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# Strategies for Sustaining Small Businesses in the U.S. Health Care Sector

James Utobunwa Nwachukwu  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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James Utobunwa Nwachukwu

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2018

Abstract

Strategies for Sustaining Small Businesses in the U.S. Health Care Sector

by

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MS, State University of New York, Maritime College, 2004

MBA, Abia State University, 1994

BS, University of Calabar, 1989

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2018

## Abstract

In the United States, many small businesses fail within the first 5 years due to poor implementation of sustainability strategies. Researchers and business practitioners have indicated that small business owners face challenges on how to maintain their businesses beyond 5 years due to lack of sustainability strategies. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that health care small business owners and managers in New York State use to maintain their businesses beyond 5 years. Sustainability development theory was used for the study's conceptual framework. Semistructured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 6 purposively-selected participants who had owned and managed health care small businesses for more than 5 years together with companies' official documents on strategies used to sustain their businesses to achieve goals. The 5 themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data are education, training, and experience; customer-centricity, information technology update, development of business plan, and relationship and networking. The findings indicated that participants use similar strategies to sustain small businesses. The results from this study may contribute to positive social change by providing area healthcare small business owners and managers with more knowledge on strategies for sustaining businesses. By sustaining their businesses, these business owners and managers can improve economic growth by offering employment opportunities and paying more corporate taxes, which the municipal government could use to provide social amenities to local citizens.

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## Dedication

I dedicate the achievement of this life ambition to my God, who led me throughout this journey. To you, my wife, Mrs. Priscilla Nkechi Utobunwa-Nwachukwu, and my five children: Bumma, Oluebube, Somtochi, Cherechi, and Chizaram, thanks to each of you for your understanding and perseverance during this period. Their support, sacrifices, and patience during this period of my study were my inspiration.

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Thank you all.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses in the United States are vital to innovation, productivity, competition, employment generation, social cohesion, and maintenance of strong economic growth (Theodorakopoulos, Kakabadse, & McGowan, 2014; Spremo & Micic, 2015). These businesses account for 99.7% of employer firms, generate half of all private gross domestic product (GDP), and employ half of the private sector workforce in the United States in addition to being the major suppliers, innovators, and sources of growth in free market economies around the world (SBA, 2014; Snider, 2015). Sustaining small business performance over the long term is challenging (Amisano & Anthony, 2017). According to Gandy (2015), only two-thirds of small businesses survive at least 2 years while about half survive 5 years. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners and managers need to sustain their businesses.

### **Background of the Problem**

A small business in the United States is a business with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2014). Small business owners are the drivers of the U. S. economy and are the pioneers of technological development in the global marketplace. U. S. small businesses accounted for 28.2 million of U. S. businesses and employed 99.7% of all employees in the business sector (SBA, 2014). Only about 66% of small businesses survive their first 2 years while, 55% to 60% survive their first 4 years, and about 50% survive their fifth year of operation (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Hyer and Lussier (2016) posited that about 50% of all new established small businesses survive 5 years or more and about

one-third survive 10 years or more.

Small businesses fail within 5 years of operation because business leaders lack the strategies to sustain their firms (Akaeze, 2016). There is little empirical data on the strategies that health care small business owners can use to sustain their businesses (Indounas & Arvaniti, 2015). Study findings may enhance business practice by providing small business owners with information on ways to sustain their businesses. The findings from this study could also contribute to the broader literature on small business sustainability.

### **Problem Statement**

Small businesses in the United States account for more than 99% of all struggling businesses (Akaeze, 2016). Gandy (2015) stated that 50% of all small businesses fail within the first 5 years due to poorly executed sustainability strategies. The general business problem was that small business owners face challenges in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. The specific business problem was that some small business owners and managers in the U. S. health care sector lack strategies for sustaining businesses beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that health care small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The population of this study consisted of six health care small business owners and managers located in New York State who owned and managed health care small businesses for more than 3 years and used sustainable business strategies to achieve

business goals. Study findings may contribute to positive social change by providing area small business owners with knowledge on effective strategies that might lead to improvement in products and services delivery. Using study findings, area small business owners and managers may also be able to minimize costs to consumers and create employment opportunities for local citizens. Positive social change may result from the generation of income to employees and their families and revenues to governments in the form of taxes, which may enhance societal economic growth and development.

### **Nature of the Study**

Gandy (2015) listed three research methods which are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. This study was a qualitative multiple case study with the research objective of exploring strategies health care small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses. Researchers use the qualitative research method to gain in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experience of participants (Choudrie & Culkin, 2013; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Uluyol & Akci, 2014). I used the qualitative method because my objective was to gain in-depth understanding of the strategies small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses. Researchers use the quantitative method to collect numerical data, conduct statistical analysis, and test hypotheses (Lunde, Heggen, & Strand, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because the approach might not have provided in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences and the complexity of the phenomenon of study. Using the mixed-methods approach would have required combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Bazeley, 2015). Researchers who use

the mixed-methods approach face challenges of time constraints and limited resources (Morse & Cheek, 2014). Mixed methods were not appropriate for this study because of issues regarding time constraints and limited resources.

Qualitative designs include case study, ethnographic, and phenomenological (Demishkevich, 2015). Researchers use the case study approach to explore phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2014). Using the case study design, the researcher can probe through open-ended questions the real-life events of the participants and gain a holistic understanding of the issues from varied data sources (Demishkevich, 2015; Enrich, 2015; Guo, Porschitz, & Alves, 2013). I selected the case study design for this study because I explored how small business owners develop and implement decisions to sustain their businesses. Researchers use the ethnographic design to study a cultural group's beliefs, feelings, meanings, associations, and cultural interactions (Cibangu, 2013; Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Simpson, Slutskaya, Hughes, & Simpson, 2014). An ethnographic design was not appropriate for the study because of its emphasis on the culture of the specific phenomenon of study. Researchers use the phenomenological design to explore the subjective meanings of lived experiences to individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). The phenomenological design was not suitable for this study because I did not explore the subjective meanings of the lived experiences of the participants.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do health care business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies do you use to sustain your healthcare products and services?
2. How effective are the strategies in meeting your business objectives?
3. How did you assess the effectiveness of these strategies?
4. What obstacles did you encounter in implementing these strategies?
5. How did you address the obstacles to implementing these strategies?
6. How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these obstacles?
7. What recommendations would you like to share on ways to improve sustainability for other small businesses?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was sustainability development theory, which was developed by Brundtland (1987). This theory encompasses concepts of sustainable business, sustainable development, and sustainable transformative business (Byrch, Milne, Morgan, & Kearins, 2015; Khalil, Ramzy, & Mostafa, 2013). The primary principle of sustainability development theory is that managers use their firm's capacity to increase their economic prosperity by realigning their business models to be consistent with how they acquire, create, deliver, support, and improve their business activities (McPhee, 2014). Transformative business sustainability (TBS) refers to the efforts of a firm's management to achieve business sustainability through the adoption of best business practices (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). The TBS model provides business owners and managers with a feasible framework for making informed business decisions,

reducing uncertainty, improving marketplace practices, and addressing specific business goals to enhance business prosperity and sustainability (Teh & Corbitt, 2015).

Understanding sustainability development concepts and how the attributes required to achieve sustainability interact is vital to the effective implementation of a business strategy for sustaining a business. As Eswarld and Vallesi (2014) noted, effective sustainability development requires a clear vision with strategic direction, time, and long-term focus on the development, survival, and success of the firm. Sustainability development theory was appropriate, I believe, for exploring the strategies that health care business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The findings of this study might add to the body of knowledge on small business sustainability by advocating a structured way for small business leaders to integrate sustainability models as a vital component of their strategy for survival.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Business model:* A business model is a structural template describing (a) how a focal firm transacts with customers, partners, and suppliers; and (b) how the firm chooses to connect with the factors and markets (Angeli & Jaiswal, 2016).

*Entrepreneur:* An entrepreneur is (a) an individual who seeks to engage in a business venture and prevail in a competitive market despite not having major aspirations for rapid growth or (b) individuals who have a particular business, for a determined period, and who strive to advance by innovating in that business in the same period (Fernandes, Ferreira, & Ratten, 2016).



*Marketing:* Marketing is the process that staff in firms undertake when developing new and innovative ways to market their products and create value for customers in multivocal market conditions and often under resource constraints (Fiore, Niehm, Hurst, Son, & Sadachar, 2013).

*Profitability:* Profitability represents the amount of revenue earned from business transactions over the total expenses incurred. Profitability equals total revenue minus total expenses (Menicucci & Paolucci, 2016).

*Service innovation:* A service innovation is a new service experience or service solution in one or several of the following dimensions: new service concept, new customer interaction, new value system/business partners, new revenue model, new organizational, or technological service delivery system (Grant, Alefantos, Meyer, & Edgar, 2013).

*Small business:* A small business is a privately owned and managed firm with fewer than 500 employees and annual revenue of \$35.5 million (SBA, 2014).

*Sustainable business:* Sustainable business implies the art of managing a company in such a way as to ensure it stays around for future generations with social and environmental programs intact (Gauthier, 2017).

*Sustainability development:* Sustainability development is development that meets the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability to meet those needs of the future generations (Eswarlal & Vallesi, 2014).

*Sustainable transformation:* Sustainable transformation is the process of aligning sustainable decisions with the paradigm of value-based management that considers the role of economic dimension in business context (Muller & Pflieger, 2014).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

In this subsection, I discuss the various assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of my research. Marshall and Rossman (2016) advocated that researchers inform readers of these aspects of the research process and their potential impact on the research results. By communicating these aspects, researchers can help readers to better understand the research results, which might generate opportunities for further research.

#### **Assumptions**

In research studies, assumptions refer to the suppositions that researchers make about their topics of analysis (Zientek, Nimon, & Hammack-Brown, 2016). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), assumptions are facts assumed to be true by the researcher without verification, which might pose risk. I made five assumptions. The first and second assumptions were that the participants would have a profound interest in participating in the research without any other motive and would be truthful in providing information and answers to the research questions. I had these assumptions because participation was voluntary and participants did not receive a special reward for participation. Participants could withdraw from the interview at any time during the interview period. In addition, I assured the participants of anonymity and confidentiality of their participation.

The third assumption was that participants would be truly representative of the population under study because they own and or manage health care businesses. According to Franco, Santos, Ramalho, and Nunes (2014), lack of strategies is one of the greatest challenges for small business owners and managers, which has contributed to many small business failures. My fourth assumption, therefore, was that small business owners and managers lack strategies to sustain their businesses. The lack of strategies has a negative effect on small businesses sustainability. More than 50% of small businesses close within their first 5 years of operation (Menicucci & Paolucci, 2016). The cause of failure is lack of business models and sustainability strategies including inadequate education, training, and management practice (Amisano & Anthony, 2017). The fifth assumption was the justification for using a multiple case study. I assumed that the small business owners and managers chosen for the study would provide detailed insight about small firms' challenges and would proffer solutions regarding the nonsustainability and failure of small enterprises.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are constraining factors that researchers encounter in conducting research study (Berg, Witteloostuijn, & Brempt, 2017). According Berg et al. (2017), irrespective of the research methods used, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, limitations inhibit a researcher from conducting research according to his or her personal wishes, which could restrict the scope and impact the outcome of the study.

The first limitation was the choice of multiple case study, which might not represent all results possible from studies with more participants from different firms

within the same industry (Alimo, 2015). I followed the established procedures for qualitative multiple case study to achieve uniformity with other prior studies. The second limitation was the sample size. An exploratory multiple case study of small business owners and manager of six healthcare small businesses might not yield sufficient data to answer the research question. Lack of sufficient data might limit the number of recommendations that could be applicable to all health care small business firms (Wang, Yang, & Yen, 2017). To mitigate the limitation of the study's small sample size, I structured the interview questions for the study based on core sustainability principles and application to small business practices from participants lived and operational experiences.

The third limitation was the environmental factors in the workplace. Wargo (2015) stated that unknown factors or conditions at the facility where the participants reside, work, or study could bias participants' responses as environmental factors may influence participants' responses. I mitigated the limitation of environmental factors in the workplace by asking participants for recommendations that could enhance the implementation of sustainability strategies among small business owners.

The final limitation was the choice of case organizations. Obtaining approval of the executives of the six firms used in this multiple case study to include their proprietary information prior to submission to the Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) posed a challenge. I obtained approval after I explained the purpose of the doctoral study prospectus to the executives of the firms and addressed their concerns.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations are boundaries or restrictive conditions that researchers institute to define the scope and control of their study (Ody-Brasier & Vermeulen, 2014). The first delimitation was the size of business. Small businesses with less than 500 employees was the focus of this study. Other limitations were the industrial sector, sample size, and location of study. I examined the sustainability strategies for six healthcare small businesses located in New York State. Another limitation was the experience of the participants. Participants should be owners and managers of healthcare small firms who have operated their businesses for a minimum of five years and adopted sustainability strategies to grow their businesses. The final limitation was the generalization of study findings. Gau and James (2013) posited that small business leaders may apply the result of a research study to other small businesses.

**Significance of the Study**

More than 50% of all small businesses fail within their first 5 years due to poorly executed sustainability strategies (Gandy, 2015). In this study, I explored the strategies that contribute to sustaining healthcare small businesses. The study findings might recommend new strategies for sustaining small businesses over a long term.

Implementing the recommended strategies might provide small business leaders with new tools to improve performance, increase profitability, enhance growth, and support sustainability agenda.

**Contribution to Business Practice**

The findings from this study could provide useful information to area small business owners and managers on how to sustain their businesses. The results from this study could help business owners and managers to improve their products and services delivery and service quality in the production, sales, and customer services to enhance business performance. Findings from this study could provide business leaders with knowledge on how to integrate sustainable business practices, including identification, determination, and execution of innovative and transformative business sustainability models to improve revenue, market share, and enhance competitive advantage. Area small business leaders could use the findings of this study to apply flexibility in the implementation of sustainable strategies that align with the firms' owners' unique internal cultures to advance growth, expand current market niche, and achieve business goals. The findings from this study could help area small business owners and managers to identify customers' needs, improve product and service delivery, boost performance, increase competitive advantage, and achieve continuous growth to sustain their businesses.

**Implications for Social Change**

The implications of this study for positive social change include: (a) enhancing business development for healthcare small business owners to improve the quality of healthcare services that could uplift the health standard of the community, (b) improving area public healthcare system delivery, and (c) generating economic growth for local communities. In the healthcare industry, proximity is a major driver of healthcare

products' utilization (Kemp, Jilapalli, & Becerra, 2014). Area existing small business owners could use the information from this study to improve relationship with consumers. New aspiring entrepreneurs could use the information gained from the study findings to establish new businesses that could contribute to economic development and societal growth. Area small business owners could use the information from the study to implement consumer-driven policies for improving quality and developing new methods of delivering values to consumers. Area small business leaders may use the findings, recommendations, and conclusions from this study for catalyzing positive social change through improvement in products and services, employment creation, and increase in employees' incomes to the benefit of their families. With improved business performance, small business leaders would pay more corporate tax which could increase governments' revenues for building social amenities and enhancing societal economic growth and development.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies healthcare small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Extensive research based on sustainability theories might help researchers understand strategies small business owners use to support their businesses. Information exists on business sustainability (Akaeze, 2016; Sirilarbanan, 2017); however, scholars have reported a dearth of literature on effective strategies for small business sustainability (Edgeman & Williams, 2014). Notwithstanding that small businesses serve as channels for innovations, technological advancement, and economic growth, few researchers have

focused on small business sustainability (Bayani & Crisanto, 2017; Galindo & Mendez-Picazo, 2013; Omri, Frikha, & Bouraoui, 2015). The focus of this study was to address this gap in literature by exploring small business sustainability strategies.

The organization of this literature review includes the fundamental concept of sustainability, sustainable business, sustainable development, sustainable transformative business model, small business strategies, small business performance, and small business sustainability. To find relevant literature, I used the Walden University online library. The databases used included business and management databases such as Business Source Complete, as well as ABI/Inform Complete, EBSCOhost, SAGE Premier, and information and technology databases. In addition, I used a collection of peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and textbooks to strengthen the literature review. The key search words and phrases used when searching the databases included *small business owners*, *sustainable business*, *sustainable development*, and *sustainable transformative business model*. The literature review contains 120 references consisting of 107 peer-reviewed journals, eight articles, two books, and three dissertations. One hundred and eight, or 90%, of referenced sources were published within 5 years from my expected completion date of my study, and 12, or 10% of references were published more than 5 years from my anticipated graduation date.

### **Sustainability Development Theory**

The sustainability development theory by Brundtland (1987) supported the premise of this study. The Brundtland Commission (1987) defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present generation without



compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. DesJardins (2016) stated that Brundtland's sustainability theory was not a philosophical discussion of ethics, hence, we should not expect to find a subtle treatment of ethics presented, but to underpin its ethical foundations. According to DesJardins, Brundtland sustainability theory was an essay in distributive justice specifically judging the distribution of economic goods and services by how well it meets the needs of the least advantaged as well as to future generations needs.

Small business owners and managers need to sustain their businesses by implementing sustainability models within their firms (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016). Akhtar, Lodhi, & Khan (2015) suggested that sustainable entrepreneurs should work collaboratively towards a distinct goal of profiting in an ecological manner with the intention of generating future wealth. Darcy, Hill, McCabe, and McGovern (2014) opined that business leaders should integrate the unique characteristics of small businesses to existing sustainability models within their scale of operation to be capable of continuing to sustain their businesses over the long-term.

Sustainability strategies include (a) introverted, (b) extroverted, (c) conservative, and (d) visionary (Muller & Pflieger, 2014; Nuryadin, 2016). Introverted strategies (risk mitigation) contain legal and other external standards of a business; extroverted strategies (legitimizing approaches) focus on businesses' external relationships; conservative strategies center on eco-efficiency of the environment; and visionary strategies (holistic approaches) focus on sustainability issues within all business activities (Muller & Pflieger, 2014). Small business leaders can use the introverted sustainability strategy to manage

business risks and to comply with legal and other external standards (Nuryadin, 2016). Nuryadin also stated that business leaders may use the extroverted sustainability strategy to manage the external relationship among organizations. Small business owners and managers may use the conservative sustainability strategy to focus on co-efficiency and the visionary sustainability strategy to focus on sustainability issues within business activities (Muller & Pflieger, 2014). The visionary sustainability activity model requires firms to acquire, create, deliver, support, and recover activities that help to build sustainable value (McPhee, 2014). By implementing visionary sustainability strategies, business leaders can identify the value of current activities, evaluate how the activities may change to reduce negative impacts, create new activities that may improve performance, and recognize activities that may enhance stakeholders' value (McPhee, 2014). Small business leaders should use these sustainability strategy components to manage their firms, improve performance, and grow and sustain their business for both current and future generations need.

Small business owners and managers may use the sustainability model to enhance their firms' resilience and long-term value by creating a collection of products or services and a combination of people, systems, and ideas that form the nucleus of the firm (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). According to Wagner & Svensson, some researchers have posited the need, however, for a paradigm shift by firm owners and managers to filter in more sustainable ways of thinking and behaving. For small businesses' sustainability, many researchers have opined that owners and managers require only moderate behavioral change adjustments to the process, procedures, and reward systems to

maintain their businesses over a long-term (Schwaninger, 2015; Wagner & Svensson, 2014). With deep commitment to visionary sustainability, small business owners and managers can sustain their businesses through deep commitment to visionary sustainability culture and developing a framework for sustainability (Schwaninger, 2015).

### **Sustainability Development (SD)**

Sustainability development (SD) is the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). SD evolves when there is a rational and an emotional link among a firm's stakeholders that may enhance the long-term sustainability practices of the company (Sen, 2014). The successful integration of SD into all areas of a firm could lead to the inclusion of all sustainability perspectives to create positive impact on the stakeholders (Windolph, Schaltegger, & Herzig, 2014). Business leaders should, thus, implement sustainability initiatives in their organizations.

Business sustainability encompasses the period when leaders of a business organization implement certain structural conditions established in advance to achieve continuity and growth (Bell, Galpin, & Whittington, 2015). Bell et al. believed that business sustainability is important to the long-term success of both the firms and the communities in which they operate. Akhtar et al. (2015) opined that sustainability requires that entrepreneurs integrate SD programs into their business logic. Small business leaders should incorporate innovation efforts to provide long-term competitive advantage (Indounas & Arvaniti, 2015). Windolph et al. (2014) posited that small business owners and managers should use administrative technologies to manage

sustainability issues by structuring, organizing, measuring, communicating, developing and defining processes and structures to support their sustainability objectives.

The business argument for SD is in alignment with the paradigm of value-based management, costs, benefits, and the risks in relation to reaching an organizational decision on investment that could bring sustainability to a firm (Muller & Pflieger, 2014). Small businesses are vital to the achievement of SD through integrating various resources, uniting stakeholders for a common goal, and striving to work efficiently in a competitive environment (Li & Nguyen, 2017). Small business leaders can achieve SD through collaboration of information and innovation to gain competitive advantage, economies of scale, and higher profitability that may enhance their business sustainability.

Virakul (2015) examined SD to identify the relationships and implications for business organizations to ensure the integration of community and stakeholder concerns into economic and ecological paradigms. Small businesses leaders should integrate SD strategy elements into the decision-making process to improve performance and provide long-term benefits to current and future stakeholders (Shields & Shelleman, 2015). Bell et al. (2015) advised business leaders and academics to recognize that sustainability is important to the long-term success of both firms and their stakeholders. Successful firms of the future will *co-create* products and services with due consideration to their key stakeholders (Li & Nguyen, 2017; Saade & Nijher, 2015). Small business owners and managers should consider stakeholders' interests to grow and sustain their business.

Abraham (2017) posited that SD instantiates and summarizes the necessity for critical changes that align with economic logic. The analysis of SD and sustainability should be coherence in relation to the cultural underpinnings which support them, the contexts which demands them, and the individuals who apply them (Borin-de-Souza et al., 2014). SD addresses four cornerstones of business sustainability (Enquist, Sebhatu, & Johnson, 2013). The four bases are (a) vision and social ambition combined with strong value base, (b) business model wherein the product range and price are the main differentiators between the firm and the competition, (c) market leadership that defines the firm's short-and-long-term growth ambitions, and (d) a firm's control to establish long-term perspective, purpose, and strong values.

Bell et al. (2015) advised business leaders to adopt a systemic approach to sustainability that supports the development and implementation of sustainability strategies to enhance the long-term survival of their firms. Bell et al. implored firms' leaders to set the process that fosters sustainable decisions and behaviors at all levels of the organization by establishing sustainable business practices. According to Bell et al. (2015), sustainable business practices encompass incorporating sustainability into the firm's strategic management process, instituting performance benefits, and setting clearer directions. Other aspects of sustainable business practices include establishing a sharper focus on what is important, developing an improved understanding of the rapid changes in the environment, and collaboration of information and innovation.

Business leaders use SD as management tool for developing strategies, including products and services, allocating resources, and gaining competitive advantage (Ratiu &

Anderson, 2014). Organizational leaders should see SD as a process and sustainability as the outcome (Hansen, Ludeke-Freund, & Schaltegger, 2016). To become more sustainable, business leaders need to apply the principles of strong sustainability at all levels as a mission-driven process. Small business owners and managers should apply sustainability principle to forcefully influence the decision-making process, challenge the firm to grow, and contribute to the sustainable development of the entire firm over the long-run (Schaltegger et al., 2016).

### **Business Sustainability Model**

Business sustainability model (BSM) is a useful technique for analyzing various aspects of a firm. BSM defines the way in which firms deliver value to customers, entice customers to pay for value, and convert those payments to profit (Philipson, 2016).

Business executives use BSM to analyze and reduce complexities. Small business owners and managers use BSM to develop new ideas, develop new innovative approach to organizing the businesses, draw up new strategies, and rationalize how to achieve the business goal (Andersen, Ljungkvist, & Svensson, 2015; Philipson, 2016). Small business owners need to protect their innovation outcomes and increase profits from their innovations to make their growth sustainable (Seo et al., 2016). Organizational leaders should adopt BSM to grow and sustain their business.

The sustainability of small businesses depends on the adoption of BSM. By adopting BSM, business owners and managers could identify their customers, engage with customers' needs, and deliver satisfaction and monetizing the value (Baden-Fuller & Haefliger, 2013). The components of BSM include (a) offer, (b) market, (c) economy, (d)

personal factors, (e) internal capability, and (f) competitive strategy (Baden-Fuller & Haefliger, 2013). The offer component of the BSM contain details on how the firm creates value, the firm's role in the production process, and how business leaders can reconfigure the offer. The market component deals with how the firm relates with the stakeholders while the economic factors entail the firm's financial operation in terms of pricing, costs, and revenue. Personal factors depict the owners' ambitions in terms of time and growth. The internal capacity describes the firm's leaders' expertise and skills regarding product development, innovation, marketing, finance, and logistics while the competitive strategy explains how the firm positions itself in the competitive market (Martins & Fernandes, 2015).

Pels and Kidd (2015) categorized the three levels of business model as economic, operational, and strategic. The economic level represents the process for generating profit to sustain the firm and comprises of the pricing, cost structure, and the revenue stream accruing to the firm through the adoption of business model. The operational level encompasses the internal processes and design infrastructure that enables the firm to create values and include delivery methods, administrative processes, and resource flows. The strategic level responds to the market positioning of the business and the overall direction of the firm and include offering differentiation, stakeholder identification, and network. Pels and Kidd posited that lack of business sustainable models could adversely impact on small businesses growth, development, and sustainability. Small business owners and managers should implement BSM to grow and sustain their firm.

Successful business leaders associate with business models with higher innovativeness than other models. Business leaders who combine and adopt business models that focus on distributing innovations to different market segments have higher propensity to succeed (Li & Nguyen, 2017). Business leaders use BSM to combine factors such as products, distribution channels, small and large volumes, high or low margins, and human capital to achieve business goals. Andersen et al. (2015) and Villanger, (2015) advised small business leaders to use BSM as guidelines to develop models for implementing sustainable business objectives.

The adoption of a BSM from a strategic level calls for a fundamental shift in mindset towards three key components of organizational purpose, value to society, and stakeholders' interests (Muja, Appelbaum, Walker, Ramadan, & Sodeyi, 2014). The organizational purpose requires business leaders to take steps to shift the vision of their success to involve a broader impact for long-term returns. The value to society, translated as *the business of business* is the creation of sustainable value by moving beyond the traditional business models to a radical model. The radical model requires firms' leaders to change business views of success from an economic-based measurement to a sustainability-based measurement. The stakeholders are requesting business leaders to build credibility and retain their trust through transparency of action and consideration for long-term impact.

Traditional business strategy anchors on delivering benefits to the firm and its customers, shareholders, creditors, employees, suppliers, and partners. The BSM requires firms to re-define stakeholders in much broader paradigm. The achievement of



sustainability in business network requires firms' leaders to incorporate the critical elements for success including product design, manufacturing, delivery, distribution, and disposal throughout the product life cycle (Muja et al., 2014). The successful implementation of BSM require firms' owners, managers, and employees to transform their mindsets to understand the interconnectivity, interdependency, and continuity of all components of the model.

### **Sustainable Transformative model (STM)**

STM involves the change from existing ways of doing business to open the way for more holistic awareness (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). Two stages of innovation available to business leaders include innovative initiation and transformative implementation (Chih, Huang, & Yang, 2014). Innovative initiation is being open to new ideas in the firm's culture while transformative implementation is the firm's leaders' ability to adopt or implement new ideas, processes, or products. Transformative learning is crucial to business sustainability because firms' leaders need to maintain business knowledge for years prior to applying transformative learning to products and service. Small business owners and managers that have the tenacity and capacity for transformation would develop a competitive advantage and achieve higher levels of performance (Hristov, 2015). Chih et al. (2014) posited that small business leaders use transformative business model to support their firms to continue to evolve, grow, and to customize products and services to satisfy customers' needs and to sustain their businesses.

Business leaders may use STM methodology to plan, implement, and assess practices to provide a holistic view of sustainable business activities that supports their firms' development and networks (Bresfelean, Res, & Comes, 2015; Wagner & Svensson, 2014). The integration of STM into the business structure may lead to success but could pose challenges in the choice of the appropriate strategy and management tools suitable for the firm (Muller & Pflieger, 2014). Small business owners and managers should establish action plans to integrate sustainability into their businesses. The action plan involves mapping out the sustainability agenda and identifying where to start implementing sustainability actions to achieve the greatest positive effect on the firm. Muller and Pflieger advised organizational leaders to understand how to transform towards sustainability, how to implement the actions, and how to capture the progress of sustainability actions as the firm moves towards transformative sustainability.

Integrating sustainability strategy into small firms' operations involve implementing sustainability as a cross-functional activity directed towards problem solving which could lead to better economic performance than profitability-related motives. The integration of sustainability strategy could contribute to improved margins and increased revenue growth, which ultimately yields greater stakeholder return and business growth (Muja, Appelbaum, Walker, Ramadan, & Sodeyi, 2014a). Business leaders should link sustainability characteristics with fundamental distinctiveness to align with different dynamics, strengthen the innovation driven *pull*, and preserve the value derived from sustainability (Sen, 2014). By integrating sustainability strategy in the organization, small business owners and managers could grow and sustain their company.

The success of businesses built on sustainability increases by matching corporate culture with sustainability activities. In implementing new sustainability strategies, small business should educate employees to understand, adopt, and apply the concepts with a sustained proof of its importance to the firm's survival and sustainability (Muja, Appelbaum, Walker, Ramadan, & Sodeyi, 2014b). Small firms' leaders should focus on long-term horizons through the adoption of sustainability strategy paradigm to sustain success. By adopting a sustainable mindset, firm leaders could integrate and maintain true change and communicate to all employees and stakeholders on the need for implementing a sustainable strategy (Muja et al., 2014b). Small business owners and managers should implement suitability strategies to sustain their firm.

Business leaders could build employee trust by disseminating information on the importance of sustainability and creating awareness on existing sustainability problems which require change. The firms' leaders are responsible for informing employees about the need for sustainability strategy, the potential hazards and pitfalls of not accepting sustainable change, and the form of transformation necessary to address the sustainability change. Small business owners and managers adopting sustainability-centered transformation should start with a *rapid* introduction of the new version and follow-up with an extended integration period to address the necessary collective sense-making processes of transforming the firms' culture. To succeed in building a culture of transformation toward sustainability, Muja et al. (2014b) advised business leaders to ensure that a fit exists between the firm's culture and sustainability activities.

### **Small Business Strategies**

Business strategy is the pursuit of a clearly defined path systematically identified in advance through a carefully chosen sets of activities (Collins, 2016). Business strategy is the instrument of competition in a competitive market (de Santos, de Melo Melo, Claudino, & Medeiros, 2017). Kachouie, Mavondo, & Sands (2018) posited that small business strategy consists of the interrelated activities and ploys for outwitting competitors. Gauthier (2017) opined that small business leaders should adopt business strategies to achieve the goal of sustaining their businesses in the competitive market.

Three types of competitive strategies include leadership strategy, differential strategy, and focus strategy (Porter, 1980; Salavou, 2015). Business leaders employ leadership strategy to derive the advantage of low costs in comparison to the costs of competitors, taking into consideration the service and product quality. Corporate leaders apply differential strategy to charge a higher than average price due to the peculiarity and uniqueness of the firm's services and products. The focus strategy is ideal for dealing with special group of customers who need peculiar and unique services and products. The application of competitive strategies is vital to small business' sustainability (Bapat & Mazumdar, 2015). Small business leaders' choice of type of strategy depends on the nature of the business, the competition, and the owner and manager's goal (Bayani & Crisanto, 2017). Most small firm leaders adopt different strategies to improve performance and sustain the business but some types of strategy may be detrimental to sustaining the business and achieving the leader's vision (Akaeze, 2016). In the era of technological advancement, the use of hybrid strategies offers most attractive choice for

small business success (Salavou, 2015). Small business owners and managers must choose the type of strategy most suitable for achieving their sustainability objectives.

The essence of sustainability strategy formulation is to assist business leaders obtain a strategic fit. Small business leaders should adopt sustainability strategies to make their firms competitive over the long term (Bell et al., 2015). The suitability of a sustainability strategy to a firm depends on the nature of the business and competition structure. The business owner and manager who chooses a strategy and sustainability objective simultaneously could find a pathway to pursue both objectives to benefit the firm and enhance the continuous improvement in achieving performance excellence (James, Oyewobe, & Windapo, 2015). The absence of innovative infrastructure would hamper small businesses leaders' implementation of sustainability strategy (Shields et al., 2015). Small firms' leaders should create innovative infrastructure to support the development and implementation of their sustainability strategies.

Communities are the pillars of all sustainability movement, regardless of the context (Too & Bajracharya, 2015). Too and Bajracharya demonstrated a relationship between sustainability, community, and community engagement. The sustainability forms the ultimate overall goal, the community is the means to achieving sustainability, and the community engagement stipulates the methods for mobilizing the community to participate actively in sustainability programs. Community integration into small business strategies helps to gain resources and to provide products and services vital to small business sustainability (Bourdon, Kimble, & Tessier, 2015). Integrating communities into small business strategies would enhance the achievement of long-term competitive

advantage and success. Small business owners should integrate communities into their business strategies to enhance sustainability.

Small business leaders should involve community stakeholders to achieve sustainability by developing strategies to serve the underserved communities (Li & Hunter, 2015). Creating strategies to cover the local segments of the population would enhance small business growth and sustainability. Battisti, Deakins, and Perry (2013) investigated the strategic behaviors of rural and urban small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in New Zealand and found that SMEs have distinctive characteristics, performance, and strategic behaviors across distinct locations. Battisti et al. posited that small business leaders across the different settlement communities should adopt different strategic responses to behaviors that match the distinctive characteristics of the locations and communities they serve to achieve their sustainability goals.

Strategies are the product of a rational decision or planning process that guides future actions and are instruments that business leaders use to maneuver the firms' behaviors (Ladwig & Wrona, 2014). The three strategies pertinent to small business owners include individual strategies, strategies for the organization, and the organization strategies (Ladwig & Wrona, 2014). Ladwig and Wrona explored the strategical relevant activities including decisions, actions, and interactions that lead to the formation and implementation of strategies in organizations. Addressing individual interests with claim of an official approval from key organization actors form strategies for the organization. Pertinent actors could develop the organizational strategies by sharing knowledge about

tactical relevant action guiding principles in diverse social interaction process. Small business leaders should implement sustainability strategies to sustain their firms.

The components of the traditional business strategy planning process include strategy formation, strategy execution, and strategy monitoring (Ghezzi, 2013). Small business leaders apply strategy formation based on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis to a firm's external attractiveness, internal competitive differentials, and existing resource endowment to generate strategic alternatives (Mondal, 2017). A firm's leader would select and implement the overall business strategy that could enhance the achievement of the firm's objectives. Small business owner's strategy execution requires the owner and manager to design business model (BM) that operationalizes the selected business strategy. Firms' leaders use value network (VN) to establish the interrelationship and strategic interplay of different BMs by different firms operating within the business area. Resource management (RM) is a useful tool that business leaders use to exploit the identified resources, competencies, and capabilities endowment to achieve business objectives (Ghezzi, 2013). Small business leaders could use the identified resources, competencies, and capabilities strategies to improve firm performance.

Benneth et al. (2016) used the market-based view (MBV) and resource-based view (RBV) to study the local sustainable production in manufacturing firms in Australia and Sweden. Benneth et al. demonstrated that business planners using MBV approach should anchor their strategic plans on careful analysis of market trends and market potentials. Business leaders using RBV approach for strategic planning should

concentrate on managing internal resources and finding markets to deploy the resources. The changes in innovation, technology, and customer expectations could shift the nature of completion (Benneth et al., 2016). Firms' leaders should consider both internal and external factors during strategy implementation to achieve competitive advantage and enhance business sustainability.

Garcia-Perez, Gonzalez-Davila, Oreja-Rodriguez, & Yanes-Estevez, (2014) studied the strategy process of SMEs. Using the strategic reference points (SRP) and the strategic positioning typology (SPT), Garcia-Perez et al. examined the strategic behavior of small business owners and managers based on the importance of their decision-making to SRP and SPT choices. Garcia-Perez et al. demonstrated that small business leaders should show professionalism and maturity in developing appropriate business strategies to support their sustainability goals. Most small business leaders do not follow a comprehensive framework to develop the business strategies but rather pay more attention to internal environment than external environment in making decisions that affect their businesses (Garcia-Perez et al., 2014). Small firm leaders should focus on improving their capabilities for adopting to market tendencies with their scarce resources.

Business strategies affect activities in the functional areas of marketing, production, technology, human resource management, financial management, planning, and networking (Kachouie, Mavondo, & Sands, 2018). Small firms' owners and managers pursuing business strategies should pay due attention to customer retention, good customer service, enhanced product benefits, efficient distribution networks, analysis of market intelligence, and effective pricing. Kachouie et al. opined that a small



firm's relative position within its industry depends on its strategy which defines its products range and image, cost structure, management, and marketing strengths, and distribution channels. Small business leaders should consider their products, marketing, costs, and distribution networks in their business strategy options.

The application of correct strategy alignment is a significant difference between successful and unsuccessful firms (de Santos et al., 2017). Strategy alignment is vital to small business success and sustainability. de Santos et al. identified two types of small business strategies to include business strategy and operation strategy. The relationship between business strategy and operations strategy is based on the theoretical framework which stipulates that firms formulate their business approaches within the limits of product-market and create their structures and processes within the province (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014). The operational strategy involves the production of goods and provision of services to generate profit for the firm. de Santos et al. posited that business leaders who want to improve their firms' performance and sustainability by implementing business strategy should modify the existing products in their operation and practice cost leadership as their competitive strategy. In contrast, a small business owner and manager adopting operations strategy for improving the firm's performance and sustainability should develop new products or services and apply mass customization technique in its operations using quality-based differentiation as the competitive strategy.

Fulford and Rizzo (2012) explored the various dimensions of small business leaders' strategy behavior to ascertain how the resulting behaviors relate to firm performance and sustainability. Rizzo and Fulford constructed a parsimonious model

depicting five trajectories of small business owner and manager's strategy adoption based on behavioral perceptiveness. The trajectories are (a) the controlled focus trajectory, (b) the contained growth trajectory, (c) the repositioning trajectory, (d) the dynamic growth trajectory, and (e) the retrenchment trajectory. Rizzo and Fulford demonstrated a dynamic coalignment between the owner and manager, the situation of the firm, and the context within which the owner and manager operates the firm. According to Rizzo and Fulford, small businesses leadership reacts heuristically to events, guided by their whims and passions that provide latitude for strategy alignment to business needs.

Small businesses in the US account for 99.5% of all businesses but most small business owners and managers do not apply strategic management (Bayani & Crisanto, 2017). The lack of strategic management application to small businesses operations hinders their competitiveness and ability to sustain the business. Bayani & Crisanto argued that nonstrategic connotes that a firm is neither actively engaged in the practices of strategic management needed to create a competitive advantage nor does the firm possess the resources necessary to develop business strategy. Small businesses owners and managers operate in increasing competitive environment amid insufficient resources for competing, resulting to inability to pursue competitive advantage. The environmental and resources constraints limit small business owners' choice to a narrow range of strategic options (Bayani & Crisanto, 2017)). Bayani & Crisanto opined that referring to US small businesses as nonstrategic was wrong because limited resources constrained them from implementing strategic management.0. Small business leaders often fail to

grow and sustain their businesses because of low scale, scope, learning liabilities, and economic disadvantages relative to large firms.

Meyer and Verreynne (2010) opined that small firms' leaders' strategy making was inadequate and advised business owners and managers to use different strategy making approaches to improve performance and sustain their firms. Three processes relevant to small firms' strategy making include simplistic, participative, and adaptive (Meyer & Verreynne, 2010). Simplistic strategy making focuses on the factors that led to successes in the past and a repeat of those actions by developing and maintaining a single strategic activity, goal, and or worldview. Participative strategy making process requires small business owners to include various internal stakeholder views in the strategy making process (Garriga, 2014). Small business leaders should include all stakeholders in the strategy making process and act as the facilitator. Adaptive strategy making approach would encourage dialogue with stakeholders that have strong positive relationship with a firm's performance. Small business leaders should involve external stakeholders in decisions regarding the direction and strategies of the firm. Adaptive strategy making could strengthen small businesses because the rigidity of some alternative approaches could lead to long-term distress and the strategy may allow leaders to respond to the needs of stakeholders (Harrison & Wicks, 2013). Small business owners and managers should use different strategy making approaches to improve performance and sustain their firms.

Globalization and market liberalization has compelled small businesses owners and managers to respond to markets needs at an increasingly fast pace and to adapt

appropriate business strategies for expansion (Ahmad, 2014). With the advent of external operating environments such as market conditions, growth opportunities, and communication technologies, small businesses leaders are engaging in business strategies to reduce competition by binding competitors as allies, increasing revenue base, and improving performance. The absence of formal strategic plans by many small business leaders have a negative effect on their potential to improve performance, achieve growth, and attain sustainability objectives. Small business owners and managers tend to use applied strategy approach to pursue success in business, which they acquire through direct reference to growth. The applied strategy approach may hinder the achievement of long-term growth, survival, and sustainability objectives (Connell, Geneste, & Weber, 2015). Small business owners and managers should use appropriate strategy to grow and sustain their firms.

Business excellence could play vital role in procuring sustainable future for small businesses during times of uncertainty (Afthonidis & Tsiotras, 2014). Small business managers who adopt the total quality management (TQM) technique tend to achieve strong competitive advantage during times of economic crisis. A firm's best strategy during times of economic uncertainty is to invest in innovation, technology, marketing, and to implement aggressive business strategy plans and customer-driven strategies (Afthonidis & Tsiotras, 2014; Atanassova & Clark, 2015). The two kinds of open innovation are knowledge strategy and business model (Yun, Jung, & Yang, 2015). By taking closed innovation strategies in both knowledge strategies and business models strategies, small business leaders could boost performance and growth. Yun (2015)

opined that small firm owners and managers who exhibit absolute limitations on resources and manpower should implement open innovation strategies to secure diverse resources from the markets and external knowledge.

Because the customers' demands and expectations are increasing, business leaders should establish long-term growth strategy to improve their firms' performance, survival, and sustainability (Biederman, 2015). Biederman listed seven steps that small business leaders could use to sustain their firms' long-term growth strategy. First, establish a value proposition which involves understanding what sets the business apart from competitors, what makes the business relevant, and what differentiates and attracts consumers to do business with your firm. Second, identify the firm's ideal customers, which involves identifying the customers, communicating and collaborating with the customers, requesting for feedback to meet the customers' needs, and motivating the customers to continue patronizing the firm's products and services. Third, define the key indicators as yardsticks to measure changes, identify how the changes could affect business growth, and devote time and resources to manage the identified changes. Fourth, verify the firm's revenue streams, what revenue stream could add to making the potential for new revenue streams, and how to sustain the revenue stream overtime. Fifth, identify what makes the firm's competitors sustain their businesses and develop unique ways to establish unique growth strategy peculiar to their firms. Sixth, focus on the firm's strengths which call for improvement in identified weakness by reorienting the playing field to conform to the firms' strengths and to build upon those strengths for growth. Finally, invest in talent

acquisition through hiring and training the employees to the firm's value proposition (Casprini, D' Antone, & Paranque, Pucci, & Zanni, 2016).

Developing a multifaceted business strategy that matches a firm's business plan, motivating employees, and interacting with the firm's customers is vital to small business success. Establishing a business strategy that conveys a firm's overall direction is an indispensable approach to improve business performance, enhance growth, and sustain the business. Small business leaders should seek to understand strategy formulation and process from both individual and collective perspectives and use both internal and external approaches for strategy implementation to enhance business sustainability (Wrona & Ladwig, 2015). Small business owners and managers should implement sustainability strategies to enhance their business performance, growth, and success.

### **Small Business Performance**

Some factors that motivate entrepreneurs to start their own businesses include the pull factors and push factors (Isaga, Masurel, & Montfort, 2015). The pull factors attract individual to start business while the push factors compel individuals to opt for self-employment. The pull factors include the desire for independence, financial betterment, higher social status, and greater personal control while the push factors include inability to find a paid work, underemployment, redundancy, job dissatisfaction, and necessity (Isaga et al., 2015). The pull and push factors may result in differences in business performance, survivability, and sustainability (Snider, 2015). To sustain local economies, small business owners and managers should (a) develop new products and services, (b) create new and competitive markets, (c) initiate and support inventions, and (d) develop

innovative activities. The most important strategy for enhancing economic livelihood across the globe is to sustain small businesses (Mutandwa, Taremwa, & Tubanambazi, 2015). Small business owners and managers should develop strategies to sustain their firms.

Trends in the past 5 years show that more small businesses failed than startups (SBA, 2014). Between 2007 and 2009, small business employees lost more jobs than their large business counterparts (Akaeze, 2016). In 2015, approximately 28.9 million small businesses that opened in the US accounted for 99.7% of businesses with 56.8 million employees or 48% of all US employees (SBA, 2016). Small businesses are the lifeblood of modern economy because they foster income stability, growth, and economic development. Small business failures result in loss of jobs, which have negative impact on job creation, employment, tax revenues, and disappointment to the communities and stakeholders (Arasti, Bahmani, & Zandi, 2014). The high rate of small business failures creates negative impact on local economies.

Researchers identified some factors contributing to small business survival and failures are entrepreneur's skills, experience, and networking abilities which affect business performance and profitability (Ayala & Manzano, 2014; Bayani & Crisanto 2017; Brinckmann, Dew, Grichnik, Mayer-Haug, & Read, 2013). After the initial success, most small business leaders focus on efficient production and sale of products and services instead of innovation (Flynn, Haynie, & Mazzei, 2016). The lack of innovation may result in limited success and business failure in the long-run. Small business leaders should develop a system of high-performance work practice (HPWP) to

encourage innovative behavior and enhance efficiency without compromising creativity and entrepreneurial actions (Flynn et al., 2016). Flynn et al. recommended nine HPWP attributes which are fundamental to small business sustainability. The HPWP attributes are (a) selective hiring, (b) commitment, (c) onboarding, (d) greater autonomy, (e) financial incentives, (f) low status differentials, (g) feedback, (h) personal development plans, and (i) public recognition. In addition, Buganza, Colombo, and Landoni (2014) identified that collaboration, technology management capability, and project management capability could increase small businesses sustainability outcomes. Small business leaders should develop specific approaches for collaborating with host communities, develop the capability to identify and integrate relevant technologies within their process, and be proficient in managing innovation projects regarding quality, cost, and time to enhance sustainability outcomes.

Small business leaders should implement strategies to develop employees' potentials for innovation, improve performance, and develop sustainability initiatives (Bacon, Hoque, & Wu, 2014). Bacon et al. advised small business leaders to ensure that HPWP strategy conforms to their nature of the business, market, characteristics, and human resource expertise. Banon (2014) opined that small business leaders should collaborate more with business advisory networks to increase the adoption of HPWPs, which could be beneficial in improving business performance.

Small business owners and managers coordinate human resource practices such as employee commitment and engagement to enhance revenue growth and perceptions of performance (M. R. Allen, Collins, & Erickson, 2013). M. R. Allen et al. advised small



business leaders to develop their human resources skills and strategy to improve employee performance, which may lead to growth and sustainability. Dajani (2015) confirmed that employee commitment has a positive influence on business performance indicators including employee satisfaction, productivity, employee turnover, organizational commitment, and safety.

Business leaders use different engagement building tools containing leadership, organizational justice, compensation and benefits, and work policies and procedures to stay competitive and improve performance (Brinckmann, Dew, Grichnik, Mayer-Haug, & Read, 2013). Higher performance indexes evoke positive attitudes among workers (Dajani, 2015). Business leaders should fulfill employees' expectations to generate positive impact on the workers' performance and improvement on business performance (Chi-hsiang, 2015). Leadership commitment makes employees feel obligated to care about their workplace welfare and to help their organization reach its objectives, leading to employee-employer pay back for improved performance (Dajani, 2015). Small business owners and managers should engage employees to improve performance.

By adopting business-planning strategy, business leaders could improve business performance. Basri, Rashid, Abashah, & Samah (2017) demonstrated that environmental scanning, business mission and vision, formality of strategy plans, evaluation and control, information sourcing, strategy implementation incentives, employee participation, and time horizon improved business performance. Dhurup, Pooe, and Sandada (2014) posited that strategy planning could boost SMEs performances and encouraged small business leaders to use strategy-planning practices to enhance their business performance. Friis,

Holmgren, and Eskildsen (2016) urged small business owners and managers to use business planning as an effective strategy to improve performance.

Business model innovation is important for improving small business performance. Brannon and Wiklund (2016) showed that business model innovation is important for improving small business performance. Bouraoui, Frikha, & Omri, (2015) analyzed the relationship between resources and small businesses performance capacity and success. Human capital, financial capital, and social factors have direct impact on performance and indirect effect on success and sustainability of small businesses (Bouraoui et al., 2015). Snider (2015) opined that capital resources may generate competitive advantage while human capital could improve profitability. Coasta, Cool, and Dierickx (2013) advised business leaders to use innovation activities to mediate the effect of resources factors on firms' performances.

Innovation is the fundamental instrument of growth strategy to enter new markets, increase existing market share, and provide competitive edge for small businesses (Lofsten, 2014). Innovation reinforces small business performance. Faherty & Stephens (2016) confirmed that a significant positive relationship exists between innovation and small business performance. Boachie-Mensah and Acquah (2015) posited that innovation has a significant and positive influence on organizational performance. The four types of innovations that positively influence small businesses performance are product, process, marketing, and organizational (Boachie-Mensah & Acquah, 2015). Product innovation and process innovation improved performance among SMEs (Rosli & Sidek, 2015). Small business leaders should coordinate innovation and business sophistication to

achieve scientific, technological, organizational, financial, and commercial knowledge to improve performance, enhance economic growth, and support their sustainability objectives.

A firm's financial leverage enhances performance (Tsuruta, 2015). Small business leaders who achieve higher financial leverage could enhance their business performance while highly leveraged small businesses may not obtain enough credit because of debt overhead problems (Tsuruta, 2015). The quantity of internal finance could limit small business performance. Dobbins and Martins (2016) demonstrated that insufficient internal finance constrained the growth of most small business firms. For small business startups, Coleman, Cotei, & Farhat (2013) confirmed that possession of financial capital enhanced performance and increased survival rate.

Arroyo-Lopez et al. (2017) identified types of capital that could enhance small business performance to include economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. The economic capital comprises of material wealth in the form of money, stocks and shares, and property. Cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions such as educational or technical qualifications derived from one's own origins. Social capital are actual or potential resources from social networks while symbolic capital is accumulated prestige or honor (Chikweche & Fletcher, 2014). Possession of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals enhance small businesses growth and sustainability. Bernard, Berrone, Gertel, Giuliadori, and Meiners (2014) confirmed that human capital including education level attained and degree of dedication, innovation, and intensity of use of own capital were significant determinants of small

business performance and success. Rosli and Sidek (2015) advised small business owners to invest in machinery, technology, product development, and innovation to improve their economic capital. To strengthen their firm sustainability, small business leaders should use innovation as a tool for achieving competitive advantage, superior performance, and increase in profit (Dobin, Klassen, & Nelson, 2015).

Information and communication technologies (ICT) enhance the productivity, business expansion, efficiency, effectiveness, organizational competitiveness, and growth. Business leaders use ICT to support organizational performance and strengthen business sustainability (Gatautis & Tarute, 2014). Small business owners should adopt ICT to improve performance.

The influence of knowledge, innovation, and consumer perceptions of products and services has positive impact on firm performance (Hill & Lee, 2015). Small business leaders should invest on new customers' acquisition, customer satisfaction, marketing and communication, and supply chain management to improve performance (Arroyo-Lopez et al. 2017). Koyagiolo (2016) encouraged small business owners and managers to use their human capital to invest in employee training, customer services, and TQM to improve performance. Small business leaders should employ relationship marketing (RM) technique to gain competitiveness, create added values to stakeholders through increase in market share, profit, and long-term success (Echchakoui, 2014). The coordination of marketing, innovation, and learning capabilities would produce synergetic effects that might strengthen the marketing activities to enhance outcomes and improve performance (El-Awad, Gabrielsson, & Politis, 2017). Small business owners

and managers should invest in their human resources to improve employee and business performance.

Business leaders could use entrepreneurial orientation strategy to improve firm's performance (Arshad, A., A. Arshad, Rasli, & Zain, 2013). Arshad et al. opined that small businesses leaders could improve business performance by adopting innovativeness, proactiveness, risk taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy. According to Ashill, Lindsay, and Victorio (2014), institutional environment affects entrepreneurial orientation and performance of microenterprises. Buganza et al. (2014) and Dickson, Weaver, and Vozikis (2013) demonstrated that formal and informal institutions have positive effect on entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. The action of a firm's leader is in congruent with country-specific institutional arrangements, environment, government policies including regulatory, shared social knowledge, and value systems (Novikov, 2014). Novikov expressed that the institutional environments directly influence firms' behavior and capacity to create competitive advantage, which affects performance. Small business owners and managers should understand the institutional environments to improve their firm performance.

Effective training technique enhances small businesses performance (Beynon, Jones, Packham, & Pickernell, 2013). Exposing employees to different training techniques advances their knowledge, skills, and capabilities necessary to raise performance. To improve performance, Beynon et al. advised SMEs owners to adopt different training methods to improve the skills and competence levels of their employees. Cognitive skills could be insufficient to induce business success but expertise

and technical knowledge in marketing and financial planning positively affects small businesses performance, growth, and success (Bryant, May, Perry, & Solomon, 2013). Small business leaders should invest on knowledge capital and shared vision to improve performance (Snider, 2015).

According to Chi-hsiang (2016), entrepreneurial vision connects positively with shared vision which coordinates positively with both internal and external integration to boost entrepreneurial performance. Entrepreneurial resourcefulness is a vital component of a firm's performance improvement (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). Application of business capabilities improves small businesses performance. Bartl et al. (2015) postulated that good leadership with an innovative vision, good staff selection and retention, and staff skills development and capabilities were the distinct strategic tools that improve firms' performance. Snider (2015) opined that small business leaders should design employees' jobs satisfaction needs above competitors offer to increase motivation, encourage retention, and mitigate competitor attractiveness to improve performance.

Strategy management improves the overall business performance (Adam, Karel, & Radomir, 2013). Strategy management tools include strategy analyses, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and feedback including ex-post evaluation and correction. Proper implementation of the management strategies supports firms' performance. Dhurup, Pooe, and Sandada (2014) confirmed that strategy planning has a positive association and predictive relationship with the performance of small businesses. Jayaram, Laosirihongthong, and Tan (2014) opined that TQM, lean manufacturing, and supply chain management enhance business performance. Jayaram et al. advised small

business owners and managers to incorporate strategy management techniques into their operations to improve business performance which may increase their business survivability and sustainability.

Small firms perform better and achieve relative growth advantage in both stable and crisis times than large firms (Bartz & Winkler, 2016). Bartz and Winkler showed that small firms exhibit a relative growth advantage over large firms in both stable and crisis times because of their flexibility of operation. Halabi and Lussier (2014) developed an eight-variable model to determine small business performance. The model consists of (a) adequate working capital, (b) managing good financial and accounting records, (c) owner professional advice, (d) having partners, (e) parents owning a business, (f) marketing efforts, (g) planning, and (h) formal education. Halabi and Lussier demonstrated that adequate working capital, managing good financial and accounting records, owner professional advice, having partners, parents owning a business, and marketing efforts were significant while planning and formal education were nonsignificant to small business performance improvement.

Small business performance is a very complex theme in business management studies. Managing performance is a complex and time-consuming activity with indirect relationship to value creation. Small business owners and managers should view performance as part of their investment of resources intended to produce positive outcomes that would affect the functioning of their firms and support sustainability agenda. Good performance leads to business survival, growth, and sustainability. Small businesses performance improvement requires both individual and relational factors from

owners and managers for success. de Sa and Pinho (2014) argued that improving small business performance requires owners and managers resilience, cognitive skills, prior business experience, knowledge about potential customers, personality characteristics, work experience, family support, and innovation to succeed. Some prerequisites that might improve small business performance include innovation, adoption of technologies, customer satisfaction, aggressive marketing, and employer-employee relationship. Achieving improvement in performance could lead to small businesses' survival and the attainment of sustainability objectives. Small business leaders should develop leadership skills and attributes to sustain their business.

### **Small Business Sustainability**

Creating a new business or developing an existing one poses sustainability challenges (Leavy, 2016). Sustaining a business enhances the motivation for excellence (Ipiranga & Aguiar, 2014). Small business leaders striving to sustain their firms through developing products and services face daunting challenges in remodeling their process of operations. The sustainability process requires the formulation of new business ideas, innovating new ways of organizing the business, and developing new systems to support the new process. Philipson (2016) opined that small business owners and managers should educate their employees on how to implement the new processes to achieve objectives.

The application of sustainability transforms the competitive business landscape by enabling firms to change the ways they think about products, technologies, processes, and business models (Trkman, Budler, & Groznik, 2015). Small business leaders use



sustainability model to define methods for delivering value to customers, entice customers to pay for the values, and convert the values into profit (Beckon, Short, Rana, & Evans, 2013). Ray and Mondal's (2017) study finding showed that sustainability model enhanced organizational and technological innovations that produce both bottom-line and top-line returns. The adoption of sustainability model would lower operational costs, generate additional revenue from better products or services and enable firms to adopt new business approaches that could improve their competitive advantage.

Technology transfer agents play vital role in the transformation of scientific knowledge into marketable innovative products and contribute positively to business development and sustainability (Carayannis, Sindakis, & Walter, 2015). Firms that combine and adopt business model innovations as technology transfer agents were more likely to succeed and sustain their businesses than firms that did not adopt.

Small business owners who sustain their businesses understand that creating a successful business requires a set of motivating attitudes and behaviors from the founders (J. Allen & Zook, 2016). The three main traits of the founder's mentality are an insurgent's mission, a front-line obsession, and an owner's mindset (Leavy, 2016). Having a founder's mentality motivates the owners and managers to achieve sustainable growth, enhance the ability to survive the initial start-up phase and starts to grow rapidly, and to manage and preserve the net benefits. The advantages come through reaping the benefits of size and market power, gaining momentum and entrepreneurial energy, and flexibility to manage the business. Most small business owners and managers use motivational attitudes and behaviors to purposely preserve and diligently enrich every

step of their development through the adoption of the founder's mentality and implementing the *three-box* solution. Govindarajan (2016) outlined the three-box contents including forgetting the past by disregarding the values and practices that fail the new business, managing the present by optimizing the current business, and creating the future by investing in new business models.

Business succession is an essential and integral process for every small business. Establishing and managing succession planning, timing, selecting a successor, and social issues are important factors that influence small business sustainability (Sharma & Dave, 2013). As business sustainability involves managing a firm to ensure continuity in operation for the benefits of current and future generations, firms' leaders should develop strategies to make profit, survive, and improve the economic system at local, national, and international scales. Gauthier (2017) posited that small business leaders should achieve business sustainability through the application of the sustainability principles and use of resources to continue to function over a long term while returning profits.

By adopting sustainability as a business strategy, firm leaders develop competencies that competitors would find difficult to match. Achieving competitive advantage puts a firm in better position than its rivals. Business sustainability does not pose a burden on firms' bottom-line because it enhances the leaders' ability to lower costs and increase revenue. Sustainability is the only small businesses success strategy of the future as they traditionally focus on providing goods and services that meet customers' needs at competitive prices (Gauthier, 2017). In the future, sustainability would become the touchstone for all innovations because only businesses with

sustainability strategies would be most likely to achieve competitive advantage. Only small businesses that satisfy their customers' needs could enhance the sustainability of their businesses (Gauthier, 2017; Trkman et al., 2015). Small business leaders should restructure their business models including their products, technologies, and processes to develop long-term strategies that would enhance their firms' performance by understanding customers' needs better. Offering quality products and services would improve financial performance and enhance their businesses sustainability.

### **The Product-Service System (PSS)**

The development of any effective business model should focus on sustaining the business (Ceschin, 2014). Small business owners and managers should apply the PSS model to fulfil specific customer needs through integration of products and services that lead to the achievement of sustainability objectives (Zancul et al., 2016). PSS comprises of tangible products and intangible services designed and combined to jointly satisfy the needs of the customers. Firm leaders use PSS to radically innovate their business models to enhance products and services integration to satisfy specific customer needs, create utility to consumers, and generate value focused on sell functionality instead of ownership (Barquet et al., 2016). The use of PSS translates into increase in market position, improvement in customers' satisfaction, and enhancement in the competitiveness of the firm involved in producing and delivering the offer (Ceschin, 2014). Ceschin opined that shifting towards a PSS-oriented business strategy could improve a firm's strategic positioning and create more opportunities.

Wallin, Parida, and Isaksson, (2015) stated that using PSS could enhance innovative capabilities and improve business diversification by offering systems of products and services to satisfy the user needs in innovative ways. Small business leaders could use PSS to develop: (a) customer interaction and innovative organizational climate, (b) cross-functionality, (c) network partnering for capabilities development, (d) increase in profitability through innovation, (e) growth of new market opportunities, (f) more efficient use of resources, and (g) cost savings. The PSS structuring processes enhance business sustainability.

Small business leaders' inclusion of PSS sustainability facets when determining and creating strategies, ideas, opportunities, and concepts will be more beneficial to the firm (Barquet et al., 2016). Firms owners and managers should maintain ownership of products or services and have intrinsic motivation to design goods for longer lifecycles. Small business leaders should apply the PSS techniques to enhance the products lifetime extension for items that satisfy additional profitability thresholds (Guidat, Barquet, Widera, Rozenfeld, & Selinger, 2014). Small business owners and managers should adopt PSS to sustain their firm.

Small business leaders derive several benefits through the adoption PSS. The benefits of PSS include motivation to extend the lifetime of the products or services, cost reduction throughout the value chain, and increased acceptance by the customers of the products or service (Guidat et al., 2014). Other advantages of PSS include better products and or services monitoring and competitive advantages. By orienting their business models towards building a PSS for business sustainability, firm leaders could

develop smart products, improve stakeholders' communication, and consumer empowerment. The application of PSS reinforces the understanding that a firm uses new selling approach that combines both physical products and immaterial services to not only predict the market but also satisfy their customers' needs.

Small business owners and managers use PSS as a technique to enhance their firms' competitiveness and sustainability. The PSS features comprise of product-oriented system, user-oriented system, and result-oriented system (Costa et al., 2015). In product-oriented system, the consumer assumes ownership of the product while in user-oriented system, the ownership of the product remains with the service provider and the consumer purchases the product function. In result-oriented system, sale-of-service replaces the product sale and the consumer may not encounter the tangible product.

Ceschin (2014) posited that adoption of PSS would enhance a firm's ability to create new sources of added value and competitiveness through fulfilling consumer needs in an integrated and customized way. By adopting PSS, business leaders could focus on core activities that build unique relationships with consumers, boost consumer loyalty, quicken innovation, and leverage the firm to follow consumers' needs better. The PSS features have the potential to encourage prudent use of resources and serves as a technique to steer production and consumption systems toward sustainability.

Achieving sustainable business requires changes in both production and consumption. Small business leaders should regard the PSS as a process that focuses on developing new and more sustainable ways of meeting *existing* customer needs rather than strategies to increase user acceptance. Small business owners and managers should

incorporate PSS design onto consumer needs (Costa et al., 2015). According to Mylan (2014), small business leaders should integrate PSS as a transformational alignment process in which practices and needs coevolve with business models, new infrastructures, and new product to achieve sustainability.

### **Strategies for Sustaining Small Businesses**

Strategy is the pursuit of a clearly defined path systematically identified in advance through a carefully chosen set of activities (Collins, 2016). Kachouie et al. (2018) posited that strategies are coordinated activities and ploys for outperforming competitors. The main objective of using business strategy is to gain competitive advantage and increase performance. Intense competition motivates firms' owners and managers to seek competitive advantage through consciously identifying and proactively formulating objectives before making decisions and implementing any action (Yuliansyah, Gurd, & Mohamed, 2017). The need to develop strategies to achieve set objectives is crucial and requires small business owners and managers to employ business strategies as instrument of competition to outwit competitors in a competitive market to improve performance and enhance sustainability (Gomez-Bezares et al., 2017).

The three types of competitive strategies that small business owners and managers use to sustain their business are leadership, differential, and focus (Singh, 2014). Business leaders use leadership strategy to explain the impact of low costs relative to the costs of competitors, taking into consideration the service and product quality. The leadership strategy involves setting out to become the lowest cost producer relative to rivals in the same market. The goal of firm leaders who use leadership strategy is to

outwit competitors in the market by producing goods and services at a lower cost that appeals to price-sensitive customers (Singh, 2014). Differential strategy involves a narrow buyer segment with a product or service offering that meets the specific tastes and requirements of niche members better than the product offerings of rivals (Alstete, 2014). Small business owners and managers use differential strategy to charge higher than average price because of the peculiarity and uniqueness of the products and services. Focus strategy refers to special group of customers that need peculiarity and uniqueness of service. Business leaders should implement focus business strategies to sustain their organizations (Alstete, 2014). Small business owners and leaders should use focus strategy to reach a niche market segment based on geographical region, income level, or production specialization.

Business leaders should implement strategies that support the accomplishment of their firm objectives (Yuliansyah, Gurd, & Mohamed, 2017). The relationship between business strategies and business sustainability depends on the nature of the business and the competition structure. By combining strategy and sustainability objectives, small business owners and managers could pursue both objectives to the firm's benefits.

Li and Hunter (2015) opined that small business owners should integrate the surrounding communities in their sustainability strategy to achieve long-term competitive advantage and success. Small business owners should develop strategies to assist the underserved communities because the predominant growth in the workforce comes from the less privileged communities and the trend will continue over the next several decades. By creating strategies to cover segments of the population, small business leaders will

enhance the growth and sustainability of their firms (Akaeze, 2016). Singh (2014) suggested business leaders to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the three competitive strategies before selecting the most appropriate approach for their businesses.

Battisti, Deakins, and Perry (2013) demonstrated that SMEs in rural and urban areas have unique characteristics, performances, and strategic behaviors that may enhance the adoption of different strategic responses to peculiar settlement patterns to achieve business goals. The geographical locations are relevant to a firm's strategic responses and behaviors, and the impact of changing economic conditions are not homogenous across economies (Battisti et al., 2013). SME leaders across different settlement patterns should adopt different strategic responses and behaviors that meet their business needs. Small business owners and managers should select and implement the overall business strategy that will enhance the achievement of the firms' objectives.

Akaeze (2016) identified six strategies that small business leaders could use to sustain their firms. The strategies are (a) consumer satisfaction, (b) aggressive marketing, (c) commitment to the business, (d) human capital, (e) possession of business knowledge, and (f) effective supervision. To strengthen small business sustainability, firm leaders should develop a functional growth strategy that aligns with the firm's business plan, motivate employees, and interact with the customers. Biederman (2015) opined that a business strategy that helps small business owners and managers to articulate the firm's overall direction is crucial to improving business performance, enhance growth, and sustain the business.



### **Transition**

Section 1 started with an introduction of the study on the strategies that small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses. Section 1 included the background of the problem, problem and purpose statements, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitation, significance of the study, and review of the professional and academic literature.

In Section 2, I restated the purpose statement and discussed my role as the researcher, the participants, research method and designs, population and sampling techniques, ethical research, data collection techniques, data organization and analysis, and reliability and validity. Section 3 included the presentation of the study findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further research, reflections, and conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I discuss the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, research participants, research methods and designs, population and sampling, ethical research issues, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, and data analysis procedures. Other topics discussed in Section 2 include the reliability involving the dependability of the instruments and the internal and external validity regarding credibility, transferability, confirmability, and how I ensured data saturation.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that healthcare small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The population of this study comprised of 6 health care small business owners and managers located in New York State who had owned and managed health care small businesses for more than 3 years and used sustainable business strategies to achieve business goals. A potential contribution to positive social change of the study findings includes area small business owners gaining knowledge on effective strategies that might lead to improvement in products and services delivery. The findings of the study could help area small business owners and managers minimize costs to consumers and create employment opportunities for the local citizens. Positive social change may arise through the generation of income to employees, and their families, and revenues to governments in the form of taxes, which may enhance societal economic growth and development.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher in a qualitative study executes the data collection, data organization, and data analysis to establish results. Researchers should explain their roles in the research process (Bahramnezhad, Cherachi, Fomani, Sanjari, & Shoghi, 2014). Bourke (2014) suggested that researchers identify whether their involvement will be emic (an insider who is a full participant in the activity, phenomenon, or program) or etic (an outsider with more of an objective viewer) in the research process. In a qualitative study, the researcher plays vital role in data collection, organization, and analysis. As the researcher, I was the data collection instrument, and my role enhanced the integrity of the study. The four stages in the research process are problem statement formulation, research design, data collection, and data analysis (Brysiewics & Erlingsson, 2013). I was responsible for all the stages of the study from establishing the problem statement, formulating the research design, and conducting and transcribing interviews to analyzing and verifying data findings and identifying concepts and themes.

Qualitative researchers use interview questions, interview notes, and official firm documents among other data to collect reliable and valid data from participants. The interview questions are the foundation of the data gathering process (Yin, 2014). Researchers use an interview protocol as a guideline and standard to follow during the interview process (Cooper, 2016; Prutton, 2015) and to align the interview questions with the research question, construct inquiry-based conversations, receive feedback, and pilot the interview (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I used an interview protocol form (see Appendix

A) to record interview information including data, observation, and notes to strengthen the order, quality, clarity, and reliability of the data from the research interviews.

The three categories of individual interviews in qualitative research are unstructured, semistructured, and structured interviews. The unstructured interview technique involves the interviewer posing a single question to participants (Chawla & Pandey, 2016). Chawla and Pandey stated that unstructured interview can be time consuming to conduct and analyze using thematic analysis. This made unstructured interview technique inappropriate to use for this multiple question case study research. Researchers use the semistructured interview technique to broaden the set of questions to ask during the interview (Chawla & Pandey, 2016). Semistructured interview technique is more expensive, and time consuming because it involves the use of open-ended questions and may not encompass all aspects of data (Yin, 2014). Some advantages of using semistructured interview technique include easier control of proceedings, less difficulty in analyzing data, participants answering questions in own terms, and the researcher asking probing questions to gain insights into the participants' worldview (Chawla & Pandey, 2016). I conducted a semistructured interview with the participants.

Each participant decided on a convenient date, time, and venue for the interview. Participants signed the informed consent form to express their acceptance to participate in the study and have their interviews tapes. I used a semistructured, face-to-face, and open-ended interview technique to administer the interview questions. I audio recorded and transcribed the interviews before analysis. For each interview, I (a) asked probing questions to build trust, (b) listened to participants responses to gain a deeper

understanding of the conversations and obtained a complete picture of the ideas from a wide variety of sources. Researchers report their study findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I collected and analyzed data, which helped to answer the research question.

Researchers should be sensitive regarding their influence of biases on research findings. A researcher's experience, value judgements, and perspectives may create bias in the analysis of the research data (Bernard, 2013). I did not own a small business nor did I have any relationship with the participants prior to starting my research. The high rate of small business failures in my neighborhood due to firm leaders' lack of sustainable strategies motivated me to explore strategies for sustaining small businesses. Thus, I do not believe that my experience was not a source of bias in analyzing the result of the study.

### **Participants**

Participants in this multiple case study consisted of small business owners and managers who used strategies to sustain their businesses. Qualitative case studies require recruiting participants with experience on the phenomenon of study (Yin, 2014). I used the following criteria to select participants: (a) be a healthcare small business owner or manager in New York State, (b) be in operation for a minimum of 5 years, (c) be profitable for at least 3 consecutive years, (d) have professional experience on small business operations, and (e) have strategies to sustain the business. In a case study research, a sample size of three participants is sufficient (Yin, 2014). I selected six participants to broaden the scope and ensure adequate representation of the phenomenon of study. I sent a letter of invitation to participate in research study (see Appendix B) to

potential participants and selected participants who responded to the invitation. The participants chose the suitable date, time, and venue for interviews.

Researchers use purposeful sampling technique to collect data rich information from their phenomenon of study. A qualitative case study requires recruiting participants with experiences on the phenomenon of study (Yin, 2014). Most qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling in their studies (Chawla & Pandey 2016; Clement, Roth, Theriault, & Worthington, 2016). I used the purposeful sampling approach to select six healthcare small business owners or managers in New York State who met the set eligibility criteria for participation to participate in this study. I checked for names, addresses, and phone numbers of potential participants through local business directory. I contacted qualified potential participants through their telephone numbers obtained from the local business directory, introduced myself and explained the reason for the telephone call, the purpose of the study, and the criteria for participation.

Qualified small business owners and managers who agreed to participate in the study received the informed consent form. The potential participants who complete and return the informed consent form participated in the study.

Informed consent is the guiding principle in research ethics. The researcher and the participants should discuss the confidentiality and informed consent processes and their significance to the study (Philips & Jiao, 2016; Pouchly, Corbett, & Edwards, 2013). I provided participants with an informed consent form for their acceptance to participate in the study. Participants agreed to audiotaping of the interviews, and sign and return the informed consent form. Upon receipt of the signed consent forms, I established

relationship and trust with the participants. I exchanged e-mails and phone numbers with the participants as means of communication. Every participant chose the most convenience date, time, and venue for administering the interview. I followed the Walden University and IRB specifications for conducting research interviews with human subjects.

The research guidelines contain narration on the purpose, rationale, design features, and anticipated outcomes from the phenomenon of inquiry. Research guidelines specify when and how to compensate research participants (Coulehan & Morse, 2014). Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants did not receive compensation except the contributions of this study to knowledge, academics, and business practice which the respondents are beneficiaries. Prior to the start of any interview, I reiterated to the participants the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, and the participant's right to withdraw at any time during the interview proceedings. Protection of the interviewee's anonymity, confidentiality, identity, and data resulting from the interview is paramount in research studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Nicolaides, 2016; Pouchly et al, 2013). I obtained permission from the participants to record the interview for accuracy, understanding, clarifications, translation, and documentation purposes. The interview process was person-to-person and recorded to preserve the information for analysis. The participants had the opportunity to ask questions prior and post interview process to strengthen the quality of the report. During the interview, I took notes to capture details relevant to the study.

Validity in qualitative research signifies the appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data used to conduct the study while reliability demonstrates the exact replicability of the research processes and the results. Achieving validity and reliability is crucial to research quality (Arminio, Jones, & Torres, 2014). Researchers use member checking to strengthen the accuracy and trustworthiness of data transcriptions (Birt, Campbell, Cavers, Scott, & Walter, 2016). I contacted every participant for member checking to ensure the transcriptions of the data from the interviews were accurate and in congruence with participants' intents and meanings to achieve validity and reliability.

A realistic approach to evaluate the generalizability for qualitative studies involve adopting the same criteria for validity using systematic sampling, triangulation, and constant comparison, including proper auditing and documentation. Researchers use methodological triangulation to establish the accuracy of information by comparing various sources of data (Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2013; Baskarada, 2014). I used the methodological triangulation to organize and analyze data sources by comparing interviews, documentations, and interview notes collected from participants for the study to establish the accuracy of information. Researchers use the feedback-driven exploration (FDE) technique to strengthen the quality of the transcription and analysis of research data (Boesch, Scholz, Schwaniger, & Weber, 2013; Patton, 2015; Thomas, 2016). Most qualitative researchers use member checking techniques to enhance the clarity of the transcription of participants' responses to the interview questions. I used the FDE and member checking techniques to evaluate how the participants understood the interview questions, verify the interview transcripts, and to ensure congruency and clarity among



participants' responses, audio recording, and transcriptions of the study data. Data saturation occurs when new information does not yield any new relevant data (Morse, 2015). During each participant's interview, I exhausted all the interview questions. To achieve data saturation, I continued to interview respondents until no new information or themes became apparent and further information prove redundancy.

### **Research Method and Design**

Researchers follow appropriate approach to ensure the research method and design align with the purpose of the study and with the problem statement to answer the research question (Cooper, 2016; Guercinie, 2014). The three research methods include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Maxwell, 2016). The research methods comprise of various designs. A qualitative method is a systematic collection of diverse, objective, and nonnumerical data from a randomly selected population of interest (Chandra & Shang, 2017; Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers employ quantitative methods to investigate the relationship between variables, collect and analyze numerical data, test hypotheses, and provide statistical analyses using experimental or nonexperimental designs to numerically reflect the relationship between variables of interest (Cooper, 2016; Hunt, 2014). Using quantitative method would not involve an in-depth understanding of the participants lived experiences. Researchers use mixed-methods to explore problems and solutions instead of understanding the cause of the problem (Warren, 2016). Researchers apply mixed methods by using both narrative and numerical data to investigate the phenomenon of study (Brown, Sullivan, & Venkatesh, 2016). The qualitative case study design was the most appropriate research design to explore and

construct an in-depth understanding of the strategies small business owners use to sustain their businesses.

### **Research Method**

The qualitative research method focuses on applied and theoretical findings or discoveries that align the research questions to the field of study in a natural setting (Park & Park, 2016). Researchers use qualitative research method to

- develop a heuristic knowledge and understanding of the processes, problems, and events surrounding the subject of study;
- gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of participants regarding the phenomenon of study;
- explore, explain, and interpret the lived experiences of participants; and
- provide a complete interpretation of the data in relation to the subject of the study (Cooper, 2016; Francois, d' Astous & Di Gaspero, 2015; Frederic, & Guy, 2017; Luu, Hau, Ngo, Bacic, & Cuong, 2016).

The qualitative research method is the most appropriate for asking probing questions, seeking explanations for circumstances, and exploring lived experiences. Researchers use the qualitative method to interpret the data from participants' own words to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of study and provide accuracy and reliability through verification (Baskarada, 2014; Park & Park, 2016). A qualitative research method is appropriate for data collection using open-ended questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, observations, and interview notes (Yilmaz, 2013).

Qualitative data possess the richness and potential for revealing complexity through thick descriptions (Guercinie, 2014). I used the qualitative method for the study.

The quantitative research method involves numerical data collection and hypotheses testing with measurable and verifiable data (Heggen, Lunde, & Strand, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). The objectives of quantitative methods in the social sciences are to predict and measure social phenomena (Zhu, Sari, & Lee, 2018). Researchers use quantitative method to

- measure, evaluate, and generalize findings to a population and to encourage replication of findings;
- test the hypothesis to achieve the research goals in controlled and contrived studies; and
- achieve precise results using standardized data collection instruments and statistical methods (Demishkevich, 2015).

In a quantitative study, the researcher is contextually separate from the research, which may restrict the researcher's ability to engage in probing questions toward a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of the study (Park & Park, 2016). Researchers select quantitative method to test hypotheses and provide statistical analyses using experimental or nonexperimental designs (Merkisz-Guranowska, Bienczak, Kicinski, & Zmuda-trzebiatowski, 2016). The numerical data from quantitative research enhances the validation of existing theories and generalizing outcomes across a spectrum of subjects which may not provide detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of study ((Demishkevich, 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies small

business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses. Using a quantitative method would not provide readers with the understanding of the lived experiences of the participants on the phenomenon of study. The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study.

The mixed methods approach requires both qualitative and quantitative data (Bazeley, 2015; Brown et al., 2016). Kaczynak, Salmona, and Smith (2014) explained that mixed methods provide the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in one design. In this study, I did not collect quantitative data to analyze. Due to limited resources and time constraints, mixed methods approach would be costly and time consuming. The mixed methods approach was not appropriate for this study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research designs include: (a) case study, (b) ethnographic, (c) narrative, and (d) phenomenological (Demishkevich, 2015). A case study design is an empirical inquiry method for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. The case study design is appropriate when the subjects and circumstances of inquiry are difficult to separate (Dasgupta, 2015; Yin, 2014). A qualitative case study researcher can use a case study design to

- probe through open-ended questions on the real-life events of the participants;
- gain a holistic understanding of the issues from varied data sources; and
- use any number of participants necessary to explore in detail the phenomenon of study (Boddy, 2016; Emrich, 2015; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

Researchers use a case study design to understand the participants' lived experience in a specific circumstance. My intention in this study was to understand the strategies small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses over the long-term. Case studies focus on confined phenomenon embedded in their contexts. The case study design was the appropriate research design for the study to explore how small business owners and managers develop and implement strategies to sustain their businesses.

Ethnographic design involves an in-depth understanding of the meaning and experience from a social context by considering the effects of the social context in the conception of meanings, attitudes, interactions, and behaviors of the participants on the phenomenon of study. Ethnographic researchers seek to study, understand, and explain a cultural group's beliefs, feelings, meanings, associations, and cultural interactions (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Cibangu, 2013; Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Simpson et al. 2014). The purpose of this study was not to establish a cultural underpinning for sustaining small businesses. My intent was to explore the strategies small business owners and managers use to sustain their business. The ethnographic design was not an appropriate design to achieve the research objective.

Narrative research design involves the use of stories as the meaning-making strategies for establishing knowledge. The narrative research design is appropriate when the researcher intends to reproduce the detailed stories or life experiences of a single phenomenon or small number of phenomena (Green, 2013). Researchers using narrative design focus on the philosophical paradigm or social process that reflects on the meaning

participants attach to their experiences. The narrative construct focuses on whom, why, and the cultural discourses that it draws upon. A narrative researcher may not aim primarily at producing the facts or truth of the accounts but the meaning portrayed in story form (Green, 2013). The objective of this study was to explore the facts or truth on the strategies small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses and not to portray superficial meaning or cultural underpins of small business owners and managers. The narrative design was not appropriate for realizing the purpose of the study.

Phenomenological design is a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, which emphasizes on the personal perspective and interpretation. A researcher may use phenomenological design to explain what an experience means for the participant who has acquired the experience and to provide a comprehensive description as perceived by the possessor (VanSoy & Evenstad, 2015). A phenomenological researcher uses the interviews method with larger sample sizes to gain in-depth perspective about the subjective meaning of the phenomenon (Tomkins & Eatough, 2013). Because I used multiple data sources to collect information, the phenomenological design was not appropriate for the study.

The appropriate research design for this study was the case study. The purpose of a case study is to understand a complex issue or subject of discourse. The case study design is a useful tool that researchers use to explore experiences or add strength to what they know through previous research studies (Gibbons, 2015). Researchers use the case study design to provide detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Soy, 2016). Most researchers use case study design to

examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Researchers from many disciplines use the case study design to build upon theory, formulate new theory, dispute or challenge theory, explain a situation, provide a basis to apply solutions to a situation or describe an object or phenomenon (Soy, 2016). Some advantages of the case study design include easy application to real life, understanding complex real-life situation, adaptability to contemporary human situations, enhancing readers' experience, and public accessibility through written reports (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Luu et al., 2016). I used the case study design to explore strategies small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses by collecting and analyzing data and information from many sources including participants interviews, field notes, and official company documents.

Using a single case study may generate great insight but could create biases that may affect the results in terms of reliability, validity, generalizability, and replicability (Leoni, 2015). Two or more cases are more representative than a single case (Yin, 2014). Scholars use a multiple-informant approach to provide a complete picture of the phenomenon of study (Amade-Escot & Bennour, 2016; Kaufmann & Saw, 2014; Ortactepe, 2016).

Data saturation or information redundancy indicates the existence of no new evidence of new themes emerging from the interviews. Failure to achieve data saturation hampers research validity which impacts the quality of the research findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation occurs when new information produces similar outcomes or a lack of new themes (Kalla, 2016). Data analysis concludes when no new themes or

relationships emerge during the analysis or at the point when incremental data starts to produce minimal or no new information (Ajjan, Kumar, & Subramaniam, 2016). To reach data saturation, I continued to interview participants until no new themes emerged to enhance reliability and validity of the study.

### **Population and Sampling**

Population in research study represents the aggregate or totality of all subjects or members that conform to the set criteria for inclusion on the phenomenon of the study. The population of this multiple case study comprised of small business owners and managers located in New York. A research sample size is a subset of the population selected to participate in a research study. The sample size for this study consisted of 6 health care small business owners and managers located in New York State who were selected to participate in this research project. Many qualitative researchers opined that sample size is not a critical issue in qualitative research (Cardon, Fontenot, Marshall, & Poddar, 2013). The sample size should enable the researcher to investigate a problem from the lens of different relevant actors involved (Kaufmann & Saw, 2014; Peterson, 2016). The researcher's sample should be a representation of the population to develop the depth rather than the breadth of understanding of the phenomenon of study.

A large sample size of more than 10 may not guarantee richness and depth case-oriented data required of qualitative inquiry (Boddy, 2016; Gibbons, 2015). According to Yin (2014), qualitative researchers use a sample size of 5-50 participants. By interviewing 6 small business owners and managers and analyzing their business data on



strategies for sustaining businesses, I collected rich thick in-depth information that strengthened the reliability, validity, and replicability of this study.

A purposeful sampling enables researchers to choose participants who: (a) meet the criteria, (b) have experience and knowledge on the phenomenon of study, and (c) enrich the findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I selected a sample size of six participants and used the purposeful sampling technique to identify participants who meet the eligibility criteria. Selecting participants using specified criteria will yield complete information, detailed understanding, and participants motivated to participate (Still & Wilkinson, 2014). The eligibility criteria for small businesses in this study include (a) should have fewer than 500 employees, (b) should be operating in New York State, and (c) should have generated profit for at least 3 consecutive years. The participants' eligibility criteria are owners and managers should be over 18 years, have professional experience in health care small business operations, have operated the business for a minimum of 5 consecutive years, and must have developed plans for business sustainability. Due to the heterogeneity of small businesses, I selected different sizes of small businesses in New York to examine the strategies owners and managers use for sustaining their businesses.

Data saturation signifies quality and completeness in data collection and analysis. Researchers should collect sufficient data to provide rich thick description of the phenomenon of study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Factors to determine the amount of data to collect include the number of interviewees and the presence of participants' observations (Cegarra-Navarro & Gamo-Sanchez, 2015). Interviewing 6 small business

executives including field notes and archival records provided enough data to achieve saturation. Researchers achieve data saturation when no new information or themes emerge from further interview, no further coding is feasible, and the study can be replicated (Boddy, 2016; Cardon et al., 2013; Fusch & Ness, 2015). I continued to interview participants until no new information emerged to achieve data saturation.

### **Ethical Research**

Researchers use informed consent to disclose appropriate information to potential study participants to enable the participant to make a voluntary choice to accept or refuse participation in the study. The principle of informed consent requires the researcher to inform participants of all aspects of the research in comprehensive language (Bahramnezhad, Cheraghi, Fomani, Sanjari, & Shoghi, 2014). Researchers use executed informed consent form as an agreement to participate in research study (Aburt, Hagemann, Rose, & Shahnazarian, 2013). I used the informed consent form (see Appendix B) to notify participants of the purpose of the study, follow-up procedures, participants rights, potential risks, and the benefits for participation. I sent the informed consent form through email to the potential participants. Interested participants returned the signed informed consent form through email.

Prior to starting the study, I applied and received approval from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Walden IRB approval number is 10-03-17-0523448. By getting the Walden University IRB approval, I agreed to comply with the research ethics protocol that prohibits the exploitation of the study participants. Participation in this study was voluntary, no coercion, and participants who wish to

discontinue from the study could withdraw at any time without consequences. I explained the purpose and details of the study including my role and responsibility as the researcher, the role of the participants, and how to protect the identity, anonymity, and confidentiality of the participants.

Research guidelines enable researchers to adhere to the principle of ethics and integrity in research. Research guidelines specify when and how to compensate research participants (Aicher, Karadakis, & Eddosary, 2015; Coulehan & Morse, 2014; Tam et al. 2015). Participants in this study were small business owners and managers who will benefit from the study's findings. Participation was voluntary and respondents did not suffer any consequence for refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation. Participants did not receive any monetary compensation but their contributions in this study could improve knowledge, academics, and business practice.

Recruitment of research participants pose ethical challenges (Hind, & White, 2015). The Belmont Report (1979) provides guidelines and summarizes ethical principles for protection of human subjects in research. The Belmont Report stipulates the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice. Autonomy involves respect for participants' rights and decision to participate or not in the research study. Beneficence outlines the measures the researcher should follow to reduce potential risks to participants while justice elaborates on potential benefits accruing to participants in research studies. I completed the National Institute of Health web-based training to uphold ethical standards and protection of human research participants (see Appendix C). I followed the Belmont Report guidelines in conducting this study.

The interview and data collection procedures in research process are vital to achieving research integrity (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). To uphold the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, I used alphanumeric coding system to mask their identities. The signed consent forms, recorded interviews, transcripts information, field notes, and other vital documents and information emanating from the study were password protected and locked in a file cabinet. After 5 years, I will shred all paper documents and delete electronic files.

Ethical confidentiality refers to the obligation of the researcher to safeguard the entrusted information of the research participants (Bartlett et al., 2014). The research ethical principle requires researchers to protect participants' privacy and to treat personal information in a confidential manner (Boulos et al., 2016). Participants' confidentiality is paramount to achieving credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015). The researcher should strive to minimize the possibility of intrusion into the autonomy of study participants (Bahramnezhad et al., 2014; Snider, 2015). To achieve confidentiality and credibility, I used pseudonyms to identify participants, pseudo identifiers on instruments containing participants' data, codes on data documents, limited access to identifiable information, and stored data documents within locked locations to prevent unauthorized access.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Qualitative case study researchers use qualitative interviews and observations to collect data (Chong, Kwong, Thadani, Wong, & Wong, 2015; Yin, 2014). Sources of data collection for this study included semistructured interviews, interview notes, and official business documents. Researchers use semistructured interviews to enhance the flexibility

and consistency of open-ended interviews, collect rich thick data, and provide explicit ways of understanding the insights from participants' perspective (Jenkins, 2015). I used interview notes and official documentation to strengthen the information obtained from the interviews.

The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Yin, 2014; Hanson & Moore, 2014). The researcher's skills, knowledge, and sensitivity are instrumental to the quality of the study results (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Ngamvichaikit & Beise-Zee, 2014). As the researcher, I was the data collection instrument. Case study researchers collect direct evidence from participants (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013). The three types of qualitative data collection techniques researchers use include structured interview, direct observations, and official business documents (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Padgett, Gossett, Mayer, Chien, & Turner, 2017). Researchers have the responsibility to decide which data collection method is most suitable to achieve their study objectives (Benneth & McWhorter, 2016; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used the semistructured interview technique, interview notes, and official company documents to collect direct evidence from participants regarding the strategies they use to sustain their businesses.

By using open-ended semistructured questions, the participants answer the interview questions freely and elaborate on the questions, which will enable the researcher to record rich thick descriptions of the phenomenon in the respondents' words (Brozovic, Buytaert, Mijic, O'Keeffe, & Sinha, 2015; Davis, Domino, Lee, Sloan, & Weathers, 2017; Park & Park, 2016). I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and

asked seven semistructured interview questions during the face-to-face interview to maintain the sequence and flexibility to the interview process. I interviewed six health care small business owners and managers (participants) from different small businesses to gather perspectives on small business sustainability. In case study, the researcher will need varied data sources to ensure methodological triangulation (Bennett & McWhorter, 2016; Padgett et al. 2017; Yin, 2014). I used the semistructured interview technique, interview notes, and official business documentations to validate the research findings.

Researchers use member checking and feedback-driven exploration (FDE) techniques to validate research interview output (Birt et al., 2016; Duan, Wang, & Yu, 2016; Patton, 2015; Thomas, 2016). I used member checking to enhance the clarity of the transcription of participants' responses to the interview questions to add accuracy, vigor, and rich thickness to the research findings. I used the member checking and FDE technique to (a) evaluate the participants' understanding and responses to the interview questions, (b) strengthen the transcriptions of interviewees' responses, and (c) ensure congruency and clarity regarding the transcripts of the audio recording. I validated the study after each participant confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts to strengthen the research findings.

Data saturation signifies a point at which no new information or themes emerge in the data from the possession and analyses of additional interviews or cases relating to the phenomenon of study. A researcher attains data saturation when no new additional information emerges, interviews are not yielding new data, and the same themes keep reoccurring (Boddy, 2016; Kalla, 2016; Metcalfe & Nowington, 2014; Morse, 2015).

During each participant's interview, I asked seven semistructured questions and achieved data saturation because no new information or themes were apparent and further information proved redundant.

Reliability is the ability to yield consistent result in the analytical procedures including consideration for personal and research method biases that may impact the findings (Cooper, 2016; Noble & Smith, 2015). Researchers use reliability to enhance research rigor and strengthen the credibility of the research data (Srivastava & Misra, 2014; Brooks & Normore, 2015). To enhance the reliability of the study, I audio recorded each interview, made notes of observations and actions, developed case study database, and ensured congruency and meaningful conformity of findings across multiple data sources. Validity is the rigor in which the findings accurately reflect the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). To achieve validity, the study findings and concepts must relate systematically (Kodaly & Vinayak, 2014). I addressed validity by using multiple sources to collect data, establishing chain of evidences, having each participant review the recordings and transcriptions, and ensuring the internal coherence of findings and concepts.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Case study researchers use several approaches to collect data including (a) archival records, (b) direct observations, (c) interviews, (d) official document, (e) participant-observation, and (f) physical artifacts (Amade-Escot & Bennour, 2016; Chong, Kwong, Thadani, Wong, & Wong, 2015; Goodrick, 2014). I used semistructured interviews, interview notes, and official business documents to collect data for this study.

By using a semistructured interview technique, researchers could gain in-depth understanding of the perceptives of the participants, strengthen the possibility of extracting qualitative data, and refocus the questions. Researchers may request more data or information to enhance complete understanding of the interviewee's perspective regarding the interview and the phenomenon of study (Amade-Escot & Bennour, 2016; Roulston, 2016). Some advantages of using semistructured interview method include flexibility and consistency; easy participation; recognition of participant's habits, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions; providing detail answers; and enhancing free expression of thoughts (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Padgett et al., 2017). The disadvantages of semistructured interviews include time consuming, expensive to conduct, and participants' aversiveness to sensitive topics (Bodoh et al., 2015). I used the semistructured, open-ended, and face-to-face interview technique to explore and extract in-depth rich thick data from participants. By using the semistructured interview technique, I understood the participant's response in more details and clarified vital information to the study findings.

Interview notes contribute to understanding of the interviewee's perspective and the social construct of the participant's accounts. Keeping interview notes will enhance understanding what transpired during interviewing, remember other information during analysis, and assist in keeping track of information relevant to the study findings (Anderson, Bolton, Fleming, & Lord, 2016; Snook & Oliver, 2015). I maintained interview notes during the interviews to enhance retrieving details from the face-to-face interview and to keep track of the firm's information. Researchers collect official



document for additional information on the phenomenon of study (Guercini, 2014; Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). I requested for and collected official company documents on the strategies and implementation approach the business leaders use to sustain their business.

Qualitative researchers use interview protocol as a procedural guide for directing the interview process (Akamatsu, Kawasaki, & Kojima, 2016). I developed and used interview protocol containing seven interview questions to collect data for this study (see Appendix A). Researchers use the interview guide to support the semistructured interviews (Buisman-Pijlman & Willison, 2016; Goffnett, Lepisto, & Hayes, 2016; Klenke, 2016). The interview protocol served as guide during the meeting with participants to ensure consistence, build trust, ask probing questions, and have informal discussions with participants on their business practices. I interviewed each owner and manager who had maintained a sustainability plans and have successfully implemented sustainability strategies on the business. Each interview lasted between 25-35 minutes.

Some researchers may conduct pilot study prior to data collection to establish schedule flexibility, clarity, understandability, and the capability of the participants to answer the research question (Jug & Vilar, 2015; Morrison, Clement, Nestel, & Brown, 2016). I did not conduct pilot interview for the study because the interview questions were clear, understandable, flexible, and participants could answer the interview questions without difficulty. Upon request, the researcher and the participants may adjust to changes to achieve coherence in translations, interpretations, and understanding.

The transcription of the interview data would be congruent with what the researcher and the participants shared as the same reference point in responses to the

interview questions (Park & Park, 2016; Roulston, 2016; Thomas, 2016). I transcribed the recorded conversation, sent a copy to the participant to check for accuracy in transcriptions, interpretations, and meanings as transcribed from the audio recorded interviews. Member checking is a research process for correcting possible misrepresentation, reducing the incidence of incorrect data analysis, and enhancing data interpretation (Carrol & Huxtable, 2014; Gill et al., 2016). The use of member checking ensures accurate portrayal of participant's perspectives and intended meanings, enhances the authenticity and originality of the study, and strengthens the study findings and results (Dahl, Hays, Kirk-Jenkins, & Wood, 2016). I used member checking to enhance the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the study results.

I complemented the member checking with the FDE technique. Using FDE technique improved communication and improve mutual understanding and enhanced collective interpretations and shared meanings (Boesch et al., 2013). Some researchers use FDE to gain valuable contributions from participants on the operation, practice, and application of the interview information. I used the FDE technique to improve the general quality and strengthen the validity and reliability of the study. Using member checking and FDE techniques enhanced the validity and reliability of this study.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Qualitative researchers use data organization technique to describe how they will manage data generated from the study. I used the NVivo 10 computer software and research logs to organize data. Qualitative researchers use NVivo 10 computer software to categorize, code, manipulate, and identify themes; organize responses; and enhance the

rigor of the qualitative research (Jenkins, 2015). Researchers use research logs and reflective journals to garner key ideas that participants express during the interviews (Mayer, 2015; Kaczynski, Salmona, & Smith, 2014). I used a research log to record key information and meanings derived from each participant during the interviews. Reflective journals are written documents containing details of various concepts, events, or interactions exhibited by participants on the phenomenon of study during the interview process (Davis, Reimaier, Smith, & Mangan-Danckwart, 2013; Shek & Wu, 2013). I used reflective journals to collect rich qualitative information and explored participants experiences about the study.

Researchers use NVivo 10 software to organize research information (Alves, Guo, & Porschitz, 2013; Bitencourt, Oliveira, Teixeira, & Zanardo dos Santos, 2016). I used NVivo 10 software for sorting, coding, categorizing, and labeling all the data for the study. The researcher should not reveal any material information that may expose the identity of study participants (Emrich, 2015; Snyder, 2015). I created a unique filing system for each participant with pseudonym code names (PT1, PT2...PT6) to mask participants' identities. All electronic data collected and used in the study were stored in password-protected computer while hard copy documents were secured in a fireproof safety cabinet. After 5 years, I will destroy the data in accordance with Walden University IRB research protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collection method distinguishing features indicate the methods used to analyze the data. Qualitative data analysis requires appropriate

organization of data, working with the data, interpreting the data, looking for patterns, synthesizing the data, determining what is essential to learn, and what information to write for others to read (Alimo, 2015). Ajjan, Kumar, and Subramaniam (2016) outlined the eight techniques that researchers use to analyze qualitative data. The steps are (a) categorization of codes, (b) creation of coding manual with operational definitions, (c) data triangulation, (d) developing concepts and themes from existing literature, (e) emergent of data saturation, (f) use of NVivo qualitative analysis software, (g) use of pattern matching to attain validity, and (h) validating concepts with secondary documents. I used data triangulation, coding, themes identifications, pattern matching, and NVivo 10 software to organize and analyze the data. The process of using NVivo 10 to analyze data included arranging data into distinct categories, linking categories to their prototypes of evidence, developing flowcharts, establishing the frequency of words occurrence, establishing words relationships, and classifying data into sequences (Akaeze, 2016).

The primary objective of using data triangulation is to gather multiple perspectives to gain proper understanding of the phenomenon of study. Researchers use triangulation to combine different methods of data collection, distinct population samples, different theoretical perspectives, and different points to solidify the study findings (Beckert & Ghisi, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014). In triangulation, the researcher uses multiple sources of evidence to generate multiple measure of the same phenomenon and strengthen the validity of the study. Some of the triangulation methods include data, investigator, theory, and methodological

triangulations (Beckert & Ghisi, 2015; Cope, 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Qualitative researchers use data triangulation to correlate people, time, and space; investigator triangulation to correlate the findings of multiple researchers in a study; theory triangulation for correlating multiple theoretical strategies; and methodological triangulation for correlating data from multiple data collection methods. Methodological triangulation is appropriate for confirming the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of this study. I combined semistructured interview technique of data collection, official company documents, and interview notes to achieve methodological triangulation.

Qualitative researchers may use NVivo 10 software to code, transcribe, and analyze data (Castelbery, 2014; Stuckey, 2015). I used the NVivo 10 software to collect, organize, analyze, transcribe, code, and categorize the data collected from the interviews including refining the emerging codes and transcription to achieve research rigor. I analyzed the data from each participant through coding of the interview transcripts, official company documents, and information derived from the research notes taken during and after the interviews. The sources of data for methodological triangulation include information from the semistructured interviews, secondary data from official company documents, and information from the interview notes. By reading the interview transcripts, qualitative researchers could identify emerging codes. I read the information from multiple sources of data to identify codes, refined the codes by discarding codes that were not necessary for inclusion in the text, and continued the refining process until no new unique codes emerged.

The process of coding and analyzing data was repeated for all the data and information collected from the participants. Each ensuing data analyzed informed subsequent data in a chronological order. By analyzing data in a chronological order, I incorporated the participants' recommendations to the final report of the emerging themes until reaching data saturation. Direct relationship exists between data triangulation and data saturation. Data triangulation precludes data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation signifies quality and completeness in data collection and analysis and the existence of no new evidence of new themes from the interviews (Guetterman, 2015). The researcher should consider data saturation within the broader scope of achieving the validity and credibility of the qualitative data (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). I reached data saturation when no new evidence of new themes in the interviews emerged and within the confines that enhanced the reliability and validity of the study. Using data triangulation to reach data saturation decisions enriched the quality of data, strengthened the credibility of the study, and gave credence to the trustworthiness of the result, which is the foundation of high quality qualitative research.

The iterative arrangement of codes led to the emergent of visible patterns during data transcription. Researchers use coding to identify themes within the analyzed data. Themes will manifest during data transcription in qualitative interviews (Akaeze, 2016). I incorporated emerging themes from the interviews, reflective journals, and official company documents with existing literature including new studies published after writing the proposal and the conceptual framework regarding the sustainability theory.

## **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability is an essential process towards establishing dependability of qualitative research results. The reliability and validity of research confers a measure of credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings (Cooper, 2015; Mangioni & McKerchar, 2013). I documented the participation criteria, analytical procedures, and all decisions taken during the research process to minimize researcher bias and heighten the level of reliability, validity, and replicability of the study. Researchers should ensure the reliability and validity of research information collected from the participants (Cooper, 2016). I ensured the reliability and validity of the information collected from participants' interviews, documents, and observations by simultaneous coordination of different pieces of data at multiple levels, holistic perception of situations, and instant processing of findings upon availability.

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to the consistency or repeatability of research instruments (questionnaire, observations, or any measurement) to produce the same result when administered to the same phenomenon under the same settings by any researcher (Leung, 2015; Gupta & Sharma, 2015). The frequency and consistency with which the measuring instrument or questionnaire produces the result should be the same on repetitive trials or analytical procedures (Noble & Smith, 2015; Jasti & Kodali, 2014). Qualitative researchers may achieve reliability of the research process and results by comprehensive data use, constant data comparison, inclusion of the deviant case, refutational analysis, and use of tables (Seawright, 2016; Silverman, 2009). The researcher should ensure that

any approach chosen should enhance the reliability of the research findings (Annum, 2016). I employed the comprehensive data use approach to establish reliability of the study results by collecting data from original sources, verifying data accuracy regarding form and context, applying methodological data triangulation, and member checking.

**Dependability.** Qualitative researchers affirm the dependability of the research result by following a clearly defined unit of analysis and developing comprehensive procedures (Snider, 2015). The more reliable the measuring instruments, the more dependable the outcome. Researchers document research procedures to strengthen the dependability of the research data, ensure a comprehensive and inclusive data analysis process to enhance the reliability of the research instruments and the study findings.

Research dependability refers to how the users can follow the original researcher's decision-making process relating to data collection and analysis during the study to reach similar conclusions (Lofstrom, Nevgi, Wegner, & Karm, 2015). The researcher accounts for or describes any changes in contexts and circumstances significant to the consistency of obtaining the same findings under similar conditions. Dependability requires participants to check the transcript, the interpretation, evaluate the findings, and recommendations to ensure they originate from the data sources received from participants (Anney, 2014). Dependability of the research instruments will establish stability of the data over time and across conditions (Hauge, Lillekroken, & Slettebo, 2015). To establish dependability for this study, I read the data materials several times, crosscheck with participants on interview transcriptions including firms' data and information used during data analysis. I applied member checking and FDE technique to



ensure dependability or auditability of the results. I and the participants discussed any discrepancies observed, made adjustments where necessary, and incorporated any modifications into the final transcripts to enhance the dependability of the results.

The member checking of data collected from participants or from follow-up interviews with the same participants enhances the integrity of the study and deepens the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bennett & McWhorter, 2016). I conducted member checking of the transcriptions of the interviewees' responses with participants to clear any ambiguity between the participants' responses and my interpretations, achieved clarity, and built confidence on how to report information derived from the interview process. Researchers use data triangulation to improve accuracy, reliability, and validity. I applied methodological triangulation to improve the validity and reliability of the results. By combining data saturation and member checking, I improved the data transcription and analysis, and enhanced the generalization and replicability of the results.

The trustworthiness of the result is the foundation of high quality qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016; Dahl, Hays, Kirk-Jenkins, & Wood, 2014). I employed member checking and FDE technique to achieve trustworthiness and dependability by sharing a copy of the transcribed data with each participant to verify data interpretation and translation for intended meanings. To reduce researcher biases, I liaised with the participants on documentations, meetings, review of the research notes taken during the interviews; crosschecked codes to ensure consistency; and implemented error-correcting mechanism. By documenting analytical process, member checking, and triangulation, I

improved the methodological rigor of the transcribed data to enhance reliability and ensure dependability of the study results.

### **Validity**

Qualitative research validity demonstrates the degree of dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings (Leung, 2015). The iterative features of qualitative research validity include the research design, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. Qualitative researchers use validity to measure the suitability of the tools, processes, and data to accurately reverberate the specific concept from the researcher's worldview (Eiras, Escoval, Grillo, & Silver-Fortes, 2014; Elo et al., 2014; Gupta & Sharma, 2015; Palmquist, 2016). According to Eiras et al., qualitative researchers use validity to ensure the research instrument measures only what the researcher intends to measure from the perspectives of the participants and the readers. Qualitative researchers use member checking to summarize and confirm information obtained from participants for correctness of understanding and interpretations. Researchers use member checking to establish credibility in qualitative studies (Wang, Duan, & Yu, 2016). I used member checking to review and validate the interview transcripts for accuracy.

The three types of qualitative research validity include (a) construct, (b) internal, and (c) external validity (Baskarada, 2014). Researchers apply construct validity to measure the extent to which a set of measured items reflect the theoretical substance inherent in the items measured. Qualitative researchers use internal validity to explain or

explore certain conditions that lead to other conditions in the study. Researchers may use external validity to:

- define the scope and boundaries of reasonable analytical generalization for the research;
- compare evidences with the extant literature to examine whether the findings are generalizable to other cases; and
- evaluate the validity of the study (Baskarada, 2014; Kodali & Vinayak, 2014).

The interview protocol stipulates the procedures the participants and the researcher followed during the interview process. Researchers use the interview protocol to enhance consistency and strengthen the reliability and validity of the study results (Foley and O’Conner, 2013; Leung, 2015). I applied the interview protocol to achieve consistency, reliability, and validity without compromising the richness, thickness, and dimensionality of the study. Some techniques I used to substantiate the study validity include member checking and FDE technique, NVivo 10 software for interview recording and transcription, methodological data triangulation technique, and adoption of rich and thick analysis in data description. To establish validity, I clarified my biases including negative or discrepant information and combined the interview recordings with interview notes and firm’s documents.

Research rigor constitutes the criterion for enhancing trustworthiness of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Achieving research rigor requires optimizing the interview questions, analysis of the first and second levels, use of member checking, and data triangulation and saturation (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). According to

Adamson and Prion (2014), the criteria for establishing rigor within qualitative research to enhance validity include credibility, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility.** Credibility is akin to internal validity. The credibility benchmark constitutes the believability or credibility of the research findings through evaluation of the participants and users. Qualitative researchers vest credibility on the expertise and trustworthiness of the feedback source (Bozer, Israel, Sarros, & Santos, 2014). Some researchers perceive feedback to be accurate, valuable, and positively responded when the source of the feedback is credible (Boesch, Scholz, Schwaniger, & Weber, 2013; Hauge et al., 2015). Superior credible sources produce persuasive messages with highly perceive argument quality by establishing truth in the value and depth of the data and their interpretations to achieve credibility (Beise-Zee et al., 2014; Gill, 2016). I established the credibility of this study using the following approaches:

- followed the research protocol when conducting the research;
- maintained a coding system to protect participants' identities and confidentiality that motivated them to respond to the interview questions honestly;
- explained to the participants the purpose of data collection, who should have access to the data, use of the data, and how I would publish the results;
- employed data triangulation technique using multiple sources of evidence, member checking, and FDE technique during data collection and data analysis phases of the study;

- presented interview transcriptions, data analysis, study findings, and conclusions to the participants for their feedback;
- incorporated participants feedback to the report-writing phase of the study;
- integrated participants feedback into the final research results to strengthen the credibility of the study;
- complied with Walden University IRB protocol for protection of research participants;
- implemented the qualitative research protocol for trustworthiness; and
- discussed the truth of the responses and opinions of participants.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability indicates the degree to which other researchers may collaborate the results of a study (Anney, 2014). Qualitative researchers use confirmability to establish the data, the interpretations, the translations, and the findings that originate from information collected on the phenomenon of inquiry. The researcher's incorporation of own attitudes and personal meaning may suggest the need for applying multiple methods to overcome the fundamental attribution errors and biases (Woodside, 2016). Anney posited that qualitative researchers use audit trail, reflective journal, and triangulation to establish confirmability. I used methodological data triangulation and reflective journal, including the application of multiple sources of evidence to establish confirmability of the study.

**Transferability.** Transferability is analogous to external validity which denotes to the generalization of the research findings beyond the project, including the application of the study results to other populations in different contexts (Adamson & Prion, 2014;

Cope, 2014). Transferability of the research findings is the responsibility of the users (Parker & Northcott, 2016). Qualitative researchers facilitate the ease of transferability judgment by providing thick and detailed description of the phenomenon of study (Anney, 2014; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Morphy, 2013). Thick description allows readers to assess the transferability of particularistic findings to other settings in which they operate. Researchers contextualize their study to enable readers to extrapolate the findings to situations they are familiar. I used the external validity technique to strengthen the transferability of the study findings.

The researcher could be familiar with the context of his or her case study site or the message sending context of the publication. The transferability of the research findings is effectively in the hands of the readers (Parker & Northcott, 2016). The more the research study context corresponds to a reader's own context, the more plausible and defensible is the transferability of research findings and the resulting naturalistic generalization (Parker & Northcott, 2016). I presented a thick and detailed description of the phenomenon of research including the process of selecting research participants and research design to the users to determine the transferability of the findings.

**Data Saturation.** Data saturation or information redundancy signifies the existence of no new evidence of new themes from the interviews. Information saturation in qualitative studies include data and theoretical saturation that may emerge in stages and often in unexpected ways (Lee, 2014; Ramadan, 2017). Achieving data saturation is key to excellent qualitative research (Guetterman, 2015; Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). Many qualitative researchers establish data saturation through

the iterative process of data collection and analysis (Bourke, 2014; Dahl et al. 2014). The criteria I chose for sample participants was useful in enriching the quality of data, promoted data saturation, and enhanced credibility. I selected 6 small business owners and managers based on their small business ownership, management, experience, and business sustainability records. Participants responded to seven interview questions. I considered data saturation within the broader scope of achieving the validity and credibility of the qualitative data.

The researcher will achieve data saturation when participants offer no further insights into the research and further interviews reveal no new significant properties of the core theoretical categories examined (Hayat & Lyond, 2017; Ramadan, 2017). I reached data saturation when no new evidence of new themes in the interviews emerged and within the confines that ensured the reliability and validity of the study. I used data triangulation technique to reach data saturation decisions, which enriched data quality, strengthened the credibility, supported the trustworthiness, and ensured reliability and validity of the research result. Reaching data saturation demonstrated quality and comprehensiveness in data collection and analysis with the existence of no new themes emerging from the interviews (Guetterman, 2015; Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). I ensured data saturation within the broader scope of achieving the reliability and validity of information derived from the qualitative research data.

### **Transition and Summary**

Section 2 comprised a restatement of the purpose statement, role of the researcher, the participants, research method and designs, population and sampling

techniques, ethical research, data collection techniques, data organization and analysis, and reliability and validity. In Section 3, I presented the findings of the study, application to professional and academic practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study, reflections, and study conclusion.



### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that healthcare small business owners and managers in New York use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Six health care small business owners and managers participated in this study and provided me with the primary data to answer the research question. The secondary data included observations, field notes, and company archival documents. Based on the participants' responses to the interview questions, I identified five themes: (a) education, training, and experience; (b) customer-centric; (c) information technology update; (d) development of a business plan; and (e) relationship and networking. The findings from this study illustrated that small business owners and managers use a combination of strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The research question of this study was: What strategies do healthcare business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? Many small business leaders use the business sustainability model (BSM) as a guideline for developing models for implementing sustainable business objectives (Andersen et al., 2015; Zylfijaj & Pira, 2017). By integrating sustainability strategy, business leaders could improve margins and increase revenue growth, yielding greater stakeholder return and business growth (Muja et al., 2014a). According to Galpin, Whittington, & Bell (2015), the main components of BSM are personal factors, internal capacity, and competitive strategy. Small business owners and managers should develop modes of communication,

employee training, and instituting performance management process to create a culture of sustainability. Small business leaders should develop internal capacity for innovative sustainability, which would produce win-win outcomes to all the stakeholders. The win-win approach will support the firms' sustainability. Firms' leaders should develop an environment that fosters sustainability by adopting strategic management approach with clear direction, sharper focus on what is important to the firm in terms of customer satisfaction, competitive capability, technology, rapid changing environment, and to incorporate these changes into their sustainability agenda.

Some factors that small business leaders consider in deciding the type of strategy to implement include the nature of the business, the competition, and the owner's and manager's goals (Bayani & Crisanto, 2017). Researchers have demonstrated that most small firms' leaders adopt different strategies to improve performance and sustain their businesses (Akaeze, 2016). With advancement in technology, most small business owners and managers use hybrid strategies to sustain their firms (Salavou, 2015). According to Bell et al (2015), small business owners and managers should adopt sustainability strategies to ensure their firms' competitiveness over the long term. The five themes I identified in this study are (a) education, training, and experience; (b) customer-centric; (c) information technology update; (d) development of a business plan; and (e) relationship and networking. In the following subsections, I will present the five themes that emerged from my thematic analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions.

### **Theme 1: Education, Training, and Experience**

The theme of education, training, and experience emerged from Interview Questions 1-7. All participants recognized the importance of education, training, and experience to sustain their businesses. Biederman (2015) posited that small business leaders could sustain their organizations' long-term growth strategy by investing in talent through hiring and training of the employees to deliver the firm's value proposition. Snider (2015) opined that human capital can improve business profitability. The two factors contributing to small business survival and failures are entrepreneur's skills and experience which affect business performance and profitability (Ayala & Manzano, 2014; Basri, Rashid, Abashah, & Samah, 2017; Bayani & Crisanto, 2017). Flynn et al. (2016) posited that selective hiring, onboarding, and personal development plans are high-performance work practice (HPWP) attributes which are fundamental to small business sustainability. Basri et al. (2017) advised small business leaders to develop their human resources skills to improve employee performance and grow and sustain their business.

Arroyo-Lopez et al. (2017) identified that cultural capital involving knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions such as educational or technical qualifications derived from one's own origins could enhance small business performance. Bartl et al. (2015) postulated that good staff selection and retention and staff skills development and capabilities are distinct strategic tools that improve a firm's performance. Responding to Interview Question 1, Participant 1 (hereafter, referred to as PT1) said, "I evaluated my capability to manage the business and what type of skills, knowledge, and experience I have and what I need to get from the labor market to complement my skills." In response

to Interview Question 1, PT3 stated, “we ensure that our doctors, nurses, and other staffers vital to achieving our business objectives are hired and trained for the type of service we offer.” Responding to Interview Question 1, PT4 said, “we ensure that our doctors, nurses, and other health care providers are trained for the type of service we offer.” In response to Interview Question 1, PT6 explained the importance of having, “the necessary skills and expertise that will enhance the quality of services we offer to our customers.” These unanimous responses from all participants demonstrated the importance of education, training, and experience to small business sustainability.

Bernard et al. (2014) confirmed that human capital including education level attained is a significant determinant of small business performance and success. Koyagialo (2016) encouraged small business owners and managers to use their human capital to invest in employee training to improve performance. Responding to Interview Question 2, PT1 said, “as the firm continues to grow, I continue to acquire more technically skilled staff in areas we have the need.” In response to Interview Question 2, PT2 stated, “ supporting continuous education of our staffers, firm paid training, and tuition assistance programs to boost employees’ moral, skills, and expertise.” Responding to Interview Question 2, PT3 said, “we support our staffers to acquire more skills relevant to our need, and support continuous education of our staffers to boost employees’ moral, skills, and expertise.” In response to Interview Question 2, PT4 stated, “ our expertise in mental health ranks us as one of mental health service providers,” and PT5 said, “we acquire more technically skilled staff in areas critical to our services.”

Participants stated that providing training and skills development for their employees boost performance. Effective training technique enhances small businesses productivity (Androniceanu, 2017). Cognitive skills are insufficient to induce business success; however, expertise and technical knowledge positively affects small businesses performance, growth, and success (Heisig, Suraj, Kiato, Kemboi, Arrau, & Easa, 2016). Responding to Interview Question 3, PT6 said, “ we implemented in-service training programs and hired expertise to manage some of our units.” In response to Interview Question 4, all the participants acknowledged that lack of qualifications, skills, and experience are major obstacles to implementing sustainability strategies and emphasized the importance of hiring skilled employees and supporting their training and skills acquisition to improve strategies implementations to enhance sustainability.

Exposing employees to different training techniques advances their knowledge, skills, and capabilities, which are necessary to raise performance (Androniceanu, 2017; Yazdanfar & Ohman, 2015). Small business leaders should invest on knowledge capital to improve performance (Snider, 2015). Responding to Interview Question 5, PT1 said, “ most of the employees need to be certified as healthcare givers or providers, which makes qualification, skills, and experience paramount.” In response to Interview Question 5, PT4 stated, “ our emergency department has been fortified with more qualified nurses and other healthcare providers to speed customer services and treatment of patients.” Responding to Interview Question 5, PT5 said, “hiring experienced and skilled candidates including conducting in-service training and certifications programs on critical professional skills enhance our quality of service,” which would support sustainability.

Human capital comprising the small business owners, the managers, and employees that support the business growth contribute to business sustainability (McKeever, Anderson, & Jack, 2014). Small business leaders could use a strategy involving human capital to sustain their firms (Akaeze, 2016). Responding to Interview Question 6, PT1 stated, “management ensures that all employees have the appropriate skills and training to be successful in their roles as care givers and care coordinators to improve quality of services to patients.” In response to Interview Question 6, PT2 said, “management has increased its assistance to employees’ education and training programs to improve skills and quality of services,” and PT4 remarked, “... offer training to employees ... .” Responding to Interview Question 7, PT2 advised, “owners and managers should provide education and training to their employees to enhance skills and expertise” because “skilled employees will reduce wastes and costs, improve performance, profitability, and support sustaining the business.” In response to Interview Question 7, PT5 explained the need for “frequent in-service training to improve employees’ skills and expertise” and said that “management should support employees’ education and certification in critical skills that are vital to improve quality of service,” which would improve customer services, enhance customer satisfaction that would support business growth and sustainability.

The participants’ responses to the interview questions aligned with Akaeze’s (2016), Ayala & Manzano’s (2014), Basri, Rashid, Abashah, & Samah’s, (2017), Heisig et al. (2016), and Snider’s (2015) statements that business leaders use education, training, and experience to sustain their businesses. The study findings indicated that healthcare

small business owners and managers used education, training, and experience as a strategy for sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. As applied to this study, 100% of the participants attested to using education, training, and experience as a strategy to achieve business goals and sustain their businesses.

### **Theme 2: Customer-Centricity**

A firm's best strategy during times of economic uncertainty is to implement customer-driven initiatives (Afthonidis & Tsiotras, 2014). Small business leaders should invest on new customers' acquisition and customer satisfaction to improve performance (Pattanayak, Koilakuntla, & Punyatoya, 2017). By investing human capital in customer services, small business owners and managers could improve performance (Koyagialo, 2016; Paoloni & Dumay, 2015). An important prerequisite that might improve small business performance is customer satisfaction (de Sa and Pinho, 2014; Pattanayak, Koilakuntla, & Punyatoya, 2017). Small business leaders attempt to deliver value to customers, entice customers to pay for the values, and convert the values into profit (Peric, Wise, & Dragicevic, 2017). Small business leaders use sustainability strategy to provide goods and services that meet customers' needs at competitive prices and enhance their business success (Gauthier, 2017). The theme of customer-centric emerged from Interview Questions 1-7. All participants indicated they used customer-centric as strategy for improving the quality of service to sustain their businesses. Participants firms' business strategies focused on client values, as their sustainability depended on the development of strong customer-centric services to satisfy specific customer needs.

By fulfilling specific customer needs, small business owners and managers could achieve their sustainability objectives (Zancul et al., 2016). Responding to Interview Question 1, PT1 stated, “I understood who my customer would be, the market I was in, and consumers’ behaviors.” In response to Interview Question 1, PT4 said, “knowing our customers demographics enabled us to develop services to meet their needs”, “... we involve customers in data collection”, and “... we use our customers feedback to improve services.” Responding to Interview Question 1, PT6 stated, “ using evidence-base practice helped us to produce better result on customer treatment, which supported us to sustain our company.”

Firm leaders adopt approaches to satisfy specific customer needs, create utility to consumers, and generate value focused on sell functionality (Barquet et al., 2016; Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014). In response to Interview Question 2, PT5 said, “involving customers in collecting data helps to provide authentic customer data, correct analysis, and correct results, which helps to build confidence and trust between our customers and members of our staff.” Responding to Interview Question 2, PT6 stated, “ my company has a policy guideline and procedure booklet which every employee should follow when providing care to our customers.” In response to Interview Question 3, PT4 said, “we use customer feedback to measure the effectiveness of our strategies.” “When discharging a customer, we interview the customer on some quality metrics”, and “... we exchange ideas with customers.” Responding to Interview Question 5, PT4 stated, “surveys and interviews were conducted with customers to identify where we need to improve and actions taking to remedy the situation.”



Akaeze (2016) identified that consumer satisfaction is a good strategy that small business leaders could use to sustain their firms. Responding to Interview Question 6, PT5 said, “making improvement in customer services ... has enabled us to retain more customers, many vendors are willing to do business with us, and our business looks great for the future.” In response to Interview Question 7, PT2 recommended that, “owners and managers should give preference to customer satisfaction, ... health care small business leaders should strive to improve services at all the units in their firms.” Responding to Interview Question 7, PT3 attested that competent staff know how “to deal with customers. This will improve customer service, enhance customer satisfaction, and bring competitive advantage to our firm and advance the company’s sustainability.”

The participants’ responses to the interview questions aligned with Afthonidis and Tsiotras’s (2014), Akaeze’s (2016), Arroyo-Lopez et al. (2017), Koyagiolo’s (2016), and Seilov (2015) statements that business leaders implement customer-centric strategy to sustain their businesses. The study findings indicated that health care small business owners and managers used customer-centric as a strategy for sustaining business beyond 5 years. As applied to this study, 100% of the participants attested to using customer-centric as a strategy for sustaining small business.

### **Theme 3: Information Technology (IT) Update**

Windolph et al. (2014) posited that small business owners and managers should use administrative technologies to manage sustainability issues by structuring, organizing, measuring, communicating, collaborating information, and or developing and defining processes and structures with customers to enhance performance. A firm’s best

strategy during times of economic uncertainty is to invest in innovation and technology (Afthonidis & Tsiotras, 2014). Buganza et al. (2014) identified that technology management capability could increase small businesses sustainability outcomes. The theme of IT update emerged from Interview Questions 1, 4, and 5-7. All the participants acknowledged the significance of updating IT in ensuring business sustainability.

By adopting technologies, small business owners and managers could improve their firms' performance. Mathu & Tlare (2017) advised small business owners to invest in technology to improve their economic capital and business sustainability. Responding to Interview Question 1, PT6 said, "we continue to update our information and technology system with the industry standard" to ensure that "our technology upgrades meet the standard of efficiency vital for success." In response to Interview Question 4, PT3 stated, "some employees resist adoption to new information and communication technologies (ICT) that are critical to any health care organization's success and sustainability." Responding to Interview Question 4, PT5 acknowledged that, "upgrading our IT system to meet advancement in ICT possess challenges to our company."

Business leaders use ICT to support their organizational performance and strengthen business sustainability (Gatautis & Tarute, 2014). In response to Interview Question 5, PT4 remarked, "telemedicine technique has been adopted in some of our critical departments to facility service delivery by using telecommunications technology to remotely diagnosis and treat patients." Responding to Interview Question 6, PT1 said, "we incorporated new information communication and technology systems to continue to improve performance and be able to tackle the business challenges more than we did

when we started.” In response to Interview Question 6, PT2 stated, “we incorporated new ICT systems to continue to improve performance and be able to update our facilities with new innovations in health care services.” Responding to Interview Question 6, PT3 said, “management continues to integrate new ICT tools to align with market demand and update our facilities with new innovations in healthcare service.”

Carayannis et al. (2015) and Mulamula et al. (2017) opined that firm leaders who adopt technology are more likely to succeed and sustain their businesses than firms that did not. In response to Interview Question 6, PT4 attested to management’s continuous investment on information upgrades and intergradation of new ICT tools to align with their service offering. Responding to Interview Question 6, PT5 remarked, “upgrades in our ICT systems has provided a competitive advantage to our company.” In response to Interview Question 6, PT6 attested to the “... upgrading of our technology systems to better serve the needs of the company and are in sync with the industry standard.” Responding to Interview Question 7, PT5 remarked, “continuous improvement and upgrade to the newest in ICT to align with industry standard will enhance sustainability.”

The participants’ responses to the interview questions aligned with Buganza et al.’s (2014), Carayannis et al.’s (2015), Gatautis and Tarute’s (2014), and Mathu and Tlare (2017) statements that upgrading IT system is crucial to sustaining business. The study findings indicated that health care small business owners and managers used upgrading IT as strategy for sustaining their business. As applied to this study, 100% of the participants attested to using IT upgrade as a strategy for sustaining their small businesses.

**Theme 4: Development of Business Plan**

A firm's best strategy during times of economic uncertainty is to implement aggressive business plans (Afthonidis & Tsiotras, 2014). Friis et al. (2016) urged small business owners and managers to use business planning as an effective strategy to improve performance and sustain their business. Small business owners and managers should develop an effective business model to sustain their firm (Ceschin, 2014). Biederman (2015) opined that developing a business plan will help small business owners and managers to articulate the firm's overall direction to improve business performance, enhance growth, and sustain the business. During the interviews, all participants acknowledged using development of business plan as a strategy for sustaining their businesses. The theme of developing business plan emerged from Interview Questions 1-2, 5, and 7.

By developing business plan, small business owners and managers could fulfil specific customer needs through integration of products and services that lead to the achievement of sustainability objectives (Beuren et al., 2015; Zancul et al., 2016). In response to Interview Question 1, PT1 acknowledged developing a business plan containing, "the long-range strategies including revenue, costs, profit target, and sustainability objectives," and PT2 attested that following a business plan was critical to the firm's success. Responding to Interview Question 1, PT4 stated, "we articulated and developed a business plan," and PT5 illustrated that implementing the business plan was helpful in sustaining the business. In response to Interview Question 1, PT6 stated, "our

business plan contains relevant information on the future direction of the firm and our business.”

In response to Interview Question 2, PT6 recognized the importance of developing business plan and stated, “we implement constructive suggestions that align with our business model.” Responding to Interview Question 5, PT6 stated, “we adhere strictly to our business model guideline in initiating new customer services to improve performance.” In response to Interview Question 7, PT3 advised that, “small business owners and managers should develop business plan and base their operations on their plans for sustainability.” Responding to Interview Question 7, PT6 recommended that small business owners and managers should “develop business model to guide our understanding on the nature of the business and the procedure to follow towards investing resources.”

The statements of the participants are consistent with the findings of Afthonidis and Tsiotras (2014), Biederman (2015), Ceschin (2014), Friis et al. (2016), Klewitz, (2017), and Peric et al. (2017) who reported that developing a business plan is a useful strategy for sustaining businesses. Most of the health care small business owners and managers attested that developing and implementing a business plan was a useful strategy for sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. As indicated in this study, 83.3% of the participants confirmed that developing a business plan helped them to sustain their businesses.

### **Theme 5: Relationship and Networking**

Virakul (2015) examined sustainable development (SD) to identify the relationships and implications for business organizations to ensure the integration of community and stakeholder concerns into economic and ecological paradigms. The entrepreneur's networking abilities affect small business survival (Ayala & Manzano, 2014; Gretzinger, Fietze, Brem, & Ogbonna, 2018; Gretzinger & Leick, 2017). Banon (2014) and Uslay & Erdogan (2014) opined that small business leaders should collaborate more with business advisory networks to improve business performance. The theme of relationship and networking emerged from Interview Questions 1, 3, 5, and 7. Five of the participants recognized the importance of building relationship and networking in sustaining their businesses.

Evers, Marroun, & Young (2017) opined that social capital relative to actual or potential resources from social networks could enhance small business performance. Responding to Interview Question 1, PT1 stated, "I try to maintain a healthy relationship and networks within the industry with my clients and employees, which have helped the firm to succeed and we hope to continue to sustain the business." In response to Interview Question 1, PT2 said, "relationship base care is one of the best strategies that have united our staffers with our customers, ..., and brought healthy relationship and interaction ... to support our firm's success and sustainability." Responding to Interview Question 1, PT6 stated, "we network with other healthcare small business firms, organize seminars, and or attend seminars to update employees with the most recent development in the industry."

Employer-employee relationship is an important prerequisite that might improve small firm performance (de Sa & Pinho, 2014). In response to Interview Question 3, PT6 said, “the Director continues to develop personal relationship with customers and or their family members who express satisfaction with our services.” Responding to Interview Question 5, PT2 stated, “our relationship based care strategy helps to improve moral and interactions among management, staffers, and customers.” and PT5 remarked, “this relationship enhanced patients comfort, convenience, and optimal health caring throughout the patients’ lifetimes.”

In response to Interview Question 7, PT1 explained that collaborating with stakeholders is a key success factor to business sustainability. PT1 stated, “networking with other small business owners in the same business or playing field provided mutual benefit to all. Joining community associations and workshops made the business popular and generated more customers.” Responding to Interview Question 7, PT2 stated, “reach out to other area business owners and managers in their locations to know the latest development and incorporate those changes into their businesses to ensure success and sustainability.” In response to Interview Question 7, PT3 recommended that small business leaders should “improve employer-employee relationship and encourage patient-provider relationship.” According to PT3, “forging meaningful relationships between provider and patient may lead to better understanding of patient’s data set and help improve service, which will support sustaining the business.” Responding to Interview Question 7, PT6 advised small business

owners and managers to, "... network with colleagues in the industry ... to enhance business sustainability."

The participants' responses to the interview questions aligned with Ayala and Manzano's (2014), Banon's (2014), de Sa and Pinho's (2014), Evers, Marroun, & Young (2017), and Virakul's (2015) statements that building relationship and networking is crucial to business sustainability. The study findings indicated that health care small business owners and managers used building of relationship and networking as strategy to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. As applied to this study, 83.3% of the participants attested to using developing relationship and networking as a strategy for sustaining their businesses.

### **Findings Related to Sustainability Development Theory**

Small business leaders could sustain their businesses by implementing sustainability models (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016; Peric et al. 2017; Zylfijaj & Pira, 2017). The primary principle of sustainability development theory is the ability of management to acquire, create, deliver, support, and recover activities that help to build sustainable value (McPhee, 2014; Painter-Morland, Demuijnck, & Ornati, 2017). To achieve effective sustainability development, business leaders should have a clear vision with strategic direction, time, and long-term focus on the development, survival, and success of the firm (Eswarld & Vallesi, 2014). The study findings indicate that health care small business owners and managers could sustain their businesses through implementation of sustainability strategies.



Small business leaders could achieve sustainability through deep commitment to visionary sustainability culture and developing framework for sustainability (Mulamula & Amadi-Echendu, 2017; Schwaninger, 2015). The sustainability of a business is important to the long-term success of both the firms and the communities in which they operate (Bell et al., 2015; Zarestky & Collons, 2017). As applied in this study, health care small business owners and managers should establish strategies for sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. All participants confirmed the sustainability development theory regarding the use of strategies to grow and sustain their businesses.

Most small firms' leaders adopt different strategies to improve performance and sustain the business (Akaeze, 2016). To sustain their businesses in the competitive market, business leaders should adopt sustainability strategies to achieve their organizational goals (Gauthier, 2017). By adopting a systemic approach to sustainability that supports the development and implementation of sustainability strategies, business leaders could enhance the long-term survival of their firms (Bell et al., 2015). As applied in this study, all participants' responses echoed Akaeze's statement on the use of different strategies to sustain their businesses.

Organizational leaders should understand that sustainability strategy is the instrument of competition in the global competitive market (Gomez-Bezares, Przychodzen, & Przychodzen, 2017). Virakul (2015) identified the importance of building relationships and networking in business sustainability. As applied in this study, healthcare small owners and managers used building relationships and networking to

sustain their business. Eighty three percent of participants used building relationship and networking as sustainability strategy to succeed in global competitive market.

The greatest challenge facing small business leaders is the lack of sustainability strategies (Franco et al., 2014). The critical success factors for the survival of small businesses are establishment of business plans and sustainability strategies including education, training, and management practice (Amisano & Anthony, 2017). In implementing sustainability strategies, business leaders should educate employees to understand, adopt, and apply the concepts with a sustained proof of its importance to the firms' survival and sustainability (Muja et al., 2014b). As applied to this study, all participants responses echoed Muja et al.'s and Amisano et al.'s assertions on the importance of education and training in enhancing the growth and sustainability of their businesses.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The identification of strategies that healthcare small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years is crucial to improving business performance and survival. Researchers and professionals have recognized the importance of small business leaders to use strategies to improve their business performance and sustainability (Amisano et al. , 2017; Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016; Franco et al., 2014; Gauthier, 2017; Muja et al., 2014b). By establishing business plans and sustainability strategies, small business leaders could enhance the survival of their firms (Amisano et al. , 2017). The findings of this study could contribute to information sharing among health care small business owners and managers who are seeking strategies for

sustaining their businesses. Small business leaders with weak business strategies may use the findings of this study to improve performance, increase their profitability, and enhance the firms' sustainability.

Researchers have attributed the failure of over 50% of small businesses within their first 5 years to poor execution of sustainability strategies (Gandy, 2015; Hyer & Lussier, 2016; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Small business leaders face the daunting challenges of sustaining their firms' performances over the long term (Amisano et al. , 2017). Based on the study findings, the most significant contribution to professional practice may be the identification of potential strategies health care small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Business owners and managers could use the results from this study to improve their products and service quality and service delivery in the production, sales, and customer services to enhance business performance.

Few researchers have studied effective strategies for small business sustainability (Basri, Rashid, Abashah, & Samah, 2017; Edgeman & Williams, 2014; Gomez-Bezares et al. 2017; Omri et al., 2015). Small business leaders should adopt strategies that will enable them to achieve the goal of sustaining their businesses in the competitive market (Gauthier, 2017). Findings from this study could provide business leaders with knowledge on how to integrate sustainable business practices to improve revenue, market share, enhance competitive advantage, and achieve business goals. The findings from this study could contribute to the literature on small business sustainability. New and upcoming health care small business owners and managers may use the findings of the

study to understand the importance of adopting sustainability strategies system to enhance the firms' performance and survival.

The three factors that determine the small business leaders' choice of strategy are the nature of the business, the competition, and the owner and manager's goal (Basri et al., 2017). By adopting sustainability strategies, small business leaders could enhance their firms' competitiveness over the long term (Bell et al., 2015; Katsikeas, Morgan, Leonidou, & Hult, 2016). The findings from this study could help area small business leaders implement excellent strategies for identifying customers' needs, improving product and service delivery, boosting performance, increasing competitive advantage, and achieving continuous growth to sustain their businesses. The study findings may help organizational leaders including governmental and nongovernmental agencies to gain useful information on how to sustain their businesses.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The poor execution of sustainability strategies is the major cause of the failure of over 50% of small businesses within their first 5 years (Gandy, 2015; Hyer & Lussier, 2016; U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). By implementing excellent strategies, small business leaders could sustain their firms. As demonstrated in this study findings, adopting sustainability strategies might assist health care small business owners and managers to increase firm performance, which may generate economic growth for local communities. With improved business performance, the company will pay more corporate taxes, which the municipal government could use to provide social amenities to the local community.

The study findings may contribute to positive social change by assisting health care small business owners and managers to understand the strategies for sustaining their firms and gain adequate knowledge to establish effective sustainability model. The existing area small business owners could use the information from this study to improve relationship with consumers to enhance their firm performance and sustainability. New aspiring entrepreneurs could use the information gained from the study findings to establish new businesses which will provide job opportunities to local citizens, thereby contributing to the economic growth and societal development in the local community.

Small business leaders use strategies consisting of interrelated activities and ploys for outwitting competitors (Bayani & Crisanto, 2017; Kachouie et al., 2018). To survive in the competitive market, small business leaders should adopt effective strategies to sustain their businesses (Gauthier, 2017). By sustaining their business, the companies leaders could fulfil their corporate social responsibility to the local citizens through award of scholarships, sponsorship of local events, and building of schools, libraries, and health care facilities. The general public might learn from the strategies health care small business owners and managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years to establish a viable and profitable businesses that would further contribute to societal development.

### **Recommendations for Action**

An effective business strategy is crucial to the growth and survival of small businesses. Adopting effective strategies is critical to the sustainability of small businesses (Gandy, 2015; Gauthier, 2017; Hyer & Lussier, 2016). I recommend that

small business owners and managers should implement effective strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

To sustain their businesses, small business leaders should implement strategies to improve the business performance. The consequences of lack of and or weak execution of business strategy are poor firm performance and failure to survive beyond the first 5 years (Gandy, 2015; Hyer & Lussier, 2016). Small business leaders should establish business strategies to enhance the growth and sustainability of their firms (Amisano et al., 2017). I recommend that health care small business owners and managers should adopt strategies to enhance the performance, growth, and sustainability of their firms.

Some small business owners and managers lack strategies for sustaining businesses beyond 5 years. The study findings indicate that health care small business owners and managers use a combination of strategies to sustain their businesses. I recommend small business leaders should have adequate education, training, and experience to adopt the appropriate strategies for sustaining their business. I will disseminate the results of this study to interested stakeholders through presentation in literature conferences, training, and seminars; knowledge sharing in my social media and place of employment; and publications in business and academic journals.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The aim of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that health care small business owners and managers in New York State use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Researchers have advised small business leaders to adopt effective business strategies to sustain their businesses (Gandy, 2015; Gauthier, 2017;

Hyer & Lussier, 2016). This study was limited to cross-sectional, qualitative multiple case study involving health care small business owners and managers in New York State. I recommend future researchers should explore longitudinal, quantitative or mixed methods, involving different levels of employees in various industrial sectors at different geographical locations.

I have limited knowledge and competency in doctoral research study, as a result, the study was limited to my accurate interpretation of the participants' responses to the interview questions. Novice researchers face challenges of organizing participants' responses into themes to gain in-depth understanding of the research problem (Morsea, Lowerya, & Steurya, 2014). I recommend future study should involve research experts from related disciplines in small business sustainability.

The study was limited to the sample size of 6 health care small business owners and managers. By using larger or smaller sample size, researchers may generate different themes (Robinson, 2014). I recommend future study should involve smaller or larger sample size of participants with various roles and responsibilities in business sustainability from various industrial sectors.

### **Reflections**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that health care small business owners and managers in New York State use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. In conducting this study, I understood that health care small business owners and managers could use different strategies to grow and sustain their businesses. From the study findings, I obtained an in-depth understanding of the

research problem and learned that health care small business owners and managers use a combination of similar strategies to sustain their businesses. My reflection on the experiences within the DBA doctoral study process indicate that I gained a better understanding and knowledge of the research process which made a positive change regarding my personal biases and preconceived ideas and values. The knowledge gained from this doctoral research study improved my understanding and skill in conducting academic research work.

I used the purposive sampling technique to select 6 health care small business owners and managers who owned and managed health care small businesses for more than three years and used sustainable business strategies to achieve business goals. Using the purposive sampling technique to select participants, I observed improvements in my networking and interpersonal skills. By choosing the qualitative research method, I conducted the semistructured interviews which enabled me to interact with the participants and provided me the opportunity to improve my listening, communication, self-confidence, and emotional intelligence skills. Conducting the interviews at the participants' convenient time and location enabled the respondents to express themselves freely and provided me with the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies they use to sustain their businesses.

Reflecting on the participants' responses, I observed that health care small business owners and managers use a combination of similar strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Of particular interest is the knowledge that most health care small business owners and managers use education, training, and skills; customer-centric;



and IT update as major strategies for sustaining their businesses. The study findings changed my personal biases and preconceived ideas and values on the approaches for sustaining small businesses because I have gained knowledge and understanding from 6 health care small business owners and managers.

### **Conclusion**

Small business owners face challenges on how to sustain businesses beyond 5 years. The aim of this qualitative multiple case study was to use the sustainability development theory as lens to explore the strategies health care small business owners and managers in New York State use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Using open-ended questions, I conducted semistructured interviews with 6 health care small business owners and managers to collect data to answer the research question. Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis of data indicating the strategies health care small business owners and managers in New York State use for sustaining businesses beyond 5 years. The themes are (a) education, training, and experience; (b) customer-centric; (c) information technology update; (d) development of business plan; and (e) relationship and networking.

Health care small business owners and managers who are facing challenges of sustaining their businesses may use the findings of this study to enhance their business sustainability. By sustaining their businesses, health care small business owners and managers might grow the firms and boost profitability, which may increase their corporate social responsibility to citizens in the local communities. Using the sustainability development theory as lens for this study, which involved health care small

business companies, this study may fill a gap in the literature. The study findings support the conclusions by previous researchers regarding the importance and benefits of using appropriate strategies to sustain small businesses beyond 5 years.

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### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

This is the procedure the participant/interviewee and the researcher will follow during the interview process.

- (a) I and the participant will meet at the designated location, introduce ourselves, and go through the interview protocol before starting the interview
- (b) The participant will receive a copy of the consent form for his/her records
- (c) I will ask the participant whether he/she has concerns regarding the protocol
- (d) Inform the participant that he/she will assume a pseudonym identification name comprising of alphanumeric code(s) for confidentiality reasons
- (e) Inform participant that the interview may last 25 to 35 minutes
- (f) Turn-on the recording device, set date, start and end time, place of the interview, and begin the interview
- (g) We will begin the interview with question numbers 1 to 7:
  - 1. What strategies do you use to sustain your healthcare products and services?
  - 2. How effective are the strategies in meeting your business objectives?
  - 3. How did you assess the effectiveness of these strategies?
  - 4. What obstacles did you encounter in implementing these strategies?
  - 5. How did you address the obstacles to implementing the strategies?
  - 6. How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these obstacles?
  - 7. What recommendations would you like to share on ways to improve sustainability for other small businesses?
- (h) Ask the interviewee if he has any further questions regarding the interview

- (i) Discuss a follow up procedure and member checking with the interviewee
- (j) End the interview, record the time of the day, and how long the interview lasted
- (k) Thank participant for his/her time
- (l) Inform participant that I will follow-up for review of interview report and for member checking to ensure accurate translation of the recorded interview
- (m) Renew contact information should either party has concerns or questions regarding the interview.

## Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Date:

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is James U. Nwachukwu and a doctoral student at Walden University. As part of my doctoral dissertation research at Walden University, I need to conduct a research on strategies for sustaining small businesses. The purpose of the study is to explore strategies small business owners and managers may use to sustain their businesses. As an owner or manager of a successful small business, you are cordially invited to participate in the study.

Participants to the study should meet the following criteria:

1. Be a small business owner or manager in New York State
2. The business should have been in operation for at least 5 consecutive years
3. The business should have been profitable for at least 3 consecutive years
4. The owner or manager must have employed strategies to sustain the business.

If you satisfy the above criteria and agree to participate in the study, please, notify me via my email address or telephone number provided below. I will contact you to conduct a semistructured interview. The interview is estimated to last between 25 to 35 minutes, will be audio recorded, and transcribed. Participants will be given a copy to review for accuracy before inclusion to the final doctoral dissertation study.

Thanks for accepting to participate.

James U. Nwachukwu



## Appendix C: National Institutes of Health Certificate of Completion

5/17/2015

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants

