




Breaking the Five-Year Barrier: Essential Tactics for Long-Term Small Business Sustainability and Growth


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Abstract

This study explores the sustainability and growth of small businesses beyond the critical 5-year mark, a pivotal milestone often associated with survival challenges. Active business owners within the United States often shut down their operations due to reduced revenues and operational challenges, including the multifaceted factors influencing long-term success. The study places a particular emphasis on effective training strategies by examining the intersection of sustainability and training to identify actionable insights for owners of small business to enhance their resilience and longevity in today's dynamic economic landscape.

Keywords: *sustainability, government regulations, knowledge management, ecological sustainability*

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Introduction

A critical need exists for a solid framework that evaluates the effectiveness of training for business owners and managers to guide their ability to lead their businesses (Afful & Addo, 2024). The roles and responsibilities of managers of small businesses differ based on position, and the solid implementation of those responsibilities is influenced by managers' actions (Januszek et al., 2024). However, Suriyankietkaew (2023) stated that

dynamic changes force owners of small businesses to reconsider their business-as-usual model and foster new management practices for longer sustainability. Among researchers and business owners, sustainability of small businesses is a wide arena of discussion, largely due to small businesses playing a crucial role in building the community and creating jobs. Despite their efforts, many small businesses fail to survive beyond the first 5 years, primarily due to a lack of funding resources, operational incompetence, and insufficient management skills. It is therefore critical to explore the underlying causes of business failure and classify various strategies that can aid in the long-term sustainability of these small businesses.

Small business owners and managers are continuously faced with pressure from their competitors; therefore, they should have a solid, sustainable development plan and undergo continuous training (Fok et al., 2021). Managerial training is a solid strategy that has been an important component in business success. To monitor the effectiveness of training for small business owners and managers, a solid agenda is needed, which can improve their ability to lead, adapt to change, and innovate in dynamic environments (Afful & Addo, 2024). Although managerial roles differ based on structure, size, and industry, sustainability and growth remain consistent across these divisions. Januszek et al. (2024) highlight that the execution of effective business practices is not primarily about position; it is heavily influenced by business owners' and managers' ability to demonstrate proactive actions and make quality decisions.

The business arena is increasingly unpredictable, and business owners are encouraged to leave behind the business-as-usual mindset and foster solid managerial practices that align with long-term sustainability goals (Suriyankietkaew, 2023). Continuous learning and tailored training are vital to meeting market demands, understanding consumer behavior, and keeping pace with technological advancements. This study is embedded in the conviction that practical managerial training is essential for all small businesses to thrive and succeed. It examines small retail business owners and how they approach training to maximize business operations and achieve sustainability beyond the 5-year mark. This research strives to provide valuable insights into how business owners' and managers' training overlaps with strategic management and systems thinking, which can prepare them for long-term challenges.

Research Question

Managerial training is considered a critical management tactic in diverse businesses. According to Panagiotakopoulos (2020), managerial training is designed for owners and managers of small businesses, focusing on their managerial skills, which enhances their ability to run or expand their business. Training and development are critical in ever-changing business environments. If training is not conducted properly, it can cause implementation costs to skyrocket and lead to inadequacies, loss in productivity, and decreased performance and outcomes (Suravi, 2024). Ng'ora et al. (2022) determined that owners of small businesses have skill gaps, which include marketing, entrepreneurship, and finance, all of which are red flags for owners of small businesses to remain profitable and sustainable. The authors further indicated a significant need for owners of small business to take a proactive approach to continuous education and training. The principal research question for this study is as follows: What strategies do owners of small retail businesses use to provide managerial training aimed at sustaining and growing their businesses beyond the initial 5 years?

Literature Review

To support the research, we used systems theory and the general systems model as a conceptual lens to guide this study and support the identification of sustainability strategies.

In the 1930s, Von Bertalanffy (1972) first established systems theory. Systems consist of components such as concepts and human subjects (Kivijärvi & Virta, 2021). Sossin (2024) identified that systems are various parts of a whole that are grouped together to interact with each other, which individuals can explore to develop their knowledge of the infrastructure to understand how systems work. The challenges owners of small businesses face can be dissected into distinct components; however, some entrepreneurs are caught off guard, failing to acknowledge the connections among and between these elements. Systems thinking is an approach or mindset used to understand systems of interconnected parts, recognizing that actions do not isolate but trigger a chain of reactions that result in changes throughout the entire system (Bozkurt, 2023). Researchers employ systems thinking as a control mechanism to identify issues within small businesses (Moore et al., 2018).

Complex systems can follow a linear pattern, exhibiting predictable behaviors, or—if the systems are nonlinear—minor alterations within the system can result in significant changes over time (Knight, 2024). In management, systems theory is used to design and optimize complex systems, improve organizational performance, and create strategies for making decisions and solving problems. Small business owners must understand how these systems work and utilize critical systems theory to sustain their day-to-day operations. Critical systems theory advocates for the use of diverse systems approaches to highlight different facets of complexity and to determine which methods are most effective and what improvements are feasible in a specific intervention context (Jackson, 2020).

General Systems Theory

General systems theory (GST) demonstrates that all systems are composed of subsystems, parts, or elements that interconnect. No single part can represent the whole; instead, the whole system comes together with two or more parts to function together (Shin et al., 2024). In GST, Von Bertalanffy's research is included to show the complexities within the systems and how to use each element within the system. Furthermore, Von Bertalanffy recognized that systems theory involved open and closed systems. For example, open systems provide business owners with a pathway to acquire relevant information from the operational settings, whereas closed systems restrict business owners from connecting beyond their immediate environment. According to Drack and Schwarz (2010), there are deeper dimensions on which to focus regarding system sciences, such as epistemology, ontology, ideology, scientific theories, and techniques and history of ideas.

Through GST, business matters can be identifiable by less complex systems that evolve into complex systems based on their capacity to adapt and organize, which highlights business owners in their official capacity to structure and manage their business efficiently and effectively as they grow (Aprile et al., 2023). GST is vital to small business owners, since it identifies how small businesses function using their strategies and training programs. In recent years, GST has enabled scholars, researchers, and small business owners to understand how previous and current systems work interchangeably to assist with the challenges that small business owners face (Shin et al., 2024).

Systems are categorized as open or closed, based on their boundaries, which determine their interaction within the environment; success in their operating functions is based on effectiveness (Xie et al., 2023). In the context of business, part of the system can affect the entire organization. Since comprehending every component and its interconnections can prove challenging or nearly unfeasible, there is a suggestion to pursue laws of greater complexity (Drack, 2009). Recognizing all parts and how they function together can be difficult to achieve.

Key tenets of GST are recognizing feedback loops, understanding the importance of subsystems, and appreciating the dynamic nature of organizations. Girum et al. (2021) determined that the concept of a

feedback loop is employed in control systems theory, where adjustments to the input signal are made based on the system's output error signal. Subsystems convert data into information and knowledge used in business processes such as planning and forecasting, which enables efficient resource utilization by business entities (Tomescu et al., 2010). In the 21st century, change is ongoing; thus, leaders must continuously adapt to new circumstances by acquiring new and enhancing existing competencies (Dobrzinskiene, 2024).

Sustainability Strategies

In today's world, sustainability has emerged as a critical consideration for businesses of all sizes, including small retailers. As Luederitz et al. (2021) suggested, managerial tools for implementing sustainability are a continuous focus for small businesses when developing strategy. As consumers increasingly prioritize environmentally responsible practices, small retail business owners face the imperative to integrate sustainability into their operations through five strategy areas: professional training and development, knowledge management, ecological sustainability, innovation, and government regulations.

Professional Training and Development

As pillars of their communities, small retail business owners bear the responsibility of embracing sustainability and leading by example. Ploscaru et al. (2023) determined that enhancing individual skills and abilities, fostering higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction, and actively supporting career advancement are all potential benefits of professional training and development. Wu & Singh (2024) stated that when business owners or managers attend seminars, workshops, and other trainings, they gain access to a wealth of knowledge, and they can relate to other business owners and managers concerning innovation and best practices. However, it is essential to have a training needs analysis to ensure the training targets current small business challenges (Ngema, 2024). Professional development can enhance productivity, lower daily expenses, and boost profits. Through a GST lens, these improvements occur due to training that diminishes variations in human performance, increases the reliability of processes, and increases information quality as it relates to planning and forecasting subsystems. When determining the need for long-term training, owners must consider issues such as demographics and sociocultural, economic, and other factors (Hrynkevych et al., 2023).

Knowledge Management

Knowledge management fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement within retail organizations. By encouraging knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation among employees, retail owners can tap into the collective expertise of their workforce to solve problems, identify opportunities, and drive process improvements. Barbier and Tengeh (2023) implied that the common denominator of knowledge management is delivering pertinent knowledge to the appropriate individual precisely when it is needed. Knowledge management can elevate the productivity of employees, teams, and organizations, providing them with a competitive edge over rival counterparts (Barbier & Tengeh, 2023). When owners of small retail businesses adapted more quickly to changing market dynamics, they developed a competitive posture that placed them well ahead of their direct and indirect competition.

Abou Hashish et al. (2025) found that leadership is the primary attribute that drives the efficiency of knowledge management, while considering the timely implementation of knowledge management practices. A great need exists for improved knowledge management and awareness among small retail business owners and managers to increase the quality and success of the organization (Abou Hashish et al., 2025). Managerial social interactions with other executives and their employees also aid in the drive for effective knowledge

management (Qalati, 2024). Social motivation can help improve an organization's knowledge capabilities, which allows for the creation and management of knowledge.

Ecological Sustainability

Wolters (2022) noted that ecological sustainability focuses on residing within and honoring the ecological boundaries of the planet. Ecological sustainability is important for small business owners for three reasons: long-term viability, cost savings, and customer expectations. When business owners adopt sustainable practices, they ensure that their resources are used in the most efficient and effective ways and that there is a reduction in waste and a positive environmental impact. Small businesses have an environmental responsibility. Environmental responsibility details procedures that trim down the ecological footprint, including sustainable findings, reduction of waste components, and energy proficiency (Asbullah & Tarigan, 2024). Business owners focus on business strategies that promote the long-term viability of the business by conserving resources and mitigating risks associated with resource depletion or environmental degradation (Sukri et al., 2023). When sustainable practices are in place, it often leads to longer-term cost savings. For example, small business owners can implement energy-efficient technologies, which can lower utility bills, and reducing waste can minimize disposal costs. Small businesses can benefit financially from these savings, enhancing their profitability and competitiveness. Consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious and are actively seeking out businesses that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability. Environmental values of consumers are the firmest predictor of their attitudes, followed by environmental knowledge and concern, highlighting the need to focus on the strengths of consumers' value systems over their knowledge and concern (Laheri et al., 2024). By aligning with customer values and preferences, small businesses can attract and retain customers, strengthen brand loyalty, and differentiate themselves in the market.

Innovation

Innovation is the foundation for small business owners who are passionate about thriving in a dynamic market. Chaniago (2022) pointed out that individuals connected to small businesses, specifically business owners and leaders, need innovation to boost the competitive posture of the business. Within the small business sector, innovation involves creative problem solving, top-tier business models, and various approaches to customer engagement. Resources and collaboration are needed within small business ecosystems to help establish partnerships and link capital gaps (Bashuri & Bailetti, 2021). Limited resources force business owners to think outside the box, looking for solutions that will address their many challenges and enable them to profit from emerging trends. Consequently, the vision and determination of business owners play a critical role in developing a brilliant learning culture that encourages not only their own, but also their employees' innovations within the business (Runst & Thomä, 2022).

When small business owners deliberately create short feedback cycles, such as testing minor changes, analyzing results, and iterating, innovation becomes repetitive rather than sporadic. The outcome is risk reduction and an increase in the probability of meaningful performance gains. While risk reduction is an important outcome in innovation, risk taking and risk management are essential to achieving it. Fatima et al. (2024) stated that the core elements of risk taking and risk management are essential when there is uncertainty within the day-to-day operations. Business owners often do not know the immediate outcomes of the decisions that must be made prematurely.

The environment for small business owners is forever changing, and adaptability allows them to thrive and adjust skills when facing innovative changes and challenges (Fatima et al., 2024). To enhance innovation, business owners and managers can build network relationships. According to Indarwati et al. (2024), networks are a key influence on the innovative process, as knowledge can be shared among partners, giving them a competitive advantage that would be hard for competitors to reproduce.

Government Regulations

The association between government regulations and small business performance has been scrutinized through numerous theoretical lenses, highlighting regulations as extremely important for creating a stable business that encourages trust and lowers operational costs (Usmany, 2024). Although government regulations may pose difficult requirements, they offer benefits to small businesses by establishing a solid structure for fair competition and safeguarding consumer interests. Policymakers hold great responsibility when trying to find the right balance between regulatory oversight and fostering a conducive environment for small business growth. Policymakers are encouraged to make regulatory reforms a top priority, which could decrease administrative burdens, improve financial inclusivity, and stabilize the flexibility of business components with sustainability and community equity (Usmany, 2024). Regulations related to safety, health, and environmental standards help protect the consumer and the community at large while improving trust for small businesses. Beaulieu et al. (2021) noted that business is a major target of government regulations, with a focus on protecting consumers and working environments, better transportation, and regulatory obligations. Owners and managers who prioritize regulatory literacy in training and knowledge achieve fewer cost violations and sustain cash flows and robust supplier and customer relationships.

Synthesis Across Strategies

The five strategy areas connect as a coordinated system when viewed as a whole. Training and development empower small business owners and managers to activate adequate knowledge and management. Knowledge management is responsible for faster operational decisions and quality feedback. Ecological sustainability adds structure, which includes cost discipline and market quality. Innovation changes the aspect of learning into tangible improvements, both in product offerings and operational processes. Through government regulations, a predictable and legitimate environment is fostered for these activities. Feedback loops can connect each strategy, while GST supports small business owners through these interactions, so interventions are ordered and strengthened rather than working at cross-purposes.

This study applied systems theory and the general systems model as a conceptual framework to identify sustainability strategies for small businesses. Small retail business owners utilize several strategies to provide managerial training aimed at sustaining and growing their businesses beyond the initial 5 years, including professional training and development, knowledge management, ecological sustainability, innovation, and government regulations. These strategies are pivotal areas to which principles such as feedback loops, subsystems, and the dynamic nature of organizations can be applied. By implementing these strategies, small retail business owners can effectively provide managerial training that addresses direct operational needs and line up their businesses for long-term success and sustainability beyond the first 5 years.

Research Methodology

In this paper, we used a qualitative method to explore strategies that owners and managers of small retail businesses used to enable them to promote day-to-day operations and long-term sustainability beyond the first 5 years. We conducted interviews with owners of small retail businesses who had extensive experience in the subject area. We collected the data from small retail business owners who operated their businesses in the southwestern region of the United States. Table 1 presents the organizational tenure and managerial experience of each participant, expressed in both raw years and percentages of the combined total. This information set the stage for our subsequent theme-based analysis.

Table 1. *Organizational Tenure and Experience*

Participant	Organizational tenure	Managerial experience
PA1	20 years (23%)	29 years (28%)
PA2	21 years (24%)	28 years (27%)
PA3	45 years (52%)	45 years (44%)

Note. PA1 = participant 1; PA2 = participant 2; PA3 = participant 3.

We collected data from owners of small retail businesses with a total of 102 years of experience in the retail industry. To be eligible to participate in the study, individuals were required to be owners of small retail businesses who had effectively implemented managerial strategies that sustained their operations beyond 5 years. In addition, the participants had to reside in the southwestern region of the United States.

Research Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study consisted of three themes that identified strategies owners of small retail businesses used to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years. The themes were updating the business model, addressing customer feedback, and enhancing business efficiency.

Theme 1: Updating the Business Model

The participants we interviewed believed that updating the business model was a critical component when implementing training strategies to sustain their business (Table 2). Business models create a picture of the business's activities, mission statement, and goals; therefore, the models must be updated over time and provide solidity (Baimukhametova et al., 2024). Each participant also stated that business owners must commit to obtaining their goals and objectives to maintain a successful business. Another component that affects and influences a change in the business model is environmental changes, which can affect the value and availability of resources needed (Chen et al., 2021). The three main points to highlight when considering potential changes are (1) business coherence, (2) key elements of coherence, and (3) action based on coherence (Shepherd et al., 2023). If a business owner or manager finds that the business model lacks coherence, adjustments must be made to improve it (Shepherd et al., 2023). Strategies that the participants stated they used to implement open systems included in-house training, hands-on training, and role play.

Table 2. *Theme 1: Updating the Business Model*

Participant	Signature strategies, theoretical bases, triangulation
PA1	Strategies: Role-play, in-house training, and hands-on social learning Theoretical: Confirms GST (Von Bertalanffy, 1972) Triangulation: Brochure quotes (e.g., “upgraded our facility” and “training and tenure”)
PA2	Strategies: UPS access-point partnership and social media integration Theoretical: GST adaptation for external partnerships Triangulation: Interview plus website evidence of new service offerings

PA3	Strategies: Free and next-day delivery added to the plan Theoretical: Systems components (e.g., technology, social, personality) per Von Bertalanffy (1972) Triangulation: Customer service messaging on the website
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Note. GST = general systems theory; PA1 = participant 1; PA2 = participant 2; PA3 = participant 3.

Theme 2: Addressing Customer Feedback

The participants we interviewed also believed that addressing customer feedback was important to the sustainability of their small retail business (Table 3). Customers who are engaged with businesses will typically provide feedback regarding their experience. The customer adds value by providing feedback and purchasing and repurchasing items (Pereira et al., 2024). When businesses obtain positive feedback, it can be useful to promote more business and increase their sales and services. Customers who are satisfied recognize their relationship with the business by established transaction factors; similarly, if the satisfaction is absent, the relationship terminates or weakens drastically (Amani, 2022). Business owners can solve customer problems by utilizing the knowledge and experience gained. This feedback theme aligns with systems theory, since business owners foster systems thinking. Feedback from customers can also be revealed by customer feedback metrics, which include customer satisfaction, net promoter scores, and customer satisfaction index. Customer service metrics are forecasters of current sales growth and growth margins (Muller et al., 2024). Monitoring and analyzing these metrics is an important focus when strategizing, as they provide great perceptions in customer satisfaction, retention, and overall business performance, allowing companies to maximize on various opportunities for sustainable growth.

Table 3. *Theme 2: Addressing Customer Feedback*

Participant	Signature strategies, theoretical bases, triangulation
PA1	Strategies: Regular surveys and social media monitoring via a third party Theoretical: Systems theory feedback loop (Von Bertalanffy, 1972) Triangulation: Interview plus website feedback loops (e.g., “experiences like yours ...”)
PA2	Strategies: Ongoing customer surveys and phone follow-ups Theoretical: Chaos theory (Lorenz, 1963) on small inputs to big impact Triangulation: Interview data matched by site testimonials
PA3	Strategies: One-on-one customer consultation to determine needs Theoretical: Feedback as system call, per Von Bertalanffy (1972) Triangulation: Interview plus artificial intelligence-driven feedback analyses cited by Popescu (2018)

Note. PA1 = participant 1; PA2 = participant 2; PA3 = participant 3.

Theme 3: Enhancing Business Efficiency

The participants we interviewed agreed that enhancing business efficiency was a critical component to sustaining their small business (Table 4). They stressed the importance of conducting employee evaluations, which can detail the quality of service provided. Evaluating efficiency and establishing components thereof are crucial steps to enhancing business competition, growth, and sustainability (Dimitriadou et al., 2023). One of the participants stated that if a business owner is not making money and growing, they need to evaluate what they or other managers are doing incorrectly, especially when one of the main goals is to profit from products sold and services rendered. Allison-Bunnell et al. (2024) stated that practically everything businesses do is a

process that helps serve customers with goods and services; how these processes are created and implemented equally influences the quality of the products and services. Business owners who can adjust their day-to-day activities to the forever-changing environment are more successful (Bilal & Fatima, 2022). Their flexibility and responsiveness guarantee strength when things are uncertain and put them in a place to conquer opportunities, improve innovation, and maintain competitiveness in the marketplace.

Table 4. Theme 3: *Enhancing Business Efficiency*

Participant	Signature strategies, theoretical bases, triangulation
PA1	Strategies: Mentoring long-tenured staff and consultant-led process reviews Theoretical: Network and accountability subsystems (Han & McKelvey, 2016) Triangulation: Consultant reports and interview comments (e.g., “training and tenure ...”)
PA2	Strategies: Managerial performance evaluations and profit-focus reviews Theoretical: Systems interdependence for profit (Sandada & Mangwandi, 2015) Triangulation: Financial metrics and staff training logs
PA3	Strategies: Customized service scripts and resource use optimization discussions Theoretical: Efficiency subsystems in evolving environments (Dentchev et al., 2016) Triangulation: Website messaging and interview examples

Note. PA1 = participant 1; PA2 = participant 2; PA3 = participant 3.

Conclusion

In conclusion, findings from this study suggested that updating the business model, addressing customer feedback, and enhancing business efficiency were all means of increasing a small business’s chances of survival beyond the 5-year mark. These findings may offer business owners information regarding the sustainability of their businesses and training for owners and employees. Increasing innovation regarding business performance is a critical component for improving sustainability. Stichhauerova et al. (2020) suggested more complex criteria are helpful when measuring ranges of inputs and outputs of business performances. Investing in employee training and development is a necessary cost to ensure the success of both current and future small businesses. The quality of any training program is based on small business owners’ and their employees’ work dynamics and changes in behaviors (Azmy & Setiarini, 2023). When integrated into the training programs that assist employees with building stronger relationships with customers and stakeholders, sustainability principles ensure business owners can remain competitive and sustain themselves in the ever-changing business landscape. Implementing essential tactics for long-term sustainability and growth is critical for small businesses to thrive in this competitive market. Small business owners can build a solid foundation that not only ensures business survival, but also drives growth over time.

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