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Strategies to Recruit Workers With Critical Skills in Canadian Small Automotive Repairs Businesses

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Johnathan T. Hyman

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Strategies to Recruit Workers With Critical Skills in Canadian Small Automotive Repairs

Businesses

by

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MSc, Nova Southeastern University, Florida, 2005

B.Ed., University of Technology, Jamaica, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2024

Abstract

Small businesses are crucial to economic growth, but face considerable challenges due to critical labor shortages and skills gaps that threaten their competitiveness. Grounded in the resource-based view theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owner-managers in the province of Ontario, Canada, use to recruit workers with critical skills. The participants comprised three small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry, with a combined total experience of over 66 years, who successfully recruited skilled workers in their businesses. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, together with an examination of business documents. Using thematic analysis, five themes emerged: compensating individual employees; enhanced networking through social and printed media; an emphasis on training, development, and licensing; embracing new developments in the automotive sector; and the word-of-mouth strategy. A key recommendation is for small business owner-managers to compensate employees based on individual performance, while providing medical coverage and flexible work schedules. The implications for positive social change include the potential for small business leaders to build human resource capacity when they successfully recruit and retain skilled employees.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family, friends, and loved ones. To my wife Valmore, who saw something in me and pushed me tirelessly. To my sons Jonmore, Javian, and Joen, never give up, genius is one percent inspiration and 99% perspiration. Above all, to the Almighty, in whom we live and move and have our being.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

There is a growing recognition of the significance of small businesses to local and national economies, but these entities face constant challenges. Small businesses are crucial to economic growth, generating employment, creating wealth, and reducing poverty (Manzoor et al., 2021). However, in terms of human resource management (HRM) practices, small businesses also face challenges such as skills shortages among the existing workforce and external challenges such as recruitment (Antcliff et al., 2021). Stakeholders have recognized employees as the most valuable assets that business leaders can leverage to survive and attain competitive advantage (Adeosun & Ohiani, 2020). To ensure small businesses attain competitive advantage, leaders must develop strategies to recruit, reward, and retain employees who possess critical skills.

Background of the Problem

The shortage of skilled labor is a significant challenge facing many small businesses. In Ontario, Canada, small businesses account for more than 90% of jobs in the private sector but face critical labor shortages and skill gaps that threaten their competitiveness (Saba & Blanchette, 2020, p. 8). A key managerial skill necessary for the success of small businesses is the ability to recruit skilled employees (Tonvongval & Tantivong, 2020). Given the significance of small businesses to the private sector, small business leaders need to pay particular attention to recruiting skilled employees.

There are inherent challenges regarding HRM activities in small businesses. Bilan et al. (2020) posited that hiring and retaining skilled workers is one of the most difficult HRM tasks due to the shortage of employees with the required skills, ensuring the

attractiveness of jobs, inefficient HRM practices, and issues associated with job satisfaction. Talented employees can influence the course of small businesses, whether by creating software, developing a website, or automating processes. Owner-managers of many small businesses face challenges in finding required competencies and employees in general.

There are differences in the recruitment process between small businesses when compared to large corporations. Small business leaders are at a distinct disadvantage in their recruitment practices given the lack of expertise and formalised human resource processes when compared to larger, better resourced organizations (Crowley-Henry et al., 2021). The failure to recruit employees with critical skills in small businesses can contribute to overall labor shortages and, ultimately, business failure. Klein and Todesco (2021) observed that there is a scarcity of specialized knowledge among small businesses, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in increased digital transformation, changes in customer behavior, and the need for increased technological knowledge.

Problem Statement

Small business leaders have been facing significant difficulties in recruiting workers with critical talents (Matt et al., 2020). In Ontario, Canada, more than 41% of small businesses had difficulty recruiting critical skills (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2019). The general business problem is that the inability to recruit sufficient numbers of workers with critical talents may contribute to a loss in competitive advantage for small businesses. The specific business problem is that some

leaders of small businesses in the automotive repair industry lack strategies to recruit workers with critical skills.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit workers with critical skills. The population in this multiple case study comprised the leaders of three small auto repairs businesses in Ontario, Canada, who have implemented successful strategies to recruit workers with critical skills. Business leaders who read the findings may be able to implement strategies to recruit and hire highly skilled workers to sustain the competitive advantage of their businesses. Insights from the study may be useful in ensuring that business leaders develop recruitment strategies based on the available talent pool, grow their businesses, and ultimately contribute to the local communities through employment opportunities, sponsorships, and supporting other small businesses through networking and social responsibility.

Population and Sampling

The population I selected for this multiple case study comprised three business leaders in the automotive repairs industry who have used successful strategies to recruit skilled workers in Ontario, Canada. I was able to achieve data saturation after three semistructured interviews; hence, I did not need to conduct additional interviews in order to answer the overarching research question. I used purposive sampling of three leaders of small businesses in the automotive industry for my study. Qualitative researchers may purposively select a relatively small sample that will increase the depth, as opposed to the

breadth, of understanding (S. Campbell et al., 2020). The three leaders I selected were able to provide relevant information, considering that they have successfully recruited talented employees within their businesses based on the high levels of organizational growth they have achieved through employee innovativeness, teamwork, and digital competence. S. Campbell et al. (2020) noted that purposive sampling is useful in qualitative research because researchers are able to improve rigor and trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Nature of the Study

The qualitative research method is exploratory; hence, I used this approach in the study. Qualitative researchers focus on understanding phenomena in a specific context (Johnson et al., 2020). Wasti et al. (2022) outlined the other types of research methods as quantitative and mixed-method. Quantitative research is appropriate when there is a need to collect numeric data or variable-based data, employing a top-down strategy of generalization from an abstract population to individual cases (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021). To answer the overarching research question as to the strategies small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit skilled workers, the quantitative methodology would not have been appropriate because I was exploring the recruitment strategies business owners use, not testing variables or outcomes. In a mixed-method approach, the researcher collects both qualitative and quantitative data and combines the strengths of each to answer research questions (Korstjens & Moser, 2022). To answer my research question, I did not need to test a hypothesis about variables' characteristics or relationships, so the mixed method approach was not relevant. Semistructured interviews

were useful in exploring participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about skills recruitment in small automotive repairs business settings and were instrumental in answering my research question

I chose the multiple case study design to explore the strategies that three leaders of small automotive repairs businesses in Ontario use to recruit workers with critical skills. Researchers use the case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific, underresearched, and real-life phenomenon (Sibbald et al., 2021). I chose the multiple case study design over the single case study design because of the need to understand the differences and similarities in recruiting skilled workers across small business operations. My primary data collection method was semistructured interviews, which generated data with richness and depth.

Other qualitative designs I considered for this study included phenomenology and ethnography. When using a phenomenological approach, the researcher may engage in activities that contribute to the description and understanding of phenomena such as aspects of human social experience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Studying the social experiences of small business leaders in the automotive industry would not have generated adequate data to answer my research question. When researchers use the ethnographic approach, they embed themselves into the social world of participants to better understand behaviors and cultures (Chopra, 2020). The ethnographic approach was not appropriate because I explored the overarching research question using semistructured interview format and did not need to understand the culture of these organizations.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: What strategies do some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit workers with critical skills?

Interview Questions

1. What internal strategies have you used to recruit workers with critical thinking skills such as evaluating information and solving problems?
2. What external strategies have you used to recruit workers with critical thinking skills such as evaluating information and solving problems?
3. What internal strategies have you used to recruit workers with digital competence such as the ability to use available technologies in carrying out their duties?
4. What external skills have you used to recruit workers who you think can use available technologies in carrying out their duties?
5. What have you found to be the key barriers in your recruitment strategies?
6. Once hired, what strategies do you use to retain skilled workers?
7. What additional information would you like to share on your recruitment strategies for workers with critical skills?

Conceptual Framework

I used the resource-based view (RBV) theory as the conceptual framework to guide this qualitative multiple case study. The main construct of the RBV theory is that some firms possess resources that are valuable and rare, which will enable them to

achieve long-term competitive advantage. Talented employees, those with exceptional abilities and skills, are valuable to an organization (Ishiyama, 2022). Penrose (1959) conceptualized the RBV theory and suggested that the firm is more than an administrative unit; it is also a collection of productive resources that administrators decide how to identify, develop, and use over time. Penrose suggested that the general purpose of the firm is to organize resources acquired from outside the firm for the production and sale of goods and services at a profit. To ensure profitability and competitive advantage, these productive resources should be valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (Gibson et al., 2021). Based on RBV theory, when there is a human resource pool that cannot be imitated or substituted by rivals, firms are better able to achieve growth objectives. Al Aina and Atan (2020) indicated that growth in an organization is dependent on business leaders positioning the right employees who possess the right skills in the right place at the right time, where talented employees are viewed as the main resources that lead to sustainable competitive advantages and prominent performance.

Based on the RBV theory, business leaders will use their resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable as the leverage for competitive advantage. A firm's profitability is contingent on the skill levels of its employees and the quality of their relationships. Technology and capital can be acquired by most firms any time – for a price. However, it is not easy to recruit a relatively select pool of highly qualified and motivated employees.

RBV theory focuses on human and material resources, as well as external capabilities. Antcliff et al. (2021) noted that the RBV theory is a dominant perspective in analyzing small businesses and the role of HRM. As a result, in conducting this study, I expected the RBV theory to be important in my analysis of the findings. Based on the RBV theory, business leaders can identify the impact of different recruitment strategies on employee and organizational performance (Wright & Constantin, 2021). Scholars have identified the importance of the RBV theory to a firm's recruitment efforts, noting that people are strategically important to the organization's success. Muñoz-Pascual et al. (2021) observed that the influence of valuable human resources has a positive impact on organizations; hence, business leaders will be concerned with maintaining and sustaining their human resources in a way that encompasses knowledge, skills and experiences, and relationships with other members of the organization.

Operational Definitions

Competitive advantage: The unique capabilities of an organization to provide valuable products and services to customers, with the organization being in a better competitive position than competitors (S. Lee & Yoo, 2021).

Critical skills: The skills necessary for successful employment in the 21st century and may include digital literacy, problem-solving skills, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration skills (Mahmud & Wong, 2022).

Critical talent: Excellent abilities or key employees with high potential who are particularly valuable for an organization (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Critical thinking: A metacognitive ability to think clearly and rationally, understand logical connections, and detect inconsistencies (Sartori et al., 2022).

Digital competence: The confident, critical, and responsible use of digital technologies in information, multimedia, and communication (Silva-Quiroz & Morales-Morgado, 2022).

High performance work systems (HPWS): A system of HR practices such as selection, training, incentives, empowerment, performance management, and job design that leaders use to achieve individual and firm-level high performance (Kakakhel & Khalil, 2022).

Talent management: Talent management is the systematic attraction, development, engagement, and retention of talents considered valuable to an organization (Warraich & Ahmed, 2020).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

In this study, I encountered factors that were outside, as well as within my control as a researcher. These factors included assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. An assumption is a condition that the reader accepts as truth, with the understanding that violations of said assumptions can ultimately result in invalid inferences (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2019). The limitations of a study include those weaknesses and shortcomings such as subjectivity, biases, and the inappropriate use of statistical models that influence the outcome of the study (Barceló & Saez, 2021). These potential shortcomings and boundaries are referred to as assumptions and limitations. Limitations

are weaknesses that influence the outcomes of the study. However, delimitations are those factors that are within the control of the researcher.

Assumptions

My first assumption was that the leaders of these small businesses would respond to my interview questions without bias, thereby ensuring reliability. Secondly, I assumed that these business leaders would respond honestly in discussing their strategies with me and provide unbiased and factual information needed for the study. I took steps to protect my participants' identities, for example, denoting participants by codes instead of their real names, thereby improving truthfulness.

Limitations

All studies have limitations or weaknesses that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research (Barceló & Saez, 2021). A key limitation of this study was that the purposive sample of three small business leaders did not represent all small business owners in Ontario, Canada. A second limitation was that owner-managers of small businesses were somewhat reticent in answering the interview questions openly, considering they did not want to divulge the unique strategies they use in recruiting skilled workers.

Delimitations

Delimitations are conscious choices that a researcher makes that may narrow the scope of the study (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). Based on the nature of this study, and to ensure manageability, I established boundaries in terms of the duration of the study, the sample size, and the type of participants. The unit of analysis of this multiple case study

consisted of leaders of small businesses in Central Canada who have successfully recruited skilled workers.

Significance of the Study

To remain competitive and economically viable, small businesses need the right people with the right skills, yet they are disproportionately threatened by labor shortages and skills gaps (Saba & Blanchette, 2020). Employer recruitment of skilled workers in an organization are usually done to maintain a competitive advantage, to innovate, and to ensure cost-effectiveness (Wright & Constantin, 2021). Businesses are competitive when they possess a highly skilled and talented workforce (Minghua, 2022). This multiple case study's findings and recommendations may contribute to business practices and social change by identifying effective recruitment strategies in small businesses to enable improving effectiveness and efficiency.

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings from this study may contribute to business practices through the identification of successful recruitment strategies in small businesses. There is a significant positive association between recruitment strategies and sustainable organizational performance (Rasool et al., 2019). Leaders of small businesses may be able to use the results of this study to improve their skilled worker recruitment strategies. Cirillo and Ricci (2020) noted that higher numbers of skilled workers in an organization accumulate process-specific experience over time and refine their ability to perform tasks and solve problems, thereby contributing to the accumulation of organizational capabilities.

Implications for Social Change

The positive social impact of this study may include the provision of significant knowledge to business leaders in their skilled worker recruitment efforts. By addressing the skills gap, leaders may ensure the economic viability and competitive advantage of their businesses, ultimately increasing employment rates and improving the overall livelihood of local economies. Gherghina et al. (2020) noted that the growth in small businesses is instrumental in poverty reduction, employment creation, trade promotion, and innovation. Small business owners who implement the successful recruitment strategies from this multiple case study may contribute to their communities through job creation, economic growth, and stability.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I conducted the study to explore the strategies small business leaders use to recruit workers with critical skills. Small businesses owners need skilled employees to ensure quality performance, production, and profits (Stackhouse, 2020). However, the lack of specialized knowledge and technical skills is a challenge for most small businesses (Gonzalez-Tamayo et al., 2023). I analyzed an exhaustive list of prior scholarly research on the recruitment of skilled workers in small businesses. I focused my study on three small business leaders in Ontario and consulted peer-reviewed literature that has been published globally on skills in small businesses. To support my literature search, I used databases that included ABI/Inform Complete, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, SAGE Journals, and Google Scholar. The key search terms I used for the study

are *RBV theory, talent recruitment strategies, skilled worker, small businesses, competitive advantage, human capital theory, and social exchange theory.*

The review of the professional and academic literature was a significant component of the study. Chigbu et al. (2023) noted that researchers must follow a significant pattern of argumentation while conducting the review, and use evidence to support findings and opinions derived from the scholarly work of other researchers. I organized the review of literature through the use of scholarly and peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, books, and government publications. I structured my review of literature in topical order, focusing on the main topics that were useful in answering the research question. I discussed the RBV theory as the conceptual framework of the study. I also identified two other theories, human capital and social exchange, as lenses through which researchers have viewed recruitment strategies in small businesses. I ensured an exhaustive literature review by synthesizing the most pertinent studies on the history and growth of the RBV theory and discussed the implications of this theory for skills recruitment and competitive advantage in small businesses, particularly in the Canadian context.

Resource-Based View Theory

The conceptual framework through which I analyzed my findings is the RBV theory. Scholars have suggested that RBV theory is useful in exploring strategic human resource practices and a firm's level of competitive advantage when employee skills are rare and valuable (Collins, 2021). Penrose (1959) conceptualized the RBV theory and, in her seminal work, suggested that the firm is a collection of productive resources in which

administrators decide how to identify, develop, and utilize over time. Using the resource-based perspective, business leaders may achieve competitive advantage through the mastery of technology, high-quality human resources, and creativity (Farida & Setiawan, 2022). Hence, based on the RBV framework, small business leaders who can identify their core competencies, especially the critical skills of their employees, are more capable in growing their firms competitively.

There is a nexus between the RBV theory and entrepreneurial dispensation. The RBV theory is an important framework in analyzing entrepreneurial firms' strategic choices of resources that are valuable, rare, imitable, and non-substitutable to achieve competitive advantage (Zahra, 2021). Business leaders apply the RBV model to ensure they use available resources to add value. Ilinova et al. (2021) argued that businesses should combine these traditional resources with their core competencies such as knowledge, skills, and innovations to gain competitive advantage. Small businesses are better able to sustain competitive advantage when managers exploit internal strengths, respond to opportunities, neutralize threats, and avoid weaknesses.

There are differing views on the significance of the RBV theory to small business competitiveness. Proponents of RBV theory have argued that the framework encompasses the internal strengths and weaknesses of the firm in contrast to the external environmental model of competitive advantage where the focus is on the opportunities and threats (Bhandari et al., 2022). Using RBV theory, strategists are able to analyze an organization starting from the internal environment. D'Oria et al. (2021) suggested that the primary function of businesses is to use their collection of internal resources that are

valuable, rare, nonsubstitutable, and inimitable for the production of goods and services. A skilled workforce is a significant internal strength of small businesses; hence, leaders should focus on not merely recruiting skills, but continually developing those skills as well.

Scholars have also highlighted the shortcomings of the RBV theory. Amadasun and Mutezo (2022) argued that the theory is limited in logic and applicability, noting that there is an emphasis on strategic internal composition while not paying attention to external market-driven factors such as market orientation, competitive intensity, and technological dynamics. D'Oria et al. (2021) suggested that the RBV theory is silent on the actions managers can use to create or capitalize on a resource-based advantage, noting the need for leaders to identify the linkage between resources and performance, and being able to structure and leverage resources to enable the firm to achieve greater economic performance. Apriliyanti (2022) indicated that there is a need to integrate the RBV theory with other theories or concepts, thereby enhancing organizational dynamics in terms of competitive advantage. However, RBV theory is a significant framework in understanding the internal resources of small businesses.

The RBV theory is helpful and relevant to the field of strategic HRM. Scholars have identified linkages between the RBV theory and strategic HRM, arguing that a high commitment human resource strategy creates greater firm-level employee-based resources that are rare and valuable, which leads to competitive advantage (Collins, 2021). Shaw (2021) supported this view, noting that, based on RBV theory, there is an association between compensation practices and organizational performance. Gerhart and

Feng (2021) noted that, since the 1990s, RBV theory has been a major influence on both human resource and human capital, even though there is need for future research data to support this assertion. The linkage between RBV theory and strategic HRM should be useful to small business leaders as they aspire to effectively deploy their human resources to ensure competitive advantage.

Both tangible and intangible resources are key drivers to a firm's level of competitiveness. The RBV theory is a useful framework through which small business leaders or entrepreneurs may analyze their tangible and intangible resources to create and sustain competitive advantage (Zahra, 2021). Business leaders derive competitive advantage and value creation by strategically combining these resources into firm-specific capabilities that are difficult to imitate (Brossard et al., 2022). For businesses to be profitable and competitive, leaders should dynamically manage both tangible and intangible resources, considering that these resources are homogenous and mobile across firms and industries (Ebrahim Seyadi & Elali, 2021). When small business leaders are able to identify their internal and external opportunities, they are in a better position to leverage their firms' competitiveness.

Small business leaders sustain competitive advantage when they are able to produce goods and services using internal and external resources better than their competitors. Based on the RBV theory, competitive advantage is a significant indicator of a firm's performance using both tangible and intangible resources (Kiyabo & Isaga, 2020). However, there is limited consensus on the extent to which small firms use these resources. Ali et al. (2020) noted the relative worth of intangible resources such as

specialized knowledge, experience, and intangible skills and capabilities. Likewise, Aguiar et al. (2021) suggested that businesses must focus their efforts on intangible resources to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and profitability, even though intangible assets are sometimes incorporated into tangible assets, such as an employee's implicit knowledge as part of the workforce.

A significant resource in an organization is the level of skills and talents that employees possess. Collins (2021) noted that high commitment human resource strategies lead to a firm's competitive advantage by creating greater firm-level employee-based resources that are rare and valuable. Based on RBV theory, both resources and knowledge management capabilities are sources of competitive advantage of a firm and that the strategy employed by the firm depends on both resources and knowledge management capabilities for superior firm performance (Kiyabo & Isaga, 2020). Skills are crucial to small businesses' levels of competitiveness, hence the need for leaders to reprioritize their work requirements by focusing on skills-based recruitment.

Researchers have explored the relationship between firm resources and competitive advantage. Abu-Rumman et al. (2021) noted that a firm's resources are important in determining the level of competitive advantage in the market. Additionally, S. Lee and Yoo (2021) stated that firms will achieve a superior position in the marketplace when leaders develop and exploit resources. Based on RBV theory, business leaders or owners must innovatively utilize the firm's internal and external capabilities such as tangible and intangible assets, financial resources, and organizational and human resources to enhance business performance. Business leaders must leverage intangible

assets or human resources to create value for their organizations (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). As a result, owner-managers of small businesses must pay particular attention to intangible human resources such as human capital, thereby ensuring the growth of other resources.

HRM practices are essential for supporting human capital, especially employees' skills. Lim et al. (2020) noted that human resources are significant to the overall growth of a firm because people are both accumulators and producers of many of the firm's resources. Zhang and Edgar (2021), in exploring the effects of the HR system as an integration of bundles of HR practices on employee capability, noted that compared with large companies, small businesses rely more on human capital than on other types of capital to achieve superior performance and success given their liability of smallness. Zhang and Edgar suggested that skilled employees are important for small business survival because these entities tend to be more highly labor-intensive when compared to larger firms. Hence, the resource-based perspective of the firm is useful in explaining the value of human resources on small business performance and success.

Small businesses may outperform the competitor when leaders pay attention to their human capital resources. Arthur et al. (2021) drew insights from the RBV theory of the firm and found that the greater use of combinations of human resource programs known as high-performance work systems (HPWS) is positively related to firm-level operational and financial performance. However, Arthur et al. noted that only a small percentage of small- to medium-sized businesses have adopted HPWSs such as job security, decentralized decision-making, teams, performance appraisals, employee

training, internal promotions, and selective hiring. Small business leaders failed to adopt HPWPs due to values and preferences, cultural issues, and resource constraints.

Human Capital Theory

The personal skills of an employee, or *human capital*, such as knowledge, experience, health, and education, are valuable to many firms that require expertise. Human capital refers to the resources associated with an employee's knowledge and skills which are crucial for economic development (Angrist et al., 2021). Human capital theory bears some relations to RBV theory. Usman et al. (2021) noted that human capital is a source of innovation and strategy renewal, creating incremental to organizations daily, via motivation, commitment, competence, and effectiveness of teamwork. Human capital theory is relevant to economic theories because differences in the supply of human capital in a country or region will ultimately impact the quality of life and productivity of citizens (Gruzina et al., 2021). Hence, human resource managers should ensure adequate and consistent attention to employee development.

Human capital theory may prove useful to small business development. Li et al. (2020) explored the relationship between intellectual capital and small business efficiency, and noted that intellectual capital facilitates small businesses in exploiting growth opportunities and gaining high financial performance. Sun et al. (2020), in championing organizational learning, noted that, based on RBV theory, human and social capital are important resources with potential competitive advantage within an organization. Hence, human capital theory is also a relevant concept to the competitive advantage of small businesses.

The role of human resources is critical to the operation of small businesses. HRM practices and the level of human capital are important factors in a small firm's propensity to innovate (Salimi & Della Torre, 2022). Nam and Luu (2021) found that HRM practices positively affected the quality of human and physical capital assets of SMEs and noted that HRM practices significantly contribute to the launch of new products and improvement of existing products. However, proponents of the human capital theory have argued that intangible resources are more crucial in the context of small business performance, productivity, and competitive advantage (Li et al., 2020). RBV is a useful framework to analyze the competitive advantage of small businesses, which usually face significant resource limitations (Zahra, 2021). When analyzing a firm's resources and strategies, it is evident that there are strengths and weaknesses inherent in both RBV and human capital theories.

There are advantages and disadvantages inherent in human capital theory. Hung and Ramsden (2021) noted that while education, on-the-job training, and productivity are useful concepts in human capital theory, the theory is too economic and does not take social, cultural, and nonmaterial dimensions into account. Aljuboori et al. (2022), on the other hand, in establishing the relationship between intellectual capital and firm performance, suggested that a firm with skilled and expert employees can enhance its performance by efficiently investing their knowledge and creativity in the firm. Ardito et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of human capital theory to small businesses, noting that human capital management is less formal and bureaucratic for small firms but may not be less significant. Based on the research, one may deduce that there is a failure

of human capital theorists to differentiate labor from capital, which is not the case in RBV theory.

There are similarities between RBV and human capital theories. Both RBV and human capital theorists have outlined an organization's human factors as the combined skills, intelligence and expertise from which a company gets its distinctive character and which workers take with them when they leave (AlQershi et al., 2021). Both theories underscore the need for an organization's resources to be rare, valuable, and hard to imitate and obtain. To maintain competitiveness, small businesses must rely on unique and rare resources, which are hard to imitate by competitors, and purely internal to the organization (Lu et al., 2021). Small business leaders stand to benefit, however, when they combine the concepts from both RBV and human capital theories.

Social Exchange Theory

Businesses are social entities; therefore, owner-managers establish relationships, or social exchanges, through cost-benefit analysis. An organization engages in social exchange whenever it takes inputs from the environment and, in return, sends outputs back to the same environment (Krishnan, 2019). Adeosun and Ohiani (2020), in exploring the drivers of attracting and recruiting quality talents, suggested that businesses engage in social exchange because every organization is a social entity that takes inputs from the environment and, in return, sends outputs back to the same environment. Ahmad et al. (2023) suggested that social exchanges are not only limited to organizations, but extend to other social circles as well. Reciprocity and equity are key tenets of social exchange, with leaders providing benefits to employees, who then feel obliged to respond

with positive attitudes and behavior, thus fulfilling their side of the contract. Small business leaders engage in social exchange when they attempt to maximize benefits and minimize costs in exchanging resources (Jahan & Kim, 2021). Andersen et al. (2020) argued that employees with a strong perception of social exchange will be prosocially motivated, owing to a greater obligation to reciprocate the benefits and support received by engaging in behaviors that exceed the minimum requirements for employment. Small business leaders may benefit from social exchange if they recognize the value inherent in mutually beneficial transactions with skilled employees.

Social exchange is applicable to the risks and rewards relationships of businesses. Based on the social exchange theory, there is a give-and-take relationship between employer and employees, with the latter increasing their work outcomes when the relationship is mutually beneficial (Chaman et al., 2021). Small business leaders will enhance employees' sense of fairness and organizational loyalty when they provide equitable benefits to their employees (Mapuranga et al., 2021). For example, Rehman et al. (2021) found that employees were more likely to reciprocate when organizational leaders are supportive, in addition to being more motivated and committed when treated equitably. Small business leaders may practice social exchange by rewarding employees equitably and promoting friendliness and camaraderie among workers.

Employees typically calculate the value of the employment relationship in terms of risks and rewards. Social exchange theorists have posited that there is a cost-benefit approach in interactions between organizational members (Jahan & Kim, 2021). Nielsen (2020) noted that, based on social exchange, when business leaders create and encourage

a positive organizational culture, employees are more likely to help and support each other. Thomas and Gupta (2021) in exploring the important aspects that can support employees' financial well-being in an organization, suggested that there is a constant practice of social exchange between a person and the organization, hence when employers show concern for employees, social exchange associations multiply, which produces useful outcomes. Based on the tenets of both social exchange and RBV theories, businesses are social institutions, with social exchange theorists focusing on why organizational members behave the way they do, and RBV theorists focusing on the specialized resources of the firm.

The RBV Theory and HRM

A significant function of a business is operations management. Business leaders manage their human resources through operations, paying particular attention to human capital, which is the strongest asset of any organization (Anastasiu et al., 2020). Based on RBV theory, human resources are valuable, enabling the organization to exploit strategic business opportunities and yielding a competitive advantage that is rare and imitable (Cheng et al., 2022). An organization achieves competitive advantage through people, hence attracting talent is one of the biggest challenges that businesses face. Azizi et al. (2021) noted that appropriate HRM strategies are necessary for employees' satisfaction, motivation, productivity, and safety at the workplace, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a need for sound human resource practices in small businesses, considering the need to be resilient in challenging environments.

The emphasis of the RBV theory is on resources that enable a firm to sustain competitive advantage. The theory is a major influence on HRM practices, because people and their interactions are valuable resources in the production of knowledge and the achievement of organizational goals (Demo et al., 2022). Shaw (2021) noted that the RBV perspective has motivated and inspired researchers to conduct hundreds of empirical studies on the link between HRM and dimensions of organizational performance. Based on the theory, business leaders can use their human resources to create sustainable competitive advantage through value creation in a way that competitors find difficult to imitate (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). Furthermore, small business leaders can develop and sustain competitive advantage by generating value in a way that is rare and complicated for other competitors to imitate, hence the need for effective HRM practices. Gerhart and Feng noted that a firm's HRM or employment system might be especially difficult to imitate when deeply embedded in the organization. In the case of small businesses, the demand and supply of labor is heterogeneous, hence human resources add value to the firm.

When small business owner-managers possess strategic resources, they are better able to develop their capabilities over time. A fundamental premise of RBV theory is that businesses can gain competitive advantage when leaders exploit the resources inherent in the organization (Isichei et al., 2020). For example, a business leader may select well-trained employees when embarking on cost-efficient strategy which requires operational efficiency. Mahdi and Nassar (2021) noted the need for business organizations to leverage knowledge management processes to achieve sustainable competitive advantage

through human and social capital. Hence, leaders of small businesses will need to pay particular attention to the critical skills necessary for these organizations to thrive, especially while dealing with the difficulties that the current COVID-19 pandemic has caused.

In the particular contexts of small businesses, HRM strategies are crucial for the performance and growth of these entities. Juneja and Matharu (2022) noted that small businesses may need structured HR strategies to include agreements, policies, a cost-effective HR system, and knowledge of outsourcing human resource function if core competencies are missing. Given the need to differentiate their products and services from those of competitors, small businesses need agile HRM practices to achieve human capital advantages, especially in uncertain environments. However, while small business leaders should be seeking strategic advice about transformational aspects of people management if they are to achieve competitive advantage, in effect, there is low priority given to HRM practices among small businesses (Antcliff et al., 2021). HRM is integral to small businesses due to the need to maximize employee performance in these entities.

RBV Theory and Skills Recruitment

Small businesses often lack the capacity to recruit and retain skilled employees. Small business leaders may use the talent recruitment function to anticipate technological disruptions, identify high potential talent, create value, and foster diversity when they recruit externally (Kumar, 2019). To ensure sustainability, small business leaders need to digitalize products, services, and processes, hence the need to recruit employees with critical talents. However, Gilch and Sieweke (2021) posited that the demand for

employees with talent far outweighs the supply, hence there is a war for talent which poses a challenge for many businesses. Small business owner-managers may not be able to compete with large corporate entities for talented employees, however, they possess the flexibility to market their businesses to prospective employees.

Businesses achieve competitive advantage through their human resource strategies. Human resources are crucial to an organization's competitive advantage, hence the need for appropriate HRM strategies (Nafari & Rezaei, 2022). Firms use their HRM strategies as techniques to keep their talented employees at the right time, thereby maintain a high level of efficient operation, continuous organizational development, and sustained competitive advantage (Battour et al., 2021). RBV theory is relevant in this scenario because of the focus on internal resources that are inimitable and non-substitutable, supporting organizational performance and competitive advantage.

Operating a small business is inherently risky. Over 50% of small businesses fail in the initial stages due to resource constraints, competencies, and limited skills (Ying et al., 2019). Alsaaty and Makhoulf (2020) noted that most small businesses fail in their first ten years, usually due to internal and external challenges such as their inability to attract management expertise, raise capital, and benefit from economies of scale. However, when small business owner-managers recognize these challenges early, they are better able to leverage resources to avoid failure.

Critical Skills in Small Automotive Repairs Businesses

Employees with good problem-solving skills are valuable and trusted in the organizational setting. Pereira et al. (2021) noted that problem-solving skills in

businesses are important in achieving sustainable development, profit, and social value. For many small businesses to remain viable and become competitive, leaders and managers must become aware of the impact of rapid technological advancements, new customer demands, and new decision tools on these entities (Ismail, 2022). Hence, critical skills such as critical thinking and digital competency are necessary if small businesses are to survive after their initial years and become competitive. van Laar et al. (2020) noted that both critical thinking skills and digital competence are crucial to the 21st century workplace; to think critically, employees need the knowledge to enable them to formulate an independent perspective, and workers need digital competence to define, identify, select, and evaluate digital information in an efficient way. Within the automotive industry in particular, critical thinking, customer engagement, and the implementation of digital technology are necessary to improve processes (Miguel et al., 2022). When employees use their problem-solving and critical thinking skills, they are better able to reduce costly errors and ensure, protect the organization's resources, and connect ideas.

Critical Thinking

There is value in thinking critically in the workplace. Critical thinking is a dynamic process that involves perspective-taking, reflection, and reasoning (Southworth, 2022). Specifically, small business stakeholders need critical thinking skills if they are to compete effectively. In the past, occupation-specific skills and high academic qualifications were adequate to enable workers to break into the workforce; however, given the rapid technological advancements in the twenty-first century, employers need

new skills such as critical thinking, working independently, problem-solving, and verbal communication (Mahmud & Wong, 2022). Given the need for frequent and quick decision-making in small business environments, undoubtedly, critical thinking is a crucial skill necessary for these entities to survive and compete.

Critical thinking is crucial for business success. Indrašienė et al. (2021) noted that in a rapidly evolving world of information flow, critical thinking is the goal of organizations because it is an important tool for the formation and development of human and social capital. Gunasekara et al. (2022) observed that critical thinking skills are especially essential in times of crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic because organizational leaders need to engage in sensemaking and understand uncertainties, owing to the need to view the circumstances objectively and keep an open mind during the decision-making process. Employees who possess critical thinking skills are innovative, insightful, and efficient, while developing leadership qualities, decision-making, and teambuilding skills (Mahmud & Wong, 2022). These competencies are as relevant to large corporations as well as to small businesses.

Business leaders may validate critical thinking by assessing the skills employees use to solve problems and make decisions. In addition to understanding how critical thinking skills impact business success, there is a need to precisely assess and evaluate an individual's critical thinking (Mohammadi et al., 2022). Organizational leaders can evaluate critical thinking skills using standardized tests such as Cambridge Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA), Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test, Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, and California Critical Thinking Skills Tests (CCTST)

(Alias et al., 2022). The CCTST measures skills such as overall reasoning, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, explanation, inference, induction, deduction, and numeracy (Hirai et al., 2022). Hence, small business leaders may find this assessment tool useful as they recruit workers with critical thinking skills.

Digital Competence

Owner-managers have increasingly pivoted aspects of their businesses online, prompting the need for digital competence among the workforce. Indeed, businesses have undergone many technological developments over the past decade, introducing information and communication technologies (ICT) and leading to the demand for digital competencies (Zhao et al., 2021). Employees demonstrate digital competence when they are able to integrate knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, strategies, and awareness using digital media and ICT (Tang et al., 2022). Small businesses may benefit from digital technology which enables them to sustain their growth momentum and contribute to regional development (Vrontis et al., 2022). Digital competence is also a crucial skill for employees entering the workplace. Bartolomé et al. (2022) noted the difficulty in finding a job where no ICT skills are required, but also observed the need for upskilling of workers and real-world digital competency assessment strategies. Given the shift toward the use of smart devices and connectivity in the automotive industry, workers need stronger digital competencies if they are to thrive in response to those trends.

Digital competence is useful both for businesses and individual employees. Blanka et al. (2022) noted that there is a gap in digital transformation concerning the role of human resources and employee competency, but emphasized that digital competence

enables companies to foster technological and strategic dimensions in maintaining competitive advantage. There is need for continued recognition of digital competence in small businesses, however. Ollerenshaw et al. (2021) highlighted that many small business owners are unaware of how digital technologies will improve productivity and efficiency, and often lack the skills and expertise to identify and implement new technologies. Vrontis et al. (2022) suggested that digital competence is particularly crucial for small businesses because, through effective adoption, owner-managers can use digital technologies to improve social and economic value and business performance especially with appropriate entrepreneurial orientation. The ability of small businesses to compete effectively will depend on owner-managers' levels of investment in digital competence across the workforce.

There is a need for businesses to evaluate the digital behavior and skills of their workforce. Oberländer and Bipp (2022) noted that there is inadequate research on measurement instruments that assess digital competence. Recruiters typically include various strategies when assessing digital competence. Silva-Quiroz and Morales-Morgado (2022) identified various frameworks that business leaders may use to assess digital competency, including iSkills, International Society for Technology in Education, ICILS by the OECD, and DIGCOMP by the European Economic Community. Within a small automotive repairs business, owner-managers may pay particular attention to digital competence skills to include information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, safety, and problem-solving

The RBV Theory in the Context of Small Businesses

Small businesses are crucial to the growth and development of an economy. Engidaw (2022) noted that small businesses are critical to growth and job creation, increasingly so because of the effects of COVID-19. Small businesses generate considerable employment levels, in general using techniques that are labor-intensive and are socially and economically significant (Erdirin & Ozkaya, 2020). Journeault et al. (2021) examined the roles that stakeholders played in supporting the sustainability adoption in SMEs and found that these businesses account for a very large proportion of economic activity and are the main drivers of global economic growth, employing more than 60% of the global workforce. Hence, the significance of small businesses to economic life necessitates the need for skilled employees in these entities.

There are varying classifications for small businesses in different jurisdictions. Government in the United Kingdom defines small businesses as those entities with an annual revenue that does not exceed \$6.5 million and employs less than 50 workers, while the Small Business Administration (SBA) in the United States classifies small businesses on the basis of their revenues and business lines or industries (Alsaaty & Makhoul, 2020). Canadian authorities use employee threshold as a criterion, defining small businesses as those with less than 100 employees (Mintah et al., 2022). In Canada, small businesses make up more than 95% of the total number of firms, provide two-thirds of all jobs, and account for 40% of foreign sales (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2019). Isabelle et al. (2022), in studying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian small businesses, found that the key challenges these entities

face include reduced customer demand, lack of employee availability, and disrupted supply chains. Despite their classifications, small businesses will continue to be significant drivers of economic recovery.

Business researchers have outlined the flexibility, innovativeness, and adaptive capabilities of small businesses. Gherghina et al. (2020) investigated the impact and economic growth of small businesses between 2009 and 2017 and noted that, compared to large organizations, these entities are highly flexible especially to technical shifts, promote higher income distribution, display better adaptability to market fluctuations and customer requirements, while their organizational structure allows for quicker decision-making. Adam and Alarifi (2021) hypothesized that innovation practices of small businesses in all environmental situations including the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute positively to business performance. The need for a performant workforce for small businesses would be significant to the flexibility, innovativeness, and adaptive capabilities of these entities.

Economic uncertainties affect businesses differently. For small businesses, economic downturns can pose opportunity or loss (Lim et al., 2020). Small businesses faced unprecedented challenges, as well as opportunities, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bartik et al. (2020), in exploring the impact of COVID-19 on small businesses in the United States, found that small businesses employ almost 50 percent of American workers, but noted the financial fragility and the severe effects of the pandemic on these entities. Within the Canadian context, 70 percent of small businesses have seen revenues falling by 30 percent or more at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, exacerbating

financial difficulties and disruptions in family and social relationships (Mo et al., 2020). Disruptions of any kind disproportionately affect small businesses; hence, leaders will need to connect to the right network of people skills.

RBV theory is a useful framework in understanding the role of resources in small businesses. Based on the theory, managers or entrepreneurs use the tangible and intangible assets of these entities to implement their strategies, thereby creating economic value (Barney et al., 2021). Additionally, researchers have used the RBV theory to describe constructs of competitive advantage. A firm derives competitive advantage from its resources and capabilities.

Digital transition takes place based on an organization's human and material resources. In an age of digital transformation, small businesses face considerable challenges including a lack of appropriate financing possibilities, lack of management expertise, and insufficient digital skills of employees (Rupeika-Apoga et al., 2022). Small businesses need both tangible and intangible resources to survive in the long run. Rodrigues et al. (2021), in a study to identify the success factors of small businesses, noted that the resources that are necessary for growth include human resources, strategic planning, manager/management capacity, innovation, and financing. Ali et al. (2020) studied the importance of intangible skills in SMEs, and found that intellectual capital, financial literacy, and business experience are significant predictors of sustainable competitive performance and new product development. As a result, it is important for business leaders to address the skillsets of both current and future employees.

A skilled workforce is crucial for small businesses which are often striving to survive in the industry due to competition from larger players. Small business managers play a central role in knowledge transfer by bringing external knowledge and skills into the company (Csillag et al., 2019). Operating a small business can be challenging because these entities face skills shortages at the managerial and workforce levels, and lack of resources means less likelihood of workforce training.

Applying RBV Theory in Unstable Business Environments

Small business leaders face uncertainties in their markets. Sołoducho-Pelc and Sulich (2020) indicated that organizational leaders face numerous challenges in the business environment. Major exogenous shocks on small businesses can create uncertainty and ambiguity and disrupt supply chains, consumer demand, and regulatory and governmental policy frameworks (Miklian & Hoelscher, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis that has posed challenges to small businesses in terms of survival and growth (Guo et al., 2020). The pandemic has affected small and large firms economically, with smaller firms at a disadvantage due to their inability to capture the opportunities that the crisis has created (Belitski et al., 2022). As a result of the pandemic, many small businesses have become financially fragile, cutting expenses dramatically, taking on additional debt, and declaring bankruptcies (Engidaw, 2022). Based on RBV theory, business leaders derive competitive advantage from the policies they employ to manage internal resources and capabilities (Allen et al., 2021). Business leaders may possess resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, but, given challenging business environments, they will also need to reconfigure and re-

orient these resources in keeping with the firm's external environment (Yin et al., 2021). However, during times of uncertainties, small businesses may endure, or even thrive, with the right strategies and resources in place.

Small business leaders need to build resilience and adaptability especially in times of instability. Thukral (2021) indicated that a crisis such as COVID-19 has resulted in significant behavioral changes which have posed challenges to the survival of small businesses, hence the need to respond to these challenges with creativity and innovation. Sarta et al. (2021) in researching the concept of organizational adaptation found that the process is significant especially in times of change in the economic or institutional environment. International policies and macroeconomic conditions affect the performance and survival of small businesses due to reduction of income stream and instability in the business environment (Zonouzi et al., 2021). Small business leaders face challenges relating to technology, uncertainty in demand and supply, and product obsolescence, hence the need for highly talented and knowledgeable employees.

Competitive Advantage and Small Businesses

There is significant research on competitive advantage in the context of small businesses. Amadasun and Mutezo (2022) observed that small business leaders achieve competitive advantage when they attain and retain greater customer satisfaction, increase employee capability, and experience significant growth in returns and profit. S. Lee and Yoo (2021) noted that organizational leaders achieve competitive advantage when their businesses possess attributes and resources that enable them to perform at a higher level than other businesses in the same industry or market. Cheng et al. (2022), in their study

of small- and medium-sized enterprises, suggested that competitive advantage theory allows businesses to embrace competitive business practices necessary for the development of these firms, which in turn leads these entities to gain market success and benefit the national economy. Based on research, there is reasonable evidence to link competitive advantage with the overall success of small businesses.

The RBV theory is a relevant framework for analyzing the role of a firm's tangible and intangible resources in creating and sustaining competitive advantage. Based on RBV theory, businesses gain competitive advantage through the possession of resources that are valuable, rare, nonsubstitutable, and inimitable (D'Oria et al., 2021). Businesses must possess resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable to achieve competitive advantage. Heriyanto et al. (2021) found that small and medium-sized enterprises may use strategic human resource development processes that are difficult to imitate to build competitive advantage. Hence, there is evidence that small business leaders may be able to achieve competitive advantage through people and the people practices of their organizations.

A key strategy to sustain competitive advantage is through planning. Rodrigues et al. (2021) noted that even though these entities are small, business leaders should ensure the strategic planning of their businesses to increase success rate and sustain long-term growth. Susanto et al. (2021) highlighted strategic planning as a significant contributing factor to sustainable competitive advantage, noting the need for small business managers to create and implement strategies that will ensure competition in the long run. As a

result, small business leaders should consider the strategic planning of their human capital to achieve their company's competitive advantage.

Significance of Critical Skills to Small Businesses

Small businesses have a small number of employees, hence the need for individual performance and effective HRM practices. Based on RBV theory, small business leaders should prioritize HRM practices if they are to achieve competitive advantage (Antcliff et al., 2021). However, HRM practices may be idiosyncratic and informal in small businesses (Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). Most business enterprises are small and medium-sized and are without human resource and recruitment portfolios; however, HRM is essential in companies regardless of their size (Monteiro et al., 2020). Small business leaders may find that hiring outside the organization is costly, hence the need for robust HRM strategies such as employee learning and development and retention.

Small businesses require special considerations based on their HRM needs. Human resources and innovations in small businesses are necessary for competitive considering the dynamic environment in which these entities operate in (Farida & Setiawan, 2022). There is also a strong, positive relationship between HRM and business performance when there are robust human resource activities such as recruitment and selection, appraisal, human resource development, and compensation (Piwowar-Sulej, 2021). For small businesses to become competitive and efficient, leaders must recognize the need for formal human resource practices.

Recruitment and Selection

For small businesses, employee recruitment and selection are crucial to achieving their growth potential. The recruitment and selection of skilled employees comprise the most difficult HRM tasks in small businesses (Bilan et al., 2020). However, recruitment and selection are integral components of HRM practice. Anastasiu et al. (2020) observed that attracting top talents is one of the most critical strategies of an organization, because in a dynamic market environment, companies struggle for supremacy and performance is linked to the quality of employees. To be successful, small business leaders require employees with high potential talent, considering that there is usually a need to develop employees as the firm grows and there is need for new hierarchical levels (Krishnan, 2019). When business leaders recruit talented candidates, they may be laying the groundwork for positive employee relationships and ultimately the long-term viability of the business.

Finding talent is a significant managerial challenge. The attraction, development, and retention of talent are among the most critical issues that businesses face (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Firms which are unable to attract the best talents have issues with productivity and output (Adeosun & Ohiani, 2020). Anastasiu et al. (2020) suggested, however, that performant employees are capable and willing to apply modern technologies if the work is challenging and interesting. As a result, it has become increasingly important for small business leaders to position themselves as attractive employers in order to secure skilled labor.

Performance Management

Business leaders use performance management when they help employees to plan individual goals that support larger business goals. Performance management is often neglected in small businesses, however, there is a need for employee learning and skills development to ensure an innovative workplace environment (Mendy, 2021). For businesses to thrive and become prosperous, there is a need to develop and retain highly skilled employees, hence the close alignment between performance management and employee development is significant (Brown et al., 2019). Business leaders, whether in small or large organizations, operate within competing and unstable environments, as a result, performance management is a useful process as the business strives to gain competitive advantage.

There is limited research on performance management in small businesses, hence some business leaders lack the direction to implement an effective appraisal process. Business leaders conduct performance appraisals across most entities whether formally or informally using official organizational processes or through daily dialogue (Brown et al., 2019). Ali et al. (2020) posited that small businesses will benefit from the performance management process which is an ongoing practice of defining and adjusting organizational goals and objectives to achieve key performance indicators (KPIs). As a result, performance management is a useful process to improve innovativeness and achieve competitive advantage in small firms.

Human Resource Development

Human resource development is an important factor in driving economic growth and increasing the productivity of SMEs. Alketbi et al. (2022) noted that business managers engage in human resource development when they organize learning within an organization to enhance personal growth and professional performance of employees. Hernita et al. (2021) suggested the need for small businesses to be able to harness human resources resulting from scientific developments and technological advances, thereby enhancing efficiency and productivity. Based on the tenets of human capital theory, in a dynamic and competitive business world, where the exchange of ideas is proficient, organizations achieve sustainable competitive advantage primarily through the non-physical human resources of the organization.

There are various factors influencing human resource development in small businesses. Short (2019) observed that small businesses are non-homogenous, therefore factors such as size, industry type, level of maturity, whether there is a human resource department, and the manager's vision regarding growth, will all influence the level of learning in small businesses. Additionally, there is an ever-growing demand for new skills. Cooke et al. (2022) noted that as businesses transition from manual or semi-manual production to full automation, there is a need for substantial investments in skills, which, in turn, will heighten the demand for soft skills as more roles become automated. Skilled employees will improve their effectiveness and productivity, thereby boosting the organization's margins and overall success.

It is more beneficial when small business leaders use internal resources, such as human capital, to exploit external resources. Human capital resources within small businesses include training, experience, and intelligence of managers and employees, and based on RBV theory, these may be scarce and valuable resources that generate sustained competitive advantages (Nam & Luu, 2021). Human capital resources are also significant to small business sustainability. AlQershi et al. (2021) described human capital as the heart of small organizations, especially when these businesses attempt to establish a niche market. Hence, the critical skills that employees possess will be significant to the growth, competitiveness, and sustainability of small businesses.

Access to critical skills is a significant issue for small businesses. Skills are fundamental drivers of economic growth and constitute the set of capabilities for task completion, behavioral attributes, and technical ability (Corradini et al., 2022). Labor shortages and skills gaps affect small businesses, which in turn contribute to low growth, require employees to work longer hours, and incur delays in goods and services (Saba & Blanchette, 2020). The scarcity of talents poses real problems for many organizations. Anastasiu et al. (2020) noted that businesses face talent shortages in terms of unemployment in the labor market, the retirement of baby boomers, the maturity of Generation X, and less commitment from next generations, hence the need to train existing employees for updating their skills. For small businesses to remain sustainable, especially after Covid-19, leaders must leverage digital skills of the workforce to enable business continuity and create new knowledge (Nachmias & Hubschmid-Vierheilig, 2021). However, small business leaders often recruit from prospective employees such as

young people, older workers, and less skilled workers who possess lower chances of finding employment.

Compensation

There is a nexus between RBV theory and effective compensation strategies within small businesses, due to the need to attract talent and boost retention. Compensation is one of the most relevant and controversial practices in small and medium-sized businesses (Salimi & Della Torre, 2022). Based on RBV perspective, organizational leaders should create human capital that is valuable, rare, and difficult to replicate to create competitive advantage. Liu and Liu (2022) posited that the compensation package is an incentive tool to compensate employees for their performance and retaining them through employee satisfaction and loyalty, thereby creating competitive advantage. Kankisingi and Dhliwayo (2022) outlined the need for business leaders to offer extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to employees, which may include regular pay, profit share bonuses, equity or share in the organization, job security, promotion, research money, public or private recognition, trips to conferences or exhibitions, and opportunities for upward mobility. Compensation and rewards are crucial for small businesses that need to recruit knowledgeable employees to access critical skills and be able to absorb capacity.

Business leaders may support the development of a performance culture when they create effective reward systems. There is a positive relationship between employee motivation and job performance, with an inefficient reward system being a demotivation to employees in terms of low productivity, internal conflicts, absenteeism, high turnover,

lack of commitment, and grievances (Manzoor et al., 2021). When business leaders compensate employees adequately and equitably, these employees will feel more motivated to perform. Chung and Al-Khaled (2022) noted that compensation and benefits practices are important in increasing organizational competitiveness and significantly increase employee motivation to improve work performance. Hence, small business leaders should pay particular attention to the welfare of their employees by constantly reviewing their compensation and rewards strategies.

Researchers have indicated the need to reward small business employees in an effort to encourage performance of these entities. Kankisingi and Dhliwayo (2022) investigated the types of rewards small business leaders offered to intrapreneurs and found that, in addition to a regular salary, the top 5 other rewards that small business leaders paid to employees were promotion within the organization, regular salary increases, monetary bonuses, sponsoring special training for new skills, and reward with time off. Piwowar-Sulej and Kołodziej (2022) noted that when recruiting qualified employees who show a high degree of environmental awareness, business leaders used recognition-based rewards such as plaques or letters of praise, which ultimately had a better impact on employees' pro-environmental commitment than other types of rewards. Based on these studies, organizational practices in rewards and compensation are significant to employees' commitment and loyalty.

Recruiting Skills in Canadian Small Businesses

When small business owner-managers focus on skills in the recruitment process, there is the likelihood that they will broaden the applicant pool. Skilled workers with key

competences are instrumental in enabling businesses to create new products, technologies and services, the ability to develop environmentally friendly technologies, and bring different benefits to a company at each stage of the value chain (Marczewska et al., 2020). In the long-term, small businesses need skilled employees who can create and transform with limited resources.

Due to the diverse nature of small businesses, there are significant challenges that business leaders may encounter in their efforts to recruit and retain talented individuals. A key challenge is the need for leaders to adopt HR support and build capacity which is critical to the success of the business (Atkinson et al., 2022). Bilan et al. (2020) identified various problems in recruiting for small businesses, among which are market factors, internal problems in ensuring the attractiveness of jobs, and internal factors of inefficient HR management. There is often a shortage of employees with the requisite skillsets, and, in terms of job attractiveness, tangible and intangible rewards such as pay, career prospects, and flexible working hours. Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. (2020) indicated that, in addition to traditional compensation, younger employees joining the labor market are more interested in jobs that respect their spare time, offer them the possibility to practice sports, improve their training, or give them a chance to increase social welfare. Hence, there is a need for small business leaders to modify their vision and strategy regarding their HRM practices.

There is need for skills recruitment within the Canadian context. Specifically, across the automotive sector, there is need to keep pace with rapidly evolving technologies, hence the need for skills and talent. Forty-three percent of small businesses

facing labor shortages are likely to experience low growth opportunities, resulting in the need to develop proper HR practices to allow for better recruitment, training, and retention (Ontario Chamber of Commerce et al., 2020). HRM measures that may be appropriate for larger organizations may not necessarily apply to small firms because these entities interact in dynamic ways and specific conditions such industry, labor market, ownership, and resources (Kroon & Paauwe, 2021). Hence, achieving the HR mission of small businesses will require a distinct approach from that of a large organization.

Small businesses are often under-resourced but require high potential talent to be successful. A key challenge that small business leaders face is to find strategies that attract and retain talent (Monteiro et al., 2020). Krishnan (2019) suggested that owner-managers of small businesses are restricted in their ability to compensate employees and provide benefits like what large organizations provide for, hence there is a challenge to attract talent from a recruitment pool that the large firms operate in. However, small business leaders can learn how to hire top talent even without a heavily-resourced HR department, by using techniques such as thorough job descriptions, assessing the talent pool, and being upfront about salary and benefits.

HRM is a significant factor in operating a small or large business. The adoption of HRM practices in small businesses may be costly, and leaders may not be aware of the benefits (Nam & Luu, 2021). In their desire to balance costs and benefits, small business leaders who secure their human resources may attract and retain employees who are seeking stability, while recognizing, however, that low turnover may impede innovation.

Based on the current business environment, small business leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of key employees in ensuring business success.

Based on RBV theory, these talented employees are particularly valuable to small businesses, and are scarce resources that leaders need to attract and retain.

Transition

In Section 1, I introduced the general business problem, noting the inability of small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry to recruit enough workers with critical talents in the province of Ontario, Canada. I have presented the purpose statement, population and sampling, nature of the study, and research and interview questions. I have also used the RBV theory as the conceptual lens through which one may view the study, in addition to discussing the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study. In the academic and professional literature review, I outlined the significance of the RBV theory in the context of small businesses, focusing my research on HRM practices and the need for small business leaders to adopt skills in their recruitment strategies to ensure sustainable competitive advantage.

In Section 2, I discuss the components of the study from the perspective of the researcher and elaborated on the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical practices, data collection and organization techniques, and validity and reliability of the study. In Section 3, I present the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations action, recommendations for future studies, summary, and conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I explore the strategies leaders of small businesses in the automotive repairs industry in Ontario, Canada, use to recruit workers with critical thinking skills and digital competence to achieve competitive advantage. To sustain competitive advantage, business leaders need to enhance their core competencies that they source from resources that are rare, valuable, and sustainable (C. Lee et al., 2022). Small businesses are crucial to economic success, hence the need to maintain and sustain the sector's human resource performance (Susanto et al., 2022). There is a shortage of talent that small business leaders need to ensure that their organizations remain competitive. Among the topics discussed in this section are the role of the researcher, participants, population and sampling, ethical research practices, data collection and analysis, and reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit workers with critical thinking skills and digital competence. The population in this multiple case study comprised the leaders of three small businesses in Ontario who have implemented successful strategies to recruit workers with critical skills. Business leaders who read the findings may be able to implement the strategies to recruit and hire highly skilled workers to sustain the competitive advantage of their businesses. Insights from the study may be useful in ensuring business leaders develop recruitment strategies based on the available talent pool, grow their businesses, and ultimately contribute to the local communities

through employment opportunities, sponsorships, and supporting other small businesses through networking and social responsibility.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of participants. The researcher is the main instrument in the qualitative research process (McGrath et al., 2019). As the researcher, I ensured my data collection instruments were appropriate, prepared myself as a researcher, considered the cultural dimensions of the organizations, and built rapport with participants. My key role in this study was to ensure participants understood the purpose of the research, conducted the semistructured interviews, and analyzed the data. I have not worked in small automotive repairs businesses in Canada, but I was aware of the challenges in terms of skills shortages facing the sector. As an HRM professional, I have had the opportunity to learn from colleagues about the need for recruitment and retention strategies, benefits, rewards, and learning and development in the small business sector.

The role of the researcher in the data collection process is to determine the purpose and scope of the study, identify the participants, consider the ethical issues, plan the logistical aspects in terms of contacting respondents, develop the interview protocol, establish rapport, conduct the interviews, analyze the data, and present the findings (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The protocol was a guide in conducting the interview, and included introducing the topic, collecting participants' consent, the interview questions, and conclusion. Knott et al. (2022) highlighted the usefulness of interviews in collecting qualitative data, noting that researchers may be able to extend the conversation

and gain insights in how participants think and what they believe. I used a semistructured interview format in which the interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants time to elaborate on their responses, and asking follow-up questions where necessary.

I followed all ethical considerations in conducting the study. Anabo et al. (2019) alluded to the significance of ethical principles when conducting research involving human subjects, indicating that entities such as professional boards, research institutions, and universities have developed and adapted codes and guidelines for their unique needs and objectives. In my role as the primary data collection instrument, I ensured that I collaborated with respondents in the data collection process and acted ethically by incorporating respect and awareness toward participants. Furthermore, as the researcher in this qualitative study, I adhered to the principles of *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). *The Belmont Report* addressed the basic ethical principles that are particularly relevant when conducting research involving human subjects. In conducting my research, I communicated in a written format to all respondents that their participation is strictly voluntary and ensured that I abide by all ethical research principles.

Building trust in the collection of the data was imperative. Qualitative researchers usually employ a variety of techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of their studies, such as member checking, triangulation, and audit trails (López-Zerón et al., 2021). *Member checking* is the practice of checking back with study respondents to see if the research is in line with their views (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 7). To ensure trustworthiness, validity, and consistency, I collected data using semistructured interviews and member checked by

providing respondents with a summarized description of their views for clarification purposes. I also examined available archival documents and training equipment.

There is a need to be transparent and reflexive to eliminate or reduce bias in collecting qualitative data. The preconceptions and biases of a researcher can influence decisions and actions throughout qualitative research activities (Johnson et al., 2020). In conducting the interviews and interpreting the data, I used member checking and ensured that my data sample was a fair representation of my research population. McGrath et al. (2019) observed that the interviewer should not be viewed as someone contaminating or biasing the data, but rather as a co-creator of data together with the interviewee, where the interviewer's previous knowledge may play an important part in understanding of the context or the experiences of the interviewee.

Member checking in qualitative research is necessary to show that findings are accurate and honest. Busetto et al. (2020) suggested that researchers should use member checking, or respondent validation, to see if the research is in line with their views. For example, the researcher may provide participants the summaries of their transcripts and verify whether they believe this to be a complete representation of their views. R. Campbell et al. (2020) highlighted the need for data triangulation in qualitative research, in which researchers collect data from multiple sources. Hence, I collected data using semistructured interviews and returned my interpreted results to the participants to ensure accuracy. Additionally, I ensured that I maintained neutrality when analyzing the responses of the participants.

Participants

In conducting this research, I selected the leaders of three small businesses in the automotive repairs industry in Ontario, Canada, who have implemented successful strategies to recruit workers with critical talent. Study participants possessed rich, in-depth knowledge of recruitment practices and were involved in the small automotive repairs business for at least 5 years. Participant recruitment is a central and dynamic aspect of qualitative research, whereby the researcher makes a connection with a person with the requisite experience and who is willing to share information (Bonisteel et al., 2021). I initiated access by gaining the contact information from the local Chamber of Commerce and Entrepreneurial Center in the region by emailing and telephoning all potential participants. I was totally dependent on the participants' perspectives; hence, there was a need to establish a good working relationship with participants, for example meeting them in a comfortable, secure environment of their choice.

I was able to handle the scenarios that I encountered when choosing the participants for the study. These scenarios included location, media through which participants wished to respond, targeting the most qualified participants, and assuring the participants that all information shared was for research purposes only and would be confidential. Qualitative interviews and focus groups, regardless of the setting, are subject to certain pitfalls such as ineffective recruitment practices and obstacles posed by distance and technology along with a study's progression from research question to analysis and dissemination (Santhosh et al., 2020). Additionally, I was mindful of the issues of informed consent and research transparency. Researchers should inform

participants of the research procedures, risks, and protection of confidentiality (Bhatia-Lin et al., 2019). To ensure confidentiality, I encrypted all computer-based files, stored documents in a locked cabinet, and removed personal identifiers from all documents.

Research Method and Design

To conduct this study, I used the qualitative method. Qualitative research methodology is multidisciplinary, involves the collection and use of a variety of empirical materials, and focuses on both the objective and subjective nature of behavior, events, and situations (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The two additional methods that researchers use to conduct a study are quantitative and mixed methods (Froehlich et al., 2020). I chose the multiple case study as the research design. The research design is crucial to the success of the study. Poucher et al. (2019) advised that researchers ensure they choose the best design to answer the research question, thereby strengthening the methodological coherence of the study.

Research Method

In this study, I sought to understand and explore the strategies that some small business leaders use to recruit workers with critical skills. The qualitative research methodology was appropriate, considering that I needed to understand the experiences of the study participants. A study is methodologically coherent when researchers select the most appropriate methods to achieve their intended research aims (Poucher et al., 2019). Researchers use qualitative research methods in the exploration of meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves, in their natural context, with the researcher collecting data in a naturalistic setting rather than experimentally (Laumann,

2020). Business leaders may demonstrate different behaviors, motivations, and strategies in their quest to recruit critical skills, hence a qualitative method was appropriate. I was best able to answer the research question when participants with different backgrounds, motivations, and challenges discussed their recruitment strategies.

I did not use quantitative or mixed method in this research. Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) posited that quantitative researchers seek answers by testing hypotheses using objective and impartial scientific methods. When conducting quantitative research, the researcher takes a deductive stance between theory and research. Researchers need quantitative data when predictors or dependent variables relate to outcomes or independent variables (Burrus et al., 2019). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because I was not testing hypotheses.

In mixed methods research, the researcher combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Gallant & Luthy, 2020). An advantage of mixed methods research is that the researcher may use the respective strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods and provide a more accurate conclusion (Dawadi et al., 2021). The mixed method was not ideal for this study because I did not combine elements of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Research Design

In a qualitative study, the researcher uses a design that includes the appropriate participants with the insights to answer the research question (Johnson et al., 2020). I used the multiple case study design in conducting this study. Researchers use the case

study design when there is a need to answer a contemporary how, why, or what question. In bounding my multiple case study, I selected three leaders of small businesses in Ontario, Canada, who have successfully recruited skilled employees. The case study was the optimal choice because I used semistructured interviews with follow-up member checking as my primary data collection method and triangulated the data using archival documents.

For this study, I also considered ethnography and phenomenology as potential research designs. When researchers use the ethnographic design, their aim is to understand the culture, processes, and patterns of a group of people, premised on trust and familiarity with the idea that participants will be more willing to share their experiences (Teti et al., 2023). A researcher who uses the phenomenological design studies the lived experiences of an individual or group (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Neubauer et al. (2019) advocated the use of phenomenology, noting that phenomenological research methods may broaden one's understanding of the complex phenomena involved in learning, behavior, and communication. However, my intention was to describe how small business leaders recruit skilled workers, not to study lived experiences, so the phenomenological design was not suitable.

I prioritized data saturation by ensuring that I continued to collect data until further data collection became redundant. A researcher achieves data saturation when there are no further insights originating from the data (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). I relied on data saturation, member checking, and methodological triangulation to ensure rigor and usefulness of this multiple case qualitative study.

Population and Sampling

The sample I selected for this multiple case study comprised three small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry who have successfully implemented strategies to recruit skilled workers in Ontario, Canada. These leaders have established and operated small automotive repairs businesses which are identified as such by the local Chamber of Commerce and the entrepreneurial centers in Ontario. When conducting qualitative studies, researchers should select a sample population that will yield rich data to understand the phenomenon they are studying (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Researchers should demonstrate rigor in their sampling approach, whether working directly with participants or analyzing secondary data (Ancker et al., 2021). My data collection technique was using semistructured interviews. I included member checking as part of my semistructured interview follow-up.

I used purposeful sampling in selecting three small business leaders for this study. Researchers conduct studies using samples because it is usually impossible to study the entire population, hence the sample should be representative of the population and adequate in size (Andrade, 2020). In qualitative research, sample sizes are effective based on the ability to reach data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Purposeful sampling is a qualitative technique in which researchers are better able to match the sample to the aims and objectives of the study, thus improving the rigor and trustworthiness of the data (S. Campbell et al., 2020). I used purposeful sampling in selecting the three business leaders who participated in my study.

The sample size of this study comprised three small business leaders in Ontario, Canada, who have successfully recruited workers with critical skills in their businesses. I chose a purposive sample size of three small business leaders because, based on their level of expertise, they were able to answer my central research question. The sample size of a qualitative study is an important determinant of the level of transparency of the research, given that the researcher has achieved saturation by capturing the diversity, depth, and nuances that one is studying (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Hence, the sample size is an important determinant of the quality of the research. Sample size affects the credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of the findings. I used a sample size of three leaders of small businesses who have successfully recruited talented employees within their businesses. A larger sample would have risked having repetitive data that would not have addressed the research question any more thoroughly.

Ethical Research

I conducted my study on the strategies leaders of small businesses use to recruit skilled workers. The qualitative researcher should design the research project to respect the rights and interests of participants (Drolet et al., 2023). I ensured confidentiality and privacy, for example, storing all software-related information on a password-protected computer and shredding paper-based information. Among my objectives was to ensure I received informed consent, thereby abiding by the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence. I included the informed consent form as per the requirement of the DBA study. I reviewed the informed consent form with business leaders and obtained their signatures before conducting my research. I abided by all legal requirements and the

tenets of *The Belmont Report*, which stipulates that the researcher advises participants of the voluntary nature of the study and ensure participants are unharmed (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Considering I conducted my research in Canadian jurisdiction, I also abided by Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement on ethical conduct for research involving humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). Researchers should always comply with all legal requirements to obtain consent for disclosing information about the participants.

Researchers should take individual responsibility to protect participants and follow all protocols before enrolling participants in any study (White, 2020). I ensured I did not violate any ethical principles or legal processes by gaining informed consent, remaining confidential and assuring information and data privacy. I have stored all related information for at least the next 5 years on a passcode-protected computer and designated all participants and businesses by a pseudonym and a letter code, respectively. I conducted this study under the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval number 08-18-23-0998007. I advised participants that their inputs were voluntary, and they would be able to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me with the information I provided them prior to the start of data collection. I did not offer any form of compensation to participants, so there were no possibility of undue influence. However, I intend to share my findings with participants after publication of the study.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, my role was the primary data collection instrument, whereby I interviewed and collected data from the participants. In exploring the strategies that leaders of small businesses use to acquire skilled workers, my data collection instruments were semistructured interviews with member checking and document analysis. Researchers use qualitative interviews to explore the unique experiences of the participants, thereby gaining insights into how participants experience and perceive different phenomena of interest (McGrath et al., 2019). Philipps and Mrowczynski (2021) posited that there is a range of interview formats from which the researcher can use, ranging from structured, unstructured, and semistructured. While I planned my interview questions, I needed to ask participants unplanned, follow-up questions, hence the need for the semistructured interview format.

Semistructured interview are a mix of structured and unstructured interviews. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) indicated that the semistructured interview format is a guided flexible interview protocol (see Appendix) between the researcher and participant, supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments. To explore the strategies leaders of small businesses in the automotive industry use to acquire skilled workers, I used semistructured interviews to collect open-ended data, paraphrase, and ask probing questions to obtain deep and rich data. Johnson et al. (2020) defined member checking as a practice to increase study credibility and confirmability that involves asking research subjects to verify the transcription interpretation of their interview. I conducted member checking follow-up interviews to confirm all interview data.

Data Collection Technique

In this qualitative multiple case study, I used semistructured interview questions with member checking to collect data, while being mindful of all ethical principles. Kostovicova and Knott (2022) noted the ethical challenges inherent in the interview process, and advised that researchers should consider the interview as collaboration rather than interactions of knowledge extraction. I used the semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix), which allowed for the use of probing questions not normally used in a structured format.

To understand the strategies small business leaders use to recruit skilled workers, I used face-to-face semistructured interviews for data collection. Researchers have indicated that there are advantages and disadvantages when using semistructured interview. Ruslin et al. (2022) posited that the semistructured interview has more potential than other types of interviews because researchers are able to acquire in-depth information and evidence from interviewees while seriously considering the focus of the study. Busetto et al. (2020) noted that semistructured interviews are interactive and allow for unexpected topics to emerge and to be taken up by the researcher. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) suggested that a potential drawback is that the interviewer must possess a high level of experience, considering that not all interviewees make great participants and may be reluctant to share information on sensitive topics, which may require the researcher to be able to expertly rephrase questions. As an interviewer, I chose the best location possible, established rapport, used the recording application on my Smartphone, and listened actively.

I used member checking to ensure that my interview data were credible. López-Zerón et al. (2021) described the member checking process as a strategy that researchers use to ensure the credibility of the findings, while also generating a valuable opportunity for research participants to actively participate in the analytic process. I used member checking by conducting follow-up interviews with the participants and discussed their responses to each interview question and thereby ensured they were in agreement with the responses that they initially provided. The use of member checking was beneficial as a validation technique, considering that the process allowed respondents to review my interpretation of their interview responses.

Data Organization Technique

One of the first steps in qualitative data analysis is to organize the data, a process in which the researcher gathers all the audio or video interview files and convert observational notes to electronic format (Lester et al., 2020). I recorded all interviews using the recording feature on my Smartphone. I then generated the transcripts from the audio files using an appropriate transcription software. I also used the traditional pen and paper method for interviews and document analysis notes.

I managed the data through careful collection, organization, and storage. Dhakal (2022) noted that qualitative data can produce meaningful findings when managed properly, however, the tools to analyze the information must provide options for multiple data formats. Dhakal suggested NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program that assist qualitative researchers to collect, organize, analyze, visualize, and report their findings. Jenkins et al. (2023) noted that CAQDAS

enables high quality data analysis when used effectively, but hinders good data analysis when used poorly. I used CAQDAS to assist me to provide transparent data, as well as an audit for the data analysis process on a whole.

I stored all data on a password protected computer and thumb drive and all paper-based data in a locked home cabinet. I am the only person with access to these devices, thereby maintaining the highest level of security. All software related data will be permanently deleted while all paper-based data will be shredded after 5 years.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small automotive repairs business leaders use to recruit workers with critical thinking skills. In exploring these strategies, I triangulated the data to ensure accuracy and validity. Triangulation is the use of multiple methodological resources or practices (Natow, 2020). Four types of triangulations that qualitative researchers may use to enhance the objectivity and validity are data, investigators, theories, and methodologies (R. Campbell et al., 2020). In data triangulation, researchers seek many different sources from which to obtain data. Qualitative researchers use methodological triangulation when they include 2 or more approaches, such as observation and interview, to explore the same phenomenon (Arias Valencia, 2022). To ensure a high level of validity in this case study, I used methodological triangulation which comprised sources of information from semistructured interview with member checking and document analysis.

After data collection, I focused on key themes and common perspectives in the data. Lester et al. (2020) noted that qualitative researchers apply thematic analysis by

sorting through the data to identify similar phrases, relationships, patterns, themes, and common sequences. I gathered all audio-recorded interview files, converted all paper-based documents to electronic format, named each file, as well as maintained a master data file with the date of collection. I focused on key themes that were more directly related to the conceptual framework of the study and relevant to the research question.

Data analysis is a significant component of the research process. Xu and Zammit (2020) noted 6 steps in analyzing data: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In each step, a researcher should convert the data into manageable parts as well as interpret the data for meanings and insights. Analyzing qualitative data quickly and rigorously can be challenging due to the almost limitless approaches that a qualitative researcher might leverage (Lester et al., 2020). Lobe et al. (2020) noted that in a time of unprecedented change and disruption due to COVID-19, where researchers need to observe social distance rules and conduct online interviews, the researcher's control over interaction decreases. I established ground rules to minimize distractions when conducting the interviews with participants. I used NVivo as a tool in transcribing the interviews, and then NVivo assisted in my identification the pertinent themes. A researcher may transfer raw data into NVivo software program which systematically identifies, sorts, and compares themes (Roberts et al., 2019). In transcribing the data, I identified the linkages between the findings and the RBV theory as the conceptual framework.

Reliability and Validity

I evaluated the quality of the study through reliability and validity. For qualitative research to be trustworthy and legitimate, the researcher should engage deeply with the data and ensure a robust connection to theory (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Rose and Johnson noted that trustworthiness, reliability, and validity are crucial components that maintain the place of qualitative research in academic discourse. Researchers should strive to maintain validity and reliability by ensuring that the quality of the research is factually and logically sound and that findings are plausible (Humphreys et al., 2021). The use of multiple sources of data, increases reliability and validity, which encompasses credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings. Reliability and validity were particularly vital to the quality of the research, owing to the need to minimize or eliminate the potential for researcher bias in the study.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the level of consistency of the results over time (Hayashi et al., 2021). Where there is consistency, there is dependability. Johnson et al. (2020) noted that dependability is the extent to which the data collection process is sound, while confirmability is the extent to which the researcher ensures that the data reflects participants' perspectives and not the interpretations of the researcher. To ensure dependability, I conducted my interviews based on the interview protocol (see Appendix). Member checking is a participant validation technique which researchers use to ensure the credibility of the findings while also generating the opportunity for respondents to participate in the data analysis process (López-Zerón et al., 2021). I also

ensured confirmability by explaining any researcher influence I might have had in conducting the study and conducted member checking as part of the follow-up interviews.

Validity

To maintain validity, qualitative researchers ensure techniques such data integrity, verbatim data transcriptions, careful observation notes, and accurate records of contacts and interviews (Hayashi et al., 2021). When a researcher uses appropriate procedures, he or she will enhance the quality of the research. The validity of qualitative research depends on the credibility of the findings; hence, I used the member checking process to enhance credibility. I contacted participants after transcribing the interviews and ensured that their responses were reflections of their experiences. Earnest (2020) observed that there is an increasing demand for qualitative research, however, what constitutes quality in qualitative research is debatable. Johnson et al. (2020) suggested that researchers may address the quality in qualitative research through credibility, transferability, and confirmability. I ensured that I met the quality criteria of the study by using an audit trail where I maintained complete notes on all procedures such as interviews, reflective thoughts, research materials, and data management.

I provided readers and future researchers with the evidence that the findings of the study may be applicable to other contexts or situations in which small business leaders recruit talented workers strategically. A key measure of trustworthiness in qualitative research is that researchers provide detailed contextual information such that readers and researchers can determine whether the results are applicable to other situations (Johnson

et al., 2020). To address transferability, I provided a rich, thick description of my experiences during data collection such as location and time of day. Borgstede and Scholz (2021) noted that while qualitative research may not be easily replicable, patterns and descriptions from one context may be applicable to another. Member checking, triangulation, and a robust description of the context of data collection will be useful in enhancing the level of transferability and trustworthiness of the data.

I enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by adhering to credibility and confirmability principles in terms of member checking, triangulation, accounting for personal bias, meticulous record keeping, and including rich, thick descriptions. Researchers enhance credibility and confirmability when they reduce or explain any personal influence on the results by using member checks and triangulation (Johnson et al., 2020). I enhanced the study's credibility by mitigating any biases and present the data from the participants' point of view. I ensured that I derived all findings and interpretations from the data. I enhanced confirmability through member checking by meeting with each participant and going through the results to check for accuracy. Johnson et al. (2020) noted that a researcher can enhance confirmability by asking participants to verify the completeness and accuracy of interview transcriptions thereby ensuring there is a truthful intent of the participant's contribution. I enhanced confirmability with the use of an audit trail in which I outlined the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

I ensured data saturation in the research process. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) highlighted the importance of data saturation in qualitative research, noting that

saturation is an important indicator that the sample size is adequate, and that the researcher has captured the diversity and depth of the phenomenon under study. I selected three business leaders as participants in the interview process, however, if I were unable to achieve data saturation after three interviews, I would have continued conducting interviews until no new themes were emerging from the data.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I introduced aspects of the study such as the role of the researcher, participant criteria, the research method and design, population and sampling, and data collection, organization, and analysis. I used the qualitative case study to explore the strategies leaders of small automotive repairs businesses use to recruit talented employees. I used semistructured interviews to gather the data related to my research question. I also explored reliability and validity as crucial components of the study, noting the need for trustworthiness and legitimacy through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. I used semistructured interviews to collect data. In Section 3, I analyze the data collected through the interviews and discuss the implications for businesses. I also outline the recommendations for future research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit workers with critical skills. Small businesses have contributed significantly to the growth of the Canadian economy, however, more than a third have faced obstacles in recruiting and retaining skilled employees (Delgado et al., 2023). I conducted the study by interviewing three small business leaders in the automotive repairs sector in Ontario, Canada. I identified five key themes in the data collected. In this section, I discuss the findings, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusion.

In conducting the study, I identified five themes reflecting how small business leaders strategically recruit skilled employees. These themes were (a) compensating individual employees; (b) enhanced networking through social and printed media; (c) an emphasis on training, development, and licensing; (d) embracing new developments in the automotive sector; and (e) the word-of-mouth strategy. All three participants have been in the automotive repairs business in different capacities for a combined total of over 60 years, and all agreed that recruiting and retaining skilled workers in the automotive repairs industry is challenging due to the nature of the business in general and the jobs in particular. Given the prevailing labor market situation, all participants noted the need for aggressive recruitment strategies through word of mouth, networking,

training through internships and licensing, competitive pay, and the use of social media and other forms of internal and external job postings.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question was: What strategies do some small business leaders in the automotive repairs business industry used to recruit workers with critical skills? I obtained IRB approval and conducted semistructured interviews with three small business leaders, with a combined total of over 66 years' experience in the automotive repairs industry in Ontario, Canada, and who have successfully recruited skilled workers in their businesses. In the ensuing discussions, I have designated each participant business leader as BL1, BL2, and BL3 to ensure anonymity. Before asking any questions on the strategies the participants used to recruit and retain skilled workers, I collected preliminary information that gave an idea of their number of years in the business and their successes.

Table 1

Preliminary Information on Participants

Participant	No. of years in business	Ownership
BL1	17	Mechanic shop, auto body workshop
BL2	34	Mechanic shop, auto body workshop, towing company, rental car business
BL3	15	Mechanic shop, auto body workshop, towing company

Based on the interview data, I identified five themes that I was able link directly to the RBV theory, the conceptual framework used in the study. Antcliff et al. (2021) noted the interconnectedness between RBV theory and HRM practices in small

businesses, suggesting that people are key resources that enable these entities to derive competitive advantage from a talented pool of employees. I was able to triangulate the data using the findings from the interviews and business documents. I outline the five themes in the following subsections.

Theme 1: Compensating Individual Employees

All three participants identified compensating talented employees as the most significant strategy in their recruitment and retention efforts. Salimi and Della Torre (2022) alluded to the importance of competitive pay and benefits in small businesses, noting that these entities are more labor-intensive than larger firms, coupled with a need for more employee flexibility, and the fact that talented employees who possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to complete their tasks prefer individualized incentives. Participant BL1 noted that “Providing good wages are similar to treating employees with dignity and respect, you have to bump up wages where necessary, because encouragement sweetens labor.” Participant BL2 suggested, “We give all the benefits, you know, proper salary and medical, whatever it takes to keep your people.” Participant BL3 indicated that “Employees have to be comfortable with their work schedules and pay.” The RBV theory supports compensating talented workers, considering that these workers often possess skills that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and nonsubstitutable, all necessary for a firm to develop and achieve competitive advantage. Participants supported the need for compensation and benefits, noting that there was a need to constantly motivate these employees.

Table 2*Theme 1: Compensating Individual Employees*

Participant	Participants' comments
BL1	Providing good wages are similar to treating employees with dignity and respect, you have to bump up wages where necessary, because encouragement sweetens labor.
BL2	We give all the benefits, you know, proper salary and medical, whatever it takes to keep your people.
BL3	Employees have to be comfortable with their work schedules and pay.

Theme 2: Enhanced Networking Through Social and Printed Media

Networking using social and printed media, the job site Indeed.com, as well as radio and the local newspaper was a key strategy that participants used to strategically recruit and retain skilled workers within the automotive repairs industry. Social media, including platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn, have greatly expanded employers' capacity to network and gather information, and the frequent use of these platforms are positively related to interview invitations (Mowbray & Hall, 2021). Participant BL1 noted that "We do a lot of advertising, a lot of promotions, with social media, in addition to job fairs where we get together with internship students."

Participant BL2 indicated that "We place our job ads on Indeed.com, we get a lot of interest." Participant BL3 suggested that he has a network of "people who find people who will work for you."

Table 3*Theme 2: Enhanced Networking Through Social and Printed Media*

Participant	Participants' comments
BL1	We do a lot of advertising, a lot of promotions, with social media, in addition to job fairs where we get together with internship students.
BL2	We place our job ads on Indeed.com, we get a lot of interest.
BL2	We have a network of people who find people who will work for you.

Theme 3: An Emphasis on Training, Development, and Licensing

All participants emphasized the importance of training and development as a key recruitment and retention strategy in their businesses. There is a nexus between training and development and the overall competitiveness of small businesses. Jalil et al. (2021) indicated that there is a need for small businesses to strengthen their human resource practices and training programs to remain viable in an increasingly technological world. There is an alignment between the findings on training and development and the conceptual framework in the study, considering that the RBV theory emphasizes the need for organizational leaders to leverage human resource endowments through learning and development. Temouri et al. (2022) noted that, in the case of small businesses, human capital resources may facilitate learning and innovation, which ultimately leads to product development. Based on the findings in the study, participant BL1 indicated that “We register with the skilled workers program overseas.” Hence, the business benefitted from new immigrants coming to Canada under the country’s federal skilled worker program.

According to BL2, “A big challenge is that mechanics, body men, and painters are hard to get because [the job] calls for working in grease and oil and stuff, but we train the people [that we employ].” Participant BL3 also emphasized the need for training and development in the sector, stating “We look for people who are willing to learn, [considering] the new technologies that are evolving daily, it’s a learning process and we try to upgrade as we learn the craft of the industry.” These views on training and development are well supported in the literature, with the realization that the advancement in technology has triggered immense changes in all industries, especially the automotive sector.

Training and development are crucial to small business growth, though these entities are often lacking in the resources available to larger firms. Mikołajczyk (2022) noted that need for a new approach in training and development, where employees now need to take responsibility in their skills enhancement endeavors to adapt to current demands and meet future opportunities. Based on the findings, however, all three business leaders were instrumental in the learning and development processes in their businesses, recognizing human capital as a significant enabler in business growth. There was a general consensus that these small automotive repairs businesses should function as learning organizations. Participant BL2 noted that he “Started working as a mechanic in 1989, but now the owner of three dealerships, employing over 150 workers, through giving these workers the opportunity to learn. Now I own a body shop, mechanic shop, towing company, and a rental car business.”

Table 4*Theme 3: An Emphasis on Training, Development, and Licensing*

Participant	Participants' comments
BL1	We register with the skilled workers program overseas.
BL2	A big challenge is that mechanics, body men, and painters are hard to get because [the job] calls for working in grease and oil and stuff, but we train the people [that we employ].
BL3	We look for people who are willing to learn, [considering] the new technologies that are evolving daily, it's a learning process and we try to upgrade as we learn the craft of the industry.

Theme 4: Embracing New Developments in the Automotive Sector

All participants agreed on the need to embrace the new developments and technological changes that have become pervasive in the automobile sector. Participant BL1 noted, "The vehicles are changing so fast nowadays, technologies are [constantly] upgraded, this month we have a scanner that will meet the criteria, by next month the scanner is a different one and it doesn't recognize the car anymore." Participant BL3 indicated that "There is a need to embrace the new technologies right now, different from what we had back in the day, we need to learn about them, go back to school [if necessary]."

Consistent with RBV theory, small business leaders who possess intangible resources such as flexibility and the ability to adapt and embrace changes are better able to sustain competitive advantage. These businesses possess an intangible resource that is unique and difficult to imitate by competitors. Hafiz et al. (2022), in discussing the theories of small business growth, noted that intangible resources are able to generate

competitive advantage, given the strategic value and the fact that these resources are rare and imperfectly inimitable. As a result, when small entities such as those in the automotive repairs business embrace the ongoing changes within the sector, leaders are better able to achieve growth and profitability.

Table 5

Theme 4: Embracing New Developments in the Automotive Sector

Participant	Participant's comments
BL1	The vehicles are changing so fast nowadays, technologies are [constantly] upgraded, this month we have a scanner that will meet the criteria, by next month the scanner is a different one and it doesn't recognize the car anymore.
BL3	There is a need to embrace the new technologies right now, different from what we had back in the day, we need to learn about them, go back to school [if necessary].

Theme 5: The Word-of-Mouth Strategy

A significant finding in conducting the study is that participants, in an age of electronic and instantaneous communication, recruited in some cases by using word of mouth with their contacts, references, and potential employees in their recruitment efforts. The general consensus among the participants was that talent referrals were more trustworthy when there was verbal communication between the parties involved.

Participant BL1 noted that,

The strategy we also use to recruit persons who are tech savvy is by word of mouth, because, even on social media when you advertise, a lot of people come in and say they are technology savvy and they are not.

Participant BL2 suggested that “Once we hire people, we constantly converse with them for one or two weeks to get a better idea of their level of experience.” Participant BL3 indicated, “We use word of mouth. When somebody says to me XYZ is a good body man, we say send him over [to my business] and we interview him.”

There are advantages and disadvantages inherent in recruitment using primarily word of mouth. Word of mouth may be an efficient communication channel that may benefit the organization in other ways. Wicaksono et al. (2021) noted that word of mouth is an important source of information, even in an era of digital communication, with more trust inherent in the process. When there is a greater level of trust among employees, there is a greater level of job satisfaction and fewer instances of turnover. This is crucial for small business effectiveness because having to train a new employees may result in loss of output. However, there are disadvantages associated with word of mouth as a communication source. Milaković et al. (2020) suggested that organizational leaders may need to consider factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and education levels when using word of mouth communication. As a result, business leaders may need to reconsider strategies such as word of mouth in recruitment, which may jeopardize the tangible and intangible resources as outlined in the RBV theory and ultimately affect the competitive position of the business.

Table 6*Theme 5: The Word-of-Mouth Strategy*

Participant	Participant's comments
BL1	The strategy we also use to recruit persons who are tech savvy is by word of mouth, because, even on social media when you advertise, a lot of people come in and say they are technology savvy and they are not.
BL2	Once we hire people, we constantly converse with them for one or two weeks to get a better idea of their level of experience.
BL3	We use word of mouth. When somebody says to me XYZ is a good body man, we say send him over [to my business] and we interview him.

Archival Documents

I obtained additional data through an examination of archival documents and physical artifacts. To triangulate the data, qualitative researchers may conduct document analysis that includes reviewing reports, guidelines, and policy documents (Busetto et al., 2020). At each workplace, participants possessed standard human resource policy documents focusing on attendance, compensation, discipline, and safety. All participants emphasized the use of the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) as a policy to enhance a safe working environment. Participants BL2 and BL3 also had old and new vehicles and equipment on site that were used solely for hands-on training, which indicated that they placed emphasis on training and development in their businesses. There were also other workplace-specific documents detailing compensation, which cannot be disclosed based on Canadian privacy laws.

Applications to Professional Practice

Business leaders, primarily in the automotive repairs industry, may find the results from this study useful as they strive to strategically recruit talented workers. I identified five key themes in the study: (a) compensating individual employees; (b) enhanced networking through social and printed media; (c) an emphasis on training, development, and licensing; (d) embracing new developments in the automotive sector; and (e) the word-of-mouth strategy. Owner-managers of small businesses may wish to use these five success factors in their skilled worker recruitment and retention efforts. Small business owner-managers do not typically have the level of resources and expertise available to larger firms; as a result, there is a need for lean business practices to remain competitive. Tej et al. (2021) argued that many organizations struggle due to the high turnover rates of skilled workers; hence, there is a need to implement HRM practices that will retain and develop talent. Business leaders may also be guided by the tenets of the RBV theory in their skills recruitment process, by recognizing the significance of tangible and intangible resources that are useful in ensuring competitive advantage and organizational growth over time.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this study may be beneficial to small business owner-managers who, oftentimes, have no alternative but to conduct the HRM functions of these entities owing to resource constraints. When small business leaders successfully recruit talented workers to their organizations, they strengthen the human resource capacity and there are ripple effects in government, educational institutions, business organizations, as well as

society on a whole. Erdin and Ozkaya (2020) noted that small businesses are catalysts to economic growth due to their high levels of flexibility, adaptability, and their substantial contributions to income, employment, productivity, and training. There are also implications for the family, the basic social unit of a society. As noted in the study, business leaders may compensate talented workers on an individual basis, which usually results in higher incomes and earnings. Higher incomes usually translate into higher standards of living for these individuals and their families.

Recommendations for Action

The findings from the study may be useful to small business leaders who need to adopt specific strategies to recruit skilled workers. The findings from the study may be useful to small business leaders who need to adopt specific strategies to recruit skilled workers. In conducting the study, I identified five major themes to which small business owner-managers should pay close attention. Compensation decisions, though crucial to the cost of doing business, are significant in the hiring and retention process. There is a need to build strong networking skills, given that the demand for skilled labor has remained high. Additionally, training and development are significant drivers in the skills retention process, and successful business leaders have implemented ways to ensure a learning environment. The findings also noted the need for business leaders to embrace emerging technologies in the small business automotive repairs sector, while still maintaining the human touch that includes hiring using word of mouth in some situations.

I would recommend, firstly, that small business leaders revisit the compensation and benefits component of their recruitment and retention strategy. Small businesses have

low compensation budgets when compared to their larger counterparts, hence the need for added efficiency. Business leaders may need to adopt a less formal approach in compensating skilled workers. A recommendation is that small business owner-managers pay these employees on an individual basis, possibly using a hybrid of competency- and performance-based pay. This does not imply mixing multiple compensation schemes. Salimi and Della Torre (2022) suggested that multiple compensation schemes may result in reduced innovation because employees may become unsure of business priorities. However, the findings reveal the need for robust and efficient compensation practices, even for small businesses.

Secondly, I would recommend owner-managers of small businesses build strong networks, which are especially useful when there is a need to recruit and retain highly skilled employees. These networks may include contact groups, seminars, associations, workshops, and online using social media. Davis et al. (2020), in exploring the use of social network sites for career purposes, observed that the presence of social media has resulted in expanded networking opportunities and higher career benefits. When business leaders develop effective networking skills, they will be in a better position to attract, recruit, and retain skilled employees.

A third recommendation would be to cultivate a culture of organizational learning and development, even after hiring managers have recruited the most skilled employee. A key theme in the findings was that successful small business owner-managers emphasized training, development, and licensing in their quest for talented human capital in their organizations. Small business owner-managers who promote training and

development are more likely to reap the benefits of effectiveness, efficiency, and personal and professional growth through shared knowledge (Alonazi, 2021). Small businesses will be more likely to succeed when owner-managers use the available intellectual capital in promoting efficiency and innovativeness.

Recommendations for Further Research

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the strategies some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit skilled workers. Small business leaders need to recognize that specialized skills are intangible resources that set businesses apart, often enabling competitiveness and sustainability. Against this backdrop, I considered the RBV theory the most relevant framework through which to understand specialized resources in an organization. Penrose (1959) conceptualized the RBV theory, noting in her seminal work that the firm is a collection of productive resources in which administrators decide how to identify, develop, and utilize over time. Future researchers may need to build on this study by considering other frameworks such as human capital and social exchange theories.

The population for this study comprised a relatively small sample size of 3 owner-managers of small businesses in a specific geographic area in the province of Ontario, Canada. As a result, the results of the study may not be readily generalizable to other regions. Additionally, the focus was on the automotive repairs industry. Future researchers may build on this study using larger sample sizes, and probably consider small businesses in other industries. Future researchers may also wish to investigate recruitment in small businesses by using quantitative methodology.

Reflections

The overarching research question in this study was: What strategies do some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit workers with critical skills? I embarked on this doctoral journey shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, and having attended all my residencies in my first year, I thought I had the all requisite KSAs to complete the program in a fairly short time. However, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant changes to daily life, and as a family man, employee, and volunteer, I had to revisit my priorities. Fortunately, I felt supported by my family, my Chair, as well as the Walden University community in general. I celebrated small successes along the way: getting my prospectus and proposal approved, oral defense of my proposal, IRB approval, and three diligent, patient, and helpful small business owner-managers in Ontario who made the time to participate in the study.

I learnt much along the journey. In conducting the semistructured interviews, I became aware of the thought processes of the participants, what drives the entrepreneurial spirit, and the need for these leaders to strategize daily to ensure business continuity. I did not have any preconceived ideas or biases while conducting the interviews, but I found it surprising that one of the themes, word of mouth as a communication channel, was a big part of recruitment strategies. Based on the findings from the study, I gained a better understanding of recruiting for skilled persons to fill the various roles, crucial for the success of these businesses.

Conclusion

Small businesses are crucial to most economies, but they face considerable challenges. In the province of Ontario, Canada, small businesses account for more than 90% of jobs in the private sector but face critical labor shortages and skill gaps that threaten their competitiveness (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2020, p. 8). I conducted this study to explore the strategies some small business leaders in the automotive repairs industry use to recruit workers with critical skills. I collected data through semistructured interviews with three small business owner-managers as well as from business manuals and websites. In analyzing the data, I identified five themes: (a) compensating individual employees, (b) enhanced networking through social and printed media, (c) an emphasis on training, development, and licensing, (d) embracing new developments in the automotive sector, and (e) the word-of-mouth strategy. I analyzed these themes primarily through the lens of the RBV theory as the conceptual framework, but drew comparisons to other closely-aligned theories such as human capital and social exchange.

The findings of the study may be useful to small business leaders, training institutions, local communities, and government. Surya et al. (2021) suggested that government support and strengthened human resource capacity have a positive effect on small business development. Additionally, the exhaustive professional and academic review of the literature may also contribute to the body of knowledge on HRM practices in small organizations. Future researchers may wish to build on this study by exploring small businesses in a different industry and within a larger geographical area.

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Appendix: Interview Questions and Interview Protocol

1. What internal strategies have you used to recruit workers with critical thinking skills such as evaluating information and solving problems?
2. What external strategies have you used to recruit workers with critical thinking skills such as evaluating information and solving problems?
3. What internal strategies have you used to recruit workers with digital competence such as the ability to use available technologies in carrying out their duties?
4. What external strategies have you used to recruit workers with digital competence such as the ability to use available technologies in carrying out their duties?
5. What have you found were the key barriers to your recruitment strategies?
6. Once hired, what strategies do you use to retain skilled workers?
7. What additional information would you like to share on your recruitment strategies for workers with critical skills?

Interview Protocol

Location: _____

Participant: _____

Date and Time: _____

Research Question: What are the strategies small business leaders use to recruit workers with critical skills such as critical thinking and digital competency?