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Strategies for Small Businesses to Win Federal Contracts

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Fredrick Murphy

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Strategies for Small Businesses to Win Federal Contracts

by

Fredrick Derell Murphy

MBA, Strayer University, 2012

BBA, Strayer University, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2017

Abstract

Small businesses miss out on federal contracting opportunities because of the strategies they lack. Both large and small businesses provide supplies and services through contract awards to the U.S. government while spending over \$300 billion annually. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies of small business owners in the Clarksville, Tennessee and Hopkinsville, Kentucky region who have won federal contracts. Porter's competitive advantage theory grounded this study as the conceptual framework. The data collection process involved face-to-face, semistructured interviews and member checking with 3 small business owners to enhance credibility of data interpretation. Themes that emerged from the study included contractual knowledge, access to resources, measures of success, and sustainability. The study findings may apply directly or indirectly to individuals, organizations, and society. The positive social implications of applying the findings include increased business opportunities for small business owners, which could promote job creation to benefit the federal government and society.

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Dedication

The dedication of this study is to God and my family. With God, all things are possible. I particularly thank my wife, Mrs. Mauricia Murphy. My wife's continuous support throughout our marriage and through this educational journey has been remarkable. Thank you for sacrificing the time for me to complete my studies and for always encouraging me that all things are possible through dedication and perseverance. Through your unconditional love and continual support, constant encouragement, and unwavering belief in me, our future endeavors will be blessed. The dedication of this project also goes to my grandmother, Ms. Ruby Mae Judkins, and my mother, Ms. Edith Tuck, who laid the foundation for what God has predestined me for. I thank God for my mother-in-law, Ms. Margie Charlton for the many prayers and caring support throughout the years. Thank you to all for your encouragement and faith in my dreams in the hope that we would have a better life.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Leaders of small businesses spend millions of dollars preparing proposals to win complex and lucrative multimillion-dollar government contracting opportunities (Bryant, 2015). Business professionals seek multiple venues to identify the essential variables in winning these contracts (Parrish, 2008; Smartt & Ferreira, 2015). Contracting with the federal government can create opportunities for small businesses (SBA, 2017b). The Small Business Administration (SBA) provides data through the Dynamic Small Business Search (DSBS) engine on teaming and joint-venturing opportunities for small businesses (SBA, 2017c). These opportunities are not limited to purchasing goods, but extend to services such as office machinery maintenance, renovation projects, construction projects, counseling services, family housing, and fingerprinting and background checks for security clearances. SBA staff have worked alongside participating federal agencies to maximize the participation of small businesses in winning contracts (SBA, 2017d).

Background of the Problem

A goal of the federal government since the 1990s has been to award a portion of its contracts to small businesses (SBA, 2017a). The reported failure to meet contract award goals costs U.S. small businesses contracting opportunities each year (SBA, 2017a). From January 2009 through January 2013, the SBA financially supported more than 193,000 small businesses with more than \$106 billion in funding used for government contracting (SBA, 2017d). During fiscal year (FY) 2011, the federal government awarded \$91.5 billion, or 21.65% of the 23% targeted prime contracting

dollars, to small businesses (SBA, 2017d). Awarding federal contracts to small businesses can lead to job creation, economic development, and capital investment in underserved markets (SBA, 2017a).

The trend among small business owners is to increase competition and broaden partnerships with federal and state governments (Eggers, Baker, Gonzalez, & Vaughn, 2012; Farmer, 2015; Loader, 2011). Small businesses compete to win contracting opportunities while boosting the economy through job creation and even the development of entirely new industries (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Yeow & Edler, 2012). Federal, state, and local government agencies in industries such as healthcare, education, defense, transportation, and protection spend billions of dollars annually (DiIulio, 2014). When enduring contractors perform well on existing contracts, some small businesses view this success by competitors as a threat and do not bid or compete (Alzahrani & Emsley, 2013).

Problem Statement

In 2012, the federal government failed to reach its goal of awarding approximately \$100 billion in contracts to small businesses (SBA, 2017d). The SBA works with federal agencies to award at least 23% of all prime government contract dollars to small businesses (SBA, 2017b), but only 22.25% of the 23% were awarded to small businesses in 2012 (SBA, 2017d). The general business problem was that some small business owners encounter difficulties in winning federal government contracts. The specific business problem was that some small business owners lack strategies to win federal government contracts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners need to win federal government contracts. The specific population consisted of three small business owners in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and Clarksville, Tennessee. The implications for positive change arising from this study include higher business revenues and local employment opportunities. The results of this study may contribute to social change by promoting improved survivability rates of small businesses, revenues, and local employment opportunities.

Nature of the Study

The three primary research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Tsai, 2014). A qualitative method was most appropriate for this study. Emerging questions require data from within participants' environments (Yin, 2014). The qualitative method meets the needs of researchers seeking to develop a holistic view on a phenomenon with subsequent analysis (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). In contrast, the uses of quantitative inquiry include counting, measuring, and investigating statistical significance (Bernard, 2012). The quantitative method was not suitable for this study because my intent was to gain a deeper understanding using semistructured interviews guided by open-ended questions. Researchers use both qualitative and quantitative methods for mixed methods research (Mertens, 2014). A mixed-method approach enables a researcher to seek information needed to solve a problem instead of identifying the cause of a problem (Sparkes, 2014). The quantitative and mixed method approaches were not appropriate for this research because no variables existed for examination or comparison.

Qualitative research designs used in business research include case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative theory (Denzin, 2012). A case study research design was most appropriate to explore the strategies that small business owners used to win government contracts and was appropriate for the investigation of real-life issues of critical cases (Yin, 2014). Researchers explore individual worldviews or lived experiences on issues of common themes (Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A phenomenological design includes the essence of the phenomenon from the points of view and experiences of the participants (Petty, Thomas, & Stew, 2012b). Phenomenological research encompasses exploring the essence of a participant's knowledge via interviews and observations (Kafle, 2013). The phenomenological design was not suitable for my study because I did not explore the unique essence of at least 20 participants' knowledge through observations. Narrative designs enable researchers to collect stories about events as well as observations, diaries, and letters, and they involve the presentation of organized stories in chronological order (Petty et al., 2012b). The narrative approach has value in capturing the stories of research participants for the purpose of data collection (Holly & Colyar, 2012). The narrative design was not suitable for this study because the focus of this research was exploring and understanding participant experiences in the context of a specific phenomenon. An ethnographic design is the basis of shared beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of a group (Robinson, 2014). The ethnographic design was not appropriate because a culture or community was not the focus of this study.

Research Question

The central research question for this study was the following: What strategies do small business owners need to win federal government contracts?

Interview Questions

The focus of the interview questions was to identify strategies that small business owners needed to win federal government contracts. The questions I used to interview small business owners for this study were the following:

1. How long did it take to secure a federal contract?
2. What barriers or restrictions did you encounter when competing for federal contracts?
3. What training or education did you use to help you win federal contracts?
4. What strategies did you use to successfully win federal contracts?
5. What support did you receive in achieving your awarded contract?
6. What contracting method did you use as your primary approach to win federal contracts?
7. How many federal contracts have you lost as a small business?
8. What other information would you like to share regarding strategies for winning and sustaining federal contracts?

Conceptual Framework

The competitive advantage theory by Porter (1980) served as the conceptual framework for this qualitative multiple case study. In concert with Porter's (1980) five forces model, competitive advantage theory affords a firm the ability to analyze

competitors, evaluate substitute products, identify suppliers and buyers, and measure competitive rivalry (Blackwell & Eppler, 2014; Morgan, 2012). Each of the five factors should assess how strongly or weakly the competitive force influences the nature of industry competition (Blackwell & Eppler, 2014). Competitive strategies differ widely among small businesses that compete for federal contracts (Beal & Lockamy, 1999; Keller & Price, 2011). Competing practices are routine practices exercised at local, state, and federal levels (Beal & Lockamy, 1999; Keller & Price, 2011).

Fieldwork depends on an understanding or theory of study, and theory development is essential for conducting case studies (Yin, 2014). In this study, implementing a theory was critical in demonstrating whether recognition of the strategies was deemed important in contracts and adequate for winning desired contracts. Competitive advantage theory fit my study's exploration of the embedded aspects of low cost, differentiation, and focus on small businesses that compete to win federal contracts (Palmer, Wright, & Powers, 2015; Salavou, 2015). Each study participant identified strategies that had resulted in winning federal contracts. The concepts shared throughout the study facilitated the identification of strategies that small business leaders used to win federal contracts.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions of terms are associated with small business concerns as identified by the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), Subpart 19, regarding contracting with the federal government.

Bidding: Bidding is a process in which the customer submits an offer for work, for the provision of a service, for the supply of a special type of good, for a process, or for construction equipment (de Souza Dutra et al., 2015).

Competitive advantage: Competitive advantage is a function of strategy that puts a firm in a better position than rivals to create economic value for customers (Grant, 2013; Harvard Business School, 2005).

Contract: A contract is a binding, legal, and enforceable agreement between two or more parties (Campbell, 2013).

Contracting officer representative (COR): CORs are U.S. government contracting officials who have received training in contract administration and are responsible for contract administration and contractor oversight (Karstrom, 2013).

Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR): The FAR is the primary regulatory document governing U.S. government agency contracting and acquisition efforts (FAR, 2017).

Federal government contractor: A federal government contractor is a business entity registered as an active participant in the Central Contractor Registry (FAR, 2017b).

RFP (Request for Proposal): RFPs specify all of the necessary actions for the preparation of a bid notice. In an RFP, the customer provides all instructions, conditions, rules, and bidding documents, in addition to presenting all of the characteristics of the subject matter (the work) of the bidding process (de Souza Dutra et al., 2015).

Small businesses: Small businesses are entities that have a size standard set by the SBA within the United States on an industry-by-industry basis, but have fewer than 500 employees and less than \$7 million in annual receipts (FAR, 2017b).

System for Award Management (SAM): SAM is a database containing information on entities that have been awarded a federal contract as well as those seeking to do business with the U.S. government (FAR, 2017a).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Researchers must be open to opposing views and findings when exploring case studies (Yin, 2014). Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations establish the boundaries for a study (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). This subsection presents a description of the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Assumptions

Assumptions are potential factors that highlight perceived outcomes by those experiencing a phenomenon (Foss & Hallerg, 2013; Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Small business leaders have openly shown interest in working on contracts with the U.S. government as defined by the FAR (2017b). An assumption was that the federal government and small business representatives form meaningful relationships. There was an assumption that a multiple case study approach would be an appropriate design. A further assumption was small business owners selected for this study were willing to participate. An additional assumption was the study participants provided truthful and comprehensive responses to the interview questions (see Appendix A). The final assumption was that participants provided copies of company documents related to the

study for my analysis. An assumption of data saturation is that the data collected capture everything important in a study (Habersack & Luschin, 2013).

Limitations

Limitations of a study are potential weaknesses that are out of the researcher's control (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). This study included small business owners who had attained federal contracts. The first limitation was that some participants might not have provided complete and honest answers to interview questions. An additional limitation was the geographic region where the study took place. Case study research is subject to bias based when the researcher possesses past knowledge of, or experience with, the particular problem (Yin, 2014).

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study identify boundaries within the researcher's control, which is limited in scope (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Mitchell & Jolley, 2013). Study participants were small business owners who had experience with successfully winning federal government contracts in the Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and Clarksville, Tennessee area and were at least age 18 years of age. Owners of small businesses who were not interested in contracting with the federal government were not included in the study. Identifying a sufficient number of representatives of small businesses in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and Clarksville, Tennessee who were willing to discuss the difficulties of working with the federal government did not pose a challenge for the study. The study focus's was limited to contracting with the federal government and did not encompass other issues that may affect small businesses.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study have value for the business environment in providing information that may assist small businesses in securing federal contracts. The federal government relies on contractors, which comprise more than 50% of the workforce on federal programs and projects (Bublak, 2013). Small business owners may benefit from the study's findings by developing a better understanding of strategies that other small businesses have used to win government contracts.

Contribution to Business Practice

The ability for small businesses to ensure proper service and products comes with unlimited responsibility. Contracting officers award contracts in the United States while technical personnel and contractors administer and manage the performance of the contract effort in vast locations (Rendon, Apte, & Apte, 2012). These conditions can have an influence on the effectiveness of the management of the contract. The gaps in the literature leave in question the processes or programs necessary to stimulate small business involvement in contracts performed in undisclosed locations.

Implications for Social Change

Researchers have viewed small businesses as the cornerstone of the country and credited these businesses with creating jobs and presenting new ideas and processes (de Wit & de Kok, 2014). Small business owners experience perplexing times in a sluggish economy (Geho & Frakes, 2013). Small firms make important contributions to the economy through innovation as well as the creation of jobs and entirely new industries (Yeow & Edler, 2012); however, the jobs created do not result in long-term employment

solutions (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). The federal government has set standards for job creation for small businesses that other countries emulate (Brush, Edelman, & Manolova, 2015; Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). The findings of this study may inform efforts to provide employment, stimulate the economy, create employment sustainability opportunities, and encourage the startup or expansion of small businesses.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study design was to explore the strategies that some small business owners used to win federal contracts. This literature review is a summary of historical and current literature regarding strategies that small businesses have used to win federal government contracts. The goal of this research was to identify the strategies that small business owners have implemented to increase business opportunities in the past 5 years. Businesses develop strategies for implementation and to create competitive advantages (Gouillart, 2014). Business leaders' ability to provide internal and external strategies and outperform competitors supports their competitive advantage (Blackwell & Eppler, 2014).

The databases and resources used in this research included Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Science Direct, Business Source Premier, ABI/Inform Global, and the Walden Library. Key terms used to search for relevant references included *bidding*, *competitive advantage*, *contract*, *federal acquisition regulation (FAR)*, *federal government contractor*, *request for proposal (RFP)*, and *small business*. The publications accessed for this literature review included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and websites, totaling 290 references. Two hundred sixty-three (89.7%) of the 290 total

references were peer reviewed. The use of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and websites verified the credibility of the 263 articles published within 5 years of the anticipated graduation date of 2017. Credibility establishes trustworthiness and exhibits an accurate picture of a phenomenon (Noble & Smith, 2015). Credibility is the truth of the data or the participants' views and the interpretation and representation of the data by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012).

Table 1 presents detailed information on the sources used for the literature review for this study.

Table 1

Literature Review Source Count

Literature type	Recent sources	Total sources	% recent sources
Peer-reviewed journals	236	263	89.7%
Books	7	9	.77%
Government websites	18	18	1%
Total	261	290	90%

Note. The term *recent* indicates within 5 years of 2017.

Theory Assessment

Small business owners who seek to attain a competitive advantage should differentiate themselves from their competition. Competitive advantage is diagnosed by identifying how the value chain activities and the linkages between them influence competitive strategies such as cost advantage or differentiation (Porter, 1985).

Researchers use competitive advantage theory to assess the performance of firms and industries in the market (Porter, 1991). The primary proposition of Porter's theory on

competitive advantage is that by analyzing competitors, evaluating substitute products, identifying suppliers/buyers, and measuring competitive rivalry, managers can develop value-creating competitive strategies (Porter, 1980).

Management choices are the fundamental determinants of success while discrete activities determine a business's position in the industry and its competitive advantage (Porter, 1991). In the quest for success, managers need to consider five forces that affect their industry and their firm's position within it (Porter, 1980). With an understanding of the forces that exist in the marketplace in which it competes, a company can cultivate a strategy to establish or maintain competitive advantage (Porter, 1980). Knowledge of the relationship between activities within the company fits into the larger value system to facilitate competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). The five forces that affect a particular industry and a business's position are considerations when seeking to attain success (Porter, 1980). A leader can determine potential profit margins and degree of competitiveness while using five forces analysis (Porter, 1991; Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012). The intent of the five forces analysis tool is to offer a clear understanding of where the power lies for executives by exploiting strengths, improving weaknesses, and identifying detrimental choices (Alrawashdeh, 2013). These forces create competitive advantage in an industry when firms learn how to best cope with the industry environment (Dobbs, 2014; Hove & Masocha, 2014; Porter, 2008). The five forces consist of threats of entry of new competitors, the bargaining power of suppliers, threats of substitute products or services from competitors, the bargaining power of customers, and intensity of competitive rivalry (Porter, 1980; Porter & Heppelmann, 2014).

Regulation of the market plays a significant role in influencing competition, as well as small business entry and performance outcomes (Blackburn et al., 2013; Kitching et al., 2013).

The new entrants to an industry bring about new capacity and a desire to gain market share that puts pressure on prices, costs, and rates of investment necessary to compete. Incumbents may be forced to lower prices or seek innovative measures to remain competitive as new entrants come into the industry (Porter, 2008). Industry vulnerability for new entrants is determined by factors of increased market share, new capacity, acquired sizeable resources, and portfolio diversification (Schwenger, Straub, & Borzillo, 2014). Additional barriers for entrants include the need for large capital investment, high switching costs, low access to distribution channels, and restrictive government or licensing policies (Porter, 2008; Ucmak & Arsalan, 2012).

Powerful suppliers capture more value for themselves by charging higher prices, limiting quality or services, or shifting costs to industry participants. Suppliers are powerful if they control the market with a limited number of firms (Porter & Heppelmann, 2014). Substitute suppliers perform the same or similar functions within an industry (Locke, Rissing, & Pal, 2013). Companies that introduce substitute products and services place ceilings on prices compared to their competitors while offering the same or similar products or services (Schwenger et al., 2014). The producers of substitute products influence markets in their development and have an influence on price production or performance improvement (Porter, 2008).

Powerful customers increase their value by forcing prices down and demanding superior quality or expanded service, while buyers flex their power in negotiating leverage relative to industry participants to create pressure for price reductions (Berenson, 2015). Buyers leverage power to decrease prices and request superior quality of products or services (Schwenger et al., 2014). Intensity in competition among companies can create severe rivalry (Suwardy & Ratnatunga, 2014). Suwardy and Ratnatunga (2014) described this intensity as a situation where competitors exceed or is nearly equal in size and power, while industry growth is slow. This has the potential to foster an environment for competitive market share for companies seeking to expand. Jockeying for position among current competitors is the most obvious and immediate source of competition (Hove & Masocha, 2014).

Historically, researchers used Porter's (1980) framework to determine the critical industry success factors (Blackwell & Eppler, 2014). Porter's five forces framework has benefited and challenged a vast number of businesses in diverse industries (Dobbs, 2014). Some researchers have used Porter's model by concentrating on a business's core competencies that give it a competitive edge. Porter's model is exhibited in an empirical study of U.S. manufacturers that suggested strategy research on industry competition for contract decisions (Han, Porterfield, & Li, 2012). Porter's model is not restricted to product-oriented firms but also applies to service firms or any business in which owners choose to deliver a different type of value from competitors, rather than to deliver the same value at a better price (Miles, Miles, & Cannon, 2012).

The value chain concept evaluates was articulated in the works of Porter on

competitive advantage, but it was not feasible for this study because the value chain concept did not relate to manufacturing areas that include operations, sales, distribution, and secondary activities such as human resources, research and development, and finance (Darmawan, Putra, & Wiguna, 2014; Porter, 1985). The general systems theory introduced by Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1941) indicates that a system must be purpose driven with methods for shaping itself and guiding its behavior. Scholars have used principal-agent theory in efforts to understand how participants manage risks, align incentives, and forge relationships (Fayezi, O'Loughlin, & Zutshi, 2014). Principal-agent theory pertains to the relationships between principals and agents in managing contracts (Witesman & Fernandez, 2013). Small business owners build trust and loyalty with customers by understanding and satisfying customers' needs (Al-alak, 2014). These relationships are built over time as customers perceive that the business leader values them and holds them in high esteem (Lam & Harker, 2013).

Competitive Advantage

Conducting business with the federal government can be a lengthy and cumbersome process, in that companies that do so must seek to win federal contracts. Procurement officials base decisions on the need to use advantageous measures to meet contracting goals (Snider, Kidalov, & Rendon, 2013). The SBA offers a plethora of business tools to enhance small businesses that compete for federal government contracts (SBA, 2017d).

Competitive advantage emerges when a company outperforms other companies competing in the same marketplace (Grant, 2013). The broadly accepted definition of

competitive advantage stems from the work of Porter (1985), who described the concept as the attainment of sustainable resources and capabilities that provide firms either cost leadership, differentiated positioning, or focus on a target market segment.

Cost leadership is contingent on conventional activities that produce products or services for customer satisfaction at the lowest price through the competitive advantage strategy (Bambang Baroto et al., 2012). In an empirical examination of strategic direction and competitive devices, Ibrahim (2015) found that cost leadership is not a highly-pursued strategy by small businesses. The cost leadership strategy stresses cost efficiency by economies of scale, which contain elements that small businesses have difficulty achieving (Ibrahim, 2015). In a study on cost leadership and differentiation strategies, Bambang Baroto et al. (2012) found that the employment of a combination of strategies could build competitive advantage in a given market.

The second strategy proposed by Porter (1985) was *differentiation* from a company's competitors. Companies that pursue a differentiation strategy compete based on price or pursue a strategy of differentiation by offering superior product value (Kohn, Miller, & Ullrich, 2015).

A focus on a target market segment, as described by Weinstein (2014), is best suited to situations where customers have distinctive preferences or specialized needs. Success in a highly competitive marketplace requires small business owners to recognize and meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders (Maden, Arikan, Telci, & Kantur, 2012). Small business owners should identify customer needs to be in a competitive

position to meet customer demands (Clark, 2013). Competition is expected in a very dynamic and ambiguous environment.

Competition in the global market of the 21st century is rigid and complicated (Eboreime & Adedoyin, 2013). Competitive advantage is defined as a facet of a business beyond what the competition has or does (Hatten, 2015). A goal of marketing is to achieve competitiveness for the organization and its products or services through marketing by creating and cultivating relationships with other organizations and people who can affect the success of the organization (Wirtz, Tuzovic, & Kuppelwieser, 2014). Niche marketing may lead to competitive advantage for business opportunities (Dalgic & Leeuw, 2015). A competitive advantage is something that a firm does better than its competitors (Ferrell, 2012).

Green marketing may represent a competitive advantage over competitors (Arseculeratne & Yazdanifard, 2013). The green marketing approach is focused mainly on the use of environmental concepts through all stages of decision making in the organization (Hello & Al Momani, 2014). Organizations expand business opportunities with the development of a green marketing strategy (Mishra, & Sharma, 2014).

Apart from the many regulations that govern the public procurement process, an equally important dynamic involves the contracting decision makers who provide input into the contractual relationship between the parties. Changes in government regulations mentioned by Ginter (2013) provided an opportunity for private entities to gain a competitive advantage. These changes would fundamentally alter the SBA's analysis regarding the implementation provisions of the National Defense Authorization Act of

2013 related to small business set-asides and subcontracting (SBA, 2017d). The newest proposals by the House Committee on Small Business included new legislation to raise the small business contracting goal from 23% to 25% (Greater Opportunities for Small Business Act of 2014).

Both large and small businesses provide supplies and services to the U.S. government while spending over \$300 billion per year (Bublak, 2013). Contracting opportunities proposed to large and small businesses include providing an incentive for mentor organizations, thorough contract oversight through workforce training, and a means for open communication between federal officials and small business representatives (Bublak, 2013). Government contracting officials do not always procure supplies and services on competition or governing policy (Joaquin & Greitens, 2012). The awarding of government contracts frequently ends in being noncompetitive due to existing programs and current laws (Johnston & Girth, 2012). Decisions to procure goods or services may derive from individual requests or urgent needs. Public procurement officials' base decisions on the need to use expedient measures to meet established contracting goals (Snider, Kidalov, & Rendon, 2013). The choices and the grounding of choices within the economics of the industry and firm result in a clear path to what must be done to create and sustain competitive advantage (Allio & Fahey, 2012).

History of Federal Government Contracting

The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) system is a comprehensive set of guidelines for conducting government contracting business (FAR, 2017b). The political influence of the top nine U.S. government contracting organizations has increased

dramatically in the last 50 years (Hayden et al., 2010). Provisions in the Small Business Act of 1953 ensure that small businesses receive a percentage of government contracts. SBA offices are located in each state, offering services that include capital, contracts, and counseling to more than 1 million small business owners annually (SBA, 2017g). Historically, the federal government failed to meet its 23% government-wide small business procurement goals (Cullen, 2012), contrary to increasing contracting opportunities in the United States (Dickinson, 2013). The procurement goal is to make available more of the \$450 billion annually in the federal discretionary budget for government contract spending (Friel, 2014) to underrepresented small business owners. The four main underrepresented categories include small disadvantaged businesses, woman-owned businesses, service-disabled veteran-owned businesses, and businesses in historically underutilized business zones (SBA, 2017a). Additional contracting programs provided by the SBA (2017a) consist of small business set-asides and the 8(a) Business Development Program as identified in the Small Business Act, which states that simplified acquisitions, defined as those between \$3,000 and \$150,000, shall be set aside for small business concerns.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, small disadvantaged businesses received the highest percentage of awarded contracts ever from the federal government—8.6%, totaling \$30.6 billion (Shoraka, 2014). The FAR stated that women-owned businesses must have 51% women owners or at least 51% of stock ownership belonging to one or more women (FAR, 2017b). Historically, women-owned small businesses have experienced denial in federal contracting opportunities (Mee, 2012). Contractors form initial alliances for

competition purposes and then sever these relationships once they have achieved a contract award (Kidalov, 2013). The joint venture of a large government contractor and a service-disabled veteran-owned small business (SDVOSB) enhanced their ability to win set-aside contract awards (Best, 2013). Obtaining a federal contract for products or services to take advantage of U.S. government programs and legislated goals has not been easy for service-disabled veteran business owners (McGann, 2014). The SBA's efforts in historically underutilized businesses zones have been intended to increase employment rates and wealth in distressed communities (SBA, 2017a).

Many small business leaders find themselves unprepared to comply with the rules and regulations that must be followed. Federal laws and acquisition regulations require the awarding of contracts by full and open competition, but these provisions also permit federal agencies to award noncompetitive contracts in certain circumstances. For example, a small business set-aside condition permits a sole-source contract award when only one vendor can supply the required products or services. The SBA promulgated final regulations on October 2, 2013, with an effective date of December 31, 2013, to establish worldwide applicability of small business set-aside procedures through a slight change in the regulatory language (SBA, 2017e). Small business set-aside requirements apply regardless of the place of performance (SBA, 2017e). The name of the 8(a) Program derived from Section 8(a) of the Small Business Act of 1953, as set forth in 15 United States Code (U.S.C.) 637. As amended by the U.S. Congress, the Act created the 8(a) Program so the U.S. SBA could support small businesses owned and operated by socially and economically disadvantaged persons in growing their businesses (SBA, 2017e).

The U.S. government understands that contracting with federal departments and agencies is complex. Small business owners must register their company with the U.S. government in the System for Award Management (SAM) when seeking to conduct business with federal agencies (SBA, 2017h). The SAM lists more than 450,000 active registrants in the federal government contracting industry database (FPDS, 2016). Some federal agencies establish mentor protégé programs to help with their subcontracting goals and contribute to small business endeavors (Kidalov, 2013). Agencies such as the DOD and U.S. Department of Energy receive incentives for subcontracting with small businesses (Kidalov, 2013). Congress created statutes, regulations, and national programs that advocate on behalf of small businesses (GSA, 2017) and promote the benefits of contracting with the federal government (SBA, 2017c) as a method for expanding sales by small businesses to the federal government, which is the world's largest buyer of commodity products and services (U.S. Trade and Development Agency, 2013). The Small Business Administration reserved (a) permanent tax credits, (b) reductions in regulations, and (c) expansion of federal contracts for small business awards that helped promote the development of more than 27 million small businesses in the United States (SBA, 2017f).

Small business owners must follow the U.S. government procuring standards and codes to qualify the business for a contract (SBA, 2017h). Small business owners must obtain a Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number and an employer identification number (EIN), which is the federal tax identification number for a corporate entity registered in the Dynamic Small Business Search (DSBS) database

(SBA, 2017h). The DSBS is an on-line tool developed by the SBA used by contracting officers to identify potential small business contractors for upcoming contracting opportunities. These small business owners should also familiarize themselves with the Federal Business Opportunities (FedBizOps) to search for contracting opportunities. FedBizOps is an online service operated by the Federal Government, which announces all contracting opportunities over \$25,000 (Shehane, 2013). Owners should visit the USASpending website (usaspending.gov) to gain an understanding of where the Federal Government award contracts. Small business owners identify other small businesses for teaming and joint venturing when using the Dynamic Small Business Search (DSBS).

A winning strategy of business owners should include understanding the standards and requirements to bid on U.S. government contracts (Gill & Biger, 2012). Business owners must understand and take advantage of the available education, training, and financing to be successful (Gill & Biger, 2012). Education and training have a positive effect on the advancement and sustainability of small businesses (Mas-Tur, Pinazo, Tur-Porcar, & Sanchez-Masferrer, 2015). A study by Karanja et al. (2013) supported the assertion that ongoing education in business management by executive leadership nurtures greater small business success. Small business owners develop their definition of success and view success as a subjective concept (Le & Raven, 2015). Small business owners fail to win contracts because of competition, economic factors, crises, shifts in priorities, and varying expectations (Miettinen & Littunen, 2013). Small business success is predicated more on the practices of its leaders than from the effects of the

market in which the firm operates while suggesting that ongoing education improves management skills (Karanja et al., 2013; Mazra & Guy, 2012).

Leadership is the major driving force of a small business to compete and achieve any breakthrough causing its vision to be successful (GAO, 2013). One method to reduce small business failure is to assist small business owners with the development of a business model underlining the development of leadership skills (Phipps, 2012). Leaders who invest in education position themselves to survive longer term because they devote more time to practicing strategic issues (Karanja et al., 2013). Growing management experience and effective financial management contribute toward achieving such business success (Arasti, 2012). Some small business leaders succeed while others fail during the same conditions, and this assertion reinforces the point that external influences are less important than leadership competencies (Karanja et al., 2013). Seventy-nine percent of Karanja's et al. survey respondents emphasized that effective technical, financial, and leadership competencies were critical to fostering small business success. Karanja et al. also concluded that higher executive education levels correlated with the greater effectiveness to improve an executive's managerial and technical skills.

Primary contracting activities encompass four general activity areas, including procurement, partnering, performance, and problems (Thomas, 2012a). Procurement activities include preparing bid strategies based upon a firm's fixed price, time and materials, or cost-plus contract types, preparing formal proposals for bid submission, negotiating contract term and conditions upon award, and filing protests in situations when the government makes errors in contract evaluations and incorrectly removes a firm

from competition (SBA, 2017c; Thomas, 2012a). The partnering activities occur during proposal preparation and include creating teaming agreements with each team's partners describing responsibilities and work share upon contract award selection of vendors that can provide products, or services in fulfillment of contract requirements, and drafting of subcontracts in anticipation of a contract award (General Services Administration, 2016; SBA, 2017c). Performance activities occur after contract award and include reporting and compliance, contract and task order administration, financial management, and audits of products and services for fulfilling contract requirements (GSA, 2017; SBA, 2017c). Problem activities occur after contract award and include dispute resolution, appeal hearings, judicial proceedings in an extreme case, and contract closeout activities (Thomas, 2012a).

In an exploratory study by Williams (2015), the finding indicated a need for small business leaders to adapt strategy approaches to contract performance and the attainment of positive performance rating in government contracting. The themes highlighted by Williams (2015) consisted of leadership strategies that influenced positive performance ratings, behavioral or trait-based attributes of leaders, understanding bureaucratic dynamics and contract requirements, resource-based capacity as an impediment, and competitive intelligence as a valuable resource. A business improves performance by developing the right strategies (Abdalkrim, 2013). Small firms create strategies to give them a competitive advantage (Karanja et al. (2013). Firm managers achieve a competitive advantage in several ways that determines and differentiate their strategies (Miculescu & Miculescu, 2012).

Contract Management

The Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2013) identifies contract management as a high-risk area for the U.S. Government since 1992. Individual competence of the contract management tasks, activities, and organizational processes lead to higher success, which enhances the outcome for small businesses (Kerner, 2013). Government contracting process provides challenges for business owners and government officials (Lu, 2013). Practitioners in small business sectors encounter diverse challenges that hinder long-term survival and development (Ojokuku, Sajuyigbe, & Ogunwoye, 2014). Small business owners in the government market face the challenges of irregular competition, and a regulated and politically driven market (Johnston & Girth, 2012; Snider et al., 2013). An expectation of the U.S. Government is to trust government contractors in overseeing services that include human resources, finance and accounting, equipment repair, maintenance, and logistical support (Herbert & Rothwell, 2013). The U.S. Government's reliance on government contractors stemmed from a desire for faster response, innovative thinking, accomplishing targeted objectives, precision skill sets, efficiencies, and cost savings (Krishnan, 2012). This reliance affected the contractor's performance of governmental functions and made the government susceptible to increased political costs, legal complications, and instances of contractor misconduct (Demessie, 2012).

Contracting officers must carefully follow the management process to determine the contract type and method based on unique characteristics of the requirement. Employing contractors enables the government to reduce costs and increase efficiencies

through force reduction and streamlining of business processes (Herbert & Rothwell, 2013). Small business owners and contractors have to trust each other and the source selection process (Maser & Thompson, 2013). The FAR (2016a) require federal contractors to first consider if a contract is a set-aside or sole source award under the 8(a) business development (BD), historically underutilized businesses zone (HUBZONE), service-disabled veteran-owned small business concern (SDVO SBC) or Women-Owned Small Businesses (WOSB) programs before setting aside the requirement as a small business set-aside (SBA, 2017e). Contracting officers, small business specialists, and program managers has increased endeavors to strengthen training initiatives in the most effective manner possible. The government is particularly concerned to include small businesses because it buys goods and services while ensuring large businesses do not over power small businesses, gain access to the new ideas small businesses provide, support small businesses as engines of economic development and job creation, and offer opportunities to disadvantaged socio-ethnic groups (SBA, 2017h). Evidence exists in federal contracting as small businesses leverage their efforts in certain industries and seek the support of critical economic assets (Mirocha, Bents, LaBrosse, & Rietow, 2013).

Negotiated Contracts

Contract negotiations use many federal procurement actions. These negotiations are typically a more complicated process for companies wanting to sell to the government and are also a method that is more time consuming for buying agencies (Nasir, 2014). A request for purchase describes the government requirements, terms, and conditions that apply, information required for the proposal, and evaluation factors for the proposal.

These parameters are likely a result in a negotiated contract. Historically, attainment of government contracts was through a streamlined process to the lowest bidder (Loosemore & Richard, 2015); however, in changing times, rather than making awards to the lowest bidder, which was the general practice in the past, the government can make awards for goods or services that best satisfy its needs at a slightly higher price (Jain, Powers, & Sanghavi, 2015).

Sealed Bid Contracts

The procedures in the sealed bidding process require the government to evaluate bids without discussions and award contracts to the most advantageous bidder that meets the government needs and price-related factors. An invitation for bid is a method used for the sealed bid process (Kettner & Martin, 2015; SBA, 2017e). Although contracts may be set-aside, Manuel and Lunder (2015) posited that sealed bids are small purchases valued at \$3,000 up to \$150,000, contracts that exceed \$150,000 in value, or by negotiating with the small business. The FAR governs the process for publicizing invitations through distribution to prospective bidders and posting in public places (FAR, 2017b).

Competition in government contracting authorizes public and private companies to compete and supply of goods and services while affording government organizations opportunities to reduce spending (Lamothe & Lamothe, 2012).

Contract Bidding

The government contracting process provides challenges for business owners and government officials (Lu, 2013). Opportunities for misconduct with government contracts exist in contract bidding, contractor selection, and other contracting processes

(Bradshaw & Su, 2013). The Government Accountability Office (GAO), SBA's Inspector General, private groups such as Public Citizen, and the American Small Business League (ASBL) investigated the bidding misconduct of non-small businesses that received annual small business contracting awards. A large number of Fortune 500 companies have won federal small business contracts despite their ineligibility to compete for these contracts (Cullen, 2012).

Contractor misconduct has existed since government contracting began (Kaen, 2011). Clarke (2012) noted that contractors believed the bidding process was corrupt. This misconduct atmosphere exists and, according to Bhojwani (2012), the U.S. government has taken the appropriate steps to mitigate misconduct. The FAR (2016b) lists penalties for contractor misconduct in the Federal Contractor Misconduct Database (FCMD). Consequences that exist for being added to this list may include exclusion from current and future bidding contracts, fines, debarment, and criminal prosecution (FAR, 2017b). Bidding misconduct occurs in both large and small businesses that win contracts with the federal government (POGO, 2014). Despite the availability of information about the quantity of contractor misconduct and governmental actions taken to reduce misconduct, information on the effect of the U.S. government's deterrent actions upon unethical behavior within the federal government contracting industry is lacking. The attempts to influence contractor ethical behavior by the U.S. government are futile despite corporate ethical behavior and corporate norms within the industry (Neu, Everett, & Rahaman, 2015). Because government contracting organizations use private

companies to do government contracting business, ethical guidelines are necessary (Bumgarner & Newswander, 2012).

Contract Conduct

In government contracting, both the government contracting employees and the suppliers have rights and obligations to conduct government contracting business ethically. On the contrary, Bradshaw and Su (2013) claimed that contractor misconduct is not limited to awarded contracts, but is present throughout the proposal and bidding processes (FAR, 2017b). Historically, violations of misconduct lead to the U.S. Government revisions of laws, regulations, and government oversight programs throughout the years to deter contract misconduct (FAR, 2017b). Project on Government Oversight (POGO) identified 953 instances of misconduct with over \$53 billion in fines and settlements from 2010 to present (POGO, 2014). The U.S. government's ability to affect contractor misconduct exists in political agendas, biased enforcement of contracting rules and regulations, and poor oversight (Warnock, 2012). Political and economic factors may affect government contracting out; however, government contracting employees may use standard laws to enforce ethical management of contracts (Yang & VanLandingham, 2012). An issue regarding contracting out of government services is a lack of oversight (Lamothe & Lamothe, 2013). Contracting out government services can provide an economic advantage (Chanson & Quelin, 2013). An effective oversight program is essential for deterring government contractor misconduct (Best, 2013). Oversight programs may prevent and detect misconduct, while informing those responsible for enforcing policy (Best, 2013).

Government contractor critics suggested the higher profit margins of contractors are because of unethical business practices (Wang & San Miguel (2012). Top government contractors exercise political influence and a strong bargaining position to create opportunities (Wang & San Miguel, 2012). The opportunities of misconduct exist in the federal government contracting industry and can shape government policy (Howlett & Migone, 2013). Contractor deception includes companies with reputations for misconduct that renamed and rebranded their organization to mask their negative history (Thomas, 2012b). The U.S. Government attempts to influence contractor ethical behavior are futile and the industry and corporate norms alone determine corporate ethical behavior (Ukoha, 2013). Corporate ethics programs exist to reduce instances of misconduct (FAR, 2017b). Policy created by the U.S. government reflects changes required for federal government contractors to self-report violations and to create business ethics awareness and compliance programs (FAR, 2017a). Contractor self-reporting and other forms of oversight are ineffective if misconduct is not prosecuted (Warnock, 2012). The U.S. Government continues to face challenges with contract compliance despite changes in laws and regulations of self-reporting of misconduct, ethics and compliance training, and expanded debarment and suspension enforcement (FAR, 2017b). Risks of combining of multiple contracts into one exposes the government to increased risk of fraud, waste, and abuse, (Demessie, 2012; Dorey et al., 2012). Contractor fraudulent practices, following contract award, include improper pricing and fraudulent billing practices (Martin, 2013). Fraudulent pricing strategies have a long history in government contracting (Martin, 2013). The Fraud Enforcement and Recovery

Act of 2009 (FERA) empowered both the private sector and the federal government in policing contractor behavior (Titolo, 2011). Contracting officials receive the necessary training in contract law, administration, and contractor oversight in efforts to mitigate contract behavior (Karstrom, 2013). Fraud, abuse, and loopholes transpire because of misguided SBA policies and lack of oversight (American Small Business League, 2012).

Laws and Regulations

The Federal Acquisition Regulation outlines the rules of doing business with the federal government (FAR, 2017b). Federal government supports small businesses through many programs, public policies, and exemptions from numerous federal laws and regulations (Gale & Brown, 2013). The SBA provides the importance of complying with laws and regulations when winning a federal contract (SBA, 2017d). Small business owners often search for future regulations and laws that affect their businesses (Kesan, 2013). Political proponents have influenced government contracting policy (Bromberg, 2014). Small businesses are unprepared for the rules and regulations they may encounter when competing for federal contracts (SBA, 2017d).

On December 29, 2014, the Small Business Administration (SBA) issued a proposed rule to implement the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2013 (Pub. L. 112-239). The proposed rule would allow small business prime contractors to exclude similarly situated small business subcontractors from the requirement that a small business prime contractor does not expend on subcontractors more than 50% of the amount paid to the prime contractor. The proposed rule would allow a joint venture to qualify as small for any U.S. federal government procurement, if each joint venture partner qualifies

individually as small under the applicable size standard. This proposed rule would amend the non-manufacturer rule, which provides that a small business concern may deny the opportunity to compete for a contract under Section 8(a) and 15(a) of the Small Business Act. The implementation of this rule is not because of the actual manufacturer or processor of the product, to clarify that the rule does not apply to small business set-aside contracts valued between \$3,000 and \$150,000.

The Government Accountability Office is the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress that exists to support Congress in meeting constitutional responsibilities and help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. Public funds, evaluation of federal programs and policies, and provided analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to assist Congress to make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions are examined by the GAO. The GAO's commitment to good government reflects its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability. While federal statutes and acquisition regulations require that contract awards be based on full and open competition, they also permit federal agencies to award noncompetitive contracts in certain circumstances such as when only one vendor can supply the requirement or awarding of a sole-source award under specified small business programs (GAO, 2015).

Under the provision of the Competition in Contracting Act (CICA) of 1984, agencies are required to obtain full and open competition using competitive procedures in their procurement activities unless otherwise authorized by law. Using competitive procedures to award contracts means that all prospective contractors are permitted to

submit proposals. Agencies are required to perform acquisition planning and conduct market research to promote full and open competition. Noncompetitive contracts need support by a written justification and approval document that addresses the specific exception to full and open competition that applies to the procurement. Each such document must include sufficient facts and rationale to justify the use of the specific exception to competition.

The federal government has the ability to implement policies that promote competition through transparency and fairness. The allowable exceptions to full and open competition are in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR). Justifications required by the FAR are to be published on the Federal Business Opportunities (FedBizOpps.gov) website and approved at various levels within the contracting organization. These levels vary according to the FAR (2016b) on the dollar value of the procurement.

Healthy Financial Standing

The mission of the SBA (2017c), founded in 1953, is to aid, assist, support, and protect American small businesses through business counseling, contracts, education, loans, and loan guarantees. Establishing competitive advantage is not an easy task for small businesses with inadequate financial resources (Thomason, Simendinger, & Kiernan, 2013). Small firms differ from large businesses because small business owners usually have limited resources to dedicate to marketing endeavors (Chollet et al., 2014; Fiore et al., 2013). The government market is how socioeconomic initiatives materialize into economic prosperity for small business (McKevitt, Flynn, & Davis, 2014; Snider et al., 2013). Determinants of the survival of SMEs include size, growth, cash flow, debt,

risk, interest rates, and gross national product (Nunes & Serrasqueiro, 2012). Small businesses are more likely to need financial resources because of an economic downturn than larger businesses (Liu & Shao, 2012). Achieving a competitive advantage includes identifying and focusing on different strategies, building core competencies, acquiring unique technologies, and developing intellectual and human capital (Srivastava, Franklin, & Martinette, 2012). Common challenges that affect small businesses comprise of lack of finance, managerial capabilities, purchasing and using the right technologies, and low productivity (Diehl, Toombs, & Maniam, 2013). Numerous programs subsidize and facilitate credit for small businesses that would otherwise be incapable of obtaining credit, short-term loans, financing to purchase fixed assets, and private equity financing of small businesses (Gale & Brown, 2013).

Lending agents often view small businesses as a credit risk even when the owner provides an extensive business plan and personal assets as collateral (Degryse, de Goeij, & Kappert, 2012; Neeley & Van Auken, 2012). The SBA provides direct and indirect financial assistance to small businesses (SBA, 2017d). The SBA is a leading lender for direct loans and guaranteed bank loans for small businesses (Mihajlov, 2012; Neumark et al., 2011). Researchers have analyzed factors that contribute to small business survival with interesting results (Armstrong, 2013; Ayala & Manzano, 2014; Mayer-Haug et al., 2013). Access to funding streams is important for the survival of small businesses (Byrd, Ross, & Glackin, 2013). A main obstacle to entry or expansion for many U.S. small business owners is accessibility to sufficient, intermediate, and long-term capital to support their working capital and fixed-assets requirements (Byrd et al., 2013). In a study

conducted by Bublak (2013), participants noted that internal barriers to small business representatives consisted of financial working capital and human capital, which were critical to their success. Some business owners are not aware that the lack of knowledge may entail an underutilize business opportunity, and miss an opportunity for the company's growth and increased productivity, and competitiveness (Doris & Kusce, 2013). In-depth knowledge on attaining capital by small business leaders assist in efforts to invest in proposal preparation, make payroll for bid and proposal, deepen knowledge on the federal requirements, interpret provisions and clauses, and prepare the amount of paperwork required for success (Bublak, 2013).

A goal of the SBA 7(a) loan, according to Kang (2015), is to help small businesses resolve their financial constraints by providing loan guaranty programs designed to encourage banks to offer loans to small businesses. Small business owners experience more resource constraints than large corporate leaders (Chen & Chen, 2013). Small businesses have increasingly used the Small Business Administration (SBA) 7(a) Loan Program through commercial banks (Kang, 2015). In 2012, the SBA 7(a) program approved 44,377 loans totaling \$15.1 billion (Kang, 2015). The 7(a) subprograms offer streamlined and expedited loan procedures for particular groups of borrowers, including SBA Express, Patriot Express, Small Loan Advantage, and Community Advantage Pilot programs. These programs have their eligibility requirements, terms, and benefits, which require a borrower to locate in the United States, be a for-profit operating business, qualify as small under the SBA's size requirements, demonstrate a need for the desired credit, and be certified by a banker. Although resources might create a competitive

advantage, this alone does not necessarily increase profits (Costa, Cool, & Dierickx, 2013). Profitability and competitiveness in the marketplace do relate directly to the strategic planning process and the small business owners' ability to adapt to the environment (Dibrell, Craig, & Neubaum, 2014; Mariadoss et al., 2014; Silver, Lundahl, & Berggren, 2014). When strategic resources are mobile and homogenous, the competitive advantage of a firm is not sustainable, because competitors can duplicate the resources (Ritthaisong, Johri, & Speece, 2014).

During an economic recession, a small business may lack excess resources to survive declining revenue because small business owners neglect to factor in the implicit costs of debt during economic growth periods (Di & Hanke, 2012). More focus on how small business owners understand and respond to the modern economic and financial crises is relevant (Papaoikonomou, Segarra, & Li, 2012). Small business is a significant sector of the economy, which influences economic growth and growth and stability of the middle class (Salyakhov, Zagidullina, Fakhrutdinova, & Aleshina, 2015). Successful small business owners create economic growth through the creation of new products and services, revitalization of communities, new civic alliances, increased job opportunities, and increased tax revenues for local and federal government (Amash, 2012 & Yang, 2012).

Small business owners who understand the funding types such as grants, equity, and debt financings gain knowledge from the beginning of business operation up to and beyond five years of operation (Lehner, 2013). Businesses with high growth rates need more aggressive financing (Forte et al., 2013). Small businesses depend on internal funds,

use lower levels of debt, and avoid external equity financing (Daskalakis et al., 2013).

Three sources of funding for SMEs may include internal finance, debt finance, and new capital contributions (Kasseeah, 2012). The survival of a business depends on access to capital, and the challenge for entrepreneurs is to merge effective undertakings for acquiring resources for survival and growing the business (Malmstrom, 2014).

Malmstrom noted that inherent financial limitations can be challenging for small businesses to obtain financing and can create opportunities to grow the business without additional debt. Small business owners promote their products, processes, and market innovations by taking strategic and entrepreneurial actions to search for new markets and make competitive advantages for their companies to create wealth (Gupta & Pandit, 2012). Innovation is known as one factor to a successful business and contributes to the economy and wealth making in a state and country (Mas-Tur et al., 2015). Government policy makers and institutional leaders can contribute to the wealth of the economy by developing and supporting small businesses (Bruton, Ketchen, & Ireland, 2013; Huarng & Riberio-Soriano, 2014).

The failure to recognize finance alternatives and characteristics may cripple an entrepreneurs' ability to develop business (Seghers et al., 2012). Small businesses have more credit restrictions because they are not legally obligated to report financial performance or to audit financial accounts (Zarook et al., 2013). As SMEs grow, managers should establish a record of accomplishment and the ability to provide collateral (Abdulsaleh & Worthington, 2013). Financing affects business decisions and strategies. Small business owners try to leverage their relationships with their existing

banks to gain funding from financial institutions through loans (Cole, 2013).

Relationships with multiple financial institutions can be a point of leverage for small business owners seeking to raise money from multiple sources (Cole, 2013). Locality is a driving factor in the awarding of contracts, with a preference for local and in-state vendors (Williams, 2014).

Networking

An option for small business owners is to venture in seeking strategic alliance. Some SMEs form strategic alliances to pool resources. These strategic alliances are defined as long-term agreements that sanction businesses to gain or sustain competitive advantage (Mitchell & Canel, 2013). Strategic alliances allow SMEs to enhance resources and reach potential customers without additional time and capital (Mitchell & Canel, 2013). Small business leaders continue to face economic challenges and have the potential to collaborate with other businesses to form sustainable alliances (Mitchell & Canel, 2013). The failure rate of a business strategic alliance ranges between 50% and 60% (Mitchell & Canel, 2013). A strategic alliance has the potential for cost savings in executing operations, seeking the best quality, and finding inexpensive labor, which leads to business growth and sustainability (Mokhtar, 2013).

Business owners can use networking to gain knowledge about new sources of information and assists the business owner to broaden exposure (Kerrick et al., 2014). Networking among small businesses fosters success by connecting small business leaders with other small business leaders in their industry and the small business offices of federal agencies (Mazra & Guy, 2012). A firm may start out with favorable initial

conditions, such as high-level skills and a good reputation, but skills alone will not ensure business success. Networks influence all stakeholders involved, but networking assists small business owners in gaining growth in business opportunities (Harris & Misner, 2012). When small business owners engage in networking, they enhance their marketing endeavors at the same time (O'Donnell, 2014).

Social media used by business leaders are to reach diverse segments of society and provide a competitive advantage to those who learn how to influence consumers (Kang et al., 2013). Small business owners can enhance the sustainability of their business venture through networking in environmental, economic, and social groups (Sullivan & Ford, 2014; Semrau & Werner, 2014). Some examples of using social media to network can be done through websites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+. Joining industry specific groups and writing a personal blog regarding your business can increase the networking footprint of the small business owner (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Many small business owners turn to the Internet to find ways to increase their businesses in building their images and networking to reach customers (Chen, Chen, & Shih, 2012). Small businesses that seek networking opportunities, according to Mazra and Guy (2012), foster an environment that enhances easier access to capital, technology, and partnerships. Small business owners who have technological and business skills would succeed in business through the physical infrastructure as the one determinant of the use of the Internet (Martinez & Williams, 2014). In sustainability endeavors noted by Psychogios and Garev (2012), small business owners need to adopt more sophisticated and structured practices in ongoing instability environments that contain factors such as

socioeconomic, cultural, political issues, changing customer needs and preferences, emerging competition, lack of control, and complex decisions.

Sustainability in Federal Contracting

Most small businesses lack strategic thinking because of funds and time available and desire to grow (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). A lack of understanding affects the customer, the contract, and the contracting process for strategic outcomes in small businesses (Haapio et al., 2012; Loader, 2013). Both strategic planning and strategic intent thinking are necessary to be a competitive business in the end (Richard, 2015). Small business owners are drivers of innovation that lead to more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable outcomes (Gagnon, Michael, Elser, & Gyory, 2013). The existence of stimulus programs creates a sustainable positive economic environment affect small business growth (Geho & Frakes, 2013). Strategizing and effective strategic planning is essential for small business leaders to achieve growth, success, and long-term sustainability (Prince, Barrett, & Oborn 2014). Majority of companies issue some sustainability disclosure, which is usually in correlation with their annual financial report (Daizy et al., 2013). Three ways to sustain competitive advantage consist of durability, transferability or imitation, and replication of resources and capabilities (Grant, 2013). Strategic intent thinking is a clear and concise expression of the direction and future focus of an organization (Chen, Liu, Ni, & Wu, 2015). Sustainability practices implemented by business owners supports preservation efforts of resources for present and future needs (James, 2013). Managers should develop exclusive firm resources that competitors cannot replicate (Ritthaisong et al., 2014). Significant goals of small business

owners involve the acceptance on how to mature their technical, financial, management, and leadership competencies promote business growth (McFarland & McConnell, 2012). The objective of leadership is to design, build, and lead the organization to achieve progress to the highest degree of value to compete in the global market (Fung, 2014). Five competitive forces of effective leadership and innovation exist to provide a model of the decision-making process such as the capacity to motivate, innovate, learn, and hone skills and capabilities (McMillan, 2013). Additional attributes that contribute to small business sustainability and growth include strong negotiation skills, creativity, hard work, and self-discipline (Surdez-Pérez, Aguilar-Morales, Sandoval-Caraveo, López-Parra, & Corral-Coronado, 2014).

Small business owners start businesses for many different reasons, and with various aspirations and abilities (Blackburn, Hart, & Wainwright, 2013). Contracting for goods and services occurs at all levels throughout the federal government as a routine practice. When exploring studies about sustainability in government contracting, the concepts used by Giunipero et al. (2012); and Tate, Ellram, and Dooley (2012) explained sustainability in supply chain management. Management initiatives and government regulations primarily dictate purchasing and supply chain sustainability efforts (Giunipero et al., 2012). Sustainability is measurable in at least three ways, which are economic, environmental, and social (Walker, Miemczyk, Johnsen, & Spencer, 2012). The social or societal, ecological, and economic dynamics equate to sustainable procurement and supply chain aspects (Walker et al., 2012). Practical implications posited by Dos Santos, Svensson, and Padin (2013) demonstrate how government

influence, institutional mechanisms, and senior management in minimizing barriers to the adoption of sustainable practices. Sustainability factors of an organization might include examining their financial and corporate performance (Ameer & Othman, 2012). In a sampling of top 100 global corporations, Ameer and Othman found that owners who placed emphasis on sustainability practices experienced higher economic performance than those who did not emphasize sustainable practices. Sustainability in government contracting is reflective of initiatives that included avoiding cost overruns through contract management of contractor performance leading to reduced costs and value creation for multiple stakeholders (Giunipero et al., 2012 & Latham, 2014).

In sustainability efforts, business managers consider the economic bottom line and the effects of the business on society and the industry (Webb et al., 2012).

Sustainability is defined as the ability of the company leaders to react to changes in the external and internal environment (Taranenco, 2013). Taranenco further posited that the expansion of small enterprises is a major factor in ensuring sustainable development of the economy.

Business leaders can achieve a higher rate of sustainability by focusing on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) (Mirzakhani, Parsaamal, & Golzar, 2014). A SWOT analysis is a beneficial tool that offers qualitative information in a structured manner (Brooks, Heffner, & Henderson, 2014). Small business owners might consider structured methods when facing business challenges (Helms et al., 2012). Many strategic planning initiatives exist according to Helms et al. SWOT emphasize the internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) forces and

sets a direction for strategy development. However, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) is a widely recognized and respected strategic tool to facilitate the assessment of economic conditions and classify internal variables (Brooks et al., 2014). The usefulness of SWOT may assist for evaluating a business' resources and environment (Antony, 2012). SWOT helps a business, country, or other entities determine how to leverage strength, enhance weaknesses, take advantage of opportunities, and prevent damaging threats (Helms et al., 2012). The internal factors of SWOT, according to Antony (2012), include strengths, or internal strong points of a business, and weaknesses, which are factors the business is lacking. Antony further defined opportunities and threats as external factors. A significant amount of small business owners' use social media, which is not without its downfalls that include lack of technological competence, customer pressure, and the characteristics of the mobile environment (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). The success or failure of a business may relate to aspects of the manager's behavior, and to the elements internal to the organization, as well as elements of the external environment (Minello, Scherer, & da Costa Alves, 2014). Small-medium enterprises need to be cognizant of the external environment (Cant, Wiid, & Kallier, 2015). A competitive environment consists of a changing external structure in which a business competes and operates (Tileaga & Stosic, 2014). A competitive environment is the development of competitive potential and the efficiency of market participants (Tileaga et al., 2014). Growth strategies often occur through new and improved product development, acquisition strategies, investments in capital equipment to increase efficiencies, and marketing strategies aimed toward consumer insights that

respond to the customers' needs (Sinfield, Calder, McConnell, & Colson, 2012). Despite the government advisement to small businesses concerning the complexity of federal contracting (DoD, 2017) and sharing of approaches to winning federal contracting awards (GSA, 2017, SBA, 2017a), conflict of interest limits the government's role in equipping small business owners and their organizations for contracting success in the federal sector (FAR, 1974).

Transition

The focus of this study was to explore the strategies needed by small business owners needed to win federal government contracts. Section 1 of this qualitative multiple case study included the background of the problem, problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, significance of study, contribution to business practice, implications for social change, and literature review. The literature included a review of the history of contractual strategies used by small businesses to win contracts with the federal government. The focus of the study was to explore the strategies needed by small business owners need to win federal government contracts.

Section 2 included the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary. Section 3 included a detailed summary of the research findings related to business practices, recommendations for social change, and recommendations for

professional practice. I made recommendations for future research and discussed reflections of my research experience.

Section 2: The Project

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners needed to win federal government contracts. In Section 1, an in-depth literature review focused on the competitive advantage strategies that exist among small businesses working with the federal government. Section 1 focused on the research portion of the project, the purpose of the study, and descriptions of this multiple case study. Section 2 includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners needed to win federal government contracts. Small business owners in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee constitute the target audience for my study. This study may lead to positive change if the members of this audience apply the findings to increase business revenues and local employment opportunities. The study results may also affect small business practice by identifying strategies that small business owners can use to secure federal contracts.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in phenomenological studies is to facilitate the study process, interview participants, conduct observations, and engage in sampling, data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Cater, Machtmes, & Fox, 2013). A researcher must convey a holistic view of the phenomenon studied from the participants' perspective

(Morse et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). Qualitative research involves researchers assuming the role of data collection instrument (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I was the primary instrument of data collection through solicitation of representatives from organizations who were willing to participate in face-to-face interviews, as well as through a second source of data. Additionally, I was responsible for organizing and analyzing the data for patterns and themes. Qualitative researchers must be able to collect reliable and valid data through interviews, document reviews, and sample observations (Serafini et al., 2015). In the execution of this study, I asked small business owners to participate in interviews; scheduled and conducted data collection through interviews; coded, analyzed, and interpreted the data; and reported the findings.

In my role as the researcher, I gathered information from three small business owners to answer the overarching research question. A researcher must gather information accurately in an evaluative process involving lived experiences (Eide & Showalter, 2012). To prepare for this research, I completed the National Institutes of Health web-based training course on “Protecting Human Research Participants” and received certification #1362433 (see Appendix B). After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I began the research.

My work as the researcher was informed by my familiarity with this field, which I gained while working for the federal government for 20 years. During my professional and active duty military service, I expanded my familiarity with government contracts. This helped me target the appropriate research and identify the most effective level of leadership for interviews to ensure the credibility of this study.

I adhered to ethical principles and guidelines for the conduct of research. IRB guidelines provided protocols for gaining written permission before conducting interviews. Researchers must be open to contrary views and findings when conducting case studies (Yin, 2014). I applied the principles of the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979) in treating participants as autonomous agents, imposing no harm on participants, and treating all participants equally. The Belmont Report protocol, created by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, provided guidelines for ethical practices in research involving human subjects (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). Small business owners who participated in this study received information on the purpose and nature of the study as well as any probable risks or benefits of their participation. Participants provided consent by approving and signing a request for invitation form.

I mitigated bias by constantly confronting my personal opinions and prejudices in relation to the data. A human instrument has shortcomings and biases that can influence a study (Merriam, 2014). In case study research designs, researcher bias is mitigated in the data collection and data analysis phases (Tufford & Newman, 2012; Yin, 2014). I mitigated bias and maintained self-awareness throughout the data collection process. A method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potential effects of preconceptions that may corrupt the research process is bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2014). Bracketing involves reaching a deeper level of reflection throughout the data collection, data analysis, and reporting processes (Petty, Thomason, & Stew, 2012b). The use of

interview questions assisted me in documenting the participants' experiences, which allowed me to identify strategies used by small business owners. Applying the bracketing technique of Tufford and Newman (2014), I maintained a reflexive journal of my experiences and perceptions prior to conducting interviews as well as during data analysis and interpretation.

Semistructured interviews are appropriate when applying interview protocols (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used an interview protocol with semistructured interviews guided by open-ended questions to mitigate bias while maintaining consistency and enhancing validity in this research. During this process, I remain focused on the conceptual framework when implementing interview protocols.

Participants

Open-ended questions provide an opportunity for participants to highlight issues and concerns while drawing on their personal experience (Brinkmann, 2012). A qualitative case study requires participants with experience in the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2014). Participants in this study included small business owners aged 18 years and older in the Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarkesville, Tennessee area who had been awarded one or more federal contracts within the past 5 years.

After obtaining IRB approval (06-28-17-0433543) to conduct research, I requested a list of small business owners' names, phone numbers, and email addresses from the local small business liaison and through a publicly advertised website provided by the SBA. No additional support or assistance was provided by the local small business liaison. If the local small business liaison had declined to support the study by providing

a list of contact information for small business owners in the local area, I would have identified participants through the SBA site that provides this information by city and location. For my initial contact with participants, I sent an email or made a telephone call with a request to speak to the owner. I then introduced myself as the researcher, explained the purpose of the research, offered a brief description of the criteria to participate, and explained the confidentiality and informed consent process. If a small business owner met the participation criteria and agreed to participate voluntarily, I obtained the business owner's email address and emailed a copy of the informed consent form. It was my responsibility to review the informed consent form with each participant and answer any questions before obtaining the participant's signature. All participants received a copy of the consent form to retain for their records. I scheduled an interview at a time and location convenient to each participant. Each participant received a copy of the final summary of the study results in a one to two-page document that I sent to them as an email attachment.

Research Method and Design

The qualitative multiple case study design guided my research process. This section includes a discussion of my reasons for selecting the research method and research design.

Research Method

A researcher must select the right method for examination to obtain significant results (Merriam, 2014). The three major methods for research inquiry are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. A qualitative method enables a researcher to seek an

understanding of a particular occurrence from the perspective of those experiencing it (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The qualitative research method enhanced my understanding of small business owners with federal government contracts in the Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee area. A qualitative approach is investigative, using predefined procedures, collecting evidence, producing evidence not determined in advance, and achieving findings beyond set boundaries (Yin, 2014).

Researchers who focus on textual data to understand meanings and interpretations of experiences use the qualitative research method (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Petty et al., 2012a). Qualitative research allows a researcher to study implementation and execution of complicated processes (Klassen et al., 2012; Yilmaz, 2013; Yin, 2014) and supports exploring the complex reality constructed by individuals in the context of their everyday worlds (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson, 2012). I followed the approach to seek and understand the meaning of a phenomenon by interpreting contextual data to avoid generalization and prediction.

Quantitative researchers analyze numerical data to examine relationships or causes and effects (Petty et al., 2012a). This method of research involves detailing measurements that include elaborate equation models to incorporate and compare variables; thus, it may require a basic or strong background in mathematics or statistics to implement (Bernard, 2013). Quantitative researchers hold a positivist worldview and rely on carrying out experiments to ensure that they separate bias from the study's objective reality by testing hypotheses (Echambadi, Campbell, & Agarwal, 2012). The quantitative research method was not suitable for this study because a quantitative approach would

have involved testing hypotheses using numbers to understand the strategies of small businesses that compete for government contracts (Bernard, 2013).

Researchers conducting mixed-method studies undertake qualitative research in conjunction with quantitative research to provide the benefits of both approaches in one study (Kaczynski et al., 2014; Tseng & Yeh, 2013). Qualitative and quantitative methods complement one another in mixed-method research (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). The mixed method approach is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches within a study (Patton, 2015). Mixed-method research was not suitable because I did not need quantitative data to answer the research question. The qualitative method was appropriate to identify strategies needed by small business owners to compete for and win federal government contracts and was the best research method for my study.

Research Design

The multiple case study research design was selected for this study. Case study design enables a researcher to frame and debate one or more cases in real-life settings to holistically and deeply explore a problem (Yin, 2014). A case study is a descriptive research study in which a thorough examination of an event, group, individual, institution, or community occurs (Hyett et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). Qualitative research includes a range of research designs such as narrative inquiry, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Petty et al., 2012b).

Case study research is suitable for exploring areas about which current knowledge is minimal or limited (Yin, 2014). Researchers conducting case studies using large or

small sample sizes must continue to conduct case study interviews until reaching data saturation (Cronin, 2014). A case study design allows a researcher to explore, examine, and contextualize varied participants' knowledge and experience into a single problem (Morse & McEvoy, 2014). Case study supports an investigation through inquiry, which allows participants to discuss their experiences (Chen & Yang, 2014; Tsang, 2014).

Researchers use narrative inquiry when seeking to explore and conceptualize human experience in written form (Merriam, 2014). Narrative inquiry was not appropriate because narrative design includes the use of field notes, stories, autobiographies, photographs, life experiences, consultations, and journals as sources of data. The researcher in narrative analysis probes how people journal their lives and seeks to understand the diversity in their stories, as well as the various levels included in their stories (Murray & Sools, 2014). McMullen and Braithwaite (2013) described narrative inquiry as involving structure, ordering of life experiences, and development of a core focus on the study of lived experiences. The narrative inquiry design works best when the subject is an individual or a small group (Hunt, 2014).

Phenomenological researchers identify the personal experiences of participants (Gray, 2013). A phenomenological design requires the researcher to become immersed in the personal experiences of the participants from inception of the study up to the point of data analysis (Bevan, 2014). The study of material and immaterial phenomena are the basic premise of the phenomenological research design (Merriam, 2014).

Phenomenological design was not appropriate because of the contextual conditions of the participants in this study. Additionally, the phenomenological design was not suitable

because it is better suited to exploring lived experiences. In a phenomenological study, a correlation exists between the external perception of natural objects and inner perceptions, memories, and opinions (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative researchers carry out case study research using small or large sample sizes, conducting interviews until data saturation or redundancy is reached (Yin, 2014). The adequacy of a sample size depends on the view of saturation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Data saturation is reached when no new data emerge during the data collection process (Yin, 2014). Achievement of data saturation occurs when continuing data collection generates nothing new (Davis, 2013; Kolb, 2012; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Data saturation ensures sufficient quality data to sustain a study (Walker, 2012). To reach data saturation, I continued to interview small business owners who had competed to win federal contracts and reviewed relevant documents until no new data emerged.

Population and Sampling

To collect data that would contribute to answers to the central question of this qualitative descriptive study, I interviewed three small business owners from a list given by the SB liaison that included individuals who possessed experience relating directly to the central question presented in this study. The list of study participants included all forms of contact information. A researcher selects a subset of a population to study in the sampling process (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). The population consisted of three small business owners in the Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and Clarksville, Tennessee area. I selected three small business owners to ensure sufficient data to answer the

research question. Qualitative studies do not have a commonly accepted sample size because the ideal sample is dependent on the purpose of the study, research questions, and richness of the data (Elo et al., 2014). The basis for the sample of participants was to explore diversity rather than statistical significance (Elsawah, Guillaume, Filatova, Rook, & Jakeman, 2015).

I requested a list of potential participants through the local small business liaison (see Appendix C). After receiving each small business owner's information, I contacted each participant personally with an invitation to participate in the interview process. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants from my study population who had won small business contracts from the federal government. This strategy ensured representation of cases that met my selection criteria in the final sample (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling is the process of selecting participants based on the knowledge or expertise that participants possess (Bagheri, Yaghmaei, Ashktorab, & Zayari, 2012; Mori & Kaale, 2012; Pirlott, Kisbu-Sakarya, DeFrancesco, Elliot, & MacKinnon, 2012; Poulis, Poulis, & Plakoyiannaki, 2013). After the IRB approved this study and issued an approval number, I requested potential participants through the local SB liaison before contacting each participant by email and following up by phone. Each small business owner had an opportunity to consent to the interview process in writing before the interview was conducted. The knowledge or expertise from small business owners increased the level of understanding regarding the research problem and questions, as well as specific issues related to the study.

A sample size is justifiable based on the concept of data saturation (Shabankareh & Meigounpoory, 2013). Saturation relies on factors not under the researcher's influence, such as whether the population is standardized and the competence level of the researcher to determine data saturation (Dworkin, 2012). A methodological concept in qualitative research is saturation and can be a tool used for ensuring that quality and adequate data are collected to support the study (Walker, 2012). The size of the sample should be sufficiently large for the researcher to obtain redundancy of responses or saturation (Yin, 2014). In qualitative research, the adequacy of sample size depends on the view of saturation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2014). The purposive sampling was used to select three small business owners with the necessary expertise and experience to contribute to this study. I selected three small business owners as the sample size. Estimating the number of participants to achieve data saturation depends on eligibility criteria, the background of the problem, research method, design nature of the study, and conceptual framework (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). I ensured data saturation by requiring each participant to expand on answers and ask additional probing questions to clarify meanings. After the end of each interview, participants were asked to expound on the research study to clarify given responses. Since no new information emerged through the interviews, I validated data saturation by reviewing the collected data for redundancy and richness of information. Qualitative researchers reach data saturation when important issues, common experiences, and primary points repeatedly surface, and the data uncover no new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Ethical Research

Ethics are a matter of understanding conflicts from moral imperatives and the method of embracing conflicts (Avasthi, Ghosh, Sarkar, & Grover, 2013). Informed consent is a significant concept of moral and lawful requirements that protect participants in a study (Jeong et al., 2012). Researchers have a responsibility to ensure the adherence to ethical practices (Vanclay, Baines, & Taylor, 2013). Collecting data for research requires the highest ethical considerations for researchers in obtaining the participant's informed consent, protecting the participant's rights, and securing the participant's privacy (Yin, 2012). All potential participants signed a consent form before conducting interview. Recruitment of participants and collection of data commenced after the IRB Approval (06-28-17-0433543).

Participants have a measure of consent as a means to withdraw from the study without penalty (Bull et al., 2013). All participants received notification that they can withdraw from the study at any time during the study, even after completion of data collection by telephone or in writing to myself. Upon receipt of a withdrawal request, I removed the participant's information from the study by shredding printed information and erasing all electronically stored information.

Participation was voluntary and no participant or company received compensation for participation. Although contact was made with some potential participants, no response was given on their willingness to participate. As emphasized by Devine et al. (2015), researchers must avoid high inducement as compensation to participants for their involvement in the study. Study participants received a \$5 Starbucks gift card, as token of

appreciation for their contributions to the research. Participants received a summary of the final study results.

The U.S. Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects (1979) requires that human subject researchers adhere to basic ethical principles for the protection of the participants in studies. Researchers use actions of de-identify, delete, or modify identifiable information to achieve a participant's privacy and confidentiality (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012; Drake, 2014; Vainio, 2013). To further ensure the ethical protection of the participants, I was the only person to have access to all study data.

After receiving IRB approval (06-28-17-0433543) and selecting a study sample, I emailed an invitation to participate in this study (see Appendix D) to each potential participant. The invitation outlined the precautionary measures that I followed when conducting my research. I communicated the importance of privacy and confidentiality of the participants and shared information before each interview. Each participant signed a consent form as required by The Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979).

All study data will be retained and stored for 5 years including all printed study related information and digital data on a password protected computer hard drive. Data should be stored in a safe cabinet before destroying the data (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). The storing of all electronic data and printed study-related information are located in a Sentry safe of my home library. Coding and naming file conventions and other identifying personal information ensured privacy. Fictional company names concealed the identities

of all small business owners and their organizations. Conducted interviews took place in a manner that neither the questions nor the responses compromise the professional or personal welfare of the participants. Each study participant received a label as Company A, Company B, and Company C to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Final publication of the study did not include participant names or the names of organizations due to redacting identifying information.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection sources for qualitative studies include focus groups, interviews, videos, existing documents, observations, and artifacts (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013; Mertens, 2014; & Yin, 2012). I was the primary data collection instrument and collected data through semistructured interviews guided by open-ended questions with three small business owners. A researcher serves as the primary data collection instrument for semistructured interviews and data analysis (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012b). I implemented face-to-face interviews as referenced in the interview template (see Appendix E) and conducted analysis of existing business documents.

Semistructured interviews are standardizing questions within an interview protocol (Hood, Hart, Belgrave, Tademy, & Jones, 2012). Each semistructured interview guided by open-ended questions lasted approximately one hour (see Appendix A). Interviews are instrumental for understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values, and processes (Rowley, 2012). I used the interview questions to capture each participant's knowledge through experiences. Semistructured interviews allow the

researcher to capture rich data about how participants think, interpret information, and make judgments (Elsawah et al., 2015). With participant approval, I used a Sony digital recorder to record the interviews and recorded hand written notes in a journal during the interview process. Recorded face-to-face interviews ensured retention of information for recall and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

I reviewed relevant small business documents to collect data for this qualitative multiple case study. Relevant documents are deemed supportive in augmenting and validating evidence from complementary sources (Yin, 2014). I asked participants to provide a copy of their company's contract for analysis. These documents provided all the required information to validate size of the company, existence of a current contract, and the small business program category. Contracting documents from the small business owner or the local Small Business liaison assisted in providing proper data analysis.

A strategy for addressing validity and reliability in case studies requires the use of different methods at distinctive stages of the research process (Yin, 2014). I conducted member checking to enhance the reliability and validity of the study's data collection instruments. The member checking method tests the researcher's interpretations and conclusions with participants in the proposed qualitative in-depth interviews to ensure the information is accurate and valid (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2015; Yilmaz, 2013). Member checking was used to enhance the credibility of this doctoral study and to capture the meaning of each participant's responses.

Data Collection Technique

The procedure for data collection in this multiple case study included interviewing three small business owners and analyzing contract documents from the Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee. I was the primary source of data collection. The main sources of gathering data are interviews, observations, and review of documents in qualitative research (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; O’Cathain, Hoddinott, Lewin, Thomas, Young, Adamson, & Donovan, 2015; Yin, 2014). In qualitative research, researchers use multiple types of data collection methods (Bang, 2012).

Semistructured Interviews

Interviews are the most common method of collecting data in qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Interviews are instrumental to understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values, and processes (Rowley, 2012). The advantages of using interviews to collect data with participants, an opportunity exists to explore topics in depth and participants can explain or help clarify questions (Milne, 2014). The disadvantages of using interviews to collect data are participants can influence the responses and participants may distort information through error, selective perception, and a desire to please the interviewer (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014).

A goal of the interview process is to acquire information from participants through interviews and face-to-face verbal interactions (Rowley, 2012). I had each participant review and sign a copy of the consent at the time of the interview. Additionally, each participant received a \$5 Starbucks gift card as token of appreciation for their contributions to the research. The face-to-face interviews allowed an in-depth

understanding of the small business owners under study. Interviews allowed an open dialogue where participants can elaborate on responses and give additional insight from prescribed questions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, in a location comfortable and mutually agreed upon with the participant. Company A and Company B invited myself to their office location, while Company C elected to meet at Starbucks. Themes were identified by using the NVivo software to facilitate conceptualization of the underlying patterns in the data. Raw data was reviewed and coding were conducted to identify themes.

Business Documentation

Researchers attain data by interviewing, examining, and reviewing documents (Owen, 2014). Some study participants may be unable to articulate or forget to include relevant information during the interview process but might be glaring in documents (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Fortunately, the study participants in this study were thorough in the information given in the process. Company documentation can provide useful background information and benefit the researcher prior to the interview process (Owen, 2014). I reviewed existing small business contracts provided by each study participant. The advantage of examining company documentation provided me with precise data that strengthened the validity of my study. An additional advantage in reviewing documentation further substantiated the strategies provided by study participants. A disadvantage of using this data source involved the willingness of study participants to share sensitive information from the documentation requested. The examination of documents consists of materials that may not be accurate and possibly reflect an

unidentified bias of the author (Yin, 2014). I reviewed all study participants contracts and transcripts to identify relevant strategies related to the phenomenon. In qualitative research, member checking with company documentation and face-to-face interviews enhances study reliability (Patton, 2015).

Member Checking

I conducted member checking to mitigate bias and ensure the accuracy of interpretation from the participants' interview responses. An email was drafted to each study participant to verify my interpretation of the recorded interview. The member checking process and time for response were explained to each participant during the interview process. Member checking verifies the validity of the collected information with study participants (Simon & Goes, 2013). In qualitative research, member checking is appropriate after a researcher submits an account of their findings using a short report to the participants who participated in the interview process (Sorsa, Kiiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). Researchers conduct member checking to verify the accuracy of the findings and results from study participants (Hudson et al., 2014). Member checks decrease the incidence of incorrect data and the incorrect interpretation of data with the goal of providing authentic and original findings (Harper & Cole, 2012).

A summary interpretation of each participant's response to each question was prepared and reviewed to make sure the interpretation was complete and accurate. Conducting member checking after a significant time lapse can jeopardize a participant's ability to recall their answers and the meaning of their intent during the interview process (Harper & Cole, 2012). Member checking is used to ensure the credibility, dependability,

and transferability in a multiple case study to illustrate specific research strategies (Houghton et al., 2013). In the process of member checking, researchers are asked to assess what the participants intended to convey in their statements (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I asked each participant to review the data collected for accuracy and for clarity on the answers provided during the interview process. Participants were allowed to provide additional inputs into the findings from my data analysis.

Data Organization Technique

Reflective journals are written documents prepared by a researcher that note various concepts, events, or interactions for the purposes of gaining insights and learning (Davies, Reitmaier, Smith, & Mangan-Danckwart, 2013). A journal note is in sequential order by date and time (Hayman et al., 2012). The following unique coding identifiers included identifiers Company A, Company B, and Company C of each participant for each small business owner to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Researchers use different instruments such as Atlas.ti, HyerRESEARCH, and NVivo when analyzing data. ATLAS.ti enable researchers to associate codes with text and construct classifications of codes through the primary data. (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015). HyerResearch goes beyond coding and categorizing by use of the theory builder to frame and test hypothesis (de Oliveira Lopes & Gomes, 2016). A software program such as NVivo can be useful for data organization, analysis, and management (Richardson et al., 2013; Rowley, 2012; & Silverman, 2013). In this study, I used NVivo 11, as well as Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel programs to store, organize, and catalog data around the major themes I identified in my literature review.

All documents were scanned and uploaded into NVivo 11 for coding and data analysis. NVivo software is appropriate to assist in the coding, referencing, counting, sorting, and displaying data gathered from research participants (Gläser & Laudel, 2013). The NVivo software program enabled me to label, code, classify, and categorize data that were manageable and meaningful. Organizing interview transcripts, field notes, and documents systematically in the same location could increase accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness in the data (Anyan, 2013; Malterud, 2012).

All raw data for this study will be stored securely for 5 years. A locked Sentry safe stored recordings, documents, notes, journals, and passwords. The Sentry safe will store study-related materials that consisted of the data, consent forms, audio recordings, flash drive with all digital data, and field notes for 5 years from completion of the study at my home office. After 5 years, I destroyed all study-related data and information by shredding hard copies and erasing digital files.

Data Analysis

Triangulation is the use of more than one type of data analysis used by researchers in investigating a research question (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Researchers use triangulation to compare multiple data sources to draw conclusions (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Cope, 2014). Five methods of triangulation include data triangulation, investigator triangulation, environmental, methodological triangulation, and theoretical triangulation (Black et al., 2013; Denzin, 2012; Fielding, 2012). Trustworthiness in a case study involves the use of methodological triangulation that provides a complete understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Methodological triangulation was the most suitable data analysis process for the research design in this study because I used multiple data sources to examine themes that emerged from literature review. I compared themes from the literature with themes that emerged from interview and document review data. Methodological triangulation is better suited for the analysis of interview and document data (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012).

Researchers use multiple methods of data, including interviews, with an analysis of a company's internal and external documents.

The intent of data analysis is to identify answers to a research question by collecting data from several sources (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Data analysis involved rearranging participants' responses into chronological order and recognizing key elements (Petty et al., 2012b). The data analysis process involves discovering themes, identifying and selecting relevant themes, organizing themes in hierarchical order, coding, and linking themes into the phenomenon under study (Silverman, 2013; Yin, 2014). Data analysis involves evaluating, categorizing, organizing, analyzing, and rearranging data to extract observational-based assumptions (Yin, 2014). I used a five-stage data analysis process to understand reasons why small business owners failed to win federal contracts and what these owners did to sustain their competitive position in the market place. Data analysis can involve collecting data, separating data into groups through coding, grouping data into themes, assessing the theme material, and developing conclusions (Yin, 2012). Data analysis is a vital step in the research process, which I used NVivo 11 to upload information for compilation, disassembly, and reassembly of collected data.

Compiling

During the compiling phase of my study, I organized data in a logical manner in efforts to identify themes and patterns. Researchers use computer assistant tools and software such as ATLAS.ti, NVivo, and HyperResearch for effective qualitative data analysis (Yin, 2014). NVivo 11 software, a qualitative software program for data analysis, expedites thematic coding and includes the categorization of the collected data during the analysis stage (Castleberry, 2014; Trotter, 2012). Federal contracts information and transcribed interviews was imported into NVivo 11 before compiling all data for analysis.

Disassembling

I dissembled all of the data by breaking down the compiled data using NVivo 11 software. A researcher uses coding for the discovery of themes contained within transcripts and includes data to reach saturation to ensure dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Yin, 2014). Emergent themes come from the literature and conceptual words by reflexivity, through critical and repeated examination of thematic expressions, and emergent coded themes (Whiteley, 2012). Themes are the confirmations of observable patterns identifiable through the analysis of interview data elements (Denzin, 2012). NVivo 11 helped to identify themes related to the research question in this study. The process of identifying themes and patterns in the data provided by participants is an accepted process of qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Yin, 2014).

Reassembling

The reassembling process involved clustering and categorizing the labels into sequence of groups. I developed a personal identification system, which helped to protect the identity of my study participants. Pseudonym names were assigned to each participant to protect identity and confidentiality. Each study participant was labeled as Company A, Company B, and Company C. Additionally, in the data analysis process, I searched recently published literature for themes that may not have emerged from the literature review. Qualitative researchers focus on new patterns, themes, or information that provides new insight (Freeman, Gergen, & Josselson, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Interpreting

I used the information from the existing literature review and interview questions to draw conclusions of data. A researcher provides their interpretation of the data during this stage of the process (Yin, 2014). A commonly used method of verifying interview data through the process of member checking was conducted by asking each participant to validate my interpretation of interview transcriptions. No changes were identified by study participants during the member checking process. It is appropriate for conceptual framework to link to the methodology, literature, and the findings of research (Borrego, Foster, & Froyd, 2014; Gough, Thomas, & Oliver, 2012). I analyzed all data in the view of competitive advantage framework to assist with my interpretation of the data collected.

Concluding

The conceptual framework is defined as the connection between the literature, method, and the results of the study (Borrego, Foster, & Froyd, 2014). Analyzed data is

through the lens of Porter's (1980) competitive advantage theory for this qualitative multiple case study. I located the research within the current field of study and verbatim quotes from the interview participants to support the analysis of the data.

Reliability and Validity

I explored the reliability and validity of the processes for this study. The strategy to address validity and reliability in case studies require the use of different methods at distinctive stages of the research process (Yin, 2014). For every research study, readers raise questions about validity, reliability, and generalizability (Loh, 2013). Quality and rigor of qualitative research are dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Black et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wahyuni, 2012). The steps of applying rigor were implemented to assure reliability and validity of the findings of this study by conducting a thorough examination of the data to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity, which is important to demonstrate the reliability, validity, and relevance of my findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The subsections included steps taken to address and achieve rigor in this qualitative case study.

Reliability

Member checking and triangulation are two methods to ensure validity and reliability of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). When another inquirer concurs with the decision trails at each stage of the research process, the study is known as dependable (Cope, 2014). Dependability is the steadiness of data over comparable conditions (Polit & Beck (2012). Researchers address dependability by conducting an audit trail of field notes, memo writing, and reflexive notes (Charach et al., 2014; Houghton et al., 2013;

Venkatesh et al., 2013). Achieving dependability happens when other researchers agree with the decision trails at each stage of a research process (Cope, 2014). I addressed dependability by being meticulous in conceptualizing the study, collecting the data, interpreting the findings, and reporting results. In addition to establishing dependability, I planned to repeat the analysis process, conducted a thorough review of the research method, and repeated my study procedures to ascertain that the original findings would be accurate.

Validity

Credibility in qualitative research encompasses elements of validity and reliability denoting value and believability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four strategies to address credibility include prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and transcription review (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ensuring credibility using these methods required me to spend sufficient time collecting data from participants' experiences, while achieving a full understanding. Credibility is enhanced through triangulation of in-depth interviews and relevant documents that add depth and richness.

A qualitative study is credible when individuals share the same experience immediately recognizing the descriptions of human experiences (Cope, 2014). The processes for achieving credibility in a study include interviewees scrutinizing the analysis and the findings to assess whether the analysis and findings are true reflections of their lived experiences (Ahmadi et al., 2012; Harper & Cole, 2012; Petty, Thomson & Stew, 2012a). Member checking refers to meeting with participants and sharing the data

to ensure that the researchers' interpretations are accurate representations of participants' experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Allowing respondents to provide feedback or add information to their interview question responses during the member checking process ensures validity and reliability (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013). To ensure credibility and accuracy of the data, I conducted member checking within 10 days following the transcription of each interview and completion of document interpretations. A review of all transcripts was conducted, looking for similarities within and across study participants.

Transferability is an indication of the applicability of research findings to other settings or groups (Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen, & Kyngas, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013; Polit & Beck, 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The process of transferability refers to the degree to which a researcher shows findings have applicability in other contexts or settings. In qualitative research, transferability requires researchers to provide a vivid explanation of all the research processes for individuals and readers not in the study (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). Scholars use transferability to refer the transfer of the findings from the completed study to another similar context or situation while still preserving the meanings and inferences (Houghton et al., 2013).

Confirmability is the ability to exhibit that research data represents the participants' responses and not the researcher's biased perspectives of the researcher (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). Maintaining an auditing trail in both the data collection and analysis demonstrates accurate, comprehensive records of approaches and activities employed (White et al., 2012). Researchers closely link confirmability to

dependability in referring to the neutrality and accuracy of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). Documentation of procedures used throughout the data collection process enhances confirmability of findings (Khorsan & Crawford, 2014; Prion & Adamson, 2014). Writing and recording all the study participant's personal feelings, biases, and insights helped to address confirmability of this research.

Data saturation is the point at which the research data become repetitive and reveal no new concepts or themes emerge (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Walker, 2012; Yin, 2014). To achieve data saturation, I ensured that participants thoroughly explore all questions in detail and that no new concept or themes emerged. For the study, I reached saturation by collecting data until no new information is obtainable and data began to replicate. Based on the epistemological premise of the subject under study, a sample size is justifiable by achieving data saturation (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I outlined my role as the researcher and factors that influenced the role of the researcher, participate criteria, population sampling and selection of the research method and research design. This section concluded with a description of reliability and validity measures, sampling, data collection, organization, and analysis of this study. Section 3 included the study findings and the importance of the results to professional practice. The objective of the study was to address strategies necessary for the sustainability of small businesses. I discussed the implications for social change,

recommendations for actions and further study, and reflections. I completed Section 3 with a study summary and conclusions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners need to win federal contracts. I conducted semistructured interviews using eight open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A) with three small business owners who had won federal contracts in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee. The collected data from interviews were analyzed, and four main themes were identified to describe how small business owners developed strategies for winning federal contracts. Coding and data analysis were conducted through the use of NVivo 11 software. The four themes identified were contractual knowledge, access to resources, measures of success, and sustainability. Study participants emphasized the importance of having an in-depth understanding of the entire contractual process, the means to fulfill an agreement to provide services or products, a unique and innovative contract approach, and the ability to forecast where their business would rank among competitors. Findings showed that competitive strategies are necessary in contract attainment and affect the bottom line for small business opportunities in the federal sector. My analysis of participant responses indicated alignment with the literature review and conceptual framework of the study. The results of my study may be useful to small business owners who are seeking to win a contract within the federal sector.

In this section, I present an introductory overview of the study, the findings of the study, applications to professional practice, implications for social change,

recommendations for action and further study, reflections, and a summary of study conclusions.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question for the study was the following: What strategies do small business owners need to win federal government contracts? Small business owners from the geographical location of my study provided their perspectives and experiences in relation to strategies used to win federal contracts through a semistructured interview process. I identified four major themes from analysis of the participants' responses. The first theme was the contractual knowledge needed by small business owners. Access to resources was the second theme. The third theme focused on the measures of success. Commitment to sustainability strategies was the fourth theme identified to assist small business owners who compete for federal contracts.

An initial review of the interview transcripts indicated the most frequently used words during the interviews (see Figure 1). The words *small business*, *federal contracts*, *strategies*, *experience*, and *knowledge* were frequently mentioned in the interviews. This preliminary analysis of the data revealed words that supported some of the themes identified. The same practice, when applied to the literature review and documents, yielded some of the same words (see Figure 2), but new terms such as *competitive advantage* and *experience* were also evident.

Theme 1: Contractual Knowledge

The government contracting process provides challenges for business owners and government officials (Lu, 2013). Table 2 includes results obtained from the interviews that support the theme of the contractual process for small businesses seeking competitive advantage. Upon review of the data from interviews, I found evidence that Company A and Company C had extensive knowledge of the administrative contract process. Individual competence in contract management tasks, activities, and organizational processes lead to greater success, enhancing outcomes for small businesses (Kerner, 2013). Significant goals of small business owners involve enhancing their technical, financial, management, and leadership competencies to promote business growth (McFarland & McConnell, 2012). In part, Company A and Company C were successful was due to their experiences and innate abilities to analyze and measure competitors in the industry. This supports the primary proposition of Porter's theory (1980) on competitive advantage. Participants from Company A and Company C noted that they used their experience and knowledge to assist in expediting the process while evaluating their competitors' position of graduating out of the small business sector. As noted by Mas-Tur, Pinazo, Tur-Porcar, and Sanchez-Masferrer (2015), education and training have a positive effect on the advancement and sustainability of small businesses. Despite Company B's novice knowledge of the process, it was afforded opportunities to compete for and win a federal contract due to the uniqueness of the services it offered to the government. Company B's participant stated, "Once I knew and understood the process, it made things a little easier." Despite the decisive approach of Company C's expert

knowledge of the process, Company C's participant stated, "I was moving too fast according to the SBA office representative." As noted by Nicholas and Frumann (2014), knowledge of successful ways to secure a federal contract is crucial to small business success.

Table 2

Subcategories of Emergent Theme 1 Found Through Interviews

Contractual knowledge	Number of sources	Frequency
Contract process	6	16
Administration	3	11

Theme 2: Access to Resources

Table 3 includes the results obtained from the interviews that support the theme of the resources available and contract opportunities for small business. The SBA (2017d) provides direct and indirect financial assistance to small businesses. It has been noted that the SBA is a leading provider of direct loans and guaranteed bank loans for small businesses (Mihajlov, 2012; Neumark et al., 2011). Establishing competitive advantage is not an easy task for small businesses with inadequate financial resources (Thomason, Simendinger, & Kiernan, 2013). Internal barriers for small business representatives consisted of financial working capital and human capital, which are critical to small businesses' success (Bublak, 2013). All three companies in this study had no issues with presenting a strong financial portfolio in obtaining federal contracts. The review and analysis of the document data corroborated the findings from the interviews. All three

participants agreed that having the financial capital to support the first 90 days of doing business with government is critical to success. Company A's participant stated, "What if the federal government was to face a sequestration again and asked if a small business would wait until the federal budget has been approved for payment?" Company A's representative continued, "Since your particular business have all of these federal contracts, we need you to be at risk because we have no dollars, we have no more funding and want you to keep providing your services and products."

The results of the data analysis confirmed the main theme of competitive advantage through the attainment of sustainable resources and capabilities. Historically, attainment of government contracts occurred through a streamlined process to the lowest bidder (Loosemore & Richard, 2015); however, in changing times, rather than making awards to the lowest bidder, which was the general practice in the past, the government can make awards for goods or services that best satisfy its needs at slightly higher prices (Jain, Powers, & Sanghavi, 2015). Despite Company B having to compete in the process at the last minute, the quality of services offered confirmed the findings in my analysis. Company B's representative explained, "Because it was such a short window for me to submit the request and because they really needed someone to fill the position, I had such a short timeframe and turnaround to submit for the contract." Top government contractors exercise political influence and a strong bargaining position to create opportunities (Wang & San Miguel, 2012). Although the SBA provides the DSBS online tool to identify potential small business contractors for upcoming contracting opportunities, Company B was notified directly on a rare occasion by the contracting

representative to compete at the last minute. Company A and Company C took initiative to expand their opportunities to win multiple contracts and seek tools such as Federal Business Opportunities (FedBizOps) to search for contracting opportunities. All study participants noted their backgrounds and experiences as unique strategies that had been responsible for winning a federal contract.

Table 3

Subcategories of Emergent Theme 2 Found Through Interviews

Access to resources	Number of sources	Frequency
Financial	4	16
Contract opportunities	3	12

Theme 3: Measure of Success

Table 4 includes the results obtained from the interviews that support the theme of measures of success for a small business's competitive advantage. The results of the data analysis confirmed the main theme of competitive advantage by way of Porter's differentiated positioning. Kohn, Miller, and Ullrich (2015) noted that companies compete based on price or pursue a strategy of differentiation. Company A, Company B, and Company C had unique attributes and fields of expertise that gave them a competitive advantage and niche needed to win federal contracts. Dalgic and Leeuw (2015) emphasized that niche marketing may lead to competitive advantage. Hatten (2015) defined *competitive advantage* as a facet of a business that goes beyond what the competition has or does.

In the business sector, many small businesses form strategic alliances to pool resources. Representatives for Company A and Company C mentioned the possibilities of expanding and pooling resources with either a large or a small business to sustain competitive advantage (Mitchell & Canel, 2013). Mitchell and Canel (2013) emphasized that strategic alliances allow small businesses to enhance resources and reach potential customers. The participant from Company A shared firsthand experience of endeavors to bring in two small businesses that sought to conduct business in the federal sector. Such networking opportunities assist small business owners in gaining growth in business opportunities, as noted by Harris and Misner (2012). Through networking, Company A and Company C enhanced their marketing endeavors for future sustainability while gaining knowledge about new resources and broadening exposure (Kerrick et al., 2014; O'Donnell, 2014). As noted by Mazra and Guy (2012), networking among small businesses fosters success by connecting small business leaders with other small business leaders in their industry, as well as with the small business offices of federal agencies.

Table 4

Subcategories of Emergent Theme 3 Found Through Interviews

Measures of success	Number of sources	Frequency
Uniqueness	3	10
Networking	3	6

Theme 4: Commitment to Sustainability

Table 5 includes the results obtained from the interviews that support the theme of small business owners' commitment to sustainability. Upon review of the data from interviews using aspects of five forces analysis, I found evidence that Company A, Company B, and Company C exhibited keen competitiveness and focused on a target market segment, as identified by Porter's competitive strategy (Porter, 1991; Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012). Each study participant's competitiveness was evident in the strategic planning process and ability to adapt to the environment (Dibrell, Craig, & Neubaum, 2014; Mariadoss et al., 2014; Silver, Lundahl, & Berggren, 2014). According to Mirzakhani, Parsaamal, and Golzar (2014), a higher rate of sustainability is reached by focusing on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Company A and Company C were synced on four of the five forces, while Company B focused its efforts on the intensity of competitive rivalry. The five forces consist of threats of entry of new competitors, the bargaining power of suppliers, threats of substitute products or services from competitors, the bargaining power of customers, and intensity of competitive rivalry (Porter, 1980; Porter & Heppelmann, 2014). Surdez-Pérez et al. (2014) asserted that small business sustainability and growth involve strong negotiation skills, creativity, hard work, and self-discipline. Strategizing and effective strategic planning are essential for small business leaders to achieve growth, success, and long-term sustainability (Prince, Barrett, & Oborn, 2014).

The federal government supports small businesses through many programs, public policies, and exemptions from numerous federal laws and regulations (Gale & Brown,

2013). Although federal laws and acquisition regulations require the awarding of contracts through full and open competition, these provisions also permit federal agencies to award noncompetitive contracts in certain circumstances (Competition in Contracting Act [CICA] of 1984). Company A and Company C received contracts in noncompetitive positions, whereas Company B competed with two other small businesses. The Company B participant explained, “There was competition, there was at least two other people who put in for the contract but two of us qualified for the contract.”

The SBA (2017d) emphasizes the importance of complying with laws and regulations when seeking a federal contract. Some small businesses find themselves unprepared for the rules and regulations they may encounter when competing for federal contracts (SBA, 2017d). As identified by Company B, the federal government has the ability to implement policies that promote competition through transparency and fairness. The allowable exceptions to full and open competition are indicated in the FAR. Company A and Company C implied that it is necessary to identify key partners with relevant experience to mitigate any risks related to being a new small business. Despite political influence, small business owners can enhance the sustainability of their business ventures through networking in environmental, economic, and social groups (Sullivan & Ford, 2014; Semrau & Werner, 2014). Company A and Company C exercised this technique well and identified having an outstanding partnering relationship as a strategy that assisted their companies in winning a federal contract.

Table 5

Subcategories of Emergent Theme 4 Found Through Interviews

Commitment to sustainability	Number of sources	Frequency
Competitiveness	3	19
Legislation	3	12

I analyzed the research findings through the lens of competitive advantage theory to corroborate the themes acknowledged through the interviews. The themes outlined in this study provide strategies that small business owners can use to increase opportunities for securing and sustaining a federal contract. Participants' responses were supported in the findings and provided me with deeper understanding of why and how small business owners used these strategies.

Relation of Findings to Conceptual Framework

Competitive advantage theory, in concert with the five forces model, was the conceptual framework for this qualitative study. Competitive advantage theory, which was conceptualized in 1980 by Porter, indicates that by analyzing competitors, evaluating substitute products, identifying suppliers/buyers, and measuring competitive rivalry, managers can develop value-creating competitive strategies (Porter, 1980). Some of the techniques and strategies used successfully in the private sector may also work when doing business in the federal sector. The study participants exhibited keen competitiveness and a focus on target market segments, as identified by Porter's competitive strategy with aspects of five forces analysis (Porter, 1991; Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012).

Small business owners who participated in this study expounded on the importance of having an in-depth understanding of the entire contractual process, the means to fulfill the services or the products promised, a unique and innovative contract approach, and the ability to forecast where the business ranks among competitors. The results of this research study connected to the competitive advantage framework by identifying the competitive strategies that small business owners implemented. Findings of this case study supported Porter's (1980) five forces, threats of entry of new competitors, the bargaining power of suppliers, threats of substitute products or services from competitors, the bargaining power of customers, and the intensity of competitive rivalry (Porter, 1980; Porter & Heppelmann, 2014). The results of this study aligned with Porter's argument that a company can cultivate a strategy to establish or maintain competitive advantage. Additionally, Porter posited that the five forces apply to service firms or any business in which owners choose to deliver a different type of value from competitors, rather than to deliver the same value at a better price (Miles, Miles, & Cannon, 2012).

Relation of Findings to Existing Literature on Effective Business Practice

The finding of this study tied to existing literature published on competitive strategies used for effective business practices of small businesses that compete for federal contracts. Although the findings from this study indicated knowledge of the contractual process, access to resources, uniqueness and innovation, and sustainability strategies, Williams (2015) emphasized that business leaders should adapt strategy importance on contract performance and positive performance rating. Williams (2015) highlighted the importance of leadership strategies that attributed to positive performance

ratings, behavioral or trait-based attributes of leaders, understanding bureaucratic dynamics and contract requirements, resource-based capacity as an impediment, and competitive intelligence as a valuable resource. Despite the contextual differences, similarities exist as it relates to Porter's competitive advantage theory and five forces analysis. Miettinen and Littunen, (2013) indicated that small business owners fail to win contracts because of competition, economic factors, crises, shifts in priorities, and varying expectations. A portion of these factors coincide with the leadership skills needed by small business owners as noted by Phipps (2012) and an understanding of the standards and requirements to bid on U.S. government contracts (Gill & Biger, 2012). The choices and the grounding of choices within the economics of the industry and firm results in a clear path to what must be done to create and sustain a competitive advantage for effective business practices (Allio & Fahey, 2012).

Applications to Professional Practice

The themes identified in this study apply directly to professional practice of small business and government leaders interested in meeting federal contracting goals. The findings of this study are relevant to improving a small business leader's approach to winning a federal contract due to expanded knowledge, access to information and resources, and targeting internal and external factors that can impact sustainability. Applications to professional practice include competitive advantage strategies concerning securing government contracts in an ever-changing environment. This study is significant in assisting the federal government in meeting the desired contracting goals and implementing programs or instituting protocols to educate and inform all stakeholders in

the federal contracting community. Involvement of all stakeholders in the continuous innovation and learning process brings about goods, services and experiences of unique value throughout the community (Gouillart, 2014).

According to study findings, key strategies used to win federal contracts involved contractual knowledge, access to resources, success measures, and sustainability. I anticipate that these strategies will serve as an educational tool for small business owners to gain unforeseen knowledge on the contractual process and enhance their overall possibilities of winning a federal contract. As identified in the literature review, the SBA offers a plethora of business tools to enhance small businesses that compete for federal government contracts (SBA, 2017d). The application of these study findings might help small business owners and provide a more enhanced and profound appreciation for the imperceptible impacts and effects of conducting business with the federal government. Small businesses with a strong reputation have the likelihood to survive, present a resilient financial portfolio, and capitalize on competitive advantages with the support of the government (Nijmeijer, Huijsman, & Fabbriotti, 2014).

The findings of this study include several aspects relevant to strategies used by small business owners on winning federal contracts. Small businesses in the public and private sectors can make better decisions when seeking to win contracts. Analysis of the three small business owners offers tangible source material that can be referenced to identify key information needed to aid in understanding the process and details showcased by the local small business liaison. Transparency in the efficiency of government policy, contract operations, and government spending will also add

intellectual value to government agencies when supporting both the private and public sectors. The results of the current study can add to the body of knowledge and provide an opportunity to capture competitive strategies on the resources, services, and the integration of personal experiences, expertise, skills, and knowledge.

Implications for Social Change

Despite the continuous decreases in federal funding, competition in government contracting authorizes public and private companies to compete and supply goods and services (Lamothe & Lamothe, 2012). Small business owners are drivers of innovation that lead to more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable outcomes (Gagnon, Michael, Elser, & Gyory, 2013). Study findings may apply directly or indirectly to individuals, organizations, and society, with implications for positive social change. Study implications of positive social change include opportunities for small business owners to increase business opportunities and job creation to benefit the federal government and society. According to the SBA (2017e), government procurement has historically advanced various national, social, and economic objectives. The SBA continuously apply small business set-aside procedures to reduce the disparities of small businesses that fall under the 8(a) Program to support small businesses owned and operated by socially and economically disadvantaged persons in growing their businesses (SBA, 2017e). Use of these findings by small businesses can help to meet the government's contracting goals while also expanding opportunities for small business owners across a variety of industries and localities.

Recommendations for Action

Conducting business with the government pose challenges for small businesses in gaining access to federal contracts for sustainability and growth. Small businesses, contracting officials, and the SBA are stakeholders in the best position to make use of the results of this study since they can directly influence and apply these findings in current programs. Participants of this study because unique insights on their experiences and insights on winning a federal contract.

The recommendations for actions are based on the four overarching themes and results of the study. My recommendations are that small business owners are to focus more on enhancing contractual knowledge of processes, means of obtaining financial resources, and changes in applicable legislation. Small businesses should seek networking opportunities for possible expansion and maintain relevance in sustaining future endeavors to win federal contracts. My recommendations for local contracting officials involves being more active in the process for new small business owners who totally oblivious on how to do business with the federal government. Small business owners could benefit from having a packet of continuity that walks them thru the process step by step, with a diagram that illustrates requirements and timelines. My recommendations to the SBA is to revisit current policies that governs small businesses who seek or plan to obtain federal contracts. According to the participants in this study, implementation of a mentor/protégé program for each specific government contract program would be advantageous for future small businesses. In the ever-changing environment of conducting business with the government, traditional means are not

always practical for future sustainability for small businesses. While small businesses provide unique services and products, innovative ways of employment should differ from traditional approaches of provided contract opportunities.

Findings in this study should be disseminated and broadened via local government publications, academic research journals, professional conferences, small business journals, and small business administration publications. I will disseminate the findings of this study to participating small businesses, local small business liaison, and supporting SBA representatives. The results of this study could help policymakers influence growth and expansion small business opportunities with the federal government.

Recommendations for Further Research

The intent of this qualitative case study was to provide small business owners with strategies to successfully win federal contracts. Although small business owners may be interested in the study findings, the need for future research still exists. The recommendations for further research are a result of study participants interview feedback, geographical region of the study, and the research method and or design. I recommend addressing ways to improve practice in business and address identified limitations of the study delineated in Section 1.; which included:

- the first limitation that some participants may not provide complete and honest answers to interview questions, and
- the second limitation on the geographical region of where the study took place.

I recommend conducting a quantitative study to reach a larger population through the use of surveys. Researchers should conduct further studies to explore competitive strategies of small business owners not identified or covered in this study, which should help to address the limitations identified in this study. I recommend conducting research where contract specialists or small business liaisons are the target population for interviews in qualitative research or surveys in quantitative research. Additionally, from a small business liaisons' viewpoints on strategic management, the information provided supports the need for further investigation on future contract opportunities for small businesses that compete for federal contracts. Since this study focused on the Clarksville, Tennessee and Hopkinsville, Kentucky area, I recommend further research on the strategies used by small business owners in other geographic locations using a larger study population. The recommendation of conducting a quantitative or mixed method study would complement the findings of this qualitative study and the evaluation on the effectiveness of strategies used by small business owners who compete for federal contracts.

Reflections

The Doctor of Business Administration Program has been an enthusiastic and rewarding journey. From the beginning, I proclaimed to mitigate bias by identifying and reflecting on my assumptions and preconceptions through bracketing my views and strictly following my study protocol. As a contributor to the body of knowledge, I found the research project stimulating as research results and personal experiences form a more solid foundation for my study.

The unforeseen responsiveness and accommodating interactions with study participants proved to be positive life changing experiences and beyond expectations. I gained professional knowledge and experiences that will enhance my leadership abilities. All study participants responded openly and honestly as I consistently followed the interview protocol. In this study, I found similarities and differences in participants' experiences. The tools and resources provided throughout the research process will aid in future research projects and interests in continuous learning.

Conclusion

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners use for successfully winning federal contracts. Small business competitive strategies to successfully win contracts were derived from themes developed from semistructured interviews with three participants in Clarksville, Tennessee and Hopkinsville, Kentucky and the examination of company archival documents. Data saturation was apparent and no new or relevant information emerged. I utilized NVivo 11 software to discover the themes related to the research topic. The four emergent themes identified in this study included contractual knowledge, access to resources, measures of success, and sustainability.

In this study, I identified competitive advantage strategies that significantly influence small business owners' possibilities of winning a federal contract. Application to professional practice and recommendations for action detailed the aspects of contractual knowledge, access to resources, measures of success, and sustainability practices. The results of the study indicated the findings from the literature. The strategies

identified in this study may be helpful to small business owners who seek federal contracts with the government.

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Appendix A: Research and Interview Questions

Research Question

The primary research question that guided this study is: what strategies do small business owners need to win federal government contracts?

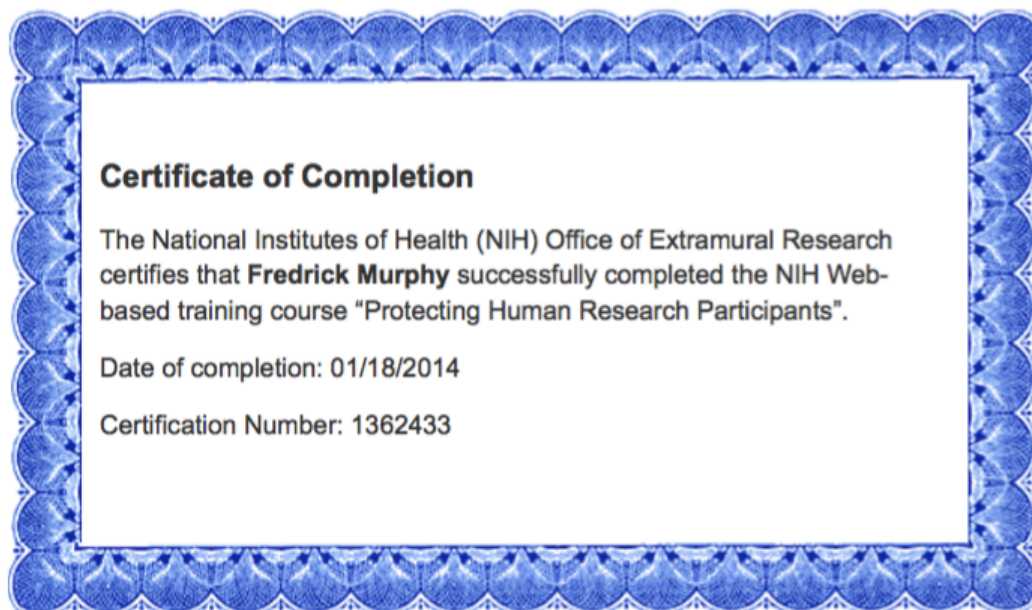
Interview Questions

The focus of my interview questions is to identify strategies that small business leaders need to win federal government contracts. The questions I used to interview managers for this proposed study are as follows:

1. How long did it take to secure a federal contract?
2. What barriers or restrictions did you encounter when competing for federal contracts?
3. What training or education did you use to help you win federal contracts?
4. What strategies did you use to successfully win federal contracts?
5. What support did you receive in achieving your awarded contract?
6. What contracting method did you use as your primary approach to win federal contracts?
7. How many federal contracts have you lost as a small business?
8. What other information would you like to share regarding strategies for winning and sustaining federal contracts?

Appendix B: National Institutes of Health Certificate of Completion for Protecting Health

Research Subjects



Appendix C: Letter of Cooperation From SB Liaison

WALDEN UNIVERSITY
Letter of Cooperation

Signing Official's Name: _____

Date: _____

Dear Fredrick D. Murphy,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I will provide contact information for the study entitled Strategies for Small Businesses to Win Federal Contracts. As part of this study, I consent to sharing potential participants for interviews for the study. I agree to provide a list of contact information of small business owners in the local area that have won federal contracts. It is understood that participation will be voluntary and at the potential participants own discretion. No additional support or services will be required or asked from the Small Business Liaison.

As part of this study, I will provide you the name of small business owners that meets your inclusion criteria and you may contact the person(s) directly to request their participation in the study. I confirm that I am authorized to provide such information and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student researcher's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and an authorized representative of this organization.

Signature of Authorized Official

Date

Title

Organization

Walden University policy on electronic signatures: An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

Appendix D: Draft Email to Study Participants

Dear [name of the requested party],

I am a student at Walden University seeking a Doctorate of Business Administration with a specialization in Leadership. I am conducting a multiple case research study entitled Strategies for Small Businesses to Win Federal Contracts. The purpose of the research study is to explore strategies that small business owners need to win federal government contracts in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee.

I am seeking small business owners that meet the following criteria:

- Experience in successfully winning federal government contracts in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and Clarksville, Tennessee
- Have won at least one federal government contract in the past 5 years
- A minimum of 18 years of age

Your participation will involve answering open-ended questions in face-to-face interviews. The potential participants may ask questions and to choose not to participate or to withdraw from participating in this study at any time without penalty or forfeiture of benefit to the individuals. The published results of this research study will not contain the organization's and participant's identity or position to anyone other than the researcher. All interview responses and information provided by organizations and individuals will be held in strict confidence. I will ensure confidentiality for each participant by assigning a letter and numeric code to protect your identity and maintain the master transcript. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide copies of documents related to phenomenon and items comfortable sharing. Requested documents will consist of schedules, charts, graphs, or other internal records related to the strategies used by small business owners that your organization is comfortable sharing.

I included a letter of informed consent requesting your voluntary support and signature. The returned signed copy of the informed consent form with your will be considered as your organization's consent to participate.

Please contact me should you have questions concerning this research study. You can contact me via telephone at XXX-XXX-XXX or xxxx.xxxxx@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a potential participant, you can call Dr. XXXX XXXX. She is the Walden University's representative who can discuss this with you. The contact phone number is XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Please print or save a copy of the informed consent form for your records.

Sincerely,

Xxxxxx X. XXXXXXXXX, DBA Candidate
Walden University

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview protocol steps:

1. I will prepare notes with reminders of what the research should do to ensure the intent of the phenomena under study.
2. I will begin each interview with an opening statement as an icebreaker to engage participants in a relaxed manner.
3. I will ask open-ended face-to-face interview questions with each participant in the same order using the same interview questions.
4. I will note and clarify any non-verbal communication such as tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and posture as needed.
5. I will ask probing questions as a continuum to help each participant think more thoroughly about the phenomenon and gather additional clarification.
6. I will record reflective notes throughout the entire interview process.
7. I will conduct member checking for verification of interview transcripts.