wanted better relationships with customers, there are things that you eat and will take on for the customer to be a good guy, to go that extra step. Always go the extra step in all these things.”

Participant 3 also believed that expansion was important to stay competitive. This participant stated, “I opened another company in conjunction with the hubzone company myself and added a women's owned branch to that division which gave us another advantage.”

Table 5

Frequency of Theme 4 and Key Terms That Motivated Themes

Theme	<i>N</i>	Frequency of Occurrence
Modifying Strategies to Maintain Competitive Advantage	6	66.7%
Creating New Relationships	4	44%
Look to the customer	2	22%

The fourth major theme, modifying strategies to maintain competitive advantage, uncovered participants' descriptions of the adaptations they make to keep the business successful. Participants shared that keeping relationships with customers and expanding their businesses to reach new customers were important changes to make as your business grows. Participants also shared that maintaining these relationships was vital to sustaining business long term.

Alignment with the Conceptual Framework

This fourth major theme also fits within the measurement, feedback, and control step of the SPPF framework and aligns with the iterative nature of this framework (Cohen & Cyert, 1973). Previous work has revealed the iterative nature of the SPPF lends itself to organizational learning. Organizational learning, like other learning, frequently requires learning from past successes and failures (Azadegan et al., 2019). As an organization implements repeated iterations of strategic planning, each iteration builds a base of strategic business knowledge through organizational learning that the organization can apply to future iterations.

Alignment with the Literature

In the current study, participants shared how they used previous successes and failures to inform their business strategies and maintain a competitive advantage. Most participants ($n=6$) reported that they made an effort to engage with customers to determine their businesses' strengths and weaknesses. Several participants shared that they worked to create new relationships with customers to adapt to new barriers their companies faced. Additionally, other participants reported on the importance of expanding their work into new branches to stay competitive. These findings from the current study extend this existing literature by exemplifying the iterative nature of the SPPF. Participants revealed their methods to adapt to their business environment.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings from the current study can serve to bridge the current gap in the literature as key stakeholders with firsthand knowledge and experience about the phenomenon shared their experiences in this study. Data are valuable for informing business strategy planning in the construction field. The findings of the current study are unique in that the experiences of nine owners of construction companies in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania motivate these findings. These participants' experiences are unique and can enlighten readers of this research about the steps and strategies undertaken by the owners of these companies to become competitive in their field and to adapt their business strategies when necessary. Business professionals and stakeholders of companies can then benefit from the current study by using the experiences and insights in present and future decisions as representatives of their companies. These business strategies allow

construction companies to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage. For example, one specific implication derived from this study was the need for companies to develop strong relationships with their customers. Most participants in the current study detailed the importance of establishing strong relationships with their existing customers as this is a source of maintained business and a potential source of referrals to expand their business.

Another implication of this study is the guidance it offers for other leaders to create their company's image and promote that image. For example, participants in the current study emphasized the importance of developing a specific scope of services. Participants diverged on their beliefs about the types of services they should offer. Some participants felt that specializing in one or a few areas was important for competitive advantage. In contrast, others proposed that providing a larger variety of services was critical for competitive advantage.

The take-away points from this research study include:

- Exercise several techniques to gain a competitive advantage.
- Maintain a positive and effective public appearance.
- Promote services offered by your company to potential customers and encourage existing customer referrals.
- Understand the competitive work environment.

Furthermore, it is critical to regularly measure and evaluate business strategy effectiveness:

- Measure growth of the company by determining changes in business

volume me over time.

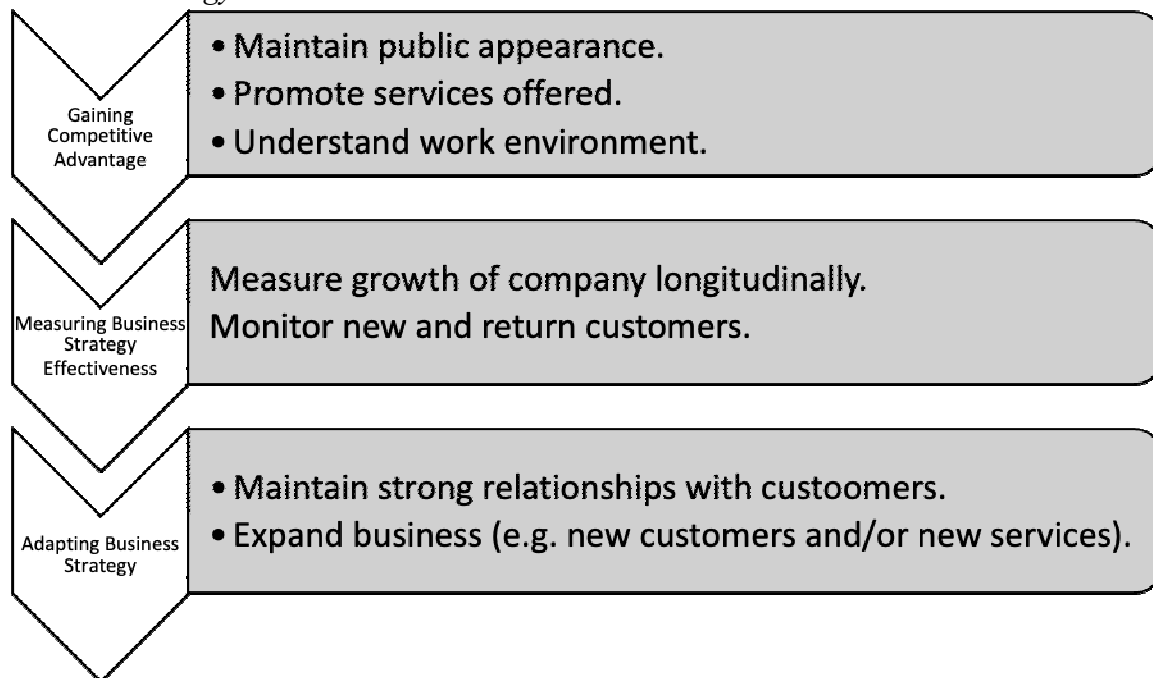
- Track new and returning customers.

Adapt business strategies to address new barriers that arise.

Figure 1 depicts the business strategy recommendations that arose from this qualitative study.

Figure 1

Business Strategy Recommendations



Implications for Social Change

There are several implications for social change from this study. First, this study benefits businesses by imparting strategies that can improve small construction businesses' competitive advantage and bring broader social benefits. Secondly, the study's findings can empower individuals to become successful entrepreneurs, which adds social value and can boost the economy. Additionally, the study's findings may also

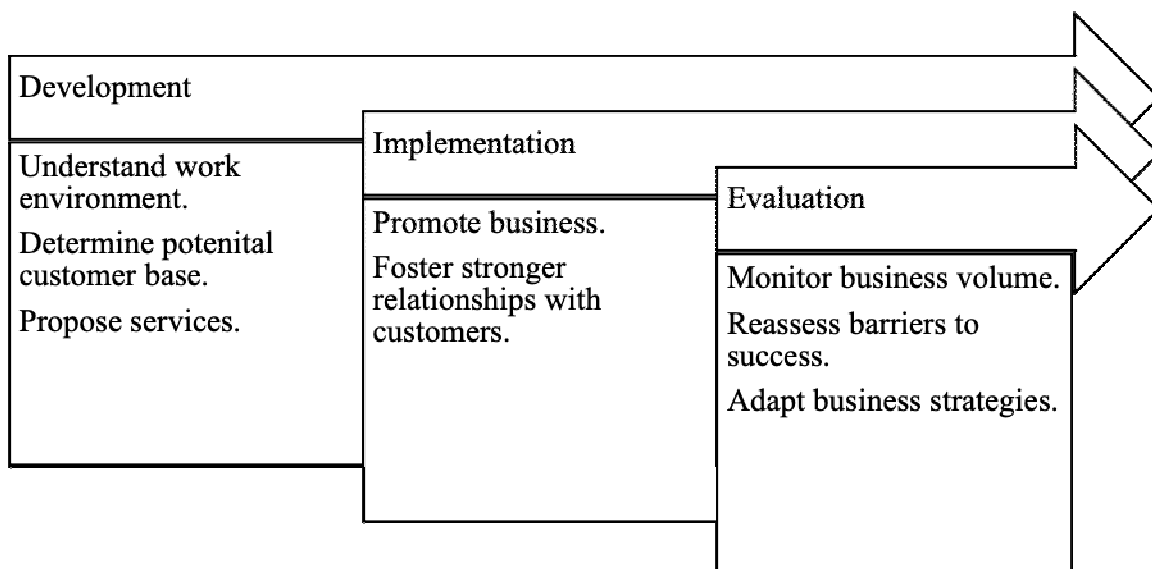
benefit local communities by creating more jobs, decreasing unemployment, and enabling citizens to provide for themselves and their families. Lastly, the findings from this study, particularly the business strategies that help participants achieve a competitive advantage, may benefit society by promoting more successful businesses. An increase in successful business owners may lead to an increased engagement in corporate social responsibility and a greater number of individuals giving back to the community through philanthropy and other socially beneficial actions.

Recommendations for Action

The recommendations from this qualitative study are useful for informing business strategy development, implementation, and evaluation. Figure 2 displays the primary findings from this study. This information will appear in the research community through peer-reviewed publications. The first phase of business strategy action involves developing the strategy based on the current work environment. Participants in the current study opined that understanding your competition and the potential customer needs was critical for informing your services and business strategy development. Next, business leaders must implement these business strategies. In the current study, participants shared that they promoted their businesses in a variety of ways. They also worked hard to maintain their customer base. Lastly, while businesses are active, it is critical to monitor business success and evaluate areas for improvement.

Figure 2

Recommendations for Different Stages of Business Strategy Action



Recommendations for Further Research

The current study evaluated a small participant pool using a qualitative methodology. Such an approach reduces the generalizability to the larger population and allows for generalization only to highly similar contexts. For example, the participants in this study were all owners of small construction businesses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Therefore, the applicability of these findings may not apply to other types of businesses. To address this limitation, future research could conduct this study in a larger participant pool. Using quantitative or qualitative methods on a larger scale could accomplish this aim.

Using surveys or another quantitative methodology would allow for data to be systematically collected from a larger population. Using this methodology also speeds up

the analysis process. In addition, using quantitative methods would allow the researcher to evaluate the strength and direction of relationships between different variables in a survey dataset. Assuming it originated from a sufficiently sized population, the resulting data would be generalizable to the larger population.

Another beneficial study design would be a case study of business customers. The current study focused on owners of small construction businesses. It would be interesting to gain the customer perspective of the effectiveness of business strategies. In addition, future research could expand the population by interviewing a comparison sample of business owners in another city or a more rural area. This second type of study population would provide a new unit of analysis and allow for a direct comparison of experiences to evaluate differences in business strategies for different environments.

Reflection

My DBA Doctoral Study experience was sometimes challenging, but overall, it was an incredible learning experience. This experience has helped increase my understanding and awareness of small construction businesses—specifically, small construction businesses operating in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was difficult at times, but I worked hard to minimize personal bias as the researcher. Before the interviews, I practiced and followed the interview protocol to stay focused on the task at hand to minimize any bias or preconceived ideas. I had no prior relationship with any participant and conducting interviews via the Zoom platform might have yielded slightly different outcomes than traditional face-to-face interactions.

Watching the participants and listening to their responses in real-time changed my way of thinking about small construction business owners. I was thoroughly impressed by their commitment, sacrifice, passion, and creativity to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage in their small construction businesses. This experience helped me to appreciate the importance of supporting local small businesses, their employees, and the broader community to improve the economy.

Conclusion

In addition to the future research directions this study motivates, the findings of this qualitative study have implications for practice. This study aimed to explore strategies that some small construction business owners use to gain a competitive advantage. Understanding these strategies is useful for informing business best practices. These study findings suggest that business owners in Philadelphia have varying strategies for maintaining a competitive advantage. They also have specific methods for measuring the effectiveness of their business strategies and adapting their strategies when needed. Given the qualitative nature of the study, I recommend that a larger, quantitative research study be conducted based on the current findings to expand the generalizability of the study.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions and Protocol

1. What strategies have you used to gain a competitive advantage?
2. How did you measure the effectiveness of your business strategies to determine if they were successful?
3. How would you describe these strategies as being relevant to construction industry competitive advantage?
4. What were the key barriers to implementing your competitive advantage strategy?
5. How, if at all, did your organization modify these strategies to maintain competitive advantage?
6. What, if any, additional strategies for competitive advantage can you address as a small construction business owner?

Interview Protocol

1. Introduce self to participant(s)
2. Present consent form, go over contents, answer questions and concerns of participant(s).
3. Give participant copy of consent form.
4. Turn on recording device.

5. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification; note the date and time.
6. Begin interview with question #1; follow through to final question.
7. End interview; discuss member-checking with participant(s).
8. Follow up with additional questions.