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Small Business Crisis Management Strategies

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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2016

Abstract

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MA, Liberty University, 2013

BS, Troy University, 2011

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The absence of adequate crisis management strategies in small firms could result in a premature small business closure. A qualitative multiple-case study was used to explore the crisis management strategies that 3 small business owners have used to survive an unexpected operational interruption. The small business owners in this study were from different industries in the southeast region of the United States and each owner owned a business for more than 5 years and had survived at least a single crisis. The theory of crisis management and crisis intervention theory were the conceptual frameworks for this study. Data collection occurred through semistructured face-to-face interviews with small business owners; observations; and a review of company documents comprised of business plans, insurance policies, floor plans, and emergency exit routes. Data were thematically analyzed and then triangulated to ensure trustworthiness of interpretations. The findings included 3 emergent themes: the importance of developing survival strategies; transparency, open communication, and relationship building; and creative thinking as a survival strategy. Recommendations for action include securing adequate insurance coverage, investing in a worker's compensation policy, and maintaining transparent and fluent communications with vendors and consumers. Small business owners who implement survival strategies may contribute to positive social change by continuing to create employment opportunities that improve economic conditions in local communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my family. The sacrifices my mother made while raising me taught me to always put God first and to never give up on any dream He places in my heart (may she rest in peace). Even though my siblings, my children, and other family members had no idea as to the depth of this pursuit, I am eternally grateful for all of the words of encouragement they unknowingly provided.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

A crisis is an unexpected event that causes stress, requires intervention, and mandates proper planning to ensure survival and sustainability in business (Doern, 2014). These unplanned events may develop from natural disasters, terrorist activities, human error, or defective machinery. Damage to buildings, transportation devices, land, people, or finances could cause business operations to cease at a moment's notice.

An organizational crisis involves a threat to the business, the element of surprise, and requires immediate decisions from company leaders (Brown & Ki, 2013). The 21st century began with a series of crises including terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and declining economic conditions, that resulted in the premature closure of businesses of all sizes in varying industries (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015). Since the mid-2000s, declining economic conditions in the United States caused owners of small businesses to develop sustainability strategies to cope until the economy began to grow again (Baily & Bosworth, 2014). In 2013, small companies represented 99.7% of all businesses and accounted for 60% of net new jobs in the United States (SBA, 2014). To ensure continued contributions to the economy and local communities, leaders must develop processes to plan for, respond to, and recover from crises (Lee, Vargo, & Seville, 2013). Conducting a study to identify effective crisis management strategies may help mitigate small business closures.

Background of the Problem

New business owners in the United States generated approximately three million jobs per year prior to the Great Depression that lasted from 1929 to 1939, accounted for

3.5% of all employment in the 1980s, and dropped to 2.6% in the 2000s (Calcagnini & Favaretto, 2012). Gohmann and Fernandez (2014) attributed an increase in small business closures to high unemployment rates in the United States. Considering employment opportunities provided by small business owners contribute to the overall stability of the economy, leaders must develop and rehearse crisis management strategies that enable quick recovery of daily operations after an unplanned business interruption (Williams & Balaz, 2014). Incidents requiring crisis management strategies often result from natural disasters, human error, equipment failures, and unexpected economic downturns.

To ensure continuous contributions to the economy, business leaders should implement written strategies to survive an unexpected interruption to daily operations (Hermes & Mainela, 2014). Even with the recommendations to plan for continuous operations, many small business leaders ranked sustainment planning as the lowest priority when compared to strategies for economic growth, stakeholder satisfaction, and contributions to society (Kahn, 2014). Operating expenses were a main contributor to small business leaders not adopting crisis management strategies (Harmeling & Sarasvathy, 2013). Processes to enhance sustainability, increase market value, and minimize liabilities could improve profitability in small companies while contributing to positive social change (Meyer, Gremler, & Hogreve, 2014). Employment opportunities in small firms contribute to positive social change in local communities. As such, small business social responsibility activities should encompass long-term sustainability strategies (Spence, 2016).

Problem Statement

Small businesses in the United States employ more than two-thirds of the workforce (Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013). In 2013, 78% of small businesses in the United States did not have written procedures on how to respond to an unexpected crisis (Kalra & Gupta, 2014). The general business problem addressed in this study is that some small business owners risk premature business closure because of a failure to prepare for a crisis (Appelbaum, Keller, Alvarez, & Be'dard, 2012). The specific business problem addressed in this study is that some small business owners lack adequate crisis management strategies to survive an unexpected operational interruption.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the crisis management strategies some small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. The targeted population was three owners of small companies in the southeast region of the United States who demonstrated success after an unexpected operational interruption. The results of this study may help owners of small businesses develop adequate crisis management strategies to minimize the risk of premature business closures and promote economic growth. The implications for positive social change include continued efforts of small business owners to create employment opportunities, improve economic conditions, and generate new products and services within local communities (Wilson & Post, 2013).

Nature of the Study

The methodology for this study was qualitative. There was no intent to test a theory by proving or refuting a hypothesis and measuring variables as prescribed in a quantitative study. The mixed methods study would enable views from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives; however, this approach is time consuming and, therefore, was not an appropriate method for this study. Johansen, Aggerholm, and Frandsen (2012) recommended the qualitative methodology when exploring the impact of human activities or decision-making processes.

Understanding the purpose and method of the research helps to determine the design for a successful study. Qualitative research designs include ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, phenomenology, and case studies (Maxwell, 2012). In ethnography, the researcher places specific focus on actions and interactions within groups of people, based on cultural or sociological dimensions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Grounded theory is used to develop new theories during a study through constant interaction with data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The narrative analysis encompasses storytelling of life-long events (Merriam, 2014). Phenomenological studies help provide an understanding of the essence of an event based on the perceptions and lived experiences of the individuals (Petty et al., 2012). Upon reviewing the pros and cons of each qualitative design, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology were not appropriate for this study. The case study design enables flexibility and the ability to analyze a variety of data sources (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013); therefore, I selected the case study design. Researchers employ the qualitative case study design to fulfill the research objectives and answer research questions (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014); therefore, the design was appropriate to explore the strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption.

Research Question

What crisis management strategies do small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption?

Interview Questions

The interview questions for this study were designed in a general format to leave room for exploration. The questions were focused enough to solicit responses that contribute to the main research topic, which is crisis management strategies for small business owners. To gain a better understanding of the skills, planning processes, and strategies implemented during a crisis, I posed the following questions to the participants:

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been in business at this company?
2. How do you differentiate your firm from your competitors?
3. How would you rate the importance of planning for an unexpected crisis in your company?
4. What was the nature of the unexpected crisis that caused an operational interruption of more than 24 hours at your business?
5. What processes did you implement to identify adequate strategies to survive the crisis?
6. What strategies did you deploy to minimize the severity of the crisis?

7. What are the components of your crisis management plan?

8. How does planning for an unexpected crisis contribute to long-term business success?

9. What are the key components of your crisis intervention plan?

10. What advice would you give to others who are considering opening a small business, about including crisis management strategies in the initial planning phases?

11. Are there any other comments you would like to add to our conversation about the success factors and strategies related to your business surviving the unexpected crisis?

Conceptual Framework

The primary goal for this study was to explore the strategies small business owners use to survive a crisis; therefore, the study used the theory of crisis management and the crisis intervention theory. Two psychiatrists conceptualized the theory of crisis management: Erich Lindemann introduced basic crisis intervention strategies in the 1940s in response to the 1943 Coconut Grove nightclub fire in Boston (James & Gilliland, 2012). Lindemann implemented a process referred to as symptomatology to categorize the symptoms or elements of a crisis (Lindemann, 1963).

Gerald Caplan provided the foundation for the crisis management framework at Harvard University in 1964 (Roberts, 2005). The theory includes four major constructs: the crisis management model, crisis management planning, contingency planning, and business continuity planning (Braun, 2015; Spillan & Hough, 2003). O’Connell, de Lang, Stoner, and Sangster (2016) endorsed the idea of adopting the theory of crisis management to increase survivability in small businesses during a financial collapse.

The crisis intervention theory derived from common goals to minimize the stress, duration, and severity of the crisis (Aguilera & Messick, 1974). Three basic models of the theory: recompensation, stress-oriented, and system-oriented (France, 2015; Langsley, Pittman III, Machotka, & Flomenhaft, 1968; Parad, 1969), help to address the psychological, behavioral, and social effects that accompany a crisis. Using crisis intervention theory along with crisis management offers a second lens to help ground and complement the study, while answering the overarching research question: what crisis management strategies do small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption?

Operational Definitions

Crisis planning team: Crisis planning team is a group of employees selected to develop strategies to anticipate and respond to crises in a manner that reduces the impact while creating sustainability (Blevins, Lord, & Bjerregaard, 2014).

Personnel crisis: Personnel crisis is high turnover, accidental death, suicide, or criminal acts committed by employees (Engstrom & Mathiesen, 2013; McCann, 2013).

Physical crisis: Physical crisis is an accident, product recall, loss of utilities, loss of communication with external parties, and structural damages to office buildings (Chebbi & Pundrich, 2015).

Reputational crisis: Reputational crisis is loss of trust from stakeholders and shareholders; caused by rumors in the absence of facts surrounding a crisis (Sohn & Lariscy, 2014).

Small business: Small business size varies based on economic activity and industry; however, Title 13, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 121 (13 CFR 121) lists most organizations with 500 or fewer employees in the small business category (SBA, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are preliminary beliefs about the case study in general (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Assumptions provide a logical rationale and direction for a study (Yin, 2014). The primary assumption of this study was that the participants would have an interest in the study and that they would present honest and truthful responses. The second assumption was that sharing the results of the study would help increase the population of small business owners who develop crisis management strategies.

Limitations

There is no such thing as a perfect research design; the limitations of a study are beyond the control of the researcher and include factors that influence results (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This study included only owners of small businesses with offices located in the southeast region of the United States; therefore, the views of the selected participants cannot represent the views of all small business owners. With this in mind, the findings of the study may not prove useful to small business owners in other locations of the world. Another limitation of the study occurred during the data gathering process as the crises experienced by the small business owners varied and the strategies they implemented were specific to their individual business crisis. I posed open-ended questions to the participants, inviting them to describe their business strategies that helped them overcome a crisis while continuing profitability. Their responses did not reveal all factors that could possibly result in a crisis; however, the objective to explore crisis management strategies that small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption was met.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries of the research; they define the beginning and endpoints of a case (Yin, 2014). Delimitations include topics or areas that a researcher intentionally imposes. In this study, I focused on small business owners who survived an unexpected operational interruption. I did not include startup firms, firms that have been in business for less than 5 years, or firms that no longer exist because of an unexpected crisis. Geographic limitations included participants with primary office locations in the southeast region of the United States.

Significance of the Study

This study may be valuable to small business owners because of the potential to identify alternate resources for implementation of adequate crisis management strategies. Pan, Pan, and Leidner (2012) presented Hurricane Katrina, Asian Tsunamis, and Swine Flu epidemics as examples where the improper handling of crisis in business multiplied the damage of the original event. Previous researchers (Junglas & Ives, 2007; Lin, Zhao, Ismail, & Carley, 2006; Rubin, Amlôt, Page, & Wessely, 2009; Thomas & Fritz, 2006; and Weick, 1993) focused on preventing crises as opposed to providing crisis response strategies. Increasing the knowledge of owners of small companies on the economic risks associated with not having crisis management strategies is a point of reference toward improving business practices (Soininen, Puumalainen, Sjögrén, & Syrjä, 2012).

Since the decisions of senior leaders directly affect entire agencies, leaders must acquire processes for efficient and effective management of crises to ensure successful recovery (Taneja, Pryor, Sewell, & Recuero, 2014). Planning techniques encompassing operational contingency, financial management, and decision-making processes play a role in the development of sustainable company policies (Evans & Borders, 2014). The significance of this study lies in the probability that the results may lead to changes in business practices to improve the overall organizational performance in small companies.

Contribution to Business Practice

Economists identified the services provided by small businesses as a main source for economic recovery during the 2008 financial crisis, labeled as the most severe recession in economic history (Papaoikonomou, Segarra, & Li, 2012). Adequate crisis management strategies are necessary to help owners of small businesses survive unexpected operational interruptions. I pursued the qualitative case study approach to explore strategies available to assist owners of small companies in the southeast region of the United States plan for and continue to thrive after an unexpected crisis. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations from this study may encourage small business owners to implement written crisis management strategies. The results of this study may help leaders implement business practices that improve operational performance while increasing their businesses' market value. Gaining clarity on the variety of strategies available for crisis management may enable small business owners to create long-term survivability in their firms.

Implications for Social Change

Small business owners utilize rapid innovation strategies to create valuable jobs in local communities and boost economic conditions (Lawless, 2014). The absence of adequate processes and techniques to provide guidance in uncertain times places small firms at risk of significant financial loss or business closure when an unexpected operational interruption occurs. The size of the firm and a lack of experience in leaders contributed to shortfalls in critical elements needed for economic growth, including sustainability, consistency, and predictability in small companies (LiPuma, Newbert, & Doh, 2013). Small business leaders cited the extensive amounts of time and energy needed to run the business effectively as reasons for their reluctance to invest in written processes aimed at predicting financial losses (Duncan, Yeager, Rucks, & Ginter, 2011). Considering small companies account for over 23 million businesses in the United States (SBA, 2014), identifying adequate crisis management strategies to help leaders continue creating jobs in local communities contributes to positive social change.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. I sought to strategically answer the central research question, which was:

what crisis management strategies do small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption? Marshall and Rossman (2014) posited that a literature review could help clarify existing information from previous research and enable additional contributions to the specified topic. This section contains the critical analysis and synthesis of the supporting and contrasting theories of the theory of crisis management and the crisis intervention theory, as well as the potential themes and phenomena of various researchers' perspectives and findings.

Organization of the Review

The literature review contains books, scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, and government websites. The selection of literature developed from the primary objective of identifying issues with regard to crisis management strategies in small businesses. The secondary intent involved reviewing articles encompassing information on the tools, skills, and strategies owners of small businesses developed and utilized to survive unexpected operational interruptions. The sources of the information include the Walden University Library, databases such as Emerald Management Journal, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, SAGE Premier, ScienceDirect, and government websites. A total of 247 sources for the study includes 90% peer-reviewed articles. From this total, 95% of the sources have a publication date of less than 5 years from the anticipated date of CAO approval. The literature review contains 123 peer-reviewed articles. Search words included, *crisis management strategies*, *crisis management theory*, *crises in small businesses, crisis survival rates for small businesses rates in the United States,* and *small business closures caused by crises*. Variations and combinations of these terms rendered more than enough information to support the proposed study on crisis management strategies for small businesses. Table 1 contains a list of all sources by publication date.

Table 1

Total Sources Used in the Study

Source	Prior to 2012	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Peer-reviewed articles	10	48	67	45	36	16	222
Books	2	5	3	5	4	0	19
Other	1	2	0	1	1	1	6
Totals	13	55	70	52	40	17	247

Literature Timeline

I began a review of literature with references dated from 2003 and continued through 2016. The most noticeable trend was the absence of crisis management teams in small businesses. During the period 2003 to 2013, developing crisis management strategies for small business owners was not a priority (Becken & Hughey, 2013). Without strategies to manage crises in small firms, the risk of significant financial loss or business closure is higher when an unexpected catastrophe occurs (Scherdin & Zander, 2014).

The absence of adequate crisis management strategies in small firms is a problem because an unexpected disaster could linger and cause additional damage without a plan for recovery. Spillan and Hough (2003) compared results of surveys conducted in 1993 to results of surveys conducted immediately after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the United States and noted the only members of senior management teams who expressed concerns about crises in businesses were those directly impacted by the crisis event. Ley, Pipek, Reuter, and Wiedenhoefer (2012) posited that developing strategies to plan for and effectively manage an unexpected crisis might be more common in larger organizations.

Several obstacles deter small business leaders from pursuing strategies to survive crises. As noted by LiPuma, Newbert, and Doh (2013), a shortage of financial assets and resources in small companies often limited the capability to plan for unexpected crises. Unfortunately, time constraints and the smallness of the firm also contribute to the reasons leaders in small companies do not engage in crisis management strategies (Olshansky, Hopkins, & Johnson, 2012). Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer (2013) posited that the limited education business leaders possessed regarding the development of strategies to manage crises correlated with the failure to plan adequately. Regardless of the justifications for not implementing crisis management strategies in small companies, a steady increase in the number of crises since 2009 contributed to rising concerns in the business arena on the topic of crisis management (Wood, 2015). Public perception of leaders' inability to respond appropriately contributed to delays in recovering from crises (Kim, 2016).

Liou (2015) conducted a case study to explore crisis management strategies at a Midwestern pre-kindergarten through 12th grade school. Semistructured interviews and focus group discussions helped to identify flexibility and collaboration as two important elements of crisis response planning. Liou reported at least one violent incident from 2009 to 2010 in approximately 90% of all public schools to highlight the vulnerabilities in schools and validate the demand for crisis management strategies to help sustain unpredictable circumstances. Carlson, Poole, Lambert, and Lammers (2016) also stated that insufficient planning led to uncertainties that caused leaders and scholars to panic during crises in educational institutions. Future research to help identify strategies for small business owners, while considering resource limitations as internal vulnerabilities that hinder effective crisis management, may help address the psychological setbacks caused by these types of incidents.

Business leaders who exercise due diligence in forecasting and profit management as a comprehensive form of risk management may help maximize opportunities for crisis survival. Nishimura (2015) used the Enron bankruptcy in 2001 and the WorldCom group collapse in 2002 as examples of why leaders in businesses of all sizes must develop processes to plan for and manage crises effectively. In both situations, manipulation of financial instruments by senior managers compromised economic stability on an international level. Likewise, Jarvelainen (2013) utilized quantitative research methods to expose potential network and data architecture breakdowns that threatened to extend disasters when technology leaders did not have a plan for rapid recovery.

Crisis Intervention and Management Theories for Survival

Methods of organizing information to form research lie within a conceptual framework (Galea, 2012). The theory of crisis management and the crisis intervention theory are relevant perspectives that may help owners of small firms understand the importance of planning for crisis survival in small businesses. The preparation and response principles of crisis management (Coombs, 1999) could help leaders explore human reactions during times of discomfort, and develop tools to understand the severity of catastrophic events. Braun (2015) identified four major constructs of the theory of crisis management: the crisis management model, crisis management planning, contingency planning, and business continuity planning. The crisis management model includes crisis avoidance, mitigation, and recovery. Crisis management planning may help small business owners minimize negative financial and legal impacts, contingency planning may help ensure the organization is adequately prepared for a crisis, and continuity planning may help minimize the down time. By implementing the crisis management framework, experts may establish behavioral responses of business leaders to unexpected situations (Boin, Kuipers, & Overdijk, 2013).

The 2010 Deep Horizon oil spill serves as an example of a catastrophic situation (Galea, 2012) to which the primary concept of the crisis management framework can be applied. Galea (2012) attributed extensive down time to faulty equipment and uncontrollable weather conditions during the disaster. The theory of crisis management includes models for management, continuity, and contingency planning to expedite recovery from an unexpected crisis. Moos (2013) posited that people are especially susceptible to outside influences such as accidents, death, and unstable work environments. Moos reported predominant emotions including anger, fear, and guilt emerged during crises. Doern (2014) asserted that the stress employees experienced during times of uncertainty caused a loss of focus, which subsequently affected their performance. The impact of crises on individual and societal levels illustrated declines in their abilities to function during an unexpected, life-altering event.

A variety of crises including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and college campus violence prompted the synthesized works of several theorists (Caplan, 1964; Golan, 1978; Parad, 1965; Roberts, 1991, 1998; and Roberts & Dziegielewski, 1995) that resulted in the creation of the crisis intervention theory (Myer, Lewis, & James, 2013). The theory derived from sources associated with cognitive-behavioral, existential, humanistic, and psychoanalytic theories (Kanel, 2014). The crisis intervention theory includes three models to help maximize mental stability during a crisis: recompensation, stress-oriented, and system-oriented.

The recompensation model may help restore the victim's pre-crisis mental state, the stress-oriented model encompasses coping techniques to help minimize the stress that accompanies an unexpected crisis, and the system-oriented model may help identify social factors to predict how people will react to a future crisis. Leaders may utilize the recompensation, stress-oriented, and system oriented models to ascertain the distinguishable beginning of a crisis, clarify whether the crisis is situational or developmental, understand the perceptions of the people involved, minimize future vulnerabilities, and pinpoint time limits for responses (Bilbao-Terol, Arenas-Parra, Canal-Fernandez, & Bilboa-Terol, 2015; Roberts, 2005).

Smith (1973) and Ewing (1978) opposed crisis management and intervention theories, citing limitations, inconclusiveness, and the inability to rigorously test models during local conflicts and natural disasters as reasons for their conclusion (Booth, 2015; Roche, Propeck-Zimmerman, & Mericskay, 2013). However, several theorists (Caplan, 1964, 1974; France, 1982; Lindemann, 1944; Parad, 1965, 1967; and Raporort, 1962, 1967, 1970) expanded both theories while developing strategies to respond to and cope with unexpected tragic situations (James & Gilliland, 2012; Kahn, Barton, & Fellows, 2013). Leaders may include crisis intervention in their crisis management strategies to help mitigate the employee stress that accompanies an unexpected disaster (Visser, Comans, & Scuffham, 2013).

The stress-oriented and system-oriented elements of the crisis intervention theory may help leaders identify techniques to develop a positive outcome during a stressful situation. In addition, employing the crisis intervention theory equipped leaders with a simplistic comprehension of a crisis based on a top-down approach (Topper & Lagadec, 2013). Based on increases in the number and severity of crises, leaders should utilize the contingency planning elements of the theory of crisis management to gain flexibility and obtain a detailed view of the causes of events (Gunawan, Shieh, & Pei, 2015). After all, an advantage of utilizing the theory of crisis management is the ability to group large quantities of crises into one pool based on rank, sense, space, and time.

Xiao and Peacock (2014) postulated that planning a response would not guarantee a successful outcome; however, the crisis intervention theory and the theory of crisis management include contingency planning techniques to increase the likelihood of surviving an unexpected business interruption. In his crisis theory, Caplan (1964) proposed minimizing stress along with providing behavioral and psychological counseling to deal with grief as contributors to crisis resolution (Braun-Lewensohn, Sagy, & Al Said, 2014). Massey and Larsen (2006) reported that leaders of the Metrolink Commuter Rail System in Southern California gained first-hand experience of a haphazard pursuit to preserve the organizational reputation in 2002, when a collision between a Burlington Northern Sante Fe freight train and a Metrolink passenger train resulted in three deaths and approximately 260 injured passengers. The situation elicited emotional strain for the families involved. Ryu, Bordelon, and Pearlman (2013) conducted a similar case study on individuals who were victims of Hurricane Katrina to explore the underlying issues, risk management efforts, and establishment of reliable communications during the unfolding events. In both scenarios, leaders restored the reputation of their respective companies by applying the crisis management model and business continuity planning constructs from the theory of crisis management. Lessons learned included a systematic method to clarify the perceptions of the crisis and the actions needed for crisis planning.

Why Plan for A Crisis?

Crisis management strategies entail policies or processes developed to minimize the impact of a crisis, and enable continued growth and development during and after the crisis (Heller & Darling, 2012). Leaders who fail to prepare for crises risk premature business closure when unexpected disasters occur. Owners of small businesses should develop crisis management strategies to help preserve reputational assets during an unexpected crisis (Kim, 2016). Examples of situations that warrant an exploration of crisis management strategies include a global economic meltdown, a volcanic eruption in Ireland, a major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, a tsunami in Japan, and political upheavals in Africa and the Middle East. Pettit, Croxton, and Fiksel (2013) utilized data from qualitative studies involving seven global manufacturing and service firms, 1,369 observed items, and 14 crises that developed from natural disasters, technology failures, pandemic theft, product liability, and changes in currencies and prices, to validate the initial assumption that organizational sustainment improved for business leaders with crisis management strategies in their firms.

Missimer, Danser, Amy, and Pankratz (2014) classified environmental droughts and improper management at a water reservoir as two elements that significantly contributed to an unexpected crisis in Athens and Atlanta, Georgia in 2007. Lake Lanier, located approximately 30 miles north of the center of Atlanta, was the source of 70% of the city's water supply at the time. Likewise, Boyle (2014) conveyed, inaccurate planning for ongoing water demands, water allocation, and political dogma allowed the reserve to reach a low level of approximately 35 days' supply. The absence of a plan to accrue water beyond a month caused concern for many business owners because the population reached an all-time high of over five million residents in the metropolitan area. The situation is an example to illustrate the importance of developing crisis management strategies to prevent future occurrences.

In addition to focusing on the day-to-day operations that increase revenue, leaders must comprehend human characteristics to address employee concerns during a crisis. Maesse (2015) described the word *crisis* as a misperceived event that many business leaders believed could only derive from external factors. In contrast, Myer et al. (2014) presented six internal factors: (a) roles, (b) boundaries, (c) communication, (d) rules and processes, (e) goals, and (f) values that constantly change during a crisis. In light of the internal and external factors that accompany an unexpected crisis, business leaders must include crisis management techniques to preserve the mental stability of employees while sustaining the potential threats to monetary and structural assets.

Crisis management planning could help to reduce employee stress that progresses from concerns over job instability, unclear definitions of job roles, and the lack of communication during unexpected crises. Gagnon, Vough, and Nickerson (2012) exposed relational and collaborative theories as customary tools for leaders to use when developing and standards of success in the workplace. Choi, Kwom, and Kim (2013) asserted, elevated employee stress caused decreased performance, excessive absenteeism, loss of commitment, health issues, and ruined the image of a company when left unresolved.

Crisis response strategies including discovery, explanation, apology, and rehabilitation may increase opportunities for an expedient, moral, and legal recovery of an organization. Campello, Giambona, Graham, and Harvey (2011) revealed results of a survey involving 1,050 Chief Financial Officers in the United States, Europe, and Asia which showed 86% of investors withdrew their contributions when small business leaders failed to adequately respond to a crisis in 2008. By presenting the statistical data, the authors demonstrated the importance of having processes to respond and recover from crises with minimal negative impact to the business, employees, and customers. Grebe (2013) posited that a loss of investors in the small business realm could lead to a financial crisis in a small firm; therefore, leaders must explore strategies that increase investor longevity.

Furthermore, leaders should develop strategies that help overcome language barriers and improve communication before, during, and after a crisis, in the initial phases of small business planning. As noted by Becken and Hughey (2013), effective communication is a necessity for success in all areas of business. Maesse (2015) conducted an analysis during economic policy debates to evaluate the efficiency of communication among the participants. Emphasis on crisis management planning with focus on stability, growth, and competitiveness as primary targets contributed to successful recovery; however, neglecting to address the pitfalls caused by ineffective communication elevated the risks. Failure to identify and address language barriers is an area with the potential to cause a statewide crisis.

To minimize the effects of unexpected tragedies, leaders must develop strategies to respond appropriately. Jarvelainen (2013) highlighted previous studies on information management that elucidated data availability as a key priority in organizations of all sizes. Statistical data within the quantitative methodology helped to provide a clear picture of the limitations in small businesses that increased susceptibility to crises. The absence of backup resources contributed to vulnerabilities with data and network connectivity.

Small Business Planning

A one-package-fits-all solution for handling crises in business does not exist; therefore, leaders must develop crisis management strategies to minimize the risk of additional damage caused by an inadequate response to the initial crisis (Ghaden, Som, & Henderson, 2012). To ensure the response is appropriate for the crisis, small business leaders should categorize crises by type, from a list of possible crisis responses, and develop strategies to pair the types to the responses (Jarvelainen, 2013). In addition, six focal points applicable to all situations are the actual management of the crisis, auditing, organizational structure, planning, team design, and training (Massey & Larsen, 2006).

Leaders who share their experiences and the advantages of crisis planning with others in the industry help to increase awareness. Campello, Giambona, Graham, and Harvey (2011) presented details from 800 companies in 31 countries to highlight the impact of lines of credit during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. Survivability concerns developed when owners of small firms experienced more difficulty accessing and renewing lines of credit than leaders of larger companies in like industries. A summarization of data supported the idea of incorporating lines of credit with crisis management strategies to minimize the impact to small businesses during a mass financial downfall. Wang and Ritchie (2012) also reported results of a nationwide online survey aimed at evaluating the importance of crisis planning and preparation in small businesses. The study included 386 participants tasked with rating the attitudes, behaviors, previous crisis experience of company leaders, and social norms to determine which factors significantly influenced decisions about crisis management strategies. The attitudes of leaders and the past crisis experiences heavily influenced decisions while behavioral factors had little impact.

Small business leaders cannot control global economic conditions; however, company leaders must plan for economic downfalls to prevent prolonged delays in recovery. A financial crisis is an immediate reduction in operating expenses due to economic conditions, loss of a major customer, reduction in bank lending, or cancelation of investments (Choi & Douady, 2012). Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin (2012) reported case studies involving approximately 1,000 small business employees throughout the United States, indicating financial crises contributed to declined employee performance. Ninety-five percent of the respondents expressed heightened concern after realizing their companies did not have a plan to deal with or recover from an unexpected financial crisis.

Failure on the part of company leaders to plan for crises could cause delays between the time of impact and the time it takes to recover, thus contributing to a premature business closure. Xiao and Peacock (2014) reported case studies involving approximately 100 small companies in Texas, impacted by Hurricane Ike in 2008. Xiao and Peacock noted that leaders of companies with disaster planning models, including periodic rehearsals, experienced minimal negative impact. In addition, the company executives without strategies to manage the crisis incurred significant financial loss and extended interruptions to daily operations when unavoidable flooding conditions accompanied the hurricane.

Establishing ongoing communication with customers is an element for inclusion during crisis management planning. Communication via Internet in small firms could become a significant limitation during the crisis if it is the only source for consumers to obtain information. With this in mind, leaders must identify multiple methods of communication to enable a continuous flow of information to stakeholders before, during, and after a crisis. Ansong (2013) conducted online surveys to examine the techniques leaders of 33 top world banks implemented after a crisis to manage financial asset risks. The amount of time leaders dedicated to minimizing risks during the global economic crisis of 2008 directly corresponded with the level of confidence portrayed by market consumers. Ansong relayed, the most prominent concern from customers during the crisis was the inability to access financial data.

Personnel management is another overlooked topic that could contribute to unexpected internal crises in small businesses if not supervised properly. Coombs and Holladay (2015) identified crises in small businesses when leaders failed to plan for replacements when employees departed the company. Training opportunities to equip employees to fill the gap when supervisors depart abruptly could help prevent a personnel crisis. Leaders in small companies must strategically employ less expensive and less strenuous methods to develop crisis management strategies that address personnel crises.

Implementing crisis management strategies that include methods to enhance communication in residential areas could help lay the foundation for longevity. Scolobig, Prior, Schroter, Jorin, and Pratt (2015) reported significant improvements to disaster risk management techniques during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The authors utilized three case studies to identify insufficient company resources and a lack of public participation as primary reasons for conflict between business owners and citizens in the local communities. Leaders must spend time educating local residents on their business intent as well as highlight the positive social contributions a newly opened business can add to the area.

Au-Yong-Oliveira and Almeida (2015) employed the grounded theory qualitative design to conduct exploratory research with a combination of open and closed-ended questions. Ten in-person interviews aimed at enhancing the understanding of the relationship between creativity, intelligence, internal motivation, spirituality, and work style revealed internal motivation and intelligence attributed to successful crisis planning techniques. Surprisingly, the work styles of employees influenced the levels of risk leaders assumed to enhance operational performance more than any other factors, while spirituality helped to define higher levels of professionalism and concern for crisis management strategies. In consideration, small business owners must develop strategies to ensure economic contributions continue.

A Strategic Approach to Enhance Crisis Survival

Natural disasters include earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornados, or severe thunderstorms (de Mel, McKenzie, & Woodruff, 2012). Hurricane Katrina, Asian Tsunami's, and Swine Flu epidemics serve as examples of natural disasters, which caused structural damage to several businesses. The absence of adequate crisis response strategies multiplied the initial impact by adding emotional stress and broken trust. Two critical strategies to help enhance the survivability of an unexpected catastrophic situation in small companies are a well-tested crisis management plan and effective communication between leaders, employees, and consumers (Pan, Pan, & Leidner, 2012).

The geographical location of the business is an item to consider during crisis management planning, as a probable factor to increase small business survival rates during periods of economic instability. Battisti, Deakins, and Perry (2013) reviewed data from 1,411 small and medium enterprises in New Zealand to evaluate the characteristics, performance, and strategic behaviors in rural versus urban small and medium enterprises during an economic crisis. Their evaluation was a means to identify potential strategies for future crisis survival. Berger, Cerqueiro, and Penas (2015) also attributed higher crisis survival in small banking firms to the location of the company.

An internal approach. Combe and Carrington (2015) conducted a study to examine the effects of standardized processes and practices in small businesses with high activity levels and identified delays in crisis response based on the intellectual content within the companies. In addition to increasing the internal knowledge base, culture and structure are significant parts of the foundation of a business; therefore, exploring these factors could help increase crisis survivability in small businesses (Paraskevas, Altinay, McLean, & Cooper, 2013). While reflecting on crisis survival, Hogan and Coote (2014) indicated visible artifacts, organizational values, and processes that promote employee involvement in community enhancement projects improved the overall health of the companies while contributing to long-term sustainability. Increases in market share and customer loyalty could evolve from organizational culture when the primary focus points include enhancements in employee performance and commitment to the company. Including these strategies during crisis planning may enhance survivability during times of uncertainty.

In addition to motivating employee performance to increase crisis survivability probability, leaders should also take advantage of technology resources within the company. Prescott (2014) utilized a qualitative case study to examine annual reports, press releases, and information on a company website to obtain knowledge on the techniques leaders of a global information and measurement company employed to respond to rapid technology enhancements in the midst of a chaotic business environment. Prescott identified Nielsen Holdings as a dominant player in data collection for the $169 billion worldwide television industry to illustrate why technology innovation that changed the way data was collected, stored, and managed was significant to the operational readiness of the company. Prescott indicated advances in technology enabled the production of over 300,000 rows of data per second during live viewing. In addition, Becker (2014) reported Nielsen acquired companies with cellular phone tracking, video conferencing, and short text messaging capabilities for over 70 million users, and this strategy kept the company a step ahead of competitors. Becker implied the strategies employed by Nielsen leaders played an integral part of creating survivability during the 2009 global financial crisis. The strategies implemented at Nielsen serve as examples to help provide solutions for small business leaders to survive unexpected crises in their firms.

Developing processes to ensure the effective use of technology for knowledge management may enhance crisis survivability opportunities in small businesses. Steady increases in internet usage exposed technology enhancements as a contributor to online crises, yet previous studies contained minimal focus on trending organizational crises that originated with social media websites (Pang, Begam, Hasa, & Chong, 2014). Leveraging technology resources could help owners of small businesses survive a crisis. Su, Peng, Shen, and Xiao (2013) conducted in-person interviews at 212 Chinese firms to explore the connections between technological capabilities, marketing capabilities, and survivability in small firms. Su et al. (2013) noted higher success rates in companies where leaders deployed technological resources in response to market instability. Business leaders with advanced technology resources reaped the benefits of their ability to predict declines in economic conditions faster than competitors, because instant access to real-time online information enabled time to prepare.

Making the Most of the Internet. Shin, Pang, and Kim (2015) identified continuous enhancements in technology and Internet capabilities that improved online communication between business representatives, shareholders, and customers. Their study involved 200 small businesses and supported the use of online media to build relationships through direct dialogue, which subsequently promoted open exchanges of ideas to and from consumers. In line with utilizing Internet resources for ongoing communication, Graham, Avery, and Park (2015) reported the top three platforms utilized to relay information on marketing strategies and to introduce new products and services included company websites and social media websites Facebook and Twitter; with over 150 million users in the United States and more than 500 million users worldwide, respectively. As such, including online resources in crisis management planning as a communications strategy during unexpected operational down time may help increase the opportunities for small business survivability during a crisis (Diers & Donohue, 2013).

Ki and Nekmat (2014) reported, over 7,000 messages posted by leaders in Fortune 500 companies who utilized Facebook to relay information to customers in the midst of unexpected disasters supported the use of social media websites to communicate crisis in businesses. Although Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012) realized the potential of social media effectiveness during and after a crisis they cautioned business leaders to exercise caution when employing social media websites for professional communication because while the information related to the business can be relayed quicker through this platform, there is no way to ensure the messages reach the intended audience in a timely manner. Based on responses from questionnaires issued to 340 European social media users, Szymczak, Kucukbalaban, Lemanski, Knuth, and Schmidt (2016) labeled Facebook as the most trusted online source for information during a crisis. Furthermore, Lim (2012) posited that utilizing Internet resources during disastrous situations provided information to mass quantities of people; however, the personalization that once accompanied telephonic communication vanished. In consideration, leaders must explore alternate methods of communicating with shareholders and customers quickly during an unexpected crisis, while developing crisis management strategies.

Although enhancements to the Internet enable access to real-time news online, some of the basic methods of relaying news to the public through radio and television changed because of continuous upgrades to computer hardware and software (Shim, You, Lee, & Go, 2015). Schlesinger and Doyle (2015) relayed information about news reporting agencies undergoing massive changes to keep up with digitization and the Internet when rapid technology innovation caused crises in business. As such, leaders of small firms should include backup plans for computer network connectivity, alternate methods of accessing shared files for employees, and fluent communication throughout the period of unexpected down time, while developing crisis management strategies (Kang, 2012).

Seethamraju (2015) reported the results of four case studies in small organizations where leaders expressed reluctance to invest in crisis planning models because of the associated costs and the complexity of implementation processes. To help with systems planning, Jarvelainen (2013) identified the Software as a Service (SaaS) model as a cost-effective tool with benefits such as flexibility for ongoing innovation, establishment of external partners, and technology support from outside resources. Since contingency planning could increase performance in small companies by improving industry stability, leaders may include SaaS as a resource when developing crisis management strategies for their companies.

Thinking ahead. Adopting strategies to identify potential threats and developing methods to return businesses to normal operations quickly may provide a level of comfort to consumers before, during, and after a crisis. A one-size-fits-all approach to managing crises may not work as an effective strategy in all situations; however, multi-level planning may ensure the right fit for each company. Werther (2014) deployed a qualitative analysis of terrorist assaults in five countries and offered resiliency as a tool for crisis management. Russo and Fallon (2015) reported resiliency practices adopted by the military improved situational awareness by enabling a closer look at the behaviors and attitudes leaders took when approaching problems. Catering strategies to meet small business specifications such as the size, location, and environment of the company could enhance crisis survivability.

Promoting existing and new approaches to manage crises improved prevention, planning, and response capabilities in small and medium-sized businesses (Coombs, 1999; Roche, Propeck-Zimmerman, & Mericskay, 2013). Some of the 21st century resources include higher levels of government involvement, technology enhancements, and risk management. Hwang and Park (2016) recommended leaders learn the dynamics of legislation and the administration to ensure effective accountability during a crisis. Panda (2016) proposed collecting and organizing data on rival crises and global terrorism scenarios as a tool to help predict crises and evaluate post-crisis consequences. Aven and Cox (2016) endorsed risk analysis with online surveys, rehearsals, and training to improve the likelihood of crisis survival in small businesses. As such, future research with specific focus on educating leaders could help improve survivability during an unexpected crisis.

Managing crises through innovation. Innovation for crisis management pertains to changing or creating processes, products, or services to increase the likelihood of crisis survival in business (Bessant, Rush, & Trifilova, 2015). Previous researchers included innovation as a strategy to survive a crisis. In fact, Hausman and Johnston (2014) posited that a lack of innovation contributed to small business closures during the 2008 financial crisis. To highlight innovation as a strategy for crisis survival, Archibugi, Filippetti, and Frenz (2013) revealed the results of surveys administered to small business owners before and after the economic crisis in 2008. In this study, participants equipped to deal with crises continued to expand the capabilities within their organizations. The less prepared small business owners refocused their efforts toward innovation activities after the crisis as a potential strategy for future survival. Blandine, Gunasekaran, and Spalanzani (2012) revealed increasing concerns from government officials for leaders to develop strategies to ensure crisis survivability in small businesses.

While exploring strategies for a quick recovery from unexpected crises, Sahin, Ulubeyli, and Kazaza (2015) identified technology innovation to help detect the early warning signs of crises in small construction companies. In this study five items that improved crisis survivability included paying attention to signals before the crisis, developing proactive defense techniques, taking control of the crisis, following predefined procedures, and documenting the lessons learned. Although McKinley, Latham, and Braun (2014) supported innovation for crisis management, they presented scenarios where leaders of small firms implemented a series of rapid modifications too quickly and experienced the opposite affect. As such, it is important to consider timing and the amount of changes a firm can handle when pursuing innovation for crisis survival.

Does gender affect crisis planning? Another element to consider while exploring crisis survival strategies is the gender of company leaders. Gartzia, Ryan, Balluerka, and Aritzeta (2012) revealed a study involving 301 male and female participants, which evaluated gender as a factor for planning and reacting to unexpected crises in business. The most prominent trend during the study listed women as more effective planners because of their genuine concern for and desire to help people. Upon concluding a study on gender-specific responses to a financial crisis, Eklund and Tellier (2012) indicated vulnerabilities among men and women leaders warranted additional research to explore leadership strengths that lead to crisis survival. Likewise, Karamessini and Rubery (2013) postulated gaps in literature exist on assessing gender as a contributing or inhibiting factor to crises in business. Future studies with focus on gender with regard to the ability to develop and implement crisis management strategies may contribute to crisis survival in small companies. Leaders of small businesses should also explore external partnerships as a method to enhance survivability as well as continuous operations during a crisis.

Establishing partnerships to survive an operational crisis. Supply chain management partnerships could benefit leaders in small businesses by providing extended oversight of products, information, and money as they move between suppliers, manufacturers, and retailers, to customers. Ideal circumstances would produce an environment that is pleasant, with the inclusion of social and economic responsibility (Carey, 2012). While not supporting the idea of establishing supply chain partnerships for crisis management, Heckmann, Comes, and Nickel (2015) relayed, many supply chain relationships failed during the 2008 financial crisis because of a failure to thrive in five areas: assessment of true demands, prioritization of supplier needs, cost flexibility, inventory realignments, and long-term project preparation. Offering a different opinion, Chong, Wang, Tan, and Cheong (2014) posited that gaining knowledge on supply chain partnerships may help owners of small businesses generate ideas to survive an unexpected crisis.

Capitalizing on the knowledge of strategic customer relationships could help small business leaders design processes to minimize the risk of a crisis caused by ineffective communication. Natti, Rahkolin, and Saraniemi (2014) conducted qualitative phenomenological research to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of business managers who pursued partnerships to enhance sustainability for their firms. Analysis supported effective communication as a method to overcome a crisis while producing better problem-solving techniques and higher levels of customer loyalty. Communication is also a key element for expansion into international territories during crisis planning. Global supply chains enable participants to construct, transport and distribute products and services between various countries (Gereffi & Lee, 2012). Considerations for expanding into international territories include decisions to secure more office space, hiring additional employees, and enhancing marketing efforts (Roh, Hong, & Min, 2014). Specific guidelines and cooperation from company leaders should also enhance survivability during an unexpected crisis in small businesses.

Skipworth, Godsell, Wong, Saghiri, and Julien (2015) surveyed 250 participants in a quantitative study to identify the relationships between shareholder alignment and customer alignment, and the impact on performance in small-medium enterprises. Seventy-seven percent of the supply chain executives identified misalignments in internal strategies. A critical element to establishing successful supply chain partnerships is the alignment of goals and strategies among all shareholders (Kim, Cavusgil, & Cavusgil, 2013). With this in mind, leaders should evaluate firm strategy, organizational behavior, information systems, and manufacturing practice within a business when pursuing supply chain management relationships to survive a crisis.

The Added Value of Small Businesses

Small business leaders who provide technology services should develop crisis management strategies to enhance operational survivability and minimize risks (Gaskill, Van Auken, & Kim, 2015). Luftman, Zadeh, Derksen, Santana, Rigoni, and Huang (2012) administered questionnaires to 620 participants in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Latin America to highlight contributions from small firms to larger organizations that enabled fluent operations before, during, and after an unexpected crisis. The most common services rendered included network connectivity, internet connectivity, and electronic mail. In the event of a crisis, the demand for external communications and continued business operations that rely heavily on telephonic or computer technology would remain intact. As such, crisis survivability strategies must include processes to keep both operations and communication steady.

Ensuring business processes encompass environmental-conscience factors is an internal dynamic that could increase crisis survivability opportunities for small business owners. Martin, McNeill, and Warren-Smith (2013) conducted qualitative case studies among eight companies to examine the perception of small business owners on the contributions of eco-innovation to the growth of profits in rural areas. An evaluation of waste reduction and a reduction in the amounts of raw materials consumed in manufacturing businesses in local communities served as primary focal points for the studies. The leaders of the businesses expressed more satisfaction in the idea of contributing to economic growth than increasing business profits.

Small business vulnerabilities during a widespread economic crisis helped to validate the need for leaders to develop crisis management strategies in small firms to heighten opportunities for continued economic contributions (Wagner & Winkler, 2013). Jones, Penaluna, and Pittaway (2014) presented results of previous studies that highlighted the value added from small businesses in areas where societies lacked skills and culture. The participant responses to surveys showed positive contributions to humanity from small businesses through increased employment opportunities and the introduction of diversity in local communities. While illustrating the effectiveness of small companies in the economy, Spence (2016) indicated small businesses contributed to social and economic growth on a global scale by generating 65% of new jobs and adding 13 times more patents per employee than larger businesses.

Chrisman, Chua, Pearson, and Barnett (2012) posited that family businesses historically provided significant contributions to the economy. Considering the commonality of leaders in larger organizations capitalizing from ideas generated in smaller entities (Woldesenbet, Ram, & Jones, 2012), establishing long-term survivability is a growing concern that requires solutions. Even the least common industries in the business arena reap the benefits of small business contributions to the economy. Gilinsky et al. (2015) conducted online surveys comprised of 23 closed-ended questions to participants of 1,469 wineries in the United States to evaluate the attitudes of the owners toward crisis management strategies. Data analysis utilizing the Likert 1-5 scale revealed owners actively pursued survivability practices and desired training and tools to enhance their knowledge of environmental management systems. Likewise, Pomarici, Vecchio, and Mariani (2015) posited that nearly 63% of all wine sold in the United States came from California wineries and constant threats of mass destruction to vineyards by unpredictable natural disasters, rising energy costs, droughts, and rapid climate changes are reasons for the owners to pursue strategies to manage crises. The economic value of small companies coupled with the vulnerability during crises, additional studies are needed to uncover crisis management strategies that fit smaller entities.

Additional Research Needed

Gaps in literature exist on knowledge management as a tool for competitive advantage and economic performance (Andreeva & Kianto, 2012). Schumann, Wunderlich, and Wangenheim (2012) sought to fill a gap in the literature by identifying methods of combining new technology-based services into existing typologies to increase competitive advantage opportunities for applicable businesses. Technological devices that enhanced global communication efforts helped business leaders provide a competitive edge while also improving sustainability for crises (Ley, Pipek, Reuter, & Wiedenhoefer, 2012). Boons and Ludeke-Freund (2013) revealed previous studies did not adequately address theory development or unique characteristics that accompany different types of businesses. As such, continued research to explore the roles of leaders in small companies with technology resources that enable worldwide interaction may provide a connection between technology enhancements and crisis management.

Forsman (2013) reviewed a longitudinal dataset from a 9-year study on 128 Finnish companies that developed products to improve environmental conditions. Forsman sought to close gaps in literature by identifying technology resources employed during the implementation of *green* processes and indicated successful innovation practices enabled a competitive advantage by expediting processes within the inherent companies. The integration of strategies used to deliver products and services expediently while simultaneously addressing social or environmental concerns into crisis management techniques could also help small businesses survive an unexpected operational interruption.

Didonet, Simmons, Diaz-Villavicencio, and Palmer (2012) conducted surveys of 104 small business owners to evaluate market orientation, market instability, and technological turbulence as contributors to environmental uncertainty. Resource constraints contributed to higher levels of vulnerability for business failure during periods of environmental ambiguity in small companies. Owners of small firms should survey the industry to identify customer demands for specific products or services offered by their companies. Strategic alignments could create value and enhance sustainability for small firms with specialty products. Since small businesses provide approximately 80% of economic growth and minimal literature exists on value creation for small companies, additional qualitative research with specific focus on small business market orientation could reveal techniques to enhance small business sustainability (Sharma & Chua, 2013). The ability of leaders to manage crises that develop from environmental uncertainty is critical to value creation and stability in small firms.

Peslak (2012) conducted a comprehensive 44-question survey-based study with analysis of variance (ANOVA) as the primary means of providing statistical data pertinent to the size of the organizations evaluated. The results of the survey supported the belief that larger firms had higher crisis survival rates because of higher levels of productivity and a trend in smaller firms was the decline of emphasis on disaster recovery planning from 39% to 17% during the years examined. Trends from 2006 to 2010 in the areas of technology investments (increased), information security (increased), and disaster recovery capabilities (decreased). In a similar study conducted by DeYoung, Kowalik, and Reidhill (2013), an examination of the impact of information technology issues in the financial industry unveiled a consistent 68% failure rate on information technology projects. These statistics may help provide a foundation for future research aimed at exploring crises caused by failing technology equipment, as well as identifying the effectiveness of utilizing technology in disaster recovery practices to increase competitive advantage opportunities. Additional studies to provide a comparison of information system usage as a tool for crisis recovery and as a strategy for competitive advantage in other countries could increase sustainability.

Lindell (2013) explored the impacts of sudden mass emergencies or disasters on behavioral and social aspects to determine the relationship between vulnerability and preparation actions at small businesses. Natural disasters caused over 50,000 deaths between the years 1900 and 2011, automobile accidents claimed approximately 34,000 lives per year, and structural damage increased at a steady pace. Ryan (2013) revealed higher susceptibility to long-term damage from environmental disasters in smaller businesses because of misperceptions in personal risk, a shortage of resources during preparation, and inadequate response teams within the organization. Lin, Kao, and Chen (2012) identified emergency operations planning, emergency response training, and periodic rehearsals as three elements for inclusion in crisis management strategies to help identify items needed for continued business operations during an actual event. Future studies using qualitative and quantitative methodologies and specific focus on crisis communication strategies may uncover alternate measures to help small business owners remain stable before, during, and after an unexpected crisis.

Pan, Woodside, and Meng (2013) conducted a study with a random selection of 17,415 email addresses to test the validity of online surveys and questionnaires designed to evaluate the effectiveness of marketing and sales campaigns. Comparably, research by Sauermann and Roach (2013) uncovered problems with low response rates ranging between 6% and 75%, biased results because of demographic variables, and poor representation from the targeted population. Both studies left room for future research to clarify the most effective measure of relaying information to different parts of the world with minimal time delays. Crisis management strategies must also include various methods of communication to ensure daily operations continue.

Goby and Nickerson (2014) developed a survey to obtain the perceptions of 105 female participants on the severity of crises and the likelihood of occurrences in the United Arab Emirates. Religious and cultural factors contributed to responses from the majority of the participants identifying the western areas as the most probable part of the country to endure a crisis. Oke (2016) reported results of online surveys where copyright abuse, money laundering, and bribery caused increasing concerns for economic stability and warranted the development of strategies to manage crises within organizations in all industries. The results of the studies could help close gaps in the literature on effective crisis communication techniques available to small organizations. Future qualitative studies to explore the streams of social interaction when evaluating and responding to a crisis may help small business owners in the United States as well as in other countries.

Following the studies involving leaders in 48,000 small and medium-sized businesses negatively impacted by unexpected disasters, Herbane (2014) relayed specific catastrophic situations required immediate responses; however, leaders could not adequately execute due to the absence of prior planning. The summary of the studies provided a direct link between crisis management planning and the resiliency of a company. Future studies to uncover the reasons business owners choose to forego the implementation of crisis management strategies could spare small businesses from the risk of closure by enabling proper preparation.

Winnard, Adcroft, Lee, and Skipp (2014) explored resilience and sustainability as focus points for owners of small businesses to increase chances of surviving an unexpected operational interruption. Poor crisis management planning, costs, and natural resource constraints contributed to constant struggles with the goals of small business leaders to secure adequate strategies to overcome unpredictable competitive environments. Small business leaders must improve their situational awareness of rapid industry changes to reduce exposure and minimize risks caused by unplanned disturbances. Additional research within small businesses to evaluate internal resiliency and sustainability practices may uncover strategies for owners of small companies to enhance value while reducing the risk of not surviving an unexpected interruption.

Orobia, Byabashaija, Munene, Sejjaaka, and Musinguzi (2013) conducted a qualitative study with semistructured interviews involving 10 small business leaders to examine the impact of behaviors and personal characteristics when making decisions about planning for crises. The results of the study helped to show shortfalls in systems, structures, and procedures caused owners of small businesses to utilize intuition to monitor and manage capital during a crisis rather than the conventional techniques employed at larger organizations. Asgary, Anjum, and Azimi (2012) identified poor planning as an internal factor that contributed to overwhelming vulnerabilities in small companies abroad. Even with significant economic contributions through job creation, income generation, and poverty reduction, internal limitations impeded small business survivability during crises (Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, Spence, & Scherer, 2013). Additional research may help highlight the importance of planning for crises in small companies.

Parnell (2015) conducted a quantitative study to examine the levels of concern for crisis management strategies in Peru, Mexico, and the United States. The participants included 270 Peruvian, 218 Mexican, and 256 American managers from small businesses in both the private and public sectors. Parnell implied small business leaders in Mexico and Peru exhibited a higher level of apprehension than the leaders in the United States. Burns and Marx (2014) revealed two-thirds more smaller firms closed than larger companies with similar functions because unexpected crises drained financial resources. Their study enabled an exploration of the significant risks associated with a failure to identify and assess the impacts of potential crises. Many participants of the study identified the cost for planning and a lack of resources as reasons owners of small companies did not invest in crisis management strategies for their businesses.

Khattab and Hood (2015) distributed questionnaires to survey leaders in Jordanian businesses on risk management techniques involving exposure to political, financial, cultural, and natural crises in public organizations. The study derived from goals to close literature gaps on the risks associated with productivity in comparison to risks that threaten organizational sustainability. Weaknesses in risk management processes added to the vulnerability of small firms during the global financial crisis of 2008 and the size of the business was a significant factor in the ability of company leaders to identify, assess, and manage risk effectively. Hallikas and Lintukangas (2016) posited that leaders in large companies faced challenges evaluating risk levels because of the size of the organization while exposure in small firms existed because of inherent resource shortfalls. Risk avoidance during decision-making could reduce negative consequences of a crisis; therefore, Cucculelli and Bettinelli (2016) recommended additional research to evaluate risk management processes in companies during real-world catastrophes over extended periods. As such, my goal is to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption.

Transition

In Section 1, I identified the research method and design as a qualitative case study, with a research population comprised of three to five small business owners located in the southeast region of the United States, who continued to thrive in business after an unexpected operational interruption. The conceptual framework encompasses the theory of crisis management. The purpose of the study is to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use survive an unexpected operational interruption. Section 2 includes: (a) a more detailed description of the research method and design, (b) the techniques for data collection techniques and organization, (c) the population and sampling methods, and (d) strategies to ensure reliability and validity of the study. Section 3 will include an overview of the study and detailed findings. Section 3 will conclude with an application to business and professional practice.

Section 2: The Project

In this study, I focused on understanding what strategies owners of small businesses employed to prepare for, survive, and continue to thrive through an unexpected crisis. This section includes specific information about the purpose of the study, the role of the researcher, and the participants. It also includes information concerning the research method, design, and the population and sampling. Lastly, this section includes information on the ethics of the study and details on the data collection procedures and data analysis techniques.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. The targeted population was three owners of small companies in the southeast region of the United States who demonstrated success after an unexpected operational interruption. The results of this study may help owners of small businesses develop adequate crisis management strategies to minimize the risk of premature business closures and promote economic growth. Wilson and Post (2013) recommended leaders in small companies effectively combine social and economic missions to increase social value. The implications for positive social change include continued efforts of small business owners to create employment opportunities, improve economic conditions, and generate new products and services within local communities.

Role of the Researcher

The focus of this study was to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. My role as the researcher was to choose an appropriate methodology and design, locate participants, gather data, and analyze the data. To accomplish these tasks, I used a qualitative multiple case study with semistructured face-to-face interviews and reviewed company documents while at the businesses as a secondary data source.

Many qualitative researchers utilize interviews as a primary means of collecting data (Merriam, 2014), and researchers must thoroughly develop interviewing skills to employ techniques effectively during the study (Seidman, 2013). Qualitative studies entail three main types of interview techniques, each with accompanying pros and cons. The type of data the researcher aims to gather determines whether interviews include the structured, semistructured, or unstructured design. When conducting structured interviews, the same questions are posed in the same order with minimal or no deviation. Structured interviews may minimize or reduce researcher bias; conversely, these types of interviews have limited flexibility to capture deep or detailed descriptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Researchers gain flexibility with the unstructured interview; however, the requirement for prolonged engagement causes the risk of data changing over time. Although semistructured interviews may require more preparation by the researcher, opportunities to capture quality data provide an advantage (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The researcher must remain unbiased at all times when conducting research to achieve the goal of capturing quality data. Obtaining detailed responses from the participants about their experiences helps to reduce researcher bias (Jarzabkowski, Le, & Van de Ven, 2013). The 1979 Belmont Report contains guidelines and ethical standards for the protection of human subjects during research (Mikesell, Bromley, & Khodyakov, 2013). In addition to completing the National Institutes of Health (NIH) training to understand the boundaries and applications, I adhered to the procedures outlined in the Belmont Report. Since interview protocols help facilitate consistency, reliability, and unity during the interview process (Foley & Conner, 2013), following the interview guide (Appendix B) helped to ensure the same protocol for all interviews remained intact.

Although no relationships with any of the participants existed, there was a genuine interest in understanding what planning and processes may help establish long-term sustainability in small companies. Spending 5 years in the southeast region of the United States fulfilling military duty assignments provided the motivation to conduct the study in this geographic location. During this time, increases in crime rates, economic instability, and natural disasters caused several small business owners in neighboring cities to close their doors. The exposure to these unfortunate circumstances sparked an interest to share strategies to help prevent future premature small business closures. I chose the qualitative case study approach with semistructured interviews to explore the strategies that enhanced sustainability for those who survived the crises.

Utilizing semistructured interviews provides flexibility, accessibility, and enables participants to respond in their words (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). The ability for the participants to add information not covered in the interview questions is also an advantage (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Because of these benefits, I opted to conduct semistructured interviews with the goal of inviting the participants to describe the strategies and skills that helped them survive an unexpected operational interruption. The responses from the participants may not have revealed all factors that influenced their survival and continued success; however, exploring the strategies they implemented in the midst of turbulence remained the primary objective.

Participants

The participation criterion of the study was that the participants be small business owners who attribute the survival of an unexpected operational interruption to the deployment of their crisis management strategies. Additional requirements included the small business owners having less than 500 employees and that they had sustained their business for more than 5 years. An exploration of the decision making and planning processes that directly correspond with crisis management could help increase small business survival rates following future crises.

Accessing the Participants

A visit to the chambers of commerce in several cities within the southeast region of the United States helped to identify the initial participants. Pattison, Robins, Snijders, & Wang, 2013; Perez, Nie, Ardern, Radhu, & Ritvo, 2013 recommended snowball sampling to increase a sample size. As such, I chose the snowball sampling technique to identify additional participants from the remaining research population of small business owners in this area who survived an unexpected operational crisis. Selecting a diverse group of participants with a variety of documents helped to facilitate triangulation and validation of the results (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). Approaching each interview with an open and receptive mind helped to maintain focus on the responses of the participants, a strategy recommended by Merriam (2014). Follow-up questions aided with clarity whenever necessary.

Establishing the Relationship

Approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) was the significant event that determined when to establish contact with the participants. During the initial communication, I explained the purpose of the research study, the procedures, and sent a consent form to each participant. The consent form included verbiage indicating participation was voluntary and personal identification information would remain confidential. To establish the confidence of the participants, a brief discussion about the measures taken to code all identities for preservation of privacy occurred. In addition, maintaining a log with field notes to supplement the data from the interviews helped ensure the confidentiality of the participants remained intact. Prior to the interview, each participant received a copy of his or her signed consent form. All forms and interview data will remain in a locked and secure file cabinet for 5 years.

Research Method and Design

The qualitative and quantitative approaches are the two most common research methods used to study business problems. In quantitative research, the analysis of numerical data helps identify relationships or causes and effects (Lewis, 2015; Petty et al., 2012). The foundation for quantitative studies involves a theory of probability with a primary focus on statistical models, central tendency, and variation (Yao & Deng, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013). In opposite terms, qualitative research involves an exploration of textual data to produce an understanding of the significance and interpretations of experiences (Lewis, 2015; Petty et al., 2012; Yilmaz, 2013).

Research Method

The structure in qualitative studies provides an inductive approach rather than reliance on chance or variation (Trotter, 2012). Although the number of small businesses could provide an indication of the scope and importance of this sector to the economy, there was no intent to define a correlation or explore differences among variables (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Hoare & Hoe, 2013). A quantitative approach was not appropriate because of limited flexibility to enhance the understanding of the motivations, strategies, and experiences of the participants (Venkatesh et al., 2013). The qualitative methodology helped explore the planning and strategies small business owners implemented to survive a crisis (Finlay, 2014; Maxwell, 2012; Smythe, 2012). The qualitative approach also enabled me to gain an understanding of how the business owners sustained their businesses in the midst of an unexpected crisis. The case study design facilitated the use of multiple sources of data such as interviews, business brochures, and websites, to help explain how the participants achieved crisis survival (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Shover, 2012; Yin, 2013).

Research Design

The research design refers to a plan to develop questions, draw conclusions, and prepare a model or report to a study (Kozlowski, Chao, Grand, Braun, & Kujanin, 2013). The qualitative designs I considered included ethnography, phenomenology, and case study. Ethnography involves a study of the daily activities, behaviors, and lives of a culture or community over time (Englander, 2012). The study did not involve a review of a culture or community for a prolonged period; therefore, the ethnographic study design was not appropriate. The phenomenological design is appropriate when the researcher seeks to interpret lived experiences from the perspective of others (Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994), with focus on gaining insight into the attitudes, behaviors, experiences, opinions, and processes that contribute to the phenomenon (Rowley, 2012). Interviews and a review of company documents enable the exploration of the lived experiences of the participants. With the phenomenological design, exploring the lived experiences of the participants could cause challenges with obtaining data saturation if the researcher does not ask probing questions (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). In consideration of these factors, the phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study.

The case study design enables an in-depth exploration of a single case or a small number of cases (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Verner & Addullah, 2012). The case study design is advantageous because the use of *how* or *why* questions that are central to a case study will expose opportunities to consider the contextual conditions of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The expectation to record all interviews for translation into written documents was met. I contacted the participants prior to transcribing the responses to clarify any questionable items. Upon completion of transcription, the participants received written interpretations to validate accuracy and meaning. The method of translation, known as member-checking, enables a practical method of relaying the contents of the interviews while maintaining flexibility and rigor (Houghton et al., 2013; Yin, 2013).

The semistructured interviews, which incorporated open-ended questions, accompanied by document analysis, was sufficient to obtain data saturation (Petty et al., 2012). The revelation of new information would mean data saturation had not occurred, and the interviews and document reviews must continue to achieve saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Houghton et al., 2012). A review of company websites, organizational brochures, and social media websites helped to obtain additional supporting data. Pursuing multiple sources of data enables opportunities for one data source to corroborate the evidence from another source and reduce the risk that a single breach of data will shape the result (Verner & Abdullah, 2012). Based on the objectives and ability to answer the central research question, a multiple case study design was most appropriate for this study.

The case study design is best suited to explore questions pertaining to how or why an issue exists, with a level of flexibility not offered in grounded theory or phenomenology (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Yin, 2013). The three types of case studies are descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory (Yin, 2014). Descriptive case studies help illustrate events and their specific background. Explanatory case studies enable an investigation of causation and a connection of an event to its effects (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013; Yin, 2014). Exploratory case studies help define research questions and hypotheses (Yin, 2013). A qualitative multiple case study design enabled the exploration of the knowledge, skills, and crisis management success strategies through interview data and company documents provided by small business owners participating in the study.

Population and Sampling

There is not a specific formula to identify sample size in case studies. Instead, the number of participants is directly tied to the richness of opinions and different representations of an issue (Kaczynski, Salmona, & Smith, 2014; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). A small number of participants proved valuable while adequately representing the population (Robinson, 2014; Verner & Abdullah, 2012). Purposive sampling enabled the deliberate selection of a specific group of participants who meet the criteria for a study (Acharya, Prakash, Sexena, & Nigam, 2013; Chan, Kan, Lee, Chan, & Lam, 2012; Smith, Colombi, & Wirthlin, 2013).

Considering the type of study and the proposed goal, purposive sampling was the most relevant sampling technique to meet the intent. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants who can provide rich, practical knowledge of the phenomenon in question (Blevins, Lord, & Bjerregaard, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). There is no fixed number of required participants for the sample size in qualitative studies (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The focus in this study was on obtaining data or theme sufficiency, a technique used by Yin (2013). While a small number of participants provided enough data to validate this study, there was a possibility of uncovering new themes and keywords with each new participant. Had new themes continued to evolve during this study, the interviews would have continued until data saturation occurred, a strategy recommended by O'Reilly and Parker (2013).

There are many aspects to consider when developing a semistructured interview. The questions are designed to allow participants to elaborate during responses and maximize the amount of information provided (Rowley, 2012). Synchronization of sampling techniques and interview questions should occur in qualitative research involving face-to-face interviews (Robinson, 2014). Purposeful exploration encompassing in-person interviews and reviewing company documents (Rowley, 2012) provided sufficient data for this study. One central research question accompanied by a series of semistructured, open-ended interview questions solicited responses (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013) that may help owners of small businesses survive crises in the future. Based on the responses of the participants, additional questions followed to enable further evaluation of the business setting and other factors that contributed to the sustainability of the firm. A considerable amount of freedom is one of the positive aspects of pursuing qualitative research (Bansal & Corley, 2012). Perez et al. (2013) recommended snowballing techniques to increase the number of participants in case studies. During my initial interviews, snowballing techniques helped identify additional participants from a diverse group of candidates.

Recorded interviews occurred at the business location of each participant. Following each interview, the participant received my translation of the interview for member checking to verify accuracy and meaning, a method employed by Maxwell (2012). I remained focused during each interview and refrained from interjecting personal comments. A review of organizational brochures, office literature, information on company websites, and company newsletters also occurred.

Ethical Research

Concerns about ethical research evolve when utilizing humans or animals as participants (Harriss & Atkinson, 2013). Following protocol for qualitative interviews helped reduce the risk of unethical research by establishing commonality, consistency, and reliability (Foley & O'Conner, 2013). Upon receiving IRB approval, each participant received an informed consent form identifying the nature and purpose of the study, my responsibilities, confidentiality procedures, and their role as participants. Verbiage on the consent form indicated participation in the study was voluntary, there were no incentives or compensation for participating, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by calling or emailing me. Signatures from the participant identified their willingness to participate and consent to the recorded conversation. Interviews occurred upon receipt of the completed form. Should a participant have decided to withdraw from the study, I would have destroyed any information obtained from them in their presence. To ensure the names of the participants did not appear in the study, P-1, P-2, P-3, etc. identification and labeling occurred from start to finish. Adherence to the principles outlined in the Belmont Report regarding respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, remained intact to ensure compliance with the highest ethical standards (The Belmont Report, 1979). Contact with the participants via telephone and email enabled accurate scheduling of interview dates, times, and specific location. In accordance with IRB procedures, a locked file cabinet is in place to secure all consent forms, transcripts, artifacts, and field notes for 5 years. Subsequent destruction will occur by shredding all papers and deleting electronic files after this period.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher plays an essential role in collecting data for qualitative studies. Common methods of collecting data include: (a) artifacts, (b) focus groups, (c) interviews, (d) observations, and (e) videos (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013). Interviewing is a common method of collecting data for the case study design (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Semistructured interviews provide opportunities for participants to answer research questions in their words with the freedom to express their experiences in detail (Seidman, 2013). I used an interview guide to provide flexibility without inhibiting the care and planning that took place to ensure the correct interpretation of questions and answers. Interviews involving open-ended questions included follow-on questions to probe additional responses from the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Mirroring the techniques employed by researchers in previous studies helped to ensure consistency and enhance the effectiveness of semistructured interviews for this case study. For example, Cronin-Gilmore (2012) conducted an exploratory case study involving 20 small business owners, utilizing an initial purposive selection and afterwards the snowball technique. The primary interviews occurred telephonically and the concerns expressed by the participants about continuous business growth ranked accordingly. Lai and Chang (2013) conducted a case study to explore customer experiences and the quality of service in Chinese restaurants. The primary method of collecting data was interviews and the secondary data sources included the review of magazines, newspapers, and video-taped news stories about the restaurants. Member checking techniques and transcript reviews occurred in both studies to establish accuracy and conformability. The results of both studies helped to relay valuable information to small business owners and illustrated the effective use of qualitative case studies accompanied by semistructured interviews. The data collection techniques in both studies ensured a right balance of rigor and freedom to produce quality data. The expectation for this study was that the use of semistructured interviews with open-ended questions would provide opportunities for in-depth discussions and clarity of all information. Following the interview protocol with the questions listed in Appendix B helped to eliminate the need to conduct a pilot study to gather data on the crisis management strategies that enabled survivability for small business owners.

Data Collection Technique

Some of the most common methods of collecting data for qualitative case studies include documentary analysis, focus groups, individual interviews, and observation (Petty et al., 2012). Semistructured interviews help provide opportunities to obtain information from participants while allowing them to express their experiences freely (Bryman & Bell, 2015). I was the primary data collection instrument for the study. The primary data collection technique for this study was in-person interviews with three small business owners who utilized the techniques contained within their crisis management strategies to survive an unexpected operational interruption. Reviewing company documents and company websites aided in the collection of secondary data.

Maximizing the potential for thorough insight and completeness of the circumstances, and strategies the participants employed to survive their crisis is an advantage of using more than one method to gather data (Houghton et al., 2013). Unluer

(2012) identified the possibility of overlooking physical queues, making assumptions about the meanings of events, and being too close to a situation as disadvantages of collecting data for qualitative case studies through interviews and document analysis. A preventive approach helped overcome the disadvantages.

Each participant received a consent form to sign prior to the interviews. Upon receipt of the signed forms, I scheduled the semistructured interviews at a convenient time for each participant. Interview recording and documenting ensued utilizing a same day reflective summary, as recommended by Petty et al. (2012). Specifically, the interviews occurred at the physical location of each business. Accompanying tools included a pen, paper, as well as primary and secondary audio recording devices. There was not pilot study; however, the interview guide at Appendix B contains the proposed list of questions. Each participant received a copy of the written interpretation of the interview to review and validate the information. As recommended by Kornbluh (2015), member checking with the participants helped facilitate data saturation.

Data Organization Technique

Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) recommended more than one means of obtaining data during interviews. As such, I used a pen, paper, and audio recorders to capture the date, time, and location; and to label the documents and files on each participant. The process of cleaning the data to remove irrelevant information included company documents and information from the company websites (Vaismoradi, Tururnen, & Bondas, 2013). Ensuring the security of research data gathered during qualitative case studies is essential to preserve the privacy of the participants and to enhance the validity of the study (Yilmaz, 2013). The files created on each participant contain the signed consent form, interview transcriptions, company documents, and any other documentation retrieved during the study. A secure computer was used to type information and store raw data. Once the study is complete and approved by Walden University, files deleted from the computer and backup data will remain on removable media in a locked file cabinet. The final step is to destroy all documents and electronic data after 5 years.

Data Analysis

The research question for this study was what crisis management strategies do small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption? The data analysis process included methodological triangulation (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014) from data gathered during interviews with owners of small businesses and the review of their company documents. A systematic review helped ensure the correct alignment between the interpretation and organization of all data elements (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). This process also enhanced the validity of the data and helped mitigate researcher bias.

After member checking occurred to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the interviews, the participant responses from the interviews underwent a process of coding with NVivo software. Rather than attempting to develop themes in advance, a progressive comparison of each data record to identify common themes and differences revealed repetitive verbiage (Hall, Ashworth, & Devine-Wright, 2013). While transcribing the data from the interviews into a written document, close analysis ensued to discover the patterns and themes projected by each participant about the strategies they implemented to overcome their business crisis. A diligent and repetitive process of reviewing data from each interview enabled categorization into units, grouping into sub categories, and a summarization of common headings to final categories (de Casterle, Gastmans, Bryon, & Denier, 2012). As recommended by Gibson, Benson, and Brand (2013), coding the interviews helped provide a true perspective of the analysis and preserve data integrity. Upon completion of these steps, all participants who expressed interest in the results of the study will receive a summary of the findings.

Reliability and Validity

The terms reliability and validity convey the accuracy and precision of research data (Street & Ward, 2012). Reliability in quantitative research refers to the ability of the researcher to duplicate a study with comparable circumstances and reach a similar conclusion (Petty et al., 2012). Replication is critical in establishing rigor in quantitative studies (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013).

Researchers must clarify specific data substitutions to eliminate threats to interpretations and explanations (Maxwell, 2012). Reliability in qualitative studies equates to words such as authenticity, conformability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utiainen, & Kyngas, 2014). Reliability and validity take on different meanings depending on whether the methodology of a study is quantitative or qualitative. Reliability and validity in quantitative research is comparable to the credibility and dependability in qualitative research (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Semistructured interviews help establish a mutual point while strengthening consistency, reliability, and validity in both quantitative and qualitative studies (Foley & O’Conner, 2013). For this study, the analysis occurred during all phases of gathering and reporting data to ensure content trustworthiness remained intact, a process recommended by Elo et al. (2014).

Reliability

The researcher serves as the data collection instrument in qualitative studies. Maintaining ethical conduct throughout the study is critical to obtaining dependability in qualitative research (Merriam, 2014). While exploring a specific or unique phenomenon, including clear definitions, detailed descriptions, direct observation, and audit trails should generate reliable results (Smith & McElwee, 2015). A chain of evidence includes emails, field notes, and memos (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Standardized procedures accompanied by sampling and data analysis ensured the same steps occurred with each participant of this study. Systematic processes helps to create audit trails that contribute to the authenticity and reliability of the study (Elo et al., 2014). With this in mind, I employed multiple data sources such as in-person interviews, reviewing company documents, and participant observations to assure authentic and reliable findings and conclusions.

Validity

Data collected from more than one source, referred to as triangulation, validates qualitative research (Houghton et al., 2013). In-depth interviews with checks and balances that included a comparison of the responses received from one participant to the others established credibility (Seidman, 2013). Obtaining detailed information from the participants, completing extensive observation in the field, and implementing member-checking techniques helped maintain validity in this study. Allowing the participants to review and validate the transcripts from recorded interviews guaranteed an accurate representation of their views.

The two most prominent terms of validity in quantitative studies are internal and external. Internal validity refers to the cause-and-effect of circumstances and results about the actual sample (Yilmaz, 2013). External validity encompasses the generalization or transferability of the study to other settings while considering the entire population (Slater & Ziblatt, 2013). Since the goals in qualitative studies involve developing unique methods to understand events rather than generalized findings, internal and external validity are not points of focus (Kolb, 2012). Researchers employ the qualitative approach to seek generalization with respect to the grounded theory and applicability to other situations. This qualitative case study enabled me to explore specific items incorporating the crisis management strategies of the participants.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I provided details on the research method and design, the techniques for data collection techniques and organization, the population and sampling methods, and concluded with a brief outline of techniques to maintain reliability and validity in this study. By keeping all aspects of integrity intact, the results exposing the skills and strategies that help small business owners survive unexpected crises and continue profitability may have positive effects in the community while contributing to the economy. Section 3 will include detailed procedures followed during the study, findings, and recommendations to improve business practices that contribute to positive social change.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. Each participant in the study experienced at least one unexpected operational interruption at their business that lasted more than 24 hours; however, none of the crises were the same. It is not uncommon for small business leaders to consider planning for a crisis their lowest priority until after a crisis occurs (Muller-Seitz & Macpherson, 2013). As illustrated in the findings of this study, each of the participants developed and implemented strategies to prevent or survive future unexpected operational interruptions only after they experienced a crisis within their respective companies.

Presentation of the Findings

This study encompassed one overarching research question: What crisis management strategies do small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption? No business is immune from an unexpected crisis (Lerbinger, 2012); therefore, strategies to enhance survival are necessary. During this study, three main themes materialized.

The first theme accentuated the importance of small business owners developing processes to survive an unexpected operational interruption; the second theme involved transparency, open communication, and relationship building to enhance crisis survival;

and the third theme supported creative thinking as a strategy to overcome the shortage of resources commonly associated with small businesses. All three of the themes correspond with alternative strategies small business owners may pursue without depleting their primary operating funds. As revealed by Runyan (2006), the lack of access to capital and infrastructure problems were vulnerabilities that led to small business closures in the southeast region of the United States following Hurricane Katrina.

In addition to the information obtained during the study, the literature review in Section 1 contains articles with variations of each of the three themes. For example, while reiterating the importance of developing crisis management strategies, Xiao and Peacock (2014) posited that a failure to plan for a crisis led to lingering financial setbacks in small firms following Hurricane Ike in 2008. Roh, Hong, and Min (2014) identified relationship building as a technique that helped small business owners secure alternate office locations during a crisis. LiPuma, Newbert, and Doh (2013) reported shortages of financial assets and resources in small companies, while Olshansky, Hopkins, and Johnson (2012) revealed time constraints and the smallness of the firm as items that warranted creative thinking when developing crisis management strategies.

Theme 1: The Importance of Developing Survival Strategies

Financial setbacks negatively affect small businesses worldwide (Mayr, Mitter, & Aichmayr, 2016). A financial crisis is one example of a situation that mandates adequate crisis management strategies for small business survival. When asked about the relevance of crisis management strategies in small businesses, all three of the participants expressed strong opinions while explaining the importance of developing strategies to survive unexpected operational interruptions. While the participants had previous knowledge of crisis management, none of them considered planning or preparing until after they realized the risk of potential business closure when their crisis ensued.

Participant #1 relayed details on an electrical outage that warranted closing one of his business locations for a month while city workers resolved the issue. While discussing the outage, Participant #1 stated that he feared his employees would abruptly leave the company because the timeline for repairs was beyond his control. Participant #2 revealed an unexpected 2-day closure of her business because of flooding conditions from a nearby ruptured septic tank. Participant #3 discussed a technology failure that lasted 5 days in one of his small business locations. Participant #3 stated he worked all night trying to figure out how to retrieve video data from a file server because a television show was scheduled to air 72 hours later. All three participants shared the common point that they felt helpless and they decided to develop crisis management strategies because of lessons learned from these situations. Another common point shared during the interviews was each participant stating that developing crisis survival strategies was as important to them as the mere existence of their business.

Theme 2: Transparency, Communication, and Connections

People panic with the perception of organizational instability caused by a crisis (Pelser, Bosch, & Schurink, 2016). With this in mind, the idea to remain transparent, communicate openly, and connect with the community may help to minimize the negative impacts of an unexpected crisis. During the interviews, each of the participants highlighted three points surrounding community involvement to survive a crisis.

Participant #3 stated that small business owners must remain transparent to avoid surprising vendors or customers with information that affects their bottom line. When asked about advice to future potential small business owners about developing crisis management strategies, all three participants identified open communication and building relationships as methods to enhance survival. Participant #1 stated he builds relationships in the community by offering professional home improvement services to single parents and elderly people at a discounted rate. Participant #2 and Participant #3 promoted the idea of getting to know the members in the local community to establish loyalty. Participant #2 and Participant #3 also recommended collaborating with competitors to outline a plan for a temporary work location as a strategy for crisis survival.

Theme 3: Creative Thinking as a Survival Strategy

While describing their individual crises, all three participants relayed nontraditional measures they employed to survive the situation. All of the participants identified finances, equipment, and personnel as resources that enable large corporations to handle crises while the shortfalls in these areas cause small business owners to explore alternate measures to deal with crises. Their comments correspond with the results of a study by Buchanan and Denyer (2013), who indicated small business owners adopted unconventional organizational processes to prepare for the impacts of steadily increasing natural disasters and other unexpected events. Although Participant #1 strongly urged against starting a business with family members, he solicited financial assistance from siblings during his month-long business interruption. Participant #2 stated she engaged in creative thinking to secure extra equipment to convert to a mobile salon in the event of a future unexpected interruption. Participant #3 stated it is important to allow employees to think outside of the box because in his business, 'the show must go on' regardless of any internal or external situations that may be underway.

In addition to the initial crises revealed during the interviews, Participant #1 and Participant #3 discussed situations they considered as self-inflicted crises that placed the financial stability of their companies at risk. Specifically, Participant #1 stated that one of his employees received burns to her face while working in the kitchen. The employee received medical attention quickly; however, the problem discovered during this unfortunate incident was the absence of a policy to cover the employee's salary while she was out on medical leave. Participant #1 stated he nearly depleted company funds during a lawsuit that developed from this situation and he subsequently added a worker's compensation policy to his crisis management strategies. Participant #3 stated he discovered a mismanagement of company funds in one of his companies that nearly caused a premature business closure. The absence of a financial advisor resulted in employees purchasing products and services without first comparing prices with multiple vendors. Following this incident, Participant #3 stated that he implemented a process to ensure that all employees who deal with finances attend formal training and certification programs, and he added a purchase review policy to his crisis management strategy.

The three main themes lead to the findings of this study, which confirms small business owners develop strategies to prevent and survive unexpected operational interruptions. Some of the findings coincide with articles contained in the literature review, i.e., Wang and Ritchie (2012); Liou (2015); and Kim (2016), to highlight the importance of developing crisis management strategies.

Wang and Ritchie (2012) posited that psychological factors influenced leaders who experienced crises to implement survival strategies. Liou (2015) reported violence in schools that validated the demand for crisis management strategies. Kim (2016) recommended small business owners develop crisis management to preserve reputational assets. Other findings extend the knowledge of this topic and expose opportunities for future research. Implementing processes to prevent or survive an unexpected crisis aligns with the theory of crisis management and crisis intervention theory conceptual frameworks used for this study. The theory of crisis management encompasses crisis survival (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015), while the crisis intervention theory enables leaders to focus on predicting and preventing future crises (Wyatt & Silver, 2015). Leaders who take preventive measures help to address the psychological, behavioral, and social effects that accompany a crisis.

Application to Professional Practice

Identifying systematic approaches to predict and quickly assess unexpected crises may help business leaders develop processes that enhance survival (Riguell, Hebert, & Jourez, 2016). The results of this study encompass elements for small business owners to include in their crisis management strategies. The strategies enable owners of small businesses to understand the importance of developing processes to maintain the ethical standards that accompany positions of leadership, provide a sense of security for vendors and consumers, and minimize the risk of potential crises while increasing crisis survival opportunities. With this knowledge, small business owners may remain proactive and create longevity in their firms. The specific business problem was that some small business owners lack adequate crisis management strategies to survive an unexpected operational interruption. Failure to prepare for a crisis increases the risk of premature business closure (Appelbaum, Keller, Alvarez, & Be'dard, 2012). The results of this study include inexpensive solutions to help small business owners implement crisis management strategies to increase survivability in their firms.

Similar to what the participants revealed in this study and through articles in the literature review, many small business owners may not understand the importance of developing adequate crisis management strategies. Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer (2013), as well as Carlson, Poole, Lambert, and Lammers (2016) reflected that educating business leaders on developing strategies to manage crises could increase their ability to plan adequately. With this study, I confirmed that strategies are necessary as preventive measures to minimize long-term effects and ultimately survive an unexpected crisis. Business leaders often refer to small businesses as the engines of economic growth because of job creation and innovation (Memili, Fang, Chrisman, & De Massis, 2015). As such, small business owners should implement strategies to survive an unexpected operational interruption (Hermes & Mainela, 2014) and ensure continued contributions to the economy.

Implications for Social Change

The implication for positive social change of this study includes the creation of proactive strategies to increase small business crisis survivability. The results of this study contain processes the participants implemented in response to crises at their businesses. Contributions to positive social change will occur if after learning of this study, small business owners are encouraged to develop crisis management strategies.

Loranzo (2013) identified leaders as internal drivers and firm reputation, customer demands, and expectations as the external drivers that connect crisis management to social change. Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2016) posited that developing strategies to lead a company through a crisis contributed to positive social change by enabling faster recovery times, decreased financial volatility, and fewer crisis-related small business closures. Taking the initiative to cultivate stability within small companies may build customer loyalty, improve the reputation of the firm, and increase profitability. Owners of small businesses may use the findings of this study to improve business practices and increase the quality of life for individuals and surrounding communities. The absence of adequate strategies to provide guidance in uncertain times places small firms at risk of significant financial loss or business closure (Singh & LaBrosse, 2012) when an unexpected operational interruption occurs. Considering more than 28 million small companies (SBA, 2016) account for 65% the total job creation in the United States (Spence, 2016), implementing crisis survival strategies may help small business owners contribute to positive social change while enhancing economic growth.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. A variety of inexpensive yet creative recommendations for implementing crisis management strategies materialized during the study. Since resource limitations commonly exist in small businesses, some of the systematic approaches that include the conventional strategies employed in large corporations may not be achievable (Goffee & Scase, 2015). Recommendations for strategies owners of small firms may implement to survive an unexpected operational interruption include: (a) securing adequate insurance coverage, (b) investing in a worker's compensation policy, (c) establishing relationships with nearby competitors to identify alternate work locations, (d) backing up computerized data in case of a technology outage, (e) maintaining transparent and fluent communications with vendors and consumers, (f) ensuring employees receive the training needed to perform their duties effectively, and (g) setting small amounts of money aside to build an emergency fund.

Bergstron, Uhr, and Frykmer (2016) posited that small business owners find it difficult to pursue complex disaster response processes. Based on numerous nontraditional strategies revealed by the participants, all small business owners may benefit from the findings in this study. The specific individuals who need to pay attention to the results are small business owners who desire to establish a stable work environment, implement strategies to survive an unexpected operational interruption, and continue profitability during and after a crisis. The SBA website newsroom and free email service are the most appropriate methods to disseminate the results of this study to existing and prospective small business owners. I also recommend inclusion on the chamber of commerce websites and educational websites that cater to owners of small businesses.

Recommendations for Further Study

I conducted a qualitative multiple case study to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. The findings provide a foundation for further research expanding beyond the southeast region of the United States. The primary limitation in this study was the sample size of the participants. Second was the focus on small business owners who survived an unexpected operational interruption. Third was the decision not to include firms that no longer exist because of an unexpected crisis. Recommendations for further research are to expand beyond the southeast region of the United States, increase the number of participants, and include owners of small businesses that closed because of an unexpected crisis. Sharing information on small business closures may provide real life lessons learned to encourage the development of crisis management strategies for future owners. Further research utilizing the quantitative methodology may be useful to measure the variables associated with these factors and add to the current body of knowledge. In addition, a qualitative phenomenological approach may enable participants to share lived experiences that generate a new round of questions related to improved practices in small businesses.

Reflections

The Walden University Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program has been a challenging and rewarding journey. I began the program with an enthusiastic mindset toward the coursework and the idea that my study would somehow change the world. When I zoned in on the topic for my business problem I was convinced the only way to relay that a true problem existed was through a mixed methods approach. My perceptions were inaccurate; as I did not realize how much information the participants would reveal through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions in a qualitative multiple case study. I also did not accurately perceive how eager the participants would be about referring me to other small business owners. As implied by Jarzabkowski, Le, and Van de Ven (2013), the detailed responses from the participants pertaining to their experiences helped to reduce researcher bias. Since I did not have a personal connection to any of the small business owners, the temptation to carry a biased opinion into the interviews did not exist. The experience and knowledge I gained throughout this process surpassed my expectations.

Summary and Study Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the crisis management strategies small business owners in the southeast region of the United States use to survive an unexpected operational interruption. The 21st century began with a series of crises that resulted in the premature closure of businesses of all sizes in varying industries (Gross, 2012). Since small companies represent 99.7% of all businesses (SBA, 2014) and account for 65% of net new jobs in the United States (Spence, 2016), providing a variety of strategies for crisis management may enable small business owners to create long-term survivability in their firms and continue economic contributions. The findings and recommendations from this study may encourage small business owners to develop written crisis management strategies. By implementing crisis management strategies, owners of small businesses may provide a sense of stability in the work environment, improve operational performance, and increase their businesses' market value.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I. Introduction

Hello, this is [redacted]. Thank you for participating in my doctoral study on crisis management strategies for small business owners. We agreed on (insert date and time) and I'd like to confirm this is still a good time for you. (If not, the interview will be rescheduled based on the participant's schedule.)

II. Acknowledge receipt of consent form

I received your informed consent form. Thank you for the quick response. Do you have any questions regarding the study or the form? (Answer questions, as needed.)

III. Review confidentiality procedures

Today we will talk about you and your experiences in creating and maintaining strategies that aided in the survival of crises for your firm. I want to assure you that everything we discuss is confidential. I will not share your personal information with anyone else. Your information will be coded and will remain confidential. With your permission, I will record our conversation. After the interview, I will transfer the conversation into a written document and send a copy to you. I would like for you to read it and verify that my interpretation accurately reflects our discussion. Please email it back to me with your initials and any comments you wish to share. If this is agreeable to you, we can begin the interview.

IV. Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been in business at this company?
2. How do you differentiate your firm from your competitors?
3. How would you rate the importance of planning for an unexpected crisis in your company?
4. What was the nature of the unexpected crisis that caused an operational interruption of more than 24 hours at your business?
5. What processes did you implement to identify adequate strategies to survive the crisis?

6. What strategies did you deploy to minimize the severity of the crisis?
7. What are the components of your crisis management plan?
8. How does planning for an unexpected crisis contribute to long-term business success?
9. What are the key components of your crisis intervention plan?
10. What advice would you give to others who are considering opening a small business, about including crisis management strategies in the initial planning phases?
11. Are there any other comments you would like to add to our conversation about the success factors and strategies related to your business surviving the unexpected crisis?

V. Closing

Record final remarks: I sincerely appreciate your participation in my study. As previously mentioned. I will send you a copy of the transcription for your review. I would appreciate it if you would return it quickly, along with any comments you wish to include. I am happy to send you the results of my study when it is finished, should you desire.

Appendix B: NIH Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Dovie Wilson** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 09/08/2014

Certification Number: 1546287