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# Strategies for Integrating Open Innovation Practices for Small Businesses

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Shannon Stewart

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Strategies for Integrating Open Innovation Practices for Small Businesses

by

Shannon Stewart

MS, Bethel University, 2014

BS, Bethel University, 2012

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2024

## Abstract

Some small business owners lack implementation strategies for open innovation. Small business owners who can successfully implement open strategies can increase the opportunity for success. Grounded in the ten types of innovation theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners use to successfully implement open innovation. The participants comprised three small business owners from West Tennessee who successfully used strategies for open innovation. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The three emerging themes were strategic and continuous development, risk management, and sustaining a culture of innovation. A key recommendation is for small business owners to provide a positive work environment that embraces open innovation to create a competitive advantage in the marketplace which may lead to long-term sustainability. The implications for positive social change include the potential for sustainability of small, rural business owners, which would support local communities through job creation, job sustainability, and economic development.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my best friend, my loving wife, and my soul's true counterpart, Elizabeth. Thank you for the many gifts you have given me, the love, the tenderness, the generosity, and your honesty. I could never have come this far without you. I also dedicate this accomplishment to my mother-in-law, Charity, and my father-in-law, Dwayne for allowing me to be a part of your wonderful family. Finally, this dedication is for my past, current, and future students and those who endeavor "to be the change you wish to see in the world."

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iv
Section 1: Foundation of the Study.....	1
Background of the Problem .....	1
Problem and Purpose .....	1
Nature of the Study .....	2
Research Question .....	3
Interview Questions .....	3
Conceptual Framework.....	4
Operational Definitions.....	5
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations.....	5
Assumptions.....	5
Limitations .....	6
Delimitations.....	6
Significance of the Study .....	6
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	7
Ten Types of Innovation Framework .....	8
Ten Types of Innovation Implementation.....	14
Economic Impact on Small Businesses .....	17
Failures of Small Businesses .....	19
Sustainability of Small Businesses .....	25
Sustainability Strategies of Small Businesses.....	26



Innovation in Small Businesses Sustainability .....	33
Transition .....	35
Section 2: The Project.....	37
Purpose Statement.....	37
Role of the Researcher .....	37
Participants.....	40
Research Method and Design .....	41
Research Method .....	41
Research Design.....	42
Population and Sampling .....	43
Ethical Research.....	45
Data Collection Instruments .....	46
Data Collection Technique .....	48
Data Organization Technique .....	49
Data Analysis .....	50
Reliability and Validity.....	52
Reliability.....	52
Validity .....	54
Transition and Summary.....	56
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change .....	57
Presentation of the Findings.....	57
Theme 1: Strategic and Continuous Development .....	57

Theme 2: Risk Management .....	61
Theme 3: Culture of Innovation Sustainability.....	63
Applications to Professional Practice .....	66
Implications for Social Change.....	66
Recommendations for Action .....	67
Recommendations for Further Research.....	67
Reflections .....	68
Conclusion .....	68
References.....	70
Appendix A: Interview Protocol.....	107
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	108

## List of Tables

Table 1. Participants' Responses Related to Strategic and Continuous Development.....	58
Table 2. Participants' Responses Related to Risk Management.....	61
Table 3. Participants' Responses Related to Innovation Culture.....	64

## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

In the United States, small businesses represent the largest segment of the workforce but many fail within the first 5 years of operation (Cepec & Grajzl, 2020). The rate of small business failure can be detrimental to the national, state, and local economies (Ertel, 2019). Approximately 51% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years, creating the need for small business owners to develop successful sustainable strategies (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2020). These high failure rates can be contributed to poorly developed sustainable strategies (Madureira & Torre, 2022). In this qualitative multiple-case study, I explored strategies needed to successfully implement open innovation to achieve sustainability.

### **Background of the Problem**

Small business owners employ most employees within the labor force of the United States (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA] Office of Advocacy, 2023). Small business owners need to develop sustainability strategies to help strengthen the U.S. economy and preserve its standing within the global economies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Small business owners located in the United States fail to successfully develop and implement sustainable strategies 50% of the time (Madureira & Torre, 2022). Small business owners who wish to achieve long-term sustainability should develop the necessary skills to develop successful strategies.

### **Problem and Purpose**

Small business owners can anticipate a 51% fail rate within the first 5 years of operation (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2020). Organizations

that do not implement innovation because of political and cultural reasons have a 50% fail rate (Ertel, 2019); however, with the integration of open innovation, businesses may increase their opportunity for success (McCausland, 2020). The general business problem is that some small business owners fail to implement innovation to adapt to changes and needs in their local economy. The specific business problem is that some small business owners often lack the necessary strategies to successfully implement open innovation.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners use to successfully implement open innovation. The target population consisted of owners of small businesses with fewer than 20 employees in rural Tennessee. The implication for positive social change includes the potential for increased sustainability of small businesses by potentially increasing revenue, which may create employment opportunities and economic development in the surrounding community.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three methodologies of research are quantitative, mixed method, and qualitative (Madureira & Torre, 2022). Researchers use the quantitative methodology to evaluate a phenomenon through statistical testing of numerical data (Madureira & Torre, 2022). The quantitative method was not appropriate because I did not conduct statistical data analyses between small business strategies and open innovation. Researchers use mixed methodology to combine qualitative research and quantitative research into a single study (Madureira & Torre, 2022). The mixed method was not appropriate because I did not gather quantitative variables for statistical analyses. Researchers use qualitative methodology to explore a phenomenon through participant collaboration (Ayaya &

Pretorius, 2021). The qualitative method was appropriate because I explored innovation implementation strategies for small business owners. I conducted a case study by gathering data from interviews with small business owners.

The qualitative research designs include phenomenological, ethnographic, grounded theory, and case studies (Widner et al., 2022). A phenomenological researcher explores a phenomenon from the participant's perspective using philosophical and methodological approaches (Makri & Neely, 2021). The phenomenological design was not appropriate because I explored innovation implementation strategies for small business owners. An ethnographic researcher explores a phenomenon from a cultural perspective (Avle et al., 2019). The ethnographic design was not appropriate because I did not explore small business culture. A grounded theory researcher explores a phenomenon without a specified research question (Bundtzen & Hinrichs, 2021). I presented a specific research question and did not use a grounded theory design. Finally, a case study researcher explores a specific and complex phenomenon (Widner et al., 2022). The case study design was appropriate because I explored innovation implementation strategies for small business owners.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do small business owners use to implement open innovation?

### **Interview Questions**

1. How would you define the term *open innovation*?
2. What skills do you think are necessary to implement open innovation strategies into your current business model?

3. What specific strategies would you use to implement open innovation into your current business model?
4. What adjustments to the strategies would you make if the open innovation implementation was not successful?
5. How could open innovation potentially create a competitive market advantage for businesses that have developed successful implementation strategies?
6. How could open innovation potentially create long-term sustainability for small businesses?
7. Is there anything about open innovation that we have not already discussed that you would like to include?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I explored the ten types of innovation theory (TTIT) to identify potentially successful strategies that small business owners who wish to achieve long-term sustainability could use to implement innovations. In 2013, Keeley et al. introduced TTIT to expand on the understanding of innovation development and implementation. Many small business owners believe investments in research and development (R&D) are the only ways to create innovation and do not pursue innovation because of limited resources (Zhang, 2022). Small business owners often do not understand the primary driver for innovations in governmental regulations that may cause disruptions in the supply chain which cannot be resolved only through R&D (Clausen et al., 2022). TTIT is a methodology that provides a broader view of innovation development and implementation (Ren, 2022). TTIT can be used to increase the small business owner's

ability to transform their business by increasing their competitiveness, which is a leading contributor to achieving long-term sustainability (Tyapukhin, 2022). I used this conceptual framework to facilitate an understanding of innovation types, development, and implementation that potentially could impact small business' long-term sustainability.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Competitive advantage:* Competitive advantage is the result of reducing operating costs through effective strategy development that increases sustainability and profits (Luamba et al., 2021).

*Design thinking:* Design thinking is the process a small business generates solutions for existing and future challenges by applying innovation (Liedtka, 2018).

*Innovation:* Innovation is the essential driver for the development and productivity of any economic activity (Królak et al., 2022).

*Sustainability:* Sustainability is the operation of a small business beyond 5 years due to the owner's ability to develop effective growth strategies (Preghenella & Battistella, 2021).

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

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are constructs that are accepted as accuracies without the validity of the proof that can be influenced by societal, historical, political, or cultural factors (Wolgemuth et al., 2022). The primary assumption of this study was that each participant had a thorough understanding of open innovation. An additional assumption of this study



was that each participant provided answers to the interview questions that are reliable, trustworthy, and honest.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are boundaries of the research design that may compromise the validity of the findings (Greener, 2018). The study's primary limitation was the education level of the participants due to the lack of understanding of strategic development. The second limitation of this study was the availability of the participants but could be resolved by the usage of various online collaboration software packages, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom meetings. The final limitation of this study was the sample size and location of the participants.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are restrictions selected by researchers to define the range of the study within the context of conceptual frameworks (Vilkaité-Vaitoné & Sologubas, 2019). Delimitations are boundaries or restrictions that limit the scope of the research (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). This research study contained two delimitations. The first delimitation of this study was identifying participants with knowledge about successful strategies to achieve long-term sustainability by implementing open innovation. The second delimitation of this study was the size of businesses that were selected to participate in the study. I restricted the scope of the study to a selection of small business owners in Tennessee with fewer than 10 employees.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study has potential value to small business owners because researchers have

identified strategies that have proven successful when implementing innovation. Identifying successful innovation implementation strategies could enhance the understanding that small business owners have on identifying and incorporating the necessary skills to implement innovation strategies successfully. Innovation implementation strategies could potentially increase profits and extend the lifespan of their business beyond the expected 5 years (Barham et al., 2020) and assist in boosting small businesses' success, profit, and performance (Ollila & Yström, 2020). Small business owners who develop strategies that implement innovation could achieve increased profits or long-term sustainability.

The success of small businesses can contribute to social change by improving the local economy for the benefit of the whole community (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). Small business owners can create jobs, generate tax revenue, and decrease unemployment. The tax revenue that small businesses generate could fund various social programs that positively impact their recipients.

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

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners use to implement forms of open innovation successfully. Small business owners need to identify the potential impact of open innovation on increasing sustainability. To retrieve peer-reviewed and seminal articles, I used the Walden University library database, Walden University Thoreau search engine, Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, and other online websites as primary sources for research. I used Ulrich's Periodicals

Directory to determine if my journal references are peer-reviewed sources. To locate relevant research materials, I used the following keywords and phrases: *innovation theory, open innovation, innovativeness, innovation management, strategic management, innovation strategies, innovation barriers, small business sustainability, small business failure, competitive advantage, vertical innovative integration, and crowdsourcing*. Sixty-four percent of the 180 proposal sources have publication dates ranging from 2019 to 2023.

I begin my literature review by examining the TTIT and the numerous possible ways to implement open innovation in small businesses. The economic impact and resulting importance of small businesses in the local and national economy will follow, emphasizing the role filled in creating employment opportunities and quality of life. I address the failure, success rates, and challenges of small businesses and conclude the literature review with a discussion of open innovation implementations to sustain and create a customer base.

### **Ten Types of Innovation Framework**

The ten types of innovation was used to explore the strategies small business owners can use to implement innovation because it integrates internal and external ideas and paths to advance the development of small business innovation owners can use as a strategic planning tool (Keeley et al., 2013). I explored research on operational strategies small business owners use to implement innovations within this framework. Small business owners can use this strategic planning tool to learn how innovations align with their strategic goals (Barham et al., 2020). Small business owners could create new

innovations, analyze existing innovations, or examine competitors' innovations by utilizing these frameworks (Orlova, 2020). The ten types of innovation frameworks could be helpful when small business owners want to improve their business's performance by implementing multiple types of innovation. Innovations could assist small business owners in utilizing external ideologies and research that reduce costs, time, and risks to develop new products or services (Barham, et al., 2020). Innovations could help small business owners create a highly productive work environment that attracts a highly skilled workforce (Yuniarty et al., 2021). The development and implementation of innovation are time-consuming and small business owners should exert patience when evaluating success. Small business owners who possess a fundamental knowledge of this framework could develop an understanding of why innovations succeed or fail (Barham et al., 2020). Small business owners who want to achieve a competitive advantage resulting in long-term sustainability can utilize this framework to understand how to implement innovations to achieve this goal.

Researchers who examine the connectivity between innovations and business performance could use this framework to formulate conclusions regardless of the business size. Researchers who desire to understand the interrelationship of innovations and small business strategies could divide innovations into three of the framework's three primary categories: configuration, offering, and experience (Keeley et al., 2013). The configuration category focuses on the business system as a whole and has four subcategories: profit model, network, structure, and process. The offering category focuses on the core products or services and has two subcategories: product performance

and product system. The experience category focuses on the customer base and has four subcategories: service, channel, brand, and customer engagement. The three primary types are identified with internal aspects of innovation initiatives, while the 10 subcategories identify with external elements of innovation initiatives.

### ***Configuration***

The primary focus of the configuration category is the internal business system. The configuration category is divided into four subcategories: profit model, network, structure, and process (Orlova, 2020). The profit model framework allows small business owners to explore new ideas for converting innovations into cash by researching what to offer, how to price, or how to collect revenues (Leon et al., 2020). The primary components are premium prices, auctions, metered usage, and subscription tactics (Barrett et al., 2021). This framework can improve performance by identifying internal resource limitations (Ferrerias-Méndez et al., 2021). For example, animosity and patriotism are two consumer behaviors that result in changing current products or services (Areiza-Padilla et al., 2021). This framework must align with strategic planning more than other innovation frameworks (Ferreira et al. 2020). Since each small business is unique, this framework has no universal application. Small business owners often fail to successfully implement this framework due to the high level of risk and uncertainty (Latifi et al., 2021). Slow market growth may be encountered when small business owners introduce new products or services to customers.

Using the network framework allows small business owners to capitalize on their strengths by forming collaborations between a business, vendors, suppliers, and

competitors (Leon et al., 2020). The partnerships could use open innovation, secondary markets, and franchises to reduce supply chain costs (Barrett et al., 2021). This framework reduces risks and expenses by utilizing the capabilities and assets of others (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). The small business's core values should be consistent with potential partners using this framework.

Using the structure framework allows business owners to organize tangible and intangible assets to create value (Leon et al., 2020). The creation and standardization of incentive systems and training protocols assist business owners with business training (Barrett et al., 2021). Fixed expenses, such as human resources, research and development, and information technology, are improved by this framework (Mahmud et al., 2021). Using the structure framework assists business owners in creating a workplace environment that is difficult to replicate for its competitors.

Using the process framework could allow small business owners to identify the activities that produce primary offerings by utilizing their capabilities, functions, adaptability, and market position (Leon et al., 2020). Lean production, process standardization, and predictive analytics are helpful tools to improve vertical integration (Barrett et al., 2021). Small business owners could create patents and proprietary innovations by effectively implementing this framework (Maitlo et al., 2021). A competitive advantage could occur when the competition cannot easily replicate a business's proprietary features or design ideas.

### ***Offering***

The primary focus of the offering category is the business's core products or

services. The offering category contains the product performance and system subcategories (Orlova, 2020). Small business owners may justify the implementation of innovations to their various stakeholders by sharing market analyses and empirical research data. Kivimaa et al. (2021) developed a questionnaire to identify why innovations occur, the changes in the market and industry, consumer buying patterns, and nontechnological aspects of innovations.

The product performance framework could allow small business owners to examine the value created when a business introduces new products or updates on existing products (Leon et al., 2020). Simplification, sustainability, and customization of their products or services reduce operating expenses offering customers a broader range of products (Barrett et al., 2021). Small business owners may experience long-term competitive advantages by satisfying customer demand by effectively implementing this framework (Muharam et al., 2020). Competitors could use this framework to imitate or duplicate other businesses' products or services.

Using the product system framework could assist small business owners to create scalable systems of individual products or services that satisfy customers while defending against competitors (Leon et al., 2020). Product bundling, product and service combinations, and complimentary offerings comprise this framework (Barrett et al., 2021). Distinct offerings are offered by fostering relationships through interoperability, modularity, and integration (Rusu & Frangieh, 2021). Small business owners often utilize this framework because it is the most used to connect businesses to customers.

### *Experience*

The primary focus of the experience category is the customer base's perception of the business. The service, channel, brand, and customer engagement subcategories are the primary components of this framework (Orlova, 2020). Small business owners can quickly implement innovations by understanding the demands of their customers (Krstić & Vujatović, 2022). However, unexpected emergencies or uncontrollable circumstances can significantly impact innovation implementation (Bigliardi et al., 2020). The ability to implement innovations quickly could meet the current market demands and achieve a competitive advantage that could potentially lead to long-term economic growth and sustainability.

Using the service framework could assist small business owners to outline strategies that enhance product offerings while finding ways to make products easier to use (Leon et al., 2020). This framework consists of product use enhancements, maintenance plans, customer support, information and education, and warranties (Barrett et al., 2021). Customers often overlook product features and functionality that this framework brings to their attention (Yun et al., 2020). The average product or service feature can be elevated into experience customers repeatedly purchase when small business owners use this framework.

Using the channel framework could assist small business owners in researching how to reach their customer base (Leon et al., 2020). This framework consists of brick-and-mortar stores, direct sales, indirect distribution, and multi-level marketing and is subjective to sudden changes in customer demands (Barrett et al., 2021). E-commerce



and traditional channels create immersive experiences for customers when small businesses incorporate this framework (Barham et al., 2020). Small business owners who are willing to analyze market trends may greatly benefit from using this framework.

Using the brand framework could assist small business owners to develop marketing incentives that ensure their customers and users prefer their products or services over similar ones offered by their competitors (Leon et al., 2020). Small businesses attract and maintain customers by promoting their values and corporate responsibilities (Barrett et al., 2021). Competitive advantages and customer loyalty are vital for long-term sustainability (Orlova, 2020). Small businesses experience success by adhering to a set of standards that should not be implemented by business owners who are not willing to be accountable.

Using the customer engagement framework could assist small business owners in researching customer and user desires (Leon et al., 2020). Local chambers of commerce and other civic organizations are the framework's primary components (Barrett et al., 2021). Small business owners could use this framework to find ways to make customers' lives more memorable, fulfilling, and enjoyable (Orlova, 2020). Social interaction with the customers is the primary reason to utilize this framework, and small business owners who aren't willing to engage with customers will not often experience success.

### **Ten Types of Innovation Implementation**

Orlova (2020) claimed small business owners must determine the motivating factors for implementing any innovation prior to implementing the ten types of innovation framework. The small business owner who is motivated by enhancing the

business model focuses on the configuration tactics first and followed by experience tactics (Barrett et al., 2021). The small business owner who is motivated by enhancing the customer experience can first focus on the experience tactics and then on the configuration tactics (Leon et al., 2020). Due to the vast array of individual motivating reasons, there is no universal approach to implementing any innovation.

With the motivating factors identified, the small business owner who determines the ambition level to implement the innovation tactic can influence how the innovation tactic will be received by the business's employers and stakeholders (Orlova, 2020). Small business owners enhance the business model by implementing one or two innovation tactics initially (Barrett et al., 2021). Small business owners transform the business model by implementing a minimum of five innovation tactics (Leon et al., 2020). Due to individual ambition levels, there is no universal approach to implementing any innovation tactic.

Small business owners may not possess a formal education or business experience to have the necessary cognitive knowledge to implement innovation successfully. Maitlo et al. (2021) stated small business owners who possess a higher level of cognition may be able to implement flexible innovation strategies that are adaptable to sudden changes in market trends or customer demands. The mental understanding of small business owners is essential in developing strategies, sustainability, growth, and opportunities (Hashim et al., 2018). Small business owners who possess a higher degree of cognitive knowledge could create a culture that embraces innovation implementation.

Small business owners in rural areas often do not possess a higher degree of

cognitive knowledge due to a lack of educational opportunities. Santoro et al. (2020) indicated the absence of a higher degree of mental ability is often a determinant of small business failure. Small business owners who do not possess more cognitive knowledge have trouble creating a culture that openly embraces innovation implementation (Maitlo et al., 2021). Small business owners often depend on innovation implementation to achieve a competitive advantage and sustainability.

Creating a culture of trust that enhances the implementation of open innovation requires small business owners to embrace open innovation as a complementary asset. Culture is the uniqueness of each business, the top-down shared values, the accepted behavioral norms, and the shared experiences of the employees (Guimaraes et al., 2018; Yun et al., 2020). Bartha and Bereczk (2019) emphasized the development of trust, which is considered the foundation of social support between upper management and employees, especially younger employees. The higher the level of trust a company possesses, the more innovativeness and risk-taking occur.

Employee training is an easily controlled aspect of management and when it occurs at every level there is an increase in employee commitment, which lowers turnover rates and assists in team and trust-building among employees (Sejfijaj et al., 2019). Employee training and attitude regarding the acceptance of open innovation implementation can be significantly affected by the business's culture and philosophy (Ollila & Yström, 2020; Seyhan et al., 2021). Millers and Gaile-Sarkane (2021) stated that the lack of proper training due to limited resources was the primary reason innovation implementation failed. Therefore, employee training could enhance or destroy

a business's success.

### **Economic Impact on Small Businesses**

Small businesses make a significant contribution to local, state, and national economies. In their systematic review of the national and global impact of small businesses, Rusu and Frangieh (2021) reported that small businesses comprise 90% of the total worldwide and represent 90% in most countries. In the United States, registered small businesses of less than 500 employees reportedly total more than 33 million, equating to 99.9% of businesses nationally (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2023). Small businesses contribute a significant amount to the GDP. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), GDP is the most used measurement of consumer products, investments, government purchases, and net exports of goods and services. The U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy (2023) stated small businesses contribute to 43.5% of the GDP of the United States. Thus, small businesses reduce national dependency on importing foreign market goods and services (Rozmi et al., 2021). Small businesses help reduce national dependence on foreign markets and provide independence for individuals seeking employment in local areas.

An improvement in the quality of life and the creation of local employment opportunities occurs because of the impact of small businesses in local economies. Small businesses contribute to 99.9% of the total jobs in the United States (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2023) while creating employment opportunities and improving quality of life (Khan et al., 2021). Mahmud et al. (2021) labeled small businesses as catalysts for economic growth and development. However, with all

examples of success, failure is possible.

Researchers should be aware that most literature on small businesses reflects data that pertains to small businesses located in urban areas. When researching performance and sustainability metrics pertaining to small, businesses located in rural areas, researchers must distinguish what parameters are used to define the geographic area where a business is located and to identify which business activities are perceived as rural (Bosworth & Turner, 2018). The United States Department of Agriculture (2023) defined rural areas as small, dispersed areas that contain populations under 2,500 residents and are not within proximity of larger towns or metro areas. While the parameters of the USDA's definitions are clearly stated, researchers should incorporate a more comprehensive definition of small businesses located in rural areas.

Researchers should develop a comprehensive knowledge of how small, rural businesses differ from their urban counterparts. Within the context of small businesses, Wojan and Parker (2018) defined a small business as rural by examining the level of involvement of how the rural area is served by the business, how the business's products are created, and how local capitals are utilized for the business's daily operations. The authors stated small businesses that locate their operation in a rural area but do not employ local residents or utilize outside financial resources will not fit into the category of small, rural businesses. Researchers could use these parameters to identify small businesses that successfully operate within the scope of rural context.

Small, rural business owners often face unique challenges that distinguish their needs and opportunities from small, urban business owners. Babalola and Agbenyegah

(2019) stated the lack of infrastructure, lack of financial resources, lack of business skills, and no or limited access to training often have negative impacts on minority-owned rural businesses. Salemin et al. (2018) identified limited or no access to broadband technology, external financial resources, lack of available skilled workforce, and insufficient business knowledge and skills as the primary challenges small, rural business owners must face and try to overcome. Small, rural business owners often know these challenges but find little to no solution-focused knowledge that assists small, rural businesses.

Small, rural business owners are often viewed as less knowledgeable than small, urban business owners. Aryal et al. (2018) identified small, rural business owners as innovative and hard-working and stated success can be achieved by leveraging the unique resources that small, rural business owners have available. Phillipson et al. (2019) stated small, rural businesses have higher success rates and employee retention rates. Researchers should understand that these rates are not uniform and vary depending on the region and location (Yu & Artz, 2019). Agbenyegah (2018) stated small, rural businesses often have positive correlations between innovation, social capital, networks, and business knowledge or skill developmental policies. Small, rural business owners should develop the necessary skills to identify challenges and unique resources that may increase business performance.

### **Failures of Small Businesses**

Leading experts in small business entrepreneurship have identified several factors that may contribute to business failures, including the lack of experience or education of

the individual owner, inadequate financial resources, employees, or other internal and external factors. Nel and Abdullah (2019) discussed the impact of standardized protocols and the development of a business continuity plan on business performance. Their research included a quantitative analysis that demonstrated how standardized protocols and a well-developed business continuity plan relate to short and long-term business performance. By acknowledging that business performance is relative to sustainability, their findings indicated that small business owners will likely not achieve sustainability without implementing measures to increase business performance (Nel & Abdullah, 2019). Sarmiento et al. (2020) extended the discussion on how business performance can be impacted by a lack of standardized protocols and a well-developed business continuity plan. Their research supported the idea that business performance can have a positive impact on achieving sustainability (Sarmiento et al., 2020). Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) identified that there are two types of failures, individual and firm but also stated that all business closures are not considered a failure. For example, an individual could close their business because they have reached their financial goals or received an offer to pursue other interests.

Small business owners often do not possess the education, experience, and adequate resources to create and implement successful strategies into their business plans. When this occurs, most small business owners will contribute to the national sustainability failure rate of 48.9% of small businesses beyond 5 years (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2023). Small business owners increase their personal skills, knowledge, and assets in management by investing in their

education and training (Liu & Yong Wang, 2018). Only small business owners who possess the necessary skills to implement realistic and flexible strategies will be successful and achieve long-term sustainability.

The use of innovative leadership strategies may help small business owners achieve long-term sustainability (Dominiece-Diasa et al., 2018). Seijts and Gandz (2018) identified 11 dimensions of leader characters along with 60-character elements that are associated with the 11 dimensions. Findings in their study indicated that a leader's character can impact the organizational change process. Results also showed how absence or presence can impact the outcomes of the organizational change process (Seijts & Gandz, 2018). Successful business owners assist in the development and implementation of the business's vision and mission by creating a leadership team who can identify the financial goals of the business (Wahyono, 2019). Longenecker and Insch (2019) examined the behavior of leaders who have been identified as high performers by their organizations. Their findings suggested a work environment that promotes employee growth and teamwork can improve a business's financial goals by reducing tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover (Longenecker & Insch, 2019). Successful business owners implement strategies that emphasize the business's vision and mission to create organizational awareness and improve employee engagement and performance.

Small business owners may achieve financial success and long-term sustainability by pursuing additional knowledge, skills, and abilities (Johnson et al., 2020). Business owners who effectively engage with their employees can create a reciprocal trust that increases employee satisfaction and commitment (Potdar et al., 2020). In their systematic



review of employee training opportunities, Tafvelin et al. (2019) found the attitudes and behavior of upper management can have an impact on employee views of training opportunities that are designed to increase employee performance. Employee attitude, engagement, commitment, and satisfaction could have a positive or negative effect on leadership performance, customer engagement, and brand value (Picardi, 2019). Owners who engage in identifying and developing knowledge, skills and abilities could create a competitive advantage by exerting pressure on competitors to offer similar training opportunities for their employees or to hire new employees who possess higher levels of skills.

Small business owners may develop insight into customer demands that require immediate changes to the current operational strategies by researching their market segment. Babae Farsani et al. (2019) stated organizational sustainability could be achieved when a business owner equates changes in market demand to opportunities for growth. Small business owners could capitalize on sudden customer trends by implementing forms of open innovation that improve technological resources (Ilac, 2018). Le (2021) concluded open innovation should be implemented into business strategies that improve products and organizational processes. Small business owners could achieve sustainability through open innovation that has a positive impact on society (Babae Farsani et al., 2019). Small business owners who implement open innovation could create a competitive advantage through collaborations with consumer groups, partners, and stakeholders.

By closely examining their specific industry and the long-term goals, such as

possible expansion into other industries or geographic locations, small business owners could identify the types of highly educated and trained individuals to engage. Onkelinx et al. (2018) suggested small business owners closely examine the current and future benefits that will be invested in hiring employees that require certain incentives based on their education and or experience. Chowdhury (2019) suggested small business owners could consider incremental salary increases and bonuses and a part proprietorship of the business to attract highly qualified individuals. Onkelinx et al. posited that small business owners who are pursuing an immediate strategy to increase their productivity need employees with higher education and specialized training. Small business owners will then have the frame of reference to identify the type of employee needed to assist in achieving their goals.

Higher-level educated employees often can be an asset by providing additional knowledge to a small business but could potentially have a downside. Chowdhury (2019) examined the impact of hiring higher-level educated employees on small businesses. Their findings suggested the high cost of employee incentives and higher salaries could have a negative impact on small business performance. Cui et al. (2022) conducted quantitative research on small business performance during the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded small businesses within the financial services market segment would struggle to achieve long-term sustainability due to the high cost of specialized employees that possess higher-level education. Chowdhury also concluded productivity could be positively impacted by employees who possess either a higher education level or a vast amount of job experience working with teams who explored innovative ways to increase

productivity. Zahara et al. (2022) examined the effects of governmental regulations and supply chain disruptions in the manufacturing segment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors concluded that small business owners with higher education levels or experienced employees had a higher chance of overcoming these factors which reduced their impact on achieving long-term sustainability. Regardless of the decision of the types of employees to pursue or the incentives to offer, the small business owner is responsible for their business's sustainability.

While the hiring of higher-level education employees can potentially assist a small business, it is not a guarantee that the small business owner will achieve long-term sustainability. Chowdhury (2019) posited that small business owners must develop an understanding of how employing higher-level education employees could potentially influence the business's external stakeholders. To understand the potential influence on external stakeholders, the small business owner may have to adjust and adapt new managerial and leadership styles to accommodate the new employees (Onkelinx et al., 2018). For example, small business owners who implement micromanagement techniques could create distrust among employees, resulting in a high turnover rate and causing negative feedback from external stakeholders (Liu & Yong Wang, 2018). Small business owners may identify obstacles that impede the capability to achieve sustainability by understanding external factors, including a business's external stakeholders.

Small business owners can potentially influence the sustainability of their business by developing strategic plans that identify external factors. Fatoki (2019)

examined the impact of external factors on business performance and sustainability. Their findings identified external stakeholders, ineffective supply chains, distribution costs, and competition as the primary external factors that contribute to poor business performance (Fatoki, 2019). Small business owners often have inadequate financial resources and are more susceptible to external factors than larger businesses (Roig-Tierno et al., 2018). However, Williams (2019) claimed that external factors outside of the small business owner's control are more impactful in achieving sustainability than inadequate financial resources. Williams identified such external factors as geographical location, organization, type of industry, and size of the small business as the most impactful in achieving sustainability. Small business owners may increase their chances of achieving sustainability by capitalizing on opportunities in the external environment.

### **Sustainability of Small Businesses**

A universal and concise definition of sustainability from a business perspective has not been developed. The term: sustainability first appeared during 1987 in The Brundtland Report that was published by the World Commission on Environmental Development (Lau, 2019). The definition of sustainability has included the concepts of corporate sustainability, environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability (Van-Marrewijk, 2019). Small business owners often struggle to achieve sustainability simply because they do not know how to define the term from a business perspective (Damali et al., 2020).

The SBA reported that 63.6% of small businesses experienced sustainability for two years, while only 41.3% experienced sustainability beyond 5 years (SBA, 2021).

Šimelytė et al. (2021) stated small business owners must work diligently to increase sustainability by implementing strategies that may include various forms of technology and innovation. When small business owners expand their knowledge of the various roles that sustainability has in creating economic stability, they increase their chances of achieving long-term sustainability.

Small business owners could measure their business sustainability by utilizing financial and nonfinancial metrics that included the number of employees, productivity rates, public perception, and current market share (Nel & Abdullah, 2019). In a review of research pertaining to Porter's five forces framework, Melton et al. (2020) found access to capital is the biggest obstacle to achieving sustainability and suggested small business owners could not implement simple designs or general theoretical frameworks. Likewise, in a systematic review, Liu and Yong Wang (2018) suggested small business owners implement flexible strategies that capitalize on sudden changes in market trends or customer demands. Small businesses can potentially achieve long-term sustainability by developing comprehensive strategies that utilize open innovation.

### **Sustainability Strategies of Small Businesses**

The development of comprehensive sustainable strategies can assist small business owners in achieving long-term sustainability by examining internal and external factors within their target market. Back (2019) stated that small business owners could potentially achieve a competitive advantage by observing current target market trends. Small business owners often lack market share or financial resources to compete effectively on pricing and should develop comprehensive sustainable strategies that focus

on providing overall value for stakeholders (Audretsch et al., 2020). Small business owners who develop comprehensive strategic management plans have a better understanding of how to implement sustainable strategies (Damali et al., 2020). Ammar and Chereau (2018) concluded small business owners have the potential to maximize resources and monitor performance when comprehensive strategic management plans are implemented. Small business owners who collaborate with employees and members of the supply chain may develop effective strategic management plans.

Small business owners often fail because they do not have the knowledge or necessary skills to understand how to develop comprehensive sustainable strategies. Yolles (2018) investigated some of the external factors that pose the biggest challenges to small business owners. Their findings identified the biggest challenges are supply chain shortages, distribution problems, and competition from larger businesses (Yolles, 2018). Likewise in a systematic review, Kubíček et al. (2020) equated the performance of small businesses is dependent on the small business owner's ability to anticipate challenges and implement sustainable strategies to minimize the impact of challenges. Small business owners who work diligently to acquire the knowledge or necessary skills often develop and implement comprehensive sustainable strategies for their businesses (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). Small business owners who develop comprehensive sustainable strategies often correlate their strategies to their managerial and leadership strengths.

### ***Corporate Sustainability***

Small business owners who develop comprehensive sustainable strategies that correlate to their managerial and leadership strengths will often motivate their employees

to embrace these strategies resulting in increased acceptance of changes in the business plan. Caitlin et al. (2018) defined corporate sustainability as the business's ability to maintain its mission statement over an elapsed time period. Hansen and Schaltegger (2020) posited corporate sustainability should encompass the business's economic, social, and environmental goals. Small business owners should develop sustainable strategies that create equilibrium between these goals (Krauss, 2019). Small business owners who utilize innovation and creativity to increase profitability could potentially create a competitive advantage within their market segment.

Small business owners often do not understand how their current sustainable strategies will impact the business's stakeholders. Chakravorty and Hales (2019) defined development sustainability as the business's ability to satisfy the demands of current stakeholders without compromising the demands of future stakeholders. Pantelica et al. (2018) defined corporate sustainability as the business's ability to meet the needs of current stakeholders while simultaneously developing sustainable strategies that ensure the needs of future stakeholders are met. Banker et al. (2019) extended the discussion on how businesses achieve sustainability regardless of internal and external threats. Their research identified increased market and stakeholder benefits and decrease operational costs and employee turnover as factors that can impact achieving sustainability (Banker et al., 2019). Small business owners who broaden their scope of sustainability can develop a broader scope of the impact of their strategies.

Small business owners fail to understand that long-term sustainability does not have any specific formula and is unique to every business. Banker et al. (2019) suggested

small business owners should apply a differentiation strategy and a cost leadership approach to achieve long-term sustainability. Carayannis et al. (2018) posited differentiation strategy uses competitor benchmarks to propose innovative products or services that will increase market share. Hörisch et al. (2020) stated stakeholder satisfaction is not sufficient to achieve long-term sustainability. Ayuso et al. (2019) stated small business owners need to examine the needs of the stakeholders who can be impacted by the business's products or services. Small business owners who examine other aspects of their business gain a better understanding of how to achieve long-term sustainability.

### ***Environmental Sustainability***

An understanding of the business's internal and external environments and ecosystems may assist small business owners in developing sustainable strategies. Uitto (2018) defined the environment as the surroundings that provide the essential elements and conditions for living organisms to flourish. Buri et al. (2019) stated an ecosystem includes climatic components, such as humidity, wind, soil, and temperature. Aldana-Dominguez et al. (2018) posited that an ecosystem is a primary component for environment equilibrium and stability. Small business owners who understand how their business will impact the environment and the ecosystems will develop sustainability strategies that minimize their impact.

Small business owners work diligently to ensure their strategies are conducive to the preservation of the environment by developing environmentally sustainable strategies. In a systematic review of the impact that methane has on the environment, Abushammala



et al. (2018) found methane is 25 times more likely to contribute to global warming than carbon dioxide. The authors suggested business owners develop sustainable strategies that protect the environment since it is essential to every aspect of life on our planet and is the provider of human existence (Abushammala et al., 2018). Likewise in a quantitative study, Bura (2019) examined topo-climatic predictors of 154 plant species to create a more effective distribution model. Their findings indicated civilization's advancement is not possible without the benefits of a healthy environment that can be nurtured through environmentally sustainable strategies. Buell (2019) stated infrastructures, such as power systems, water supply systems, and commerce supply systems are dependent on environmental resources. Small business owners who understand the limitations of environmental resources develop adaptable sustainable strategies to minimize the business's impact on the environment.

Small business owners can develop successful long-term sustainable strategies by understanding their stakeholders' views regarding the environment. Hahn et al. (2019) stated stakeholders have increased pressure on businesses to incorporate changes to their operations that align with environmental sustainability. Van-Rensburg and Head (2019) suggested small business owners should engage with policymakers to develop laws that address environmental issues. Small business owners who develop environmental sustainability strategies may increase their business chance of achieving long-term sustainability by appealing to stakeholders who value acts of environmental concern.

Small business owners broaden their knowledge of their customers' concerns about the environment by developing environmental sustainability strategies. Dyllick and

Muff (2018) stated environmental sustainability strategies are expensive to implement but create several opportunities to increase stakeholder engagement with the business.

Susskind (2018) stated environmental sustainability engagement could potentially decrease the probability of legal issues, such as lawsuits. Small business owners who examine the added costs of implementing environmental sustainability strategies may have a deeper understanding of determining the feasibility of such expenses.

### ***Economic Sustainability***

Small business owners are better equipped to develop effective sustainability strategies by understanding profit does not equate to economic sustainability. Oberoi (2018) defined economic sustainability as the creation of profitability and growth by efficiently using the business's assets and fulfilling the business' social and financial obligations. Gupta (2019) stated the most challenging part of being a small business owner is making a profit and achieving long-term sustainability. Hoffer and Pincin (2019) stated the business' income is dependent on its sales while the business's savings is dependent on its spending and consumption. Without understanding the role of revenue and operating expenses, small business owners cannot effectively develop long-term sustainable strategies.

When small business owners create innovative products or services, they may be about to achieve economic sustainability. Sharma and Agrawal (2019) stated small businesses that create innovative products or services could expand their business into new markets. Schaltegger et al. (2018) state small business owners should create their own innovative products or services to create profit and achieve long-term sustainability.

Small business owners who understand that developing their own innovative products or services could result in a competitive advantage often create successful sustainability strategies.

When a small business owner creates innovative products or services, the stakeholders often become confused and need reassurance their investment will provide an acceptable return. Sharma (2019) stated small business owners must develop the ability to build emotional connections with stakeholders through brand equity and value. Schreck and Raithel (2018) stated small business owners should implement the highest code of ethics to maintain stakeholder trust. Kang and Choi (2018) analyzed that small businesses' long-term sustainability is dependent on relationships with various stakeholders. Small business owners who understand the delicate balance between long-term sustainability and stakeholder relationships have a better chance to ease the concerns of their stakeholders.

### ***Social Sustainability***

Small business owners may achieve social sustainability by developing comprehensive sustainable strategies that promote positive community development. Long (2018) defines social sustainability as the creation of competitive advantage by implementing strategies that address social equity, social justice, and social responsibility. Sabella and Eid (2018) stated social sustainability is the practice to implement strategies that nurture social capital, human capital, and human well-being. Schaefer et al. (2019) stated small business owners should develop social sustainability strategies that align with current and future stakeholders. Smith (2019) defined a socially

sustainable business as a business that appeals to potential employees in the present and in the future. Small business owners begin to comprehend their business's role in society by developing a broader scope of social sustainability.

Small business owners may increase their knowledge on becoming more effective leaders by developing and implementing social sustainability strategies. Sabella and Eid (2018) stated effective leaders develop strategic plans to incorporate social sustainability into every aspect of the business. Siltaoja et al. (2019) posited effective leaders develop sustainable strategies that exceed regulatory requirements to minimize environmental damage. King and Gish (2019) stated effective leaders develop sustainable strategies that improve the lives of their stakeholders. Small business owners who are genuine and sincere about maintaining stakeholder engagement increase the chances of implementing successful social sustainability strategies.

### **Innovation in Small Businesses Sustainability**

Small business owners may experience difficulties implementing innovation into sustainability strategies due to the complex interplay of many dynamics, opportunities, and expectations. Friedman and Carmeli (2018) identified a lack of rural context in research involving innovation implementation in small businesses. Mohamad and Chin (2019) stated most research focused on small businesses without any context to small businesses located in rural areas. Small business owners who are in rural areas may struggle to develop effective sustainability strategies that implement innovation due to the lack of resources that examine the role of innovation in small, rural businesses' success and performance.

Despite the scarcity of research on innovation in the rural context, researchers will discover strong evidence amongst available studies to link innovation implementation with small, rural business performance. In a 10-year longitudinal study in the UK, Blanchard (2019) concluded small, rural businesses that implemented innovation had higher sustainability rates than small, urban businesses. In a report conducted for the United States Department of Agriculture, Gamito and Madureira (2018) established strong evidence that non-agricultural, small, rural businesses had higher sustainability rates in which innovation was implemented into sustainability strategies than non-agricultural, small, urban businesses in which innovation was not implemented into sustainability strategies. Small business owners should develop sustainability strategies to increase overall performance by supporting and fostering innovation implementation.

Since innovation implementation does not guarantee sustainability, small business owners often need to gather knowledge, information, and support to develop sustainability strategies that include innovation implementation. After researching the availability of broadband internet access in rural areas, Phillip and Williams (2019) concluded many small business owners often believe technological innovations will ensure business success, performance, and sustainability. Meili and Shearmur (2019) stated small, urban businesses can quickly implement innovations into their sustainability strategies due to the availability of technological innovations. Small business owners who wish to develop sustainability strategies by implementing innovation can achieve success regardless of the business's location.

Small business owners must develop an understanding of their roles and how their

own skills, education, knowledge, and experiences can disproportionately impact their businesses' sustainability and performance. After conducting a correlational study of sustainability in rural areas, Kmecova and Vokoun (2020) identified personal characteristics, business attributes, and external environment as contributors in achieving sustainability. Dotzel and Faggian (2019) stated small businesses could increase their sustainability by establishing a successful external network of resources and small, rural businesses are more dependent on these resources than small, urban businesses. Small business owners who wish to implement successful sustainability strategies should engage with members in their respective industries to gain market knowledge.

When analyzing small business sustainability strategies, economic experts often view small, rural businesses more negatively than small, urban businesses. Phillipson et al. (2019) concluded in their extensive quantitative analysis of small, rural business sustainability rates that small, rural business owners often do not possess the skills to overcome challenges and limitations of being in rural areas. Greenberg et al. (2018) stated small, rural businesses can quickly implement changes in their sustainability strategies to meet new market demands. Cowie et al. (2019) stated small, rural businesses often show better profits than small, urban businesses by converting challenges into opportunities. Small business owners who are in rural areas could develop sustainable strategies by researching the challenges that small, rural business owners encounter and what strategies were used to face them.

### **Transition**

In Section 1, I provided the foundation of my study as well as the background on

sustainability with small businesses in the United States. I introduced the elements of my study that included the problem statement, the nature of the study, the conceptual framework, and an overview of the literature on innovation implementation in small businesses.

In Section 2 I included an overview of the research study process that includes the role of the researcher, participants, methods, and design. I outlined the processes of collecting, organizing, analyzing, and storing data from the participants. I reviewed the steps taken to maintain ethical standards, and the researcher's biases, and maintain the validity and reliability of the study.

In Section 3 I presented the findings of my study as related to the conceptual framework and the literature review in Section 1. I discussed the implications for social change and offer recommendations for future research. I shared my reflections on the research and my conclusion in the final part of the study.

## Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes specific information on the rationale for the multiple case study process and specific techniques on how I conducted the research. Section 2 includes information about the purpose of the qualitative multiple case study, the role of the researcher, a description of the research participants, population, sampling, and justification of the method and design. Section 2 concludes with a discussion of how I addressed the data collection process, technique, reliability, and validity of the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners use to successfully implement open innovation. The target population consisted of owners of small businesses with fewer than 20 employees in rural Tennessee. The implication for positive social change include the potential for increased sustainability of small businesses by potentially increasing revenue, which may create employment opportunities and economic development in the surrounding community.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is a key component for the continuation of the research topic by examining current data and providing insight into future research (Widner et al., 2022). The researcher plays an important part in qualitative studies because the scholar serves as the primary data collection instrument (Saldaña, 2018), collecting primary data from the participants using interviews, observations, and artifacts (Chauvette et al., 2019). The researcher accepts responsibility during the qualitative data collection process to observe the selected phenomenon with ethics and remove unbiased personal values



from the research study (Lai, 2019). I was the primary data collection instrument and used ethical principles to conduct the research and secure the qualitative data in this study.

In a qualitative study, the researcher must explain their relationship to the topic, participants, and research area to the intended target audience (Mirhosseini, 2020). I explored innovative strategies that small business owners use for long-term sustainability. My professional experience includes over 30 years in engineering and design, 20 years as a master instructor in the computer-aided design technology program at our local technical college, and 5 plus years as an ergonomic consultant for manufacturing facilities. My position requires me to build and foster relationships for the continued support of our local technical college. My position bound me to comply with the ethical expectations that are defined in the *Belmont Report*.

The researcher must accept the responsibility to conduct ethical research based on the *Belmont Report* (Anabo et al., 2018). The *Belmont Report* was first published in 1979 and outlines the three principles that include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice for the researcher to follow (Tajir, 2018). The researcher must also obtain ethics approval from a research ethics committee to ensure protection for the participants, and the quality of the collected data, monitor the researcher's qualifications and mitigate liability risks (Mallia, 2018). I communicated with each participant that their participation will be voluntary and provide them with adequate information outlined in the consent letter. The participants were given plenty of time to review the document and consent to participation via a typed email response of "I consent to participation," To ensure that the

principle of beneficence principle was adhered to, I minimized the risks to the participants by not putting them in a position of discomfort, not affecting their financial status, and maintaining their confidentiality. To ensure that the principle of justice was adhered to, I remained fair and consistent in my data collection by ensuring all potential participants were treated the same in communication during interviews and post-research. I used the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines that ensured my research process was ethical and transparent. All Walden University students must obtain approval from the IRB before conducting a study.

The researcher of qualitative studies must also mitigate biases (Mirhosseini, 2020). Researchers can reduce bias by recruiting participants with whom the researcher has not had any past or existing business relationships (Epp & Otnes, 2020). I only selected participants with whom I have never had any personal or working relationships. The researcher must also alleviate any individual interpretations by analyzing the data (Schneider et al., 2019). The researcher must collect and analyze the data in an objective manner to reach an unbiased conclusion (Jemielniak & Ciesielska, 2018). During the interview process, I worked diligently to be an active listener, maintain self-awareness, and avoid leading questions. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) that reduced my personal bias that may have affected the participants or influenced the conclusions. The researcher should use interview protocols to establish consistency and mitigate bias (Zairul, 2021). In qualitative research, the researcher should address validity, reliability, and ethics by establishing strict protocols to follow during the data collection process (Fendler, 2018). To establish and define the protocols, the researcher

could conduct semistructured interviews that create consistency by aligning interview questions with research questions, creating conversations that are inquiry-based, and receiving appropriate feedback in a prompt manner (Veronesi, 2019). I audio recorded each interview at a place of convenience for each participant. I used Microsoft Word Online to create transcripts of the audio. I used Microsoft Excel to categorize the interview responses in a manner to evaluate the data, remove bias, and develop conclusions.

### **Participants**

The researcher should select participants who will add value to the research by having the knowledge, experience, and ability to answer the main research questions (Verma & Verma, 2020; Widner et al., 2022). I chose rural, small business owners who use innovation strategies to achieve long-term sustainability. Participants of this study were over 30 years old and own a rural small business located in northwest Tennessee that have been established for a minimum of 5 years.

I selected three to five small business owners as participants in the study by contacting my local chamber of commerce to acquire a list of small business owners in the specified geographical area. I used small business owners who are members of the Chamber of Commerce, which promotes economic and community growth. The researcher can develop rapport with the participants by demonstrating excellent listening skills, authenticity, and respect (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I sent an initial email to the participants to ask them if participation in the study would interest them.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The research method selected for this study was qualitative, which enabled me to explore the strategies that rural small business owners use to successfully implement open innovation. Researchers use the qualitative method to gather information from participants who have experienced the phenomenon studied (Widner et al., 2022). With a qualitative research method, I explored my participants' experiences with open innovation implementation. The qualitative research method is the preferred method to analyze a phenomenon that cannot be quantified with statistical measures (O'Leary, 2018). The qualitative method was appropriate for this research because I did not require statistical analyses to reach conclusions. Using qualitative methodology, researchers collect data by conducting open-ended interviews and analyzing the content and quality of literature that pertains to the research question (Blaikie, 2018). I conducted semistructured, informal interviews with seven open-ended questions for each of the participants to obtain in-depth insights into their strategies and experiences.

Researchers use the quantitative method to develop a hypothesis, which is used to explore the relationship between research variables by testing the statistical significance of the relationship (Gunasekara & Zheng, 2019). The quantitative method is used when researchers are interested in understanding how much and how often a phenomenon occurs (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because I wanted to understand what, why, and how rural, small business owners develop and implement open innovation.

Researchers use a mixed method which includes both qualitative and quantitative techniques to develop a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Hlady-Rispal et al., 2021). This method requires researchers to be experts in both techniques, but methodological scholars argue that research should be either qualitative or quantitative but not both (Timans et al., 2019). This method can be time-consuming, and the qualitative data can limit the data's flexibility (Halcomb, 2018). The mixed method was not appropriate for this study because time limitations and quantitative analysis were not applicable.

### **Research Design**

The researcher should select a research design prior to starting the data collection process (Epler, 2019). The researcher will use a research design that yields consistent data collection throughout the research process. When conducting qualitative research, the researcher investigates phenomena through case studies, phenomenological, ethnography, or narrative designs (Durdella, 2019). The case study is the most common research design and is used to investigate multiple data sources and offers flexibility that other research designs do not offer (Widner et al., 2022). The researcher could use company documents as data by using a case study design (Hancock et al., 2021). The researcher could use multiple case studies to increase the strength, validity, and reliability of the research because the data comes directly from the participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Fazli et al., 2018). After reviewing the different research designs, I selected the multiple case study design for this research study because it allowed me to gather information about small business open innovation implementation.

Researchers use phenomenological design to investigate a phenomenon through lived experiences of the participants (Ilac, 2018). Phenomenological research identifies historical events to discover common themes related to world views (Townsend et al., 2019). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for the study because small business open innovation implementation did not require investigating world views. Researchers use ethnographic design to investigate a phenomenon related to specific cultures or communities (Harris, 2019). Ethnographic research requires researchers to spend a significant amount of time collecting data (O'Leary, 2018). The ethnographic design was not appropriate for the study because I did not investigate phenomena related to specific cultures or communities.

Data saturation is a vital component of the quality of the research that sets the standard for discontinuing data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Researchers reach data saturation in qualitative research when the data collected addresses the research question (Lowe et al., 2018). In multiple case study research designs, researchers collect data using semistructured interviews (Widner et al., 2022). Researchers can achieve data saturation with semistructured interviews because multiple participants can answer the same questions (Guest et al., 2020). In this study, I collected and analyzed data through semistructured interviews with qualified participants. Data saturation was reached when my participants' information became repetitive and additional information no longer emerged.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population for this research consists of a purposeful sample of small rural

business owners in northwest Tennessee. Researchers use purposeful sampling to ensure that experienced and knowledgeable participants are available to provide significant and comprehensive data pertaining to the phenomenon (Elfenbein & Schwarze, 2020). A purposeful sampling technique was appropriate for the study because I was able to search for qualified participants who added value to the research. Researchers should determine an appropriate sample size to accomplish data saturation (Lahman, 2021). Qualitative researchers use smaller sample sizes that range between three and 500 participants (Assarroudi et al., 2018). The sample size for this qualitative study was adequate to reach data saturation through consistent repetition of semistructured interview questions.

I sent an email invitation to the participants once I had my initial research sample. Researchers should conduct interviews in a location where the participants' privacy can be respected (Hlady-Rispal et al., 2021). I encouraged the participants to select a suitable place that was convenient and allowed the interviews to be recorded. I preferred the interviews to be conducted face-to-face but respected the wishes of the participants if they wanted virtual interviews due to COVID-19 safety protocols. The virtual interviews were conducted using Zoom or Teams meetings. The interview questions are provided in Appendix B.

Researchers should continue interviewing participants until no new analytical information is yielded (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I used participants who had direct experience in open innovation implementation. I continued to interview participants until no new information or themes emerged, resulting in data repeating themselves. Researchers should be able to develop meticulous plans to obtain data, arrange collected

data effectively for analysis, and possess the listening skills necessary to fully understand the participants' responses (Gudkova, 2018). Qualitative researchers can reach data saturation, which is the point of diminishing returns through using semistructured interviews (Zyphur & Pierides, 2019). Data saturation occurs through methodological data triangulation techniques, including semistructured interviews, audible recordings, document analysis, and participant selection (Widner et al., 2022).

### **Ethical Research**

I conducted research according to the ethical standards of the Walden University IRB, that included the informed consent process. Anabo et al. (2018) stated IRBs establish the guidelines for the informed consent letter requirements when research has human participants. The informed consent letter is a legal and ethical requirement in research that ensures confidentiality while protecting the rights of research participants (Guloy, 2018). King et al. (2018) stated the informed consent letter should provide participants with full awareness of their rights. Manti and Licari (2018) suggested the informed consent letter should include the researcher's contact information, the research's purpose, and general expectations of participants during and after the research, benefits of participation, risks associated with participation, participant criteria, participant confidentiality information, withdrawal procedures from the research, IRB information, and the statement of consent. I emailed the informed consent letter to every participant and requested their typed consent via email prior to conducting interviews (Appendix D). Othman and Abdul Hamid (2018) suggested researchers should align the research process with The Belmont Report's ethical standards and guidelines that include



treating the participants with respect, beneficence, and fairness. I treated the participants with respect and fairness while ensuring they understood the beneficence of the research.

The participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the research without penalty at any time by contacting me by phone or email. I did not provide the participants with any gifts or forms of financial compensation. Manti and Licari (2018) recommended researchers should encourage the participants to ask questions about the research prior to signing the informed consent letter. At the conclusion of the research, I sent thank you cards to the participants as a token of appreciation. Researchers should implement measures to protect the participant's identities and privacy rights while sharing the findings of the research (Turcotte-Tremblay & McSween-Cadieux, 2018). I protected the identities and privacy of the participants by using coding and pseudonyms: rural small business owners (RSBO) and participant one was coded RSBO1. I repeated the coding for each participant and did not list company names or published documents. I will store the data collected on a USB drive and a password-protected external hard drive in a safety deposit box for a period of 5 years. After the 5-year period, I will destroy all collected data through a certified disposal company. Walden University's IRB approval number will be provided upon my IRB approval.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative study. In qualitative multiple-case study research, a researcher is the principal instrument in the data collection and may employ several data collection techniques (Denny &

Weckesser, 2019). DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) stated semistructured interviews are the most popular data collection techniques used in qualitative research. Researchers use semistructured interviews to gain the participants' experiential data about the research topic while observing the participants' behaviors during the interview process (Creswell & Báez, 2020). I conducted semistructured interviews to explore successful strategies used by rural and small business owners to implement innovation.

Bearman (2019) suggested using an interview protocol to ensure uniformity and consistency when conducting semistructured interviews. In a qualitative study, the researcher uses semistructured interviews to elicit more information about the research phenomenon from the participants (Yeong et al., 2018). In many cases, researchers may have to schedule follow-up questions to add clarity to the initial responses (Mirhosseini, 2020). Researchers conducting semistructured interviews that follow an interview protocol increase the reliability and validity of their research (Potts, 2018). I followed the interview protocol to schedule and conduct semistructured, face-to-face interviews. I developed open-ended questions that are relevant to the study. I provided the participants with the informed consent form (see Appendix D) prior to the interviews. After receiving written informed consent via email from the participant, I scheduled interviews. I audio recorded the interviews in a comfortable setting that ensured maximum privacy for the participants. I used NVivo software to transcribe the interviews and organize, analyze, and code the data. Using keywords, I identified themes collected from the interviews that required member checking to ensure the reliability, validity, and transferability of the research.

Qualitative researchers enhance the study's reliability, validity, and transferability by incorporating member checking into their research (Dennis, 2018). Prior (2020) defined member checking as a research technique that requires the researcher to share their interpretations of the interview responses with the participants for accuracy. Researchers should be active listeners during semistructured interviews and ask follow-up questions for interpretation inaccuracies (Iivari, 2018). To improve the reliability, validity, and transferability of the study, I conducted member checking with each participant that ensured my interview summaries are accurate. I corrected any mistakes and sent the updated interview summaries to the participants. I performed subsequent follow-ups until final interview summaries of the interpretations were delivered.

### **Data Collection Technique**

In qualitative research, the researcher collects information relevant to the research from expert participants during the data collection process (Alam, 2021). Archibald et al. (2019) claimed semistructured interviews are the most used method to collect data in qualitative research. Neubauer et al. (2019) concluded additional questions can be generated when researchers start questions with the word, what. Researchers also collect data in qualitative research through observations, documents, archival data, and artifacts (Popoola et al., 2018). I collected data relevant to the study by conducting semistructured face-to-face interviews with participants who had experience and expertise with the phenomenon. Prior to the interview, I ensured the privacy and confidentiality of each participant by removing their names and company name from my research. I identified participant number one as "RSB01" and labeled each participant sequentially.

Bearman (2019) stated researchers can establish reliability and validity by implementing interview protocols. Aguinis and Solarino (2019) suggested an interview protocol is a key component used by qualitative researchers to reach data saturation by ensuring consistency in the interview process. Researchers may reduce the number of field observations by effectively using an interview protocol (Lukyanenko, 2021). I will follow an interview protocol to create guidelines to ensure the interview process will be consistent with each participant. I asked each participant the same questions to fully encapsulate their level of expertise about the phenomenon. During the interviews, I was an active listener and took detailed notes that lead to additional research questions.

Veronesi (2019) stated member checking should be used by researchers to validate the accuracy of the interview interpretations from the participants' perspectives. Haenssger (2019) suggested member checking often leads to additional questions that allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Researchers could mitigate bias and improve data triangulation by engaging in multiple interview sessions with the participants (Weller et al., 2018). I used various forms of media to record the interviews, transcribe the interview responses, and code any thematic patterns in the responses. To confirm my interpretations of the responses, I implemented member checking and conducted a second interview as needed to gain additional clarity and insight.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Qualitative researchers should develop a data management plan that provides information on the collection, organization, management, storage, and backup of the data

(Saunders et al., 2019). Widner et al. (2022) suggested a sound data management plan can reduce researcher bias and increase the research's validity. I collected the data using audio recordings of the semistructured interview questions. During the organization stage, I created labels for each participant that included the time, date, informed consent, and interview transcription. Researchers can identify patterns by organizing, coding, and evaluating the data (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2020). Using NVivo software, I organized and cataloged the data for analysis. Adu (2019) suggested researchers securely protect recorded information collected from the participants. I will store the data collected on a USB drive and a password-protected external hard drive in a safety deposit box for at least 5 years. After the 5-year period, I will destroy all collected data through a certified disposal company.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers analyze the data after it has been collected in the field and transcribed (Azungah, 2018). Haenssger (2019) defined data analysis as the interpretation of processed data that has been collected through semistructured interviews, observations, and written and visual document reviews. Widner et al. (2022) stated researchers must (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the data, and (e) report the findings of the research. Qualitative researchers should collect data from multiple resources to accurately understand and interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2019). I analyzed the data about successful strategies to implement open innovation that I collected from semistructured interviews and organizational documentation that included business plans, financial statements, and employee training opportunities.

The data analysis process for this multiple case study included methodological triangulation from two data collection methods: semistructured interviews and organizational documentation that included business plans, financial statements, and employee training opportunities. Qualitative researchers use methodological triangulation from multiple data sources including semistructured interviews, observations, and organizational documentation (Abdalla et al., 2018). Ashour (2018) defined triangulation as a process used to enhance the reliability and validity of the collected data and research findings through the development of a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Researchers could ensure objectivity and mitigate bias through triangulation (Saks, 2018). I used methodological triangulation to validate the findings and mitigate bias to ensure objectivity.

Before conducting data analysis, researchers should organize, classify, code, and interpret the data prior to presenting the findings (Maxwell, 2021). I conducted data analysis by organizing and classifying the collected data in a Microsoft Excel workbook. D'Amato (2019) recommended researchers use qualitative data analysis software like NVivo to code the data from semistructured interview transcripts for data management and retrieval. Microsoft Word enabled me to import the audio files and export transcript files. After reviewing the transcripts, I corrected any mistakes within the context. Researchers should use member checking, a process where additional interviews are conducted to determine if the researcher's interpretation of the interview data reflects the interviewee's intentions (Roberts et al., 2019).

Bergeron and Gaboury (2020) suggested NVivo, and a codebook can assist with

data saturation by grouping the data into categories and concepts that start with common words or phrases. Clark and Veale (2018) suggested emergent themes can be identified because of data saturation through coding and sorting data. I combined my research into a single document and uploaded it into latest the version of NVivo to code. After the coding process, I used common words and phrases to identify emergent themes that correlated to recent studies and the conceptual framework. I compiled the theoretical findings for presentation after using semistructured interviews and organizational documentation that included business plans, financial statements, and employee training opportunities to achieve data saturation.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative researchers could implement several data collection techniques to ensure the reliability and validity of the research (Kyngäs et al., 2020). Bogna et al. (2020) stated the study's consistency will determine the study's degree of reliability while the study's accuracy will determine the study's degree of validity. To establish reliability and validity in the research, qualitative researchers use credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hulme et al., 2021). As the primary data collection instrument, I implemented research data collection methods that met those criteria and established reliability and validity in the findings.

#### **Reliability**

Qualitative researchers ensure their research's reliability by implementing consistent data collection methods that are appropriate, transparent, and replicable. Saunders et al. (2019) defined reliability as the degree of consistency discovered

throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Starcher et al. (2018) stated dependability is achieved when relevant research demonstrates consistency and reliability. Researchers demonstrate reliability and dependability when the findings of the study can be analyzed by other researchers and similar findings are yielded (Forero et al., 2018). To achieve dependability, I used consistent data collection methods that enhanced the study's reliability by minimizing errors while implementing research guidelines that can be replicated by future researchers.

I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A), member checking, and data saturation to achieve reliability and validity in the study. López-Zerón et al. (2021) stated that reliability could be when researchers implement data collection methods that are transparent and consistent. Qualitative researchers use interview protocols to better understand the participant's perspectives on the phenomenon by improving the interview process (Yeong et al., 2018). Participants review the interview transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations and to add insights missed during the initial interview (Candela, 2019). Naidu and Neil (2018) suggested that qualitative researchers use member checking to validate the researcher's interpretations of the interview questions by sharing the transcripts with the participants and correcting applicable misinterpretations.

To further enhance the reliability and validity of the research, researchers could reach data saturation by implementing consistent data collection methods and data analysis (Hair et al., 2019). I followed the interview protocol to schedule and conduct semistructured, face-to-face interviews using open-ended questions relevant to the study.



I provided the participants with the informed consent letter before the interviews. After receiving the written informed consent via email “I consent to participation” from the participant, I scheduled the initial interview. I recorded the interviews and created transcripts to be used with the NVivo software to achieve data saturation by identifying emergent themes that correlated to recent studies and the conceptual framework. After using multiple data methods to achieve data saturation, I compiled the findings for presentation.

### **Validity**

Qualitative researchers establish research validity by implementing comprehensive data collection methods and data analysis that ensure trustworthy and meaningful findings. Saunders et al. (2019) defined validity as the degree of accuracy between the researcher’s conclusions and the actual data collected. Leung (2018) stated validity has two subcategories; internal which is the extent to which the research establishes cause-and-effect relationships and external which is the extent to which the outcome of the research can be generalized to similar research. Daniel (2019) stated the criteria for evaluating validity in qualitative research include credibility, transferability, and confirmability. I established validity by applying member checking, triangulation, and data saturation to ascertain trustworthy and meaningful findings.

Dawson (2019) stated credibility in qualitative research can be achieved by establishing credible and believable findings obtained from the participant’s perspective. Researchers should develop strategies such as prolonged engagement and member checking to fully understand the phenomenon from the participants’ experiences (Madill

& Sullivan, 2018). Researchers who triangulate data from multiple sources and reach data saturation have a higher chance of establishing credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I used semistructured interviews, member checking, and triangulation for data saturation to ensure the credibility of the study.

Mandal (2018) defined transferability as the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one scholar to another. Researchers who implement high levels of prolonged engagement and member checking increase the chance of enhancing transferability (Johnson et al., 2020). Ames et al. (2019) suggested researchers implement sample selection strategies that identify participants who have expert knowledge about the research topic. I enhanced transferability by providing a detailed explanation of the data collection and data analysis methods used to generate the findings.

Qualitative researchers add value to the existing phenomenon by conducting reliable and valid research that can be used for future research (Maher et al., 2018). Forero et al. (2018) defined confirmability as the confidence level researchers have in previous research that pertains to a particular phenomenon. Dennis (2018) suggested researchers use detailed methodological descriptions, accurate audit trails, and triangulation to ensure confirmability. Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019) stated confirmability can only be achieved once credibility, transferability, and dependability have been established. I ensured confirmability by providing detailed research method descriptions, audit trails, triangulation, and analysis.

Widner et al. (2022) stated data saturation in qualitative research is present when the data becomes redundant. Aldiabat and Le Navenec (2018) suggested data saturation is

an accepted methodological standard in research to establish reliability and validity.

Fusch et al. (2018) indicated data saturation can be achieved by triangulating data from multiple sources. To achieve data saturation, I used semistructured interviews, member checking and triangulation, and detailed NVivo software analysis.

### **Transition and Summary**

Section 2 included the role of the researcher, research method and design, participant population and purposeful sampling, ethical research considerations, data collection, organization, and analysis methods, reliability, and validity of the study. In Section 3, I presented the research findings collected from the study and themes that may emerge from my analysis. I recommend applications for professional practice and the implications of social change. Section 3 concluded with recommendations for future research.

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

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners use to successfully implement open innovation. The sample of this study included owners of small businesses with fewer than 20 employees in rural, western Tennessee. The data were collected by conducting semistructured, face-to-face interviews and asking seven open-ended questions to these participants. In the following sections, I present the findings, the professional practice applications, social change implications and future research recommendations. I conclude this section with my reflections and a conclusion to my study.

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

The overarching question for this study was “What strategies do small business owners use to implement open innovation?” Innovation strategies were revealed during participant interviews, which were analyzed using NVivo 12 software. I discovered three main themes: strategic and continuous development, risk management, and sustaining a culture of innovation. In the following sections, I provide thematic analyzes and discuss the findings pertaining to these themes.

#### **Theme 1: Strategic and Continuous Development**

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis process was the importance of developing strategic and continuous plans for innovation implementation. All four participants agreed that efficient strategic and continuous plans are vital to achieve sustainability in rural areas. Table 1 reflects Theme 1 that emerged from participants’ responses.

**Table 1***Participants' Responses Related to Strategic and Continuous Development*

Participants	Responses
RSBO1	15
RSBO2	8
RSBO3	11
RSBO4	16

All four participants discussed the importance of a strategic and continuous planning process where leaders create clear, quantifiable goals that can be changed to achieve those objectives. Small business owners should develop an understanding that strategic and continuous planning cannot be effective in a short-term time frame (Dhanda & Shrotryia, 2020). Strategic and continuous planning is comprised of the business's mission, values, goals, policies, and protocols to achieve sustainability. A written business plan is an instrument outlining the strategic and continuous plans, including expected growth and expansion (Chao, 2018). Small business owners who write a detailed business plan could obtain business loans, attract new partners, and skilled employees (Lee et al., 2019), and they often experience an increase in stakeholder advocacy and financial backing (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). The participants agreed that the development of a strategic and continuous plan was vital to the implementation of innovation and achieving sustainability, as it helps them become consistent in decision making regarding innovation implementation.

The participants shared organizational documents comprising strategic and

continuous plans, methods to evaluate goals, and schedules of deadlines to achieve the goals. By reviewing the participants' organizational documents, I discovered additional evidence supporting the strategic and continuous business plan as an important theme. Small business owners should review strategic business plans on a regular basis to identify any possible changes in the business's direction or in the market segment that the business operates (Kimuli et al., 2020). Small business owners should utilize operating procedures to assist in achieving their goals over a 12-month period. Operating procedures are planning documents that provide more detail about the implementation procedures of specific business operations and about what implementation is needed to achieve the business goals (Untaru & Han, 2021). SBO1 stated, "A plan is an important tool to help me stay the course by identifying where I am and where I want to be. To achieve my goals, I must remain vigilant and dedicated to my plan." SBO2 explained, "An effective strategic business plan is necessary to help me grow my entrepreneurial skills and be a better leader for my employees." SBO3 said, "My business is an extension of who I am and obtaining long-term sustainability isn't an option, it's a necessity. A solid and effective strategic plan will help me achieve all my goals." SBO4 stated,

I have seen too many small businesses around me close their doors. I often wonder what happened to cause them to go out of business. I have tried to mentor many younger business owners and teach them how important developing an effective strategic plan is to achieve their goals. I would be among them if I didn't just have a solid strategic plan.

Small business owners cannot achieve their goals or long-term sustainability

without developing a clear and precise business plan. By performing a detailed SWOT analysis (Vlados, 2019), small business owners can develop such a plan by examining the micro and macro environments of their business (Ratten, 2020). The participants agreed developing an effective SWOT analysis is a primary step in developing a well-written strategic plan. SBO1 stated, “The SWOT is the spokes of a wheel with the goals as the hub. Without the spokes, the wheel falls apart.” SBO2 said, “Creating a SWOT has been instrumental in developing strategies to address their weaknesses and threats.” SBO3 stated, “Without a SWOT, the company simply wouldn’t be able to compete in the market.” SBO4 added, “The best advice I can give any new small business owner is to learn how to develop a SWOT.”

Small business owners could benefit during the strategic planning phase by performing a customer analysis that would identify who is likely their intended audience (Turkmen, 2020). Small business owners can design their strategic plan implement innovation to address the needs of their customers. Customers are the primary driver for a small business to exist and without them, there would be no need for the business. SBO1 stated, “Without their customers, none of us would be able to pursue a life as a business owner.” Small businesses often fail due to the owner’s inability to develop strategic plans, obtain leadership skills, and provide adequate resources to successfully implement strategic plans (Chao, 2018). RSBO2 stated, “The business plan serves as a foundation for the business to be built and must possess a solid understanding of their customers’ needs.” SBO3 stated, “Small business owners are often the drivers for economic development on a local level. We owe it to our communities to be successful.” SBO4

said, “Strategic planning without customer analysis is likely to result in business failure. Every business owner must understand the symbiotic relationship between customers and sustainability.”

## **Theme 2: Risk Management**

The second theme that emerged from the data analysis process was the importance of developing effective risk management protocols. All four participants agreed that effective risk management is often difficult to develop due to its unpredictable nature. Table 2 reflects Theme 2, which emerged from an analysis of the data collected from participants.

**Table 2**

*Participants’ Responses Related to Risk Management*

Participant	Responses
RSBO1	19
RSBO2	13
RSBO3	15
RSBO4	12

Sadgrove (2020) stated risk management is the process where investment decisions are identified, analyzed, accepted, or mitigated. Small business owners should understand and implement effective risk mitigation strategies to protect the business. Polinkevych, Khovrak, Trynchuk, Klapkiv, and Volynets (2021) stated small business owners could avoid unnecessary risk by developing a well-written strategic plan that outlines the steps to reduce the negative impact of unforeseen events. All four



participants have created a written strategic plan. SBO1 stated, “Planning for an unforeseen event is a difficult task even the most experienced business owner.”

Many small businesses failed during the Covid pandemic due to the lack of developing an effective strategic plan. The four participants agreed the pandemic had a negative impact on their businesses but were able to maintain their sustainability by quickly mitigating the restrictions placed by governmental agencies. Untaru and Han (2021) stated the pandemic was the most significant risk that many businesses had ever experienced, and many did not recover from its impact. Many businesses mitigated the pandemic’s negative impact by quickly integrating various innovations into their business model (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). Baldegger, Wild, and Schueffel (2021) stated many small businesses had to use various forms of digital innovation to mitigate risk to their supply chain. Manjula Bai (2020) stated many small businesses had to implement digital innovations to meet their customer demands. The pandemic has changed consumer trends and small businesses without a strategic plan will find it difficult to achieve sustainability. The four participants agreed their businesses would have suffered had they not developed a strategic plan that included resources for risk mitigation. SBO1 stated, “The pandemic forced us to make drastic changes in our daily operations. Our hours had to change to accommodate the social distancing guidelines which resulted in longer workdays. Our customers felt a more personal connection to us, and our business increased.”

Crovini (2019) stated small business owners could identify risk as an opportunity or a threat when performing a SWOT analysis. The four participants agreed risk is an

opportunity and should be viewed in a constructive manner. SB03 said, “Owners should view risk as an opportunity to develop stronger leadership skills. Taking a positive attitude will contribute to a healthier workplace.”

Glowka, Kallmünzer, and Zehrer (2020) identified internal risks as weaknesses and external risks as threats. Small business owners can control internal risks once they have been identified while external risks are out of their control. Small business owners who have developed effective strategic plans could minimize the negative impact of risks. Chakabva, Tengeh, and Dubihlela (2021) stated human risk is an internal risk that small businesses cannot manage effectively. Human risk includes illness, death, theft, turnover, and low morale. Quansah and Hartz (2021) stated supply chain disruptions are an external risk that small business owners cannot control. Wallis and Frese (2020) stated small business owners could minimize the negative impact of risks by developing strong lines of communication, setting realistic expectations, developing support systems, training staff, assessing risks, and developing contingency plans. The four participants agreed mitigating human risk during the pandemic was challenging and required high degrees of empathy. The four participants also agreed supply chain disruptions resulted in loss of business and customer loyalty. SBO4 stated, “Our supply chain consisted of several small businesses which closed during the pandemic. We will never recover from the loss of those relationships.”

### **Theme 3: Culture of Innovation Sustainability**

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis process was sustaining a culture with a focus on innovation. All four participants indicated a sustainable culture

cannot be achieved if upper management fails to encourage their employees to challenge traditional approaches to the day-to-day operations. All four participants agreed upper management could create high employee morale by willing to implement changes suggested by employees. Table 3 reflects Theme 3, which emerged from an analysis of the data collected from participants.

**Table 3**

*Participants' Responses Related to Innovation Culture*

Participant	Responses
RSBO1	9
RSBO2	11
RSBO3	12
RSBO4	9

Matheus (2020) stated a positive work culture often leads to the implementation of innovation. Some small business owners often overlook how education and experience contribute to building a positive work culture. Panggabean and Jermias (2020) stated successful businesses create positive work culture by recruiting individuals who have the knowledge and commitment to innovation for maintaining customer satisfaction, developing effective operational strategies, and continuous organizational growth. The four participants agreed a positive work culture is vital when overcoming unexpected obstacles. SB02 stated, "Without a work culture that's capable of overcoming challenges, the impact of COVID would have been detrimental to the sustainability of the business."

Linneman and Stanton (2020) identified work culture as a key ingredient needed

for development of successive strategic marketing plans. Chuang (2020) stated small businesses often have limited resources including a positive work culture that makes it difficult to implement strategic marketing plans. Strategic marketing plans must include social media to increase a business's visibility and sustainability (Thomas, 2020). Le (2021) stated small businesses can compete with larger businesses using social media by giving them an equal opportunity to promote their products or services. The four participants agreed an increased social media presence was a vital component in sustainability during the global pandemic. SB03 stated, "I relied heavily on my employees to help expand our use of social media. Without them, it would be hard to predict what would have happened during Covid."

Inoue and Todo (2020) identified work culture as a key component in building partnerships with the local community. Chuang (2020) stated strategic marketing plans should include the development of partnerships with the local community to expand the shareholders of a business. The increase of shareholders often leads to expanded market share, competitive advantage, and sustainability (Vu & Nwachukwu, 2020). Customer loyalty can be increased with increased social media by creating a sense of ownership with businesses who engage their customers (Krüger & Meyer, 2021). The four participants agreed the reason they started their respected businesses was to contribute to their local communities. SB01 stated "Without community ties, it would be impossible to keep the doors open." SB02 added "Our primary goal is providing services to our community that otherwise would not be available. Without our community, this is no us."

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The findings from this study may assist small, rural business owners develop successful innovation strategies for increased sustainability. Specifically, small, rural business owners may benefit from the strategies discovered during the study by applying them to their own strategic plan development and innovation implementation. Findings from the study provide successful strategies small, rural business owners use to effectively implement innovations into their daily operations while satisfying customer needs and building community partnerships. As the literature shows, small, rural business owners must find creative ways to innovate to achieve sustainability over the long-term. Historically, small, rural business owners receive less financial support than their urban counterparts due to the lack of infrastructure, workforce, and supply chain disruptions. Therefore, small, rural business owners must utilize any resource to implement innovation and achieve sustainability.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The challenges small, rural businesses must overcome are well known, but there is a lack of understanding of how small, rural businesses can successfully overcome them. This study's findings may assist small, rural business owners to develop successful innovation strategies for increased sustainability. Small, rural businesses are pillars of the community and assist in generating tax revenues needed for many community outreach programs. Additionally, small, rural businesses help communities to keep monies within the boundaries of the community. Without small, rural businesses, customers would have to spend their monies in other communities.

### **Recommendations for Action**

This study and its findings resulted in three main themes: strategic and continuous development, risk management, and sustaining a culture of innovation used by the study participants. The findings from this research can be beneficial to small, rural business owners and their stakeholders. Small, rural business owners can achieve sustainability by finding creative ways to implement innovation into their business strategies. A key recommendation is that small, rural business owners should implement innovation in their organization to create and maintain a competitive advantage in the marketplace which may lead to sustainability. I plan to share the findings of this qualitative multiple case study with the participants, including a final publication if requested. I also plan to publish this study in a dissertation database, making it available to academic and professional communities. I would also welcome the opportunity to present the findings of this research at small business conferences and seminars.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be relative to small urban businesses, medium businesses, and large businesses. The limitations of this study included the education level of the participants due to the lack of understanding of strategic development, availability of the participants, and the sample size and location of the participants. There is a need to further research the relationship between innovation implementation and sustainability. I recommend that future researchers expand the scope of similar research to include small business owners in urban areas. To address the limitations of this study, I recommend future researchers select small business owners

with higher education levels, increase the sample size, and select different geographic locations. Future researchers could conduct a quantitative study on the correlation between innovation and sustainability.

### **Reflections**

The Doctor of Business Administration academic process has been the most daunting and challenging of my academic journey. Life obstacles have prolonged this aspect of my journey and have diminished my enthusiasm periodically. I truly value the support I have received from my chairs and classmates throughout each milestone. I chose this study to broaden the understanding of innovation implementation in small, rural businesses. During this journey, I have gained a deeper understanding of local small businesses and the obstacles they must overcome to achieve sustainability. I have acquired many new research skills and have developed skills in academic writing. I have also enhanced my critical thinking skills which will assist in my future journeys.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners in rural Tennessee used to implement open innovation. The ten types of innovation theory were the conceptual framework for this study. Four volunteer participants who met the established participant criteria were selected to articulate their strategies for implementing open innovation into their business strategies. The three main themes that emerged from this study include: (a) strategic and continuous development, (b) risk management, and (c) sustaining a culture of innovation. I correlated the results of this student to the current literature related to strategies for small business open

innovation implementation and conceptual framework, ten types of innovation theory, developed by Keeley, Walters, Pikkell, and Quinn (2013). To increase the probability that small business owners implement open innovation, I encourage current and potential small business owners to utilize these strategies to implement open innovation to achieve sustainability.



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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I will introduce myself to the participants and explain the purpose and scope of the research study. I will assure participants that all information collected during the interview will be confidential. I will inform the participants of the right to stop the interview at any time.

Topic of the Study. Strategies for Integrating Open Innovation Practices for Small Businesses

Research Question. What strategies do small business owners use to implement open innovation?

Inform Consent. Prior to the interview, I will provide the consent letter to each participant and verify that I received written consent back via email. Upon completing the interview, I will thank the participant. I will gather any additional documents; take note for on-field observation. I will request a follow-up meeting for member checking.

Member Checking. Conduct the follow-up interview in person. Provide a copy of the transcript for the interview. Examine the participant each question answered during the past interview. After the evaluation, I will ask: Did I misunderstand anything? Or, is there any information you would like to change or add? Conclude the follow-up section. I want to thank you for taking the time to complete the interview and follow-up section.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How would you define the term, open innovation?
2. What skills do you think are necessary to implement open innovation strategies into your current business model?
3. What specific strategies would you use to implement open innovation into your current business model?
4. What adjustments to the strategies would you make if the open innovation implementation was not successful?
5. How could open innovation potentially create a competitive market advantage for businesses that have developed successful implementation strategies?
6. How could open innovation potentially create long-term sustainability for small businesses?
7. Is there anything about open innovation that we have not already discussed that you would like to include?