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Leadership Strategies for Small Business' Sustainability

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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

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2024

Abstract

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Abhay K. Arora

MS, Post University, 2018

BS, Post University, 2016

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Small business leaders are concerned with the lack of effective leadership strategies for sustaining their businesses, which can jeopardize their long-term operational and financial success. Grounded in systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore leadership strategies small business leaders use to sustain their financial performance. The participants were comprised of four business leaders operating businesses in local malls in Manchester, Connecticut who implemented successful leadership strategies for sustainability. Data were collected using semistructured interviews. Five key themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) customer focus and service, (b) community engagement, (c) employee collaboration and engagement, (d) integrating technology, and (e) meticulous attention to business operations. A key recommendation is for small business leaders to develop long-term visions and plans to guide their business strategies. The implications for positive social change include the potential for improvements in decision-making, increased business performance, and enhanced sustainability rates for small businesses.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my wonderful brother, Ajay Arora. His unwavering

support and constant encouragement have been the bedrock of my journey. Ajay's belief

in me has kept me going, and his presence has always been a source of strength and

inspiration.

Ajay's wisdom, kindness, and generosity have shaped who I am today. His

support has helped me overcome countless challenges, and his faith in my abilities has

fueled my determination. Ajay's own achievements and dedication have set a high

standard for me to aspire to, and his positive influence is evident in every aspect of my

work.

I am deeply grateful for everything Ajay has done for me. His love,

encouragement, and belief in me have made all the difference. This study is a testament

to his enduring impact on my life, and I couldn't have done it without him.

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I am profoundly grateful to Dr. Walter McCollum for his unwavering support and mentorship throughout this dissertation journey. His positivity and encouragement have been a guiding light, motivating me to strive for excellence at every turn. Dr. McCollum's insightful feedback and extensive knowledge have been crucial in refining my research, while his genuine enthusiasm has inspired me to surpass my own expectations. His dedication to my academic and personal growth has been immensely motivating, and his commitment to excellence truly inspiring. I deeply appreciate his patience, wisdom, and the significant time he has devoted to helping me reach this milestone. His support has transformed this dissertation process into a rewarding and enlightening experience.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

The survival and sustainability of small businesses depends on good leadership. Leaders tend to develop shared company values and vision and create and implement meaningful strategies to achieve their goals. Active leadership is vital for sustainability because leaders can identify challenges and opportunities early on and address them effectively and quickly. Unfortunately, approximately 52% of new small businesses in the United States. fail within the first five years of operation because of poor management and leadership (Alsaaty & Makhlouf, 2020). Poor leadership results in the wastage of material and human resources, resulting in the low commitment of stakeholders, investors, and consumers. Poor leadership also leads to a poor reputation and mistrust among consumers, all of which affect the sustainability of the small business entity. Failure to sustain small businesses for an extended period is detrimental to the U.S. economy because they employ over 46.4% of employees (Small Business Administration [SBA], 2022). These statistics indicate that there is a need to develop robust leadership strategies for small business sustainability.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

Small-business owners embody 99.9% of all U.S. employer firms, which comprises 33.2 million successful small businesses that account for nearly 61.7 million employees in the United States (SBA, 2022). These small business owners employ over 46.4% of all American employees. Nevertheless, approximately 52% of new small-business startups fail within the first five years of operation because of poor management (Alsaaty & Makhlouf, 2020). These failures lead to psychological, financial, human, and

economic losses that negatively impact the growth of a country. Determining the problems behind the failures can help sustain a small business for the foreseeable future. The general business problem was that multiple small business owners have limited knowledge and understanding of how to run a small business successfully. The specific business problem was that some small business owners lack leadership skills and experience to sustain their businesses. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to explore strategies that small business owners can use to acquire various leadership skills, enabling individuals to effectively guide, motivate, and influence others towards achieving organizational goals to sustain their businesses.

The population consisted of four owners of successful and well-sustained small businesses in Connecticut, in which small businesses had demonstrated longevity and stability over a significant period. I used the purposive sampling technique to ensure I did not choose participants who I had interacted with before (Bryson et al., 2022). This sampling technique helped me avoid individuals with whom we share similar perspectives on the topic under research (Campbell& Murray, 2021). To qualify for participation, individuals must have had physical presence within the mall and were actively engaged in daily business operations. Participants had to possess at least two years of experience in their business to ensure they bring invaluable insight to this research. I used multiple literature resources such as journals and scholarly works to identify data related to the problem under study. I used systems theory and SWOT analysis as the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework for this study was the composite conceptual framework of systems theory and the strength, weakness, opportunity, and threats

(SWOT) analysis. Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced the systems theory in the 1950s. He postulated that organizations are open systems made of interdependent and interrelated parts that form a whole system (Think Insights, 2023). Von Bertalanffy underlined that real systems are exposed to, and cooperate with, their surroundings and that they can obtain qualitatively original properties through occurrence, developing in the frequent expansion (Think Insights, 2023). Small businesses are a cohesive collection of information, activities, and resources that interact to create a functioning organization system. Leaders must investigate the environment, inputs, transformational processes, outputs, and feedback to understand how the components affect business operations. The system theory also follows that the employees focus on attaining the set collective goals by following a leader's or employer's leadership.

As a conceptual framework, systems theory helps leaders understand the external and internal operations and perspectives surrounding their businesses (Think Insights, 2023). I used systems theory to represent the management field of small businesses in my research. I used systems theory to examine any system using different collective parts in addition to efficiency requirements for the system to function. Many times, there are unexpected encounters that small business owners may not foresee. Systems theory delivers a foundation for small business owners to embark on establishing components that interfere with establishing sustainable businesses.

The conceptual framework for this study was the composite conceptual framework of systems theory and the SWOT analysis. Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced the systems theory in the 1950s. He postulated that organizations are open systems made of interdependent and interrelated parts that form a whole system (Think

Insights, 2023). Von Bertalanffy underlined that real systems are exposed to, and cooperate with, their surroundings and that they can obtain qualitatively original properties through occurrence, developing in the frequent expansion (Think Insights, 2023). Small businesses are a cohesive collection of information, activities, and resources that interact to create a functioning organization system. Leaders must look into the environment, inputs, transformational processes, outputs, and feedback to understand how the components affect business operations. Systems theory also follows that the employees focus on attaining the set collective goals by following a leader's or employer's leadership. As a conceptual framework, systems theory helps leaders understand the external and internal operations and perspectives surrounding their businesses (Think Insights, 2023). I used systems theory to represent the management field of small businesses in my research. I used the systems theory to examine any system using different collective parts in addition to efficiency requirements for the system to function. Many times, there are unexpected encounters that small business owners may not foresee. Systems theory delivers a foundation for small business owners to embark on establishing components that interfere with establishing sustainable businesses.

I used the SWOT analysis to identify four key dimensions of business modeling: strategy, operations, finances, and marketing. Albert Humphrey introduced the SWOT analysis theory in 1960 to guide business owners and minimize risks (Harmon, 2019). It is a valuable tool because it helps leaders understand and make decisions for diverse situations that organizations and businesses face. SWOT analysis is a useful framework that can be related to experience and leadership skills in the context of small business sustainability. To align SWOT analysis with my study, I considered conducting

interviews with small business owners to identify and analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats they perceive regarding their leadership skills and experience in sustaining their businesses. This can provide valuable insights into the specific areas where small business owners may need support and guidance. The business environment is uncertain and requires leaders to find competitive strategies. The SWOT analysis provides a robust framework for reviewing a business's position in the market and its external and internal environment, especially when leaders face indecision periods (Benzaghta et al., 2021). The internal environment analysis helps business owners identify their competitive advantages, core competencies, capabilities, and resources. The external environment analysis identifies business threats and market opportunities by scanning the industry environment and competitors' resources (Benzaghta et al., 2021). The SWOT analysis helps leaders produce alternative business options and possible future consequences (Harmon, 2019). Understanding the meaning behind the SWOT analysis and the business planning necessary to complete it helped me better understand how this impact small business owners and whether being efficient in a SWOT analysis can impact the duration of a small business. By completing a SWOT analysis, business leaders can reflect on their competencies and develop derivative leadership strategies to support their business sustainability.

Research Question

The research question for this study was as follows: What strategies do small business owners use to acquire leadership skills and experience to sustain their businesses?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are statements foreseen by the researchers to be accurate as understood through beliefs without any sustaining proof or data (Theofandis & Fountouki, 2019). The first assumption in this study was that small business owners would be ingenuous and forthcoming about their skills and experiences in sustaining their small businesses. The second assumption in this study was that the selected small business owners discussed their leadership style and clarify if that was a factor in their business sustainability. The third assumption was that small business owners disclosed what made their businesses successful and sustainable.

Limitations

Limitations are the theoretical or practical shortcomings of a research study (Radu, 2019). A standard limitation during the qualitative approach study is the quality of research. This quality is profoundly reliant on the individual expertise of the researcher. However, there may be an influence by the researcher's personal biases and peculiarities that can occur as well. Precision and consistency become more challenging to preserve, measure, and prove if the researchers' personal bias comes in the way of the research (Radu, 2019). The first limitation of my study is the participants' bias. That is, participants may respond just to match up with the expected or desired results of the study. The second limitation is the sample size, as it is a smaller sample size which may make it difficult to generalize the findings of the study.

Transition

Section 1 provides a comprehensive analysis of the various theoretical frameworks and models that have been developed to promote sustainable small business practices. Moreover, it also highlights the background of the problem, business problem focus, and the project purpose. This section contains an overview of the study's assumptions and limitations. The section contains the overarching research questions and interview questions developed to help gather insights from small business owners or managers on their experiences with leadership strategies, their successes, and their challenges in enhancing sustainability.

Section 2 contained a review of the professional and academic literature on the problem under study. It contained the literature on conceptual frameworks.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Through this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study, I explored strategies that small business owners can use to acquire various leadership skills, enable individuals to effectively guide, motivate, and influence others towards achieving organizational goals to sustain their businesses. For this pragmatic inquiry study, I interviewed four owners of successful and well-sustained small businesses in Connecticut, who have demonstrated longevity and stability over five years. The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by informing small business owners on when and how businesses fail, which helps them prepare well (Albalushi & Naqshbandi, 2022). Secondly, knowledge of small business failures improves the chances of success in terms of the constant provision of goods and services to consumers, increases self-dependency, provides stable employment, and contributes to community growth because of the resulting tax revenues. Thus, it is essential to investigate leadership strategies small business owners may use to achieve business sustainability.

I gathered the literature review herein to explain the connection between leadership styles and business sustainability. I used literature from numerous resources, such as scholarly peer-reviewed journals, books, and electronic data that indicate a relationship between business sustainability and leadership.

I used the following scholarly electronic data to retrieve peer-reviewed journal articles: Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ABI/Inform Global, and ABI/INFORM. I used these keywords to help with the search: small business owners, small business success, small business failures, small business sustainability, leadership strategies, SWOT

analysis, small business recovery, recovery plan, and vested interest theory. The primary objective of this review was to gather credible and comprehensive themes within the literature on small business sustainability. As a result, this literature review provided a framework to guide and demonstrate how small business owners can better their chances of sustaining their business for a long time.

By incorporating perceptions based on my study, I ground my research appropriately. The substance of my study transpired from synthesizing data gathered through an organized breakdown and analysis of published literature based on my chosen research topic. This review included the following components: investigation and incorporation of the research, critical analysis of the conceptual framework, and assortment of literature themes. The literature review concluded with a summary of the concepts of ideas related to small business owners in Connecticut who sustained past the five-year mark.

SWOT Analysis and systems theory are related to my study because they are tools help prepares small business owners on how they are doing from a competitive and performance standpoint. Analyzing these two things is a primary method for business sustainability because it prepares and organizes small business owners to proceed with pressures, threats, and profit deflection. From a performance standpoint, SWOT analysis helps small business owners understand which part of their business is performing well. SWOT analysis is good for the success and betterment of a business (Benzaghta et al., 2021). The systems theory helps small business owners bring different parts together to work as one unit. The collaboration of these different parts creates a good working environment crucial to business sustainability (Nikiforova, 2022). These are the areas that

are critical to success because they are what give the business the competitive benefit. Small business owners can maintain their power by identifying these strengths without losing their competitive advantage. SWOT analysis also helps small business owners foresee their competitive standpoint by breaking down the internal strengths and weaknesses of the organization.

Small Business Characterization

Small businesses can be very diverse, and no single process would define a small business. The definition behind the term small business varies globally because of unique features, various business settings, and differences in regulations. However, the definitions of small businesses are similar in various countries when comparing the revenue, capital, number of workers, and organizational aspects (Hait, 2021). The United States focuses on capital turnover and the number of employees to classify and organize companies (Hait, 2021). The U.S. SBA defines a small business with the following factors: organized for a profit, has a place of business within the United States, makes a significant contribution to the U.S. economy through payment of taxes or use of American products, materials, or labors; and lastly is independently owned and operated and is not dominant in its field of national basis (US Department of State, 2019). I focused on the SBA's definition for my study because the small businesses under study are within the United States.

Small businesses are crucial to the economic growth of a nation. Small businesses tend to create more jobs during economic expansions than large businesses. Small businesses are affected the most in times of recession. Wilmoth (2022) noted that small businesses account for 2 out of 3 jobs created in the past 25 years. These statistics

accounted for 66% of employment growth during the same period. Wilmoth (2022) also noted that Americans lost 8.6 million jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the pandemic, small businesses created 5.5 million jobs (Wilmoth, 2022). These numbers indicate the necessity of promoting an entrepreneurial culture that leads to the development of small businesses. Thus, countries seeking sustainable growth must promote the growth of small business enterprises.

Competitive strategies adopted by large organizations tend to exert pressure on small businesses. This pressure contributes to the failure of many small businesses in the United States fail in times of crisis compared to large organizations (Adam & Alarifi, 2021). Therefore, small businesses need to evolve constantly by turning problems into opportunities. Leaders of small businesses must take risks to improve their performance for growth and sustainability. Taking these risks results in introducing innovations crucial for promoting business development (Luamba et al., 2021). Small business leaders must effectively manage the employees to help them develop a flexible organizational culture essential to achieving continuous innovation in the changing environment. Adam and Alarifi (2021) postulated that small businesses that adopted innovative practices during the COVID-19 pandemic survived the crisis. The researchers noted that small business leaders should constantly update their plans, seek new information, and develop innovative and creative practices to ensure continuity and survival.

Small businesses need to adopt technology to improve their chances of survival. The emergence of new markets, intensive scientific development, and application of technologies influences how organizations conduct business today. Businesses quickly adapt to the internet age by incorporating technology to improve their effectiveness and

efficiency (Juniarti & Omar, 2021). Customer preferences are also shifting because of the increase in technology use. This shift means that small businesses must also adopt technology to increase their chances of survival. However, there are a lot of uncertainties and risks associated with technology adoption. For example, changes in work procedures may increase computer anxiety, resulting in a dip in performance. Additionally, small businesses face financial and resource constraints that limit technology adoption (Juniarti & Omar, 2021). To ease these burdens, leaders must develop strategies for smooth technological transitions in small business setups.

People start businesses for various reasons, such as to make profits and remain independent. The latter kind of entrepreneurs are content with remaining at their current scope and size. Independence is an entrepreneur-specific characteristic that negatively impacts the accessibility of finances by small businesses, which affects their competitive growth (Ahmad et al., 2022). As a result, many small businesses cannot meet their successful guidelines and fail as early as their first three years. Failure on the part of the entrepreneur results in a damaged reputation for small businesses, which makes it difficult for financial institutions to loan money to them. Entrepreneurs and leaders must have the right reasons for starting small businesses to achieve sustainability.

Small Business Strategies for Success

Small businesses form the backbone of the economies of countries worldwide. In the United States, small businesses account for 99.9% of employer firms. A failure of small businesses in the United States would result in catastrophic results. Therefore, small business leaders must develop efficient and effective strategies to curb business failure. To do so, these leaders must understand factors such as profits and performance

that measure business success. Liman et al. (2021) examined the concept of business performance and classified it into four distinct sets. One uses non-financial and financial metrics to measure whether a business has met its goals. Another definition views performance as a causal dynamic model that predicts future results based on current actions. Liman et al. also classified performance with the degree of clarity in the field of responsibility. Lastly, the authors noted that performance should be quantifiable. Liman et al. also postulated that businesses must look into the external environment to recognize challenges and opportunities affecting performance. Leaders must ensure that the identified factors work together in an integrated manner to improve business performance. Improving business performance increases the likelihood of success of small businesses.

The internal environment of a business affects its performance. Engidaw (2021) argued that small businesses should find a balance that allows their departments and employees to collaborate and work together. To solve such problems, small business leaders must improve the internal environment. The internal environment provides a business direction and helps it differentiate itself from the competition (Umar et al., 2022). The internal environment comprises factors such as physical infrastructure, technology capacity, and organizational structure manageable by the business's top leadership. Addressing these internal factors allows a business to set long and short-term goals and develop viable plans to meet the goals. Leaders in small businesses should identify their strengths and weaknesses, which will help create a sustainable internal environment.

Successful businesses have organized hierarchical structures that improve communication and information flow. The organizational structure helps small businesses invest in better customer services, the right entrepreneurial culture, and good management skills (Umar et al., 2022). Most organizational structures are linear or triangular, with few individuals at the top and a large base of employees (Baruah & Gogoi, 2021). Leaders in small businesses should avoid adopting such structures but rather structure their businesses depending on the size and workflow. These leaders should also seek to understand workers' specialization and how employees interact. This information helps leaders develop appropriate organizational structures that improve decision-making processes. Consequently, the decisions improve customer services essential to increasing small business performance. Increased performance leads to business sustainability.

Small businesses should leverage technology to increase productivity and efficiency critical to business success. Technology capacity provides small businesses with the current knowledge to compete with rival firms (Umar et al., 2022). Small business leaders must be able to distribute and reinvest additional returns, promote their products and services, and make well-informed decisions (Engidaw, 2021). Technology improves access to data, eliminates human error, and provides insight into consumers' tastes and preferences. For instance, online shopping platforms increased customer collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Technology as an internal factor creates a conducive working environment for employees by reducing collisions and confusion. Consequently, it increases the likelihood of a business succeeding.

Every business should have clearly defined objectives and goals to improve its chances of success. Clear goals ensure small businesses plan, budget, forecast, and report the correct information. According to Gruenbichler et al. (2021), small businesses that clearly define their goals are highly successful. The authors noted that managers could easily measure the feasibility of fulfilling clearly defined goals. Setting goals helps improve accountability among employees and quantify success (Baruah & Gogoi, 2021). Leaders can ask specific questions and evaluate the progress of the business. Setting goals motivates employees to work towards a shared purpose, improving their optimism. It also increases their sense of fulfillment if they meet the set goals. All these factors increase employee satisfaction and the retention rate. Small business leaders must set specific goals and develop effective strategies to improve performance and business sustainability.

Businesses need help with making the right decisions at the right time. Pereira, Santos et al. (2021) recommended that small business owners use the scientific management model to help develop problem-solving skills such as transparency and responsible management of business resources. The nature of the business life cycle is that it is complex, ambiguous, uncertain, and volatile (Pereira, Santos et al., 2021). As such, businesses must constantly transform and adapt to survive. Business owners must cultivate complex problem-solving skills based on facts and execute decisions objectively and without cognitive biases. Developing rational decisions takes much work, especially for small business owners. Small business owners must deal with over-confidence, anchoring, and confirmation biases. Others are unwilling to give up on a predetermined course of action, primarily when they have heavily invested in it. Using the scientific

management model helps small businesses make valuable decisions that improve their prediction capabilities and reduce uncertainty, errors, and failure rates.

Small Business Challenges

Small business entrepreneurs should prioritize sustainability to ensure their ventures thrive for the foreseeable future. Sustainable practices involve making fundamental adjustments to how a company runs (Pereira, Santos et al., 2021). Small businesses play a significant role in driving economic development across America. Many start-up businesses fail within just a few years because the owners lack sufficient understanding of how to tailor their practices for long-term success. According to Alsaaty and Makhlouf (2020), inadequate marketing efforts and strategies play a substantial role in the 50% failure rate of small businesses within five years in the United States. Such failure has serious ramifications on both local and national economies; as such it is imperative for small business owners to understand how sustainability and failure relate to specific skills such as marketing to fully grasp what their businesses require for survival and take steps towards making sure it happens.

Reaching sustainability requires coming up with creative and effective methods for your business, particularly small enterprises which face greater exposure to risks than larger enterprises. As risks have increased for small business owners, they have become more aware of both challenges and opportunities they face. One such obstacle is marketing aspects of small business which could impede its survival (Schaltegger et al., 2016). Small business owners must remain actively engaged in innovation processes and incorporate strategic planning into their business models. Customers today have access to numerous technologies and connectivity options, which make them more selective about

who they engage with. Some small business owners find adopting new technologies challenging due to cost, risk, and uncertainty; as a result, developing customer-centric approaches may prove challenging for them.

Selecting a niche market is an essential decision for small business owners in their efforts towards sustainability, and their sustainability strategies should often revolve around targeting that segment of customers. But narrowing their market focus can present its own set of difficulties: small business owners with narrowed niche offerings may have limited influence over market demands according to Schaltegger et al (2016) this could hinder their ability to expand and adapt products/services according to demand therefore small business owners must create an environment that increases the chance of long-term sustainability for their businesses.

Small Business Failure

Understanding the term business failure helps entrepreneurs develop leadership strategies for small business sustainability. Business failure refers to when an organization goes bankrupt, enters a merger, or fails to meet its responsibilities to the stakeholders (Mitic, 2022). It can also refer to an event when expenses escalate to a point where the business becomes insolvent, when the revenue decreases exceptionally, or when the business owner disposes of its assets to avoid further losses. The role of small businesses in expanding the United States economy suggests that it is crucial to understand why they fail. Approximately 50% of small businesses fail in the first five years for various reasons (Mitic, 2022). Knowledge of the reasons for failure can help develop strategies that improve the health and stability of the country's economy.

Small businesses fail because of poor management or incompetency. Entrepreneurs must develop good management skills and be competent to improve the survival rates of small businesses. Unfortunately, there are small businesses led by incompetent leaders who lack the basic principles of management which leads to failure (Pauline, 2019). These leaders fail to conduct prior and extensive research on the targeted entrepreneurial activity before they open small businesses. Their lack of knowledge forces these leaders to take unrealistic, excessive, and unmanageable risks (Pauline, 2019). Additionally, these incompetent leaders lack strategic plans to implement the necessary actions to achieve organizational goals. Such leaders struggle with conflict resolution and cannot direct and motivate employees. Other businesses are led by technically incompetent leaders who lack the resources and expertise to run the specific businesses (Chen, 2022). Other leaders fail to develop strong and appropriate entrepreneurial networks which leads to business failure. Good professional networks help entrepreneurs remain informed on any changes within their industries. Therefore, small business owners should cultivate managerial and technical competencies to increase their chances of success.

Small businesses also fail because of inadequate financing and poor planning. Elbahajaoui et al. (2022) noted that most businesses fail because of poor planning, and inadequate financing. *Planning* is a continuous process that allows businesses, especially startups, to navigate uncertainties. Unfortunately, most small business owners fail to plan, resulting in a lack of a concrete business plan necessary for businesses to obtain financing (Elbahjaoui et al., 2022). Poor planning also affects the ability of a business to employ quality staff, contributing to continuous losses and eventual exit from the market. Small

businesses must also plan for their success. In most cases, failure to plan for the level of growth a business can maintain leads to overtrading or uncontrolled growth (Elbahjaoui et al., 2022). This unplanned expansion affects the successful transition from personal to professional management and may result in business failure. Small business owners need to plan for the short and long term to increase their chances of success and sustainability.

Another reason for small businesses' failure is inconsistent and poor cash flow management techniques. Cash flow refers to the movement of cash into and out of business. Cash flow management refers to creating cash-flow-related controls and plans to enable a business to make profits and maintain liquidity (Ramli & Yekini, 2022). Businesses require constant and sufficient funds to meet day-to-day expenses. According to Ramli and Yekini (2022), cash is king and determines the ability of a business to succeed or fail. Robust cash flows enable a business to adapt and exploit opportunities during crises. Cash flow allows a business to meet its short-term obligations without increasing operating costs. Unfortunately, most small business owners focus on profits rather than managing cash flow. Ramli and Yekini noted that small businesses that failed to manage their cash flow before and during the COVID-19 pandemic failed. This information revealed that small business owners should invest in proper management of their cash flows. Understanding a small business's cash situation can help it make better decisions that contribute to sustainability.

Small business owners need to make smart investments by predicting future trends. Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal introduced the term *ex-ante* business model to evaluate the probability of business success before investing in it. The Ex-ante method is a process that predicts future market events before participants become aware of the

pertinent facts (Chen, 2022). For example, individuals can estimate the price of their target stock to determine whether to invest in it. An individual or business investigate previous financial results, interest rates, market demands, business performance, and market conditions to determine trajectory of business (Chen, 2022). This analysis helps business owners better understand factors that can contribute to business failure. Furthermore, this method also assists small businesses in efficiently strategizing on what and how much to produce according to the feasible demand scenario (Hyytinen et al., 2022). It can also determine the businesses' rate of capital in relevance to the open interest rates and cash-flow forecasts. Expectations of the future economic scenario support efficient planning to avoid inflation, deflation, or recession. However, the ex-ante approach does not provide factual determination because it is not based on actual results. Even so, small business owners should look into the future of the ventures they engage in.

<center>**Small Businesses' Performance**</center>

Small businesses play a critical role in developing a country's economy. According to Garcia-Martinez et al. (2023), small businesses play a pivotal role in driving economic development, poverty reduction, employment creation, and overall job creation. The importance of small businesses means that entrepreneurs need to explore strategies to boost performance and longevity of these small enterprises. Understanding the factors that influence the growth and success of small business helps entrepreneurs develop these strategies. Business that wants to survive must consider their performance that revolve around financial and non-financial parameters (Dogan & Koyluoglu, 2021). Financial parameters refer to the market share, growth rate, and profitability of a

business. Non-financial parameters refer to factors such as job satisfaction, technology acceptance, employee performance, and employee quality. The knowledge on these business performance parameters can help small business owners develop management models that reduce the negative impacts of business difficulties.

Modern business environment is continuously changing with businesses facing continuous competition. It is difficult for small businesses to maintain or sustain a competitive advantage. Adapting to the evolving environment requires that small business owners venture to establish a steady source of income to maintain or increase their performance. According to Stojanovic and Stankovic (2021), small businesses can establish a steady flow of income or financial expansion through innovation. Dogan and Koylouglu (2021) also noted that innovative efforts are key to improving the competitiveness of a business by improving its performance. The innovation practices should revolve around risk-taking habits and encouraging creation of new ideas that contribute to increased business performance. Innovative businesses are flexible and can easily take advantage of opportunities better than the competitors. Small business owners should focus on product and process innovations which will improve business performance.

Over the years, the world has experiences global crises such as economic meltdown, climatic changes, political crises, terrorist attacks and COVID-19 in different magnitudes and scales. These crises have led to individual, societal, and financial impacts on individuals (Maria & Evangelia, 2021). Most recently, businesses downsized or collapsed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes led to loss of jobs which affected the mental health and wellbeing of individuals. Those who were left had no job

security. Such situations led to poor mental states and as a result poor business performance because it affects both the small business owners and employees. The world health organization 2014 report revealed that individuals' psychological wellbeing helps them realize their potential and manage life and work stress simultaneously (Aquino et al., 2020). Individuals with positive psychological wellbeing tend to make strong workplace relationships and are more interested in their job. The individuals are productive, less distracted, and often post good performance. Small business owners must provide employees with a good working environment, assurance, infrastructure, have realistic targets, and give them freedom to do their work as a way to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Governments also need to provide a conducive political environment for people to thrive. Good working environment inspires positive mindsets critical to improve business performance.

Small business owners have a difficult time adapting to the evolving business environment. According to Kuepie et al. (2016), small business owners experience difficulties adapting to unexpected events, outsourcing resources, networking, and efficiently obtaining commercial credit. Social networks cannot be ignored because of its importance to improving small business performance (Lans et al., 2016). These networks open doors to credit, innovation and have a direct correlation with economic and performance success. Building social networks is challenging for small business owners. However, the benefits social networks provide in terms of increased productivity and enhanced business performance outweigh the risk involved in networking (Walther, 2015). By building these relationships, small businesses owner get insight and advice on current issues affecting their business. This information helps small business owner

develop strategies that enhance business performance. As such, small business owners need to cultivate social competence while engaging with social networks in order to maintain performance.

Business owners must set clear, concise, and specific goals for their businesses. Sharma and Dave (2014) noted that setting specific goals can significantly boost the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME). They observed a positive correlation between small business owners' goals and organization performance. Aligning business' needs and owner's goals was central to achieving positive performance. Sharma and Dave (2014) identified six essential goals to attain positive performance: cultivating an environment in which employees feel satisfied, productive, and proud to work; offering benefits to owners for financial security; producing quality products; supporting personal development and advancement; encouraging positive corporate citizenship practices; and guaranteeing job security. These findings show that setting specific goals with effective strategies in mind can drive performance and ensure long-term sustainability of an enterprise.

Financial resources have both positive and negative effects on all business systems. Mikic et al. (2016) noted that most successful small business owners had to identify all available funding options and financial resources prior to beginning their ventures. Adequate financing allowed these small businesses to survive. Thus, small business owners must explore financial avenues such as self-financing loans, debt financing or equity capital. Funding helps businesses realize their achievements and performance.

Small business owners need to identify internal and external factors that negatively influence business performance. Dragnic (2014) identified eight factors influencing small businesses' internal and external systems. These factors included life cycle stages, technology, business size, product/technology innovation, autonomy roles, and the importance of goal formalization/centralization. Leonidou et al (2017) identified internal drivers such as uncertainty, need for substantial financial contributions, high complexity, lack of expertise, no cohesive culture and improper organizational structure as causes of poor performance. Leonidou et al. (2017) also highlighted how inadequate organizational structures may prevent proper performance management practices from taking effect. Leonidou et al. identified external factors like customer type, business sector and the state of the economy as additional considerations affecting small business performance. McDowell et al. (2017) identified entrepreneurial orientation, innovativeness, flexibility, adaptability, and locality as essential characteristics of small business success. These researchers indicated that market conditions, available resources and strategies all interact to influence the performance of a small business. Given the information, small business owners should focus on implementing business strategies to boost financial performance, establish competitive advantages and tackle various internal/external challenges effectively.

Factors of Sustainability

Businesses that demonstrate positive impacts on the economy, society, and their local environment are more likely to achieve sustainability. Most business leaders devote significant resources and efforts toward this end; growth is usually an essential objective when striving for sustainability; developing sustainable practices can include integrating

elements like customers with exceptional service expectations as well as high-quality products into the framework (Strohhecker & Grossler, 2012). Adopting these practices has an immediate and long-term effect on the ongoing operations of any given enterprise. Leaders tasked with maintaining sustainable businesses must consider the gradual development of culture, workforce, and environment. Failure should be seen as an opportunity for innovative tools for environmental stewardship and social progress (Strohhecker & Grossler, 2012). Encouraging innovation within sustainable business should not prevent leaders from upholding ethical work standards while emphasizing empowerment, foresight prudence and trust to foster long-term viability of their enterprise.

Expanding on the idea of business sustainability, a sustainable business can be defined as one with a viable strategy that allows it to compete effectively in an ever-evolving marketplace where challenges, opportunities and investor expectations vary considerably. Any economic endeavor has the potential to become sustainable by adhering to actions that improve its economic performance (Ferro et al., 2017). Having transparent leadership within a business is key for a thriving business. This form of leadership allows the sharing of power, information, and risk management with all relevant parties throughout its lifespan (Ferro et al. (2017). Transparent and committed business leaders can promote sustainability by assuring the safety of both their company and employees, adopting innovative competitiveness strategies, meeting shareholder obligations, creating an optimal workplace environment and employee morale, offering high-quality products and services, as well as creating retention/attraction programs.

Small business owners should be transparent and committed to ensure the sustainability of their businesses.

Year by year, entrepreneurs recognize the significance of sustainability for business success. That is why entrepreneurs today are providing investors with data, tools, and information to win their trust and achieve business sustainability (Jibreal, 2021). There exist comprehensive processes and actions which act as tools for providing entrepreneurs with the needed information. Entrepreneurs have also turned to selling goods to consumers or the entertainment sector to achieve sustainability in customer service. Jibreal (2021) further noted that business leaders should offer employees up-to-date training to meet changing consumer behaviors while adapting products accordingly to improve customer service. These actions are significant to entrepreneurs because they help them create sustainable initiatives.

Business leaders are responsible for formulating strategies for their businesses. The primary task of these leaders should be to identify innovative, revenue-focused sustainable strategies which make them invaluable assets and primary backers of the enterprise (Nasiri et al., 2021). While formulating these strategies, business leaders need to ensure that the strategies promote enterprise growth and benefit society and environment. These leaders should also ensure that they create long-term economic strategies that can sustain business expansion, performance, and success. Business leaders should build on product knowledge, strengthen corporate capabilities, and encourage innovation within their small enterprises (Nasiri et al., 2021). Small business owners also need to take care of their employees, clients, and society by implementing positive social change policies and managing risks effectively and identifying

opportunities to ensure sustainable operations (Strohhecker & Grossler, 2012). Therefore, small business owners should introduce compatible technologies that support business activities, provide functional tools that reduce expenses, manage overheads and boost customer loyalty. Focusing on enterprise growth while benefiting society and environment ensures entrepreneurs prioritize long-term vision over short-term plans which leads to sustainable business expansion.

Sustainability within an enterprise involves prioritizing areas of improvement, innovation and change that maximize shareholder returns. Sustainability refers to maintaining the business's ability to continue producing profits and remain viable over time. Small business owners strive to achieve sustainable success through continuous growth and stable revenue, necessitating specific actions and strategies for success (Nasiri et al., 2021). Leadership knowledge plays an essential part in this regard. An entrepreneur's strengths, expertise, and capabilities can have a powerful effect on business prosperity and sustainability. Motivation, proficiency, efficiency, and the personality of their small business owner are essential ingredients for their business to flourish and endure over time.

Education Factors for Sustainability

Attaining sustainability in today's business landscape entails making positive contributions to the economy, society, and local environment. Many business leaders are actively committed to this pursuit (Strohhecker & Grossler, 2012). Business leaders need to adopt strategies such as having a consumer-centric approach, providing exceptional customer service standards, and offering quality products to promote business growth and sustainability. Ferro et al. (2017) added that business leaders must consider how

gradually their organizational culture, workforce and environment evolve over time as a way of promoting business sustainability. Viewing challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles is essential; this shift of thought facilitates the search for innovative tools that foster environmental security and social prosperity.

A sustainable business as one that employs both an environmentally responsible strategy and can compete effectively in an ever-evolving marketplace, while adhering to governance practices that enhance economic performance. These dynamics forces entrepreneurs to provide potential investors with all the data, tools, and information necessary to gain their trust and support (Ferro et al., 2017). Thorough business processes and actions can play an essential role in creating long-term sustainability; customer service in sectors like public goods sales and entertainment is of critical importance; this includes offering employees up-to-date training to meet customer satisfaction while adapting to shifting consumer habits. Customer feedback provides invaluable sources for driving innovation while improving products while simultaneously building business sustainability.

Technology is essential to supporting sustainable business activities. According to Al Badi (2014), technology reduces operational costs and enhances customer loyalty. The use of technology allows individuals in an organization to focus on areas for development, innovation and change that will maximize shareholder returns. This shift in focus allows organizations to develop strategies that foster sustainable business growth (AL Badi, 2014). Small business leaders should incorporate technology to improve efficiency and employee satisfaction which are essential ingredients for achieving success and sustainability.

Leadership and Management Roles

Leadership and management can commonly be used in very similar perspectives, however, the concept behind each can be very different. A leader influences, enables, and motivates a group of people or an organization to success (Jibreal, 2021). A manager controls and directs systems towards organizational success. Leadership focuses on a leader's ability to influence and set goals while management focuses on the processes of achieving the set goals (Jibreal, 2021). Another difference is that leaders create a vision and are prone to risk taking while managers focus more on controlled risks. Both a manager and leader have the same end goal, however, they have their own methods and strategies to fulfill these goals.

Leaders and managers operate differently for the success of a business. Leaders build relationships while managers build systems and processes (Jibreal, 2021). Leaders focus more on their responsibilities to stakeholders, which enables them to build loyalty and trust because they can deliver on their capacity to get things done. Managers are more concerned with the essential structures to set and attain goals. They are focused on the analytics behind the structure to obtain the anticipated outcome of the problem. Lastly, another critical difference between the two is the interactions with their team members. Leaders focus more on interaction with a coaching mechanism (Jibreal, 2021). They know their team members have the solutions and will eventually find those answers. Due to this, leaders can avoid telling their team members how to do their job because they are confident about their potential.

Another difference between leaders and managers is how they interact and view team members. Managers interact with their team members by giving specific directions

and guiding them (Jibreal, 2021). Managers are particular about the assigned tasks to the team members and prefer giving direction on how to solve them rather than letting their team members figure it out on their own. Another difference is that a manager's goals emanate from necessities while a leader's goals are from their attitude. These leadership and management role differences play an important role in small business success and sustainability because both offer different skills to ensure the business can succeed. Below is a breakdown of different leadership theories and their significance. Understanding the various leadership styles is crucial to determining suitable strategies that different small business leaders can use to increase their businesses' chances of success and sustainability.

(a) Leadership Theory Taxonomy: The leadership behind a small business is crucial because it determines how successful the business may be. However, the leadership styles vary and are different from one another (Pauline, 2019). The following few paragraphs demonstrate potential leadership theories utilized by management to help sustain a small business.

(b) Democratic Style of Leadership: Also known as the participative leadership style. This leadership style allows the leaders to coordinate, distribute decision-making responsibilities, and facilitate group discussion with employees. As a result, the democratic leadership style improves employee engagement, leading to superior employee performance (Anwer et al., 2022). Participation creates morale in that employees respond more co-operatively when the leader issues the necessary instructions. It also improves the flow of information and feedback. However, the democratic leadership style has its disadvantages. One such shortcoming is the

assumption that people have shared expertise level in decision-making (Anwer et al., 2022). Unfortunately, employees have different levels of conscience, self-control, and intelligence all which increase the likelihood of poor decision-making and execution processes (Dike & Madubueze, 2019). Another core issue with democratic leadership style is that it assumes all employees are trustworthy, responsible, and self-motivated which is not always true. Lastly, democratic leadership can result in failed communications and uncompleted projects, especially where roles are unclear.

(c) Autocratic Style of Leadership: Also known as the authoritarian leadership style. Autocratic leaders control all decisions and demand absolute obedience from the employees. These leaders accentuate the distance between themselves and the employees. This leadership style stifles innovativeness, uniqueness, and creativity among the subordinates. According to Pizzolitto et al. (2022), autocratic leadership leads to negative performance, strained leader-follower relationships, and high employee turnover.

Nevertheless, an autocratic leadership style is sometimes beneficial and can positively affect employee performance. One such situation is when a project needs quick decisions and strong leadership to complete the task. Autocratic leaders come in handy because they are fearless in assigning tasks and establishing strict deadlines for employees (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). Autocratic leadership is necessary for stressful situations such as the military. Here the leaders make all the decisions, and the subordinates are left to perform specific tasks without worrying about making complex decisions. Autocratic leadership is

effective when there are large employee groups, low rewards, low team power struggles, and low cost of failure.

(d) Transactional Leadership: This form of leadership was founded by Max Weber in 1947. Transactional leadership focuses on the exchanges between the leader and employees. This leadership style focuses on short-term goals and as such offers rewards and benefits (Ramadhanti et al., 2021). This appeals to employees who in most cases feel appreciated and motivated to perform. Transactional leaders favor controlled and structured procedures and strategies. They revel in efficiency and follow rules in doing things correctly. However, transactional leaders are not open to change and tend to be very fixed and inflexible (Ramadhanti et al., 2021).

(e) Transformational Leadership: James MacGregor Bur founded this form of leadership in 1978. Transformational leaders are fair and have a sense of integrity. These leaders set clear goals and have high expectations from their peers (Ramadhanti et al., 2021). They are also encouraging and provide support to the followers. Lastly, they inspire others to reach out and go above and beyond (Ross & Kendall, n.d.). Overall, transformational leadership involves leaders trying to change people for the betterment of a business or organization.

(f) Authoritative Style: Daniel Goleman created this style of leadership in 2002. It is also known as autocratic leadership. In the authoritarian leadership style, a single leader commands the entire policies, determines goals to accomplish, and controls all the activities without any meaningful involvement from others (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). This type of leader tries to dictate complete control of the team, leaving low independence from the group.

(g) Pacesetting Style: Daniel Goleman created this style of leadership in 2001. The key characteristics of this leadership style are a leader leading from the head, who would constantly have high expectations for their team and presumes the team to exceed with minimal management (Pal, 2022). The leader is result-oriented, focuses on continuous improvement, and emphasizes high quality output under strict timelines.

(h) Coaching Style: Paul Hersey created this style of leadership in the late 1960s. Coaching leadership involves and enables the engagement of team members, as well as drawing out and empathizing with their specific and individual motivations (Pal, 2022). The leader recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of team members to help them improve.

(i) Affiliative Style: Daniel Goleman created this style of leadership in late 2002. This style of leadership promotes positivity and an effective team-building workplace. The affiliative leadership style concentrates primarily on conflict resolution and creating personal associations between management and employers to construct trust and loyalty (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). Therefore, this leadership style is effective in several situations: where the team morale is low, where teams need to follow strict rules and regulations, and where leaders need to rebuild trust among team members.

(j) Laissez-Faire Style: Kurt Lewin founded this form of leadership in 1939. The laissez-faire leaders are confident and do not rely on others for guidance. They give their staff enough freedom to make intelligent choices and decisions (Anwer et al., 2022). Laissez-faire leaders delegate authority to the right experts and give

the necessary leadership qualities to their staff. They praise accomplishments and

provide constructive criticism to their subordinates.

(k) Authentic Leadership: Bill George founded this form of leadership in 2003. An

authentic leader should establish behavior that always empowers the awareness of

trust. Authentic leaders can take responsibility for their errors, are genuine, self-

aware, result-driven, have internalized moral perspective, and transparent

(Prakash et al., 2021). They focus more on long-term goals by encouraging

positive interpersonal relationships and trust.

Innovation in Leadership

In the competitive and vigorous contemporary society, firms and businesses value

their capacity to transform or change. Superior leaders adopt and apply new and exciting

means to motivate employees and attain their organizational goals. Introducing new

devices, methods, or ideas into a business is often called innovation (Alharbi, 2021).

These innovations are vital to an organization's capacity to transform and gain a

competitive advantage. They are a source of value creation that is essential to their

sustainability. Alharbi (2021) argued that small business leaders must create

environments within the businesses that encourage sustainable innovation to avoid

failure. Unfortunately, not all innovations are sustainable. Small business leaders must

balance the innovation processes' environmental, social, and economic elements. The

balance ensures that small businesses transform or change while maintaining competitive

advantages.

Small business leaders face many operational challenges that affect the innovation

capabilities of their businesses. Leaders must acquire knowledge of external and internal

business factors to understand how to deal with these challenges. External factors such as pressures from competitors, suppliers, the labor market, and stakeholders can create threats or opportunities (Nasiri et al., 2021). To manage these external factors, small business leaders must create frameworks encouraging interactive processes and showing employee support. These frameworks improve information flow within the businesses, improving small business leaders' knowledge and sustainability skills (Nasiri et al., 2021). Small business leaders must also manage internal factors that affect a firm's readiness for change, vision, employee capabilities, entrepreneurial orientation, and business sustainability. The ability to navigate these competitive pressures results in small business sustainability. Thus, small business leaders must offer leadership by encouraging innovation to increase the performance and long-term success of the business.

Incorporating innovation into small businesses is a complex process. Leaders must strategize and prioritize specific terms and conditions to ensure small businesses adopt sustainable innovations. They must also strategize on how to continuously organize and deliver innovations with enough value to improve performance. For this study, I propose the formula below whereby small business leaders strategize around these critical elements:

Scale:

Innovations should generate value to meet financial growth objectives. The concept of scale refers to simultaneously launching innovations at the correct scale in the relevant markets and segments. The correct scale means having large enough targets to force small business leaders to invest in innovations (Luamba et al., 2021). For instance,

if a small business has been closed or shut down, to revamp the market with the existing

or the prevailing issues, the more ideal or logical method, which will not be an easy way

to accumulate and generate results, needs to be made through the targeting of the right

audience for the proper role and duties. The business must also identify an appropriate

audience to encourage belief in innovation.

Choose:

Having creative and innovative ideas is invaluable. However, small businesses

can fail if they choose the wrong innovative ideas to support and scale. Small business

leaders must create boundaries around the opportunities they intend to explore (Alharbi,

2021). These leaders must prioritize these innovative ideas by identifying the most

valuable ones. The businesses must also be confident that investing in the ideas will later

finance the business. This strategy helps eliminate the less promising ideas and saves a

business from losses or eventual failure. Small business leaders must also choose

transparent communication processes that provide direction and better outcomes.

Accelerate:

The chosen innovation should excite consumers and bring new products into the

market. Small business leaders must ensure that the innovation they choose solves a

practical problem and generates money. Small businesses should actively test, develop,

validate, and refine their innovations to avoid losing customers to competitors (Alharbi,

2021). Small business leaders must also constantly evolve by increasing their market

intelligence which helps them differentiate between noise and market signals. This

knowledge helps the leader make crucial decisions promptly and ensures innovations

continually move through the business. Small business leaders must also be responsible

and support the success of their innovative projects above other successes (Luamba et al. 2021). Such an approach increases end-user involvement because customers can offer helpful feedback crucial to developing desirable and complete innovative products. Increased customer interactions increase sales and help small businesses work more effectively, where the results are directly proportional to the organizational goals and objectives.

Mobilize:

Small business leaders require finances to stimulate, reward, support, and encourage innovation. Setting financial targets for innovation encourages employees to be at their creative best. Small business leaders must also create structures and a culture that allows individuals to share knowledge and ideas freely (Alharbi, 2021). The free flow of knowledge ensures that individuals learn lessons from previous failures, which increases chances for success. Small business leaders should also create modern spaces where employees can experiment.

Innovation is critical for small business success, but it must be approached strategically. Small business leaders must consider the concepts of scale, choose the right innovation, accelerate its development, and launch, and mobilize resources to support it (Alharbi, 2021). They must prioritize and invest in innovative ideas that generate value and solve practical problems, while also ensuring that the innovation is financially feasible and appeals to customers. Small businesses must also create a culture that fosters free flow of knowledge and experimentation (Luamba et al., 2021). These strategies, if implemented effectively, can help small businesses achieve long-term success and growth.

Different leadership styles have advantages and disadvantages, and the leader's choice of style can significantly impact employee engagement and performance. Democratic leadership enhances employee morale and encourages participation, but it assumes all employees have the same level of expertise in decision-making (Anwer et al., 2022). Autocratic leadership can be beneficial in situations that require quick decisions, but it stifles creativity and innovation among subordinates (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). Transactional leadership focuses on short-term goals and offers rewards, but it is inflexible and resistant to change. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, focuses on changing people for the betterment of the organization (Ramadhanti et al., 2021). The authoritative style emphasizes control over policies, while the pacesetting style sets high expectations for the team's output (Pizzolitto et al., 2022). Coaching leadership helps team members improve their strengths and weaknesses, while the affiliative style emphasizes team building and trust (Pal, 2022). Lastly, laissez-faire leadership gives employees the freedom to make intelligent decisions but can result in a lack of direction and leadership (Anwer et al., 2022). Overall, choosing the right leadership style is critical to the success of a small business.

Conceptual Framework

Systems Theory

Biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced the systems theory in 1956 to describe the behavior and nature of real systems. Bertalanffy defined *systems* as interacting and interrelated units exposed to and cooperating with their surroundings (Dreier et al., 2019). Because of the emerging complex systems in the world, Bertalanffy had to break down the systems theory into three elements: philosophy, science, and

technology (Dreier et al., 2019). Along with the breakdown of these elements, Bertalanffy deliberated on the significance of the external environment in a system, how specific and general environmental elements impact systems and organizations, and the reactions of organizational leaders to these elements (Dreier et al., 2019). Systems concepts include the following factors that work in emergence: system-environment boundary, input, output, process, state, hierarchy, goal-directedness, and information (Nikiforova, 2022). These factors originate from concepts and principles of different elements of science, such as biology, sociology, physics, and technology. These factors work together to produce the systems concept and formulate patterns through these methods (Nikiforova, 2022). Instructive investigation from the perception of systems theory provides a universal interpretation of guidance and direction. The systems theory considers the interactions between different parts of the system within an organization to develop an understanding of how collectively they are affecting the change rather than simply trying to understand the specific components separately. Understanding the systems theory will help alleviate the strengths and weaknesses of the system about the mission and objectives that leaders in small businesses set.

Researchers use systems theory as a science to explain the complex nature of organizations and improve performance within a firm. Researchers in this field often collaborate with experts from other disciplines to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex systems and how they interact with the world around them (Nikiforova, 2022). Some focus areas for systems theory as a science include artificial intelligence, self-organization, network, and cybernetics (Nikiforova, 2022). Research in these areas can help to improve the design and management of complex systems, such as

organizations, and can provide insights into how these systems interact with their environment. This knowledge is essential to leaders because it helps them create a culture that fosters adaptability, innovation, and creativity. Such organizational culture leads to improved business performance.

The primary objective of this study is to explore strategies small business owners use to acquire leadership and industry experience to support business sustainability. The application of systems theory aids small business owners in the development of strategies aimed at improving the financial sustainability and longevity of the business (Harney, 2019). Leaders who understand systems theory and the interactions and relationships between numerous factors, such as cost structures, external factors' impact, regulations changes, and revenue streams have a greater chance of being successful business owners. This appreciation of the interdependency of the environmental and organizations' internal structures helps leaders make informed decisions crucial to improving financial performance (Harney, 2019). Small businesses can also use the knowledge of interactions of various organizational factors or components to identify and manage risks. The systems theory approach enables businesses to comprehensively measure risk by analyzing the synergy of a combined working system (Harney, 2019). This information empowers small businesses to develop comprehensive strategic plans that increase sustainability and financial performance.

Another critical characteristic of systems theory is the focus on marketing and management to observe the connections between an organization and its environment. According to Roth (2019), businesses must be aware of and react to the external environment to market themselves. These interactions facilitate businesses growth,

evolutions, and adaptation to complex transaction flows. My focus is on small businesses in a mall setting. As such, the environment and demographics are crucial to these small businesses' success within this setting. Sustaining small businesses within mall settings is difficult because of the demographic location. Therefore, small business owners should locate their businesses within a more engaged segment to increase their chances of success and sustainability (Roth, 2019). For example, locating a small business in a crowded location is better than in a closed area around the corner.

A business must understand its customers' preferences to gain a competitive advantage. The systems theory approach promotes a stable, time-independent, and customer-centered view of marketing. This perspective aids businesses in adapting and responding to new marketing demands. Individuals within society interact and exchange with each other and develop interdependent relationships (Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). These relationships affect their structural patterns and preferences, which affect small businesses' marketing and management. Therefore, businesses must understand their customers' demographics to classify them by their wants and needs. This data assists small businesses in understanding the characteristics of the individuals who buy products and services (Lang et al., 2021). Consequently, small businesses can develop marketing strategies suited to their dynamic consumers. In the context of this study, understanding customers' preferences and developing effective marketing strategies based on their characteristics and needs will be essential for small business owners to acquire the necessary leadership skills and experience to sustain their businesses in a completive market environment.

The systems theory is applicable to this study because it gives leaders insight into business sustainability by displaying accountable funding and strategic decisions, resource administration, and capitalist characteristics essential for high sustainability (Think Insights, 2023). These insights are crucial to discovering strategies that small business owners can use to acquire leadership and industry experience to support business sustainability and provide a better understanding of how to increase small businesses' financial sustainability and longevity. Using the systems theory helped me discover components within small businesses that small business owners can improve to attain financial sustainability beyond five years.

SWOT Analysis

Business owners need to understand business dynamics and decision-making for all business situations. The SWOT analysis is a unique tool for business owners to use for all business situations. The SWOT analysis concept originated in the 1960s to foster business and marketing management (Ayodele, 2021). It helped businesses evaluate the internal and external environment's influence to develop sustainability strategies. Ayodele (2021) postulated that the SWOT analysis tool is crucial because it provides insights into a business's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. SWOT analysis provides a robust framework for reviewing a business's position, strategy, and direction. SWOT analysis aids in the examination of external threats that small businesses encounter, such as economic factors, competition, and geographic barriers. SWOT analysis analyzes some of the internal threats such as risks that may result from customer service quality and employee discontent (Ayodele, 2021). Businesses use this framework together with the Porter's 5 forces framework developed by Michael E. Porter

to analyze the following factors: potential of new entrants, threats of substitutes, bargaining power of buyers, bargaining power of suppliers, and rivalry amongst existing competitors (Bhaskar et al., 2019). Using the SWOT analysis framework can help small business owners evaluate their businesses' threats and develop effective sustainability strategies.

Most businesses nowadays engage in strategic planning to achieve their goals. Strategic planning assists firms in creating, implementing, and evaluating their decisions. It also enables an organization to proactively initiate and influence rather than respond, granting the firm control over its future (Benzaghta et al., 2021). Small business owners can use the SWOT analysis framework to plan, especially identifying opportunities. However, SWOT analysis is quick, approximate, and incomplete. Thus, a small business owner must utilize SWOT analysis more efficiently to acquire a comprehensive strategic planning perspective. SWOT focuses entirely on key characteristics surrounding strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and only these factors (Benzaghta et al., 2021). Combining the SWOT analysis with the Systems Theory will assist in obtaining a comprehensive demonstration of a strategy's success by a small business owner as they are looking past just the four factors in the SWOT.

Modern-day organizations face numerous challenges in the form of competitive and complex business environments. These organizations manage risky environmental factors such as uncertainties, business globalization, natural disasters, and scarcity of resources. These changes in the internal and external environment mean that companies should explore sustainable management rather than profit maximization (Pereira, Pinto et al., 2021). Nezha et al. (2021) conducted a SWOT analysis to evaluate tourism's impact

on Morocco's economy. The authors noted that adopting environmentally sustainable practices was vital in enabling the sustainable growth of tourism firms. Small business owners can use SWOT analysis to add value and determine how to distribute resources optimally for sustainability. This method is a crucial characteristic for business sustainability because identifying these factors enables an organization to access whether business can establish a successful future and maintain sufficient sustainability for success.

Relevant Alternative Theories

Theories specify the key variables that influence a study and examine how these variables might differ under different circumstances. However, not all theories can support the conceptual framework of the research behind small business sustainability. I further evaluated complexity theory and vested interest theory to see if they are a good fit for my study.

Complexity Theory

This theory attempts to rationalize the operation behavior of large and complex systems. The origin of the complexity theory dates to the 17th century when Isaac Newton developed a comprehensive system of mathematics to validate the works of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Descartes (Karaca, 2022). This worldview gained traction among scientists and laid the foundation for the industrial revolution. The revolution led to the development of complex systems that required reliable, regular, efficient, and precise oversight. The increase in the uncertainties fueled by globalization and the development of new technologies in our workplaces has resulted in increased complexity in managing businesses today. Different parts interact to form intriguing

points of overlap, resemblance, unpredictability, or complementarity (Turner & Baker, 2019). Understanding these complexities can help promote trans-disciplinary collaboration critical to establishing relevant leadership strategies in the business world.

The complexity theory is an alternative to the systems theory that researchers deem has a disconnection from modern-day practices. Scientists and researchers use it as a lens to capture chaotic systems' behavior (Karaca, 2022). The complexity theory elucidates how a system may work under stable and unstable behavior. Systems under stability tend to return to their initial state, while unstable systems tend to deviate when disturbed (Rosehead et al., 2019). Studying complex theory assists researchers in understanding business performance under varying and complex conditions. Unfortunately, the increase in complex situations makes it challenging for a business to properly plan and forecast. Leaders must result in evaluating elements such as suppliers, technology, customers, and other environmental influences shaping the business. In the context of small business sustainability, the complexity theory offers valuable insights into understanding and managing business performance under varying and complex conditions, considering factors such as suppliers, technology, customers, and environmental influences. By examining the principles of complexity theory, small business leaders can enhance their ability to evaluate and navigate the dynamic and interconnected elements that shape their businesses to plan and forecast effectively.

The complexity theory is useful to business leaders seeking to develop sustainable businesses. Leaders can utilize the concept of complexity theory to apply conjectural hypotheses to comprehend better how to make progress and create strategies for the survival of their business (Rosenhead et al., 2019). Small business owners can use

complexity theory to inspire innovative critical thinking and real-time answers to change by permitting business units to organize themselves more effectively. Rosenhead et al. (2019) argued that modern business today drifts in a nonlinear direction, with no permanence of flow through competitive events, apart from being witnessed from hindsight. Small business owners must hand over rigid control of these systems to be able to put complexity theory to work successfully. This theory emphasizes focusing on emerging properties and organizational patterns that can define solutions; rather than focusing on the daily running within the organization (Karaca, 2022). Furthermore, this theory can focus on management and leaders foreseeing growth from customer communications and turning that into a persistent flow or pattern.

My focus for this study is on small businesses that employ at most ten individuals. Complexity theory would only identify a limited number of organizational patterns within a small company, as there might not be sufficient data for effective results. Complexity theory did not serve as a good fit for my study because complex situations impacted no small business owners in my chosen region. This approach would be better suited for small businesses outside of a mall setting.

Vested Interest Theory. Individual interests play a significant role in achieving success when collaborating with others. Sivacek and Crano developed the Vested Interest Theory (VIT) to understand people's vested interests' influence on attitude-behavior consistency (Siegel et al., 2019). Sivacek and Crano examined students' attitudes toward increasing the legal drinking age. Students' opposition to the measure depended on their vested interests or the extent to which it affected them personally (Siegel et al., 2019). The VIT focuses on explaining behaviors related to an attitude perceived as significant

and of vibrant hedonic importance to an individual. According to Duncan and Chapple (2021), maintaining a specific situation because of our interests is often necessary and legitimate and can contribute to social interests. However, people must take care because vested self-interests can adversely affect social interests. Leaders understanding their self-interests can improve the strategies they use to sustain a business. VIT inspires individuals with beliefs relevant to the prescribed business goals (Duncan & Chapple, 2021). Understanding VIT also helps individuals regulate their behavior or outlook.

People may have different attitudes towards the same object for different reasons. People hold these attitudes because they perceive them as valuable. Leaders must understand the four key dimensions that affect the variation in vested interests to manage such individuals. These four dimensions include (a) the salience of the attitude; (b) the observed certainty of potential consequences following from behaviors that apply to the attitude; (c) whether those consequences are supposed to be immediate as opposed to remote in time; and (d) the confidence in their ability to engage in the attitude-relevant conduct (Duncan & Chapple, 2021). Although VIT makes many good points, it is not a relevant theory for my study because it plays a significant role in focusing on attitudes and perceptions at an individual level and does not make any assumptions about rational decision-making. Rational decision-making is an essential factor for a small business to remain sustainable. Small business owners cannot make perceptions based exclusively on their judgment; they need to consider external and internal factors that may impact the business, allowing for organizational and cultural effects on the attitude-behavior relationship. VIT measures behavioral intentions without understanding perceived risk, which would be an issue for small business sustainability.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 contains the literature review relating to phenomena under study. The section also contains the conceptual framework and other related theories.

Section 3 contains the research project methodology, project ethics, nature of the project, population, sampling and participants, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, and reliability and validity.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In this section, I included the project ethics, nature of the project, population, sampling and participants, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, and reliability and validity.

Project Ethics

The purpose of qualitative research is to explore the meaning and understanding of people's lived experiences. A qualitative researcher's role involves exploring, collecting, and presenting data in an organized form (Leedy & Ormond 2018). Researchers using qualitative methodologies must actively engage with data while creating an intelligible narrative (Fetters et al., 2017). Researchers are an integral component of the study process because they are primary data collectors, organizers, summarizers, categorizers, presenters, and analysts (Richards, 2019). As the main data collector, organizer, summarizer, categorizer, presenter, and analyst on this project, I drew upon my extensive familiarity with the topic as an established Connecticut resident and scholar in entrepreneurship and passionate advocate of this study's significance to add to the body of knowledge. I ensured that I safeguard the integrity of the data I will collect. I familiarized myself with the research ethics that guide research studies involving human participants.

The Belmont Report serves as a comprehensive framework of ethical principles and guidelines related to human protection (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). In this paper, the researcher differentiates between research and practice while emphasizing three fundamental ethical principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. As a

qualitative researcher, I adhered to ethical considerations outlined during fieldwork, respecting participants, promoting their well-being, and maintaining fairness during my studies (Angelos 2021; Zuraw, 2022). I obtained informed consent, protect the participants' anonymity and confidentiality, allow the participants to withdraw as they wish, and minimize harm to participants (Angelos, 2021). I also ensured that the participants understand their role in this study. By following the Belmont Report guidelines, I ensured that I promoted fairness, trust, accountability, mutual respect, and protected any original ideas within the study. All these directives were important to ensuring I remained professional while conducting the research study.

As the primary data collector, I ensured I used the appropriate methods and tools for data collection, analysis, and representation. Recognizing and acknowledging potential researcher bias is essential for qualitative researchers because it helps increase the reliability and validity if the research findings (Malone et al., 2020). For this study, I used interviews to reduce bias and provide an informative narrative on the topic. The interviews followed a logical order, and I reported all findings without any alterations (Houghton et al., 2018). Establishing and adhering to an interview protocol helps the researcher maintain consistency and reliability throughout the research process (Foley & O'Connor, 2021). I also used member-checking to verify that the participants' responses accurately reflect their views and not my personal biases or perspectives. I also had someone check my selection biases, judgment, and review my interpretation. All these procedures ensured I developed a valid research study.

I have owned and managed a part-time small business while providing consultancy services in financial and management matters to several friends' businesses

in Connecticut. I have many relationships with small business owners and entrepreneurs within the region. Therefore, I used purposive sampling technique to ensure I did not choose participants who I have interacted with before (Bryson et al., 2022). This sampling technique helped me avoid individuals with whom we share similar perspectives on the topic under research. I also used other individuals to help code the data to avoid personal biases within my research study. These procedures helped me improve the credibility of my research findings.

The interaction between researchers and participants places immense responsibilities on researchers. Researchers follow ethical guidelines to ensure that they extract reliable information while protecting the participants (Williams, 2021). These ethical guidelines promote fairness and ensure the research process is moral, legal, and acceptable. For my study, I maintained confidentiality and anonymity of participants (Johnson & Lee 2020). I addressed my participants using codes name to protect their privacy. According to Brown and Adams (2021), researchers assign pseudonyms and unique labels to participants to protect individuals and companies during interview sessions. Researchers must hold interviews in secure environments such as offices with stringent measure to avoid unwarranted access or interruption during interviews. These measures ensure participants are comfortable and always protected.

I sought approval from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning the interview process. I ensured I respect the autonomy, beneficence, and justice principles as outlined in the Belmont Report (National Institutes of Health 2023). Respecting participants autonomy means participants can make decisions without coercion from other entities. Following this principle also means researchers should not

take advantage of people who lack self-determination (Brown & Adams, 2021). Researchers should ensure these individuals are protected from harm and enjoy all benefits of the study. Beneficence principal dictates eliminating harm and maximizing benefits. I explained the importance of the study to all participants to ensure they provided the correct information which made the study beneficial to the outside world. The third principle on justice means researchers should never exclude vulnerable individuals without reasons (Williams, 2021). Following these three principles enhanced the validity and credibility of my study.

Researchers should uphold intellectual rights of their studies. I ensured I did not falsify the data, deceive participants, plagiarize other peoples' work, and treated all participants fairly. I provided participants with informed consent forms with adequate details on the purpose and procedures of the study (Smith & Johnson, 2022). I informed participants that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the process without fear of adverse repercussions or penalties. I informed participants that their opinions and choices were valid. I ensured participants understood that I would not be giving gifts or rewards for participating. Incentives promote bias, exaggerations, affect participants' autonomy, and encourage financially motivated views. I allowed participants to ask questions about the research process.

Researchers should protect data. I stored all interview transcripts and recordings in a password protected device with restricted access (Johnson & Smith 2022). I stored hard copies in a locked area with restricted access. I will store the data for five years after which I will destroy it (Williams et al 2023). By adhering to contemporary ethical standards and practices, my investigation aimed to safeguard all participants involved

while upholding their rights, and confidentiality; ultimately leading to effective

investigations with robust results.

Nature of the Project

I considered three possible methods for this study, quantitative, qualitative, and

mixed. Researchers using a quantitative approach focus on producing numerical data that

is translatable into usable statistics (Abuhamda et al., 2021). Researchers use the

qualitative research methodology to explore patterns in views and ideas essential to

understanding the phenomena under study (Abuhamda et al., 2021). The quantitative

approach does not suit my study because I do not intend to test any hypothesis about the

variables' characteristics or relationships. The mixed method approach combines aspects

of qualitative and quantitative methods and helps identify the critical variables while

testing their characteristics (Hernández & Méndez, 2020). The main goals of quantitative

research are to make predictions with larger samples, generate facts, and test previously

stated hypotheses. The primary purpose is to find evidence that may or may not support

an existing hypothesis, testing and validating already constructed theories about how and

why phenomena occur (Abuhamda et al., 2021). The mixed method design is a product of

several primary characteristics measurable during the design process. These

characteristics are based on the purpose of mixing, timing, theoretical drive, point of

integration, and degree of complexity (Hernández & Méndez, 2020). The mixed methods

did not work for my study because the mixed methods approach is a collection of

qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. The quantitative method is not required to

address my study's purpose; the mixed method would be inappropriate. The qualitative

research method best suits my study because I intend to explore the strategies owners of

small businesses use to acquire leadership and industry experience to support their business sustainability.

I considered four possible qualitative designs for this research: case study, pragmatic inquiry, phenomenology, and ethnography. The pragmatic inquiry study design uses several cases to select and develop a better understanding of the phenomena than a single-case study (Eleanor et al., 2020). I used a pragmatic inquiry study design for this study because I interviewed multiple small business owners from different backgrounds. Using pragmatic inquiry allowed me to adapt to the interview questions or methods during the research process to uncover deeper insights (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). A phenomenological researcher seeks to identify the universal nature of the applicants' lived personal experiences (Eleanor et al., 2020). Using the phenomenology study, a researcher can understand the personal meanings participants attach to their lived experiences. An ethnographic researcher focuses on a cultural group to define and interpret the shared and intellectual patterns of behaviors, values, languages, and beliefs of one or more groups of interest (Hernández & Méndez, 2020). I did not use a phenomenological or ethnographic approach because these designs cannot help the reader understand the essence the participants are experiencing during the phenomenon or the cultural patterns of different groups, which is very significant for my study. I focused on defining the why, how, and what strategies small business owners used to identify and develop the leadership qualities to succeed in their businesses.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

Population

Population refers to individuals with desired characteristics who can participate in each study (Jenkins et al., 2019). I centered my study on the dynamic population of small business owners operating within local malls in Manchester, Connecticut. This population encompasses entrepreneurs from various industries who have established their businesses in the mall environment, contributing to the local economy and community (Bryson et al., 2022). Focusing on this population helped me gain comprehensive insights into sustainability practices, challenges, and perspectives within the context of local malls. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of these small business owners is crucial in addressing sustainability issues and fostering sustainable business practices.

Participants

Every research study must have its exclusion and inclusion criteria. These criteria help the researcher identify the right participants who align with the objectives of the study (Campbell & Murray, 2021). For this study, the participants consisted of four small business owners operating out of a local mall located in Manchester, CT. To qualify for participation, individuals must have had a physical presence within the mall and were actively engaged in daily business operations. Participants possessed at least two years of experience in their business which brought invaluable insight to this research (Campbell& Murray, 2021). I used purposive sampling technique to access participants. I involved the mall management to provide participants' contact details and introduce me to interested potential participants. I asked the participants to identify and recommend other small business owners within the mall who met eligibility criteria for recruitment.

This approach leveraged existing connections and relationships among small business owners within their local mall community (Miles et al., 2020). I used the initial engagement to establish rapport and create a good working relationship with the participants. I also provided consent forms to the participants and an overview of the research study. The consent form contained the interview process and ethical guidelines for the research process.

Creating trust and rapport between participants and researcher is a key ingredient towards establishing successful research study. For this study, I ensured I created a bond with the participants by actively listening, showing empathy, and genuine interest in the participants business (Campbell & Murray, 2021). I also communicated regularly, created opportunities for face-to-face interactions, and informed the participants that it is okay to withdraw from the process any time they felt like doing so. I also included the participants in the formulation of the research questions by asking for their input, insights, and perspectives thereby increased the study's relevance and applicability (Patton, 2015). I used up to date references from scholarly peer-reviewed sources published within the last 5 years to back up the findings, claims and decisions made in this research. This approach improved the rigor and validity of my doctoral study and formed a solid basis for the findings and conclusions.

Sampling

I used purposive sampling to select a subset of small business owners from local malls in Manchester, Connecticut who had demonstrated commitment to sustainability. Purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of participants with specific characteristics or expertise relevant to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Researchers use purposive sampling to increase study's credibility and validity (Bryman, 2016). I got small business owners who had operated for more than 5 years. The business owners also needed to have grown their business from what it was at the beginning. I also picked participants who were available, willing to participate, and could effectively communicate. I sent the participants the consent forms, sample interview questions, and the interview protocol before the actual interview. I provided the participants with contacts to Walden IRB staff to confirm the approval status of my study if the need arose. I also let the participants know their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. I also let the participants choose areas where they felt comfortable holding the interviews. These criteria helped me select experienced small business owners with invaluable information on sustainable business practices, and challenges that could delay implementing sustainability initiatives.

I used a combination of maximum variation and criterion sampling techniques to obtain a comprehensive representation of perspectives. Maximum variation sampling involves purposefully selecting participants who represent a wide range of characteristics, such as business size, location, industry, and years of operation (Braun & Clarke, 2020). By including participants with diverse backgrounds, I captured a holistic view of sustainability practices across different types of small businesses in local malls. Criterion sampling ensured selected participants met specific criteria, such as active engagement in sustainability initiatives or being recognized for sustainable practices within the mall community (Morse, 2016). These techniques helped me achieve a comprehensive understanding of sustainable business practices in the local mall context.

Data Collection Activities

Data Collection Instruments

Effective data collection involves gathering and recording information from diverse sources to gain insightful knowledge into an area of study (Radu, 2019). For this study, I was the primary data collector. I conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with carefully chosen research participants. I recorded audio and took notes of participants' non-verbal cues. The data collected in the form of sentences and words expressed the participants' perspectives. I used open-ended interview questions to enable participants to express themselves freely, providing richer and contextualized information (Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). The open-ended interview questions provided me with the opportunity to probe further if the need arose. I was open to using online platforms such as zoom or meet on participants requests. I scheduled the interviews at mutually acceptable times, considering participants' preferences (Abuhamda et al., 2021). Prior to commencing interviews, I created rapport with individuals and addressed any concerns that might have prevented participants from giving candid answers.

Qualitative researchers must ensure that their studies are valid and credible. I used the guidance of my chair and colleagues to make appropriate interviews and research questions. These two groups ensured I aligned my questions with the research objectives. I also had my chair review these questions to ensure the questions were understood by the participants. Through their feedback, I revised the questions and developed simple, accurate, and understandable questions. I also conducted a field test to stimulate the interview process. The field test helped me prepare for the actual interviews. It also helped me develop a suitable interview protocol. I used data triangulation and member-

checking to enhance the reliability and validity of my study. Data triangulation is the use of multiple sources or methods to establish the validity of a study. I have used numerous literature sources to capture information on the topic under study. I used data triangulation to verify my study findings and achieve data saturation.

Data Collection Techniques

Qualitative interviews are of three major types: Structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Researchers who use structured interviews must follow strict interview protocol. Structured interviews do not give researchers the freedom to probe. Unstructured interviews do not follow any format and have no written interview questions (Eleanor et al., 2020). The researcher and participants have conversations. Semi-structured interviews incorporate a conversation aspect and have a list of interview questions (Nahak & Ellitan 2022). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to probe further for answers. Semi-structured interviews offer researchers rich data, but also pose unique challenges. Researchers must be mindful of potential biases during data collection and analyses (Radu, 2019). Researchers must pay attention to detail and have in-depth knowledge of the research objectives while transcribing and analyzing semi-structured interview data.

For my study, I used semi-structured interviews with a written set of eight questions. These questions were related to the overarching research question and the conceptual frameworks. I took notes while conducting the interviews. I read the notes to participants at the end of the interview to ensure what I had accurately described their opinions and positions. I also sent the interview transcripts to participants to ascertain the accuracy of the data. I set 60 minutes as the maximum length of each interview. Quality

research study depend on asking the right questions (Alsaaty & Makhlouf, 2020). I conducted a field test with subject matter experts to identify areas I could improve on during the actual interviews. Conducting field tests with subject experts enhanced my study's validity. These field tests did not require IRB approvals (Eleanor et al., 2020). Therefore, I conducted as many as possible to ensure I familiarized myself with the interview protocol and procedures. The field tests helped me develop an appropriate interview protocol.

Interview Questions

I used the following interview questions to get the views of the participating small business owners:

1. What are the three leadership strengths that have assisted in sustaining your business?

2. What specific strategies have you utilized to acquire leadership skills?

3. How have you gained experience in a way that contributes to sustaining your business?

4. What approaches have you employed to ensure the long-term success and continuity of your business through the development of leadership skills and experience?

5. How has your leadership strategy differed from the time you started your business?

6. Which significant challenges have you encountered in implementing your strategies for sustainability?

7. How do you assess the effectiveness of your strategies to acquire industry experience to support business sustainability?

8. What else can you share with me about the strategies for business sustainability you have developed and used?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Data Organization Techniques

Data organization is arranging data in a logical and usable manner. Research work relies on large amount of data. Researchers need to scrap through the data and find useful and informative data. Using effective data organization techniques enhances data gathering, disassembly and organization (Eleanor et al., 2020). Implementing efficient methods simplifies compilation of data and assures accessibility and integrity throughout a study (Hernandez & Mendez, 2020). Research logs provide one useful method of organizing data as they document observations and activities (Hernandez & Mendez, 2020). They can either be maintained digitally or in hard copies to record key details. Data organization allows researchers to focus on the study and attain high-quality data.

For this study, I used mnemonic aids such as acronyms and images while taking notes. I actively listened, looked for non-verbal cues, and paraphrased any key points the participants mentioned. After the interview, I expanded and refined my notes while the details were vivid and fresh (Theofandis & Fountouki, 2019). I asked for clarification and encouraged elaboration of points from the participants to ensure I had the best understanding of their position on the phenomena under study. To safeguard confidentiality and protect participants' privacy, I assigned participants unique identifiers such as P1, P2, P3, and P4. I stored the data on a private, code-protected computer

(Eleanor et al., 2020). Upon publication of the study and meeting ethical standards, I will store the data for five years and then delete it.

Research logs aren't the only data organization techniques available; data coding and categorization techniques may also help enhance data organization and analysis (Radu, 2019). Effective organization not only supports current studies but can lay a solid foundation for future investigations as well as sharing and verification (Alsaaty & Makhlouf, 2020). Implementing effective data organization techniques helps ensure coherence and reliability in research findings, contributing to overall study quality and credibility.

Data Analysis Technique

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to explore leadership strategies for small business' sustainability. I used thematic analysis to analyze data from the interview notes and transcripts. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns in data that answer research questions. I familiarized myself with the literature available on the topic under study and the data I collected. I employed methodological triangulation to assemble multiple external data collection methods such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and document analysis in a comprehensive way (Hernandez & Mendez 2020). I read and analyzed the meaning of sentences, phrases, words, and paragraphs. I followed the well-regarded five-phase cycle proposed by Yin (2017) of compiling, disassembling reassembling interpreting concluding. This compilation method helped me generate codes that identified key concepts related to the conceptual framework and research questions.

The compiling phase resembles an artful construction of a structured database, carefully organizing data to form the basis of an in-depth and systematic qualitative investigation (Yin, 2017). I utilized electronic research logs which included audio recordings and transcriptions and thoroughly reviewed research notes and observations prior to analysis. I engaged in an intensive disassembling phase, dissecting transcripts, and interview notes in detail to unearth key elements and uncover meaningful patterns (Hernandez & Mendez 2020). I generated unique codes to every identified pattern to serve as building blocks for later reassembling phases. The codes formed the basis for assembling key themes.

Researchers must ensure data analysis is transparent. I adopted a comparative approach where I compared all transcripts to capture all relevant patterns (Alsaaty & Makhlouf 2020). I also used Microsoft Excel to provide an organized and structured approach to data. The rationale for using Excel is that it is cheap and provides researchers with advanced tools for data management, organization, coding, and analysis (Abuhamda et al. 2021). During the interpretation phase, I delve into identified arrays from reassembled data and explored the meanings and implications (Yin, 2017). I focused on comparing the themes with the existing literature and conceptual frameworks. I used methodological triangulation and compared patterns with data from websites, review of business and other relevant business documents that I collected during the interview process. I revisited the exercise several times to see if I could develop further themes.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers need to ensure their study findings are trustworthy ad accurate. Failure to do so means the finding will be unreliable and invalid.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the repeatability, dependability, and consistency of research findings. According to Leedy and Ormond (2018), researchers should offer detailed reporting of research processes. The process should be orderly and transparent to ensure other researchers can replicate the same results. Researchers should use sound practices such as interviews, notes, transcripts, and account for their biases (Zuraw, 2022). I outlined the limitations and delimitation of the study. I meticulously upheld the credibility, an essential aspect of qualitative research, through a thoughtfully crafted research protocol and the seamless incorporation of diverse data collection techniques (Zuraw, 2022). I conducted field tests before the actual interview to enhance the reliability of this study. The field tests ensured I corrected my mistakes and developed better interviewing skills. I offered a detailed reporting of the process to promote transparency and allow readers to assess the rigor of the research practices I followed.

Triangulation and member-checking increase the reliability of a research study. According to Foley and O'Connor (2021), researchers use member-checking as a powerful validation technique. Researchers engage participants in reviewing data and findings to minimize bias and increase data accuracy which enhances the credibility and reliability of the study (Zuraw, 2022). I provided participants and my supervisors with my interpretations, analyzed data, findings, and recommendations. Participants reviewed the data to confirm if it represents their opinions and experiences. I also explained the rationale behind using a qualitative pragmatic inquiry study and semi-structured interviews. I have kept the data safe to avoid distortion by other parties. All these precautions have enhanced the dependability of my study.

Validity

Validity is the appropriateness, accuracy, and generalizability of a research study. The pursuit of validity was characterized by a focus on credibility, ensuring rigorous methods were employed to uphold the trustworthiness of the research (Leedy & Ormond, 2018). I carefully considered transferability, the potential applicability of research findings to other contexts, through adherence to a robust interview protocol and meticulous data saturation (Leedy & Ormond, 2018). I used member-checking to substantiate the accuracy and consistency of my interpretations to establish confirmability of my study. Establishing validity means researchers should ensure future researchers can use the findings for their studies (Zuraw, 2022). I provided a detailed description of the research design, conceptual frameworks, and interview questions. The description helps readers and other researchers understand the purpose, application, and how they can use my study for future studies. Researchers can use triangulation to establish the confirmability of their study. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the variables within a study (Foley & O'Connor, 2021). I used multiple literature sources to support my study. I used two conceptual frameworks that helped me with the interpretation of interview data. I also explained how I handled my bias and stated the limitations and delimitations of this study.

Data saturation guarantees the comprehensive and high-quality capture of information (Zuraw, 2022). By reaching data saturation, I ensured no further insights can be gathered, solidifying the validity and credibility of the research (Foley & O'Connor, 2021). I gathered relevant literature sources to develop my study. While conducting the interviews, I probed further to ensure participants exhausted all information regarding the

topic under study. All these steps helped me achieve data saturation. This study exemplifies the rigorous pursuit of reliability and validity, laying the foundation for trustworthy and impactful research findings. The integration of diverse methods, attention to credibility, and meticulous data handling contributed to the overall robustness and dependability of the study's outcomes.

Transition and Summary

In this study, I aimed to explore how small business owners sustain their businesses for over the 5 years mark. In Section 1, I discussed the background of the problem, business problem focus, and the project purpose. Section 2 contained a review of the professional and academic literature on the problem under study. It also contained literature on conceptual frameworks. Section 3 contained the research project methodology, project ethics, nature of the project, population, sampling and participants, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, and reliability and validity. In the final section, Section 4, covered the presentation of findings, business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and a conclusion of the project.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question I explored in this study was the strategies small business owners can use to acquire leadership skills and experience to sustain their businesses. I collected data from interviews, observations, and existing literature on the topic. The findings from this study will help other small business owners understand the leadership skills and strategies they can use to sustain their businesses. The participants answered eight interview questions that were instrumental to getting their views on leadership strategies.

The findings of this study revolve around the leadership strategies small businesses owners can use to sustain their business. I interviewed small business owners within a mall and identified potential leadership skills and strategies they have used. I gave the interview transcripts back to the interviewees to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. I interpreted the data using the systems theory and SWOT analysis theory. Using the SWOT analysis theory, I identified key themes for sustaining small businesses: attention to details, financial and resource management, customer service, adaptability, continuous learning, community engagement, technology incorporation, and long-term planning. All these themes relate to the four key dimensions used in the SWOT analysis theory: strategy, operations, finances, and marketing. Using these themes, small business owners can analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats they perceive regarding their leadership skills and experience in sustaining their businesses.

I interpreted the data from the interviews using the systems theory. A business is a sum of all its parts: internal and external environment. These units work together to

create a sustainable working environment crucial to business sustainability. I analyzed the ability of the small business owners to understand business environment, feedback, output, and input while adjusting to the resulting challenges. Using the systems theory, I identified key themes such as employee engagement and collaboration, education and experience, networking, and entrepreneurial resilience. Addressing these themes will help small business owners develop strategies for business sustainability.

Key Themes

There was consensus among the participants small businesses require leadership strategies for sustainability. The participants mentioned leadership strategies such as customer focus and service, community engagement, employee collaboration and engagement, integrating technology, paying close attention to business operation, having long-term plans and visions, networking, acknowledging the existence of challenges, continuous learning and adapting, and the need to have knowledge and experience related to the business.

Customer Focus and Service

Small business leaders within the United States need to develop feasible strategies to respond to the ever-changing tastes, preferences, and needs of consumers. Abrokwah-larbi (2023) noted customer-focus strategies puts customers' interests first in a proactive manner that propagates a business' long-term growth. Customer focus strategy revolves around listening, understanding, and thanking the customers. Small business leaders need to promote friendly and positive environment that leave great impressions on all customers. These impressions make customers happy and improves the likelihood of them returning to spend more or referring other customers to the business. Participants

noted the importance of excellent customer service through understanding customers' need and preferences in sustaining their businesses. Participant 1 stated, "You've got to be very strong about the customer service, the service you provide to your clients and stuff like that." Participant 3 stated, "If you fail to understand how much sentimental value they place on the pieces, you will never sell or experience the beauty of selling watches." Providing quality customer services enhances customer loyalty and helps a business thrive. Small business leaders should focus on offering the best customer service as a small business sustainability strategy.

Adaptability and Continuous Learning

All entrepreneurs want their businesses to thrive for a long period. These entrepreneurs must establish clever and dominant market positions that set their businesses above the rest. Unfortunately, the business world today is constantly changing which creates risks and uncertainties. There are new technologies, precarious political administrations, pandemics, financial and economic regime changes, and natural disasters that impact small business activities (Chughtai et al., 2023). These changes necessitate small business leaders looking to modify old or produce new products, increase productivity, enlarge customer base, and compete more effectively to adapt and continuously learn (Sivili & Boateng, 2023). These leaders must bear business pressures and treat their employees with tolerance and independence to navigate the changes (Chughtai et al., 2023). The participants acknowledge the need for small business leaders to continuously learn by staying updated on industry trends and evolve with market trends. Participant 4 stated, "I am constantly updating myself on future trends and analyzing market demands." Participant 2 emphasized leaders need to adapt quickly and

effectively to changing business environment. Participant 3 recommended that small business leaders be flexible, adaptable, and educate themselves on issues relating to their businesses. Engaging in continuous learning helps small businesses engage employee more effectively and improve their skills.

Education and Experience

Small businesses are essential for the growth of American economy. Researchers recommend business development to spur economic growth. To spur small business development, individuals must remain knowledgeable. Education provides a platform through which individuals can prepare their minds to bring about small business sustainability. Education involves acquisition of the right information, attitudes, and skills (Saah, 2022). Business owners must get qualifications that enhance their ability to operate and manage a business. Education provides a base for job creation, employment options, and opportunity evaluation. Saah (2022) noted most less-educated entrepreneurs make bad decisions in terms of financial planning, risk profiling, staff recruitment, and infrastructure investment. Entrepreneurs must pursue relevant and respectable business education levels to be aware of basic business procedures and concepts critical to sustaining their businesses. Entrepreneurs need hands-on experiences gained through working in different industries and roles. Prior experiences equip leaders and managers with the necessary skills to understand and overcome difficulties in business setups. Pham et al. (2023) stated individuals with prior hands-on experience are not afraid of failure and are inclined to act in a positive manner when faced with difficulties. This study participants agree education and working experience is essential to sustaining small businesses. Participant 1 stated, "Well, I went to a business management school, so that

teaches you a lot of stuff over there…" Participant 3 stated, "So, from time to time I like to educate myself on new trends and repair techniques." Participant 1 stated, "My experience is a combination of formal education and hands-on experiences." Small business leader should have prior working experience and education to help them sustain their businesses.

Employee Engagement and Collaboration

The success and sustainability of any business is dependent on multifaceted elements. One such element is employee engagement and collaboration which is a critical determinant to sustainable business practices. Shkurti (2024) defined employee engagement as emotional involvement and commitment employees have towards the business. Engaged employees contribute to high performance as they go above and beyond their assigned roles. Small business leaders must find leadership styles which foster connections among employees. The leaders should exude confidence and have traits and values that effectively motivate the employees (Shkurti, 2024). Small business leaders should prioritize the growth and needs of the employees. Leaders must create inclusive work environment where diverse teams feel accommodate and appreciated for their diverse viewpoints. The participants in this study agreed that small business leaders need to collaborate and engage with their employees for continued growth. Participant 1 emphasizes on building long-lasting relationships with employees. Such relations contribute to increased employee morale, employee engagement, and higher employee retention. Participant 2 stated, "You know, if you are looking long-term, you should include everyone. People need to feel valued and motivated, you know, if they must put their best out there for you." These relations foster collaborative environment

contributing to employee retention and satisfaction. Participant 4 stated, "I treat them like family, and I would like to think they see me as part of their family. I enjoy brainstorming with them." Participant 3 noted he had to change his leadership style to engage his employees. The decision improved creativity and innovation in his team. Valuing employees' input is critical to sustaining a business. As such, small business leaders must engage their employees to sustain their businesses.

Long-Term Vision and Planning

Entrepreneurs struggle with sustaining excellent performance for long periods of time because of the uncertain business environment. Entrepreneurs must strike a balance between the internal and external environment to develop models suitable for the growth and sustainability of their business (Alhosseiny, 2023). One way is through having a well-defined vision for a business. For an entrepreneur to develop a well-defined vision, they must think strategically and create strategic and specific plans and objectives for their business (Alhosseiny, 2023). The entrepreneurs must also have a high degree of adaptability and problem-solving skills essential in navigating the unstable business environment. Small business leaders must evaluate their businesses' capacity to reach the set goals and identify measures to improve the business. For entrepreneurs who plan long term, they must look at the financial, marketing, production, and human resource aspects (Alhosseiny, 2023). These aspects help entrepreneurs develop strategies and policies to ensure all resources are utilized to their fullest extent. Small business leaders must effectively communicate their vision and plans to employees and customers. Effective communication ensures the clients and employees buy into the strategic plans. This study's participants are in consensus that small business leaders must plan for the future

by developing clear goals, strategic plans, and have a long-term vision to sustain their businesses. Participant 2 noted business leaders should always think long-term. Participant 3 also stated it is essential to have long-terms plans as a way of getting new and diverse customers with higher purchasing powers. Participant 4 noted she started the business to run it for the foreseeable future. Long-term plans and vision empower small business leaders by strengthening and improving their businesses' competitive market position.

Community Engagement and Social Impact

In today's interconnected business world, small businesses are viewed as agents of social change and economic growth. The small businesses are growing aware of the rising expectations from investors, employees, and consumers. Business owners are adopting practices such as Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental, Social, and Governance to align their vision and goals with sustainability (Gutterman, 2023). Small businesses leaders must embrace this shift towards increased environmental and social responsibility by engaging and collaborating with the local communities. Connecting with the community helps businesses drives social values. Community engagement helps businesses establish partnerships based on trust and loyalty. Consumers are more involved with businesses which genuinely care about their community. Consequently, these businesses strengthen their credibility and reputation, fuel growth and innovation, and increase employee satisfaction and productivity; all factors necessary for business sustainability (Gutterman, 2023). Small businesses leaders engaging their communities are exposed to diverse ideas that spark innovative solutions to their daily problems. Small businesses leaders must conduct thorough research and

have meaningful conversations with the community to develop sustainability strategies. Collaborating with the community allows small business to leverage local resources and improve decision-making processes. Participant 4 stated, "I have done it successfully through hosting events, collaborating with local artisans, and supporting social causes." Participants emphasized the importance of engaging and collaborating with the local communities through events, collaborations, and supporting social causes. Participants noted small business leaders should seek to make positive impacts beyond product sales. Participant 3 stated, "Small businesses should participate in industry events and collaborate with locals as a way to stay connected and informed." These assertions indicate community engagement and collaboration is a good strategy for ensuring the sustainability of small businesses.

Networking

Networking involves businesses collaborating for value creation and innovation. Small businesses must invest in internal and external networks to navigate through the risks and uncertainties. These networks provide small business leaders with access to resources such as technology, finances, and knowledge to successfully run their businesses (OECD, 2023). With their limited internal capacities, small businesses need to integrate into global, local, and national knowledge networks to upscale. Small business leaders need to network with suppliers, production, firms, technology institutions, and industries. These networks must be in close social, technological, and geographical proximity for the businesses to enjoy full benefits and gain competitive advantage (OECD, 2023). Participants noted they have networks that are a source of knowledge and support. Participant 1 stated, "So these are things that helps you experience working with

other people, working with other corporates." The participant noted the firms provided knowledge on how to outsource products and deal with setbacks. Participant 2 noted he enjoys working with supportive networks and creative individuals outside his business. These individuals have allowed his business to stay ahead of the competitors. Participant 4 stated, "I also went to seminars and events which I do to date. I enjoy interacting and collaborating with others within the industry." Small business leaders should network as a strategy to sustain their businesses.

Accepting Challenges and being Resilient

Entrepreneurs start businesses for profitability and sustainability. Unfortunately, most of these businesses fail within the first five years (Alsaaty & Makhlouf, 2020). Most entrepreneurs lack sustainable business models which can help them explore challenges and opportunities. These entrepreneurs lack an open mind to maintain a business. They fail to acknowledge running a business is a larger challenge than starting it. Entrepreneurs need to accept challenges exist and work to transition these challenges into viable business opportunities (Noor & Ayob, 2021). Entrepreneurs must be resilient, flexible, adaptable, and determined to survive through crises. They must anticipate, adjust, and avoid business shocks. The Participant 4 stated, "I am constantly updating myself on future trends and analyzing market demands. You know, women tend to be flashy and bored easily." Analyzing the market trends helps the business stay ahead of the competitors. Participant 3 stated, "So, from time to time I like to educate myself on new trends and repair techniques. I research on new and exciting watches and try to stock those that appeal to my client base." The participant acknowledges customers' changes in taste and preferences and seeks ways to overcome the challenge. Participant 2 stated,

"Every business has its challenges. If you go around these businesses here, you will find even the most successful ones have their challenges. For us, our biggest challenge has been navigating through intense market competition." Entrepreneurs who accept challenges exist can prepare well. Accepting challenges exists and being resilient helps entrepreneurs develop right attitude to create effective strategies for sustaining businesses. Small business leaders with positive mindsets can effectively develop strategies for sustaining small businesses.

Technology Integration

In contemporary society, technological infrastructure forms the basis for the most successful business ventures. Businesses that fail to integrate technology into their operation struggle to access information or reach a wide and diverse consumer base. The recent COVID-19 pandemic severely affected businesses and necessitated them to implement new strategies to avoid failure. Governments placed restrictions on small businesses which affected their growth. Small businesses resulted to implementing digital technology as it offered opportunities for business to evolve. According to Jardon et al. (2020), small business managers can use technology to gain competitive advantage. Therefore, these managers need to develop an organizational culture to encourage integration of technology. Employees need to genuinely accept the use of technology as it directly affects their innovation and decision-making capacity. Businesses with flexible employees who accept changes tend to be more innovative (Ibrahim, 2021). This literature aligns with the findings of this study. Participant 1 stated, "Good Lord. What a blessing it was! The power of social media to create supportive environment and tutorials for our clients." The statement echoes the need for small business leaders to leverage

technology to reach customers. Participant 2 stated, "Small businesses need to invest in technology, use social media, Instagram, TikTok and the like for online presence." Participant 3 encourages individuals to use social media to advertise their product and service. Small business leaders need to integrate technology for efficiency and improved customer engagement which play a significant role in sustainable business growth.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

Findings from this study could contribute to and improve professional practice by providing small business leaders with strategies to sustain their businesses. The findings are relevant to small business leaders who intend to grow their businesses and remain competitive for a long period. Most small businesses fail in the first five years. Given that small businesses are important to the U.S. economy, it is imperative researchers find solutions to sustain them, Findings from this study will help small business leaders identify strategies they can use for sustainability. The major themes revolved around customer focus and service, adaptability and continuous learning, education and experience, employee engagement and collaboration, long-term vision and goals, community engagement and social impact, networking, accepting challenges, and technology integration. The knowledge on these strategies will help small business leaders improve performance, gain competitive advantage, and improve the sustainability of their businesses.

Findings from this study encourage small business leader to network with professional and engage employees and community in decision making. Networking allows small business leaders to share ideas and information which positively influence marketing decisions. Better market decisions improve confidence among employees and

leaders which allows these individuals to build connections for the benefit of the business (OECD, 2023). Small business leaders need to network with professionals within their industry to stay informed on new developments, policies, or innovations that spur sustainability. Small business leaders also need to network and collaborate with local communities. Small businesses lack resources which hinder their growth. Collaborating and networking with the local communities helps small business leaders gain access to unwavering support, indispensable resources, and vast knowledge (Chen, 2022). It also helps businesses improve their reputation which is critical to long-term growth and profitability. Therefore, I recommend that small business leaders make meaningful networks to sustain their businesses for the foreseeable future.

Findings from this study can help increase awareness on the need for small businesses to adopt technology to achieve sustainability. Adopting technology helps small businesses develop innovative business models and communication strategies which help with business growth. According to Vrontis et al. (2022), technology can help small businesses develop new modes of function and interactions with potential partners and customers. For example, small business leaders can adopt social media marketing on Facebook to improve brand-building activities. However, small business leaders need to evaluate the environment before adopting technology. That is, small business leaders must evaluate the perceived usefulness and ease with which employees can use the technology. Small business leaders must use techno-savvy employees to train, advice, and guide others on how to use a given technology (Juniarti & Omar, 2021). Training employees helps them develop their capabilities essential to exploiting and exploring digital technologies. I recommend small business leaders conduct thorough research on

the best technology to adopt to improve reputation, profitability, growth, and customer interactions. Implementing these strategies helps small business leaders sustain their businesses.

Finding from this study encourage small business leaders improve their skills through education and training. Investing in education and training helps improve communication, teamwork, and problem solving. These skills allow employees to view difficult situations as opportunities to grow and improve. Small business leaders with education and experience can identify, delegate and plan on customer requirements and needs (Saah, 2022). They are also knowledgeable on where to access the necessary capital and resource while starting out. Additionally, training and educating employees reduces errors and accidents, instils a sense of security at work, improve skills, reduces supervision, and uncovers employees' potential which result in continued success and sustainability. Therefore, I recommend small business leaders invest in education and training to develop their abilities and run sustainable business models.

Findings from this study implore small business leaders to offer excellent customer services. According to Adnan et al. (2023), excellent service has a positive effect on customer retention and business sustainability. Sustainable growth occurs when businesses build long-lasting relations with consumers. Small business leaders need to understand their clients to maintain a competitive advantage over rival firms. One way of understanding the customer base is by developing a customer database. Small business leaders can use the database for targeted advertising. This form of advertising helps us reach out to a wide range of potential clients. Furthermore, small business leaders should invest in making an excellent first-time impression to help retain first time customers.

Therefore, I recommend small business leaders train their employees on customer relations and offer excellent service quality.

Implications for Social Change

Findings from this study may contribute to positive social change by adding to the body of knowledge on some of the strategies small business leaders can use to sustain their businesses. Alsaaty and Makhlouf (2020) noted approximately 52% of small businesses in the U.S. to not survive past the five-year mark. As such, small business leaders need to develop strategies to improve the survival rates of small businesses. I developed this study with the hope that the findings will improve the knowledge on how small business leaders can sustain their businesses beyond the 5-year mark. By presenting prospective small business leaders with these findings, they could make informed decisions, improve performance, and maintain a competitive advantage. Small business leaders could use these findings to understand some of the problems they may encounter while running their businesses. Small business leaders may use these findings to promote the social wellbeing of their employees which positively impact their morale and performance. Lastly, small business leaders can use these findings to build better, safe, and caring communities within the areas the businesses are located.

Recommendations for Further Research

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study, I explored some of the strategies small business owners could use to sustain their businesses. I used semi-structured interviews which provided flexibility in diving deeper to get insight into the research question. I interviewed four small business owners from local malls in Manchester, Connecticut who have demonstrated commitment to sustainability. However, this study had a limited scope

and further research is needed to establish if the strategies can be used everywhere. I recommend:

1. My study is limited to Manchester, Connecticut. Further research be conducted in other states to enhance the transferability of the findings.

2. Increase the sample size. I interviewed four mall owners. The information gathered from the four participants may not reflect strategies of all successful small business leaders.

3. The participants were small business retailers with less than six employees. Further research to be conducted on small business leaders with more than six and less than 500 workers. The study should investigate if the strategies can be transferred as best practices into other industries.

Conclusion

Small businesses are integral to the growth of the United States economy. However, small businesses continue to fail because of poor leadership. Small business leaders must make concerted efforts to ensure these businesses remain operational for long periods. Findings from this study could help small business leaders develop strategies critical for the log-term survival of their businesses. Findings from this study indicated the long-term sustainability of small businesses depends on strategies such as small business leaders having long-term visions and plans, engaging the customers, employees, and local community, being resilient, continuously learning through education and work-related experiences, networking with other professionals, and providing excellent customer services.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What you will do	**What you will say—script**
I will introduce the interview to set the stage.	
✓ Watch for non-verbal cues. ✓ Paraphrase as needed. ✓ Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth.	1. What are the three leadership strengths that have assisted in sustaining your business? 2. What specific strategies have you utilized to acquire leadership skills? 3. How have you gained experience in a way that contributes to sustaining your business? 4. What approaches have you employed to ensure the long-term success and continuity of your business through the development of leadership skills and experience? 5. How has your leadership strategy differed from the time you started your business? 6. Which significant challenges have you encountered in implementing your strategies for sustainability?

	7. How do you assess the effectiveness of your strategies to acquire industry experience to support business sustainability?
	8. What else can you share with me about the strategies for business sustainability you have developed and used?
Wrap up interview, thanking participant.	
Schedule follow-up member checking interview.	

Appendix B: Informed Consent Forms for DBA Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Doctoral

Study

You are invited to take part in an interview for my doctorate research study on

Leadership Strategies for Small Business' Sustainability.

This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this

study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks volunteer small business owners who are:

- ✓ 18 years of age or older.

- ✓ Have operated small businesses for more than 5 years.

- ✓ Of sound mind

Interview Procedures

If you agree to be part of this study, you will be invited to take part in an audio-recorded

interview about your professional experiences. Opportunities for clarifying statements

will be available (via a process called member checking). Transcriptions of interviews

will be analyzed as part of the study, along with public documents and records.

The Interview protocol will involve the following steps:

- ✓ Face to face interviews lasting not more than 45 minutes

- ✓ Audio recording

- ✓ Member checking process. Once I complete the interview transcripts, I will email

    a copy of the interview to you (respondent) to check for accuracy. You will have

    7 business days to respond to the email with corrections. I will proceed with data

    analysis if the respondent does not provide any response.

Some of interview questions include:

1. What are the three leadership strengths that have assisted in sustaining your business?

2. What specific strategies have you utilized to acquire leadership skills?

3. How have you gained experience in a way that contributes to sustaining your business?

4. What approaches have you employed to ensure the long-term success and continuity of your business through the development of leadership skills and experience?

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are also allowed to withdraw from the process at any time without giving a reason. Your withdrawal from the process will not affect any relationship, if any, you might have with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

Risk and Benefits of being in the Study

Being in this study would not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. Respondents who feels uncomfortable sharing any information that they made deem sensitive are free to terminate their involvement at any time. Through this study, I will look to provide data and insight on the best leadership practices small business owners can use to sustain their businesses.

I will not be offering thank you gifts or compensation of any kind to participants of this study. This will not affect the care or services to which you are entitled to during the course of the interview process.

Privacy

The researcher must protect the privacy of all participants. I will take the following measures to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants:

- I will code all information from the interviews to protect all the respondents. No names that can help with the identification of the participants will be used when reporting or discussing the data.

- I will share audio recordings and transcript as needed by Walden University supervisors or with authorities if it is court ordered.

- I will store the data from this study in a password protected laptop for 5 years as required by the university.

- I will destroy the collected, analyzed, and reported data after 5 years.

Contact and Questions

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Walden University Research Participant advocate via 612-312-1210.

If you have questions about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is …..

Please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be

interviewed as described above, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent."