2017

Strategies for Small Business Enterprise Success in Ireland: A Case of Three Businesses

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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,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Abstract

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

In 2012, only 50% of Irish small firms survived in business for more than 5 years. The purpose of this qualitative, explorative case study was to explore strategies some Irish small firm owners use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The case population consisted of 3 small business owners operating in Lucan, County Dublin, Ireland who had been managing a profitable small business venture beyond 5 years from beginning operations. The conceptual framework was the competitive theory of entrepreneurial orientation. Data collection included semistructured interviews with the 3 participants, which also involved member checking and triangulation with business documents to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations. Three broad themes emerged after completing a 5-stage qualitative data analysis: an embedded and consistent entrepreneurial attitude, internal management of firm-specific dynamics, and management of external elements affecting the business' operating environment. The firms' owners developed schemes to counter the effects of consumers' lower purchasing power from economic downturns by enabling customers to purchase products through flexible financing arrangements. The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by informing the efforts of small business owners to sustain their operations beyond the first 5 years. Increasing the rate of business success can lead to employment of more people, better standards of living for employees, and concomitant benefits for their communities.

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Dedication

The dedication of my doctoral study goes to Almighty Allah, the beneficent, the merciful for enabling me to complete this study successfully, and for giving me succor in the hour of need. To my wife, Aminah and my children Mukhadis, Mursheed, Muntakha, and Mufeed, I dedicate this study to you for your tolerance, understanding, and perseverance throughout the entire process. To my father Alhaji Isa and mother Hajiya Zainab who encouraged me to start the doctoral program, and supported me to continue until the end, and to my brothers and sisters, I also dedicate this study.

Acknowledgments

With Allah's grace, it was possible to complete this study with the support of many persons too numerous to mention who assisted me in one way or the other throughout the entire process. I wish to acknowledge the roles of my committee chair, Dr. Godwin Igein; my second committee member, Dr. Richard Boyd Johnson; and the University Research Reviewer (URR), Dr. Al. Endres; and to express my appreciation to Dr. Freda Turner for her leadership and support. I would like to say thank you to my brothers, Mohammed and Dahood; my sisters Rahmat, Rahinah and Madinah; my father-in-law and mother-in-law, Alhaji Moshood and Alhaja Bilkis; and my uncle, Alhaji Sabi, for their encouragement and prayers. I would also like to thank Clement, Tafsir, Olutekumbi, and Yankah for helping to proofread multiples drafts. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the roles of my classmates, friends, and family (including my cousins, nephews, and in-laws especially Alhaji Mahmud Mudi) for their supporting me through this journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute significantly to job creation and economic growth in many nations. In the European Union (EU), SMEs accounted for 99.8% of businesses in the nonfinancial sector in 2014 and were responsible for 71.4% of the increase in employment in many sectors of Europe's economy (European Commission, 2016b). The European Commission (2016b) indicated that, in 2014, SMEs provided 90 million jobs in the nonfinancial sector in Europe, which represented 67% of total employment and accounted for 58% of the valued added. In 2014, the European Union micro businesses constituted 93% of all SMEs and accounted for 29.2% of the total employment and 21.1% of the total value added (European Commission, 2016b). Small business enterprises (SBEs) accounted for 20.4% of the jobs and contributed 18.2% of the value added (European Commission, 2016b). Medium-sized companies comprising firms with less than 250 workers provided 17.4% of the employment and 18.7% of the value added. The Irish SME sector, which included 155,751 enterprises and 828,020 workers, is one of the most active in the European Union. In 2014, SMEs in Ireland contributed 57.8% of the total gross value added (European Commission, 2016a). However, despite their enormous contributions to economic growth and employment, only 50% of Irish SMEs survived business beyond 5 years in operation in 2012 (Central Statistics Office Ireland [CSO], 2014a). The high rate of small venture collapse in Ireland underscored the importance of conducting this study.

Background of the Problem

Although small companies represent the largest share of Ireland's enterprise activities, the differences between small business failures and creation indicate that there is a net negative of business startups each year in the country (European Commission, 2016a; Forfas, 2013). For instance, the number of Irish firms that failed in 2013 was 20,080, compared to only 15,080 new enterprises created that year (CSO, 2016). The CSO (2016) indicated that between 2008 and 2014, more Irish businesses failed each year than new companies emerged. In 2012, only 50% of the small firms operating in Ireland were in commercial activity beyond 5 years of starting operations (CSO, 2014a). The Irish SME sector experience is similar to the situation for SMEs in the United States regarding the generation and loss of employment. In the United States, small businesses represented 63.3% of net new jobs created from 1992 to 2013 (U.S. Small Business Association [SBA], 2016), but in 2012, small firms constituted 40% of employment losses from jobs created as start-up companies (Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013).

However, new small business owners who continue to improve their internal knowledge assets and efficiently access external knowledge can remain competitive over multiple business cycles (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014; Huggins & Weir, 2012). Business owners who design firm-specific strategies to search for profitable products carefully monitor costs and avoid intense price wars witness growth, even in hostile markets (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). Fifty percent of Irish small companies remain in business after 5 years (CSO, 2014a), and efficient strategies may help more small firms succeed in business beyond 5 years.

Problem Statement

Small business enterprises in Ireland provide 70% of private sector jobs, 99.8% of enterprise activities, and 50% of the gross value added (European Commission, 2016a). Indigenous companies, of which 98% are SBEs (European Commission, 2016a) provide 63% of the employment in the Irish SME sector (Lawless, McCann, & Calder, 2014). SBEs are the most important drivers of the Irish private sector economy (European Commission, 2016a). The general business problem of this study is that 50% of small enterprises operating in Ireland fail within the first 5 years of starting commercial activity. The specific business problem is that small firm entrepreneurs often lack the strategies to succeed in business beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, explorative case study was to explore what strategies small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The specific population of my study consisted of successful small venture entrepreneurs operating in Lucan, County Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. I selected three small business proprietors in Lucan to interview who demonstrated experience developing and implementing strategies to address the specific business problem of sustaining their small businesses beyond 5 years.

The result of this study may be useful to start-up entrepreneurs, leaders of firms facing challenges, and people aspiring to self-employment. This study might become a reference document that includes success strategies for small firm entrepreneurs to invest successfully and contribute knowledge for business practitioners and academics. The result of this might bring about positive social change as the improved success of small businesses may result in employment of more people, better welfare and standards of living for employees, and more revenue. The multiplier effect of successful enterprise practices may lead to a wider distribution of prosperity and result in benefits for the country.

Nature of the Study

The three common approaches used by researchers are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study included the qualitative method. Researchers use the qualitative method and open-ended interview questions to discover what has occurred or is occurring (Bernard, 2013). Using the qualitative method enables interactions with participants in their natural environment (Bernard, 2013; Yin, 2014). In contrast, quantitative researchers use closed-ended questions to test hypotheses (Bernard, 2013). Mixed-method research is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative elements (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). I did not envisage using either quantitative or mixed-method research for my study.

After examining the case study, ethnography, narrative study, grounded theory, and phenomenology as possible research designs, I selected the case study design. By using the case study design, it is possible to understand a phenomenon within its natural context from multiple sources (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012). A phenomenological design was not suitable for this study because researchers use phenomenological designs to study participants' lived experiences with a phenomenon (Bernard, 2013). Grounded theory is appropriate for generating theories and telling the how and why of an issue (Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011), which was not my intention in this research. Ethnography involves studying a multicultural group in a process that usually starts with a theory and then extends to interviews and observations of the participants' daily lives (Yin, 2014), but this design was not suitable for this study. The narrative design was also not appropriate for this study because it entails narrating the stories of an individual or a group of people to understand their experiences with a phenomenon (Bernard, 2013).

Research Question

The overarching research question was as follows: What strategies do small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

The interview questions listed below supported the process of answering the research question:

1. How would you describe your experience during the first 5 years of managing your SBE?
2. What skills or training did you have before starting your company that has influenced your experiences with small business management, survival, and sustainability beyond 5 years?
3. What support did you find helpful during the start-up years that contributed to your remaining in business over 5 years?
4. What key success strategies have you used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?

5. What were the principal barriers that you faced in implementing the strategies?
6. How did you address the barriers to implementing your key success strategies?
7. What more would you like to add that I have not asked you about operating a successful company beyond 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was the competitive theory of entrepreneurial orientation (EO). Entrepreneurial orientation refers to the characteristic traits or entrepreneurial tendencies that guide the behavior of business owners and the dynamics in the operating environment that facilitate business success. Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) observed that EO relates positively to the performance of an enterprise and contended that certain discrete variables mediate or moderate the EO–performance relationship. The origin of the EO model dates back to Mintzberg's research in 1973, and other researchers expanded the theory over the years (Covin & Wales, 2012). By 1996, the model evolved from the original three dimensions of innovativeness, risk taking, and proactiveness to five dimensions with the addition of competitive aggressiveness and autonomy (Wales, 2016).

The theoretical structure of the EO concept was significant for this study because it provided a compatible intellectual lens for understanding the relationship between entrepreneurial characteristics and firms' performance and its application for business success. Figure 1 is a diagram of the proposed EO framework depicting how five discrete variables or EO dimensions mediate between entrepreneurs' characteristics, firms' processes, and business performance.

Figure 1. The Proposed Entrepreneurial Orientation Framework

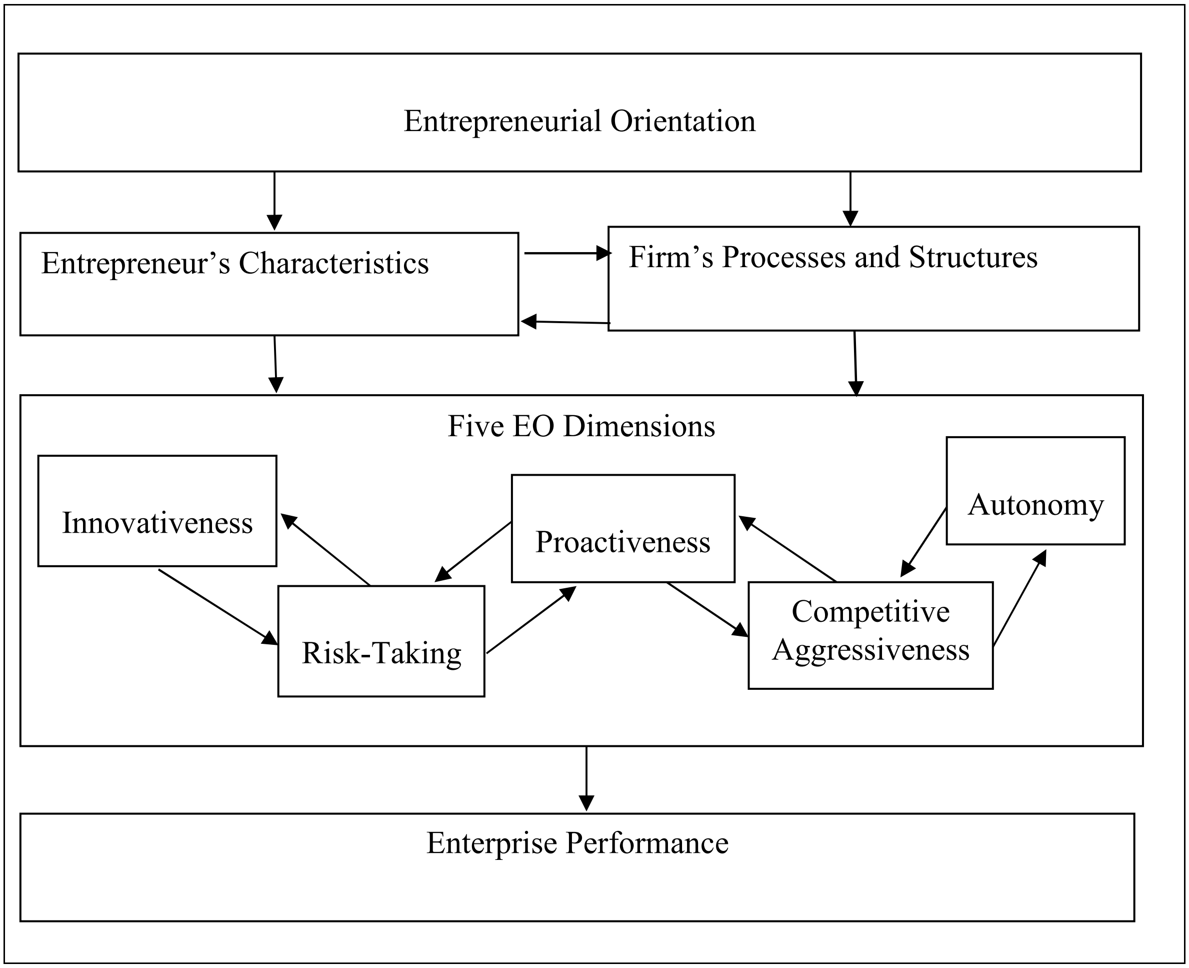

Figure 1. The proposed entrepreneurial orientation framework depicting how the entrepreneurial orientation dimensions mediate entrepreneurial characteristics and firms' processes and structures to improve firms' performance.

Operational Definitions

Business failure: A situation in which circumstances involuntary to an owner's control result in an enterprise ceasing operation, which consequently results in liquidation (Coad, 2013; Coad, Frankish, Roberts, & Storey, 2013).

Business success or sustainability: When a business unit maintains continuous operation over a period of 5 years during which there were no consecutive annual revenue losses (Alagirisamy, 2014).

Founding decision: The decision made by a potential entrepreneur to engage in business activities (Jayawarna, Rouse, & Macpherson, 2014).

Funding decisions: Decisions that entrepreneurs must make about how best to secure both internal and external financing for the firm (O'Toole, Lawless, & Lambert, 2015).

Micro businesses: Companies with 10 or fewer workers (European Commission, 2016b).

Nascent enterprise: A potential business outfit still in the planning stage that has no commercial activity, although the entrepreneur may have acquired most of the resources needed to start operations (Fitzsimons & O'Gorman, 2013).

Necessity-driven entrepreneurship: An entrepreneurial activity carried out because it was the only option available for an individual to earn an income (Fitzsimons & O'Gorman, 2013).

Small businesses: Business units with between 1 and 50 workers (European Commission, 2016b).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The focus of this subsection is the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in this study and accentuating the scope and boundary of the research. Some facts in this study were impossible to verify but presumed to be true. Similarly, there were circumstances beyond my control that imposed certain constraints on the research. Furthermore, because of some limitations, I did not focus on all areas relating to the topic or every characteristic. Consequently, I introduced delimitations to the study.

Assumptions

Assumptions in research are the beliefs that certain things will hold true or are facts without subjecting those beliefs to verification, observation, or scientific experimentation (Kouchaki, Okhuysen, Waller, & Tajeddin, 2012). First, the primary assumption in this study was that the potential participants would agree with the objective of the research and willingly and voluntarily take part in the research. Second, I assumed that the respondents would be honest and provide open, truthful, and accurate answers to the interview questions without bias. The third assumption was that the outcome of the research would provide small firm entrepreneurs with useful information and insights on how to succeed in business beyond 5 years.

Limitations

The limitations of research are the elements that may directly or indirectly impede the investigation and cause potential weaknesses to the outcome that are beyond the control of a researcher (Coffie, 2013). Coffie (2013) observed that these limitations might arise from the population, the sample size, or the available information. For instance, one of the limitations of this study was that it is hard to control the effect of entrepreneurs' social status on their ability to harness their external environment. Social status may affect individuals' EO and the behavioral tendencies that determine their performance (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Furthermore, entrepreneurs' education levels may have some effect on their knowledge of the support network available during challenging times, but it was not possible to control this attribute in my study. Moreover, there are some limitations in understanding how individuals' circumstances can influence the consistency of their answers. The study did not cover distinctions in race, age, and gender differences among the sample. Furthermore, I exercised caution regarding human tendencies that can result in possible distortions or skew the results. People have the tendency to apportion blame to others for failures or to take credit for success that is not theirs. It may be impossible to eliminate or prevent the occurrence of all human-related issues in a qualitative study, but I tried to reduce the impact of uncontrollable human attributes on the outcome.

Delimitations

Delimitations in a study are boundaries that researchers impose to set the parameters for the investigation that help them to stay within a particular scope throughout the research. The reason for delimitations in research is to restrict the inquiry to specific areas and to establish the extent of the investigation (Spitzmüller & Warnke, 2011). Clearly and precisely delineating the participants, presenting their depictions, and identifying the peculiarities of each of them are important (Marshall, 1996). By portraying the respondents accurately, a writer can discover more facts about the topic and gain a better insight into emergent themes (Marshall, 1996). In a qualitative study, there is no guarantee of selecting the valid sample of participants; researchers take a chance with every chosen subject (Marshall, 1996). Researchers who identify their limits and set clear boundaries (delimitations) can obtain results, and one way of doing this is to present the precise characteristics of their research sample (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, I used the purposeful sampling technique to select three entrepreneurs who represented the category of small business owners in Lucan, County Dublin, for the study.

Significance of the Study

Small firms continue to dominate the European SME sector, 93% of which are micro businesses (European Commission, 2016b). In 2014, SMEs provided 71.4% of the increase in employment in the nonfinancial sector and accounted for 58% of the value added in the EU (European Commission, 2016b). Apart from the construction and agriculture sectors, Irish SMEs account for 72% of private sector employment (Lawless, McCann, et al., 2014). Lawless, McCann, et al. (2014) observed that 63% of the employees in SMEs in Ireland worked in indigenous firms, and the domestic companies servicing the local market comprised 57% of the SMEs. As a result, in Ireland, the growth of small businesses is essential for the sustenance of the domestic economy. However, 50% of Irish SBEs failed during the initial 5 years of operation between 2007 and 2012 (CSO, 2014a). The fear of failure was a significant disincentive for people engaging in self-employment and resulted in 45% of the Irish adult population avoiding start-up businesses in 2013 (Fitzsimons & O'Gorman, 2013). Therefore, conducting this study was important to explore strategies small business owners use to navigate the challenging early stages and succeed in operations beyond 5 years to sustain their business activities.

Contribution to Business Practice

The result of this qualitative, multiple case study research may lead to an understanding of small business operations in Ireland and provide some answers regarding how SBE owners can sustain activity beyond the critical start-up years. The findings from this study may provide small business owners, potential entrepreneurs, and business practitioners with better ideas on how to succeed in commercial activities. The recommendations from the study include notes outlining some effective strategies that support small firms' success.

Implications for Social Change

The positive social change implication anticipated from the outcome of this research includes the potential to provide small firm entrepreneurs with new ideas and useful insights on how to operate a successful business for more than 5 years. The findings may help boost start-up enterprise activities and significantly improve the sustainability of many small firms in Ireland. The SBE subsector in Ireland may experience increased net new business creation and higher start-up survival rates. The multiplier effect of this can include increased enterprise activities, employment, profits, growth, and better business practices that will facilitate economic growth. The possible consequences of these actions include the potential to improve the standard of living and well-being in society and bring about positive social change.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore what strategies small firm entrepreneurs in Lucan, County Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland use to survive in business beyond 5 years. The sources included peer-reviewed scholarly journals, books relating to methodologies and management theories, enterprise promotion programs, and materials about entrepreneurial characteristics. My literature review included materials from or about the target population and other relevant studies conducted worldwide.

To present a clear picture of the process of acquiring the materials for the research, under the next subheading, I explain details of my search and the articles, journals, and databases. For clarity, I present the details of the findings from the literature review in particular subject groups. The groups are: (a) the conceptual framework of entrepreneurial orientation; (b) start-up enterprises; (c) entrepreneurial development; (d) dynamics of SBEs, and (e) strategies and practices for small firms' success.

The Search and Sources of Materials

The primary sources for collecting research materials for my study were the Walden University Library and business and management databases. Specific databases included ABI/INFORM Complete, Academic Search Complete, and government databases. I also consulted business journal publications such as *The Journal of Small Business Management*, *The Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, *Small Business Economics*, and *The Journal of Business Venturing* for articles relating to my topic. Furthermore, I reviewed official newsletters, annual reports, and government statistics published by the European Commission, European Central Bank, Central Bank of Ireland, and the CSO. Other relevant sources that I consulted for this study included the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor and Forfas Ireland.

The keywords and phrases that I used to search for relevant sources within the databases and to search sources were *small business formation*, *small enterprise development*, *small business success and failure*, and *small business enterprise life cycle*. Other phrases that I used to refine the search were *small business funding*, *sources of business finance*, and *qualitative explorative case study*. Table 1 contains a summary of the 132 references that I consulted for this study. I consulted 114 peer-reviewed documents and 18 that were not peer-reviewed materials. The table includes the summary percentages of the peer-reviewed papers and year of publication of the total references. Of the total 132 references, 86.36% were peer-reviewed documents, and the date of publication of 86.36% of the total references was within 5 years of my anticipated 2017 year of graduation.

Table 1

Peer-reviewed Sources and Years of Publication

	2013 & Later	2012 & earlier	Total for source	% peer-reviewed of total documents
Peer-reviewed journals	87	16	103	
Government publications	10	1	11	
Total peer-reviewed or government documents	97	17	114	86.36%
Other journals	12	0	12	
Dissertations	2	0	2	
Books	3	1	4	
Total other documents	17	1	18	
Total sourced documents	114	18	132	
% sources less than 5 years old in 2017	86.36%			

Entrepreneurial Orientation

Researchers anchor studies to a possible theoretical or conceptual framework that describes an existing principle, concept, or idea in an area related to their subject or topic of inquiry. For qualitative research, the conceptual framework is the depiction from the extant literature of a concept, central idea, or main argument that researchers expect to provide a lens for interpreting the results. I chose the competition theory of EO as my conceptual framework.

The EO model originated from the work of Mintzberg in 1973 and became a reputable construct for researchers in the field of entrepreneurship and broader management studies (Covin & Miller, 2014). The EO model is a multidimensional concept that reflects how individuals' personal EO dimensions affect the relationship between their competitive strategies and their firms' performance. Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) explained that EO refers to the behavioral patterns of entrepreneurs or business owners and the processes and structure of enterprises that characterize people's autonomy, how aggressively they compete, their innovativeness, and their ability to take risks and act proactively.

There were three original dimensions of the EO concept: innovativeness, risk taking, and proactiveness. By 1996, the model evolved to include five with the addition of autonomy and competitive aggressiveness (Wales, 2016). Semrau, Ambos, and Kraus (2016) concluded that the EO concept was a universal model applicable across different contexts. Entrepreneurs and small business owners in any environment can apply the EO concept by making independent business decisions to manage their firms to success.

Individuals who have the impetus to take risks and are forward thinking, highly creative, and willing to experiment with new ideas or compete aggressively can achieve greater performance.

The EO concept is a universal model that relates individual behavior to successful enterprise performance. However, even in EO-active firms, EO does not guarantee business success unless entrepreneurs and small business owners sustain the commitment. Wales (2016) noted that in EO-inclined companies, entrepreneurs who do not match their personal characteristics with a deep conviction in the significance of their entrepreneurial action might not produce positive results for their businesses. Entrepreneurs who display any of the five characteristics of EO dimensions perform better than most of their rivals in the same sector or market (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Therefore, small firm proprietors with EO attributes can use them to succeed in longer-term business operations.

Small business owners who uphold strong beliefs in their entrepreneurial actions can allocate resources efficiently, especially in risky, innovative, and uncertain projects, to achieve improved performance (Wales, 2016). However, the distribution of performance outcomes for high-EO companies varies widely from total losses (failure) to homeruns (success), but entrepreneurs who manage the consequences of their decisions efficiently can shape the distribution of their outcomes (Wales, 2016, p. 5). Although there are significant variances in the results of EO-inclined companies in achieving either success or failure, proprietors with the necessary aptitude can reduce the variation in their outcomes and improve their achievements.

Resourceful business owners manage their firms to success by skillfully allocating resources efficiently and reviewing their performance regularly to observe the consequence of every action before deciding on the next move. Therefore, small firm entrepreneurs and other business owners who want to obtain the benefits of EO for their organizations need to support their entrepreneurial behaviors and decisions, with a strong belief in the positive consequence of their action. When implementing the decision to act entrepreneurially by engaging in certain processes, business owners should review the result of their actions to determine the next strategies.

Each of the following five dimensions of EO influences entrepreneurial behavior and actions differently: innovativeness, risk taking, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy (Wales, 2016). The manner in which individuals demonstrate one characteristic over the other reflects their personality. How small firm owners apply each of the five dimensions in their actions or decision making determines the effect on their companies' performance.

The dimension of innovativeness reflects firm owners' ability to be creative, and can affect how business owners experiment with new products or processes, and the way the business owners support revolutionary ideas to introduce dramatic changes. Innovative entrepreneurs develop new ideas and invent revolutionary goods or services to gain some control at the market and outcompete rivals (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Innovative entrepreneurs are inventive individuals who like to try new ways, processes, products, or services and spearhead technological advances. Innovativeness helps firm owners discover and exploit ways to improve quality, save time, or increase efficiency.

Risk taking is an essential EO dimension in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship involves risk taking and requires good judgment to evaluate and appraise risks and to rationalize the decision to take action. Humbert and Brindley (2015) challenged the perception that risk-averse individuals performed poorly in business, but Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) contended that people who do not hesitate to take risks performed better in business. However, entrepreneurs and small business owners must evaluate risks and estimate uncertainties to make a rational decision on a risky and unknown venture.

Proactive business owners who recognize and exploit unidentified, unknown, or untested markets can benefit from their decision to act progressively. Proactiveness as an EO dimension engenders the capacity to anticipate future events and capitalize on the first-mover advantage to stay ahead of the competition (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Being proactive encompasses striving to act ahead of competitors to be the first to identify new markets or invent new products or processes and not to be reactionary by waiting to embrace what others have pioneered. Proactive business owners use their experience and the knowledge of their position in the industry to predict future trends, project market direction, and lead their companies to explore new businesses.

Entrepreneurs and business owners with competitive aggressiveness are not afraid to compete and do not consider failure to be an option. Individuals' zeal and motivation engender competitive aggressiveness, which creates the urge to expand market share and surpass the competition (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). Business owners who pursue the competitive-aggressive strategy do not yield the market to competitors; rather, they struggle to outperform rivals to achieve growth. Business owners who seek a competitive lead by acquiring resource advantages over their peers can achieve practical experience with positive performance in their firms.

The autonomy dimension of EO involves the aptitude to act independently and exert control over the decision-making process of a company. Without autonomy, business owners cannot implement innovative ideas, act proactively, compete aggressively, or take risks. Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) concluded that entrepreneurs and other business owners who engage their resources efficiently and associate actively and positively with their autonomy can identify, create, and exploit opportunities that will result in successful outcomes.

The effect of the five characteristics of the EO concept reflects in individuals' behavior to act entrepreneurially to achieve success. The positive consequence of innovativeness is new or improved products, services, or processes. Eshima and Anderson (2017) observed that high-quality new products or services are less susceptible to price increases. With risk taking, entrepreneurs derive the courage to venture into unknown frontiers, away from the comfort of the conventional practice, with some uncertainties. Proactive entrepreneurs use knowledge of their previous growth as a guide to making projections that would help to improve their performance (Eshima & Anderson, 2017). Competitive aggressiveness engenders the drive to survive and excel, and firm owners with strong and aggressive responses to competitors' actions or inactions can survive the competition.

Small firm entrepreneurs and other small business owners can achieve high returns by practicing a *cost leadership strategy,* a *differentiation strategy*, or both competitive strategies (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). A cost leadership strategy entails sourcing alternative inputs and other business factors to lower the cost of business within an operating environment to achieve a competitive advantage over rivals. The differentiation strategy involves rendering a specialized service, developing a different, better, and unique product than competitors, and taking into consideration and addressing particular customers' needs. Differentiating goods or services is cheaper, involves lower investments, and represents a strategy for reducing the differential effect on small company performance (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) concluded that the differentiation strategy was more effective for small firm entrepreneurs seeking strategies to improve their activities, even though cost leadership has a larger effect. Therefore, leaders of small companies can gain the competitive edge and improve their performance by practicing the differentiation strategy to retain their existing clients and increase their market share by acquiring new customers to succeed in business.

Business owners can develop specific policies in line with the peculiar dynamics of their firms and improve firm-level behavior to invest resources consistently and carefully in enhancing their competitive strategy. Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) noted that leaders of small enterprises could gradually develop EO over time to improve their competitive strategy and make tactical decisions to compete aggressively to improve their performance. Effective strategies and sound economic policies enhance business development, but a company's operating environment can affect the implementation of the strategy.

Well-developed systems and institutions such as those in advanced economies support planning that facilitates business performance and enhances the growth of entrepreneurship. Enterprise performance is typically lower in emerging markets because less structured institutions and frameworks often do not support policy planning (Semrau et al., 2016). Irrespective of the structural or institutional framework in society, entrepreneurs' geographical locations do not affect how average firms acquire funds for their companies (Lee & Drever, 2014). Social status or the operating environment do not influence business owners' orientation to innovativeness, risk taking, proactiveness, competitive-aggressive behavior, or autonomy (Lumpkin, Moss, Gras, Kato, & Amezcua, 2013). The EO dimensions are inherent personal attributes that are independent of external influence.

Research evidence indicates that the five dimensions of EO actively influence entrepreneurs' and other business owners' behavior and engender people to act entrepreneurially to facilitate business success. Individuals' EO dimensions mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and entrepreneurial intention, but no evidence indicates that EO moderates environmental factors and entrepreneurial intention (Ibrahim & Mas'ud, 2016). Ibrahim & Mas'ud observed that the EO dimensions can inspire entrepreneurs' intention to engage in business activities, but people's entrepreneurial characteristics have no effect on environment factors that can influence their enterprise intention.

The EO theory is a conceptual framework for understanding conditions in competitive business environments that inform specific strategic decisions and the ways entrepreneurs' behavior can facilitate enterprise performance. The EO model provided an expected intellectual lens for understanding some of the entrepreneurial attributes, firm dynamics, and environmental characteristics that could contribute to small business success. I expected the EO concept to be significant in this study to understand how small business owners and entrepreneurs could improve their chances of succeeding in business beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Start-up Enterprises

Start-up companies are fledging business entities with unique characteristics, and the fundamental difference between a start-up company and a well-established organization is the number of years in active business operation. Start-up enterprises are newly operational ventures in their early years of commercial activities. A start-up company is an organization that has been operating for a few months to less than 5 years (Fitzsimons & O'Gorman, 2013). The entrepreneurship process includes different stages of development, and a start-up enterprise is the second phase of the process as well as the beginning stage of actual commercial transactions.

The first step of the entrepreneurship process is forming a nascent business, which is the resource mobilization phase of enterprise activities. A nascent enterprise is a commercial prospecting venture still at the planning stage of start-up activities that has yet to begin any operation (Renko, Kroeck, & Bullough, 2012). At the nascent stage of the start-up process, the initiator may have acquired the necessary resources to start an operational venture, but has not engaged in any commercial activity. Start-up entrepreneurship is the early stage of the business life cycle that follows resource mobilization and the beginning phase of the real enterprise activities that symbolizes a successful transition from nascent entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneur motivation is essential to accomplish the transition from a nascent to a start-up company and to sustain successful business activities throughout the initial years of operation (Estay, Durrieu, & Akhter, 2013). Start-up-specific instrumentality, valence, and expectancy are crucial to developing entrepreneurial motivation (Renko et al., 2012). The intensities and the effect of entrepreneurs' and other small business owners' motivation engender action that results in business start-up activities (Estay et al., 2013; Pinho & Sampaio, 2014). Personal qualities such as intuition, innovativeness, and self-achievement are also highly relevant when making start-up decisions. Therefore, motivation is a fundamental element within the context of small business ownerships to catalyze people's drive to undertake enterprise creation, endure the challenges of commercial activities, and sustain operations.

Motivation engenders the drive to engage in business activities, but without the necessary complementary inputs such as support for the business, motivated start-up firm owners might encounter difficulties in growing businesses. Motivated individuals have the intensity to pursue entrepreneurship, but even with high motivation, people often require support to navigate the challenges during the start-up years (Pinho & Sampaio, 2014). Entrepreneurs' social status can influence their entrepreneurial decisions positively or negatively, but people's motivation for self-employment facilitates the drive toward entrepreneurship and start-up activities (Boyer & Blazy, 2014). Pinho and Sampaio (2014) posited that nascent entrepreneurs who successfully transitioned to start-up venture owners struggle from deficiency to efficiency and often require support to sustain their business.

Safiullin, Shaidullin, Ulesov, and Shigabieva (2014) observed that small firm entrepreneurs typically have to mobilize resources through de-monopolization from various fields of activity and concluded that the developmental process of most small businesses is from the ground up. Coad, Frankish, Nightingale, and Roberts (2014) contended that the scale of a company at start-up was relevant to its subsequent growth. It is important for small firm owners to mobilize sufficient resources before starting operation. Understanding the strategies small businesses need to sustain transactions and grow after start-up is crucial to their success.

Growth after starting commercial activities is uncertain and random and depends on various dynamics (Coad et al., 2014). Coad et al. (2014) described the paradox that small enterprises are small at start-up, yet growth after entry into the market is difficult. It is essential for start-up entrepreneurs to mobilize sufficient resources at inception to prevent interruptions in operations. Entrepreneurs with significant start-up financing are more likely to perform better in the future (Coleman, Cotei, & Farhat, 2013). Apart from securing sufficient funds, small firm entrepreneurs must synergize their learning capabilities with efficient marketing and innovation to enhance the potential to grow (Sok, O’Cass, & Sok, 2013). Therefore, to succeed in operations over the long term, potential small firm entrepreneurs and other small business owners must mobilize sufficient resources during the nascent stage before commencing operations.

The level of resources mobilized at the nascent phase of the entrepreneurship process, and in the early years, could affect the performance of start-up enterprises. Entrepreneurs' resourcefulness is critical to organizing resources before and after start-up (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). Solomon, Bryant, May, and Perry (2013) contended that age and demographic differences are some of the elements that influence enterprise growth after start-up. Solomon et al. concluded that the effects of firm size and entrepreneurial experience on small companies' performance were higher than even skills acquisition, which indicated that business owners could not use their skills to compensate for the effect of small size and inexperience on business performance.

To reinforce the importance of size to business activities, Fackler, Schnabel, and Wagner (2013), like Solomon et al. (2013) and Coad et al. (2014), posited that size was a critical element to enterprise success. Fackler et al. (2013) established a connection between companies' size and mortality and noted that both old and young companies, especially those with less than 5 years in operation, are susceptible to business failure. The probability of failure is high at start-up, declines over the years, and then starts to rise again as the company ages (Fackler et al., 2013). Smallness is a liability to a start-up business, as beginning operations with few resources can result in business failure. Therefore, start-up entrepreneurs can reduce the odds of failure and increase their chances of success by ensuring they mobilize adequate resources when starting up the enterprise process before commencing operations.

Start-up entrepreneurs with modest resources can use their personal attributes to develop strategies and plan effectively to expand their business activities. Proper planning ranks higher than skills acquisition among elements that contribute to start-up business success (Mayer-Haug, Read, Brickmann, Dew, & Grichnik, 2013). Good planners can identify gaps in the market to maximize their returns (Renko, El Tarabishy, Carsrud, & Brannback, 2015). Knowledge helps people to plan better, and knowledge increases with experience (Solomon et al., 2013). Therefore, small firm owners need to use their personal attributes, including skills, knowledge, experience, and networks, to recognize new opportunities and plan effectively to exploit the differences between demand and supply to enhance their companies' performance.

People engage in entrepreneurship for different reasons, but the two classes of individuals that embark on start-up enterprises are *opportunity entrepreneurs* and *necessity entrepreneurs* (Liñán, Fernandez-Serrano, & Romero, 2013). Opportunity entrepreneurs are business proprietors who establish a company to capitalize on opportunities or to exploit openings or gaps in the market. Necessity entrepreneurs are individuals who engage in entrepreneurship because it is the better option available to them (Liñán et al., 2013). Opportunity entrepreneurs are careful planners who know where, how, and when to seize the opportunity to invest. Therefore, small start-up company owners should continue to look for further opportunities to exploit to enhance the performance of their company.

The economic well-being of people and nations influences the levels of opportunity-driven or necessity-driven entrepreneurship in a country. The motivation to start a small business is more prominent among people with more wealth and stronger human capital credentials than among individuals with less money and weaker human capital credentials (Liñán et al., 2013). Wealthy people, like rich nations, engage in business activities more than poor people because the lack of business capital and borrowing constraints that deter poor people from start-up entrepreneurship are not a problem for the wealthy. Rich people can either use part of their wealth as to provide capital for their business or use their prosperity as collateral to secure loans (Lofstrom, Bates, & Parker, 2014). Wealthy individuals consider entrepreneurship as a way of preserving their wealth, whereas poor people engage in enterprise activities for their sustenance (Jayawarna et al., 2014). For poor people, entrepreneurship is usually necessity driven, while rich people engage more frequently in opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.

To overcome resource constraints, some start-up entrepreneurs first enter commercial operations through market testing with safer and less structured business activities in the informal sector. Test trading in an unregulated environment helps to develop the necessary skills, competencies, and experience to succeed in business. Test trading is a common practice among small venture holders in the United Kingdom to facilitate the gradual movement from paid to self-employment or the transition from nascent to start-up enterprises (Williams & Martinez, 2014). By engaging in informal trading, small firm entrepreneurs and other business owners can accomplish the initial stage of the business start-up process while avoiding the regulations of regular trading to develop competencies to operate a formal venture.

Small start-up business owners can increase their chances of success by engaging in multiple or simultaneous enterprise options. Sociological, economic, and institutional issues affect people’s choice between self-employment and paid employment (Castano, Mendez, & Galindo, 2015). Individuals opting for entrepreneurship can choose to remain *novice entrepreneurs* or become either *serial entrepreneurs* or *portfolio entrepreneurs* (Parker, 2014). Serial entrepreneurs are business proprietors who test and manage different types of ventures, one after the other, at different times. Portfolio entrepreneurs are firm owners who exploit multiple investment activities in parallel by testing and running more than one type of company simultaneously. To increase the chances of success, small firm owners should not remain as novice entrepreneurs but seize any opportunity to operate various ventures sequentially or simultaneously by considering multiple enterprise options.

Successful entrepreneurs broaden their scope and versatility to benefit from numerous advantages and use their networks to access critical information and resources to promote business start-up activities. McGrath and O’Toole (2013) noted that entrepreneurs develop wider networks by participating in coordinated consumer events. Firm owners use previous entrepreneurial experiences and knowledge of the environment or industry to increase their human capital (Cassar, 2014). Access to extensive networks and social connections helps small businesses during the initial phases of enterprise development. However, strengthening network ties could affect founding activities (Kreiser, Patel, & Fiet, 2013). Kreiser et al. observed that start-up business owners can use their social connections to launch their businesses and to secure a market position, but strengthening network ties can affect business activities during the early stages of enterprise formation.

Start-up entrepreneurs who change from conservative beliefs about entrepreneurship to engaging in multiple business formations can improve their firms' fortune. By adopting a more comprehensive view of entrepreneurship, business owners develop temporal careers in concurrent portfolio management to increase their chances of survival and success (Sarasvathy, Menon, & Kuechle, 2013). Furlan and Grandinetti (2014) noted that innovation is critical to creating new ideas and expanding business, which can result in spin-off performance. Through effective networking, productive interactions happen that help entrepreneurs gain the requisite business knowledge, extend business marketability, and improve the chances of survival (Aldrich & Yang, 2013).

In the EO model, the EO dimensions can mediate entrepreneurial characteristics and firms' processes and structures to improve company performance. Miettinen and Littunen (2014) contended that enterprise characteristics and customer market, rather than human capital measures such as business experience, age, education, gender, and employment status, influence enterprise performance. The possession of the requisite skills and personal qualities by entrepreneurs might not result in the success or survival of firms. To succeed in business, entrepreneurs need a significant market and appropriate firm-level conditions to complement experience, education, and social status to facilitate performance (Miettinen & Littunen, 2014). The same authors concluded that, in effect, start-up entrepreneurs use their connections to expand market share and engage in more than one venture to improve their chances of success.

Entrepreneurial Development

A challenging phase in the entrepreneurship process is transitioning from being an employee or unemployment to being an employer or self-employed. People need to understand the business development process thoroughly to succeed. Entrepreneurial development evolves through some mutually inclusive stages, and people require certain characteristics or attributes to initiate and gainfully accomplish entrepreneurship (Miettinen & Littunen, 2014). The transition from paid employment to self-employment requires motivation, decisiveness, and willingness to take risks to achieve a successful switch. Caliendo, Fossen, and Kritikos (2014) concluded that potential entrepreneurs usually exhibit three inherent predictor traits: (a) extraversion, (b) openness, and (c) emotional stability. Individuals with these characteristics are more likely to undertake entrepreneurship successfully. Therefore, to accomplish entrepreneurial development, business owners must overcome learning barriers, acquire the requisite knowledge in business management, and be open to new ideas and ways of doing things.

During the early stages of the entrepreneurial development process, it is possible to envision what type of an entrepreneur a prospective business owner can become. Individuals' mind-sets determine how they view events, respond to situations, resolve crises, manage challenges, and act entrepreneurially. Entrepreneurs' beliefs shape their perspectives, influence how they view what has occurred or why things are happening the way they do, and affect the choices that they make as firm owners (Sandberg, Hurmerinta, & Zettinig, 2013). The decisions people make affect their business performance and shape their entrepreneurial development process. Sandberg et al. (2013)

observed that two kinds of mind-sets, *internal locus of control* and *external locus of control*, dominate people's views about events and affect their entrepreneurial actions.

The dominant locus of control in an entrepreneur's mind-set influences how an entrepreneur responds to different situations that arise in the daily management of an enterprise. People who exhibit a high external locus of control tend to believe that environmental circumstances or other external elements, rather than people's actions, determine future outcomes. Individuals with a dominant internal locus of control tend to connect future results to their past decisions and believe that the actions people take have repercussions in the future. Sandberg et al. (2013) concluded that people who eventually became entrepreneurs had a high internal locus of control. Firm owners with an internal locus of control demonstrate strong determination, believe in the significance of their role in achieving business success, and believe that successful performance is the result of proper planning and strategic decisions. The internal locus of control is the kind of mind-set that engenders successful entrepreneurship.

Block, Hoogerheide, and Thurik (2013) observed that people's aspiration to engage in business start-up activities increases with higher levels of education. Prospective business owners who overcome learning obstacles can improve their entrepreneurial judgment to start up successful enterprise activities (Caliendo et al., 2014). Business owners can enhance the decision-making process to nurture new enterprise creation by developing and improving human capital resources. Entrepreneurs use the knowledge they derive from entrepreneurial activities and the experience they acquire from the operating environment and the industry to increase their human capital.

However, Cassar (2014) noted that because of high task heterogeneity regarding business outcomes, firm owners cannot always rely on their experience to enhance their ability to forecast business performance or use their knowledge to improve the lack of regular feedback or their cognitive biases. Multiple factors determine firms' performance, so entrepreneurs cannot always use their experience to predict the business outcome accurately. However, experienced company owners can increase their human capital to improve the performance of their company. Therefore, people with an enhanced standard of literacy and human capital resources can increase their participation in start-up business activities to promote entrepreneurial development.

Entrepreneurs and other small business owners can succeed in their operations if they can access more funds to run their business and if they can broaden their sources of finance by acquiring nonbank credit (Cassar, 2014; Lawless, O'Connell, & O'Toole, 2014). Fraser, Bhaumik, and Wright (2015) contended that entrepreneurs who widen their resource pool to explore the links between bank and nonbank sources to complement their financial gaps could achieve enterprise growth. By acquiring external financing, small business owners can change the dynamics of their firms and enhance their capacity to compete effectively (Bottazzi, Secchi, & Tamagni, 2014). In effect, small firm owners, who can mobilize adequate resources, can sustain longer-term business operations.

Bank loans constitute the largest source of funding for small firms operating in Ireland, but when compared to the other EU countries, Irish SMEs do not primarily access formal bank debt to run their businesses (O'Toole et al., 2015). Lawless, O'Toole, and Lambert (2014) observed that start-up enterprise owners find it difficult to secure loans because they encounter difficulties convincing bank lenders about the quality of their business plans. Lenders at financial institutions are skeptical of new firms because start-up companies lack sufficient history of transactions to back up their applications, and it takes a long time to build a reputation. To bank lenders, the costs of assessing and monitoring small companies are enough of a disincentive to not process loan applications. Entrepreneurs who understand their business's life cycle and who scrutinize different investment markets to fill the funding gaps performed better in commercial activities (Fraser et al., 2015). In effect, small firm owners could explore others sources to fund their companies.

Small business entrepreneurs who cannot obtain adequate financing for their companies risk a liquidity crisis, high debt burden, reduced operational outcomes, and possible liquidation (Lawless, O'Toole, et al., 2014). An inverse relationship exists between high debt burden and small firms' performance (Lawless, O'Toole, et al., 2014). O'Toole et al. (2015) noted that inadequate funding constitutes a huge obstacle to the success of Irish small businesses and increases their loan default rates. By seeking both working capital and investment funding from banks, small firms in Ireland become susceptible to credit supply shocks (O'Toole et al., 2015). During the period of economic boom in Ireland, increased demand for bank credit, coupled with relaxed standards, resulted in high SME loan defaults (Lawless & McCann, 2013). Therefore, as banks tighten credit requirements, entrepreneurs and other small business owners need to diversify their funding bases to secure funds to maintain business operations.

Lawless, McCann, and O'Toole (2013) observed that about 50% of Irish companies stopped using bank loans between 2005 and 2012 to finance either working capital or investment because of both supply and demand factors. Since the banks imposed stringent conditions in the approval process, fewer businesses approached the banks for credit, yet some small firm owners have not accessed available alternative sources. In Ireland, borrower discouragement was another reason for the poor business financing, as some small business owners are unwilling to approach financial institutions for loans. Gerlach-Kristen, O'Connell, and O'Toole (2015) noted that some entrepreneurs are reluctant to apply for loans because they fear that bank lenders will reject their applications.

Another major obstacle to small firms' efforts to acquire finance for their operations is the introduction of personal guarantee requirement for securing bank credit. Bank lenders sometimes stipulate preconditions to produce personal guarantees, especially with smaller, riskier, and more opaque borrowers and with new applications (Carroll, McCann, & O'Toole, 2015). A personal guarantee is one of the measures to safeguard bank lending and provide some collateral. However, the credit constraints imposed by bank lenders hurt small companies, make funding difficult for them, and undermine their growth. It is essential for small firm entrepreneurs to discover other methods of raising capital for their businesses because the lack of credit financing can hinder business success.

Small companies can survive in the short or immediate term if the entrepreneurs redesign their existing work systems to respond to economic pressures and seek alternative sources of finance. Entrepreneurs can develop and adopt strategies to manage their business costs that strain their companies' finances. Roche and Teague (2014) noted that determined and persistent entrepreneurs and other small business owners should reassess their challenges and introduce significant measures to cut their overhead costs to survive economic challenges.

Various informal (nonbank) business finance options are available to SMEs operating in Europe to reduce their funding gaps. Some of the nonbank financing options in the European common currency area (eurozone countries) are trade credit, peer-to-peer lending, issued debt, family and friends, and partnerships in business (O'Toole et al., 2015). Other finance options available to small firms in the European common currency area include mezzanine debt to supplement working capital and equity investments such as venture capital and business angels. Crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending are new borrowing alternatives that have a potential to expand over time. Crowdfunding is a form of business financing in which a large number of people contribute various sums of money to fund a business venture, and is useful for entrepreneurs of small enterprises in the early stages who are looking to raise modest amounts of capital (Lawless et al., 2014). Peer-to-peer lending is a way of assisting small businesses through granting of a loan from another company or individual to support the recipients' business activities.

Lawless et al. (2014) explained the need to provide financial education and advice to entrepreneurs of SBEs to increase their awareness of equity financing options and to guide them toward looking for capital contribution in equity and away from bank credit sources. How small firm owners access and secure business finance depends on their professional experience, age, gender, and social status (Boyer & Blazy, 2014). O'Toole et al. (2015) suggested creating a miniSME bond market in Ireland and introducing initiatives targeted at investors that will promote the creation of investment options in local businesses to increase the equity structure or long-term financing for small companies. Social connections are important to explore the opportunities of securing funding for small enterprises. Irish small firm owners can benefit from various nonbank financing and from special arrangements that include prolonged microfinance schemes offering maximum loans, longer repayment durations, and flexible repayment terms.

Small enterprises in Ireland are employment intensive, predominantly indigenous firms, drivers of private sector commercial activities, and sustainers of the domestic economy. Irish small companies are large generators of employment (European Commission, 2016a, 2016b), similar to small businesses in the United States, which provided 48% of the private sector jobs in 2013 (U.S. SBA, 2016). In Asia, small firms accounted for over half of the new jobs in 2012 (Amoah-Mensah, 2013). However, despite the significant contributions of SBEs in Ireland, there are no specific policies to protect small firms' activities. Retail small business owners, especially in food and hardware, face a serious threat from larger corporations operating in the competitive open economy with a large number of transnational corporations (Lawless, O'Toole, et al., 2014). Lawless, O'Toole, et al. suggested the need to develop strategies to protect and increase the financial stability of small firms to create a vibrant SBE subsector for stimulating countries' economies.

Irish government leaders introduced a medium-term developmental plan (2014–2020) in 2013 to increase capital market funding, institutional investments, and alternative financing to facilitate enterprise activities (O'Toole et al., 2015). According to O'Toole et al., the purpose for medium-term developmental policy was to provide alternative channels for acquiring business funding for small companies, but this initiative did not go far enough in solving the problems of SBEs. The industrial policy designed to attract foreign direct investment did not include programs to promote indigenous firms within the context of the Irish economy (Bailey & Lenihan, 2015). Bouette and Magee (2015) noted that the objectives of public support programs must align with the needs of micro firm proprietors to augment their abilities to succeed in their small business practices in Dublin. The Irish government developed an industrial policy initiative to attract foreign direct investment, but the plan had no clear strategies to support local Irish small businesses (Lawless, O'Toole, et al., 2014). Small firm owners in Ireland operate under the influence of big corporations, and they lack the capacity to establish an enduring entrepreneurship and small business development agenda for the country.

The absence of transnational corporation-led broad-based economy-wide enterprise activities affects the development of a vibrant indigenous entrepreneurship culture in Ireland. However, other mitigating circumstances may have prevented the multiplier effect of a cluster of companies. Lawless, O'Toole, et al. (2014) noted that small Irish producers avoid markets dominated by bigger corporations and do not compete directly with transnational corporations. By avoiding certain markets or clients, indigenous Irish company owners are limiting their prospect of increasing sales and profits.

Small firm owners with modest financial resources and little access to credit facilities, but who have well-composed business teams, can compete effectively in markets and become successful (Brannon, Wiklund, & Haynie, 2013). The relationships that new companies present at inception can be enduring and affect the direction and potential growth of the enterprise. Family relations have a potential implication on companies' performance during the formative years of entrepreneurship, and the composition of businesses' founding teams influences the initial sales volumes (Brannon et al., 2013). Brannon et al. observed that couples in business, either married or house sharing, are more likely to achieve viable initial sales volume than blood-related teams. Cohabiting couples can work together to make sales, as they are more flexible and adaptive in their roles as entrepreneurs and as a family. According to Brannon et al. (2013), biologically related teams are likely to encounter role conflicts because of the salient and rigid nature of a traditional family role. Therefore, business teams with less acrimonious relationships can form a more competitive force to achieve sustainable performance.

The ability of entrepreneurs, particularly women, to influence and implement changes in a firm depends on the work–family culture of the enterprise and the female proprietor's personal status in the company. The family-friendly policy of a firm can determine the extent to which women entrepreneurs can shape the policies of the business (Adkins, Samaras, Gilfillan, & McWee, 2013). The structure and composition of a small company's ownership determine the nature of cooperation among the managing partners, and the synergy in the owners' harmonious relationship can result in business success even for firms with few resources (Brandon et al., 2013). Therefore, at inception, small start-up business owners must establish an enterprise culture to support the implementation of strategic policies to enhance performance and must select teams that will ensure harmony (Adkins et al., 2013).

Dynamics of Small Business Enterprises

Small businesses in most countries share common characteristics, particularly regarding their large numbers and their role in growing the economy. Small firms undergo similar experiences concerning their formation and operational lifecycles. Therefore, reviewing the nature, dynamics, and conditions under which SBEs operate could be helpful in understanding the elements that influence small firms' performance. Small venture businesses operate in large numbers and are net generators of employment in several countries. In 2014, about 98% of the companies in the nonfinancial sector in the European Union were SMEs and were responsible for providing 90 million jobs, representing 67% of total employment in the nonfinancial sector (European Commission, 2016b). The small companies accounted for 67% of the total jobs from all sectors, and 71.4% of the increase in employment. In the United States, small businesses represented 63.3% net new jobs creation from 1992 to 2013 (U.S. SBA, 2016).

In Ireland, the issue of net employment generation is not the same as in the United States, as approximately one new small business replaces two failed small companies (Forfas, 2013). Therefore, to maintain the growth of employment in Ireland, it is essential to discover strategies to improve the sustainability and success of small ventures. The nature and structure of a firm relates to the dynamics of its operations. The criteria for categorizing companies into different groups include annual turnover, size, capital structure, and the number of workers engaged. The three broad categories of businesses operating in the European Union are SBEs, which include micro and small firms, medium-sized companies, and large organizations. SBEs are commercial units that employ from one to 50 workers.

In 2014, SBEs in the EU accounted for 20.4% of jobs and contributed 18.2% of the value added in the EU (European Commission, 2016b). Micro business enterprises are much smaller companies among SBEs that hire 10 or fewer employees. In 2014, European micro businesses constituted 93% of all SMEs and accounted for 29.2% of total employment and 21.1% of total valued added in the EU (European Commission, 2016b). Medium-sized enterprises employ 51 to 249 workers and operate within the SME sector, while large corporations have 250 or more employees. The medium-sized companies provided 17.4% of employment and 18.7% of value added in Europe in 2014 (European Commission, 2016b).

In 2014, the Irish SME sector, which comprised 155,751 enterprises and 828,020 workers, was one of the most active in the EU and contributed 57.8% of the country's total gross value added (European Commission, 2016a). The three component units that constitute the SME sector are micro firms, SBEs, and medium-sized companies. The business units mainly affected by the research problem of this study are SBEs, which are companies with less than 50 employees; these companies were the focus of this study.

Small business ventures play an important role in private sector enterprise and economic development. Therefore, it is crucial to explore strategies to improve the rate of small business survival and success beyond the start-up years in business (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014).

Small business owners encounter challenging moments during the initial years of operation, and most small companies struggle to contend with adverse conditions that threaten their survival. Approximately 50% of the small businesses operating in Ireland failed during the initial 5 years of operation between 2007 and 2012 (CSO, 2014a), which was similar to the rate of small firm failure in the United States between 2007 and 2013 (U.S. SBA, 2016). Some small business proprietors do not prepare adequately before startup and lack the support, resources, and strategies necessary to sustain successful transactions beyond 5 years.

Enterprise failures are sometimes inevitable natural events that are unavoidable. Ucbasaran, Shepherd, Lockett, and Lyon (2013) observed that where there are uncertainties, business failures can be unavoidable. In effect, business failures are not an aberration but a natural process of the market system, and in a typical business environment, enterprise development and failure are a normal process of business evolution. However, small firm owners can increase their chances of survival by developing firm-specific competitive strategies to outperform rivals (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). In effect, small business proprietors who plan carefully, prepare adequately, and develop effective strategies can manage a commercial enterprise over a longer term.

Small business owners who engage in collaboration practices during the formative stages of their companies' development between 2 and 8 years of operation engage in activities that can improve their chances of survival. Collaboration is crucial to sustaining continuous operation, but small firm owners in Europe are unable to participate in collaborative agreements because of entrepreneurial issues, enterprise characteristics, and operating market environment conditions (Kim & Vonortas, 2014). Well-educated entrepreneurs and other small business owners use their networks, experience, and better judgment to obtain collaborative support to identify market risk and capitalize on the rapidly changing technology to benefit their businesses (Kim & Vonortas, 2014). Small firm owners who can leverage their extensive networks to form business alliances can survive the difficult early years of business. Therefore, for SBEs to succeed, entrepreneurs must understand their firms' dynamics and learn to develop appropriate strategies that suit their circumstances to manage their companies effectively (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014).

Strategies and Practices for Business Success

Small business entrepreneurs and other small business owners who adopt appropriate strategies, implement the right policies, and engage in good practices can perform credibly in business to sustain commercial activities and remain profitable beyond 5 years. Small firm owners combine both character and perseverance to manage crises efficiently, and *entrepreneurial persistence* is a practical strategy that small firm proprietors use to develop resilience to sustain operation and persevere in difficult situations (Liñán et al., 2013). It would be logical to ask what determines strategic persistence in the face of potential business failure and how persistent entrepreneurs manage difficult times. Persistence is the tenacity to follow through on a set path and to continue along a particular course of action to accomplish a goal, regardless of the difficulties faced (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Liñán et al., 2013).

The intensity of entrepreneurs' persistence determines the differences in the levels of their enterprise activities (Liñán et al., 2013). The two sources through which entrepreneurial and other small business owners' persistence originates are the paradox of success and the fear of failure (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). The paradox of success refers to people's beliefs regarding why and how success happens, the conviction that nothing great occurs without effort, and the mind-set that people must keep working to succeed until they achieve their goals (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Entrepreneurs with a paradox of success mind-set, like individuals with a high internal locus of control (Sandberg et al., 2013), are relentless in their quest to succeed and are persistent because they believe their actions determine the outcome.

The fear of failure makes people persistent, as small firm owners cannot afford to fail because remaining in business was their best chance to earn a living, and so, they develop resilience and continue trying. Some entrepreneurs become persistent because they have investments in the company that are too large to consider quitting (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Small firm owners are in unpredictable business environments, and should develop strategies to overcome cycles of major challenges to business operation (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015). Resilience, perseverance, and persistence in times of difficulty are practical management policies that stem from entrepreneurs' mindset and useful strategies for preventing and managing firm-specific or industry-specific problems to remain in business.

To manage their companies successfully and improve performance, entrepreneurs and other small business owners can develop strategies to improve their enterprises' outcomes by learning from the failures of either themselves or others or by engaging in training activities. Business owners can draw on the expertise gathered from people's unfortunate experiences to develop success strategies without compromising values (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Incidents of business failure are upsetting and sometimes inevitable, but the lessons to learn from the bad experience are not always negative.

Individuals who learn from the failure of others can obtain information crucial to enterprise success and gain potential strategies for survival, thereby benefiting from unsuccessful entrepreneurship (Testa & Frascheri, 2015). The social-psychological process of learning from the outcomes of an unsuccessful enterprise is perhaps the most valuable lesson from an experience of business failure (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). By learning from entrepreneurs' failure experiences, especially those in a related trade, sector, industry, or environment, small business owners can develop strategies that can help them to survive.

To foster sustainability and small business development, small business owners can engage in formal learning to discover strategies for business success. Teaching entrepreneurship to aspiring individuals in a formal setup is critical in preparing potential future entrepreneurs to manage different entrepreneurial situations. Testa and Frascheri (2015) concluded that the most efficient way to teach enterprise education is in schools and in stages to young people, with the initial phase focusing on providing a deeper insight into learning about self-employment to develop a positive attitude toward entrepreneurship. Therefore, as young people are learning about entrepreneurship in school to apply to future practice, existing business owners can improve their knowledge by participating in entrepreneurship courses to benefit from training.

Developing entrepreneurial competence through personal experience takes time and involves trial and error, but engaging in formal active learning can facilitate a direct transfer of the requisite knowledge and skills peculiar to current managerial challenges. Training helps to improve managerial competence to enhance competitiveness in entrepreneurship (Alasadi & Al Sabbagh, 2015). Small firm owners can acquire vital knowledge by receiving training from entrepreneurship centers and academic institutions (Heriot, Jauregui, Huning, & Harris, 2014). There is a statistically significant relationship between training in marketing and new start-up performance, and business owners and managers perceive training positively (Alasadi & Al Sabbagh, 2015). To maximize the knowledge transfer process, educators responsible for teaching entrepreneurship courses in institutions must have requisite knowledge and qualifications in the related field (Heriot et al., 2014). Exploring training options from the beginning of the commercial activities can help start-up companies to acquire the necessary competencies to manage challenging situations.

Firm owners who manage the incubation stages of new venture creation increase their chances to survive in the long-term business practice (Testa & Frascheri, 2015). Apart from enrolling in training centers or academic institutions for courses in entrepreneurship, another way small firm owners can develop their managerial abilities is through participation in entrepreneurial advancement programs. Entrepreneurs who participate in coordinated entrepreneurship programs develop their core competencies to help them develop the capacity to identify potential opportunities to gain a competitive advantage (Chang, Liu, & Chiang, 2014). Through blended learning techniques and cooperative programs, business owners can acquire knowledge that will add value to their commercial experience.

Collaborative schemes such as the partnership between experienced entrepreneurs and other stakeholders can enhance the capitalization of shared skills, competencies, and resources (Thatcher, Alao, Brown, & Choudharya, 2016). Knowledge transfer takes place among small venture entrepreneurs operating in an environment where people engage in cooperative and collaborative projects to help one another and share facilities. Small firm owners working in specific locations can support each other with resources by participating in programs such as an evolving learning community. The evolving learning community is an informal but sophisticated knowledge-acquisition process that is effective for exchanging information within a local environment. An evolving learning community helps to facilitate the movement of expertise to and from the participating community and to generate networks and new thoughts for the bigger group (Reinl & Kelliher, 2014). Therefore, small firm entrepreneurs and other small business owners can engage in a collective action to improve their competence and to resolve the challenges facing individual members in a cooperating group to overcome crises and achieve business success.

An active entrepreneurial strategy for small firms' survival and continuity in operation is for the owners to diversify their loan portfolio to include both formal and informal finance sources, as well as nonfinancial assistance. Small company owners can enhance their capacity to compete effectively by supplementing their equity capital to sustain continuous operation (Bottazzi et al., 2014). Therefore, to achieve enterprise growth, Lawless, O'Connell, et al. (2014) suggested that entrepreneurs and other small business owners should examine the linkages between bank and nonbank sources to widen their resource pool to reduce their financial gaps.

Successful small firm owners mobilize funds from diverse sources to sustain operations and compete in the market (Lawless, O'Connell, et al., 2014). Inadequate financing constitutes a major obstacle to small business survival, but entrepreneurs who overcome their funding constraints can compete effectively in the market (Boyer & Blazy, 2014; Lawless, O'Connell, et al., 2014; Lawless, O'Toole, et al., 2014; O'Toole et al., 2015). Nonbank business investments such as trade credit, peer-to-peer lending, issued debt, or loans from family and friends are some options available to European small businesses.

Apart from obtaining training support and financial assistance, entrepreneurs can seek support through mentorship programs or concessions of flexibility on certain requirements or conditions. Small firm owners can also receive help from experts in sector associations, national government, and financial institutions (Pinho & Sampaio, 2014). In Ireland, advisors provide facilities with a broad range of options to assist small company owners, including business advisory services (McKevitt & Marshall, 2015).

Consultants and support agencies help small business owners assess their competencies' spectra and guide small firm proprietors to understand the temporal cycle of traditional recruitment (Darcy, Hill, McCabe, & McGovern, 2014). In effect, entrepreneurs defer to an expert to help them determine the optimum level of workers to save cost and improve performance. Experts also assist small firm owners in analyzing the knowledge base of their companies and understanding the dynamics of their industry or sector to know the best practices for firms of their size to facilitate better performance.

Entrepreneurs can explore new business opportunities to improve performance, and the government can assist in small ventures by creating an enabling environment in which to operate. New business opportunities exist in every environment, and small firm entrepreneurs who can identify previously unknown openings can enhance their competitive advantage to improve performance. Firm owners with robust networks, relevant previous business experience, potential customer knowledge, and family support can develop strategies to capitalize on new business opportunities to become successful (Pinho & Sampaio, 2014). Talented entrepreneurs who know when to seek, where to look, and how to capitalize on market gaps can identify opportunities and exploit them to the maximum benefit.

Entrepreneurs' social resourcing enhances their capacity to predict future market expectations. Competent firm owners who know where to look to find rare business opportunities and when to act to benefit from occasional breaks can outcompete rivals (Keating, Geiger, & McLoughlin, 2015). Apart from exploring new business outlets, collaborating with bigger and more established corporations is also vital for small companies' success. In Ireland, the state's policy to leverage the technology sector and to encourage collaboration between the firms and other stakeholders operating in the area paved the way for the growth of the industry (Andreosso-O'Callaghan, Lenihan, & Reidy, 2014). Small venture entrepreneurs can liaison with their local enterprise agencies for assistance and advice on how to obtain support for their companies and to seek collaboration with big corporations for mentorship.

Small firm entrepreneurs who develop their social networks and entrepreneurial competencies, and who follow others' leads or experience personal trials and errors can improve their ability to identify and exploit opportunities to beat the competition (Keating et al., 2015). Entrepreneurs use their networking skills to acquire knowledge on core aspects of business management to facilitate successful entrepreneurial activities (Egeraat & Curran, 2014; Foley & O'Connor, 2013). Irish small ventures are predominantly indigenous companies whose owners artificially insulate their businesses against a perceived threat by refusing to operate in a similar marketplace or to compete for customers the same way that larger multinational enterprises do (Darcy et al., 2014). Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) advised small firm owners to continue to improve the quality of their products or service and seek better strategies to compete favorably in any market to succeed.

Exploiting the opportunities in the market requires the interplay of skills, social dynamics, meaningful context, serendipity (Keating et al., 2015), entrepreneurs' experiences, and the system that operates within the social circle (Egeraat & Curran, 2014). Small venture owners can use technology, especially information technology (IT), to facilitate business activities and achieve positive results (Pollard & Morales, 2015). Lawless, O'Toole, et al. (2014) noted that Irish entrepreneurs and other small business owners can improve performance by competing effectively in the domestic environment and expanding their operations to other markets within the EU.

Innovation is critical to business survival, and several elements influence the level of innovativeness in organizations. Through assimilation, entrepreneurs can acquire knowledge at the firm level that can act as catalysts to innovation (McAdam, Reid, & Shevlin, 2014). Small firm owners can achieve competitive advantage by using their superior managerial capability to leverage resources more rapidly than their rivals or other new start-up companies (Kearney, Harrington, & Kelliher, 2014). Proactive business owners who are adaptive to changes, develop networks, and invest in new ideas can develop revolutionary concepts to predict changing trends in society and act swiftly to benefit from evolutions (Eshima & Anderson, 2017).

Innovativeness is an essential attribute in gaining a competitive edge to facilitate business success (Wales, 2016). However, Boyer and Blazy (2014) cautioned that innovation does not always positively influence small firms' performance during the early years of operations. The two key attributes that engender entrepreneurial innovativeness are *open-mindedness* and *collaboration* (Fitjar, Gielsvik, & Rodriguez-Pose, 2013). Open-minded entrepreneurs collaborate more with bigger corporations or international partners in a mutually beneficial way, and the regional, national, or international locations of the partners determine the nature of the collaboration.

Small business owners can improve their firms' performance by using their management expertise and experience to rationalize and maximize their companies' resources. Small firm owners can use knowledge management to succeed in their market by offering dedicated services to their customers. Knowledge management is an effective strategy for managing organizations' internal resources to enhance performance (Khadir-Poggi & Keating, 2014). Small company proprietors can endure multiple business cycles and remain competitive by continuously improving both their internal and external knowledge assets (Huggins & Weir, 2012). Therefore, small business proprietors can use knowledge management strategies to improve their performance to remain in operation.

To expedite the benefits of knowledge management practices, small company owners must direct their focus on customer needs, quality service, and effective marketing to reinforce their success. Small business entrepreneurs who develop new and profitable products or services or alter their existing business to meet customers' needs and expectations and maintain low costs of production are likely to survive. Some clients are willing to pay a slightly higher price for a specific product, and entrepreneurs who can identify a group's particular needs and meet their expectations can perform and grow, even in challenging market environments (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014).

Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) concluded that an effective competitive strategy involves delivering a specific product to meet the particular needs of a certain targeted group, creating a reputation in the market, and charging a slightly higher price to buy the product. Small business entrepreneurs who manage their company assets efficiently and service their customers competently can achieve operational success (Khadir-Poggi &

Keating, 2014). Therefore, to succeed beyond the first 5 years of beginning business, it is essential for small firm owners to galvanize their personal attributes, maximize company structures, and if feasible, efficiently address external elements affecting their businesses' operating environments.

Transition

The purpose of this explorative case study was to explore the strategies small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The introductory parts of this section included an outline of the foundation and the background of the research, as well as the problem and purpose statements. After the statements, I presented the nature of the study and the research and interview questions, followed by the conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The literature review followed the outline of the significance of the study, and the topics discussed included start-up ventures, the different phases of entrepreneurial development, and the factors that drive entrepreneurship. There was also an analysis of the characteristics of individuals who have successfully transitioned from a nascent to a start-up venture. The other topics in this section were opportunity and necessity entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial developments, and small businesses dynamics. Lastly, I presented the highlights of some of the strategies small firm owners can use to succeed in business and the current models discussed in the literature. There were some clear inconsistencies in the literature regarding small business success strategies, and some of the sources were complex. However, conducting the literature review made it possible to discover various studies that had different outcomes, and that provided additional useful information for my study.

The discussions in Section 2 include justification for choosing the qualitative method and an explorative case study design for conducting the research. Furthermore, Section 2 includes a depiction of the population and sampling method, the instruments and procedure for collecting and analyzing data, and the data organization techniques. Section 2 also includes discussions of the methods for ensuring data reliability and validity. Section 3 begins with the presentation of an overview of the study's findings, including the introductory notes, purpose statement, research question, and findings. Section 3 also includes applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and further study. Section 3 concludes with a presentation of reflections, a summary, and a statement of my conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes the details of the research process and procedure for gathering and analyzing data. The discussions include a delineation of the target population, a synopsis of the survey participants, and a justification for the sample size and sampling method. Section 2 also includes an explicit description of the research method and design, as well as the data collection instruments and techniques. Furthermore, this section includes statements that address the methods I used to ensure I conducted the research process ethically, as well as details for ensuring the dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of my study’s findings and conclusions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, explorative case study was to explore what strategies small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The specific population of my study consisted of successful small venture entrepreneurs operating in Lucan, County Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. I selected three small business proprietors in Lucan to interview who demonstrated experience developing and implementing strategies to address the specific business problem of sustaining their small businesses beyond 5 years.

The result of this study may be useful to start-up entrepreneurs, leaders of firms facing challenges, and people aspiring to self-employment. This study will be a reference document that includes success strategies for small firm entrepreneurs to invest successfully and contribute knowledge for business practitioners and academics. The results of this might bring about positive social change as the improved success of small businesses may result in employment of more people, better welfare and standards of living for employees, and more revenue. The multiplier effect of successful enterprise practices may lead to wider prosperity and result in benefits for the country.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers in a qualitative study are significant contributors to the process and serve as the primary human instrument for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Researchers are active contributors in a qualitative study who create a mirror image of the research objects in their consciousness and interpret how they make sense of it (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) contended that investigators as human instruments engage in a process similar to calibration in a scientific experiment. In a qualitative study, new and inexperienced researchers, when calibrating, lean toward being either research centered or informant centered (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). The closeness of novice researchers to either of the two states depends on how they identify with four dimensions: their knowledge of the phenomenon, the participants' responses, the information they seek, and type of data they gather (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Personal biases in qualitative studies can affect the trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions depending on how researchers seek, collect, and process information, any of which can affect data interpretation. Personal biases may arise from writers' beliefs and values, their history with their search topic, and their demographic paradigms (Pezalla et al., 2012; Smith & Noble, 2014).

Research bias is a systematic error in a study that can occur at any stage of the process due to omission or commission that has a potential to affect the result and cause distortion in the outcome (Smith & Noble, 2014; Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). Incidents of bias can occur with all types of research methods, which can affect the validity and reliability of research (Smith & Noble, 2014). Researchers using a quantitative method can use statistical testing to calculate approximately the size of the error in the sample and the significance of the outcome (Smith & Noble, 2014). Qualitative researchers can use random sampling to reduce selection bias, although sample bias sometimes occurs when the responses of those who are not the respondents can affect the findings (Smith & Noble, 2014). Smith and Noble contended that employing purposive sampling could help to reduce bias when using a qualitative method because of the purposeful way the researchers draw the sample for the study. The researcher as the human instrument plays the dual roles of being the observer and the participant in a qualitative approach, and each function and the balance between them can cause bias (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015).

As the researcher of this study, I was a human instrument and my roles were to select the appropriate research method, choose a suitable design, and draw the sample of participants. Researchers can minimize personal bias in qualitative research through the process of bracketing, which means setting aside any personal bias, values, and judgments during the process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I sorted, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted the data and then drew conclusions addressing the research question. I maintained neutrality and avoided personal prejudice throughout the process to mitigate any biases as an observer and contributor to ensure my study was trustworthy.

I have neither owned nor worked in an SBE and did not associate with any of the participants before the commencement of the research, except for the purpose of establishing a rapport for the study. Qualitative researchers engage their respondent directly, and the ensuing interaction provides a broader understanding of a wider range of issues from the participants' perspectives (Bernard, 2013). The primary source of data collection for this research was face-to-face interviews, and I adhered strictly to the research protocol to ensure the validity and reliability of my study. The face-to-face interview technique is useful for collecting an accurate picture of the event in a qualitative study by facilitating the participants' contribution to the process that leads to the emergence of themes (DeCeunynck, Kusumastuti, Hannes, Janssens, & Wets, 2013; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). DeCeunynck et al. (2013) noted that when researchers adhere to interview protocols, they gain consistency in order to achieve dependability and reduce the possible occurrence of problems during the process. I abided strictly by the guidelines for ethical conduct regarding human subjects of research and by the rules regarding respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

I audio recorded and transcribed the participants' responses verbatim and took notes on all the interviews, as I used the same open-ended questions for each participant. I conducted the follow-up conversations in line with the interview procedure, and as Snelgrove (2014) suggested to researchers to minimize biases as an observer, I used the bracketing technique. Standard practices for mitigating bias during information gathering and data analysis are memo writing, keeping a well-updated reflective journal, and engaging the role of a third party to help identify the researcher's preconceptions (Snelgrove, 2014). I took notes and wrote memos during information gathering and throughout the duration of the study. Qualitative case study researchers can reduce biases, especially those concerning reliability and construct validity, at the stages of collecting and analyzing data (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) noted that investigators could also reduce bias by preserving a strict chain of evidence, conducting thorough observation, and using multiple sources. Researchers can mitigate bias and enhance reliability in data analysis by matching patterns, building explanations, and providing clarification of the repeated account of particular details of the phenomenon. It is important for researchers to explain their methods to ensure the validity and reliability of their studies and to state the potential effect of their self-awareness and personal reflection in a qualitative study.

Participants

The participants were three small firm entrepreneurs operating in Lucan, County Dublin, Ireland, who employ from one to 50 workers, and who have maintained profitable operations beyond the first 5 years of opening their businesses. I used purposive sampling to select participants from the target population. The purposeful sampling technique is a sample selection method used to choose study participants deliberately to achieve a reasonable representation of the targeted category of respondents (Smith & Noble, 2014). After receiving Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct my study, I chose three potential participants and contacted them separately to request their participation in the study formally, and I subsequently asked them to sign a written informed consent form. I did not disclose any of the participants or their companies' names or provide any other description that could make them identifiable.

Results bias can occur when people feel pressured to respond in a certain way, which can affect the credibility of research (DeCeunynck et al., 2013). Therefore, before choosing the participants, it was important to address the issues that could generate a lack of confidence or make respondents feel uneasy. I did not select individuals with whom I had any connection. I clearly disclosed the purpose and methodology of the research to each participant. I also assured the participants that I would maintain their privacy and confidentiality, which I believe facilitated open and honest answers (see the interview protocol in Appendix A). The process of sample selection involved contacting the prospective participants and requesting their consent to participate. After obtaining IRB approval, I visited with potential participants to inform them about the research and their selection as possible contributors. I then followed up with a telephone call for those who agreed to contribute to the study. Subsequently, I maintained communication with the respondents by phone and text messages to remind them of their interview date, as well as to establish rapport.

Research Method and Design

The research protocol I used in this study included the qualitative method and an explorative case study design. I reviewed three research methods and five designs to determine which approach was appropriate for this study. I selected the qualitative method and case study design because of the nature of the research question.

Research Method

The primary objective for choosing a research method is to find answers to research questions using an appropriate approach (Reiter et al., 2011). The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. According to Reiter et al. (2011), choosing one research method over another depends on the research problem, the problem statement, and the research question. Qualitative researchers interact with a select sample of participants among a target population within the context of their natural environment (Bernard, 2013; Yin, 2014). The use of numerical, statistical, or computational data to investigate a phenomenon and extract information is the procedural process in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The quantitative method involves examining quantities, frequencies, and effect sizes, as well as forming and testing hypotheses. Researchers can also use quantitative measurements and instrumentation with the protocols of qualitative investigation to examine a phenomenon in a mixed methods research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Erlingsson, & Brysiewicz, 2013).

As Reiter et al. (2011) described the research process, I adopted the qualitative method as the appropriate approach after considering the research question, problem statement, and nature of the research problem. The qualitative approach is appropriate when the plan is to gather original and context-intensive data from participants at the center of a phenomenon (Yin, 2014). A qualitative researcher engages directly with the respondents and asks them questions to broaden their understanding of a wider range of issues (Bernard, 2013; Reiter et al., 2011). In general, research questions for a qualitative design are open-ended and include *how* and *what* questions to explore a phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The qualitative method is suitable to understand participants' experiences with their businesses (Humphrey, 2014; Minai & Lucky, 2012). Therefore, the qualitative method was the most appropriate approach to explore what strategies small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years.

Research Design

A research design is the logical process of data collection and analysis in a study that provides the means for linking data with the research conclusions (Baskarada, 2014). A research design is a particular technique for conducting a study that includes the details of the plan to collect and analyze data. The most common qualitative designs are phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, grounded theory, and case study (Yin, 2014). The research design that I considered most appropriate for this study was the case study design. Using an explorative case study design, I was able to address the research question to obtain insights into the research problem. As Radley and Chamberlain (2012) noted, researchers can use an explorative multiple case study design to study a phenomenon from different individuals' perspectives, separate cases, and various sources. Following the process described by Heale and Forbes (2013), I collected data from multiple sources, including the face-to-face interviews and secondary sources such as extant literature and data from business records. The expectation from using a qualitative explorative case study design is to identify the procedures that can facilitate an inquiry into the phenomenon to address the research question (Yin, 2014). I conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants and I asked open-ended questions using a semistructured format. The open-ended semistructured interview format included both formal and informal components. I used scripted questions to focus on areas to address and then used unscripted follow-up questions to conduct further probes.

Conversely, a phenomenological design would involve studying a heterogeneous group of people to reflect the subjects' account of their personal and lived experiences of a phenomenon (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). However, the phenomenological design was not suitable for this research because the focus was not learning from participants' lived experiences but rather understanding the strategies the entrepreneurs used to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The ethnographic design is a research process for studying the shared and learned patterns of behavior of a cultural group, including an exploration of their beliefs and language (Bernard, 2013). Ethnography involves studying a group by observing participants' daily lives with a phenomenon in their natural setting (Yin, 2014). However, the purpose of this research was not to study patterns of a group's behaviors or to learn about entrepreneurs' daily lives, and so an ethnographic design was not appropriate. A narrative design is useful when the focus of a study is just one individual or a particular group to examine experiences and stories for a specific timeline, usually presented in chronological order (Yin, 2014). Grounded theory is typically a design used to develop a theory to explore patterns of experiences with a social phenomenon where previous research is sparse (Engward, 2013). From the review of five research designs, I concluded that the most suitable procedure to explore the research problem within the context of the small firm environment in Lucan, County Dublin, was the case study design.

One primary consideration in selecting a research design is how to achieve data saturation to ensure the validity of findings and conclusions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Qualitative researchers using the case study design can reach data saturation by narrowing their sample size, selecting qualified participants to interview, and conducting follow-up interviews, by either member checking or transcript review (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Therefore, to achieve data saturation in this study, I narrowed the sample size to three entrepreneurs. By limiting the number of participants to three, I focused on each respondent to collect sufficient information on the research problem to achieve data saturation. Similarly, I gathered quality data that were useful in addressing the research problem by interviewing qualified personnel who were the owners and managers of their companies and were responsible for decisions affecting the business. I conducted follow-up interviews and used member checking to enhance the study's quality and to achieve data saturation.

Population and Sampling

The general characteristics of the population were consistent with the purpose of the research, and the site of the study was a focal point in the process. The population of my study consisted of successful small firm entrepreneurs operating in Lucan, County Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. The sample of participants for the research consisted of three small firm proprietors who demonstrated experience in developing and implementing strategies for addressing the specific business problem. The business problem of this research was that small firm entrepreneurs often lack the strategies to succeed in business for more than 5 years. Therefore, the focus of this study was to learn the strategies that three successful small business owners in Lucan, County Dublin, used to sustain profitable commercial operations beyond 5 years. Purposeful sampling is suitable to select participants from the target population to interview to learn from their expertise on the phenomenon in their natural environment (Bernard, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Nyman, Ballinger, Phillips, and Newton (2013) explained that the purposive sampling method is useful when the subjects of interest are rare or few within the population. Nag and Gioia (2012) and Seawright, Smith, Mitchell, and McClendon (2013) used a purposive sampling technique to draw the list of participants in their independent research. In both case studies, the researchers investigated the respondents' experience of particular phenomena. For instance, in exploring operators' experience with changes in the aftermath of the evolution of the metal casting industry in the United States, Nag and Gioia used the purposeful sample selection method to draw the participants for their research. Seawright et al. adopted the purposive sampling technique to explore what similarities existed in management practices between franchise owners and types of firm managers, who were entrepreneurs or were not entrepreneurs. The outcomes of the case studies indicated that purposeful sampling was a useful method of choosing a particular cohort for an interview in a qualitative case study.

In this study, each of the three participants was an owner of a distinct business, and I conducted separate interviews with each at different times. In a qualitative study, the researcher increases the sample size as long as new themes keep emerging until data saturation occurs (Yin, 2014). Three participants can be adequate for a qualitative explorative case study to gather sufficient data (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) noted that it is possible to produce quality research that will be reliable and valuable with just a few individual participants without looking for a broad cross section. To achieve data saturation, I purposively selected and interviewed three participants, who were owners, managers, and decision makers of their businesses and who had successful experience in solving the research problem. Following the description of O'Reilly and Parker (2013), I conducted repeat interviews to demonstrate data saturation after the initial three interviews, and I used member checking and transcript review. To encourage participants to answer the questions, I allowed them to choose the setting for their interviews.

Ethical Research

Research participants who are the object of the inquiry in a qualitative study require protection and respect, and it was imperative to treat them fairly. I strictly adhered to the guidelines and requirements for the research process for protecting human subjects and abided by all standards and ethics. At the onset of the study, I sought and obtained approval from Walden University's IRB number: 12-16-16-0499639 and complied with the ethics of research with human involvement as noted in the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). A researcher should conduct any study involving human beings in accordance with the tenets of three ground rules, which are respect of persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I requested and obtained the participants' consent to participate in the study. In compliance with the applicable ethical standards, the participants voluntarily signed written consent forms to express their willingness to contribute to the research. I stated and maintained the participants' rights to withhold their consent or to withdraw from the process at any time during the research without any consequences or repercussions. The participants could withdraw in person, in writing, or over the phone. There was no compensation or any incentive to the participants for their part in the research, and I avoided any act that would have induced or influenced their participation. There were no incidents involving participants withdrawing from the research, but if any participants had withdrawn from the study, they would have had access to their associated interview notes and recordings and a guarantee of privacy. As Yin (2014) suggested for researchers, I ensured strict privacy and confidentiality for all participants and adopted measures such as using aliases, pseudonyms, and codes to substitute for identifiable data.

Furthermore, I concealed names, locations, dates, and other identifiable information using numerical ranges, alphanumeric associations, and geographical approximations and codified key details that might associate participants to actual information. I securely stored all information and data in an encrypted password-protected external hard drive and will destroy them 5 years after concluding the study.

Data Collection Instruments

The contents of this subsection include a discussion of the data collection instruments and details of the approach and procedure used for gathering information, such as the interview protocol and the selection tool sets that I used for my study. A researcher who chooses to use the qualitative method can adopt one or a combination of six sources: (a) direct observations, (b) interviews, (c) archival records, (d) documentations, (e) participant observation, and (f) physical artifacts (Yin, 2014). In a qualitative study, researchers are the primary instrument for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Therefore, as the human instruments, researchers' knowledge, sensitivity, and skills are paramount and can determine the quality of research (Rowley, 2012). Interviews are a unique way of gathering information in a qualitative method and for collecting facts or gaining insights into a phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Semistructured interviews are a common means for collecting data in qualitative studies (Reiter et al., 2011; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014). Therefore, in alignment with the research purpose, I used the semistructured interview format that comprises both structured and unstructured elements. The formal interview features were similar to all the participants, as the preestablished questions led to little deviation to ensure a focus on the research topic. Furthermore, the unstructured interview elements were open for participants to comment freely on related areas. By adopting the semistructured interviews, I was able to follow a list of predetermined questions to help me explore the research topic while also facilitating the use of follow-up questions to extract further responses from the participants.

The method of the interviews in this study was individual face-to-face meetings with each participant using open-ended questions. Webb, Passmore, Cline, and Maguire (2014) used open-ended interview questions to explore the ethical and moral issues that neonatal intensive care nurses experience when caring for low birth weight preterm infants and their families to gather sufficient data to identify five recurring themes. Seven balanced interview questions were appropriate for extracting adequate information from the participants to explore the research question thoroughly and to identify relationships with the literature. The questions were clear, appropriate, unambiguous, and applicable to the research question for addressing the specific business problem (see Appendix B). I used the interviews to discover themes around areas of business practice such as personal attributes and entrepreneurial behavior, internal management of firm-specific dynamics, and external elements and the operating environment. The comprehensive answers to all seven broad interview questions captured different entrepreneurial perspectives on strategies small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The entire interview process for each respondent took between 30 and 45 minutes to minimize disruption at the place of work and to ensure time was sufficient to balance resources and achieve total data saturation (see Appendix A). The semistructured interviews included a question to which participants could respond with further remarks. Each meeting commenced with the participants reviewing and signing a consent form, and during the actual conversation, I encouraged interviewees to elaborate by prompting further responses through follow-up questions. To ensure reliability and validity, I employed repeat interviews with the same participants for member checking to reach data saturation, and to ensure validity, I asked participants to review the transcripts of their responses. Therefore, the data collection instruments included me as the researcher, and the interviewing technique was the semistructured interviews, business records, and documents. The multiple data sources included business records and the literature review of journal articles.

Data Collection Technique

The purpose of collecting data for this study was to explore what strategies small firm entrepreneurs in Lucan, County Dublin, use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The technique that I used to collect data was the semistructured face-to-face interview format. Face-to-face interviews facilitate gathering information to address the research question and to obtain insight into how to solve the specific business problem (Englander, 2012). The data collection technique also included fixing a place and time for the interviews that was convenient for each participant and me and providing an alternative plan in the event of the unexpected, such as delays, lateness, or interruptions. The recommended types of interviews in qualitative case studies include in-depth interviews, focused interviews, and formal surveys (Yin, 2014). I used in-depth interviews to capture the context, content, and decision-making processes and strategies the selected participants used in their small businesses to succeed beyond 5 years. The data collection technique also involved selecting only qualified participants who were owners and the strategic decision makers of a business.

As prescribed by Onwuegbuzie and Byers (2014), during the process of the interviews, I recorded participants' verbal response with an electronic device while also taking notes and collecting data from business records. I obtained IRB approval, followed the interview protocol and ethical practices in research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), and protected participants' privacy, identity, by using codes, and pseudonyms (see Appendix A). To achieve data saturation, I followed Yin (2014)'s suggestion and balanced resources to facilitate each participant's interview, and completed addressing all interview questions within 30 to 45 minutes that ensured minimum disruption at the place of work (see Appendix B).

Data Organization Technique

Organizing the semistructured interview data in a qualitative study involves several steps, and researchers should follow these procedures consistently throughout the process. A proper data organization technique requires that researchers maintain and update a reflective journal, regularly review interview notes, and acquire and use software to analyze the raw data (Miles, 2013). After reviewing any relevant new literature, I grouped the main findings from all sources into different categories as described by Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2012), based on potential and evolving themes that emerged from the interviews. During the interviews with the individuals, I followed the procedure described by Onwuegbuzie and Byers (2014), recorded all the participants' responses to the questions using a portable handheld electronic device, and transcribed the data verbatim. I used an Excel spreadsheet to sort data on the topic from all sources, including the interviews and the literature references, and to organize the data. I used NVivo11 to sort and organize the transcripts of the interview conversations. Using NVivo is an efficient process regarding both time and cost considerations (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). I created folders; categorized data by participants, application, or themes; and saved all the materials, including the interview transcripts, digitally scanned field notes, and journal entries, to an external drive. To ensure the privacy, confidentiality, and protection of the data, I will store these materials for 5 years to prevent any access to them and will destroy them after this period.

Data Analysis

It is important that researchers achieve data validity with the procedure they choose to collect and analyze data. The research protocol that I used for this study to ensure data validity was the qualitative method and an exploratory case design. To ensure the validity of this research, I triangulated the sources, which also ensured the validity of the conclusions. Researchers use triangulation to enhance the confidence of a study by comparing, contrasting, and confirming information and through checking the integrity of their inferences (Heale & Forbes, 2013; Yin, 2014). The four standard triangulation methods for improving quality and validity are multiple data sources, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives, and methodological triangulation (Heale & Forbes, 2013; Yin, 2014). In methodological triangulation, researchers use multiple data types to create a more wide-ranging picture of the phenomenon (Heale & Forbes, 2013). I used methodological triangulation to compare the findings from interviews data to the reviewed journal articles and data from business records. Qualitative case study researchers use multiple sources to supplement data gathered from a single source (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015). Through methodological triangulation, I analyzed areas of corroboration and deviation, as well as ideas complementing the transcripts and the other types of data. I also employed data triangulation through repeat interviews and follow-up conversations until I demonstrated data saturation. According to Taylor and Thomas-Gregory (2015), multiple case study data analysis should start with analyzing the information from each separate case before comparing across the cases. Therefore, I first reviewed the data from each participant singly, then compared the data across the three cases, and then compared the data to other sources including the literature and my conceptual framework. I thoroughly compared and analyzed interview transcripts, notes, and stored data and used NVivo11 to categorize the contents from the interviews.

Furthermore, standard practices in qualitative research require that researchers set up a systematic data analysis process to ensure validity in the presentation of the emerging themes (Robinson, 2014). Yin (2014) described the five data analysis steps to use when a researcher is applying the traditional method or using software to identify themes: (a) compile, (b) disassemble, (c) reassemble, (d) interpret, and (e) conclude. I completed each of the five processes for my data analysis and started by reviewing the transcripts of the interviews, the questions, and side notes, followed by data cleansing of the changes made during follow-ups and transcript reviews. Data analysis involved grouping the data into categories, and identifying and evaluating the themes emanating from the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I noted the consistency of themes from the interviews and other data sources with the themes from the literature review and conceptual framework for addressing the specific business problem (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity connote the key distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods. In the research process, reliability and validity constitute the basis for evaluating the precision, accuracy, and quality of the study. Paradigmatically, what constitutes a reliable or valid study in a quantitative research differs from that in qualitative methods. The four elements that demonstrate credibility in a quantitative study are reliability, objectivity (construct validity), external validity, and internal validity (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Conversely, in a qualitative study, the analogous criteria for ensuring reliability and validity are not measurable qualities but demonstrable features. According to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2012), demonstrating dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability indicates the reliability and validity of a study. Qualitative researchers can ensure reliability by using multiple data sources (Yin, 2014) and can confirm the validity of a study through data triangulation and member checking (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015). In the following subheadings, I describe how I demonstrated due diligence to assure reliability and validity in this study.

Reliability

Reliability, in qualitative research, is the ability for future researchers to use the documents and detailed procedures of the original writer to replicate their work (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). Barusch et al. (2011) noted that dependability shares some similarities with reliability in quantitative studies, which indicates that a different individual can use the decision trail of a researcher to replicate the study. To ensure and demonstrate the reliability and dependability of the study, I have described every stage of the study design process from planning, sample selection, to data analysis and the ways I developed my conclusions. In qualitative research, ensuring data quality enhances the credibility of the study (Yin, 2014). As demonstrated by Fusch and Ness (2015) and Yin (2014), I used member checking, transcript review, and repeat interviews to achieve data saturation. Furthermore, Fusch and Ness (2015) explained that selecting the chief executives for in-depth interviews with well-aligned questions could lead to the retrieval of sufficient data to achieve saturation. The participants that I chose to interview were entrepreneurs who were managing successful ventures who had demonstrated experience in developing and implementing strategies for addressing the specific business problem.

I followed the procedure for conducting data coding described by Rowley (2012), who noted that data coding involves assigning labels or codes that represent the core topic of segments of data. The reason for using codes was to protect the identity of each business owner and to organize the interview notes. To impose structure into the data set after completing the audio-recorded face-to-face interviews with the participants, I generated codes and stratified data into various classes of groups and subgroups. I initially sorted the data into three broad categories that I identified through my literature review process. These main categories were entrepreneurial characteristics, firm-specific features, and external elements. I then created subgroups for each of these categories using codes for themes that emanated from full raw descriptive notes from participants' responses. For instance, I used codes such as SKL for entrepreneurs' skills, SBE for particular SBEs, DTM for determination, and EXP for entrepreneurs' experience. Further examples of some of the codes that I used to group the data during analysis were EQF for entrepreneur's qualification, IMG for internal management, BKP for bookkeeping, and EXT for external elements. I created a personal and confidential code logbook as a separate document to identify each participant and created nodes so that I could see emerging patterns. I used codes to identify the participants: Research Participant 1 (RP1), Research Participant 2 (RP2), and Research Participant 3 (RP3). I used SBE1, SBE2, and SBE3 to group data from Small Business Enterprises 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) recommended processes for ensuring the reliability of a study. To ensure the reliability of my study, I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A). I also aligned interview questions with the research question and asked each of the three participants the same open-ended questions (see Appendix B) until achieving data saturation. With the participants' consent, I audio recorded their responses, which following Yin (2014)'s suggestion, I played back and transcribed word-for-word for data quality control and to ensuring study reliability. I provided the participants access to their transcripts, which I reviewed with them to verify accuracy and to address any misconceptions. To enhance the quality of this research, I ensured neutrality and accuracy, identified and addressed all issues that can create bias, and created an audit trail of all decisions. Synthesizing materials in the literature review and conducting the data evaluation, analysis, and interpretation is essential to help establish the dependability of the data from the interviews and other sources (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012).

Validity

Validity in qualitative research involves elements that make the study credible, confirmable, and transferable, as well as dependable (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). A researcher can show credibility by accurately depicting the experience of a voluntary group of participants with the phenomenon. Researchers can enhance credibility through reflexivity, member checking, and creating a vivid depiction of the extent and duration of exposure to the problem under examination (Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers can achieve data validity by ensuring accuracy in data recording and maintaining procedural consistency throughout the process (Barusch et al., 2011). To ensure research validity, I thoroughly scrutinized participants' accounts of their experiences with the problem and used member checking, examination, and history of exposure to the phenomenon to review the data to the point of data saturation. Data saturation occurs when researchers start to observe repeated information from the selected source and when additional data reveal no new themes (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Another essential element of a quality study is its confirmability and dependability. An individual conducting a qualitative study can ensure confirmability by maintaining accurate data and remaining neutral in the process (Houghton et al., 2013). To ensure confirmability, I conducted follow-up interviews via member checking with the participants to verify the validity of my interpretation.

Transferability in research refers to the ability for other researchers to determine the relevance of design and the applicability of outcomes to their contexts, subjects, or participants. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that future researchers, not the original, are responsible for demonstrating that the findings of the study apply to their context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To enhance the transferability of my study, I presented a clear and detailed description of my methods, decisions, and processes. I stated precisely the procedures, systems, and reasoning that I applied in my research and then provided a detailed description of my process to enable other researchers to make a determination of its relevance to their use.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 contained the discussion of the study's method and design. Also included was the depiction of my role as researcher, description of the participants, and details of the qualitative method and case study design. Section 2 included discussions on data collection instruments, organization, techniques, and analysis of my research. Section 2 featured an overview of the participants and the population, as well as the determination and rationalization of the sample size and selection technique. Other topics discussed in this section included details of how to ensure the study's reliability and validity, which included a discussion on how to address issues concerning the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of the study.

Section 3 includes the results of the research starting with an overview of the study and then discussions of the outcomes. Section 3 also includes a discussion of the emergent themes and a comparison of the findings to other data sources, including discussions of the five dimensions of the EO conceptual framework. Furthermore, Section 3 includes discussions that extend the EO dimensions and the extant literature. I present the outcomes of the study and their potential applications to improve knowledge and professional practices in business, as well as the potential implications for social change. I also present recommendations for action and further research and end with a discussion of my reflections and conclusions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Section 3 includes an overview of the findings and of the results of my research on strategies SBEs use to succeed beyond 5 years. In this section, I provide the presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, and implications for social change. Section 3 also includes recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusions.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative explorative case study was to explore the strategies small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The data came from three small firm owners operating in Lucan, Ireland, who were successful in managing a business beyond 5 years of beginning operations. The findings showed the three successful small firm owners use personal characteristics and implement strategies, which include entrepreneurial attitude, internal management of firm-specific dynamics, and management of external elements affecting the business' operating environment. The results indicated that skills, competence, and passion for the trade and business knowledge are personal characteristics that could influence business performance. Entrepreneurial attitudes such as perseverance, determination, and hard work were also relevant to sustain operations for more than 5 years. The findings showed that proper bookkeeping, controlling costs, assuring high product quality, and efficiently planning facilitates enterprise success. Identifying and managing the external elements affecting business' operating environment also helps small firm owners remain competitive and survive beyond 5 years.

Presentation of the Findings

After completing data analysis and interpreting data, the findings from the study addressed the overarching research question: What strategies do small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years? As summarized in Table 2, three themes emerged from the study's data and analysis.

Table 2

Summary of Themes: Strategies for Small Business Success

Themes	No. of participants	%
Personal attributes and entrepreneurial behavior	3	100
Internal management of firm-specific dynamics	3	100
External elements and the operating environment	3	100

The first theme was entrepreneurs' personal attributes and entrepreneurial behavior. Business owners' internal management of their firm-specific dynamics was the second theme that emerged as a strategy for succeeding beyond 5 years. The third emergent theme was entrepreneurs' ability to secure support for their companies, compete in the market, and manage other external elements, including general economic conditions. I will follow the presentation of the three categories with a reflection on how the themes relate to EO theory and other peer-reviewed studies from the literature review including new studies since writing the proposal.

The findings indicate that the small firm owners' behaviors at firm levels influenced their actions to exploit their external environment to succeed beyond 5 years. Participants' experience, as summarized in the three emergent themes, was similar to the description in the literature of some of the five dimensions of the EO concept that facilitate business success. For example, Wales (2016) noted that EO attributes influence entrepreneurs' decisions, actions, and management philosophies to coordinate their internal management, practices, and strategic orientation at the organizational level to improve company performance.

Theme 1: Personal Attributes and Entrepreneurial Behavior

All three participants described their personal attributes that contributed to remaining in business beyond 5 years. The small firm owners used terms such as skills, competence, and knowledge to accentuate their description of the entrepreneurial attributes that facilitated their success. The participants also used terms such as perseverance, determination, motivation, innovation, and hard work to describe other entrepreneurial behavior that facilitated their remaining in business. The data also revealed the significance of passion and business interest to enterprise success. The words and phrases that represented a summary of the terms the small firm entrepreneurs used to describe the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors that influenced their performance are in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme 1: Personal Attributes and Entrepreneurial Behavior

Personal characteristics and entrepreneurial attitude	No. of participants	%
Skills, competence, and trade knowledge	3	100
Perseverance, determination, and hard work	3	100
Passion and interest in the business	2	67

Skills, competence, and trade knowledge. I categorized entrepreneurs' skills, competence, and knowledge of a particular business under one subgroup in the first emergent theme. The common characteristics of the personal attributes in this category referred to individual traits that the small business owners possessed or developed through training or involvement that contributed to their success. Analysis of participants' responses revealed that having requisite skills, competence, and adequate knowledge in their respective areas of business was significant to their performance. The entrepreneurs' responses were compatible with my findings from the literature and the conceptual framework. For example, Liñán et al. (2013) contended that entrepreneurs' attributes such as skills, knowledge, and experience in business were significant to a company's performance. In the EO concept, entrepreneurs' attributes reflect their decision, behavior, and actions (Covin & Wales, 2012).

RP2 explained that despite intense competition, especially from the big supermarkets that offer lower prices, he maintained his clientele base and market share because of his skills and competence in his line of business. RP3 claimed that her expertise and experience helped her to attract new customers to her business. RP1 reported it was his competence, skills, and mutual interests that made it possible to satisfy customers to retain their patronage. According to RP1, understanding customers' needs, knowing exactly which product will serve their specific needs, and explaining to them how to maximize the benefits of the product was critical for client retention and business success.

RP2 said, "In my line of business, I am far more qualified than supermarkets to deal with the particular product that we supply." RP3 explained how her practical knowledge of the trade and competence in her field made it possible for her to concentrate on the professional aspect of the business. RP3 reported that both existing and new customers found her knowledge of hair and beauty admirable and referred her to other people. For start-up business development, it is essential for entrepreneurs to have knowledge of the business, and knowledge advances with experience (Solomon et al., 2013). RP3 noted that in her line of business, she viewed herself as a talented salon owner rather than the salon entrepreneur with a talent and noted that customers appreciate those who know their trade.

Business owners can use the knowledge of their previous growth patterns as a guide to making projections that can result in improved performance (Eshima & Anderson, 2017). RP1 explained that business knowledge includes understanding trends, changes, and development in the field. RP1 said, “My experience was instrumental to my success.” The data revealed that all three participants used their skills, knowledge, and experience in managing their business successfully.

Perseverance, determination, and hard work. This subgroup of the owners’ characteristics categorized under the first theme includes participants’ references to entrepreneurial behaviors such as perseverance, determination, hard work, innovativeness, and motivation that facilitated small business success. The common characteristics of entrepreneurial behaviors and attitudes in this category related to individual traits that are inherent in small business owners that contributed to success. All the participants described the challenges of managing an SBE and the entrepreneurial attributes that helped them to sustain the operation.

The three small firm entrepreneurs disclosed that in the early years of operation, they contemplated closing down their firms on several occasions because of situations that threatened the operation of their businesses. Participants explained that their strategies for enduring difficult times were perseverance, determination, and hard work. The small firm owners persisted and succeeded in remaining in operation beyond 5 years. RP2 remarked that he persevered, worked hard, and endured the physical and psychological pressure to remain in business. RP3 added, “You just have to stick with it basically. It does get a little bit easier, and it would come to that stage where you would get it right.”

RP3 reported that determination, work ethics, personal goals, and personal ego encouraged her to keep working through the hard times, and even when business improved, she kept working. RP1 explained that when things became difficult, he reminded himself about his responsibility to his large family, including his children, and he knew that he did not have a viable alternative other than entrepreneurship. RP2 stated that on certain occasions, he sometimes felt like closing down the business, but the thought of his family kept him going and the fact that the investment was a security for the future. RP2 remarked, “When you have a young family . . . you have to get up on your feet and walk on it, and that is what I have done.”

The participants described the sacrifices they made to sustain their businesses. RP1 explained that he does not have a standard wage, but paid himself on week-to-week basis and only took whatever he could afford to take. RP2 claimed he works about 75 hours a week to keep the business running and has not had a holiday in the past 3.5 years, noting “that was expected to run the business successfully.” RP3 said that one of her key characteristics was the stamina to work very hard, and she sacrificed her personal time to work to maintain the business. RP3 said that she only recently had her first 2-week holiday in the past 10 years.

The experiences of the research participants were similar to some of the results from previous studies in the literature and the conceptual framework. Amankwah-Amoah (2014) noted that entrepreneurs who combined both character and persistence to manage crises efficiently and persevered during difficult and challenging times would survive in a hostile business environment and perform successfully. Liñán et al. (2013) contended that the intensity of business owners' persistence determined the level of enterprise activities they achieved. The discrete variables of EO influence firm owners' behavior to facilitate business success (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The three research participants described their perseverance, determination, and hard work as some of the key entrepreneurial behaviors that contributed significantly to their success in business beyond 5 years.

Passion and interest in the business. The small firm owners' strategies summarized in Theme 1 were similar to some of the findings in the conceptual framework and the literature. Another topic that was prominent among two of the participants and that helped them to succeed in business was entrepreneurs' passion and interest for their particular line of work, which I categorized under Theme 1. Everyone is passionate about something, but passion is relative to individual preferences. What appeals to one person may not interest another. The data from participants' responses indicated that the small firm owners' engagement in business activities was a key area of their passion. The data revealed that the passion and interest of the small firm owners influenced their desire to continue engaging in the enterprise, their willingness to sacrifice, and their resolve to endure for the business to work out.

Wales (2016) noted that to achieve positive results entrepreneurs must match their personal characteristics with a deep conviction in the significance of their entrepreneurial action. RP1 explained that his love of cycling and racing and his passion for bicycles bolstered his interest in making the business succeed because an increase in cycling activities results in improved business. RP3 revealed that her love for the profession kept her going when things were slow and difficult. RP1 reiterated his passion and love for his trade when he described it as a key element to his success. RP1 clarified that being passionate alone was not sufficient to ensure business success and noted that having an interest in the business was a motivation to work hard to improve performance.

The details of the participants' descriptions of their passion and love for their trade portrayed a significant conviction for their chosen business practices. Small firm owners' personality traits and entrepreneurial action, including their positivity and genuine interest in trade facilitate better performance (Covin & Wales, 2012). Therefore, the patterns that emerged from participants' responses regarding the significance of personal attributes and entrepreneurial behavior to enterprise success aligned with the findings in previous studies.

Theme 2: Internal Management of Firm-Specific Dynamics

Entrepreneurs' internal management of firm-specific dynamics was the second theme discovered from the data. Theme 2 emerged from participants' references to the fact that their ability to implement effective policies specific to their firms contributed to their success. All three participants developed firm-specific strategies to manage their operation within the local market and industry. The broad topics that emerged from the data pertaining to internal management of firm-specific dynamics that I placed under Theme 2 were (a) proper bookkeeping and cost management; (b) past experiences, current trends, forecast, and planning; and (c) supplying quality product and services.

Participants' strategies for managing the internal dynamics of their particular enterprise aligned with the EO concept relating to proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy. In the EO model, proactive entrepreneurs and small business owners who are competitive aggressive and have the autonomy to take independent decisions can implement strategies to outcompete rivals (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). According to Lechner and Gudmundsson, entrepreneurs who manage their internal resources efficiently and associate actively and positively with their autonomy can identify new opportunities to exploit to improve their firms' performance.

Business owners can remain competitive over multiple business cycles if they continue to improve their internal knowledge assets, and access and utilize external knowledge efficiently and effectively (Huggins & Weir, 2012). The small firm owners used internal management practices such as proper bookkeeping, reducing overhead and other costs, planning, forecasting, and improving product quality to gain a competitive edge over their competitors to succeed in operation. The topics that emerged under the internal management theme as a strategy for business success are in Table 4.

Table 4

Theme 2: Internal Management of Firm-Specific Dynamics

Internal management	No. of participants	%
Bookkeeping and cost management	3	100
Past experiences, current trends, forecast, and planning	3	100
Product and service quality	3	100

Bookkeeping and cost management. A pattern of behavior that emerged from the data regarding the practices of small firm entrepreneurs that contributed to their success was bookkeeping and cost management. Participants described how organizing business documents, keeping proper records of all transactions, and preparing logs of all impending liabilities was significant to managing losses, avoiding payment defaults, and accruing debts. I categorized small business owners' practices of bookkeeping and cost management under Theme 2 because this strategy involves internal management of the structure and dynamics of the company to achieve success. The documents I reviewed corroborated participants' accounts of bookkeeping practices, which included invoices and receipts, tax records, managing bills, fines and charges, and statements, as well as maintaining records of stocks, inventories, creditors, debtors, suppliers, and other sundry income and expenses.

RP1 explained that proper bookkeeping helped him reduce his business costs significantly by understanding areas in which to minimize expenses and identifying expenditures that are not adding value to the business. RP3's business documents showed that she sets aside money on a weekly basis to pay staff, including herself, and to settle all expenses. RP3's accounting records showed good bookkeeping practices, such as consistent eight weekly deductions to settle energy bills due every 2 months. RP2 introduced a new product or service, and then opened up a separate account to monitor the performance and contribution of the new product to the company's performance. RP3 scheduled all business activities and transactions such as appointments, staff holidays, upcoming events, and bill payments well in advance. RP3's backup plan for ensuring uninterrupted services, especially during the peak season was to have a pool of casual contract workers who are available to work on short notice.

Data retrieved from the interview transcripts and document reviews showed that the small firm owners engaged the services of accountants to manage their books. RP1 remarked, "When you have a good system in place, things work better, but without proper records, things could escalate, and the next thing you know is that, you owe more money than you probably should have, because you did not pay it a little bit at a time." RP3 explained that her accountant handled all the financial aspects of the company because she did not have a business or financial background, but noted bookkeeping helped her cost-management strategy. RP2 also hired an accountant to manage the books for his company and said that the accountant always recommended prudent measures for cost effectiveness.

All three participants lamented that increasing overheads and business costs affected enterprise performance. Using different expressions, the small firm proprietors described the significance of controlling business costs, continuously seeking less expensive alternatives without compromising quality, and identifying areas to cut costs for remaining in successful operation. RP1 said that he maintained the same moderate business premises he had occupied for 34 years, despite offers of spaces in highly elegant complexes, and did not have a company van because his business did not need a van. RP1's strategy was to control rent cost and to avoid unnecessary expenditures. During member checking, RP2 described hiring only two workers, with himself as the third, as a cost-management strategy because that was the minimum number of staff his company needed to operate successfully.

RP1's and RP2's strategy for lowering cost was consistent with the EO concept that entrepreneurs gain a competitive advantage over rivals by continuously seeking alternative sources of inputs within the operating environment to lower business transaction costs (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). RP3 adopted a cost-management technique that entailed stratifying all business expenditures on week-by-week budget basis over 52 weeks in a year. RP3 prepared weekly budgets to deduct proportionate sums of money for settling specific expenses due weekly, fortnightly, monthly, and bimonthly. RP3 explained that the week-by-week expenditure system was a firm-specific internal management strategy that she used to evaluate the weekly performance of her company and to identify weeks of low returns to intensify efforts to make up for the shortfalls. RP1 and RP3 emphasized they avoided loans and debts as much as possible, as overexposure to banks can affect business performance.

Participants' descriptions of their bookkeeping and cost-reduction strategies were consistent with the findings in the literature. Roche and Teague (2014) concluded that small firm entrepreneurs survive the economic challenges and perform better in business when they introduce drastic measures to reduce their overhead and business costs. Small business entrepreneurs who manage their internal resources efficiently and serve their customers competently can achieve repeated successful performance (Khadir-Poggi & Keating, 2014). Entrepreneurs who design company-specific strategies to search for profitable products, carefully monitor costs, and do not engage in intense price wars can witness growth even under adverse market conditions (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). The small firm entrepreneurs' cost management strategies evolved around sourcing less expensive but quality alternative inputs, avoiding unnecessary expenses by spending only on necessities, and lowering overhead.

Learning from past experiences, identifying current trends, forecasting, and planning. The successful small firm entrepreneurs reported that they used their experience from past mistakes and the current position of their companies and the market to forecast the future and then developed a plan to improve performance. I categorized participants' references to the ways they managed their companies' past and present structure to project and plan for the future as a subgroup under the second theme relating to the internal management of firm-specific dynamics. The participants' accounts on this topic revealed how the small firm owners learn from the mistakes, and used current configurations and their firms' internal assets to forecast the future, and implemented plans to improve their outcomes.

The findings of this study indicated that the participants learned from past mistakes and used that knowledge to improve their strategies for the future. RP3 stated that when she started managing her business, she made several mistakes, corrected them, and then learned from the experience for better results: "We kind of went, there, there, there and kind of tried all different techniques. We made mistakes along the way, but we got the same results in the end, probably in a longer process." RP2 also referred to learning from mistakes: "You learn from mistakes and from the experience of running your business." PR1 described learning from mistakes as the school of life: "In the school of life means you learn by making mistakes, and hopefully you survive making those mistakes and improve on your performance. . . . That is what the school of life is."

Participants' use of experience for effecting future improvements aligned with findings in previous studies that indicated business owners can draw on others' unfortunate experiences to develop success strategies (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Testa and Frascheri (2015) concluded that individuals who learn from failure could use the experience to develop potential strategies to succeed in the future. Learning from the outcomes of entrepreneurs' disappointing experiences entails a social psychological process that results in gaining valuable knowledge for the future progress of enterprise activities (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Competent venture owners who experiment through personal trial and error discover ways to improve their competitiveness (Keating et al., 2015). The findings in this study indicated that knowledge from experiences, especially concerning mistakes and wrong decisions, was critical to the future success of small firm entrepreneurs.

RP3 emphasized that being up to date with the current trends in fashions, styles, and elegance around the world was significant to retaining relevance in the cosmetics and beauty industry. RP1 reported that he planned carefully and never took any chances. RP1 noted he would "plan for the worst and hope for the best." RP3 stated that one of the reasons for her success was that she embraced the latest products, methods, and equipment, which was essential to maintaining an appreciable position in the market. RP2 mentioned during transcript review that supplying meat for barbeques during summer, turkey at Christmas, and convenience foods for fast movers was a way of keeping with the trends to improve sales.

Participants revealed that they benefited from periods of high demand such as Christmas by making projections based on the current situation to forecast anticipated sales and mobilized resources in advance to exploit the opportunity. Keating et al. (2015) observed that entrepreneurs who enhanced their capacity to predict future markets and expectations benefit from seizing business opportunities. RP1 stated that Christmas and summer seasons are periods of high sales periods for which he plans months in advance to maximize the benefits. RP3 disclosed that she planned 12 months ahead, from one Christmas to the next Christmas to maximize sales during these periods, and anticipated and organized all products, equipment, and staff required to meet the high demand.

RP3 noted no workers took holidays during peak seasons and she made alternative arrangements for casual staffing in case of the unexpected. RP3 said, “When the Christmas period is over, you start doing simple small things, like checking your calendar to know the date of next Christmas to start another plan.” Mayer-Haug et al. (2013) noted that planning in business was more critical to start-up firms’ survival than even entrepreneurial skills. All the participants described how learning from and correcting past mistakes, proper planning, and engaging in realistic projections facilitated their business success.

Product and service quality. Another subject that emerged from participants' responses regarding how they managed their enterprises successfully was supplying high-quality products and services to customers, which I categorized under Theme 2. The three small firm owners noted that supplying quality products and services to their customers positively influenced their companies' reputations, promoted their business names, and helped them to sustain customer patronage. RP2 claimed, "I do a better quality product than the supermarkets. . . . I took a chance, took a risk, and brought a higher product that is a bit more expensive to buy . . . but it sold because of its quality."

RP2 noted that his clients came to his shop because of quality product expertise, regardless of paying a slightly higher price to get that, and they kept coming. RP1 added, "The customer is [more] interested in good value and good service than having what we will call a posh shop." RP3 remarked during member checking that she was good at giving customers value for their money with quality services. Participants' practices on maintaining high quality were consistent with the findings in the literature. Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) contended that entrepreneurs can identify and provide higher quality products or services to meet the specific needs of a particular cohort of customers and then charge a price that is slightly higher than the competitors to increase their returns.

RP2 remarked that certain customers are conscious of good standards and are willing to pay a higher price for the higher quality. RP2 said, "What I tried to do was to sell meats that were far more superior to the supermarkets at a slightly higher price. . . . That is my strategy, and it is a very simple one." RP3 explained to me during transcript review that her business strategy includes doing whatever it takes "reasonably" to satisfy, maintain, and retain her existing customers and then try everything she could to attract new customers without compromising standards or prices. RP1 also remarked during member checking that some of his clients would always choose quality over price, and he made sure they received good value.

RP3 revealed that on occasions when few customers went to close rivals, they ended up returning to her because of her high quality, despite some of the competitors charging a lower price. The findings indicated that all three small firm entrepreneurs used their expertise to supply high-quality products and services to overcome the competition and retain customer patronage. Each of the three participants used a firm-specific internal management strategy of proper bookkeeping, reducing costs, effective planning, and supplying high-quality products and services within the local operating environment to overcome the competition to succeed beyond 5 years in operation.

Theme 3: External Elements and the Operating Environment

The third theme that emerged from analyzing the data on strategies that small firm entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years was their ability to manage the external and environmental elements that affect enterprise performance. The participants revealed that seeking and receiving support for the business, developing competition strategies, and managing the effects of general economic conditions was critical to the survival of small firms. I categorized the topics discovered from the participants regarding strategies they used to manage the external elements under Theme 3, and the participants' answers were consistent with the EO theory and previous studies. Entrepreneurs use EO elements that are specific to their firms to suit their particular contexts and industry to manage the external environment effectively to facilitate business success and accomplish the entrepreneurial process (Wales, 2016).

Semrau et al. (2016) observed that with EO, small business owners can exploit the external framework of the economy to plan and implement specific company strategies, but noted that it was difficult to implement policies in markets with less-structured institutions. As a multidimensional concept, EO reflects people's ability to influence their firms' competitive strategies to enhance their performance (Covin & Miller, 2014; Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The findings indicated that the participants coordinated and mobilized the external support to sustain operation and to manage the effect of the general economic environment on their businesses. I summarized the categories of topics discovered under Theme 3 and the number of participants who referred to the subject appear in Table 5.

Table 5

Theme 3: External Elements and the Operating Environment

External elements and the environment	No. of participants	%
External support	3	100
Competition strategy	3	100
General economy	3	100

External support. All three participants agreed that receiving essential support from stakeholders and other sources outside the company was critical to small business survival. Each of the small firm entrepreneurs confirmed that receiving external support such as moral and psychological support from families and friends, financial assistance from banks and creditors, concessional and extended credits from suppliers, and professional support from experts contributed to their success. RP1 and RP3 claimed that they did not receive any loans, grants, or capital contribution from any source at start-up or during the earlier years of operations, but all three entrepreneurs reported that they received financial support during critical times that helped them to sustain operations.

Document reviews confirmed that RP2 received investment funding from the Bank of Ireland and an overdraft facility from the Allied Irish Bank. RP2 remarked that the banks were helpful to his company and noted that receiving support at critical times saved his business, but he cautioned against heavy indebtedness because of high interest and noted owners of small firms might have to reduce their profits through payment to the banks. Reviewing bank statements confirmed RP2's claim that he used his overdraft facility from time to time. RP3 reported that the support she received from the property owners during the early years by agreeing to a flexible weekly rent payment was critical to her survival during the first 3 years of operation. RP1 described support from his suppliers as a significant element that contributed to his success. RP1 said, "Some of my suppliers . . . allowed me extended credit. . . . If they had been working strictly within their terms and conditions, they would have closed me down. . . . Some suppliers look at the big picture."

RP2 noted that the South Dublin County Council (SDCC) was helpful to small start-up enterprises and even old firms in Lucan Village. The council helped the participant's business when he was struggling with identifying available mentorships. RP2 explained that the SDCC facilitated his access to establishments that helped his business. RP3 added that her "landlord was very good . . . and that was helpful, particularly during the early years." RP1 added, "If they thought your business was viable, they would . . . even help you pay for some of the fittings in the shop, in order to get you up and running." RP1 remarked during member checking that he only asked for banks' support when it was necessary, but the loans from the banks were useful for augmenting working capital, which helped him from defaulting on the terms of the trade credit to suppliers.

Another kind of external support that small firm proprietors used to manage their enterprise activities to enhance performance and contribute to their success was the services of experts, professionals, and other experienced entrepreneurs and small companies' owners. In Ireland, advisors provide elaborate facilities with a broad range of options, including business advisory services, to assist small firms (McKevitt & Marshall, 2015). The data from participants' responses showed that all three entrepreneurs hired accountants to advise them on financial matters and to help them to handle bookkeeping and finance-related transactions of the business. RP3 said,

> We had a good accountant who steered us in the right path and made things easier for us . . . did all sort of things for us. . . . You know, the PRSI (Pay Related Social Insurance), the VAT (Value Added Tax) end of it, and that kind of stuff. He made sure we did not default in anything.

RP1 said that he relied on the expert advice of his accountant who has once said to him that "turnover is vanity, profit is sanity. . . . Turnover in business is not profit."

RP1 and RP2 described the contributions of networking, referrals, and trade organizations to business success and explained that social connections, word of mouth, and membership in business associations helped them extend their client base and expand their market share. RP2 said that he was a member of the Irish Craft Butchers Association through which he linked up with fellow butchers to share resources and ideas. RP1 reported, “We formed a cycling club here in Lucan about 30 years ago, myself and other guys . . . still going strong . . . with over 200 members. The club was a huge part of the business here, and in making it successful.”

The participants’ account of their experience with positive external support helping them to enhance their small businesses’ activities was consistent with some of the conclusions in the literature. Pinho and Sampaio (2014) noted that small firm owners could get help from experts in the field such as sector associations, the national government, and financial institutions to support their business activities to succeed in operation. Business owners who collaborated with experienced entrepreneurs and other stakeholders could benefit from the capitalization of shared skills, competencies, and resources that would improve their performance (Thatcher et al., 2016). Reinl and Kelliher (2014) observed that small enterprise owners in specific locations could support each other by participating in programs evolving learning communities to facilitate the movement of expertise to generate new thoughts to improve their business. The findings from this study showed that small business proprietors received vital external support from friends, families, stakeholders, professionals, and government bodies that helped to sustain operations and remain in business beyond 5 years.

Competition strategy. The participants revealed that they used competitive strategies to respond to rivals’ business activities or to overcome the competition to remain successful. I categorized the competition strategy under Theme 3 because this topic related to business owners’ techniques regarding controlling events outside of the organization. Competitive aggressiveness is one of the five dimensions of the EO theory. Lumpkin et al. (2013) noted that EO competitive aggressiveness refers to the intensity of business owners’ efforts to sustain effective market control through deliberate actions to outperform their rivals. Competitively aggressive entrepreneurs are not afraid to compete and are aggressive about expanding market share to surpass rivals (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014).

Participants indicated that they used specific competition strategies to compete in the market, but they did not engage in aggressive competition, especially against big corporations. RP1 and RP2 reported that they avoided price competition with big companies producing similar products as them because they could not afford to charge the low prices that leaders of larger supermarkets were setting. RP2 stressed that his competition strategy was not to compete with the big stores for the low-end customers, but to target a specific segment of the market and sell superior quality product to them at a higher price than the supermarkets. RP2 noted that his business model was to “deal with higher markup on gross margin, rather than lower profit on high turnover.”

Product differentiation was one of the strategies the small firm owners used to compete to sustain business operation. PR2 said, “I do different products that are more attractive to people in the kitchen . . . and add a bit of convenient foods on the side.” RP3 added that to outcompete rivals in service delivery, she remained up to date with new products coming in and current trends. She said, “My strategy is change things around a bit, to be different from the crowd, advertise differently.” Lechner and Gudmundsson

(2014) noted that differentiation is a generic competitive strategy that small firm entrepreneurs use to achieve a competitive advantage over rivals, which involves rendering a specialized service or developing a different and unique product to meet customers' needs. All the participants demonstrated that they had adopted a form of competition strategies to remain successful in business beyond 5 years.

PR1 stated that small business owners of hardware stores, butchers, newsagents, and other independent companies who sell similar products as the supermarkets and massive chains do not survive in business by relying on selling only those items. During transcript review, RP1 explained that businesses survive by differentiating and not selling the same brand as the big stores. RP1 revealed that he added servicing products to his business of selling products by using his skills and expertise and noted that 40% of the income to his business came from the servicing. RP3 emphasized that it was important for small business owners to be creative to do or add something different. RP3 emphasized that as a beauty salon owner, her main line of business involved providing a service, but she added a retail component to the business to sell hairsprays, conditioners, and other related products.

Another competition strategy used by RP1 was not to sell products on the Internet. RP1 disclosed that online selling involved additional cost to the small business because people generally expect to buy things cheaply over the Internet and expect business owners to bear the carriage cost, or at least part of it. RP1 posited that from his experience, online selling involved extra costs to small firm owners, who usually do not deal in very high volumes, sometimes have to collect back partly damaged returned goods, and need time to monitor Internet transactions. He noted that big stores sold their product at both in-store and online venues, but for small firms, the margins from online sales are lower, and selling on-line requires more administration time to process a transaction to its conclusion.

RP1's competition strategy was to concentrate on selling high-standard in-store products (old and used), parts, and accessories and to deliver other services such as trade-in deals, repairs, servicing, and after-sales services. Participants' descriptions of their competition strategies were consistent with Darcy et al.'s (2014) conclusion that small ventures in Ireland avoid operating in a similar marketplace or competing for the same customers as larger enterprises.

General economy. I categorized the common patterns of references in the data concerning the effects of the operating environment and the general economic situation on small businesses under Theme 3. All participants agreed that the prevailing general economic situation affects business activities, especially during periods of slow growth. The three small firm owners described the different techniques they used to sustain sales and retain customer demand during periods of economic downturn. RP2 reported that low and decreasing purchasing power of the general populace affect business activities, which pose a large barrier to business success. RP2 explained that the strategy he used to mitigate the effects of a slow economy and a lack of money in people's pockets was to sell different ranges of high-quality products that rival stores do not stock.

To reduce the effect of low purchasing power on sales, RP1 developed a flexible payment scheme for well-known customers interested in his products so they can buy the goods and pay for them on a weekly repayment agreement. RP3 elucidated that a strategy to mitigate the effect of people's low purchasing power was to expand the customer base. RP3 explained that sustaining sales revenue to retain old customers who are the "base of the business" and attract new customers is an effective strategy. RP3 noted that her strategy for keeping old clients and attracting new ones is to change her products and refine her services continuously. RP3 pointed out that the idea was to make the company stand out and be different from other similar shops.

RP2 expressed that improving product quality and having the skills to supply them competently was his strategy to retain customers. RP1 noted that to mitigate the rising cost of living and the effect on business costs, he revised his company's budget to identify areas to avoid and unnecessary expenses. RP1 said, "By remaining fairly humble, we managed the harsh economic situation. We maintained a small shop for many years, kept the overheads down, and did not buy any fancy transport or even own a van." Another important finding pertaining to the effect of external elements that emerged during member checking was a reference to small business owners avoiding issues that result in trouble with the law, such as regulations, legislations, and prohibitions. RP1 noted that allowing issues to escalate into court cases results in a serious loss of focus for small businesses. RP1 indicated that, from his experience, court cases are a distraction and are capable of affecting business activities.

The data revealed that the entrepreneurs implemented strategies to respond to changing economic situations that aligned with the EO conceptual framework model by adopting specific policies based on the nature of their business. Semrau et al. (2016)

contended that entrepreneurs use their personal EO attributes to stimulate an interaction between a firm's internal management structure and external environment to maintain or improve performance. Lumpkin et al. (2013) observed that an enterprise's operating environment does not affect the entrepreneur's orientation toward the five dimensions of EO. However, small firm owners could use their internal knowledge assets to improve their external knowledge to remain competitive over multiple business cycles (Huggins & Weir, 2012). The firm owners used their personal attributes to develop firm-specific strategies to manage both the internal dynamics of their firms and the external elements to operate their business successfully beyond 5 years.

Applications to Professional Practice

This study involved exploring the strategies small firm entrepreneurs in Lucan, County Dublin, used to succeed in business beyond 5 years to prevent or address some of the problems small company owners face in Ireland that result in failing to remain in operation beyond their fifth anniversary (CSO, 2014a). The findings from this study may provide small business owners, potential entrepreneurs, and business practitioners with better ideas on how to succeed in commercial activities.

The research findings supported the theory of EO by indicating that certain entrepreneurial attributes influence people's management philosophies and actions to coordinate internal resources to succeed in operation (Wales, 2016). The results showed that small business entrepreneurs used personal attributes that were similar to the EO dimensions to manage their firm-specific dynamics to exploit their external environment to benefit their establishments (Semrau et al., 2016). Small business owners could use the results and recommendations from this study to sustain operations by using their internal knowledge assets to improve their external knowledge to remain competitive over multiple business cycles (Huggins & Weir, 2012).

The findings of this study are relevant to professional business practice, and the references that entrepreneurs may find useful for operating successfully, include skills, competencies, and trade knowledge. Small firm owners use their skills, their competencies in the field, and the knowledge of their particular trade to lead their companies to success. The findings from this study confirmed the conclusion in Amankwah-Amoah's (2014) study that persistent small business owners could succeed even in hostile business environments. The findings indicated those small firm entrepreneurs' personal attributes such as perseverance, determination, hard work, and passion and interest in the business contributed to sustaining operations, which is relevant to professional practice.

Entrepreneurs' management of internal businesses activities through actions such as proper bookkeeping, avoiding debt, and reducing overhead are success strategies relevant to business practice. The findings also showed that successful entrepreneurs learned from their past mistakes to improve their strategies, forecasted and planned adequately, and supplied high-quality products and services to their customers. Other findings relevant to professional business practice include identifying avenues for receiving external support such as extended credit from suppliers, expert advice from accountants and other experienced professionals, financial support, and moral and psychological support from families and friends.

The findings revealed the efficacy of applying a competitive strategy to respond to rivals' business activities within an operating environment and competing effectively to succeed in business. Competitive aggressiveness reflects the drive to gain control over the market and to outperform rivals, and the intensity of entrepreneurs' capacity to act entrepreneurially influences their ability to compete effectively (Lumpkin et al., 2013). Small firm entrepreneurs struggling to survive the competition, and start-up company owners in their early stages could use the results of this study for developing strategies and practices to remain competitive over multiple business cycles.

Business owners can benefit from the findings regarding the strategies entrepreneurs use to sustain sales in a slow economy relevant to their profession practice. The results indicated that by changing the nature of products, continuing to modify and improve products and services, and ensuring high-quality standards, small firm owners can retain existing customers' loyalty during economic downturns and gain new clients. Another success strategy used to mitigate the effect of decreasing purchasing power that is relevant to professional practice is designing flexible payment arrangements to enable certain customers to make flexible payments.

Avoiding extravagance, unnecessary expenses, and debts, as well as reducing overheads, meeting obligations to customers and supplier, and also complying with regulations, abiding by the laws, and avoiding litigation are findings that apply to professional practice. Small firm entrepreneurs could consider the results of this study useful and relevant to their professional business practice to increase their chances of succeeding in business beyond 5 years. The recommendations from the study included summaries outlining some effective strategies that support small firms use to succeed.

Implications for Social Change

The Irish SME sector is one of the most active in the European Union, with 155,751 enterprises and 828,020 workers, and 98% of the companies in this sector are SBEs (European Commission, 2016a). However, there is a net negative of new business creation in Ireland, because there are more small company failures than start-up venture successes (European Commission, 2016a; Forfas, 2013). In 2012, only 50% of the small firms operating in Ireland were in commercial activity beyond 5 years of beginning operations (CSO, 2014a). Business failure results in the loss of employment, income, means of livelihood, and a lower standard of living, which affects entrepreneurs, workers, families, societies, and the government through the loss of tax revenue. The effects of reduced government revenue include a reduction in public expenditure and development projects, to benefit the country.

Aspiring entrepreneurs and potential small business owners may use the findings from this study to accelerate start-up enterprise activities and improve the sustainability of small firms in Ireland. Small firm entrepreneurs may implement or tailor the strategies to improve their financial positions for extending enterprise activities. The crucial SBE subsector in Ireland may experience increased net new business creation and increased survival rates among start-ups. The multiplier effect could include increased enterprise activities, employment, profits, and growth through utilizing better business strategies and processes. The possible consequences of these actions include increasing employment opportunities and the derivative potential to improve the standard of living and well-being in the country.

Recommendations for Action

My recommendations reflect some strategies small firm entrepreneurs might find helpful in their enterprise practice to succeed in business beyond 5 years. The findings of this study include three broad themes addressing the research question on the strategies entrepreneurs use to succeed in business beyond 5 years. I encourage aspiring business owners and start-up firm proprietors struggling in their early years of operation to review the findings and themes for the potential to address challenges in business activities while trying to sustain operation beyond the first 5 years.

My first recommendation is that small firm owners objectively assess and apply their personal attributes to their decision-making processes, and use their dimensions of EO to implement actions to improve the performance of their companies. Having inherent entrepreneurial characteristics or attitudes reflects a psychological profile and may not influence firms' performances unless entrepreneurs convert those attributes into tangible behavior to act entrepreneurially to improve business activities (Covin & Wales, 2012). Small firm entrepreneurs who develop entrepreneurial competencies or who experiment using personal trial and error can identify and exploit opportunities to outperform rivals to survive over a longer-term (Keating et al., 2015). Small firm owners can transform their skills, competence, knowledge, innovativeness, risk taking, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy into actions to manage their business to success.

I urge potential entrepreneurs who aspire to become start-up entrepreneurs to consider businesses in areas, fields, or trades where they have particular knowledge, skills, competencies, interests, passions, or qualifications. Individuals' personal characteristics and business relationships significantly influence their performance and success in business (Pinho & Sampaio, 2014). Having requisite knowledge in an occupation or a particular line of business is significant to an enterprise's development. Small firm entrepreneurs in this study sustained their businesses for at least 5 years of successful operation by using their skills, competence, and knowledge of a specific trade. Using expertise in their particular areas of business practice enabled them to supply high-quality products and services to retain customers' patronage and attract new clients. The findings also indicated that small company owners used their innovativeness to change continuously and develop new products and services to remain competitive. Small firms competed favorably in the market by differentiating their goods or services from those of their rivals.

I advise small venture proprietors to engage in entrepreneurship in their areas of strong interest or passion because, during challenging times, the demonstration of their love and interest in the particular trade will influence their motivation to continue the enterprise activities. Perseverance, determination, and hard work are some of the personal attributes that small firm owners need and use to sustain operations that other small company owners may adopt to succeed in business beyond 5 years. Small firm owners could survive in hostile business environments to succeed in business by being persistent and enduring hardships (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). The participants in this study remained resilient through adversities, persevered, and with hard work and strong determination, endured the challenges to sustaining their businesses.

The second recommendation for small business owners is to develop internal company management strategies that align with the specific dynamics of their enterprises to succeed. I recommend potential and existing small business entrepreneurs engage in bookkeeping practices and keep proper records of all business activities, including sales, purchases, inventories, financial transactions, invoices, receipts, credit and debit notes, and human resource issues. The small firm owners in this study honored their obligations to suppliers, creditors, and regulatory bodies and paid their tax and statutory responsibilities because, at least in part, they kept proper records enabling efficient business management.

The findings indicated that small firm owners paid their bills regularly, managed indebtedness, reduced overhead, checked business costs, and did not engage in unnecessary expenditures in their enterprises. Entrepreneurs, who design company-specific strategies to search for profitable products, carefully monitor costs, and who do not engage in intense price wars can achieve growth even under adverse market conditions (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). I recommend that small venture owners explore areas in their business in which they could reduce costs, such as renting a moderate location (RP1), finding areas to reduce expenses (RP3), or hiring the minimum number of workers (RP2). I advise small firm owners to seek efficient ways of transacting business without compromising quality.

The small venture owners in this study remained successful for many years by learning from their mistakes and correcting their plans. The entrepreneurs embraced current trends, were up-to-date with the changes in their industry, and forecast the future direction of the market to capitalize on first mover advantage. Business owners with the capacity to predict future market expectations, and who seek to identify distinct business opportunities can exploit the gaps in the market to improve performance (Keating et al., 2015). The findings from the study indicated the internal management strategies of introducing new and better products or services or changing the appearance of goods can be beneficial for effecting competitive advantage in small business environments. Entrepreneurs who continue to introduce new products with high standards and quality that are different from the ones commonly available in the market could benefit from retaining a core base of customers.

The final recommendation from the findings of this study is for small business owners to identify and seek available external support from other stakeholders, institutions, private and public bodies, experts, and professionals to help manage the effects of general economic conditions. As indicated, small business owners received moral and psychological support from friends and family to remain motivated, sought support on professional matters from experts, benefited from extended credit from suppliers, and used overdraft facilities from banks. Receiving external support at critical times helped the participating small company owners survive and succeed in business. Small firm owners could receive help from experts in the field through sector associations, the national government, and financial institutions (Pinho & Sampaio, 2014). In Ireland, small company owners seek business advisory services from advisors on a broad range of options to assist them in managing their enterprises to succeed (McKevitt & Marshall, 2015). The findings indicated that small firm owners benefited from their membership in clubs and associations related to their field of endeavors, which help establish and extend networks for acquiring social capital for increasing or maintaining sales.

I urge small business venture owners to develop effective competition by using every advantage over rivals, such as skills, knowledge, qualification, or experience to render higher quality service and to have the edge over the competition. Small firm owners developed firm-specific schemes to counter the effect of slow economic growth that mitigated the obvious impact of low purchasing power, to encourage customers to buy and pay for products and services in flexible arrangements. Differentiation is a generic competitive strategy that involves rendering a specialized service or developing a different and unique product to meet customers' needs that small firm entrepreneurs could use to achieve a competitive advantage (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The participants in this study used strategies such as supplying high quality at higher prices, modifying product looks and service delivery, changing ways of advertising, and providing dedicated services to selected customers to differentiate their services to overcome the competition.

The Irish government could do more to help the activities of SBEs by providing similar support to that given to companies in the Irish technology sector. The state's policy to leverage the technology sector in Ireland to encourage collaboration between firms and other stakeholders operating in the area paved the way for growth in the industry (Andreosso-O’Callaghan et al., 2014).

Correspondingly, I recommend that Irish government leaders develop SBE initiatives to strengthen the activities of agencies that work with small companies. Government leaders should implement policies to monitor the operations of large organizations and transnational corporations to ensure their activities support the creation of sustainable cluster businesses. Expanding mentoring services, increasing the amount of grants, creating an environment that will encourage people to invest in small companies, and introducing legislation to facilitate small business activities are ways the Irish state could contribute to small business development. I will create an executive summary of this study, make it available to participants, and make a copy available at the South Dublin County Council Library in Lucan. I will use suitable channels such as seminars, conference presentations, and web blogs to spread the results to a broader audience, including institutions of higher education, profit and nonprofit organizations, and the Irish government.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study included some limitations that I recommend researchers address through further research to increase knowledge and improve business practices. The first limitation of this study was that I could not control the effect of entrepreneurs’ social status on their ability to harness their external environment. Participants’ social status might have affected their personal attributes, EO dimensions, and the behavioral tendencies that determined their performance. I recommend that quantitative researchers who conduct further research on this topic explore the influence of social status on personal attributes and on entrepreneurial behaviors. The second limitation of this study was entrepreneurs' education levels might have had some effect on their knowledge of the support network available during challenging times, but it was not possible to control this attribute. Third, people's circumstances or prejudice could have influenced the consistency of their answers, which was difficult to know. However, future researchers may address this limitation by seeking further information about potential participants before recruitment beyond the meeting the legibility criteria for selection. The fourth limitation of this study was that I did not cover distinctions in race, age, and gender differences among the sample, which might have had an effect on the outcomes. The three participants were all over 40 years of age and had been in business for over 15 years. I recommend conducting quantitative research involving participants whose businesses have been in operation over 5 years but less than 10 years and who are between 18 and 39 years of age and to examine the potential relationships among age, gender, nationality, strategies and success rates.

Reflections

My doctoral study experience was challenging and gratifying. I acquired new knowledge to fulfill a learning experience and increased my understanding of managing a successful small enterprise. I started recruiting for participants a few days before Christmas, which made the process challenging because it was a busy period. Hence, the recruitment and scheduling of interviews were initially difficult, but it became easier after the holidays. All the interviews took place after Christmas. Participants had sufficient time for the conversations, participated actively, shared information freely, and provided sufficient data that assured the validity of the findings.

I have neither owned nor worked in an SBE, did not know any of the participants personally, and did not associate with any of them before the commencement of the research except for the purpose of establishing rapport. Before the study, I had no preconceived notion regarding the result of my research but rather engaged the participants with the intention to learn from their experiences. Conducting this study has provided me with a better understanding of small enterprise practice and equipped me with some knowledge to assist small business entrepreneurs and other business owners with strategies discovered in the findings. I am optimistic that I will use my doctoral study experience to improve communities in Ireland and other countries in which I might reside in the future.

Conclusions

In this study, I conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with three small business entrepreneurs in Lucan, County Dublin, Ireland who have been managing a profitable small business for more than 5 years from beginning operations to explore strategies they use to succeed. The research findings supported the conceptual framework of EO as described by Wales (2016) that certain entrepreneurial attributes influence people's management philosophies and actions to coordinate internal resources to succeed in business. The results of the study formed the basis for my recommendations for action and future research.

Discovering strategies to help small firm proprietors operate successfully could benefit communities, create a sense of stability in families throughout the country, and bring about positive social change. The applications of findings from this study may help boost start-up enterprise activities and significantly improve the sustainability of many small firms in Ireland. Small business entrepreneurs may implement the recommendations for enhancing business practices to increase sales and profits. Possible positive social changes resulting from these actions include the provision of increasing employment opportunities and improving the standard of living for the well-being in the country.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Introduction, develop some rapport, and the give a brief overview of the study.
2. Present the consent form to the participant, discuss its contents, and address any concerns.
3. State the position regarding privacy and confidentiality.
4. Participant signs consent form and receive a copy.
5. Explain to the participant the importance of recording the interview, and request his or her consent to record. Turn on the voice-recording device, after participant agrees to the recording.
6. Follow through the interview procedure by introducing the participant with pseudonym/coded identification, note and state the date and time.
7. Begin the interview with the first questions and follow through to the final question.
8. Use follow-up or probing questions as needed.
9. End interview and stop the recording device.
10. Discuss with the participant about member checking and possible dates for the member checking.
11. Thank the participants for their part in the study and reconfirm contact numbers for the review.
12. End interview protocol.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experience during the first 5 years of managing your SBE?
2. What skills or training did you have before starting your company that has influenced your experiences with small business management, survival, and sustainability beyond 5 years?
3. What support did you find helpful during the start-up years that contributed to your remaining in business over 5 years?
4. What key success strategies have you used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
5. What were the principal barriers that you faced in implementing the strategies?
6. How did you address the barriers to implementing your key success strategies?
7. What more would you like to add that I have not asked you about operation a successful company beyond 5 years?