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Organizational Leadership Strategies for Growing Membership in a Start-Up Online Business

Pascale Rheault
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Pascale Rheault

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Review Committee

Dr. Meredith Wentz, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Bridget Dewees, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2024

Abstract

Organizational Leadership Strategies for Growing Membership in a Start-Up Online

Business

by

Pascale Rheault

MS, University of Miami, 2018

BSN, Barry University, 2001

Consulting Capstone Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2024

Abstract

Leaders of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a critical role in driving the global economy; however, online start-ups often face high failure rates within their first year. Some start-up leaders fail to implement effective promotional strategies, hindering their ability to succeed in a competitive market. Grounded in the Baldrige performance excellence framework, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore effective strategies business leaders use to grow membership in an online start-up business. The participants were two senior leaders in the Toronto region's start-up sector. Data were collected using semistructured interviews as well as a review of internal organizational documentation and professional and academic literature to address the business problem. Through methodological triangulation, three themes were identified: (a) strategic planning, (b) consumer management, and (c) performance measurement and analysis. A key recommendation is for start-up leaders to use design thinking to enhance the user experience and leverage digital marketing to drive engagement. The implications for positive social change include the potential to equip leaders of SMEs with strategies to successfully launch online businesses, thus contributing to global economic stability and supporting the financial strength of local communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my exceptional husband, Eric Rheault, and my children, Joshua and Aydin. Your constant support in words and actions made me feel like I could do anything. I completed this doctoral journey in your honor, and I encourage you to believe that nothing is beyond your reach if you take one step at a time in that direction. Additionally, I dedicate this work to my extended family and work colleagues, who encouraged me to keep moving forward through the challenges of caring for my aging parents. My parents planted the seed of curiosity, and I aim to pass it on.

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A special thank you to my primary organizational leader, who dedicated many business hours sharing their experiences to make this study possible. You and other entrepreneurs are the backbone of the world's economy, and the spirit of innovation thrives in people like you. Your aspirational dedication is a model for current and future generations of businesspeople. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to my Walden University DBA student cohort for their honesty about their challenges and successes, which helped uplift us and inspired us to persevere through our shared human experience.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
Section 1: Foundation of the Project.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Business Problem Consulting Focus and Project Purpose.....	2
Population and Sampling	3
Research Question	4
Assumptions and Limitations	4
Assumptions.....	4
Limitations	4
Transition	5
Section 2: Literature Review of Business Consulting Topic	6
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	6
Literature Selection.....	6
Conceptual Framework.....	8
Business Problem Evidence Review.....	12
Business Topic Integrative Review and Analysis.....	21
Literature Review Synopsis	26
Transition	27
Section 3: Research Project Methodology	29
Capstone Research Project Ethics.....	29

Nature of the Project	31
Population, Sampling, and Participants	32
Population	32
Sampling	33
Participants.....	35
Data Collection Activities.....	37
Data Collection Instruments	38
Data Organization and Analysis Techniques	40
Data Organization	40
Data Analysis	41
Reliability and Validity.....	43
Reliability.....	43
Validity	44
Transition and Summary.....	45
Section 4: Research Project Findings and Professional Conclusions	47
Organization Profile.....	47
Organizational Description	47
Organizational Situation	51
Leadership Triad: Leadership, Strategy, and Customers	55
Leadership.....	56
Strategy	58
Customers	60

Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management.....	61
Workforce	63
Operations	63
Project Results	65
Product and Process Results	66
Customer Results	70
Workforce Results	72
Leadership and Governance Results	75
Financial and Market Results.....	78
Key Themes Findings	80
Business Recommendations for Professional Practice	85
Design Thinking.....	85
Value Cocreation	87
Knowledge Management	88
Implications for Social Change.....	89
Conclusion	91
References.....	92
Appendix: Interview Protocol.....	108

List of Tables

Table 1. Professional and Academic Literature Review Statistics 8

Table 2. CJ and CPA Central: Website Traffic Summary 55

Table 3. Key Work Processes 65

List of Figures

Figure 1. Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program Concepts	10
Figure 2. Organizational Metrics on Marketing Success.....	68
Figure 3. The CJ Firm and CPA Central (Parent Company) Home Page Engagement....	70
Figure 4. Word Cloud on Customer Management Assessment.....	71
Figure 5. CJ's Workforce Task Dispersion.....	74
Figure 6. The CJ Firm's Leadership Responsibilities.....	76
Figure 7. Canadian Unemployment Rates	79

Section 1: Foundation of the Project

The Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and framework is the lens through which I grounded this qualitative single case study of effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. The Malcolm Baldrige excellence framework (MBEF) is a performance measurement system of core concepts that include leadership, strategy, customers, workforce, operations, results, measurement, assessment, and knowledge management (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). I collaborated with a small, start-up online partner organization to build on the Baldrige foundational concepts for performance improvement. The Walden University (2023) guidelines outlined the standardized and ethical activities for Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) Consulting Capstone students, which I adhered to in this study. Using the systems perspective of the Baldrige criteria, I explored opportunities for sustainable performance improvement and impactful social change.

Background of the Problem

Entrepreneurs starting online businesses in the small business sector face a complex environment within the commerce industry. A significantly higher number of online start-ups fail compared to their traditional, brick-and-mortar counterparts (Smith, 2020). Start-ups are defined as small- to medium-sized, privately owned, technology-oriented companies that are less than 10 years old, with limited resources, and are in the process of establishing a stable business model (Lasso et al., 2019; Men et al., 2021; Szathmári et al., 2024). The failure rate for these online start-ups is 90% within the first

year of platform operation (Smith, 2020; Szathmári et al., 2024), presenting unique challenges to entrepreneurs in this digital domain.

Start-up organizational leaders are in a pivotal position to steer the direction of their firms. Lee and Ooi (2014) noted that a set of practical activities aid in the operation of an organization for continuous improvement. Maier and Wieringa (2021) reported a lack of understanding regarding the acquisition of customers in online marketplaces for organizational survival. In the specialized context of online start-up businesses, leaders must capitalize on opportunities for sustainability within this market. Therefore, a qualitative single case study was appropriate to explore effective strategies business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business to deliver value to a global economy and enhance the lifestyle of community members for positive social change.

Business Problem Consulting Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some business leaders lack effective strategies for growing membership in a start-up online business. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore and identify effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. Saunders et al. (2020) asserted that quantitative research is principally associated with experimental research, surveys, or possibly observation, while qualitative research derives meaning from words and images. I selected the qualitative single case study approach as most appropriate to explore the experiences of a start-up online business leader to gain a holistic understanding of the business problem. As a scholar-consultant, I examined the

perspectives and business choices of the online start-up's executive leader/founder in a single case study through the MBEF lens.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, established the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program in 1987 through the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act, aimed at empowering U.S. businesses to compete at a high level and create social value (Garfield et al., 2021; Link & Scott, 2012). The NIST (2023) honors the work and managerial excellence of Malcolm Baldrige, an advocate for quality management, with a regularly revised MBEF for performance excellence, core values, and guidelines for evaluating processes and results (Garfield et al., 2021). Additionally, the Baldrige Excellence Builder consists of validated, open-ended questions crafted to examine an organization's strengths and opportunities for improvement (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). I used a semistructured interview approach with the 2023–2024 Baldrige Excellence Builder to explore strategies for growing membership in a start-up online business.

Population and Sampling

Walden University DBA Consulting Capstone administrators selected and paired me with a Canadian-based small business leader who agreed to participate in a doctoral study. The organizational leader's firm fits the criteria of a start-up in the nonprobability convenience sampling strategy used in the current study. Start-ups are privately owned small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are technology-oriented companies operating for less than 10 years (Lasso et al., 2019; Men et al., 2021). I also reviewed

public data, journals, books, government sites, and the study site firm's internal materials that the organization's leader deemed appropriate to share with me as the researcher.

Research Question

What effective strategies do business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Researchers must carefully review assumptions in the study design (Yin, 2018). Verostek et al. (2022) asserted that assumptions are defined by their utility in making the problem-solving process tractable and what the researcher believes to be true in the problem. I derived this study's thematic findings using qualitative, semistructured interviews with a business leader and analyzed them through the 2023–2024 MBEF lens. The semistructured interviews were instrumental in collecting evidence about the viewpoints of an online start-up founder, which I assumed to be transparent, complete, and accurate. The assumption with the semistructured interview research design is that the circumstances are complex and dynamic (Saunders et al., 2020). Consequently, an attempt to replicate this research may not be feasible.

Limitations

The limitations of the current study were related to those issues in the research design that influenced the findings (see Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Yin (2018) asserted that case study researchers should be aware of their study's data collection and analysis limitations. This qualitative single case study had several limitations. First, the start-up

online organization operated in Canada, under Canadian regulations, and served Canadian professionals, thus impacting international transferability. Second, the small sample size of one start-up online firm hinders generalizability. The third limitation was the early development stage of the organization (i.e., less than 6 months at the beginning of the study). Since the organization was a new entity, several organizational procedures were still under development, thus impacting the available evidence. Additionally, I must acknowledge my researcher bias regarding standardized framework and quality management technique selections for data collection and analysis activities.

Transition

Entrepreneurs launching start-ups in the online small- to medium-sized business sector face a complex and demanding commercial environment. Within the first years of existence, up to 90% of online start-ups fail as entrepreneurs struggle with best practices for sustainability (Men et al., 2021; Smith, 2020). Maier and Wieringa (2021) posited that acquiring new customers is a critical factor in organizational performance in the specialized context of the online marketplace. In this study, I addressed the specific business problem that some business leaders lack strategies to grow membership in a start-up online business. In the following sections, I examine existing knowledge in professional and academic literature, followed by my presentation of the research project methodology, research project findings, and professional conclusions.

Section 2: Literature Review of Business Consulting Topic

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In the following subsections of the literature review, I first discuss the literature selection process, then describe the conceptual framework, start-up organizations, membership growth, value creation, and social impact to address the business problem. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore and identify effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. Consequently, I consulted professional, peer-reviewed academic literature; reports; and government websites to address the aim of the study.

The significance of business study is invariably assessed in the context of contemporaneous qualitative research (Reuber & Fischer, 2022). Aligned with this perspective, Dana et al. (2023) asserted that as literature evolves, nascent entrepreneurs and scholars must evaluate new and vital business insights that inform theory and practice. Thus, researchers must assess multiple timely data sources and integrate the findings and perspectives into a distinctive yet evidence-based view. Therefore, I performed an exhaustive review of current professional and academic literature to illustrate knowledge development, identify the study's relevance, and analyze the business problem.

Literature Selection

Yin (2018) asserted that researchers use literature reviews to determine the answers for known topics and reveal the gaps that require further study. I performed literature searches using databases and search engines accessible through the Walden

University Library, including Academic Search Complete, APA PsycINFO (EBSCOhost), Business Source Complete, Education Resource Information Center, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), Emerald Insight, Google Books, Google Scholar, MEDLINE (EBSCOhost), ProQuest, PubMed, SAGE Journals, ScholarWorks, ScienceDirect (EBSCOhost), Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley, for this doctoral study. The following keyword search terms and phrases were used: *Baldrige*, *Baldrige award*, *Baldrige framework*, *Malcolm Baldrige*, *CPA*, *customer behaviors*, *customer experience*, *NIST*, *business ethics*, *business law*, *business networks*, *business ecosystems*, *customers*, *grow a brand*, *marketing*, *NEST*, *online marketplace*, *management*, *social media marketing*, and *online job search*.

I adhered to the Walden University academic guidelines when selecting scholarly literature for this study. Optimally, peer-reviewed journals account for 85% of the literature reviewed, and the sources must be published within the last 5 years of the expected capstone completion (Walden University, 2023). Wanyama et al. (2021) advocated using various databases and reputable journals when conducting literature reviews because relying solely on a single source could significantly affect the quality of the analysis and outcomes. Other than the data collected from the organizational leader, I verified the literature's peer-reviewed status using the Ulrichsweb Global Serials Directory, which was available through the Walden University Library. Table 1 displays the numbers and percentages of the professional and academic literature reviewed per Walden University's doctoral capstone requirements. The older sources published before

2021 included seminal theorists' work to add depth and historical context to the case study.

Table 1

Professional and Academic Literature Review Statistics

References	Total count	2021 to 2025	Within 5 years %	Before 2021	Older %	Total %
Peer reviewed	58	54	87%	4	7%	94%
Not peer reviewed	4	2	3%	2	3%	6%
Total	62	56	90%	6	10%	100%

Conceptual Framework

The Malcolm Baldrige performance excellence framework is the lens through which I performed the current study. Conceptual frameworks are used to describe critical factors, constructs, and variables impacting a phenomenon, including the relationship between the factors (Orkin et al., 2021). Contemporary researchers have illustrated the importance of standardized, measurable frameworks to facilitate processes. For example, Wang et al. (2022) demonstrated that standardized quality practices with calculated feedback loops proved to have a statistically significant positive influence on organizational operations and performance results. Consistent with Wang et al.'s results, Rochmatullah et al. (2023) found that the implementation of the Baldrige excellence performance measurement system was correlated with workforce quality, customer satisfaction, social responsibility, and total productivity improvement. Thus, the structured procedures contributed to favorable outcomes.

Similarly, I required a systematic framework with core performance improvement concepts applicable to the contemporary business context. Researchers design business

excellence frameworks to help organizational leaders drive world-class performance and create value for their stakeholders (Ghafoor et al., 2021; NIST, 2023). Ghafoor et al. (2021) reported that 65.5% of international business excellence custodians were confident in using a systems-based and adaptable framework for promoting business excellence. Thus, practitioners across disparate industries have been empowered with foundational but nonprescriptive concepts to meet their needs.

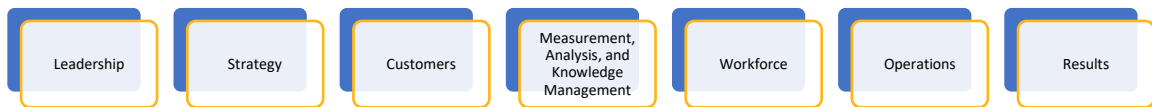
Consequently, the conceptual framework must be flexible yet incorporate precision to accurately assess the organization, measure progress, and achieve goals. The U.S. Congress established the Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Program through the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act in 1987 to improve organizational performance and competitiveness (NIST, 2023). Szathmári et al. (2024) contended that organizations require an integrative assessment approach structured around conceptual frameworks to avoid fragmented and confusing knowledge. These observations align with Rangsungnoen et al.'s (2023) findings that entrepreneurs valued the Baldrige model with its framework for setting a clear direction for business excellence and developing a customer-focused organizational culture combined with social responsibility to drive success. Thus, an evidence-based yet balanced approach to organizational sustainability and social responsibility was an essential consideration in choosing a framework to address the research problem.

Consequently, I leveraged the MBEF to understand and structure effective strategies leaders used to address the business problem of generating membership growth in start-up organizations. The power of the Baldrige framework stems from its emphasis

on establishing continuity and connections between operational activities and overarching goals (Garfield et al., 2021). The Baldrige criteria is built on an interrelated system of core values and concepts, including leadership, strategy, customers, workforce, operations, results, measurement, analysis, and knowledge management for performance excellence (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024; NIST, 2023). I leveraged these concepts, illustrated in Figure 1, for a foundational understanding of the target organization and the context in which it operates.

Figure 1

Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program Concepts



Note. The Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and framework are based on seven categories of organizational performance excellence concepts (NIST, 2023). The image above depicts the concepts I used as the lens for assessing the target organization's processes to address the business problem.

Furthermore, I required standardized processes incorporating the MBEF's core concepts to guide activities and yield quality results. Business practitioners worldwide use excellence models to structure and guide activities with best practices for leadership, strategy development, operations, customer engagement, and social responsibility (Muhammad Din et al., 2021). However, Hernández-Linares et al. (2021) asserted that leaders must remain competitive in their respective industries by consistently developing and adjusting work processes, ensuring their ability to adapt and maintain a competitive

edge. Therefore, besides being validated and reliable for achieving high performance, the business model must adhere to foundational standards while incorporating agility and responsiveness.

Yet, arguably, no business excellence model is perfect. A variety of framework options exist with different concepts for assessing business performance. Ubaid and Dweiri (2023) noted that many researchers analyze business excellence models for efficiency and effectiveness. The Baldrige framework is an evidence-based, nonprescriptive approach for leaders across business sectors to assess their processes and accomplish performance excellence (Garfield et al., 2021; NIST, 2023; Rangsungoen et al., 2023; Sahputra et al., 2021). Ghafoor et al. (2021) asserted that international business excellence custodians have adopted the Baldrige excellence framework, which indicates the flexibility of the Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program in disparate contexts.

The Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Program had several additional advantages. I could adopt the program in its published form. Moreover, the program conducted quality reviews more frequently than many other business excellence frameworks (every 2 years), and the Baldrige Excellence Performance Program continuously monitored high-performing organizations through ongoing research (Ghafoor et al., 2021). An additional benefit of the Baldrige framework was standardization. As an integral function of the program, the Baldrige Excellence Builder was a standard assessment tool that enabled leaders of any organization to critically detail and assess their processes through the lens of core values and concepts found in high-performing organizations to accomplish their

mission, improve results, and gain a competitive edge (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Therefore, I utilized the 2023–2024 Baldrige Excellence Builder tool to systematically assess my target organization in addressing the business problem.

Business Problem Evidence Review

Start-Up Organizations

When evaluating strategies, I had to consider the entrepreneur behind the start-up. Lasso et al. (2019) found that entrepreneurs' top-ranked reasons for opening a technologically based start-up included market opportunity, new challenges, learning opportunities, self-realization, and freedom to implement their work methods. Möller et al. (2020) asserted that entrepreneurs bring together disparate actors with varying capabilities and resources to cultivate the conditions for innovation development. Enterprising business leaders of small- and medium-sized organizations are responsible for driving up to 90% of the global economy (Rao et al., 2021). Thus, entrepreneurs have a tremendous effect on business evolution and the world's economy.

However, entrepreneurs must navigate a unique set of circumstances in a start-up firm. Start-up organizations are small- and medium-sized innovative online enterprises that are privately held, technology-driven, and less than 10 years old with the entrepreneur's intent for sustainability and scalability (Men et al., 2021; Szathmári et al., 2024). Unfortunately, Szathmári et al. (2024) found that online start-up failures were predictably linked to business plans. In the early stages of an online start-up, entrepreneurs struggle with best practices for business relationships, such as with consumers (Desku & Sadrijia, 2023; Men et al., 2021). Therefore, start-up entrepreneurs

could benefit from optimizing their customer orientation as part of their sustainability plan.

Curating and cultivating customer relationships can be crucial components of start-up business strategies for a competitive edge. Kingsnorth (2022) noted that organizational leaders require customer relationship management whether the organization has membership enrollment or is a single-sale model. Fundamentally, online firm leaders must make strategic choices that prioritize consumer-based recruitment opportunities, acquisition, and retention for sustainability and brand growth (Ahmad et al., 2022). Therefore, start-up entrepreneurs must strategically leverage effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business.

Start-ups have the magnetic attraction of disruptive innovation. Entrepreneurs tap into neglected market segments to serve unmet demand and disrupt the existing industry (Agyei-Boapeah et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). However, the trailblazing nature of start-ups begins with the orientation of the organizational leader. Men et al. (2021) asserted that entrepreneurs across cultural contexts, including the United States, United Kingdom, and China, share innovative, risk-taking, and visionary behaviors. This eagerness to break the status quo can be a compelling draw for consumer attention in the online ecosystem.

Membership Growth Strategies

Recruitment. Entrepreneurs may require a combination of strategies to effectively articulate their vision and recruit new customers to join their platform. A digital marketing strategy is essential for recruitment, enabling business leaders to use analytics to understand consumers' behavior and interests (Kingsnorth, 2022). To remain

competitive and relevant, organizational leaders must take advantage of digital tools to communicate, set up feedback loops, and respond to threats and opportunities (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Nonetheless, most website owners have not yet leveraged the most effective digital strategies to enhance their online presence (Semrush, 2023). The digital landscape inherent to online start-ups enables the prime opportunity for engaging and attracting consumers.

Email Campaigns. Entrepreneurs may require a combination of strategies to effectively articulate their vision and recruit new customers to join their platform. The inherent digital domain of online start-ups offers numerous opportunities for customer marketing. Digital marketing strategy is a critical factor in recruitment because business leaders may use analytics to understand consumers' behavior and interests (Kingsnorth, 2022). For example, email is a ubiquitous tool for interactive communication. Thomas et al. (2022) asserted that business practitioners should strategically use marketing emails to engage consumers. Thomas et al. found that consumers were likelier to respond to informational alerts from consumer relationship management emails they considered beneficial. Despite this evidence-based consumer relationship management strategy, emails may be perceived as a promotional nuisance.

Desku and Sadrijia (2023) warned of the potential negative effects of consumers' interpretation of emails as spam, resulting in a low promotional impact. Repetitive promotional emails evoke defensive coping strategies in consumers, resulting in deleted emails (Desku & Sadrijia, 2023; Thomas et al., 2022). Alternatively, business leaders would be better served with a more palatable and surgical approach. Kingsnorth (2022)

and Purnomo (2023) asserted that a well-planned email marketing campaign targets relevant customers with a storyline series, discounts, and exclusive content, which elicits more consistent responses than repetitive emails. For example, potential and existing customers may receive private newsletters, loyalty programs, product updates, and special offers to encourage returning to the platform (Kingsnorth, 2022). Additionally, incorporating positive consumer feedback in communications effectively increases awareness and encourages brand loyalty (Purnomo, 2023; Semrush, 2023).

Social Media Marketing. The number of social media (SM) platforms and SM users has increased significantly, with extraordinarily diverse uses, making these applications the most important on the internet (Aichner et al., 2021). With the rise in SM usage, researchers are exploring how the interactions and swift exchange of information can be leveraged in business. Firm leaders have been intensifying their social media marketing strategies over the last decade to expand their geographic reach and optimize consumer interactions (Li et al., 2020; Muninger et al., 2022). According to Cao and Weerawardena (2023), the strategic use of SM has become essential to market-sensing capability, increased competitiveness, and enhanced customer-linking capabilities. Consequently, organizational leaders must explore SM as a mediator of customer relationship management.

SM is an umbrella term that describes online platforms, including business networks, blogs, social networks, product reviews, social gaming sites, and virtual worlds (Aichner et al., 2021). SM technologies enable customers to inform themselves about products and services without interacting with salespeople (Cao & Weerawardena, 2023).

Therefore, a power shift has enabled SM users to freely gather information, communicate, collaborate, and post their experiences with products and services (Muninger et al., 2022). This user-generated content yields a rich environment for communication, gathering feedback, and facilitating long-term relationship-building activity with consumers (Cao & Weerawardena, 2023; Li et al., 2020; Muninger et al., 2022). Thus, despite having limited budgets for traditional advertising, public relations, or research and development, start-up leaders can now advantageously engage with customers in ways that were previously impossible in the marketing context.

Möller et al. (2020) asserted that marketing scholars must focus on where strategic marketing practice will be rather than where it has been. With scrutiny, Li et al. (2020) contended that SM proliferation has caused three fundamental shifts: networking between firms and customers nurtures social ties from shared interests, customers may influence others' consumption behaviors, and the proliferation of SM has made it increasingly possible for firm leaders to enhance their decision making. For example, Netflix leaders monitored SM and found that consumers fell asleep while watching programs, which led to the development of the pause feature in streaming services with inactivity (Muninger et al., 2022). However, organizational leaders may be better informed, but harnessing the benefits may be challenging.

Despite the challenge, as SM activity surpasses face-to-face interactions, organizational leaders must continuously monitor internal and external factors in their industry to identify potential disruptions early using analytics and smart technology (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Start-up entrepreneurs may leverage

artificial intelligence (AI) for processes, such as the automation of digital tasks, cognitive insight for detecting patterns in vast volumes of data to detect quality issues, and engagement with employees and customers using chatbots, intelligent agents, and machine learning for continuous service (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Clayton (2021) asserted that organizational leaders must declare their change vision, empower internal and external experts to drive the change, use SM to drive awareness, and embrace learning. With such preparation and continuous monitoring for change opportunities, firm leaders could equip themselves for emerging challenges and disruptive technology that impact their competitive position for drawing new consumers to their platform.

Acquisition and Retention

Hendricks and Mwapwele (2024) asserted that the digital e-commerce platform enables business leaders to strengthen customer relationships and satisfaction correlated with increased sales, making customer connection a crucial strategic duty. According to Semrush (2023), SM has an increasing presence and substantial impact on people's lives. Angelou et al. (2024) reported that Facebook and Twitter metrics can predict website traffic with a 60% or higher success rate. Since the start-up is a technology-based enterprise (Lasso et al., 2019), the internet is a practical portal for investigating consumers' online behaviors, which can play an essential role in membership acquisition.

For example, via online surveys, Karaoglu et al. (2021) found that the socio-demographic characteristics of people engaged in digital job searches strongly correlate with SM and internet use, higher education, and elevated income levels. However, once

firm leaders target their intended client, the marketing strategy must result in a sales conversion. Purnomo (2023) posited that the digital era has significantly shifted the business paradigm for selling products and services online. A combination of digital era strategies impacts visibility, customer attraction, and the conversion to active consumerism, including:

1. Search engine optimization (SEO) increases a site's ranking and visibility in search results, increasing the chances of consumers visiting the platform. As a content marketing strategy, 46% of business owners cite SEO as a leading success factor (Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023; Semrush, 2023).
2. Pay-per-click in e-commerce is paid advertising on search engines, such as Google Ads, Facebook Ads, or Instagram Ads. With paid advertising, start-up leaders can target audiences with specific keywords (Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023; Semrush, 2023).
3. Advertising on third-party market platforms and synergistic business relationships increase visibility and new customer acquisition (Guenther & Guenther, 2022; Maier & Wieringa, 2021; Möller et al., 2020).
4. Content marketing involves creating and distributing informative articles, tutorials, product reviews, cocreation opportunities, and other engaging content, such as in newsletters or an email campaign (Kingsnorth, 2022; Li et al., 2020; Purnomo, 2023).
5. SM marketing can increase brand awareness and drive traffic to the online platform. However, firm managers must select SM platforms relevant to the

targeted audience and actively respond to questions (Angelou et al., 2024; Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023).

6. An SM monitoring strategy is a critical customer-oriented perspective for listening and responding to customer feedback and complaints (Li et al., 2020). Managers can leverage consumer-generated SM content to enable consumers to be powerful allies for improving services or products (Aichner et al., 2021).
7. User experience optimization (with scheduled quality checks) for an intuitive layout, easy navigation, fast loading times, responsiveness across different devices, and simple search tools to help visitors easily interact with the platform for a pleasurable, gamified experience (García-Magro et al., 2022; Kingsnorth, 2022). As interactivity is highly valued, links to social platforms, such as Instagram or onsite forum discussions, can enable peer-to-peer recommendations (Dobre et al., 2023).
8. Leverage customer reviews and testimonials. Positive reviews are social proof of communal confidence in the service or product, which has an enormous impact on customers' decisions (Purnomo, 2023; Semrush, 2023; Ylilehto et al., 2021).
9. Personalized content and product recommendations via AI and data analysis can help provide a more tailored consumer experience (Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023; Ylilehto et al., 2021).

10. Videos of influencers showcasing products or services provide information in an easily digestible format to drive visual interest and engagement (Purnomo, 2023). Kingsnorth (2022) asserted that if the competition launches a viral video campaign, managers should pivot to a YouTube video campaign to reduce the competitor's gains and draw new attention.
11. Loyalty programs with special incentives such as discounts and reward points encourage increased shopping, engagement, and retention (Kingsnorth, 2022; Li et al., 2020; Purnomo, 2023). According to Haverila et al. (2022), the key success factor for loyalty program success is the perceived value of personalized recommendations to members based on their purchase history and information.
12. Mobile optimization is an essential consideration as more consumers shop increasingly on mobile devices, with mobile browsing positively associated with purchase intention (Ylilehto et al., 2021). As part of the mobile experience, animated images and visual appeal improve browsing enjoyment, which is an essential emotional connection with consumers (Dobre et al., 2023).

Leaders should remain focused on effective membership growth strategies at the start-up's nascent beginnings and throughout its transition to maturity. Customer retention, gains, and losses are critically relevant indicators of customer satisfaction with organizational performance and predict market positioning and sustainability (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). According to Saura et al. (2020), business

leaders must collect, download, and analyze data on how consumers make decisions in the digital ecosystem and change tactics as needed for organizational sustainability.

These observations align with Szathmári et al. (2024), who emphasized the critical role of feedback loops, highlighting that inadequate efforts in seeking customer feedback can predict start-up failure. Start-up leaders must promote their organization, meet consumers where they are, collect and evaluate opportunities for improvement, improve the consumer experience, and celebrate positive reviews.

Business Topic Integrative Review and Analysis

As start-up entrepreneurs craft an action plan with strategies to expand their online business membership, they should consider what their customers value. Strategic planning for long-term organizational excellence must include a customer-focused perspective with operational performance improvement and organizational learning to drive customer engagement (NIST, 2023). The customer experience is a subjective, temporal, social, and holistic experience profoundly intertwined with value creation (Ylilehto et al., 2021). Thus, the ebb and flow of an evolving consumer experience must remain a high priority for start-up leaders to maximize the value of their service or product.

However, organizational priorities are often reflected in the firm leader's activities. The NIST (2023) noted that high-performing businesses have critical performance and operational requirements embedded in a results-oriented framework of interrelated core concepts, including leadership, strategy, customers, measurement, assessment, knowledge management, workforce, operations, and results. Therefore,

understanding the start-up context, including the leadership orientation, is essential for grasping how the core concepts align for an organization.

Value Creation

Communicating Value. Strategic communication requires more attention. Men et al. (2021) found that start-up CEOs who use empathetic, direction-giving, and motivating language nurtured quality relationships in their sustainable business practices.

Subsequently, employees were better connected and committed to supporting the higher goals of the business. Organizational leaders must communicate a compelling vision and shared values with employees or contractors. According to Burns (2012), *opinion leaders* pass on information in a vertical and horizontal flow throughout an organization to meet their agenda; however, they must consider their team's values and goals. Thus, firm leaders must assert a clear vision with measurable goals, but leaders must balance their demands with a willingness to investigate their followers' needs and motivations.

Nevertheless, when executive decision-making is unstandardized, the unpredictability of foot-draggers, expeditors, adjusters, and others with their own goals is magnified (Burns, 2012). Begeç and Akyuz (2023) asserted that leaders of technology-based organizations must ensure open communication to support an interdependent, collaborative network for creating and capturing value. According to Yan et al. (2022), business sustainability depends on a long-term commitment to creating value for stakeholders. Constant bidirectional communication is an essential strategy to drive active engagement and dedication throughout an organization (Baldrige Performance

Excellence Program, 2024). Thus, communication throughout value-building activities is a powerful tool for internal and external stakeholder awareness.

Value Cocreation. The consumer's experience with an organization shapes their purchasing decisions and brand loyalty (van Langen et al., 2021). Pratap et al. (2022) asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic boosted e-commerce enterprises; however, consumer expectations have evolved to anticipate high-quality service offerings, seamless processes, and customized experiences. Thus, business leaders must consider engagement builders for the online experience. As consumers become more knowledgeable and, therefore, more selective, this presents a compelling condition for organizational leaders to meet the needs of a more sophisticated platform user (Karaoglu et al., 2021). Thus, consumers are critical shaping forces in an organization's ecosystem. As start-up leaders increase membership, consumers can be powerful allies in cocreativity activities for organizational sustainability.

Cocreation is a management initiative to enable interaction with an external individual or group associated with the business to contribute added value, marketing, or content to improve production and profitability (Ahmad et al., 2022; García-Magro et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2021). According to Ahmad et al. (2022), when consumers actively participated in crafting their experience, there was a sense of shared ownership in value cocreation. Online consumers compare prices and influence others to patronize the competition when dissatisfied; and they expect an aesthetically appealing website that is easy to use, and private (Pratap et al., 2022). Since the e-commerce platform surpasses the constraints of time and space, the start-up leader may enable a personalized

experience to meet the client's needs with fewer limitations. This enables both the consumer and the organization to have a shared experience for mutual benefit.

With the experience-oriented approach, value cocreation is interactive and considers the emotional and cognitive connections of users (García-Magro et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2021). For example, Nike executives anticipated their competitive advantage was in value cocreation through experiences of connecting users on the Nike+ gamified platform (García-Magro et al., 2022). Nike+ membership enables runners worldwide to share their experiences, upcoming events, and personal achievements, thereby driving participation for insider tips to experience a healthier lifestyle. In the digital platform ecosystem, the ability to share and converge ideas has a positive effect on value creation (Li et al., 2023). Data transparency boosts organizational leaders' understanding of consumers' experiences with their products. Thus, a communal forum facilitates the assembling of ideas to build a better product for the firm's members.

Corporate Social Responsibility

As start-up entrepreneurs cultivate membership growth for organizational sustainability, they should consider how their core values align with their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, if any. The Baldrige performance excellence program's core values favor more socially inclusive practices to satisfy the stakeholders and demands of the institutional environment (Ford, 2021). Similarly, Yan et al. (2022) asserted that sustainable business development requires firm leaders to commit to CSR activities in value creation for stakeholders as a contribution to the social welfare of their

communities. Yan et al. revealed a significant positive correlation between CSR activities and organizational trust.

Extending the research on community perception, Kwak et al. (2022) and Khan et al. (2023) found that CSR activities were expected by consumers and enhanced an internet organization's authenticity and socio-political legitimacy. Furthermore, Gupta et al. (2021) noted that transparent CSR communication via SM was positively related to brand admiration and purchase intention, thus indicating a link between socially responsible practices and organizational sustainability. However, CSR activities must also be sustainable as part of a larger organizational strategy.

Many traditional business leaders may question whether CSR activities lack fundamental business sense. Nevertheless, organizational leaders are integrating CSR into strategic opportunities to address business problems. For example, Yan et al. (2022) noted that Starbucks executives enhanced their public image while positively impacting the environment when Starbucks leaders committed resources to sourcing wholesome ingredients and reducing packaging and food waste. Corporate citizenship, in the form of a commitment to respecting human rights and protecting the environment, is an emerging trend in CSR (Okafor et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, CSR can also have a positive influence on financial performance. Organizational leaders who use corporate governance for dedicating resources and spending on CSR activities increase organizational growth (Okafor et al., 2021). According to Ghanbarpour and Gustafsson (2022), consumers' favorable perceptions of a firm's CSR activities and innovation are positively related to financial performance

through the indirect influence of customer satisfaction. However, as firm leaders leverage the long-term carryover effect of customer satisfaction and resulting behavioral intention for brand loyalty, they must not overlook the importance of continued CSR activities and communications.

Technology firms, such as start-up organizations, have an advantage regarding the internet platform. Social networks are gathering places for like-minded users who rally behind a shared cause and utilize these platforms to exchange ideas and get informed (Saura et al., 2020). Loureiro and Lopes (2019) found that leaders who shared CSR and cocreative activities on social media platforms significantly improved awareness of their community activities, fostered consumer empowerment, increased word-of-mouth distribution, reinforced brand ties, and boosted participation. Thus, an integral facet of corporate strategies for organizational reputation and performance must include a shared commitment to social responsibility for communal well-being.

Literature Review Synopsis

I delved into the existing knowledge about the context of start-up firms in Section 2. Start-ups are technology-oriented small- to medium-sized firms that are privately owned, less than 10 years old, with leaders who aim to scale their model (Lasso et al., 2019; Men et al., 2021; Szathmári et al., 2024). Entrepreneurs often start technologically based ventures due to market opportunities, new challenges, learning opportunities, self-realization, and freedom to change processes (Lasso et al., 2019). According to Rao et al. (2021), enterprising business leaders drive up to 90% of the global economy. However,

start-up leaders face unique challenges in the early stages of the organization, including planning-related opportunities for recruitment, acquisition, and retention of customers.

I used the Malcolm Baldrige performance excellence framework as the lens to explore and identify effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. Through monitored and measured processes, high-performing organizational leaders create, foster, and reinforce engagement, which requires innovation, inclusion, and a focus on the future (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Thus, entrepreneurs require a blend of systematic strategies to effectively articulate their vision and continuously monitor opportunities for value creation and product improvement (Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023). According to Mukhuty et al. (2022), start-up firm leaders must also ensure that their values align with socially responsible leadership activities. Consequently, start-up leaders must commit to process improvement, monitoring feedback, flexibility, and accountability for their organizational and communal well-being if they aim to grow customer membership.

Transition

In Section 2, I performed a comprehensive literature review to provide context for the business problem of the lack of effective strategies for growing membership in a start-up online business. I reviewed the literature selection process, conceptual framework, start-up organizations, membership growth, value creation, and CSR factors of this study. In the following section, I will present the research project methodology, which includes the capstone research project ethics, nature of the project, population, sampling, and participants. Additionally, I will describe the data collection activities, data organization,

data analysis techniques, and examine the reliability and validity of the study. In Section 4, I will detail the research project findings and professional conclusions, which include the participant's organizational profile, leadership triad, project results, business recommendations for professional practice, implications for social change, and conclusion.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Capstone Research Project Ethics

In qualitative research, researchers are the main tool for data collection and engage in a sequence of interconnected activities to answer the research question (Yin, 2018). My investigation began with the facilitation of Walden University's DBA Consulting Capstone administrators, who provided access to participants via established partner organizations. Although the research participants were not given financial incentives, they benefited from free business consulting, which was based on the insights revealed from the Baldrige Framework assessment. I obtained the participant's consent and the signed service order agreement via email to ensure the informed authorization of the business leader for participation as well as instructions for withdrawal at any stage of the study. I presented a copy of the signed service order agreement in the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for optimal compliance with research ethics, federal regulations, and university policies.

Only after receiving the Walden University IRB authorization to proceed (IRB Approval Number: 02-05-24-1184202) could the semistructured interviews begin within the preapproved parameters. Semistructured interviews enable researchers to ask questions and probe the responses based on the answers to add significance and depth to the data (Saunders et al., 2020). As the sole researcher gathering evidence for this study, I was obligated to follow ethical guidelines in managing interviews, maintaining study materials, and destroying transcripts, as needed, for participants who opted out of the study. IRB protocols mandate that researchers adhere to the following fundamental

principles of the *Belmont Report* to guide the ethical research conduct involving human subjects:

- beneficence in which researchers minimize harm to research participants in the pursuit of knowledge;
- respect for participants as autonomous in their decision-making process, with predetermined guidelines for informed consent without coercion; and
- justice is maintained when researchers focus on fairness, lack of bias, and protecting participants from exploitation (Ritchie, 2021).

I had no previous relationship with the participant or their organization before engaging in the research process. The interviewee was the organization's senior leader and founder, making them a decision-maker; therefore, the participant could deem it appropriate to grant me access to the firm's archival data. Nevertheless, I was bound to comply with organizational regulatory, legal, and confidentiality requirements in research processes and procedures. Additionally, within the terms of the service order agreement, the participant reserved the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Thus, as participation was voluntary, I, as the researcher, agreed to stop conducting the interviews immediately upon the participant's request.

Saunders et al. (2020) asserted that researchers must prioritize the continuing anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of their data. I protected the participants by designing the scheduled interviews to be audio recorded with no video. Only senior leaders could be interviewed and participate in the study. Aside from publicly available data, the client must deem any internal archival material appropriate to

share with me for the study. I coded the names of the participant and their organizations to protect their confidentiality. I will securely store the data for 5 years in a password-protected cloud drive, and a digital copy remains on an external drive with physical notes in a locked cabinet under my supervision. After 5 years, I will shred all the paper documents related to the study and delete all digital documentation to protect individual and organizational information. No data were or will be used for any purpose other than the project outlined in the service order agreement.

Nature of the Project

Researchers may select quantitative, mixed, or qualitative methods to explore a phenomenon. Quantitative researchers collect statistical data and analyze it to determine relationships and answer research questions (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). The quantitative methodology was inappropriate for the current study because I did not aim to collect numerical data. In qualitative studies, researchers leverage conceptualization to find meaning from participants' expressions about a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2020). The mixed method was inappropriate because this research study was not aimed at collecting a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Yin (2018) asserted that case study researchers find patterns and insights from interviews to understand the complexities of contemporary events. The qualitative single case study design was appropriate for this study because it enabled me to learn about the participant's unique perspectives and contemporary experiences with their online start-up firm.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore and identify effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. According to Saunders et al. (2020), whatever the objective, sampling from the specified population enables the researcher to reduce the amount of data needing to be collected rather than considering all possible cases or elements. Nevertheless, Yin (2018) noted that researchers must clarify the conditions of the population and the qualitative case being studied. I outlined and maintained specific parameters for this study's population, sampling, and participants to explore the business problem.

Population

Entrepreneurs of start-up businesses were the population for this study. E-commerce start-ups are one of the fastest-growing industries but only have a success rate of 10%–20% (Smith, 2020; Szathmári et al., 2024). Unfortunately, the low success rate is often due to a lack of demand for the product or the entrepreneur not understanding their consumers' needs (Shewale, 2024). According to Yin (2018), when using the case study approach to address a research question, the researcher aims to explain “why” or “how” a contemporary phenomenon works. I aimed to explore and identify effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business as one dimension of the entrepreneur's experience.

However, there are logistical and practical issues with population evaluation. The population refers to a whole group of people, things of interest, or events the researcher investigates (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). The entrepreneurial population is vast. In 2024,

there were 150 million start-ups worldwide, with 137,000 start-ups launching daily (Shewale, 2024). Researchers often find it impossible to collect data from and analyze every population element (Saunders et al., 2020). Researching the entire population was prohibitive due to time, cost, and access to qualifying participants for this study.

Thus, the scope of this qualitative single case study was limited to one start-up entrepreneur's contemporary experience. Per the Walden University IRB approval parameters for this case study, the eligibility criteria for the entrepreneur's participation included a consenting individual in a senior leadership position. The entrepreneur had to be capable of addressing the business problem and implementing strategies for the partner organization.

Sampling

Purposive sampling for small samples, such as in a case study, enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding from information-rich participants (Subedi, 2021). Shewale (2024) asserted that there are 3,870 start-ups in Canada. Entrepreneurs aiming for leadership success must have a firm orientation to the future, acceptance of risk as a part of planning and conducting operations, a commitment to improvement, an innovative orientation, intelligent decision-making, and prioritization of organizational sustainability (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). For this single case study, I interviewed two participants selected as part of a nonprobability convenience sampling.

With the assistance of the Walden University DBA Consulting Capstone administrators, I was paired with a Canadian-based start-up leader. I had no previous relationship with the participants to pressure them to encourage participation. However,

to establish a working relationship, I invited the business leader to an introductory meeting to share information about myself and discuss the objectives of the consulting capstone study to optimize communication and data collection. I developed a communication plan after the business leader decided they were comfortable with the study and virtual interviews. Following the introductory meeting, consent, service order agreement, and IRB approval, we established a weekly virtual meeting convenient for the participant. After the first meeting, we transitioned from the Microsoft Teams application to the ZOOM platform, per the participant's familiarity with its functionality. I collaborated with the business leader to recommend a trusted advisor to interview for adding depth and enhancing data saturation. Over 24 nonconsecutive weeks, the interviews were audio recorded, without video, to protect the participant's identity and privacy. Some interruptions in weekly meetings came from the client's previously scheduled plans.

A common concern is an apparent inability to generalize from single case studies. Yin (2018) posited that generalizations from physical and life sciences are rarely based on one experiment, and instead, knowledge is gained from replications of a phenomenon under different conditions. Aligning with Yin's perspective, Saunders et al. (2020) asserted that a single case design may be purposely selected because the case is typical of a phenomenon. Consequently, I selected the single case study as a suitable approach to explore a business leader's unique and contemporary experiences with a common business problem for start-up firms.

I aimed to build on existing knowledge and find conceptual connections with the experiences of a member of the entrepreneurial population. A scholar may leverage existing knowledge to present a case study to explain how or why a phenomenon works in specific contexts (Yin, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative case studies are not an attempt to generalize to the general population (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021; Yin, 2018). However, qualitative studies may generate useful information for internal generalization within a particular group, setting, or population that is the subject of the study (Maxwell, 2021). Consequently, the single case study approach could provide additional insights and practical implications for entrepreneurs navigating similar challenges.

Participants

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative single case study. Subedi (2021) posited that qualitative researchers aim for rich insights into a phenomenon from the lived experiences of individuals. According to Yin (2018), case study researchers collect data through interviews, direct observation, participant observation, documentation, and archival records. Although I reviewed organizational documents, professional and academic literature, and public data, I interviewed one participant for their lived experience, which was essential for enriching the empirical data. As the founder of a start-up, the participant was a senior leader capable of addressing the business problem and implementing strategies for the organization.

The participant had over 25 years of accounting management experience as a chartered professional accountant (CPA) based in Toronto, Canada. Toronto is Canada's

largest city, the most prominent start-up ecosystem, and the second-largest innovation cluster in North America (Toronto, n.d.). Therefore, the executive leader lives and works in a rich urban center of North America. Saunders et al. (2020) advised that reviewing contextual information is essential for semistructured interviews because it enables the exploration of deeper meaning, including culturally specific issues.

As a researcher based in the United States, I was committed to maintaining an enthusiastic yet respectful and effective communication plan with a Canadian-based participant. Multijurisdictional research should account for relevant cultures, policies, laws, and regulations (Government of Canada, 2022). In preparation for the interviews, I completed the Canadian Panel on Research Ethics education, reviewed the Canadian laws and ethics in online business, and drew information from the publicly available organizational website. The participant approved of the plan for continuous communication, interview, and feedback sessions during the study. Nevertheless, the participant reserved the right to their privacy and could withdraw from the study at any time according to the consent and the service order agreement.

However, data saturation was a critical component for addressing the business problem in this single case study. Saunders et al. (2020) defined data saturation in qualitative studies as the stage when little, if any, new insight is gained from conducting additional interviews. Similarly, Subedi (2023) noted that data saturation occurs when new information ceases to be revealed. I continued the interviews of the business leader and their trusted advisor until thematic repetition emerged, and I had gathered no new information from the interviews.

Throughout the interview schedule, I continued collecting data via organizational documents provided by the participant. Horner and Ferron (2021) posited that combining semistructured interviews with other data collection methods, such as document analysis, provides a comprehensive understanding of an individual's experience with a phenomenon in single case study designs. Therefore, I also reviewed public reports as well as academic and professional literature for new or repeating themes to triangulate the data.

Data Collection Activities

Data collection for a qualitative single case study involves a careful, methodological approach to ensure the richness and depth of the data gathered. Case study researchers gather data through an empirical investigation of the phenomenon within a real-world context, often referencing multiple empirical evidence sources (Saunders et al., 2020). However, when researchers interact with human subjects, the IRB requires the type of data and the plan for upholding ethical standards, including the interview guide and plans to securely store and transmit data for semistructured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Consequently, I had a standardized approach to the data collection activities.

The start-up's senior leader and I coordinated weekly standing meetings in which I led semistructured interviews with feedback as the primary data collection technique for this qualitative single case study. McGrath et al. (2019) noted that semistructured interviews are the optimal data collection method for researchers to better understand a participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of the

phenomenon. According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), the primary benefit of the semistructured interview is that it enables focused interviews while giving the investigator the flexibility to further explore pertinent issues, which enhances understanding of the research topic being explored. I maintained the structure and flexibility of the semistructured interview using an interview protocol (see Appendix) for the study.

I followed the interview protocol to guide my preparation, introduction, interview management, and follow up with the participant. I first emailed a request for an introductory meeting to establish a working relationship. During the initial meeting, I reviewed the Walden University consulting capstone consent form and service order agreement. We established a communication plan for emails, phone calls, and weekly ZOOM meetings for interviews and feedback. However, no data collection occurred before the Walden University IRB's approval in addition to the participant's consent to the service order agreement and the senior leader interviews.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary instrument for data collection. I coordinated a weekly virtual meeting with the client using the ZOOM platform, supported by audio recordings on a mobile device. At the participant's convenience, I scheduled a weekly standing meeting with reminders for the specified meeting time on the digital ZOOM platform. The consistency of the meeting times enabled the participant to block the time, relax, and focus on the interview topic. At the participant's discretion, they intermittently sent applicable organizational documentation, such as website traffic summaries for customer

engagement and email campaigns, for discussion during the upcoming interview. During these interviews, we examined pertinent information that added depth and value to the data collection process.

Nevertheless, Yin (2018) asserted that case study investigators must follow a line of inquiry via a protocol to pose questions in an unbiased manner that addresses the aim of the study. However, Ritchie (2021) cautioned that, per the *Belmont Report*, researchers must continuously prioritize beneficence, respect the participant's autonomy, and maintain fairness in their approach. Ritchie further noted that IRB-like protocols lead to better critical analysis, maintenance of ethical procedures, and higher-quality projects. Therefore, I implemented an interview protocol (see Appendix) to protect the client's privacy and maintain a standard operating procedure for qualitative data collection.

Consequently, I approached the interviews as a guided conversation to gather evidence to address the research question. Data collection for exploratory studies into a phenomenon requires a flexible yet systematic approach to gathering in-depth participant insights (Saunders et al., 2020). As such, I leveraged the Baldrige Excellence Builder as a standardized tool to guide the organizational assessment. The Baldrige Excellence Builder is a compilation of questions crafted to focus on performance excellence based on fundamental criteria (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Foundational to the Baldrige questions are criteria categorized for gathering pertinent information, including the organizational profile for defining the organizational environment, organizational process items, and results items to report process results (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Thus, the Baldrige Excellence Builder

questions provide a framework for critical insights into the internal and external factors shaping organizational performance outcomes.

Despite the standardized questions for gauging performance, I needed to ensure the rigor of this study with valid and reliable questions for the semistructured interviews. The Baldrige program's central purpose is to enhance performance excellence and improve outcomes with evidence-based, validated assessment tools for leaders to evaluate organizational performance (NIST, 2023). Jayaraman (2023) asserted that the Malcolm Baldrige model was a groundbreaking tool for strategy formulation and integrated processes. According to the Baldrige Foundation (2022), community and organizational leaders routinely report 10%–20% performance improvements in customer, workforce, and financial management after implementing the Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence program. Consequently, I leveraged the Baldrige Program's evidence-based, valid, and reliable assessment questions and member checking to ensure a rigorous evaluation of the participants' organizational processes in a standardized and proven approach for effective performance outcomes.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Data Organization

I tracked the study's data using a journal, digital tools, a mobile device, and hard-copy notes. According to Yin (2018), researchers must utilize data organization techniques for accurate reporting and practical data analysis processes. I used Microsoft Word dictation software to create transcripts of the virtual meetings. In the case study journal, I documented all modes of communication with the study participant, including

email, phone calls, text messages, and virtual meetings, chronologically. The ZOOM meeting calendar was an effective digital tool for anticipating and tracking virtual interview sessions on the platform.

Additionally, to enhance the accuracy of data capture during the virtual sessions, I used a voice memo recording application on a passcode-locked mobile device. The audio recordings for capturing the participant's responses would also be helpful for transcription, coding, and analysis of the data in future phases of the study. I secured digital copies of organizational documents and audio recordings on a passcode-encrypted cloud drive. All hard-copy notes and records remain in a locked drawer under my control. I will destroy all the study documents and digital data after 5 years to keep the participants and their organizations anonymous.

Data Analysis

I grounded this study's data analysis in methodological triangulation, which included interviews, internal documents, and a thorough review of professional and academic literature to address the overarching research question. Möller et al. (2020) asserted that the evolution of business will stem from harnessing the strengths of multimethodological research. I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 15 qualitative software to manage the interview data. NVivo facilitated analysis with features for identifying patterns in the evidence from data collection. Researchers using qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo, effectively create a structured track record and foundation for the analytical process, which increases the study's rigor and transparency (Dalkin et al., 2021). I labeled and coded each interview file to maintain the

confidentiality of the study participant and their organization. After data collection and input into the qualitative software, the analysis plan was to code, identify themes, and triangulate those themes with external data.

Consequently, I coded data with concepts of standardized meaning from the MBEF conceptual framework. Coding entails labeling related data, such as words, sentences, or paragraphs, to symbolize or summarize the meaning of the data from an interview (Saunders et al., 2020). As I reviewed the data through the lens of MBEF, I used Baldrige concepts as a primer to create codes and identify preliminary themes for analysis. The Baldrige Builder assessment tool is intended to be a holistic process for defining and understanding the organizational environment and processes for identifying performance excellence opportunities (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Researchers use a unifying process to relate data fragments from interviews and facilitate analysis (Saunders et al., 2020). Thus, the Baldrige Excellence systems perspective was critical for a systematic strategy for yielding and framing the results.

As the primary instrument for gathering the evidence, I leveraged semistructured interviews as the primary data source. Yin (2018) asserted that interviews provide a rich source of individual lived experiences but require a systematic strategy for compiling, analyzing, and reporting findings. However, when leading in-depth interviews, Urry et al. (2024) urged researchers to engage in collaborative reflection, or member checking, as a critical part of knowledge production. Feedback was an essential component of the interview sessions. The participant and I reviewed summaries of the data gathered from

the previous interviews to ensure that I extrapolated the participant's true meaning from the data. Once we validated the data, they were ready for coding and analysis.

Yin (2018) asserted that analysis via disassembling and indexing data enables researchers to form interpretations and conclusions. I analyzed the data through the lens of the MBEF to organize the data and to answer the research question, thus facilitating thematic analysis to find patterns in the large quantity of nonnumerical data from the interviews. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify patterns and relationships in raw data (Saunders et al., 2020). However, researchers incorporate methodological triangulation to compare data sets for ensuring accuracy (Saunders et al., 2020). Therefore, I also reviewed academic and professional literature as well as organizational documents the participant deemed appropriate to share to strengthen the study and provide further evidence of the themes.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

To enhance the quality of the findings, I designed and evaluated the research activities using existing research knowledge and member checking for dependable findings. Yin (2018) posited that researchers must demonstrate the reliability of a study's data collection procedures with quality management using various techniques, such as interview protocols, audio recording, member checking, and qualitative software, to help reduce researcher bias and improve accuracy. I captured the semistructured interviews with recordings, transcripts, notes, and NVivo 15 software. As the primary data collection instrument, I addressed the dependability of my understanding of the participant's

responses by member checking the interview summaries as part of the interview protocol (see Appendix).

Furthermore, I reviewed the reliability of the Malcolm Baldrige Program and instruments. Parast and Safari (2022) asserted that the Baldrige quality excellence model was a valid and reliable tool for assessing and improving small businesses' performance outcomes and competitiveness. Aligning with Parast and Safari's findings, Jayaraman (2023) found that the Baldrige model was a groundbreaking strategy formulation and implementation tool. To mitigate researcher bias in processes and tool selection, I enhanced the study's credibility with triangulation from multiple peer-reviewed and seminal sources throughout the study.

Validity

Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative case study researchers manage non-numerical data from a participant's experience with a real-world phenomenon. I ensured data saturation from interviews by continuing the interviews until no new insight or information emerged, and I noted thematic repetition. Nevertheless, Yin (2018) asserted that qualitative case study researchers must validate the interview transcript. The criteria for judging qualitative research include credibility from the participant's perspective, transferability as the degree to which the results may be generalized, dependability for repeatability, and confirmability in the degree to which the results may be corroborated (Trochim, n.d.). Thus, qualitative case study research hinged on ensuring rigor in managing nonnumerical data.

As I explored the business problem through the participant's experience, I addressed credibility by member checking the interview summaries with the participant, who could legitimately judge the credibility of the results. I enhanced the study's transferability by detailing the research context, activities, and assumptions for possible transference to other settings. However, I defer to the reader's judgment of transferability due to the ever-changing context of real-world phenomena. I detailed the participant's experience using an interview protocol (see Appendix), consent form, service order agreement, and the validated Baldrige Excellence Builder questions. However, if changes in these details or the real-world context described in this study occur, the dependability or replicability may be at stake. Finally, I optimized conformability by using academic and professional literature triangulation as a mitigation strategy for bias or distortion in the data.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I detailed the research project methodology, which I used to guide study activities. I reviewed upholding research project ethics, the nature of the project, the population, sampling, and participants. I also described the data collection activities, organization, and analysis techniques to enhance the reliability and validity of the study. For this qualitative single case study, I obtained the participant's consent and the signed service order agreement to ensure the participant's informed consent. However, only after the IRB authorization did semistructured interviews begin with ethical guidelines and foundational IRB principles.

According to Ritchie (2021), ethical research involving human subjects requires conduct prioritizing beneficence, respect, and justice to protect participants from exploitation. As there will be 150 million start-ups worldwide (Shewale, 2024), the Walden University DBA Consulting Capstone administrators selected one start-up entrepreneur for addressing a business problem for this study. As the primary data collection instrument, I leveraged semistructured interviews with an interview protocol (see Appendix) and the Baldrige Excellence Builder for a standardized operating procedure. Yet, to enhance the quality of the findings, I incorporated data triangulation, member checking, detailed the research context, and data collection activities in conjunction with a professional and academic literature review. In Section 4, I will provide the research project findings and professional conclusions by exploring the organizational profile and leadership triad of leadership, strategy, and customers.

Section 4: Research Project Findings and Professional Conclusions

Organization Profile

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. This study was guided by the following research question: What leadership strategies do business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business? CJ is the pseudonym for the organization that was the focus of this study. I used the 2023–2024 Baldrige Performance Excellence Program as the framework to systematically assess and understand the organizational profile of the CJ firm. Performance excellence first requires an assessment of the context in which the business operates (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Therefore, I collected information about the organization itself and its situation to gain perspective on its operations and the factors influencing decision making. Based on the overall organizational profile findings, the following opportunistic themes for addressing the business problem emerged: (a) strategic planning, (b) consumer management, and (c) performance measurement and analysis.

Organizational Description

The CJ organization is a start-up, for-profit, online platform based out of Toronto, Canada, that links CPAs and other accounting or business professionals with exceptional job opportunities for career advancement. The CJ organization is a subsidiary of the CPA Central organization, which provides up-to-date accounting information, trends, and changes, serving CPAs, accountants, and other professionals interested in accounting for their businesses. The CJ website displays a plethora of newly posted jobs for Canadian

accounting and business professionals to browse for the next career opportunity that sparks their interest. CJ was born of the client leader's aim to create a central location for CPAs, accountants, and accounting professionals to access cutting-edge information in their profession.

Organizational Environment

Product Offerings. CJ's virtual service offerings include job postings to connect CPAs and other accounting or business professionals with possible jobs to leapfrog ahead of the competition and advance their careers. The digital platform advertises that it will soon have links to educational resources for industry insights and informative webinars. The client leader aimed for CJ to be a centralized, career-enhancing experience for CPAs as well as accounting and business professionals to source new executive positions and learning opportunities. In the future, the platform will be a source of professionally led webinars and career-launching guidance on accounting practices, regulations, and emerging business trends.

Mission, Vision, and Values. The CJ organization's mission is to empower accounting and business professionals with the tools and knowledge they need to thrive in their careers. The founder was committed to promoting excellence, integrity, and continuous learning within the accounting community. At the time of this study, the CJ firm did not have core competencies because CJ's founder contracted workers for marketing and website design. The vision for the online platform was for CJ to be a credentialed accountant's professional hub and a trusted partner for upwardly mobile accountants and other professionals looking for valuable insights, knowledge

development, and the latest job opportunities. The supportive values for the mission and vision were excellence, integrity, and continuous learning.

Workforce Profile. The workforce profile at CJ consisted solely of the founder, who was also the organizational owner and leader. At the time of this study, there were no employees at CJ. The founder contracted out website design and maintenance to a webmaster and consulted an email marketing service to promote new job postings and services. The organizational leader tasked himself with checking the website and email daily for functionality and communications. The leader of CJ contracts consultants for the roles of webmaster and marketing communications via email.

Assets. CJ's organizational leader claims their invaluable online platform, with no material assets.

Regulatory Requirements. The Canadian government enacted new regulations regarding commercial technology use. Under the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, organizations must obtain an individual's consent when collecting, disclosing, or using the individual's personal information (Ervine, 2023). Organizations may not distribute the information collected from client submissions of personal information. Thus, the CJ organization could only use personal information for the purposes for which it was collected.

Organizational Relationships

Organizational Structure. CJ's organizational founder and owner is the sole executive leader. The organization has no board or governing structure. However, the founder takes responsibility for checking the website's performance, managing

contractors, and consumer communications. Organizations must have clearly identified roles and relationships for effective governance (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). The executive leader contracted a webmaster and email marketing service for website maintenance and email marketing campaigns for the CJ organization. The centralized approach to making operational and strategic decisions ensures a clear and accountable process that upholds independence. This approach fosters a direct and flexible work environment that the client leader prefers when working with external stakeholders.

Customers, Stakeholders, and Collaborators. The CJ organizational leader aimed to serve top-tier executives who are accounting and other business professionals, aiming to access up-to-date information on job opportunities, education, and empowerment to reach their full potential. The organizational owner and leader servicing the customers is the for-profit company's central stakeholder. CJ's organizational leader contracted a webmaster to design and maintain the online platform. The executive leader has over 25 years of accounting management experience and has provided accounting services to highly recognized organizations for decades.

Suppliers and Partners. The CJ organization was in partnership with Source.com, a large online employment platform. Maier and Wieringa (2021) found that organizations have positively benefitted from relationships with larger organizations in the digital marketplace. Guenther and Guenther (2022) asserted that some businesses have synergistic relationships. Positive income flow can arise when customers learn of the website from different sources. When customers on the CJ platform were positively

matched with a position originally sourced from Source.com, the CJ organization earned a commission. In such a business-to-business (B2B) relationship, the smaller organization is nested and functionally linked to the larger organization in a dynamic and mutually beneficial business environment. The larger organization (Source.com) served as both a supplier of new job postings in the accounting and business field and a financial partner for the CJ client organization, which received commissions with new hire matches. CJ's organizational leader also hosted bimonthly webinars with Source.com as the sponsor to offer business and career development advice along with informational resources. In nested business relationships, smaller firms can benefit from the larger organization's competitive advertising investments because they increase general market awareness for consumers (Guenther & Guenther, 2022). The executive leader for CJ leverages the existing organizational relationships that Source.com leaders offer for each organization to maintain a sustainable business model.

Organizational Situation

In the following subsection, I provide an overview of CJ's (a) competitive environment, (b) strategic context, and (c) performance improvement system. Assessing the organizational situation is crucial for understanding the competitive environment in which the organization operates (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Subsequently, in today's highly competitive marketplace, organizational leaders may identify key organizational challenges and determine or preserve competitive advantages.

Competitive Environment

Competitive Position. The CJ organization was founded in the fourth quarter of 2023. At the time of the client leader's interviews in January 2024, CJ was new to the online job marketplace in the Canadian context. The CJ organizational platform is an online site serving Canadian senior CPAs and other business professionals seeking new job opportunities. Online posting is becoming a common practice in the labor market. Up to 90% of open positions requiring a bachelor's degree are advertised online (Uwizeyemungu et al., 2020). The CJ organization branched from CPA Central, an established Canadian accounting information resource, to meet the evolving needs of employers seeking accounting professionals.

Competitiveness Changes. Since the CJ organization was new to the online job marketplace, the client organization's leader reported no competitive changes at the time of this study.

Comparative Data. The leader of the CJ organization contracted an email marketing service to advertise promising job opportunities for CPAs and business professionals. As the organizational leader of CJ and CPA Central, the founder had curated a contact list of 17,500 people in the general accounting and business fields. Currently, the client leader monitors direct responses to the posted email and does not review any analytics, such as the rate of opened emails. However, the client leader was in the process of building a comprehensive webinar communication plan for the main organization, CPA Central.

The communication plan that could serve the CJ organization includes metrics from website postings, advertisements on SM accounts (such as Facebook, X, and Meet Up), Mailchimp, and Eventbrite for email marketing as well as directly from the organizational leader of CPA Central and CJ. Thomas et al. (2022) found that consumers have developed persuasion resistance to promotional emails and are less likely to click on them versus informational emails. Wibowo et al. (2020) noted that SM activity is an effective strategy for customer engagement in online platforms. The highest response rates are directly from the organizational leader and LinkedIn postings, which convert to triple the registrations for the upcoming webinars.

Strategic Context

The key strategic challenge for the CJ organization's leader has been increasing membership rates. The organizational leader's strategic objective is to establish CJ as a primary resource for senior CPAs and business leaders to access the latest industry insights and career prospects. At the time of this study, the singular strategic plan was the email marketing campaign with a contracted servicer or from the organizational leader. CJ's main strategic advantage is the organizational leader's more than 25 years of experience in the accounting and consulting industry, with contacts in some of Canada's largest and most well-known firms.

Performance Improvement System

The CJ organization's leader performed a daily assessment of the online platform to confirm the website's optimal performance. The organizational leader had also contracted a webmaster to monitor the quality and performance of the organization's

online platform. The leader charged the webmaster with continual maintenance and monitoring for errors on the site. For errors that required immediate organizational leadership attention, the webmaster researched possible solutions and reported them to the client leader for approval or redirection to the responsible party.

Wang et al. (2022) found that information technology integration in quality management had a positive relationship with leadership quality, operations, and business effectiveness. In alignment with those findings, CJ's founder checked the firm's email daily for any customer outreach regarding job opportunities, reported issues during the application process, career advice, industry insight, and website functionality issues. The founder also reviewed a monthly website traffic performance report for this study's target organization, CJ, and its parent company, CPA Central. Table 2 depicts the CJ and CPA's website traffic metrics to illustrate customer engagement over 3 months.

Table 2*CJ and CPA Central: Website Traffic Summary*

Page title	Page views: March	Page views: April	Page views: May
CJ's job opportunities home	56	44	6
CPA Central (parent company) home	55	93	28
Job applications	7	5	3
Accountant	4	11	2
Bookkeeper (2)	6	3	1
Part-time/junior accountant	4	–	2
Accounts payable	2	2	–
Controller	2	–	–
Division accounting manager	2	–	–
Career advice/contact	–	8	2
Privacy policy	–	–	2

Note. MonsterInsights (n.d.) collected and provided the organizational leader with the website activity data of the CJ organization and its parent company, CPA Central. These data are reprinted with permission.

Leadership Triad: Leadership, Strategy, and Customers

Effective leadership is an essential factor in achieving exceptional results. The Baldrige Criteria for organizational excellence is an integration of concepts for an overall system of performance improvement (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). The leadership triad consists of (a) leadership, (b) strategy, and (c) customers in the Baldrige framework (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). The leadership's focus on strategy and customers is critically linked to results in a constant integration of information. In this section, I detail how CJ's leadership manages strategies and customers of the organization.

Leadership

Senior Leadership

Mission, Vision, and Values. The leadership at CJ consisted solely of the organization's founder. CJ's leader describes their role as all-encompassing. There was no board or governing structure, so the founder oversaw the firm's daily requirements and strategic guidance. Stakeholders, including contractors, consultants, and consumers, will find the organization's mission statement prominently posted on their website. CJ's leadership promoted knowledge sharing to empower accounting and business professionals. In so doing, CJ's vision was an accounting community built on the core values of continuing learning, excellence, and integrity.

Communication. The leader hosted webinars, checked the website's performance, responds to consumer communications, and contracts out email marketing campaigns, website build, and design. CJ's organizational leader occasionally works with student volunteers at a regional university for a revamping project at the parent company, CPA Central. The senior and sole leader of CJ has no immediate plans to hire staff to assist with executive or support activities.

Focus on Organizational Performance. Although the CJ firm did not have a formal organizational performance monitoring and improvement process, the founder prioritized organizational monitoring and performance improvement. CJ's founder assessed operational performance in a daily review of the website and email communications. The founder immediately communicated with the webmaster to troubleshoot any performance issues. Should they require executive action with the host

platform, the founder is the sole decision maker. The owner hosted a monthly ZOOM meeting with college students tasked with specific assignments. The leader established clear expectations and reviews deliverables and performance thoroughly to ensure accountability and performance excellence.

Governance and Societal Responsibilities

Organizational Governance. CJ had no formal governance system detailing the structure and organization of leadership. The founding leader was solely responsible for governing the CJ organization. There were no staff or systematic processes to hold the current leader or future employees accountable. There was no board of directors to oversee the strategic process. No quality department was in place for internal or external audits to evaluate operational effectiveness and efficiency. Al-Abdallah et al. (2023) posited that leaders bolster optimal organizational performance with oversight and feedback. Accordingly, CJ's founder reviews MonsterInsights as a monthly platform-generated report of customer engagement based on website activity.

Legal and Ethical Behavior. CJ's founder and contracted professionals adhere to all local and national regulatory standards. The organization also prominently posts an email to enable notifications and responses to any community concerns for legal and ethical behavior. For all legal questions, CJ's founder deferred to legal professionals. At the year's end, the owner will consult with tax professionals and submit to all applicable Canadian taxation laws.

Societal Contributions. CJ's founder manages societal responsibilities by aligning their activities with their mission to empower business and accounting

professionals to thrive in their careers while promoting excellence, integrity, and learning. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the client encouraged contractors to work from home and enabled electronic communications, such as ZOOM meetings. The founder virtually engaged college students in their professional development. As a committee member of a professional group, CJ's organizational leader noted that recently, they have only been focused on increasing membership. Men et al. (2021) posited that organizational leaders must communicate a compelling vision and shared values to address a business problem optimally. CSR communication on social media positively relates to purchase intention and brand admiration (Gupta et al., 2021). CJ's founder noted that motivating language around societal responsibilities may benefit the organization.

Strategy

Strategy Development

Strategy Development Process. No systematic approach was in place for strategy development at the CJ firm. The organizational leader was the primary and sole responsible party for strategy development at CJ. As the client was also the founder of the parent company, they had professional relationships that enabled the business model for the CJ organization. While managing the parent company, CPA Central, the organizational leader developed a working relationship with the founder of Source.com. The platform's job postings were obtained from Source.com using a commission-based model. The client noted that they belong to a community of professionals collaborating to achieve tremendous success in their accounting and finance careers. The CJ executive

discovered that they spend 90% of their time discussing how to increase their membership but admitted there may be an opportunity to discuss the company's direction with supporting contractors.

Strategic Objectives. The organizational leader's strategic objective was to match accounting and business professionals with premier job opportunities. CJ's founder entered a nested relationship with a larger job search platform from which they curated job postings. The CJ organization received a finder's fee if the applicant was hired and remained in the position for at least 30 days.

Strategy Implementation

There was no formalized action plan at the CJ organization. CJ's founder was the impetus for strategic implementation at every level of the organization. The primary goal of the strategies is to align with the organization's mission. The client sought specialized contractors to implement the strategy as needed. The client contracted a webmaster to design and maintain the online platform and report any implementation impediments. Mailchimp manages most of the email marketing campaigns via automated processes. The client leader determined the intervals of the email blasts for the most significant impact from the communications regarding new job postings and pending webinars. CJ's founder also participated in direct email communications to customers as part of a comprehensive marketing campaign.

Customers

Customer Expectations

Customer Listening. The CJ organization's online job platform was new; thus, there was no significant customer feedback to assess customer expectations. However, the CJ firm's website displayed a contact menu option for consumers to email the organizational founder directly. Alternatively, the website displayed a template where navigators are encouraged to give feedback, request career advice, or post general inquiries. CJ's founder noted that their first task every morning, including weekends, was to check the website and email platforms for inquiries or troubleshooting issues.

Customer Segmentations. CJ's organizational leader aimed for customers to expect the site to be a premier source of up-to-date career information and the first site to visit for life-changing job opportunities in accounting and business. There was no formal customer segmentation data for dividing the customer base into specific groups. However, the monthly report of customer engagement with specific job postings helped elucidate consumer interests. Table 2 displays customer engagement based on website page activity and job posting views.

Product and/or Service Offerings. The organizational leader cited themselves as the primary source of ideas for service offerings, with no formal process for determining the final decision. CJ's founder is a member of a professional accounting group and requests inspiration or ideas for webinars at their monthly meetings. The website advertised that it would soon provide informative webinars for professionals to stay

current on the latest industry knowledge on accounting practices, regulations, and emerging trends in the accounting and business fields.

Customer Engagement

Szathmári et al. (2024) found that start-up companies are more likely to fail with deficiencies in information-seeking opportunities in customer service orientation. The founder reviews a monthly report on the CJ organization's website traffic for customer engagement metrics. Table 1 in the Comparative Data section of the Organizational Situation depicts the home page views, overall job opportunities, specific job postings, and the job application form. The founding leader would like to provide professional feedback, as many do not learn what they can improve from their experiences with employment agencies. At the time of this study, the CJ organization lacked a structured approach to assess customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction at specific points in time. Customers may communicate directly with the client leader via the email posted on the website or send a message via the Contact menu template.

Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management

The Malcolm Baldrige framework incorporates measurement, analysis, and knowledge management to drive performance excellence and competitive advantage (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Wang et al. (2022) emphasized the significance of evaluating organizational process effectiveness with robust measurement and analytical processes. The following section details how the CJ organization's founder manages data regarding core systems and processes.

Measurement, Analysis, and Improvement of Organizational Performance

Performance Measurement. CJ's founder checked the organizational website daily for expected performance and checked the contact email for any issues or questions customers reported. Suppose the website has a minor or catastrophic failure in functionality. In that case, the organizational leader reports the issue to the webmaster, who will assess, manage the correction, and report the status to CJ's founder.

Comparative Data and Analysis. The leader of CJ received and reviewed a monthly MonsterInsights data summary of website traffic. Page views are an important predictor of organizational performance (Angelou et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022). CJ's founder reviewed the monthly metrics report as an important statistical source for tracking customer engagement or interest in the topics and services. However, there was no formal process for incorporating competitors' comparative data into decision-making processes.

Information and Knowledge Management

The founder of CJ drew on more than 25 years of professional experience in accounting management and the operation of the parent company, CPA Central, for business insights that inform decisions. As the executive and sole proprietor and employee of the CJ firm, with only contracted specialists, the founder had no systematic processes for information and knowledge management implemented during this study. The founder of CJ actively engaged in direct communication via email, telephone, or ZOOM meetings to listen, disseminate pertinent information, and promote knowledge

exchange with contractors and students, all the while maintaining a journal of ideas and significant insights obtained from meetings and industry peers.

Workforce

Workforce Environment

CJ's founder was the sole employee and conducted all activities remotely from either a home office or abroad. As such, there was currently no established system for evaluating the workforce's capability and capacity requirements or for addressing the workforce's overall climate.

Workforce Engagement

The CJ organization currently had no staff to conduct an engagement assessment. The founder considered themselves semi-retired, having relinquished other consulting pursuits to run the parent organization (CPA Central) and the offshoot CJ firm. They eagerly enjoyed the business opportunity to provide a location for their professional peers to find up-to-date career information and explore job listings for career advancement into the executive tier.

Operations

An organization's operations are at the core of its production and delivery of services or products. The leader and founder of CJ was responsible for the operational design, implementation, monitoring, and management of organizational strategies and work processes. To achieve organizational success, business leaders must ensure operational effectiveness and mitigate risks with improvement processes (Baldrige

Performance Excellence Program, 2024). In the following subsections, I detail the work processes and operations of the CJ organization.

Work Processes

The founder of the CJ organization relied on their professional experiences to determine key services, products, work processes, and branding. Thus, the CJ organization had no formal or structured work processes. CJ's founder was solely responsible for the overall operations management, strategic partnerships, customer service, career advice provision, application filtering, and billing management. The founder had over 40 years of experience as a CPA, consultant, and founding board member of a large CPA accounting group. In networking with other CPAs and business professionals, the CJ founder informally sought ideas from colleagues to determine what services or webinar topics would be in demand for their community.

The leader was comfortable outsourcing specialized tasks, such as hiring a webmaster to design, implement, and maintain the organization's online platform. Additionally, the founder intermittently contracted email and social media marketing specialists, such as Mailchimp, Eventbrite, and Twitter managers. The founder extracted the applications that met the job qualification requirements but was actively exploring additional support. Table 3 depicts the responsible parties for key work processes at the CJ organization.

Table 3*Key Work Processes*

Work process	Responsible party	
	Founder	Contracted specialist
Strategic partnership management	✓	
Website management	✓	✓
Marketing management	✓	✓
Application filtering ^a	✓	
Customer service	✓	
Career advice service	✓	
Billing management	✓	
Overall operations management	✓	

^aAt the time of this study, CJ's founder was evaluating opportunities to hire someone to filter qualified applications for job postings.

Operational Effectiveness

No systematic processes supported the measurement of daily operations and key work process performance. However, CJ's founder checked the website, social media, and email communications for service performance and consumer feedback. The client leader also personally forwarded emails for marketing campaigns to a contact list of 15,000 participants. The founder intermittently contracted MailChimp for event marketing emails for the CPA Central parent organization. No email marketing campaign went out without the founder's verification and confirmation of timely distribution.

Project Results

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore and identify effective strategies that business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business. Using the Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Program and framework as the lens, I conducted semistructured interviews with senior organizational leaders to gather data

aimed at addressing the business problem identified in this case study. The Baldrige Excellence Builder evidence-based and standardized tools enable leaders to critically detail an organization's processes with seven categories of organizational performance excellence, including (a) leadership; (b) strategy; (c) customers; (d) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; (e) workforce; (f) operations; and (g) results (NIST, 2023). I illustrated the target organization's profile (description and situation), leadership triad (leadership, strategy, and customers), measurement, analysis, and knowledge management processes with the organization's workforce and operations using the validated and reliable Baldrige Excellence Builder assessment tool.

To further ensure the quality and accuracy of the data, I leveraged an interview protocol (see Appendix), audio recording for transcript generation, collaborative member checking, and monthly organizational analytics reports (see Table 2), with additional triangulation from professional and academic literature sources. Through triangulation of interviews, internal documentation, professional reports, academic literature, and data analysis, the following themes emerged: (a) strategic planning, (b) performance measurement and analysis, (c) customer management, and (d) knowledge management. In this section, I present the project results regarding product and process, customers, workforce, leadership and governance, the financial and market results, and key themes findings.

Product and Process Results

The CJ organization's online platform offered a virtual job posting service to help CPAs and other accounting or business professionals advance their careers. The platform

will soon include links to educational resources and professionally led webinars currently offered on the CPA Central parent company's website. The founder's goal is for the CJ platform to become a central hub for access to new executive positions, professional learning opportunities on business trends, and contemporaneous regulations. The CJ organization has no material assets besides the invaluable online platform.

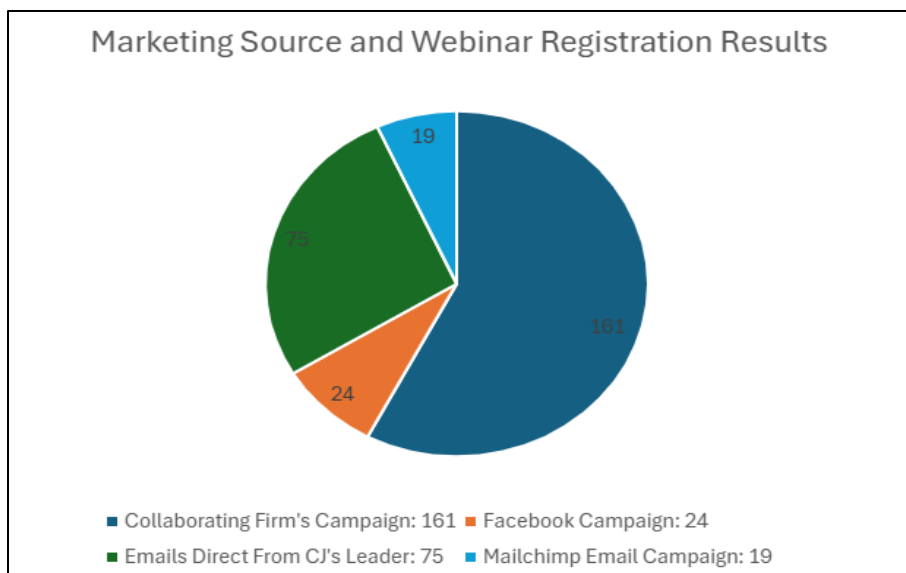
With the CJ platform, the founder partners with Source.com, a larger online employment platform. Source.com is a reservoir for job postings. CJ's founder aims to earn a commission with each successful professional job match. This business relationship correlates with existing academic literature. Synergistic relationships can generate positive income flows for each organization by diversifying the channels for consumer acquisition (Guenther & Guenther, 2022). In nested business relationships, smaller firms can gain from the competitive advertising investments of larger organizations, as these investments enhance consumer market awareness (Guenther & Guenther, 2022). CJ's founder nurtures the business relationship with the financial partner by hosting bimonthly webinars on professional learning opportunities for accounting and business professionals with the sponsor, Source.com.

Upon review of the marketing processes for the business learning webinars, a hierarchy of success emerged from the promotional activities. Despite a contact list of 15,000 business professionals, CJ's leader touted the competitor's firm's extensive contact list and popularity. As depicted in Figure 2, Source.com, the external firm in the B2B relationship, had the most successful event promotion. Consistent with this finding, Guenther and Guenther (2022) found that in the nested B2B context, smaller firms

benefit from the effectiveness of the larger, more established firms because they boost overall consumer awareness with their extensive resources.

Figure 2

Organizational Metrics on Marketing Success



Note. The data in Figure 2's pie chart was captured from CPA Central's organizational tracking data for completed webinar registrations resulting from marketing announcements.

Nevertheless, as depicted in Figure 2, emails from the contracted Mailchimp campaign were the least successful marketing option. As Desku and Sadrijia (2023) noted, emails have a low promotional impact as emails have a low impact on the consumer's decision-making process, which includes problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. According to Thomas et al. (2022), mass emails evoke a defense response from consumers. However, SM channels have a positive impact on the decision to complete a purchase (Desku & Sadrijia, 2023). Similarly, Angelou et al. (2024) found that access directly from SM sites

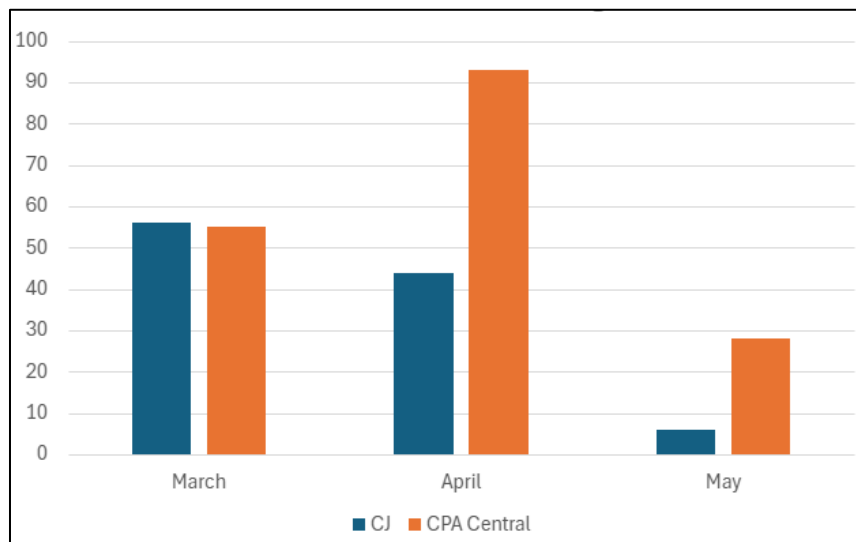
can predict website traffic by up to 60%. However, according to Gupta et al. (2021), brand admiration is a factor in purchase intention. Reputation aligns with the role of senior leadership in the Malcolm Baldrige Excellence.

In highly respected organizations, senior leaders personally engage with customers (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Therefore, the success of the emails that come directly from CJ's founder may be the result of reputation and previously established relationships influencing consumer intention and registration follow-through. However, only the CPA Central parent company has benefitted from the B2B business partnership due to the absence of the CJ firm in marketing initiatives. Registration for the webinars on the CJ platform was not available at the time of this study.

CJ's founder hosts the webinars under the parent company, CPA Central's name, with no mention of the CJ platform out of concern for a conflict of interest. The CJ firm and Source.com provided the same service of executive accounting and business postings for job seekers. Upon analysis of the MonsterInsights report over 3 months, engagement with the parent company has increased, and activity on the CJ platform has decreased. The findings are consistent with the increased visibility of CPA Central versus the CJ firm. Figure 3 illustrates the home page views of the study's target organization, CJ, and its parent company, CPA Central.

Figure 3

The CJ Firm and CPA Central (Parent Company) Home Page Engagement



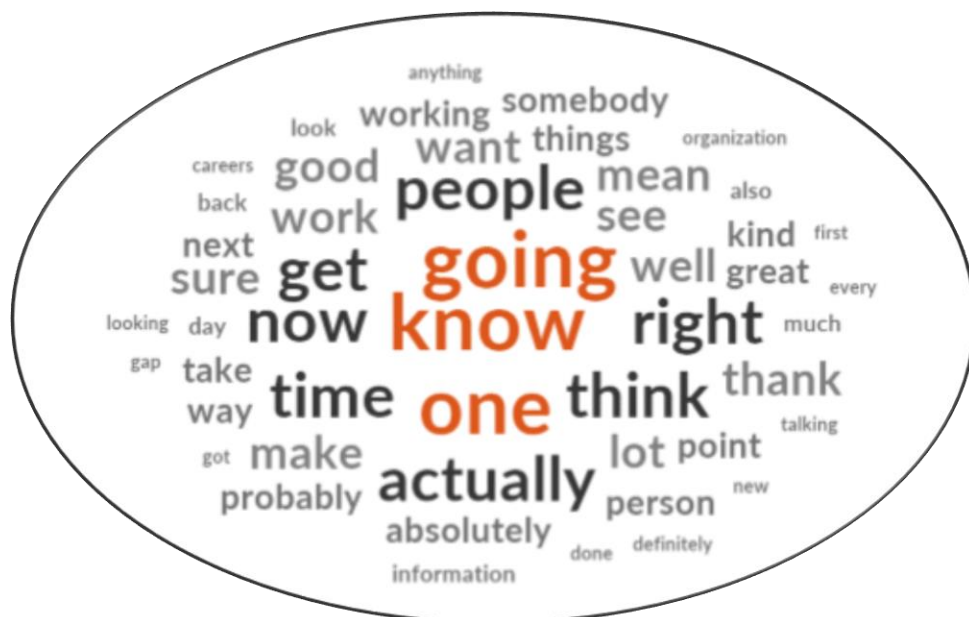
Note. This table demonstrates the number of home page views for the CJ firm and its parent company, CPA Central, during a 3-month period in 2024.

Customer Results

A high priority for CJ's founder was understanding their customer's needs. As illustrated in Figure 4, the client's most uttered word in the category of consumer management assessment was "know." Based on the NVivo 15 qualitative statistical data of the interviews, "know," "knows," or "knowing" was uttered 996 times at a weighted percentage of 1.14% in the customer-coded data category. As the founder and the one person responsible for internal organizational activities, CJ's leader aimed to know what motivated people to drive membership growth within a targeted community. He would leverage that knowledge to be a premier provider of the right candidates for the job. Figure 4 depicts the CJ leader's top 50 words in response to the Baldrige Builder's questions in semistructured interviews regarding customer management.

Figure 4

Word Cloud on Customer Management Assessment



Note. Figure 4 is a word cloud of the top 50 words the start-up's leader uttered during their customer management assessment. The image was generated using NVivo 15 software.

The website offers a contact menu for users to engage with the founder via email or in a feedback template on the platform. CJ's founder prioritizes checking inquiries and troubleshooting issues daily. However, as a newly launched online job platform pending a thriving and engaged membership base, the CJ organization lacks significant customer feedback to gauge expectations for decision-making. Additionally, the organizational leader has not established a structured method for consistently assessing customer satisfaction levels, relying instead on direct communication from users.

A pivotal determinant of start-up failure is the lack of a focused customer service orientation and information-seeking (Szathmári et al., 2024). CJ aims to be a leading

source for career opportunities in accounting and business. Thus, consumer engagement with job postings is tracked through monthly reports. Yet, the firm lacks formal customer segmentation data. Segmentation is a marketing strategy for understanding the customer's perceived benefits, behaviors, demographics, geographic location, and lifestyle (Kingsnorth, 2022). Although the MonsterInsights report displays what customers click on, nothing gathers information about the potential client.

With segmentation data, organizational leaders can potentially target the intended clients and understand if their product or service meets their needs. Organizational leaders must identify the characteristics and performance of products and services essential to customers throughout the entire life cycle and consumption process (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Business leaders using the Baldrige framework have implemented checkpoints, including surveys for community feedback as part of their planning and stewardship priorities (Garfield et al., 2021). The founder relies on personal insights and professional group meetings for service-offering ideas, with upcoming webinars planned to share industry knowledge.

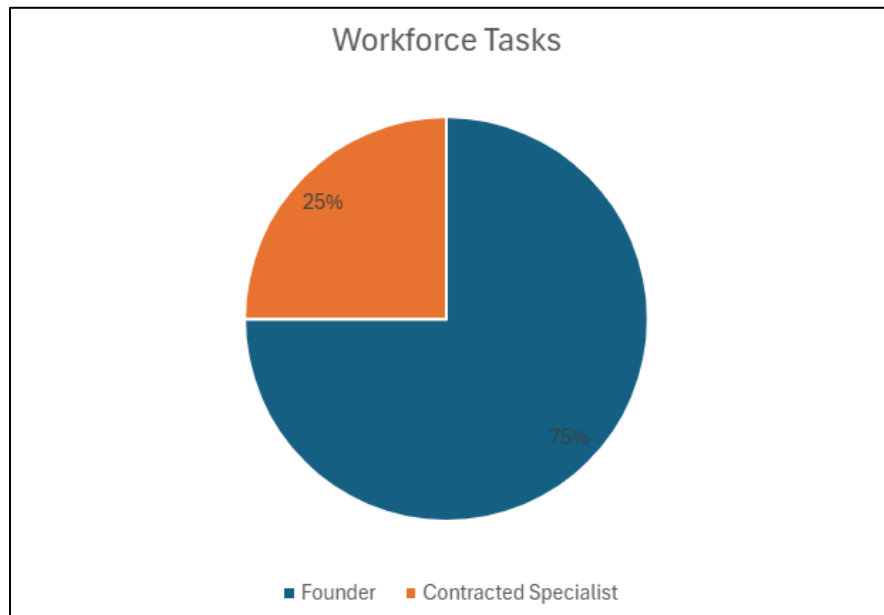
Workforce Results

Regarding the CJ firm's workforce capability and capacity, the founder thoughtfully asserted, "I do make the decision[s], but actually, I really listen to people around me. I take their advice." CJ's leader is the founder and sole employee of the organization, and thus, the entire internal workforce equals one. There was no standardized framework for assessing the capabilities and capacity requirements of the internal, self-directed workforce. The organizational leader relied on over 25 years of

professional experience as a CPA to provide career advice to analogously trained accounting and business executives. However, he found it crucial to rely on the specialized knowledge of experts with essential industry experience and resources. For example, the founder contracted specialists to perform specialty tasks such as mass email campaigns and web management. Consequently, the CJ founder could make informed decisions based on thoughtful consultation that would impact the organization's current and future state.

According to the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2023), strategic development may involve key suppliers, collaborators, and partners. CJ's leader contracted consultants as an integral part of the organization's production process. Outsourcing tasks and core competencies are essential strategic considerations when assessing acceptable organizational risk (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Listening to experts could enable informed decisions based on specialized knowledge and experience.

For example, Kingsnorth (2022) asserted that the digital transformation process can be a confusing mishmash of buzzwords, trends, and themes for organizational leaders. As illustrated in Figure 5, the firm's leader performed 75% of the organizational tasks independently. However, since he did not consider himself a website or marketing specialist, he contracted specialists to assist with organizational tasks. The CJ founder maintained daily (or hourly) performance oversight with visual inspections and confirmation of task completion, such as email delivery.

Figure 5*CJ's Workforce Task Dispersion*

Note. The founder shares responsibility for performance oversight with contracted specialists.

Therefore, the start-up founder contracted a webmaster as an essential expert for navigating the challenges and achieving the strategic objectives of an optimally functioning website. CJ's founder prioritized the user's experience with the website. Every morning, the firm leader checked the website for performance and reported any malfunction to the external workforce, the contracted webmaster, for correction. The intuitive flow of a website leads to a better overall brand experience and influences the development of stronger client loyalty (Ertemel et al., 2021). By employing an expert's advice, the depth of knowledge from years of experience could provide insights and solutions to resolve issues quickly before a significant impact on the consumer's experience and, subsequently, their platform loyalty.

Leadership and Governance Results

The leader of the CJ firm focused on strategy and customers by integrating information gained from self-reflection and experience with executive professionals in the accounting and business fields while actively listening to experts. Executives who meld information from different contexts is a leadership process that aligns with the Malcolm Baldrige excellence program's concept of leadership. The Baldrige criteria for organizational excellence integrates concepts for performance improvement, emphasizing a triad of leadership, strategy, and customers (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). The interrelationship between the leadership, strategy, and customers were critical elements of the organizational assessment.

CJ's leadership responsibility is solely held by its founder, who oversees daily operations and strategic direction without a formal board or governance structure. The founder's leadership role was all-encompassing in the firm's leadership structure for internal daily operations and contracted out specialty tasks. The founder created CJ with the vision of knowledge sharing to empower accounting and business professionals to find executive positions from job postings and become part of a community for continuous learning, excellence, and integrity. To bring this to fruition, the leader self-imposed the responsibility of strategic partnership management, application filtering, customer service, career advice, billing, and overall operations management. See Figure 6 for a breakdown of the internal and external activities. Although the CJ organization had no board of directors or standardized hierarchy, the founder faithfully incorporated

internal management activities and shared the oversight of contracted workflows into his daily operations.

Figure 6

The CJ Firm's Leadership Responsibilities



Note. The allocation of responsibilities at the CJ firm was derived from the information disclosed by participants during the interview process. The firm did not have a standardized matrix of official duties.

Simultaneously playing the leadership role and performing all the organizational tasks may seem chaotic, but it correlates with known entrepreneurial workflows. Maurya (2022) indicated that many entrepreneurs *run lean* by focusing on essential activities in the iterative process of making a web application function. The author noted that running lean is demonstrative of a leader with discipline and rigor in the face of extreme uncertainty. CJ's organizational leader checked the email and website performance daily, including on weekends, without fail. This behavior illustrated the leader's commitment

and adaptability, which were essential traits for the uncertainties and complexities of managing an online business. In alignment with Maurya's perspective, Kingsnorth (2022) emphasized that successful digital transformation leaders require the following traits:

1. A relentless consumer-oriented focus on the end user's needs.
2. The diligent pursuit of consumer issues through structured operating standards.
3. A collaborative and flexible attitude to managing customer service.
4. Adaptability.
5. A focus on value-creation breakthroughs rather than incremental change.
6. Prizing people and their ingenuity.
7. Technology is pursued as the conduit of the above hallmarks rather than relying on technology adoption alone.

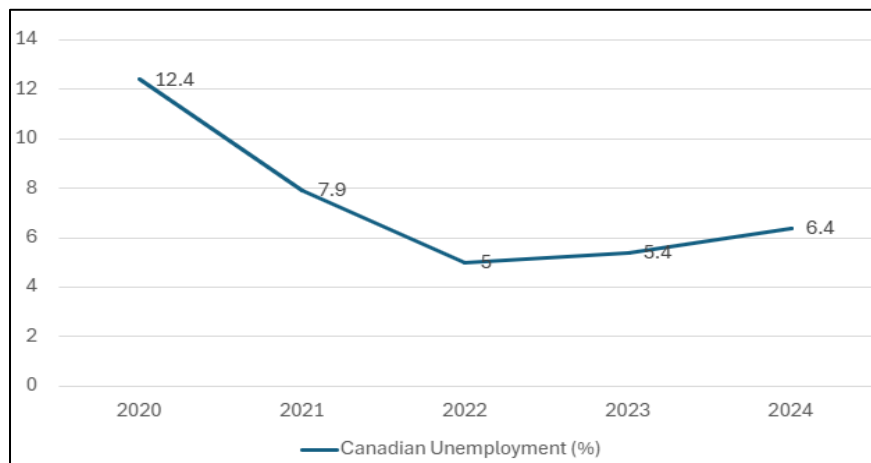
The organizational leader was committed to empowering accounting and business professionals and promoting a vision based on continuous learning, excellence, and integrity. Without an internal staff (other than himself), the founder engages in various consumer communication methods, including webinars and email marketing. The founder also partners with a university to collaborate with students on website-building projects and career advice. Although there is no formal performance monitoring process, the founder assesses the website's operational performance through monthly activity reports and consumer feedback.

To ensure contractor accountability, the leader hosts monthly meetings to check project status. CJ adheres to legal and ethical standards by consulting legal professionals

to ensure compliance. The founder noted that he aligns his societal responsibilities with the organization's mission by promoting remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic and engaging regional university students for professional growth. These leadership behaviors align with Baldrige's recommendations for senior leaders to guide, inspire, and motivate their teams to support a productive innovation culture (Garfield et al., 2021). CJ's founder acknowledged his responsibility to use motivating and engaging language with webinar attendees, contractors, and students for their professional development and to engage participants.

Financial and Market Results

Source.com is the CJ firm's financial partner. CJ's founder aimed to be an extension of Source.com as a proliferating opportunity to reach accounting and business executives. In this nested business relationship, the benefit of the smaller firm was that it extended the reach of Source.com to new online applicants. The annual Canadian unemployment rate has decreased overall since 2020 but has risen from 2022-2024 (The Daily, 2024). Karaoglu et al. (2021) asserted that organizational hiring processes have increasingly moved online. These issues may have critical implications for additional support in the job-matching industry. Figure 7 depicts the Canadian unemployment trends since the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

Figure 7*Canadian Unemployment Rates*

Note. The Canadian unemployment rate in Figure 7 is from June of the corresponding year. Figure 7 data were gathered from: The Daily. (2024). *Labour force survey, October 2024*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/241108/cg-a002-eng.htm>

The CJ firm's founder screens exemplary applications matching the job posting's requirements. If the business hires the applicant, the CJ firm's leader earns a commission from Source.com. In a dynamic nested business environment, Guenther and Guenther (2022) found that competitive advertising could have a synergistic effect to increase the effectiveness of each organization's advertising. However, the CJ organization was pending any job matches, and financial returns were \$0.00 at the time of this study.

Therefore, the organizational leader astutely noted, "Since the CJ firm is very new, we don't really have a particular market position." During the interviews, the CJ firm was only in its second quarter of market presence in 2024. The market positioning of the CJ organization was a critical feature in assessing the organizational situation. Leaders must understand their market to inject knowledge into their strategic planning

and action plan deployment (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Thus, the founder of the CJ firm needs to take proactive steps to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current situation and the competitive landscape of the industry.

This knowledge is essential for identifying the key changes necessary to address both existing challenges and those that may arise in the future. According to the Baldrige model, organizational leaders must scan their internal environment and outside industry to detect challenges as early as possible (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Comparatively, Source.com was founded in 2021 and, with less than 10 employees, has since been recognized as a significant player in the gig economy space for connecting employers with job seekers (Crunchbase, 2024). This collaborating organization exemplified a successful model for achievement within the market ecosystem.

Key Themes Findings

The overarching research question for this qualitative single case study was: What effective strategies do business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business? Utilizing the Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Program as a framework, I conducted an in-depth exploration of leaders' experiences within online start-ups. This was achieved through semistructured interviews coupled with a comprehensive review of the organizational documents in its early stages. Rigorous studies are expected to incorporate a variety of tertiary sources, including academic literature (Saunders et al., 2020). Thus, as an integral component of this study, I reviewed professional and peer-reviewed academic literature, including seminal theorist's work, to

add depth, context, and triangulation of the data in the case study. The key themes of the study were (a) strategic planning, (b) consumer management, and (c) performance measurement and analysis.

Process Strengths

The CJ firm's founder's 25-year history in the accounting and business field is the core of the organization's planning processes. Strategic planning is critical for determining the best approach to achieving long-term goals by evaluating the organization's current state (NIST, 2023). Strategic and continuity planning are essential to developing an agile organization with sustainability and resilience (Garfield et al., 2021). CJ's leader consistently monitored the performance of the start-up website and relied on his experience in accounting and business to offer services to targeted CPA and business executive job seekers.

The organizational leaders of each firm maintained a collaborative relationship in multiple projects, including collaboration webinars on business and accounting trends. CJ's founder hosted the webinars sponsored by CPA Central, with Source.com's leader as the keynote speaker. The business relationship exemplified a trust-based collaboration, and those webinars generated the most registrations for webinar attendance. Trust enhances risk-taking and innovation (Möller et al., 2020). The CJ firm's organizational leader had built a 25-year reputation in the accounting and business communities to foster trusting relationships. As demonstrated by the business partnership and positive response metrics from campaign emails forwarded directly from the CJ founder, potential partners and clients responded positively to direct requests and communications.

Process Opportunities

The financial strategy at the CJ start-up was organically forming, with no official pricing structure agreed upon between the CJ firm and its collaborating agency's leader at Source.com at the time of this study. The organizational leaders had a gentleman's agreement with no contract of terms and strategies. Entrepreneurs commonly use informal financial management processes (Rao et al., 2021). The founder's pivotal role and the reliance on informal financial agreements underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of strategic planning at CJ. However, Joseph et al. (2021) found that entrepreneurial decisions based on inaccurate comparison, emotional overreaction, overestimation, and overconfidence from unproven processes were predictors of start-up failure. The Baldrige framework was instrumental in identifying the need for enhanced strategic planning. Understanding the role of the competition, profit opportunities, and what makes the business unique is essential for strategic planning (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). Thus, the unique organizational situation of the CJ firm presented opportunities for process enhancement and strategic planning.

The organizational leader has facilitated webinars under the auspices of the parent company, CPA Central, in collaboration with Source.com. This initiative has resulted in enhanced visibility to a targeted and trustworthy audience, which is a strategic process opportunity to attract consumer attention to the CJ platform. Business continuity and resilience are built upon agility and activities on multiple fronts (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). CJ's leader had already demonstrated flexibility and willingness to collaborate with a competitor. As a sponsor of professional educational

webinars, the parent organization, CPA Central, could be the portal for their viewers to career enhancement opportunities on the CJ platform.

Results Strengths

Consumer management around understanding and addressing the needs, values, and behaviors of individuals and communities was the third theme that emerged. Using NVivo 15 qualitative software, the words “know” (996 times, 1.14%), “think” (591 times, 0.68%), “timing” (517 times, 0.59%), and “people” (490 times, 0.56%) had high word counts and weighted percentages in the semistructured interviews. The organizational leader aimed to target the right people at the right time to provide what they valued, and he maintained a journal to track new ideas. Data for accurately tracking performance enables more flexibility and responsiveness in content strategy in service-oriented businesses (Kingsnorth, 2022). In an era of rapid social change, consumer management must adapt to shifting cultural norms, technological advancements, and evolving consumer expectations (Aerts et al., 2017). Thus, information regarding the customer's requirements, expectations, and satisfaction could influence strategic activity.

Quality feedback loops with knowledge management are critical to providing world-class performance and value for stakeholders (Ghafoor et al., 2021; NIST, 2023). Stakeholder requirements drive the organization's sensitivity to the strategic risk of service offerings, support, and susceptibility to disruption (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). By fostering strong relationships and aligning with societal values, businesses can meet and anticipate consumer needs to drive satisfaction and

loyalty. Ultimately, effective consumer management is about creating a positive, inclusive, and responsive marketplace that prioritizes people and their changing needs.

Results Opportunities

Performance measurement and analysis was another central theme in the assessment and understanding of how well the organization achieved its goals and objectives. The organizational leader was diligent in checking the website daily. Still, there were no standardized checklists for the organizational leader, nor one provided to or by the webmaster. If a discrepancy or break existed in the system, the founder and contracted web specialist had immediate communication portals (phone, text, and email). However, a standardized checklist emerged as an opportunity for thoroughly examining the effectiveness of their strategies and operations to meet foundational operational requirements and the ever-changing market needs.

The leader could comprehensively understand the organization's position by evaluating the firm's finances, market trends, and performance measurement processes. Firm assessments help identify opportunities to align processes with the leader's vision for the future, ultimately increasing the chances of achieving sustainable success (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). For example, the notable increase in Canadian unemployment rates could be a market opportunity. The world's organizational leaders have identified skills gaps, with 60% of surveyed executives highlighting the difficulty in bridging the skills gaps and 53% identifying their inability to attract talent to support their industry's transformation (World Economic Forum, 2023). These values

present an opportunity for greater engagement with organizational leaders to address critical barriers to attracting talent and innovation.

Business Recommendations for Professional Practice

For entrepreneurs looking for effective strategies to grow membership in a start-up online business, self-assessment is the crucial initial strategic step, followed by a change in perspective and activities. According to the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2023), proprietors who act on self-assessment results increase their total profitability by up to 13% over 3 years. Business leaders must commit to continually improving their customer experiences to preserve long-term and sustained consumer engagement and loyalty (Ahmad et al., 2022). Consequently, entrepreneurs' potential business change effect is continual self-assessment for the groundwork to create value in quality-checked processes for generating, fostering, and reinforcing consumer engagement and value creation for organizational sustainability.

Design Thinking

Start-up leaders must relentlessly and consumingly focus on the end-users' experience. Kingsnorth (2022) asserted that *design thinking* has transformative power in a user-centered approach that emphasizes the user's needs and experiences. By integrating empathy and ideation in digital marketing strategies, organizational leaders can create comprehensive marketing campaigns that resonate with their target audience to drive engagement. Consider the potential initial encounter with the start-up.

Marketing campaigns must begin from the beginning. Online start-ups exist in a digital landscape inherently structured to attract consumers. Still, most website owners do

not utilize fundamental strategies to attract consumers and enhance their experience (Semrush, 2023). SEO, SM, and streamlining the initial contact experience are critical considerations for high-performing organizations (Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023; Semrush, 2023). SEO and SM extend the reach of the target audience to draw them in, and content keeps them there (Maurya, 2022). Regardless of the business model, start-ups should promote their website on Facebook because it is the world's most widely used SM platform (Semrush, 2023). Visibility is a critical factor of organizational sustainability.

Business leaders should ask themselves, “Is it convenient to find my organization?” Of the 17 billion search queries per day, 75% never click past the first page of results (Agrawal, 2024). Organizational leaders and their teams must brainstorm to identify their target audience and keyword placement to capture their attention. Google Ads’ (n.d.) Keyword Planner is an example of a digital tool for designing and refining a campaign to stand out and drive sales. However, a SM marketing strategy is an additional tool to increase brand awareness in a targeted online community and drive traffic to the start-up (Angelou et al., 2024; Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023). Likewise, the unique situation of the website may generate more opportunities for visibility.

For example, in the case of this study’s target organization, the parent company’s founder earned the trust of an established community of accountants and business leaders who access the site for information pertinent to their professions. The parent company’s SEO optimization and reputation could be leveraged for easy and quick access to the CJ firm. Backlinks are useful for promoting another website and generating traffic (Semrush, 2023). The CPA Central and CJ founder could add a link under Professional

Development opportunities on CPA Central's ad-supported and profitable home page.

The new content, with informative articles and webinars, can generate a convenient, multilayered, and valuable experience for their target audience.

Value Cocreation

Cocreating a service or product can be a transformative experience for the company and the consumer. The customer experience has become increasingly intertwined with cocreation for shared ownership activities that preserve and sustain long-term consumer loyalty (Ahmad et al., 2022). Executives must put themselves in the position of working with their customers and learn the realities of their product or service offering for opportunities to improve and create value. This approach encourages continuous feedback and iteration, ensuring that the final product or campaign is aligned with business and consumer objectives (Kingsnorth, 2022). The Baldrige performance excellence program favors socially inclusive practices for performance excellence (Ford, 2021). This cultural shift was consistent with digital transformation trends.

Organizational executives have successfully adopted the cocreation approach as part of their sustainability plan. For example, Starbucks and Dell maintain platforms that enable current and potential customers to submit innovative ideas and provide feedback to optimize their products and services (Kingsnorth, 2022). Alternatively, an SM monitoring strategy could garner important information and a customer-oriented perspective on how the company is doing (Aichner et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020). Aligning with the power of SM, executives may collaborate with influencers to add layers of brand awareness with social proof that the business is trustworthy (Beichert et al., 2024). As

consumers become more connected and knowledgeable, they can become powerful allies in letting organizational leaders know how to meet their needs (Karaoglu et al., 2021). Consequently, with the experience-oriented approach, executives can tap into the emotional and cognitive connection with the product.

Knowledge Management

The underpinning and supportive theme of each strategy is knowledge management. Knowledge management is central to using data and information to drive improvement, foster a competitive advantage, and support productive growth (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2024). The COVID-19 crisis of 2020 challenged the business strategies of organizational leaders worldwide. Durst et al. (2023) asserted that crisis events that cut over geographical and organizational boundaries, such as COVID-19, make knowledge management instrumental to firm survival. Organizational leaders must use information to align operations with their strategic objectives.

However, the information must not remain siloed within an organization. Within the Baldrige performance excellence framework, leaders employ measurement, analysis, and knowledge management to create a feedback system for learning processes (Ubaid & Dweiri, 2023). Through self-assessment, firm leaders may determine which activities are effective and which processes do not meet the expected performance levels. For example, in the initial stages of the start-up, CJ's founder performed most of the activities (see Figure 5) and used specialty contractors as needed. However, standardized checklists and processes developed from the knowledge gained from system errors and consumer feedback are essential to document for future reference. Leaders must honor feedback

and share it to build resilience to disruption (Garfield et al., 2021). Such essential information could be communicated to future staff to establish organizational priorities.

Organizational leaders may leverage their existing resources for managing information. Durst et al.'s (2023) exploratory literature review indicated that knowledge management is instrumental in fostering the sustainability of small- and medium-sized enterprises. The Baldrige leadership triad characterized information technology as a core analytics tool for facilitating quality management and communication (Wang et al., 2022). For example, artificial intelligence can be a robust quality management tool for managers (Möller et al., 2020) and a technical assistant for generating personalized content for customers to have a customized experience (Kingsnorth, 2022; Purnomo, 2023; Ylilehto et al., 2021). Firm leaders may begin by following the end user's journey with a commercial analytics tool, such as MonsterInsights.

Implications for Social Change

This study is significant because the results could have implications for professionals who aim to grow membership in an online start-up business. This study builds on the core values and concepts of the Baldrige excellence framework to leverage opportunities to develop successful strategies tailored to the organization for performance excellence. The interrelated concepts and core values of the Baldrige performance excellence program have been embedded in the strategic operations of high-performing organizations (NIST, 2023). For example, organizational leaders have adjusted their hiring practices to meet the evolving requirements of technological breakthroughs (World

Economic Forum, 2023). The CJ firm's founder could host webinars designed to help job seekers effectively navigate the challenges associated with the technological transition.

By integrating a CSR orientation in the organization's processes, the implications for the community include stable employment, contribution to a growing economy, and the enhanced lifestyle of the community members to nurture a culture of well-being and positive social change. Executive values are the guiding force behind the effective use of information for strategic planning, analysis, and change. A socially responsible leadership orientation has a reverberating impact on employee trust, reducing change resistance and improving the corporation's reputation (Mukhuty et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). In alignment with these results, Ferrarez et al. (2023) found that firm leaders have embraced social responsibility as part of their business philosophy and sustainability practices for addressing the needs of internal and external community stakeholders.

From a financial perspective, a one-point increase in an organization's customer approval rating can lead to an up to 3.6% increase in future earnings (Ghanbarpour & Gustafsson, 2022). However, although brand admiration is correlated with purchase intention (Gupta et al., 2021), marketing CSR activities (for example, on social media) and engagement with consumers in the process are critical for reinforcing brand ties (Loureiro & Lopes, 2019). Organizational leaders must proactively engage with their communities to identify optimal iterations of CSR initiatives for support. This approach ensures that CSR activities are aligned with the organizational vision and the needs and expectations of the community they serve.

Conclusion

The overarching research question for this study was: What effective strategies do business leaders use to grow membership in a start-up online business? High-performing organizations use an interrelated system of core values and concepts, including leadership, strategy, customers, workforce, operations, results, measurement, analysis, and knowledge management for performance excellence (NIST, 2023). The best practices of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and framework underscored the importance of self-assessment, strategic planning, and continual improvement for fostering organizational sustainability and consumer engagement. Researchers designed the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program to help leaders achieve world-class performance and create stakeholder value (Ghafoor et al., 2021; NIST, 2023).

Consistent with this vision, Kingsnorth (2022) asserted that entrepreneurs must leverage design thinking, enhance consumer experiences, and incorporate digital marketing strategies to create resonating campaigns for target audiences. Consumers increasingly expect CSR activities for organizational legitimacy (Ghanbarpour & Gustafsson, 2022). In the digital era, combining strategies for membership growth in an online start-up is critical for long-term sustainability (Purnomo, 2023; Semrush, 2023). Burns (2012) posited that opinion leaders guide activities with a clear vision. Begeç and Akyuz (2023) added that leaders must ensure transparency for a collaborative network to create and capture value. Thus, the underlying themes of design thinking, value cocreation, knowledge management, and prioritizing CSR activities emerged as essential for maintaining a competitive edge while promoting positive social change.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

After the Walden University DBA Consulting Capstone administrators pair me with an organizational leader who meets the criteria of a *senior leader* and decision-maker for the purposes of this study, I will adhere to the following protocol:

1. I will send a preliminary e-mail to the participant to set up an introductory meeting to establish a working relationship necessary for the study.
2. I will review the Walden University Consulting capstone consent form and service order agreement during the introductory meeting. After the business leader consents, we will establish a communication plan that includes email or phone calls and weekly virtual meetings for interviews and feedback. These meetings are subject to change based on the interviewee's schedule.
3. Before the interviews, I will review the participant's rights and withdrawal ability. The participant will verbally express understanding. I will share my screen of interview questions and confirm approval to begin audio recording and taking notes.
4. I will use the Baldrige Excellence Builder questions across 17 criteria items, each with a particular focus. I will ask follow-up questions to be sure I understand the answer and the interviewee understands the question.
5. After each interview, I will review a summary of the transcripts to avoid bias and to ensure my interpretation of the information is accurate and corresponds with

the participants' understanding of their answers and what they wanted to communicate.

6. Once the interviews and documentation are captured, I will review my interpretation and analysis of the participants' responses with them. I will correct or remove inaccurate information.
7. If the participant deems it appropriate to share archival data, meeting minutes, training material, performance indicators, protocols, internal communications, agreements, reports, surveys, or other documents, I will remove any identifying information and code the participant and their organizations to protect the client's privacy.
8. I will secure the study data for 5 years in a password-protected cloud drive, and a digital copy remains on an external drive with the physical notes locked away under my supervision. After 5 years, I will shred all the study documents and delete all digital documentation.