

11-25-2025

Effective Strategies to Address Poor-Quality Suppliers in the Automotive Industry

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Virginia Hartleigh

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Effective Strategies to Address Poor-Quality Suppliers in the Automotive Industry

by

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MS, Walden University, 2018

MBA, Western Governors University, 2016

BS, Southeastern University, 2014

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
Business Administration

Walden University

December 2025

Abstract

Poor-quality suppliers present a significant risk and cost liability across the manufacturing industry. Industrial automotive manufacturing leaders are concerned with this challenge because supplier quality directly affects production efficiency and accounts for over 70% of total production costs. Grounded in resource dependence theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore successful strategies supply chain leaders use to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes and achieve cost savings. The participants were six purposefully sampled supply chain leaders in the U.S. industrial automotive sector who were experienced in successful supplier mitigation strategies. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and a review of public industry documents. Through thematic analysis, five themes were identified: (a) communication, (b) relationships, (c) key performance indicators (KPIs), (d) Six Sigma, and (e) supplier integration. A key recommendation is for manufacturing leaders to redefine supplier performance criteria by utilizing KPIs that specifically grade supplier communication transparency and their willingness to collaborate on process improvements. The implications for positive social change include the potential to stabilize employment and income within the local community workforce by promoting supplier development over costly relationship dissolution.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Leaders in the automotive industry oversee a complicated process, from gaining resources to producing the final product. Acquiring the needed resources can be a challenge in any economic environment; however, aside from supply chain disruptions, such as COVID-19, manufacturers sometimes struggle to find suppliers who can provide good-quality products in large quantities (Lee & Li, 2018). Additionally, manufacturers sometimes also struggle to identify poor-quality suppliers and then mitigate such issues. While many researchers have written studies regarding the effects of COVID-19 on the supply chain, there is little research concerning identifying poor-quality suppliers and the strategies that automotive manufacturers use to address these specific types of suppliers. More research is needed to discover effective strategies to identify poor-quality suppliers and mitigate risk once such suppliers are found.

The cost of production for automotive manufacturers can vary significantly, and many manufacturing companies pay more than 70% to their suppliers for production costs (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020). The costs of industrial automotive manufacturers have not yet been researched, but the cost of manufacturing industrial vehicles compared to regular consumer vehicles is much higher because of how much larger industrial vehicles are in every way. Because there is little to no research specifically covering industrial automotive manufacturing, this qualitative pragmatic inquiry may help to bridge that gap in practice, at least in part. Therefore, the focus of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies industrial automotive manufacturers use to

identify and address poor-quality suppliers, thereby improving manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some industrial automotive manufacturer supply chain leaders lack strategies to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore the strategies industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain leaders successfully use to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. The targeted population consisted of six purposefully sampled supply chain leaders in the automotive manufacturing industry throughout the United States who have successfully used strategies to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. The data sources for this project consisted of (a) semistructured interviews; (b) public data, such as publicly disseminated reports, public websites, and other industry-related public information; and (c) literature, such as books, peer-reviewed articles, and other bodies of written knowledge that provide substantive research findings about practices that are relevant to the research topic. Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependence theory (RDT) was the conceptual framework of this research project.

Research Question

What strategies do some industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain leaders use to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

I made several assumptions when thinking about how and what information I would gather for this project. Assumptions are ideas researchers believe are true but have not been researched to prove or disprove (Pyrzczak & Bruce, 2017). One such assumption for this project was that industrial automotive manufacturers have found successful strategies to mitigate poor-quality suppliers. Large brands, such as the ones included in this project, are three of the largest and well-known in the industry within the United States, and many organizational leaders who have come to trust these brands may purchase because of loyalty to the brands for various reasons, including reliability. However, to mitigate such an assumption, I hoped to prove or disprove that such loyalty exists because of these assumptions.

Another assumption was that some sourcing policies and supplier selection processes may have changed because of the effects of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted all supply chains around the world, and some disruptions and delays still occur, while many manufacturers find it difficult to recover quickly during and after a supply chain disruption (Shokrani et al., 2020). The interview questions addressed supplier selection and strategies that mitigate poor-quality suppliers regardless of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I also assumed that the interviewees would be as forthcoming and honest as possible in their answers to the interview questions. I believe that this assumption may have resulted in limitations, depending on what the interviewees were permitted to

disclose according to the organization's policies. However, it may be highly likely that these individuals were permitted to disclose any information I requested if the information was not proprietary and was used specifically for this pragmatic inquiry project.

Limitations

Limitations are factors that can impede or reduce the effect of research that the researcher cannot help or change (Yin, 2018). One such limitation is that I included a minimum of six individuals in the automotive manufacturing industry who may have shared opposing ideas and strategies. The leaders in the automotive manufacturing industry may not use the same strategies as many other automotive manufacturers; however, each of the interviewees had used or was currently using successful strategies to address poor-quality suppliers to improve automotive manufacturing supply chain processes, resulting in cost savings.

Another limitation may have been the amount of information these manufacturing supply chain industry leaders permitted to be used in this project. Some business leaders are unwilling to disclose any information at all, or such limited information that it would not be useful in a project such as this one. The hope was that I would be able to address any concerns the leaders had about confidentiality.

Transition

In Section 1, I identified the specific business problem that industrial automotive manufacturer supply chain leaders lack strategies to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. Leaders within

the automotive manufacturing industry may struggle to identify poor-quality suppliers and then mitigate the poor quality. Therefore, the aim of this project was to identify effective strategies that successful manufacturing leaders use to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers. The focus of this project was on industrial automotive manufacturing companies' procurement departments. Although there were limitations to this project, such as focusing solely on United States-based companies, I assumed that many companies could reflect what many successful manufacturers employ for strategies around the world.

In Section 2, I will provide a literature review that contains a synthesis of the articles used in the research portion of this project prior to interviews with the industry leaders. In Section 3, I will discuss the correlating themes that emerged from the six participant interviews and the specific strategies these individuals shared. I will also share a summary of the interview process, along with any relevant portions of written information these individuals were willing and permitted to share during the interview process that supported the use of successful strategies to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers. In Section 4, I will present the findings from the data collected, the conclusions I have drawn from the research project, and the implications for social change.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore the strategies industrial automotive manufacturer supply chain leaders successfully use to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. Extensive research based on the theories used to mitigate supply chain effects on the manufacturing industry might help researchers understand the strategies supply chain leaders use to mitigate poor-quality suppliers, resulting in cost savings. Information exists regarding the influence supply chain disruptions have on manufacturing companies around the world (Küffner et al., 2022). However, there has been a focus on strategies to mitigate poor-quality suppliers but not enough to disclose specific, effective strategies supply chain leaders have used. The focus of this research project was to address the gap in business practices by exploring effective strategies to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings.

The organization of this literature review includes the fundamental concepts of RDT and how it can be used to mitigate poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. Using RDT as the conceptual framework for this project helped to build perspective through a specific lens from which to learn and understand the complexities of how organizations make decisions (see Sherer et al., 2019). Based on the RDT, developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), manufacturing companies should assess all needed resources to prioritize and plan for manufacturing processes with the greatest efficiencies and minimal cost. The literature review also

includes the evidence found in the literature focused on the business problem and the literature supporting the resolution strategies for the business problem. To find the literature for this review, I searched the Walden University online library databases, including EBSCOhost and SAGE Premier. The various keywords used were *poor-quality suppliers*, *supply chain disruptions*, *risk mitigation*, and *poor-quality mitigation*. The literature review contains 59 references, consisting of five textbooks, four public publications, and 50 peer-reviewed articles; all but 15% of them were published within 5 years of my projected graduation date.

Conceptual Framework: RDT

The RDT was developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), who posited that an organization's success is dependent upon the organizational leaders' ability to acquire and maintain the necessary resources to keep the business operational. No matter the type of organization, all organizations must interact with their environment to some degree, whether through relationships, acquiring resources through other organizations, or responding to a governing power (Burns & Stalker, 1966). However, before studies regarding external effects on organizational behaviors, researchers studied internal structures of organizations and leadership decisions based on employee satisfaction, production efficiencies, and other internal organizational motivations. Katz and Kahn (1966) developed the open systems theory through their study of social psychology regarding organizations, in which they believed that the focus should be on external influences that influence an organization's behavior rather than on the internal structure of an organization for making decisions and motivations for behavior. The open systems

theory might have had some influence on Pfeffer and Salancik at the time they developed the RDT.

An organization's behavior can be influenced by both external and internal factors. Bowers (1973) developed the need-satisfaction model and showed that a job or position has various components by which an employee's needs are met. The focus of the needs-satisfaction model is on the employee and how the employer helps the employee form a job attitude and motivation, not only to continue to return to work, but to help form the organization and to help the organization move forward. The need-satisfaction model was another contemporary framework that Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) may have drawn from when developing the RDT in addition to social psychology studies by Burns and Stalker (1966).

Organizational leaders and researchers can use RDT as a conceptual framework when examining the decision-making processes and organizational development for creating procedures to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers. Employee attitudes toward their jobs, along with the economic environment of the organization, can affect the success of the organization and the direction an organization may take.

Organizational leaders must understand the economic and environmental aspects of the supply chain to make decisions on how much and how often to obtain needed resources (Hillman et al., 2009) as well as internal factors that could affect resources within the organization. Both internal and external factors may be considered necessary resources that guide and maintain an organization. In this pragmatic research project regarding the industrial automotive industry, the RDT framework was especially appropriate, notably

because of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several factors organizational leaders should consider as they use the RDT as a framework for decision making.

RDT has been used to study various organizational behaviors based on organizational resource needs. Product type and simplicity can determine how an organization would acquire needed resources (Ma et al., 2019). For example, the focus of this research project involved industrial automobile manufacturing leaders who manufacture several models of the same vehicle, but each model may contain more luxury features than others, thus making the manufacturing process more complex. Additional components and resources would be needed for the more complex models. Manufacturers can form a dependence on a supplier, which can influence supplier performance and organizational decisions of both manufacturer and supplier (Prajogo et al., 2020). Resources, such as time to market, customers' willingness to pay higher costs, satisfaction, and/or dissatisfaction of customers, can also affect an organization's behavior (Saorín-Iborra & Cubillo, 2019). Organizational leaders make decisions based on the severity of their need for a particular resource (Nienhüser, 2008). Consumers may be considered a resource for manufacturers because manufacturers often rely on consumer feedback to change organizational behavior, which may help to lower costs and/or increase revenue. Industrial automotive manufacturers depend on suppliers and consumers for various resources at every stage of manufacturing and must make decisions to influence organizational behaviors that align with the RDT.

Suppliers may also depend on manufacturing leaders as a resource for capital to acquire more supplies or services. Manufacturers who produce proprietary products with

proprietary components may cause a supplier to depend on them for volume and consistency to continue supplying them (Ma et al., 2021). Therefore, RDT was a proper framework upon which to base this pragmatic inquiry research project, specifically regarding the industrial automotive industry.

Business Problem Evidence

Some industrial automotive manufacturers are independent of, rather than dependent on, other organizations for making decisions and obtaining resources. Many organizational leaders try to reduce dependence on other organizations to gain more autonomy and self-sufficiency (Sherer et al., 2019). Organizations that provide resources for other organizations tend to hold more power over the others, and the dependent organizations work to manage such relationships to reduce that power (Wang et al., 2016). In an economy where many organizational leaders seek to gain a competitive advantage, it would seem difficult if the power dynamic were balanced on the supplier's side. Researchers have found a positive relationship between technological uncertainty and how well a supplier communicates with the buyer. In times of technological uncertainty, some buyers are more dependent on suppliers than when there are no technological issues (Xiao et al., 2019). Ultimately, many buyers prefer less dependence on suppliers but may have no choice when there is a supply chain disruption or if there are proprietary resources that could only be obtained from one or two suppliers.

Many manufacturing leaders form relationships with suppliers to improve performance and reduce costs. However, manufacturing company leaders may struggle with various levels of trust with potential suppliers or may not recognize warning signs of

poor-quality suppliers during the supplier selection process (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020). Distrust in the buyer-supplier relationship can also result in poor supplier performance or quality (Mahama & Chua, 2016). Trust is a key component of the buyer-supplier relationship from selection to dissolution of that relationship and can result in poor-quality goods or services if that trust is damaged in any way. Trust must be developed and often begins through the supplier selection and development process.

Supplier selection can be difficult if the vetting process is not robust enough or if the supplier development processes are not robust enough to identify a supplier's lack of willingness to cooperate. Leaders may also find difficulty in developing suppliers properly once a supplier is selected (Benton et al., 2020), thus failing to identify poor-quality suppliers until they are invested in the buyer-supplier relationship. Without processes that can help leaders delve deeper into suppliers' capabilities and compatibility, they may lose time, money, and resources when a poor-quality supplier is selected and implemented into the manufacturing processes (Yoon et al., 2018). Communication and honesty between manufacturers and suppliers are key to success in being better able to either develop the supplier or select a good one.

Manufacturing organizations, or buyers, in the buyer-supplier relationship must communicate expectations, challenges, concerns, and praise to the supplier to enhance the relationship. Buyers who do not communicate clearly may encounter disruptions in the supply chain with the supplier or poor-quality goods or services (Y. Chen et al., 2019). Suppliers must also communicate with buyers to reduce uncertainty and mistrust (Ko & Noh, 2017). Lack of communication and/or miscommunication within the buyer-supplier

relationship can result in poor-quality suppliers through performance or goods and damage the buyer-supplier relationship.

Buyers or manufacturing leaders may create a power dynamic with suppliers depending on the buyer's needs, which could cause a problem with quality or performance. There are many buyer-supplier relationships in which the supplier is beholden to the buyer, which can form a shift in power to the buyer, and the buyer must be cognizant of this to minimize the negative effect of the buyer-supplier relationship (Chae et al., 2017). Suppliers may not perform adequately if both parties do not work together to form a positive relationship when there is a power dynamic in the supplier's favor (Wang et al., 2016). Buyers and suppliers may need to work together to minimize any power dynamic for either party to avoid mistrust or resentment, which could negatively affect supplier performance or quality. Such negative effects could result in disruptions within the supply chain. Conversely, supply chain disruptions can occur without blame on either party within the relationship as well.

Many diverse types of manufacturing companies struggle with various supply chain disruptions of various sizes and effects, but COVID-19 severely disrupted most supply chains, including automotive manufacturers. Specifically, automotive manufacturing companies experienced severe supply chain disruptions during COVID-19 (Spieske et al., 2022). However, manufacturers were not the only organizations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many organizations along the supply chain and throughout the supply chain network were affected and may have struggled with the same power dynamic in one form or another. The relationship with the supplier can be considered one

of the resources the buyer needs during times of technological uncertainty; however, the difficulty is in the lack of autonomy, resulting in more dependence on the supplier than the buyer would like.

Control, or lack of control, could contribute to the problem organizations face when they depend on outside resources to survive. Unfortunately, the industrial automotive industry, and the automotive industry in general, have become more interdependent on each other and primary suppliers than ever before due to COVID-19 (Küffner et al., 2022). Additionally, consumers had difficulty locating vehicle inventories for purchase and had to order their preferred vehicle with the dealer or online before their vehicle could be produced (Pató et al., 2022). Organizational leaders sometimes work to form interdependence with other leaders to reduce one organization's power over others (Hillman et al., 2009). Quality relationships between buyers and suppliers may help acquire resources while reducing costs, and some relationships may cause power dynamic problems that cannot be overcome.

Manufacturing leaders may develop buyer-supplier relationships with various suppliers to obtain needed manufacturing resources; however, some manufacturers may act too quickly to dissolve a relationship with a supplier rather than develop the supplier. Some suppliers make mistakes resulting in dissolution (Y. Chen et al., 2019), and some relationships end because of a break in their contract on either side (Kingshott et al., 2020). If a buyer or supplier breaks a contract or dissolves the buyer-supplier relationship without collaborating to improve the relationship and quality, the risk of disruptions in the supply chain and worse quality problems could arise.

Some automotive manufacturers may struggle with poor-quality performance, which may result in product recalls. According to a report from BizzyCar (2024), more than 27 million vehicles were recalled by automotive manufacturers throughout 2024. Automotive recalls result in about 70% loss in value (Allianz Global Corporate & Specialty, 2017; Nassar et al., 2020). If the reason for a recall includes a poor-quality supplier, it may be difficult for the manufacturing supply chain leader to detect the poor-quality supplier if they do not already have effective strategies in place. Manufacturing leaders may need to create a total quality management program to improve quality and reduce negative effects from poor-quality suppliers.

Many studies and tools have been created around the topic of quality management. The purpose of a total quality management program is to identify and define a problem or quality issue within the manufacturing process and mitigate those issues as quickly and as efficiently as possible (McDermott et al., 2023). Manufacturing supply chain leaders who lack such a program may fail to identify a quality problem before the product is completed, thus having to remanufacture the product, which would cost the organization a lot of time and money (Olanrewaju & Lee, 2022). There may be several more potential issues not listed in this project; fortunately, several potential solutions for identifying and mitigating poor-quality suppliers will be revealed in the next section.

Business Problem Resolution Evidence

There are several resolutions to the business problem that some industrial automotive manufacturer supply chain leaders lack strategies to identify and address

poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes. However, there may not be one solution that works for every organization. Some decisions depend on the type of relationship between the buyer and supplier (Alghababsheh & Galliar, 2020). Other decisions related to the supplier selection process, while other decisions may influence supplier evaluation processes. The business leader(s), making such decisions based on the RDT, should evaluate needed resources and the most efficient and effective methods of obtaining those resources regularly. With the competitive advantage in mind, leaders may find multiple solutions to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers.

Barring proprietary or limited resources from a few suppliers, one of the quickest solutions manufacturing leaders may take is to terminate the supplier relationship. A manufacturing supply chain leader may identify a poor-quality supplier and automatically dissolve the relationship with that supplier (Y. Chen et al., 2019). Oftentimes, supply chain leaders create contracts that can be easily annulled when a supplier breaches the contract and in which the supply chain leader does not feel the need to work with the supplier to improve (Fan et al., 2020). Additionally, many supply chain leaders create contracts that offer a way out of the contract without breaching any of the terms (Kingshott et al., 2020). In either case, supply chain leaders who are averse to risk may find some security in such contracts to quickly mitigate poor-quality suppliers. This solution may also be a last resort in many cases, especially if the supply chain leader has a robust supplier selection process.

Supplier selection is important in acquiring needed resources in any manufacturing process. Manufacturing supply chain leaders must factor in the availability

of resources, how many viable suppliers there are with the same resources, cost advantages, turnaround times for deliveries, and a multitude of other variables that could affect manufacturing processes, any of which could be a risk (Dupont et al., 2018). The supplier selection process can be difficult in environments with or without supply chain disruptions (Ilyas et al., 2021). The more robust the supplier selection process, the more successful the manufacturing supply chain leader may be in identifying poor-quality suppliers before they are selected. The supplier selection process, in conjunction with supplier development, may prove to be successful as a combined strategy.

Manufacturing supply chain leaders may successfully mitigate poor-quality suppliers if they have an effective supplier development process. Buyers should work to create a solid relationship with their supplier to help in supplier development, where the buyer understands the supplier's perspective (Benton et al., 2020). The relationship between the buyer and supplier, or manufacturing supply chain leader and supplier, can aid in positive supplier development, or it can lead to poor-supplier performance, depending on how well each communicates with the other (Hoque & Maalouf, 2022). Communication, or lack thereof, is key to the success or failure of any buyer-supplier relationship and helps to develop trust, especially when both parties within the relationship are equal (Chen & Lewis, 2023). Power dynamics may play a part in some buyer-supplier relationships; however, successful supply chain leaders may work to mitigate such power dynamics with open and honest communication. Supplier development may be an important and successful process as a strategy, but product quality evaluation processes are an important part of the manufacturing process.

The quality of a resource can directly affect the quality of the finished product in the manufacturing process, including the automotive manufacturing processes.

Manufacturing supply chain leaders should implement a quality management program throughout the manufacturing process to ensure no recalls or product failures (Samani et al., 2019). Quality management programs are typically part of the risk management strategies manufacturing leaders use to help mitigate poor quality both in products and in suppliers (Ganguly, 2020). Manufacturing leaders should address faulty resources or products from suppliers as quickly as possible to minimize not only the risk in the manufacturing processes but also to minimize costs for recalls and remanufacturing. Additionally, manufacturing processes that involve immediate identification, problem solving, and mitigation of poor-quality resources and products can help manufacturing leaders employ successful risk management strategies (Sila & Cakir, 2020). As stated previously in the Business Problem Evidence section, a total quality management program may be one of the most integral parts of the manufacturing process in helping to mitigate poor-quality suppliers once they are identified.

Manufacturing supply chain leaders may value relationships with their customers, which could also influence the organization's success. Many supply chain leaders may depend on customer feedback to improve products or services or manufacturing processes. Customers can sway product outcomes and manufacturing performance in positive ways through relationships and loyalty with manufacturing companies (Nenavani & Jain, 2022; Saorín-Iborra & Cubillo, 2019). However, suppliers may also view buyers as customers and can also influence supplier performance through feedback and

relationships as well (Mohan et al., 2021; Pellegrino et al., 2020). In any case, customers can positively affect the performance of the supplier, thus mitigating poor quality or poor supplier performance. Manufacturing supply chain leaders who invest in relationships with their suppliers and with their customers may find more success in creating and implementing strategies to avoid quality issues throughout the manufacturing processes (Niu et al., 2022). It is possible that manufacturing supply chain leaders may use a combination of several solutions at the same time to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers that all fall within the topic of risk management.

Risk management can be an ever-evolving solution to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers. Risk management, as it pertains to the supply chain, can be defined as reducing vulnerability within the supply chain through identifying and addressing such risks (Vanalle et al., 2020). Manufacturing leaders who use risk management as a strategy often plan for contingencies before disruptions or delays within the supply chain take place by investigating various scenarios and creating plans for those scenarios (Can Saglam et al., 2021). The strategies within the topic of risk management can range from supplier selection to supplier dissolution. Each manufacturing supply chain leader must decide which strategies fit best for their organization.

The location of an automotive manufacturing company can affect the manufacturing leaders' strategies in the basic manufacturing processes and their ability to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers. Automotive manufacturing leaders in India face vastly different challenges than those in the United States or other first-world countries (Bandyopadhyay & Kim, 2022). Therefore, identifying and mitigating poor-

quality suppliers can look very different from one country to another because of different economic and social environments (Mahdiraji et al., 2021). However, manufacturing supply chain leaders face the same challenges and must develop strategies to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers.

Transition

In Section 2, I presented business problem evidence that outlined potential business problems about identifying and mitigating poor-quality suppliers. Though not exhaustive, several issues were mentioned that many automotive manufacturing company leaders may face. Additionally, I revealed several solutions to those business problems that can help to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers.

In Section 3, I will describe the ethical considerations made when collecting data for this project and the nonethical practices I avoided. The section will also include discussions of the nature of the project and the specific components of the data collection and analysis processes used to address the business problem and prove the potential solutions to the problem of identifying and mitigating poor-quality suppliers.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

My role as the researcher in this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was primarily to collect and analyze the data for this research project. The researcher's role is not only to collect data but also to identify themes and patterns within the research and to report those findings (Abbott & Bordens, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the researcher, I was responsible for protecting the participants and any information they produced for this project. The methods for collecting data for this pragmatic inquiry were primarily through interviews of at least six participants in the field of procurement as well as review of peer-reviewed articles and industry publications. Each part of the project was described and shown to be safe for the participants and for me (see National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Protecting the participants and any information they provide is an important part of the research process in general, but allowing interviewees to remove themselves from the process, if needed, is also an important dynamic to the research process.

I have been a procurement professional for 16 years and a procurement manager for 7 of those years. I have experienced supply chain disruptions several times throughout my career. Not considering the COVID-19 pandemic, poor-quality suppliers have cost the companies I have worked for thousands and even millions of dollars, depending on the product or service I was involved in at the time. I have also found that the simplest answer, or even the most obvious answer, to such a problem is not necessarily the correct answer. While each scenario may be different during a delay or disruption within the

supply chain, learning new strategies may help improve overall success and create stronger relationships between buyers and suppliers.

As the researcher in this pragmatic inquiry research project, I may have had a past working relationship with those in the industry; however, there has been a significant amount of time between when I worked with any potential participants and now. Much has changed in the time since I have worked with these individuals, including the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The other procurement or supply chain professionals were chosen through different methods. Regardless of how these interviewees were chosen, I have maintained an ethical boundary in interviewee selection by adhering to the *Belmont Report*.

The *Belmont Report* can be used as the basis for ethical behaviors between researchers and their research subjects. As the researcher, adhering to the *Belmont Report's* principles was extremely important because it established an ethical, valid, and trustworthy research environment, which directly impacted the quality of the data (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Respect for persons required the use of informed consent and protected the participants' autonomy, which was necessary for fostering a safe atmosphere that encouraged interviewees to share candid and truthful insights.

Beneficence dictated the protection of confidentiality and anonymity to avoid harm, such as exposing sensitive business data, thus securing the participants' willingness to cooperate and ensure the findings would benefit the industry as a whole. Finally, justice required the fair and equitable application of research methods, maintaining

impartiality, using methods which ultimately built the trustworthiness and credibility of the project's conclusions.

Everyone carries a bias, whether consciously or not; however, it was my role as the researcher to minimize that bias as much as possible and try to approach each interview, as well as the whole research project, with as much objectivity as possible. Additionally, I followed the ethical guidelines given by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The Walden University *IRB Manual* contains ethical guidelines that protect both the interviewees and Walden University as well as a consent form that each interviewee signed and returned before I began asking interview questions. The consent form was sent in its original format and wording to the interviewee without any changes. Additionally, I ensured that no proprietary information was discussed. I did not video record the interviewee during the interview process and was only permitted to audio record the interviews. Once the interview process was complete, I provided a copy of the summary of the interview to the participant.

During my initial attempts to connect with procurement professionals for interviews, I sought participants purely on a voluntary basis without incentives. However, because there was a need for incentives due to a lack of participation, I offered a \$10 gift card to a well-known coffee shop in exchange for an interview. None of the participants who were chosen worked for me directly or indirectly, and I maintained the confidentiality of the participants throughout the data collection process and beyond. I did not mention any real names, organizations, or locations in the pragmatic inquiry;

however, I used pseudonyms to identify specific participants within the project. All communication with participants outside of the interviews was made through my Walden University email account and was not shared with anyone. All documents and information pertaining to this pragmatic inquiry will be kept in a secure location for 5 years to keep the participants' identities confidential. The Walden University IRB approval number for this project is 12-30-24-0449508.

Nature of the Project

I selected the qualitative method to use open-ended questions in the participant interviews for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project. Qualitative researchers use open-ended questions to discover what is occurring or has occurred (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). A pragmatic approach to design and analysis entails strategically combining and borrowing from established qualitative methods to meet a researcher's needs, typically with guidance from an existing framework with detailed research and practice change goals (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). My research was inductive, focusing on individual decision-makers within a real-world problem.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

I was purposeful in my approach to gathering participants for this pragmatic inquiry. The participants for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry were six United States-based procurement professionals of the same level who have been in the procurement field and in leadership or management for at least 5 years and were familiar with successful strategies to identify and mitigate poor-quality suppliers. I used job boards, such as LinkedIn, to find various procurement professionals working within the

automotive manufacturing industry and either used the messaging platform within LinkedIn or emailed them if there was an email address available, using the Invitation Template for email, social media, and flyer formats. Additionally, I inquired about each potential participant to see if they knew of other procurement professionals who might want to participate in the interview process of this project. This is also known as snowball sampling (see Leighton et al., 2021). I hoped to develop a relationship with each participant through the commonality of similar positions and experiences in our careers as procurement professionals; however, I also expressed the importance of the business problem and the need to find solutions to it, which they could help with. Six procurement professionals were enough interviewees for data saturation and to reach a well-rounded answer to the research question. This is the minimum number of participants necessary to reveal a common theme that can be reliable (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). However, I would have invited more people to volunteer for an interview if needed.

The sampling for this pragmatic inquiry was representative of the procurement professional population within the industrial automotive industry. I carefully and purposefully chose the participants through searches for industrial automotive company websites and job positions as well as LinkedIn searches of industrial automotive companies and procurement professionals of those companies. All the participants held the same or comparable positions. The goal was to achieve data saturation (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Newhart & Patten, 2022). Each of the individuals I interviewed had enough experience within their career to be able to share strategies they used along with describing the success or failure of these strategies. Additionally, the same interview

questions were used in all interviews in this project. Because each of the procurement professionals worked for automotive manufacturing organizations, their experiences and input directly applied to the business problem of identifying poor-quality suppliers and mitigating such suppliers within the automotive industry.

Data saturation cannot be achieved by only one method but by more than one method (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Member checking was just one of several ways used to reach data saturation in this pragmatic inquiry. A saturation grid in which common themes are found through transcribing all the interviews and then coding them to identify those themes can be used to achieve data saturation as well as working to achieve data triangulation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The purpose of data saturation is to obtain as much quality and quantity data as possible so that as many perspectives as possible can be revealed. As the researcher in this project, it was important that I eliminated as much bias as possible, while recognizing any bias that remained, and ensured objectivity as much as possible throughout this pragmatic inquiry.

I, as the researcher, sought only those procurement professionals who were most qualified to answer the research and interview questions. Many researchers determine their participants based on how qualified the participants are in their field and whether they can contribute information that they have personally observed within their careers (Abbott & Bordens, 2022). Six different individuals across the country were able to provide perspectives from various points of view to bring a well-rounded and substantive approach to finding successful strategies in identifying and mitigating poor-quality suppliers during the data collection process for this project.

Data Collection Activities

As the researcher for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I was the sole person responsible for collecting data through semistructured interviews, research articles, and industry publications. Semistructured interviews are interviews with preset questions that the interviewer uses to guide the conversation but that also provide enough flexibility to delve deeper into various answers the participants give as needed (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). The interviews flowed as organically and naturally as possible, and I got as much detail as I could from participants.

Following the interview protocol (see Appendix), I audio-recorded the conversations with each participant, set up follow-up interviews to ensure member checking, and provided a summary for each interview to the participant. Following the interview protocol helped not only to verify the information but also to fill in any gaps that may have been missing from the first interviews. The interview protocol also helped with the member checking process.

To triangulate and achieve data saturation, I planned to collect automotive publications and procurement-related publications that referenced various supplier strategies. I did not use any organizational information unless it was published as a public document. All data, including recordings, names, contact information, and articles, are kept in a secure location, and the confidentiality of the participants will be maintained (Zyphur & Pierides, 2020). All data I collected are stored on a flash drive and secured in my home throughout this project and will continue to be for the next 5 years.

To prepare for each interview, I dressed professionally and logged into the video call at least 5 minutes before the start of the interview. Dressing professionally helped set the tone for the interview (Abbott & Bordens, 2022). Once the participants arrived at the interview via video call, I introduced myself and gave a little bit of background on the project and the purpose of the interview. I watched for verbal and nonverbal communication throughout the interview and asked follow-up questions as needed, depending on each participant's answer. After the interview, I asked each participant for any final thoughts and then thanked them for participating. I then informed them that I would send them written summaries of the interview responses once I completed them so that they could respond with any questions, concerns, or revisions about any of the answers they provided. Giving the participants this opportunity to correct or revise was the first part of the member checking process, which was also part of achieving reliability and validity in the project. Through member checking and triangulation, I achieved data saturation, yielding a richer and fuller outcome.

Interview Questions

I asked the following questions in interviews with participating supply chain leaders:

1. Please describe your role(s) and responsibilities you have held as a leader in the industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain industry.
2. In your experience, how do you define poor supplier performance within the industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain industry?

3. What strategies are you using to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing supply chain processes, resulting in cost savings?
4. What methods have you found that work best to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing supply chain processes, resulting in cost savings?
5. What are the most significant challenges related to addressing poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing supply chain processes, resulting in cost savings?
6. How did you overcome those significant challenges related to addressing poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing supply chain processes, resulting in cost savings?
7. How often do you struggle with poor supplier performance?
8. What kinds of strategies do you employ to address poor supplier performance?
9. How did you form your strategies regarding poor-quality suppliers?
10. In what ways do your strategies affect your relationships with suppliers?
11. What do you do in a case where the supplier is a proprietary supplier or the only supplier for a particular category you maintain?
12. What else can you share with me about your strategies in addressing suppliers with poor quality and/or poor performance?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Data organization and analysis were important steps in understanding the data collected and helping me concisely present the research question, the business problem, and the possible answers to that problem to the reader. To start the data organization and analysis process, I used a specially designated flash drive and a backup flash drive to keep copies of recorded interviews, articles, summaries, logs, notes, spreadsheets, and cataloguing. I will keep all information for at least 5 years after project completion. Use of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet helped not only to organize the data but also to categorize and identify themes. I labeled the main themes or categories and used them in my findings as I analyzed the data. Organizing the collected data helped to analyze the data methodically and thoroughly.

In this project, I employed the six phases of thematic analysis discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Using an Excel spreadsheet, I transcribed the data, which was the first phase in thematic analysis. By using a spreadsheet throughout the six phases, I was able to familiarize myself with the interview answers thoroughly enough to be competent in the findings and later discussions. The second phase was to code the data systematically and collect data connected to each code. Once I completed the coding process, I searched for themes and reviewed those themes within the data, which were the third and fourth phases of the thematic analysis process. Once I was familiar enough and had then created and reviewed the themes within the data, I defined and named the themes to try to refine the data, which is Phase 5. The final phase was to write and submit the report using compelling examples to give answers to the research question.

Interviews are not the only source of data I used in this project. When performing a qualitative pragmatic inquiry, researchers should obtain and analyze multiple sources of information (Alam, 2021). To obtain data saturation and accuracy, researchers also use triangulation (Abbott & Bordens, 2022). In addition to the semistructured interviews, I used the notes I had taken, publications from the automotive industry where appropriate, and procurement publications. Each of my interview questions was an open-ended question that prompted each participant to give more than one-word answers. The more detailed the answer, the better the chances I had of achieving data saturation and accuracy. I reached the data saturation point with the fifth and sixth participants. Participant 5 began to repeat some of the same things as Participants 1 through 4, and Participant 6 revealed no new information that the previous five had not already discussed.

Once all interviews were completed, I transcribed each interview and then deconstructed each interview and categorized it. Researchers who use interviews as part of their data collection often analyze their data by using software to identify main themes and correlate those themes into codes (Alam, 2021; Paulus, 2023). I identified key themes and created a code from the interview answers. Upon creating a code from the themes identified in the interview answers, I searched for similar themes in the publications I used in the project. The data were reviewed several times, so I could become very familiar with the data and themes, be able to present the findings in the final section of this project, orally defend this project, and educate those who are genuinely interested in the topic of identifying and mitigating poor-quality suppliers.

To ensure the reliability and validity of all data I collected, I used a process called member checking. I employed member checking to achieve data saturation and accuracy in which I summarized each participant's answer to each question and sent those summaries to each participant respectively and waited for confirmation or feedback for corrections, added details, or better answers according to each participant. Researchers use member checking to increase reliability, validity, credibility, transferability, and accuracy of their research (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Additionally, triangulation is an important part of the data collection process that helps with reliability and validity as well (Yin, 2018). Researchers also use interview protocols to be as objective as possible throughout their research (Yin, 2018). I, too, used the interview protocol (Appendix) to reduce my own bias throughout the data collection process.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers may be able to reduce personal bias when performing research, but there is no way anyone can completely remove all bias. Rather than trying to remove all bias within a researcher, researchers should reflect upon their approach to the research as it pertains to race, gender, background, and reliability and validity can help by improving accuracy and reducing bias within qualitative research (Coleman, 2021). I tried to be mindful of my own bias as I moved forward into the data collection process, including my own professional experiences.

Reliability

Reliability can be interchanged with the word dependability. Researchers should make sure that the data presented are dependable and consistent (Coleman, 2021). I tried

to make sure that the data I present were dependable or reliable and consistent through member checking, triangulation, and data saturation. The journal articles that I used within this project were all peer reviewed, which makes them more reliable than basic internet search results. Additionally, finding common themes and similar answers that are repeatable throughout the interview process also helped to prove reliability and dependability. Data collection from more than one source can also reduce bias when it is consistent (Abbott & Bordens, 2022).

Qualitative Validity

The qualitative validity of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was just as important as its reliability. Validity helps to increase the credibility of the data (Coleman, 2021). Credible data would be data found from interviews with multiple procurement professionals from different backgrounds, peer-reviewed articles, and other verified data. The validity of the data collected in this research project is aided by the richness of the data, which comes from asking deeper questions and receiving deeper answers, in addition to the deeper articles and information found throughout the process.

Credibility

Credibility may be difficult to fully prove; however, researchers may increase credibility not only by using trusted resources but finding common and repetitive themes throughout their research. Transparency into the data collection process, triangulation of the data collected, and acknowledging potential biases can help to increase credibility (Vella, 2024). By member checking, I increased the credibility of the data collected from each interview. Each participant reviewed the summary I provided them for each of the

questions we discussed in our interview through the interview protocol, at which point the participant verified, corrected, or enhanced their answers. Additionally, I used data triangulation between the interview protocol, research articles, and procurement publications.

Transferability

Transferability can be difficult for researchers to achieve if they are not conscientious when applying what they have learned to the project they are performing (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability is the act of applying information found from research, such as interviews, articles, or other methods to areas of study (Drisko, 2024). To achieve transferability, I used the interview protocol and data collection techniques for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry in conjunction with member checking and triangulation to reach data saturation. My goal was to find similar or same themes and descriptions from multiple data collection techniques, such as the interview protocol and member checking, so that the reader can also deduce the same information from the same data that were collected.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the ability of the reader to go back and confirm sources, research, and statements within the research (Lim, 2024). To achieve credibility and validity, researchers should present research findings that are confirmable. Articles, conceptual frameworks, recorded interviews, and other proof and data that have been gathered should all confirm what the researcher has collected and presented. The ability to confirm findings and research is an important part of credible and reliable research.

Through member checking and follow-up interviews as well as asking questions from different perspectives, I made sure that the results I initially found can be confirmed. Additionally, finding journal articles and industry publications helped in making sure that the information found in the interviews was confirmed.

Data Saturation

Data saturation is the ability to guarantee, as much as possible, that all information presented is trustworthy, valid, and as saturated as possible (Naeem et al., 2024). Data saturation is more than using multiple sources for data collection. Using many resources does not guarantee data saturation. However, more in-depth answers from interviewees who are all asked the same questions in conjunction with peer-reviewed articles and other sources can help to achieve data saturation. My goal as the researcher was to be able to present as many full answers as possible without gaps as much as possible. I used member checking through reviewing and interpreting the interview transcripts, and I provided a one paragraph summary of each question to each participant respectively, asking the participant if the summary covered their entire answer. I also asked for clarification and feedback on any changes or more details. I continued the member checking process until the data repeated itself and no new data were revealed.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I discussed this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project ethics and how I conducted the project and myself in an ethical manner. I also explained why I chose the qualitative pragmatic inquiry over any other method. The data collection process,

interview questions, data analysis process, and the reliability and validity of the data collected were described as well. In Section 4, I will present the findings as well as discuss how they could help automotive organizations in their strategies and the implications for social change. In addition, I will share what I believe needs to be researched further.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic project was to explore strategies industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain leaders use successfully to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings. I sought to answer the following research question: What strategies do some industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain leaders use to identify and address poor-quality suppliers to improve manufacturing processes, resulting in cost savings? Data were collected through semistructured interviews with six supply chain leaders in the industrial automotive manufacturing sector. The analysis of these interviews revealed a distinct set of strategies that align with the foundational concepts of Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) RDT, particularly regarding the need to manage external dependencies and minimize the risks associated with critical resources. The following themes emerged: (a) communication, (b) relationships, (c) key performance indicators (KPIs), (d) Six Sigma practices, and (e) supplier integration.

Theme 1: Communication

The foundation of successful strategies for identifying and mitigating poor-quality suppliers is communication as well as building and maintaining a strong relationship with them. All participants in this project mentioned that a lack of communication can not only damage the relationship between buyer and supplier but also cause disruptions within the manufacturing process (see Richey et al., 2009). Participant 5 stated:

It starts with communication and understanding your supply base. First and

foremost, having regular meetings is essential. It can be monthly communication; or it might be quarterly. Through communication, you understand all the risks and learn what is currently happening, good or bad.

A key element in communication was for suppliers to be proactive in communicating any issues as they arise. The buyer can then work with the supplier to schedule various operations around the issue. Buyers and suppliers may engage in weekly, monthly, and quarterly meetings to encourage transparent communication and potentially avoid any potential disruptions (Nassar et al., 2020; Nenavani & Jain, 2022). A supplier's willingness to collaborate can ultimately have a positive effect on the relationship and manufacturing processes. However, the opposite is true, too. Participant 4 stated, "The poorest supplier performance would be a supplier that doesn't communicate. Even if they can't deliver your parts on time, and as long as they're communicating when they can, you can schedule your manufacturing processes around that."

Participant 2 works in a company that manufactures electronic chips for various automotive companies and believes that communication is important, particularly in shipments from outside of the country. They stated:

There are really no reasons as to why those things [delivery issues] shouldn't be confirmed within 24 hours. There's a lot of communication in general, but for deliveries, communication, especially delivery confirmations, should take place immediately. Otherwise, it causes problems within our own manufacturing process.

Therefore, communication can be a strategy to improve the manufacturing process or solve problems. However, the lack of communication can not only cause disruptions in the manufacturing process but also disruptions in the supply chain.

Relevance of Findings to the Conceptual Framework

The evidence gathered for this theme strongly confirms the foundational application of RDT within the automotive sector. According to RDT, the manufacturing organization works to secure its critical resources, such as quality components and delivery time, by managing external uncertainty and the power suppliers hold (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The theme of communication is a key strategy for this management.

Specifically, the findings confirm how communication directly reduces supplier power by minimizing uncertainty, a central tenet of RDT. Participant 5's emphasis on required proactive communication and Participant 4's willingness to adjust schedules around delays shows that leaders can minimize uncertainty by controlling the flow of information. Furthermore, this project extended the existing knowledge of RDT application by demonstrating a practical, operational link. The use of immediate communication requirements, such as Participant 2's confirmation that delivery issues should be confirmed within 24 hours, extends RDT by providing specific, real-time manufacturing strategies that reduce dependence and increase resource control.

Relevance of Findings to the Literature

The findings on communication confirm established academic and professional literature while also extending it by providing operational context. The triangulation of evidence—from the direct experience of Participants 2, 4, and 5, and the studies by

Richey et al. (2009) and Nassar et al. (2020) confirmed that communication is not merely a relational courtesy, but a strong, noncontractual strategy essential for mitigating uncertainty and reducing risk.

This project revealed the gap in practice by showing that communication can be a direct strategy for process improvement. The need for continuous, transparent, and proactive communication is presented by the participants as a mechanism to avoid disruptions, which confirms the findings of Nassar et al. (2020). The extension within the specific automotive application shows that proactive scheduling (Participant 4) and immediate confirmation requirements (Participant 2) are necessary to safeguard the internal manufacturing process, thus clarifying how communication translates into specific, risk-mitigating strategies that were detailed in the literature.

Theme 2: Relationship

Managing the buyer-supplier relationship effectively was a strategy that was revealed during the data analysis portion of this project and was preferred and more successful than merely terminating the contract and dismissing the supplier. Instead, the data revealed that building a relationship with the supplier so that the relationship becomes more of a collaborative partnership helps to better avoid disruptions and create greater efficiency (see Zhang et al., 2023). The buyer-supplier relationship can be built on mutual respect and trust (Mahama & Chua, 2016), which is essential for identifying and mitigating poor-quality issues in a proactive approach rather than a reactive one. However, when disruptions occur due to supplier performance, the relationship between

buyer and supplier can help to work through the disruptions (de Goede et al., 2018; Putre, 2025). In any case, the quality of the relationship directly affects supplier performance.

Participant 1 discussed how important good relationships are between buyer and supplier. When a relationship is built on trust and honesty, supplier performance is improved. Participant 1 stated:

If you have a good relationship with the supplier, then the supplier is more willing to help when an issue comes up. The better the relationship, the better the performance. It's important for both sides to be humble when creating a relationship.

Additionally, when a supplier is unwilling to communicate or help to resolve an issue, the buyer-supplier relationship may become difficult and possibly dissolved.

Participant 2 stated, "If I find a supplier is not willing to work with us, or if a supplier is not willing to correct the wrongs, that's how a relationship goes bad."

In RDT, it is suggested that instead of terminating an external dependency, which involves high costs of switching suppliers and uncertainty, manufacturing leaders typically choose to invest in the relationship and gain greater control of the supplier's future decisions (Prajogo et al., 2020).

Relevance of Findings to the Conceptual Framework

The findings concerning relationship management confirm the tenets of RDT. According to RDT, manufacturing leaders often choose to invest in the relationship to gain greater control over a supplier's future decisions rather than acquiring the high costs and uncertainty associated with terminating an external dependency (Prajogo et al.,

2020). The current project findings confirm this theory because the interviewees unanimously preferred building collaborative partnerships to outright contract dissolution, even in the face of poor performance. This is a strategic move to secure critical resources.

Additionally, this project extended the application of RDT by demonstrating the nature of dependence management; when a supplier is unwilling to collaborate or correct mistakes (Participant 2), it invalidates the RDT strategy of investment and signals that the relationship is no longer viable for controlling resources, making termination a final necessity.

Relevance of Findings to the Literature

The interview data confirms existing literature, revealing that the buyer-supplier relationship should be built on mutual respect and trust to facilitate proactive identification and mitigation of quality issues (see Mahama & Chua, 2016). The findings from this project confirm that when disruptions occur due to supplier performance, a strong, established relationship is crucial for collaboratively working through the issues (see de Goede et al., 2018; Putre, 2025).

This project disconfirmed the literature's occasional focus on termination as a primary recourse. Instead, the findings extended the discussion by highlighting that the strategy of relationship development is more successful than dismissing a supplier. The practice of investing in the relationship to create a partnership is thus confirmed as a necessary strategy for managing risk and mitigating the effect of poor performance.

Theme 3: KPIs

Many manufacturing leaders use KPIs to grade suppliers on various metrics, depending on the needs of the manufacturing leader (Aparna et al., 2025). Some of the metrics entail order confirmation time, lead times, and on-time delivery and quality. The buyer in the buyer-supplier relationship, who is usually also the manufacturing leader, holds suppliers to a high set of standards. Participant 6 stated, “Through our grading system, they [the supplier] have to score a minimum of 93%, and really, we’re looking for a minimum of 95%. We’ll accept 93%, but we obviously prefer 100%, if it were possible.”

However, at the same time, the better the score, the better the relationship. Participant 1 stated, “Anything about 90 out of 100 we consider as a good relationship. Anything less than 70 is a red. It means they need improvement. And between 70 and 90 is okay. It’s workable.”

KPIs establish clear expectations throughout the selection and application processes. The grades from the KPIs not only help to continually grade the supplier but also give justification for termination if the score diminishes due to repeated unresolved failures (Aparna et al., 2025; Rasol et al., 2024). However, suppliers have a choice to improve performance or to do nothing.

Manufacturing leaders who use KPIs to measure supplier performance exercise power and control over the relationship as well as the manufacturing processes. The RDT revealed that the manufacturing organization must actively build its environment to reduce supplier dependency (Niu et al., 2020). When manufacturing leaders use strict

grading criteria that can affect supplier status, such as 93% as a minimum (Participant 6), the manufacturer can severely reduce uncertainty. The KPI score can be viewed as an instrument of power that provides justification for the manufacturer's actions. A low score, such as 70% (Participant 1), can justify termination of the supplier and sever the dependency. Additionally, a midrange score can strengthen the partnership when the supplier becomes willing to improve. KPI is not just a tool, it is a way to encourage accountability, which helps the buyer maintain control and keep the resource flow predictability.

Relevance of Findings to the Conceptual Framework

The findings regarding the use of KPIs confirm the central idea of RDT. The RDT revealed that the manufacturing organization must actively build its environment to reduce supplier dependency and maintain resource control (Niu et al., 2020). The use of strict grading criteria that affect a supplier's status, such as setting a minimum of 93% (Participant 6), acts as an instrument of power that manufacturers use to reduce uncertainty.

The KPI score justifies the manufacturer's actions that a low score, such as 70% (Participant 1), can justify termination and sever the dependency, while a midrange score encourages the supplier to improve, thereby strengthening the buyer's control over the predictability of the resource flow. This confirms the use of power to manage uncertainty and control resources, which is the central premise of RDT. The grading system is not just a tool but a strategic way to encourage accountability, which helps the buyer maintain control.

Relevance of Findings to the Literature

The interview data confirms the literature on supplier performance measurement, which details the necessity of using KPIs to grade suppliers on various metrics (see Aparna et al., 2025). KPIs establish clear expectations and justify relationship decisions (Rasol et al., 2024). This project, however, extended the existing knowledge by highlighting how the KPI structure facilitates the supplier integration process. While literature generally focuses on KPIs as a measurement tool, the findings extended this role by showing how the grading system itself is a mechanism for maintaining leverage and demanding continuous improvement. The explicit link made by the interviewees between a KPI score and the quality of the relationship extends the literature by detailing the relational consequences of poor performance and how the KPI serves as the justification for either relationship termination or improvement.

Theme 4: Six Sigma

When performance issues are identified using KPIs, manufacturing leaders, or buyers, and suppliers use process-improvement methods, like Six Sigma. Six Sigma not only helps improve overall processes but also helps evaluate processes and find more efficient ways to continue manufacturing to save money, which helps to proactively identify any issues in the supply chain (Chiang et al., 2015; Tsanos & Zografos, 2016). A team is created to evaluate processes from top to bottom and works with suppliers to improve processes and rewrite procedures. Such collaboration reduces long-term risk and dependence by increasing the supplier's efficiency and overall process success.

Six Sigma is extremely important in manufacturing companies. Some manufacturing leaders deem Six Sigma so important as to pay for the training for the supplier or train the supplier themselves. Participant 3 stated the following about Six Sigma programs with suppliers, “Most of our offers to train were programs like Lean and Six Sigma. If they couldn’t meet us, we would meet them for the training.”

The use of Six Sigma programs and practices directly and more granularly reveals the collaboration and relationship between buyer and supplier, which are based on the RDT framework. According to RDT, when dependency on the supplier is too high, manufacturers may invest resources in the relationship to gain control over supplier processes. When manufacturers use their quality control programs and standards into the supplier’s processes, the manufacturers internalize controls the flow of the resources and affect supplier performance (Benton et al., 2020). Six Sigma can help transform the supplier from an external resource, which can be unpredictable, into a part of the internal processes, they can secure a long-term partnership and collaboration with more predictability.

Relevance of Findings to the Conceptual Framework

Using Six Sigma programs and practices confirms the application of the RDT framework in managing buyer-supplier relationships. In RDT, it is posited that when dependency on a supplier is too high, manufacturers will invest resources into the relationship to gain greater control over the supplier’s processes and secure critical resources (Benton et al., 2020). The findings confirm this theoretical application because the manufacturer’s investment in supplier training (Participant 3) is a direct, tangible

strategy to internalize control over the resource flow. By integrating their own quality control standards and programs, like Six Sigma, into the supplier's operations, manufacturers transform the supplier from an unpredictable external entity into a more predictable component of the internal processes. This internalization confirms the RDT mechanism for securing long-term partnership predictability and managing dependency.

Relevance of Findings to the Literature

The findings confirm previous literature on quality control and risk management, which views Six Sigma as a necessary method for improving processes and proactively identifying issues in the supply chain (Chiang et al., 2015; Tsanos & Zografos, 2016). Furthermore, this project extended the existing knowledge by highlighting the specific, granular function of Six Sigma as a relationship management tool. While the literature discussed its process improvement value, the findings extended this by showing that the implementation of Six Sigma is often a demonstration of the manufacturer's investment and willingness to develop and help the supplier. This investment, which includes paying for or providing training (Participant 3), acts as a noncontractual, relational strategy that reduces risk and dependence, thereby making the collaborative aspect of process improvement a central theme for supply chain risk mitigation.

Theme 5: Supplier Integration

A strategy many manufacturers use to mitigate communication failures and manage on-time deliverables is supplier integration, which involves physically placing a member from the supplier's organization into the manufacturing process. Supplier integration increases the manufacturer's power over the flow of resources and mitigates

potential disruptions for the most critical components (Spieske et al., 2022). The employee is given an office on-site and acts as the primary contact, which streamlines communication. Supplier integration reduces the time, distance, and barriers that oftentimes negatively affect operations (Richey et al., 2009). Supplier integration also helps with delivery times, which is one of the most important KPIs. Four of the six participants said very similar things regarding supplier integration. Participant 6 gave the best overall description of supplier integration and how it helps with communication:

We use a method called supplier integration, where an employee from our supplier has an office at our plant. That employee is typically very knowledgeable as far as what our manufacturing workflow looks like and what our needs are. They do a great job of communicating between us and the supplier and addressing whatever issues may arise.

Participant 3 used the supplier integration method in their manufacturing processes but also had major suppliers in a different location. Participant 3's company leaders would often meet with the offsite supplier for regular meetings, training, and discussions. Participant 5 had virtually the same scenario with both integrated suppliers and off-site suppliers, depending on the parts and other various needs in the manufacturing process.

Supplier integration involves physically placing a supplier's employee on-site and is the most direct correlation to RDT. RDT includes emphasis on manufacturers establishing strong connections to obtain critical resources, which will also reduce uncertainty in the resource flow. By bringing a supplier representative (Participant 6), the

manufacturer gains the ability to more quickly and effectively communicate with the supplier. The supplier's representative, who is also the supplier's employee, acts as a liaison between the manufacturer and the supplier. This creates real-time information exchange rather than the lengthy time and processes an off-site supplier might take.

Relevance of Findings to the Conceptual Framework

Supplier integration directly confirms the core tenets of RDT identified in this project. In RDT, it is emphasized that manufacturers will establish connections to obtain critical resources and reduce external uncertainty in the resource flow. The findings confirm this by showing that placing an integrated supplier representative on-site (Participant 6) gives the manufacturer the ability to quickly and effectively communicate and gain real-time access to information. This extends the manufacturer's internal control directly into the supplier's organization, allowing the buyer to internalize control and manage resource predictability. The integrated employee acts as a liaison, enabling real-time information exchange that bypasses the lengthy time and processes an off-site supplier might require, thus ensuring the manufacturer obtains critical components and reduces dependency.

Relevance of Findings to the Literature

The interview data confirms the literature on supply chain risk mitigation, which identifies supplier integration as a key for managing on-time deliveries and mitigating potential disruptions (see Spieske et al., 2022). The process of having an on-site employee who acts as a primary contact confirms how this strategy reduces barriers that negatively affect operations and streamlines communication (Richey et al., 2009).

Additionally, this theme extended existing knowledge by demonstrating how integration is used as the primary strategy to disconfirm the relationship termination assumption. The extensive investment required for integration confirms that buyers prioritize collaboration and development over termination. Furthermore, the findings extended the literature by showing that integration is not an all-or-nothing approach, as manufacturers effectively manage a mixed portfolio of integrated and off-site suppliers based on the criticality of the parts (Participants 3 and 5), clarifying the strategic application of this costly risk mitigation tool.

Summary

The findings of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project confirm the core tenets of RDT while also extending knowledge in the supply chain practices by describing successful strategies to manage resource dependency and power. The strategy of communication confirms literature on how important it is for risk mitigation (Nassar et al., 2020). Communication extends RDT to how it reduces uncertainty as a strategy. Additionally, the decision to develop a buyer-supplier relationship also confirms the value of trust (Mahama & Chua, 2016). Communication also helps manufacturers to gain control over the flow of information and increases the manufacturer's power by requiring transparency (Can Saglam et al., 2021). Investing in the supplier relationship can help the manufacturer to gain control over a critical resource and avoid relationship and contract termination (Prajogo et al., 2020). Communication is an important component of the buyer-supplier relationship, and a successful relationship can directly affect the buyer's control, while a difficult relationship can increase the supplier's control. A foundational

tenet of RDT is to reduce the supplier's control and reduce the buyer's dependence on the supplier.

A formal tool to manage the buyer-supplier relationship is considered to be an approach through RDT. Quality management can be achieved with the use of KPIs (Ganguly, 2020). But KPIs can also be used as a powerful instrument that initiates actions through the lens of RDT, which is strongly supported by recent literature on the power of metrics (Aparna et al., 2025). Moreover, using Six Sigma is also used as a supplier development tool (Benton et al., 2020) but extends RDT by proving that it is used as an investment in a collaborative partnership when termination of the relationship is too costly. Thus, the manufacturer can internalize control over the supplier's process quality (Samani et al., 2019). Finally, process collaboration is also a decision based on RDT and helps with resource flow.

The findings for this pragmatic inquiry project showed specific ways automotive manufacturers are dealing with suppliers, offering opportunities to change their business practices for the better. The biggest problem for manufacturers is a lack of communication from the supplier. Manufacturing companies need a specific measurement, like KPIs, to manage their dependency on the supplier and to receive honest and transparent communication. KPIs help manufacturers determine what actions are needed to improve the buyer-supplier relationship and improve manufacturing processes that are directly influenced by the supplier. Additionally, the primary data (i.e., participant interviews) and secondary data (i.e., review of peer-reviewed articles and publications) revealed that manufacturers who are willing to pay for training and Six

Sigma programs for the suppliers can strengthen any weak areas in the processes of both suppliers and manufacturers.

Finally, the costly decision to replace a supplier is only used for the most critical components in the manufacturing process. However, supplier integration can be one of the largest risk-avoidance investments that can have long-term benefits. Overall, the results of this project showed that the strategies that are most successful are deliberate actions automotive manufacturers employ to gain control of the flow of resources and establish a competitive advantage.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The strategies that were explored in this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project provide guidance to automotive manufacturing leaders with methods that are executable and have been validated to mitigate poor-quality suppliers, reduce risk, and help gain cost savings. These strategies can be applied for business and organizational leaders as well as the research or scholarly community.

The central idea for supply chain leaders is that cost savings are directly connected to process investment, not penalties listed within a contract. Immediate dissolution of the buyer-supplier relationship is not efficient, especially when it comes to costly materials that can also be high-risk. There are three recommendations given by the interviewees. Manufacturers should redefine poor performance to include not only delayed deliveries and part failure but also relationship quality. This means that manufacturing leaders should use KPIs that grade communication effectiveness and the supplier's ability to rectify problems. A supplier's score should fall sharply when or if

they conceal issues or fail to be a part of predesignated meetings. Recent literature stated that information sharing mitigates many supply chain risks (M. Chen & Wang, 2023). Grading such transparency can help to reduce costs and improve the buyer-supplier relationship.

Because of the costs of having to repair or replace items when an issue is found, automotive manufacturing leaders need to find a way to invest money into Six Sigma programs to prevent repairs or replacements. This confirms that supplier development is focused on the process capabilities and is a useful tool to help achieve cost savings (Jain et al., 2021). Six Sigma is considered by many manufacturing leaders as necessary rather than an option. Six Sigma can help the manufacturing process as well as the supplier's operations. An investment in Six Sigma programs can prevent future failures, which is far cheaper than recalls and disruptions to the manufacturing processes.

This project may help to fill the gap in practice concerning strategies to mitigate nondisruptive but poor-quality suppliers who specialize in the industrial automotive manufacturing field. This project also extends RDT by providing evidence of how leaders address dependency. The findings show that when there is no way to avoid dependency on a supplier, manufacturing leaders can work with the suppliers to develop new processes. The findings demonstrate another aspect of RDT than what was previously documented. Additionally, the findings show that putting trust and communication effectiveness into measurable criteria can be applied to other industries to mitigate poor-quality suppliers (Choi et al., 2023). The better the relationship, the fewer issues concerning quality.

Implication for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include economic and workforce stability, organizational culture and human capital development, and sustainable business practices and stakeholder trust (see Amoako et al., 2021). The implementation of the strategies identified in this project, which focuses on changes the average buyer-supplier relationships maintain into collaborative partnerships, reveals implications for positive social change.

Economic and Workforce Stability

The action of developing rather than terminating the buyer-supplier relationships promotes economic stability within local communities. When manufacturing leaders invest in supplier capability through process improvements, they help mitigate production disruptions, which enables manufacturers to build and maintain long-term contracts and reliable production schedules. This longevity in buyer-supplier relationships supports the maintenance of the workforce, helping to ensure consistent employment and income for both buyer and supplier employees. This predictable and stable economic condition reduces employee dependency on public services, thus strengthening the local economy and promoting community resilience.

Organizational Culture and Human Capital Development

The application of quality management tools, such as Six Sigma, within the organizations of both buyers and suppliers fosters a lasting culture of continuous learning and process improvement. When a manufacturing leader invests in such programs for a struggling supplier, the knowledge and standardized processes become permanently

integrated, improving the supplier's operations and positively affecting the entire supply chain. This investment contributes to social change by developing human capital, creating a more skilled and adaptable labor force.

Sustainable Business Practices and Stakeholder Trust

The finding that manufacturing leaders prioritize communication and relationship quality over mere transactional or contractual relationships supports a move toward sustainable business ethics. Using KPIs to grade trust and transparency encourages leaders to view suppliers as shared stakeholders in mitigating risk rather than as replaceable components of the manufacturing processes. This perspective establishes a culture of shared accountability across the supply chain. Such business practices minimize legal disputes, improve morale, and enhance the reputation of the manufacturing field, creating a positive social effect through showing ethical and durable organizational management.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this project not only provided successful strategies for industrial automotive manufacturers, but they also revealed new areas for research that would help with finding best practices. Future research should focus on revealing quantifiable information from the standpoint of strategies in the buyer-supplier relationship and expanding the geographic limitations of this project. Additionally, this project showed that strategies like supplier integration and Six Sigma during the supplier development process help in minimizing risk and achieving cost savings. However, the findings are qualitative rather than quantitative. Therefore, future researchers should use a quantitative

or mixed methods approach so that the correlation between implementing these strategies and costs can be revealed. In addition, research to develop a tool that can quantify the criteria for measuring trust and communication is needed. Such an approach can help other manufacturers, and businesses in general, in risk assessment aspects of their business.

Conclusion

In this project, I successfully explored the strategies industrial automotive manufacturing supply chain leaders use to identify and address poor-quality suppliers, resulting in improvements demonstrated in processes as well as cost savings. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with industry leaders whose experiences provided a positive approach to help improve risk mitigation. The RDT was the conceptual framework, guiding the project and helping me develop an understanding of how successful leaders manage and reduce their dependence on external suppliers.

The data analysis revealed that the mitigation of poor-supplier quality is a complex strategy that involves changes from a transactional relationship to a collaborative partnership. The key findings revealed five intertwined strategies: communication, relationships, KPIs, supplier integration, and Six Sigma. The analysis also revealed that immediate dismissal of the supplier is not as effective as employing each of the five strategies, but particularly communication, relationships, KPIs, and supplier integration.

This project provides a blueprint for organizational leaders to practice. The findings bridged the gap in practice regarding the original scope of the RDT to reveal an

adaptive approach to becoming less dependent, which also has implications for social change. By utilizing investments in Six Sigma programs and building a development program with the supplier, the findings of this project may be applied to promote a healthy economy within the supply chain and maintain employment.

In conclusion, industrial automotive leaders should recognize that a poor-quality supplier is more of a process problem and not a personnel problem. The foundational approach to this research can be summarized by cost savings and best quality in industrial manufacturing are not obtained by replacing suppliers but by investing in continuous improvement of the supply base. This approach can transform the risk of supplier dependence into a valuable partnership.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
<p>Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.</p>	<p>Hello, my name is (First/Last Name). I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore the effective fiscal strategies used by municipal administrators to attain their annual operations targets. I am going to ask you nine questions to which I would like your responses to. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?</p>
<p>Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth</p>	<p>Interview Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How would you describe your role in creating the organization's effective fiscal strategies to attain its annual operational targets? 2. What effective fiscal strategies have you implemented to meet your annual operational targets? 3. What were your strategies for reducing expenses? 4. What were your strategies for generating revenue? 5. How did you implement those fiscal strategies within the organization? 6. What challenges did you face in implementing the fiscal strategies within the organization? 7. What business processes did you use to mitigate the impact of the challenges? 8. How did you measure the effectiveness of the fiscal strategies you implemented? 9. What additional information regarding fiscal strategies you used to attain operational targets would you like to provide in addition to your existing contributions?

<p>Wrap up the interview thanking participant.</p>	<p>Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.</p>
<p>Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.</p>	<p>I will contact you in a week to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.</p>

Follow-up Member Checking Interview

The member checking follow-up interview can help one reach data saturation through obtaining indepth information and enhancing academic rigor

Graphic adopted from DBA Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Research handbook (2023). Not needed in proposal or research project. A visual reminder during proposal stage when creating interview protocol

<p>Introduce myself and purpose of the follow-up interview to set the stage.</p>	<p>Hello Interviewee, Thank you for taking this time to meet with me again to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.</p>
<p>Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual questions. Bring in probing questions related to other information that I found – note the information must be related so that you are I am probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Is my interpretation correct? Did I miss anything? Or Would you like to add anything?</p>	<p>I will read the questions one at a time and my interpretations of your responses to them and ask you if my interpretation is correct.</p>
	<p>1. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>
	<p>2. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>
<p>3. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>	

	4. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed
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