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Success Strategies for Small Service Business Owners

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

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by

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MS, University of West Florida, 1998

BS, University of West Florida, 1989

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Small business owners struggle to sustain their businesses over time. According to U.S. Census data in 2014, only half of all small businesses survived beyond the first 5 years of operation, and only a third survived longer than 10 years. Grounded with the strategic contingency theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. The target population consisted of 4 owners of small service and retail businesses in Arlington, VA, with fewer than 50 employees who have succeeded in business longer than 5 years. Through a process of methodological triangulation, data collected from financial documents, publicly available records, and external sources supplemented semistructured interview data. Using thematic analysis by coding narrative segments, 3 themes emerged including developing a unique marketing strategy, developing strategic leadership skills, and required business skills for sustainability. Successful unique marketing strategies emerged from understanding customer needs. The results from this study could benefit business owners by improving business success rates, which would have a positive economic effect on local community, including job creation, and sustainable economic stability. The implications for positive social change might include the reversal of small business failure trends through the application of successful business strategies.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my father, the late L. K. Stallworth, my mother, Ann Hilton, and my two sisters, Jennifer Kelly and Delores Lane. I thank my family for their love and support, and especially my mother for teaching me that all things are possible through Christ. I would like to thank Amber Ratcliff, for her love, support, motivation, and understanding of the long hours I put into completing this study successfully. Amber you can achieve whatever your heart desires. I am truly grateful to God for giving me the strength and mind to travel this road and complete this journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small business owners must understand and possess the essential skills necessary for establishing and sustaining successful businesses. Since 1992, the rate of small business failure paced the number of startups (Small Business Administration [SBA], 2014). Individuals invest time to create successful enterprises. However, not all small business owners have the skills necessary to sustain their businesses and remain profitable. Since 2014, only half of all small service businesses survived beyond 5 years and only one-third survived beyond 10 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). According to Goetsch and Davis (2014), the factors that may contribute to failure include inadequate planning and lack of strategy.

Background of the Problem

Historical records from the 1800s include accounts of entrepreneurs' contributions to the U.S. economy (Webb, Ireland, & Ketchen, 2014). Small business leaders who possess well-developed and adaptable skills achieve incremental success (Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, & Ferris, 2013). Business life-cycle theorists founded their inquiries and investigations on the assumption that all businesses characteristically progress through start-up, growth, maturity, and decline phases (Miettinen & Littunen, 2013). While innovation tends to propel and enhance survival opportunities for small business owners during the development stage, chances of failure may peak during the growth stage (Miettinen & Littunen, 2013). Consequently, small business owners need strategies appropriate for managing their operations throughout the business lifecycle.

The factors that contribute to business failure include inadequate planning, lack of

strategy, and poor operation (Goetsch & Davis 2014). According to Goetsch and Davis (2014), a high level of risk tolerance was a common entrepreneurial trait that could lead to poor decision-making and an increased probability of business failure. Failure remains a part of the business experience that affects entrepreneurs negatively (Jenkins, Wiklund, & Brundin, 2014). Jenkins et al. (2014) claimed that learning from failure requires the business owner to reflect on their failure deliberately and comprehensively. The results of this study may provide small service business owners with strategies other successful small business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Problem Statement

Few small business owners have enterprises that survive beyond the first 5 years of operation (SBA, 2014). Statisticians used labor force data from 2014 to show that only half of all small businesses survived beyond the first 5 years of operation, and only one-third survive beyond 10 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The general business problem is small businesses embark on initiatives without adequate strategies, which results in premature business failure. The specific business problem was that some small service business owners lack strategies necessary to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. The target population consisted of four owners of small service businesses in Arlington, VA, with less than 50 employees who have succeeded in business beyond 5 years. The implications

for positive social change could include the potential to strengthen-business practices, which may lead to economic opportunities in local communities because of the sustained success of small business owners and increased job security for potential employees.

Nature of the Study

The three methods used by researchers are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. The qualitative research method is useful when researchers seek to acquire deep understanding of a problem (Yin, 2014). A researcher might achieve this goal by gathering narrative or observational data from individuals or groups for inductive analysis (Bernard, 2013). A qualitative study does not include numeric data but involves: (a) an open-ended interview, (b) content analysis, (c) quality document analysis, and (d) literature synthesis (Holt & Goulding, 2014). The quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study because a researcher cannot access the strategies and skills necessary for success using numerical data. Quantitative researchers test hypotheses by examining the relationships among numeric variables (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Quantitative techniques are useful for confirming the existence of theory and for testing to help develop an idea further; however, there must be a clear understanding of the base constructs (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The mixed methods research approach is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Yilmaz, 2013). A mixed methods approach was not appropriate for this study because I was not interested in including an examination of a relationship among variables in this study. The study included collecting only qualitative data to explore a business problem. Thus a qualitative method was appropriate for the study.

A qualitative researcher can choose among numerous designs (Yin, 2014). Of the available designs, I considered phenomenology, ethnography, and case study. A phenomenological researcher attempts to gain an understanding of the *lived experiences* of participants (Moustakas, 1994). Understanding the lived experiences of participants was not the intent of this study. An ethnographic researcher explores the cultures of specific groups (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). Exploring the culture of a group was also not the intent of this study. I conducted a multiple case study design for this study to explore strategies small service business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. Case study design is the most appropriate research approach to explore a *bounded system* using various data sources or collection methods according to Abma and Stake (2014). I used a qualitative method and case study design to collect in-depth information from semistructured, face-to-face interviews and document analysis.

Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do small successful business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation?

Interview Questions

The following semistructured interview questions were effective for eliciting rich data for qualitative analysis. The semistructured interview questions were:

1. What strategies do you use to succeed in business?

2. What strategies did you use to overcome obstacles you encountered?

3. What skills are critical to your success?

4. What strategies do you use to attract and retain customers?

5. What planning process do you use during your first 5 years in business?

6. What skill sets were most important to improve the profitability of your business?

7. What other information can you add concerning your skills and knowledge as contributing to a successful small business owner beyond 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

The strategic contingency theory (SCT) as developed by Fiedler in 1964 served as the conceptual framework for this study. Fiedler (1964) stipulated that the effectiveness of leadership strategies depended on situational or environmental factors in which the organization operates. Fiedler used the theory to explain why management style of the leader within a business changes, depending on the operating environment (Abdalkrim, 2013). The key proposition of the theory is that managers have to use strategies that fit the nature of the business and employees (Andersen, 2016). Through the application of SCT, researchers frame the success of businesses based on the diplomacy skills of leaders and decision-making strategies. As it relates to this study, SCT provided a lens through which I explored business strategies of small business owners.

Utilizing the propositions offered by the SCT provides a lens for participants to explain their experiences regarding successful business strategies. The application of this theory supports my research question which was: What strategies do small successful business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation? Other authors, such as Will (2016) and Baron, Zhao, and Miao (2015) used the SCT framework to frame various strategies management use for business success. The authors found that flexibility

and not over-relying on one specific strategy were key to success. By interviewing several successful business owners, I was able to explore a range of successful business strategies used by small business owners.

Operational Definitions

Business failure: Business failure occurs when a business owner terminates operations or does not create a net profit for previous years (Ucbasaran, Shepherd, Lockett, & Lyon, 2013).

Business survival: Business survival occurs when managers can operate continuously (Abdalkrim, 2013).

Business success: Business success is measured by profitability (SBA, 2014).

Business Owner: An employee is an individual who organizes, manages, and assumes the risk of business (Bromiley, McShane, Nair, & Rustambekov, 2015).

Entrepreneurship orientation: Entrepreneurship orientation is present when a person possesses the cognitive ability to create a new business, incorporate the assumption of risk, seek opportunities, and develop an idea from inception to reality (Pérez-Luño & Saparito, 2014).

Small businesses: Small businesses are businesses operated by one owner with fewer than 50 employees (SBA, 2014).

Strategies: Strategies are the creation, implementation, and evaluation of decisions within a business that enable the organizational leaders to achieve their long-term objectives (Moore & Buchanan, 2013).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are notions that the researcher believes to be true but has not verified (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Lifecycle theorists, for example, based their studies on the assumption that small business owner's progress through four fundamental stages characteristically; these stages are startup, growth, maturity, and decline (Miettinen & Littunen, 2013). I made four assumptions in this study. First, I assumed data collection was timely, valid, and reliable. Second, I assumed participants would give truthful responses with an understanding that their responses were confidential. Third, I assumed using in-depth, open-ended questions in a multiple case study design was appropriate to provide the breadth and depth required for relevant analysis. The fourth assumption was that the participants would provide valuable insights related to the research problem.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses that affect the outcomes of a study (Kaefer, Roper, & Sinha, 2015). I identified three limitations in this study. Participants may not express what experts consider best practices. Participants may also be unwilling to share their business decision-making processes, strategic choices, and unfavorable experiences in the interview setting. Lastly, focusing on business owners in one Virginian city might limit the generalizability of the study's conclusions to rural or metropolitan areas.

Delimitations

Delimitations are restrictions or boundaries that researchers impose to focus the

scope of exploration (Newman, Hitchcock, & Newman, 2015). The first delimitation was the use of small businesses as categorized by SBA researchers. Additionally, the narrowness of the research problem, the use of nonrandom or purposeful sampling, and geographic restrictions coupled with the use of semistructured interviews delimited this study. The final delimitation related to small business characteristics. I limited the population to small business owners with at least 5 years of successful operations and who had fewer than 50 employees.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study could improve organizational stakeholders' understanding of strategies of small business owners. The study findings may help future practitioners develop successful business strategies. Society could benefit from this study because successful small businesses are integral to the structure of a community.

Contribution to Business Practice

Business leaders could benefit from the results of this study by understanding the factors that affect the survival of small businesses. This information will be helpful to both new and established small businesses. The number of small business startups in the United States exceeded 700,000 in the previous decade (SBA, 2014). Businesses that are profitable for over the first 5 years of operation indicate their ability to sustain high profits, grow profits, and deploy effective strategies (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013). The results of this study can help identify what skills and operational strategies small service business owners need to succeed in business beyond the first 5 years of operation. Additionally, the results of this study may reduce gaps in the literature by increasing the

knowledge useful to small service business owners during the initial phases of business activity. This type of knowledge could contribute to the evolution of the business environment. A business model of this type might create positive changes in the industry, might be of benefit to employees, and might support communities economically.

Implications for Social Change

Communities and society could benefit from the results of this study by improving business success rates, which would have economic effects on the community, including job creation and sustainable stability. The discussions and conclusions in this study may be of value to the business community; however, to learn lessons from failure requires deliberate reflection (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Once learned, these lessons can transcend generations and put entire communities on the precipice of economic equality. The findings in this study may contribute to positive social change through the creation of recommendations that might lead to the reversal of the business failure trends.

<p align="center">**A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**</p>

This section is a presentation of the available literature related to the research topic. Searches for relevant literature included the use of databases available through Walden University's Library and Google Scholar. Database searches of Academic Search Complete/Premier, Expanded Academic ASAP, EBSCOhost, SAGE Premier, and ProQuest resulted in the accumulation of journal articles, books, dissertations, government reports, conference papers, and websites relevant to the topic. Keywords and phrases used to procure the literature used in the study included *small business history*, *defining failure*, *defining success*, *entrepreneurs' failures*, *small business history*, *small*

business finances, and *lack of human capital.* Searches included various combinations of these terms to ensure optimal relevance.

The purpose of a literature review is to synthesize and summarize the literature as it relates to a research topic (Wakefield, 2015). A literature review could provide a new interpretation of existing literature and help scholars and researchers to avoid unintentional duplication of existing research while enhancing professional development and enabling important contributions (Wakefield, 2015). This literature review contains 239 total references. In total, there are 218 peer-reviewed sources published within five years of my pending graduation, which represents 91% of the total references. Of the total number of references in the study, 96% of my references were within 5 years of my expected graduation.

Strategic Contingency Theory

The SCT formed the framework of this study. Fiedler (1964) stipulated that the effectiveness of leaders' strategies depended on situational or environmental factors. Applying a particular leadership style to all organizations or situations is not universal. Management style takes different forms and leaders design strategies for their business operating environments specifically. There are numerous management modalities; managers have to use strategies that fit the nature of their businesses and employees (Fiedler, 1964). Using this theory, I framed my research question.

Jokipii (2010) supported Fiedler's (1964) explanation of the SCT. This researcher used the theory to emphasize that leaders should be able to employ strategies that are suitable for businesses' operating environments. Jokipii posited employees ought to be

flexible in their obligations to prevent organizations from failing. The basis of the theory is that an organization's success depends on the presence of a diplomatic business leader who uses strategic decision making that reflects the context of which the business is operating. The theorist explained leaders should try to obtain optimum employee productivity by capitalizing on behavioral traits. According to Müller and Drax (2014), leaders should try to obtain optimum employee production based on employees' developmental practices in the specific operating environment.

The SCT is a key theoretical lens used by scholars to view organizations. The essence of the SCT paradigm is that organizational effectiveness results from fitting characteristics of the organizations (structure) to contingencies that reflect the situational circumstances (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Organizational leaders seek strategies that match operations to the existing business environment to attain maximum efficiency and productivity. These leaders avoid the misfits that might result when contingencies change and do so by remaining adaptable and flexible. Contingencies contribute to the shaping of the business as the leaders work toward reducing the loss of performance. While one or two key individuals might necessarily lead a small business, each business may vary in size and there is little opportunity for a strict demarcation of roles; each person functions in an ad hoc capacity.

Turel and Bart (2014) stated that a business owner risks failure when the leaders do not conform to the business-operating environment and if the leader does not have the control and respect of employees. According to Hollenbeck, DeRue, and Nahrgang (2015), leaders direct employees in performing duties that contribute to the success of the

organizations. Leaders should understand how to stimulate their followers by balancing management and motivation techniques. Examining the causes of small business failure, Jenkins et al. (2014) used the SCT to affirm that businesses failed due to poor leadership or management and because of the leaders' inabilities to make adequate situational decisions.

Will (2016) used the SCT to suggest that the management style and strategic orientation of the business leader should align with, and be sufficiently flexible to match, the volatility and dynamism of the operating environment. In essence, small businesses should think strategically to prepare their businesses for the unexpected by setting contingency plans. Entrepreneurs look for other ways of addressing business problems that occurred instead of choosing to close those businesses permanently. Baron et al. (2015) suggested that entrepreneurs have a personal responsibility to prevent their businesses from failing. The author's view was small business should have self-enhancing and transcendent value orientations to be more innovative.

According to Baron et al. (2015), innovation would imply formulating business operating strategies that best fit the environment of the business. This view aligns well with Fielder's (1964) SCT theory that forms the basis of this study. Lussier (2014) proposed failure to adapt adequately to the environment and external factors could cause businesses to fail. Consequently, small business leaders' robust strategic capabilities could link positively to business growth; however, what is unknown is whether small business leaders engage in strategic planning, especially in changing business environments.

Alternative Theories

While the SCT provides an appropriate framework for the research question, I

also considered two additional theories, the servant leadership theory and the

entrepreneurship orientation theory (EOT). Both theories provide addition constructs

related to the success of small businesses. The servant leadership theory provides a

framework for understanding how a manager may interact with employees. The servant

leader shares many of the attributes of spiritual leaders who transformed followers into

servants (Shek, Chung, & Leung, 2015). The servant leaders move beyond performance

outputs by emphasizing the moral, emotional, and relational aspects of ethical leadership.

The servant style, categorized along with other value-based leadership, relates to spiritual

leadership (Krishnakumar, Houghton, Neck, & Ellison, 2015).

The EOT applies to all business regardless of size, age, or formation type;

entrepreneurship orientation exists independently of the small businesses objectives.

During the 1940s and 1950s Schumpeter, Harper, and Cole were vital researchers who

were instrumental in developing the EOT by establishing higher levels of

conceptualization (as cited in Covin & Miller, 2014). The early theorists suggested that

entrepreneurs were agents of disruptive change (Covin & Miller, 2014; Schumpeter,

1934).

Covin and Lumpkin (2011) focused their study on one aspect of EOT; their

investigation involved entrepreneurship orientation as an aspect of corporate

entrepreneurship. According to Covin and Lumpkin, entrepreneurship orientation consists

of leaders' and managers' abilities to recognize sustained behavioral patterns that enable

entrepreneurship and innovation within a business. Dimitratos, Liouka, and Young (2014) noted that owners of family-operated firms considered long-term orientation as the tendency to prioritize the long-range implications and effects of decisions and actions. Dimitratos et al. (2014) provided insight into how long-term orientation and entrepreneurship orientation aligned with a relative level of innovation, autonomy, and overall positive effect.

Creativity is a component of entrepreneurship (Lobontiu & Lobontiu, 2014). According to Lobontiu and Lobontiu (2014), understanding the contribution of creativity to entrepreneurial effort led to a holistic and transdisciplinary understanding of entrepreneurship. While the definition of entrepreneurship depended on the subjective interpretation of the scholar (Lobontiu & Lobontiu, 2014), the use of creativity and innovation can provide solutions for established businesses and entrepreneurs alike. Similarly, the presence of an entrepreneurial culture could increase the probability of empowering small businesses and employees. Toma, Grigore, and Marinescu (2014) focused their study on the concepts of economic development and factors involved in the relationship between entrepreneurship and economic development. The researchers revealed a secure connection between economic development and entrepreneurship. The advent of worthwhile ventures led to economic development (Toma et al., 2014).

Jenner and Jenner (2016) sought to extend the research on opportunity identification in the social entrepreneurship literature. Across multiple case studies, these authors identified a pattern in social value creation. The pattern reflected actors seeing a social need and prospecting an idea (Jenner & Jenner, 2016). The article revealed that

multiple, engaged interactions nudged opportunity into manifestation. There is a flow in entrepreneurship theory from rational to wise. According to Lobontiu and Lobontiu (2014), the reviewed narrow rationality of entrepreneurial studies noted that individuals should view entrepreneurship as an inherently normative enterprise. The researchers suggested it might be necessary to view entrepreneurship through practical wisdom, which may lead to a more productive and complex view of entrepreneurial decision-making.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is an approach to management that focuses on innovation, proactivity, and risk-taking. Entrepreneurs plays a significant role in the development of jobs and economic development (Decker, Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2014). Dai, Maksimov, Gilbert, and Fernhaber (2014) indicated that entrepreneurship is the best method for combating social ills. There is a need to bring back the sense of community that has declined in recent calls for businesses to move beyond good citizenship and become community leaders (Dai et al., 2014). Corporations can empower communities by implementing community-organizing strategies (Franks, & Vanclay, 2013). A small business who exhibits socially responsible behaviors may encourage and maintain a positive relationship with stakeholders (Helmig, Spraul, & Ingenhoff, 2016). Mason and Brown (2013) indicated that to promote growth, stakeholders must be conscious of quality-of-life concern as they relate to the small business image. Consumers are less likely to engage in business transactions in regions perceived as high crime area, thereby

causing the business to lose potential sales and to reconsider the business migrating into such neighborhoods (Mason & Brown, 2013).

Defining success. The terms success, growth, performance, and profit appear as synonyms in small business research (Leković & Marić, 2015). Increases in self-employment contributed to ambiguity about research results on small businesses success (Omri, Frikha, & Bouraoui, 2015). Owners of insolvent small businesses often invested personal assets, borrowed from friends and relatives, and reduced their compensation to remain in business (Armstrong, 2013). Small businesses faced with financial challenges considered the business successful when it was surviving, although failure remained imminent (Armstrong, 2013).

The long-term success of small businesses was dependent on investment in human capital and training for sustainability (Albuquerque, Escrivão Filho, Nagano, & Junior, 2016). Many professional groups noted the importance of skills and relevant educations had recognized the value of educational programs. Leadership was a key component of organizational success, and there was a concomitant association with low employee turnover (Berson, Da'as, & Waldman, 2015). Small businesses needed to look at the past and consider the practitioner propensity for new leadership initiatives. There was a need for appropriate leadership training for small businesses practitioners; training programs required flexibility, knowledge relevance, and an environment where practitioners could apply what they learned (Coenen & Kok, 2014). Sarasvathy, Menon, and Kuechle (2013) reviewed entrepreneurial self-effectiveness after failure and noted that although many entrepreneurs failed; they recovered and persevered to start another

business. Leadership skills were success factors for projects and businesses (Bullough &

Renko, 2013). Although the style of leadership varied with each situation, applying the

appropriate style was necessary for success (Nordqvist, Wennberg, & Hellerstedt, 2013).

Nordqvist et al., 2013 argued for the consideration of culture in leadership and

management education.

   Defining failure. Administrators at the SBA classified businesses by industry;

furthermore, there were sub-classifications by the number of employees and by annual

sales (Luo & Lee, 2015). Additional characteristics included (a) initial capital, (b)

employee turnover percentage in the first year, (c) value of raw materials, (d) value of

products produced, (e) annual sales, (f) net income, (g) net worth, (h) relative size within

the industry, and (i) a combination of these characteristics (Armstrong, 2013).

Researchers developed differing definitions of failure; thus, researchers produced

inconsistent findings and inaccurate recommendations (Luo & Lee, 2015). Additional

causes of business failure included (a) bankruptcy, (b) involuntary termination with a loss

to creditors, (c) voluntary termination, (d) failure as opportunity cost, (e) partnership

dispute, (f) legal dispute, (g) personal limitations of owner, (h) elective discontinuance,

(i) merger with or acquisition by another firm, and (j) death of the small business owner.

   Business failure results in economic and financial costs to communities and

owners respectively (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Through to the end of the 20th century, the

number of small business start-ups consistently outpaced closures (SBA, 2014). Each

year fewer than 25% of small businesses survive beyond 5 years (SBA, 2014). According

to Madsen and Bingham (2014), approximately 34% of new businesses failed within the

first 2 years. No organizations tracked small business failure rates before the 1950s.

However, the failure rates have been consistent from 1950 through 2011, and this number

doubled since 1955 due to the increasing number of start-ups (Armstrong, 2013).

During the economic recession from 2007 to 2010, businesses with fewer than 50

employees experienced a higher rate of job loss and failure than businesses with more

than 50 employees (Lee, Sameen & Cowling, 2015). In 2010, as the economic recession

ended, business closures exceeded new business start-ups by 20% for the first time in

recorded history (SBA, 2014). Although the data regarding small business failures varied,

researchers agreed that new small businesses failed at an alarming rate, and additional

research would be necessary on the topics of success and failure (Lee, Sameen &

Cowling, 2015). Nearly 390,000 businesses failed in the United States in 2014 (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2017). Business leaders could prevent business failures through better

planning (SBA, 2014).

Entrepreneurs' failures. Successful entrepreneurs use their failed business

attempts as learning tools for future opportunities (Toft-Kehler, Wennberg, & Kim,

2014). According to Toft-Kehler et al. (2014), failure occurs because of barriers to

success, such as limited access to capital and ineffective management. The greatest lesson

gained from failure was learning what not to do during the next attempt (Toft-Kehler et

al., 2014). Having an internal audit system contributed to entrepreneurs' successes.

Warren and Smith (2015) provided insight into how the lack of use internal auditing

systems by entrepreneurs caused business failure, and the authors noted that the auditing

process should include a focus on the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of

operations. According to Warren and Smith, these attributes would enhance the entrepreneur's skills as well as the business. The authors revealed a view of the business from a perspective other than conceptual skills, human skills, and technical skills.

Löfsten (2016) reviewed the performance of 539 new small IT businesses ventures and discussed the causes of business failure. Less than half the businesses survived 2 years; economic conditions contributed to the failure, and first-product success highly correlated business continuation (Löfsten, 2016). Ideas generated by the founder enhance the first-product. Venture and first-product success were higher when the entrepreneurs' ideas reflected the technological development and customer needs (Löfsten, 2016). The authors indicated the importance of a successful first-product leading to the success of the new business venture.

Khelil (2016) sought to identify the causes of entrepreneurial failure by reviewing reports from 1999 to 2001 from seven major U.S. newspapers, which provided 389 accounts of failure. They found that the cause of entrepreneurial failure depended on the geographical area (Khelil, 2016). The researchers' revealed failure occurred because of mistakes made by the entrepreneur as well as misfortunes that were out of the control of the entrepreneur. The failures of small businesses caused stigmatization of entrepreneurship as entrepreneurs began to view themselves negatively (Khelil, 2016). Byrne and Shepherd (2015) reviewed the conditions confronted by entrepreneurs at the time of business establishment and noted that founding effects are essential determinants of exit rates. The researchers indicated that there was no superior theoretical perspective to explain the survival of a small business.

Small Businesses in the U.S. Economy

Small businesses are critical to the U.S. economy. Tassey (2013) asserted if the United States is to rebuild its manufacturing industry, that small businesses must be an element of the strategy. Tassey asserted a natural and favorable situation for the United States would be an economic revolution with emphasis on services industries. Tassey posited manufacturing was a vital element of a prosperous and vibrant economy. The proposed strategy was to revitalize the manufacturing industry by developing (a) comprehensive public policy that was supportive of large and small manufacturers; (b) encouraging lending institutions to extend credit to small businesses to ease the difficulty in securing capital; and (c) government support in for the form of credit policies. According to Laufs, and Schwens (2014), disadvantaged domestic small businesses could then effectively compete with foreign subsidized small businesses.

Small business history. Lawmakers established the U.S. SBA in 1953 to protect, assist, and counsel small business owners (O'Donnell, 2014). Government-sponsored organizations such as the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Smaller War Plants Corporation, and the Small Defense Plants Administration were the predecessors of the SBA. Each of these organizations was a government response to a period of American economic hardship, such as the Great Depression and World Wars I and II. Federal and state governments, small business lending institutions, and business organizations like the SBA had the common goal of helping disadvantaged people shift to business ownership (O'Donnell, 2014). The SBA adapted its functions to service various government initiatives throughout the years (Bates & Robb, 2013). For example, through the

Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the SBA expanded its loan guarantee program to include marginalized business owners who lived in poor neighborhoods and who could not compete in the marketplace. High loan default rates preceded the program's demise in 1984. In a related effort, from 1977 to 1996, SBA administrators oversaw another program called the Minority Enterprise Small Business Investment Company (MESBIC). The administrators, with the intent of revitalizing neighborhoods and boosting microeconomic growth, used MESBIC to target economically distressed areas around the country. The MESBIC program ended after an extended period of negative return on investment, inadequate distribution of resources around the country, and limited innovative business activity (Bates & Robb, 2013).

Since its inception in 1953, the primary goal of the SBA was to facilitate lending to business owners who had limited capital and limited liquidity (O'Donnell, 2014). When ethnic minority business owners applied for SBA loan guarantees, SBA agents used equity to net worth ratio as part of the determination matrix (Bates & Robb, 2013). SBA agents relied on the same criteria used by lending institutions and thus denied African Americans startup or operating capital (Bates & Robb, 2013). Equity and net worth standards were particularly problematic for African Americans who seek capital from traditional lending institutions or the SBA. Typically, African Americans were deficient in both equity and net worth. Additionally, the SBA agents offered epigrammatic training programs, but these programs and services were not sufficient to support entrepreneurial success within ethnic minority communities (Bates & Robb, 2013). Researchers used decomposition analysis of SBA loan approval rates and denial

rates to verify findings from earlier investigations (Mijid & Bernasek, 2013). The findings in this study provided further evidence that patterns of credit rationing were discriminatory. Lenders used statistical discrimination to judge the merits of loan applicants; statistical discrimination was a process of applying the perception of quality of an applicant based on statistical expectation rather than using the attributes of the applicant to judge the merits of the loan. The researchers questioned whether SBA loan denials resulted from internal (SBA) criteria or if the loan denials related to past discriminations that influenced business owners' management choices. Investigational findings led researchers to promote the reinforcement of public policy to improve anti-discrimination compliance within lending institutions (Mijid & Bernasek, 2013).

Starting a small business. According to Staniewski, Szopiński, and Awruk (2016), starting a new business is risky. Small business owners face challenges and disadvantages. Before small business owners can accomplish a stated mission, they must attract and recruit knowledgeable and devoted workers to join the business. Although this particular need is not unique to small business owners, scholars have noted this group encounters challenges when attempting to meet such needs. Unlike the operators of large enterprises, small businesses do not have name recognition, nor do they have the wherewithal to offer a competitive array of perquisites. Ucbasaran et al. (2013) discussed the reasons for success or failure of small businesses, claiming small businesses ceased operations for many reasons. A variety of measures including the number of employees, revenues, and skills provide the basis for defining a business as small (SBA, 2014). Staniewski rt al., 2016 discussed the similarity of issues faced by small businesses. For

example, Lussier (2014) asserted external conditions such as regulation and industry

conditions are critical determinants of success. According to Solomon, Bryant, May, and

Perry (2013), small businesses shared challenges such as limited resources.

Small businesses require (a) adequate capital, (b) competent employees, (c) a

coordinated value chain, (d) knowledge management, and (e) efficient and effective

management of ongoing operations (Madsen & Bingham, 2014). Securing adequate

capital is a critical aspect of success. Administrators at the SBA developed guaranteed

finance programs to support small businesses; however, these programs appeared to

benefit the involved financial institution more than the business owner (Qaied, Ennab,

Neamat, 2015). Owning a small business might provide opportunities for

underrepresented demographic segments of the labor force, including people with

minimal education, senior citizens, workers with disabilities, and individuals in rural

regions (Madsen & Bingham, 2014).

The importance of small businesses to the U.S. economy began to decline in the

early 20th century; according to Obi (2013), this was an era when leaders of corporations,

unions, and the government worked jointly to deliver economic growth (Obi, 2013). A 5-

decade resurgence of entrepreneurism began in the 1970s (Madsen & Bingham, 2014). A

small business renaissance expanded into the second decade of the 21st century.

Small businesses have served some crucial roles in the U.S. economy such

including (a) providing income for unemployed and underemployed; (b) employing 66%

of minorities; (c) employing 70% of older individuals; (d) employing disabled workers,

and (e) employing rural workers. Additionally, this group filled underserved niches and

provided products and services in which large corporations could not benefit from economies of scale. Madsen and Bingham (2014) claimed other small business roles included (a) serving as the primary source of new creative and innovative concepts, products, and services; (b) providing support services for large businesses; and (c) providing 16.5 times as many patents per employees as large businesses.

There was operational research on small businesses enterprises, but researchers tended to address the needs of larger small businesses (Obi, 2013). However, little research existed on leadership in smaller enterprises (Sakiru, D'Silva, Othman, DaudSilong, & Busayo, 2013). In a discussion of the uniqueness of small- and medium-sized businesses, Memili, Fang, Chrisman, and De Massis (2015) cautioned against generalizing because strategies for large businesses differed from those used in small businesses. (Memili et al., 2015) mentioned the greater resource constraints on owners of small enterprises tended to impede their (the owners') understanding of strategies needed to achieve success.

Small businesses operated in obscurity, had few employees and lacked access to information. Sakiru et al. (2013) noted neglect for microbusinesses, those businesses with fewer than five persons, regarding resources and research dedicated to solving the inherent problems. Small businesses account for greater than 95% of businesses in most counties in the United States (Hilbrecht, 2016). In the United States, half of all small businesses cease to exist after 5 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Family businesses play a role in the business sector. These businesses range in size from two-person operations to Fortune 500 businesses. The family business sector

comprises 90% of all businesses in the United States (Gilding, Gregory, & Cosson, 2015). Ko, Hur, and Smith-Walter (2013) identified a gap in research for family businesses that was disproportionate to the economic impact. Ko et al. (2013) noted that 70% of the owners of family businesses, which were complex than traditional nonfamily businesses, failed to plan strategically, and 66% of the owners had no succession plans. Kahan & Agha (2013) claimed the family-owned business was the prevalent form of business. The problems with small family-owned businesses related to combining business and family decision making. According to Kowsalyadevi and Kumar (2013), there was little separation between life and business decisions but entangled with life a decision often becomes with those involving the business. The family might bear the risk for business decisions and the burden of legal obligations (Kowsalyadevi & Kumar, 2013).

In many small businesses, owners wanted to leave a legacy for others to follow. Taranenco (2013) investigated the effects of the family legacy on businesses and compared the relative sustainability of businesses with and without such legacies. Trends existed between small businesses who want to leave a personal legacy through their business and those who had sustainable strategies for the future generations of stakeholders. An occurrence in small family business is generational legacies; information from successful family-owned practitioners might influence the next generation of leaders.

Small business strategy categories. Small business strategy categories include networking, processes, innovation, technology, and internationalization. The strategies

for each of these topics are not specific to small businesses, but relate to operations; to operate through riotous times small business owners need strategies focusing on issues. Strategy should be a combination of creativity, analysis, planning, and learning (Abdalkrim, 2013).

Developing and leveraging business networks and seeking to study competitors' approaches continually in the marketplace provided small business businesses opportunities to succeed (De Salas & Huxley, 2014). Obi (2013), and Talay, Calantone, and Voorhees (2014) suggested small businesses should continue to expand networking capabilities to ensure stakeholder involvement. Small business leaders needed to consider formal and informal networking and connectivity opportunities as part of the strategy. Building quality customer relationships led to achieving success (Bogren, von Friedrichs, Rennemo, & Widding, 2013). Determining how to improve knowledge management processes was a proposed approach for managers to leverage (Obi, 2013). Processes were opportunities to link value-chain activities in firms. These processes were supportive of the formalization of strategies and plans within the business culture. Small businesses were the primary drivers of innovation (Audretsch, Coad, & Segarra, 2014; Brunswicker & Vanhaverbeke, 2015). Chen, Chen, Hsu, and Podolski (2016) highlighted the importance of unleashing employee creativity to drive innovation. However, incremental innovations stimulated the majority improvements to existing products or services.

Technological advancement is commonplace and associated with the IT industry intricately (Blackburn, Hart, & Wainwright, 2013). Leveraging cloud computing technology to decrease cost structures while enhancing capabilities provides a

demonstrated opportunity for small businesses simultaneously (Blackburn, et al., 2013). Small businesses must build technology skills that complement expertise in areas like finance, human resource management, and information management. Wilburn and Wilburn (2014) argued the technological knowledge and expertise determine a business owner's ability to assimilate new technologies into operations.

Obi (2013) suggested focusing on a broader range of factors as the best approach to studying small business strategy. Elements that could influence successful strategy included resource management, environmental scanning, stakeholder involvement approaches, and knowledge management. An important finding in research was that small-businesses failed to develop strategic plans for periods of more than six months at a time. Obi recommended additional research to improve the understanding of why businesses planned for such short time horizons.

Formal business plans for small businesses. Strategic plans were important in shaping owners' responsibilities by creating awareness and promoting directional responses from stakeholders (Garriga, 2014). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) concluded that business plans promoted employment growth. The authors pointed to the direct relationship between planning and business survival. These authors indicated there might be weaknesses other than a lack of planning as small businesses did not borrow funds from banks; therefore, there was no obligation (on the part of the owner) to produce formal plans. As with formal planning, mission statements were important to business survival. In both studies (Duh & Letonja, 2013; Garriga, 2014), the authors agreed that small businesses who operated without clearly defined strategic plans, and honest and

meaningful mission statements lacked understanding of organizational complexities. Operating a business without a formal business plan is one of the fundamental problems with closely held businesses. There was a tendency among small businesses to attempt to protect private information; typically, only one person had the strategies mapped out, yet there was nothing in writing. The lack of a shareable business plan became a problem in the day-to-day operations because other operatives did not have a clear direction. The absence of clear operational strategies was also one of the reasons that financial institutions allocated higher risk profiles to small businesses. The perceived risk occurred because of limited business survival and the unpreparedness of a successor (Ellis & Kiely, 2015).

Planning was a critical competency for small businesses; however, there was limited research regarding specific methods (Trkman, 2013). Strategic planning is an expansive concept that includes a broad range of actions such as control measurement, multi-level planning across many functions. Strategic planning also provided organizational leaders with a means to recognize the adaptive contingencies required to exploit opportunities and challenges. Strategic planning will direct an organization in a changing economic environment, and the process typically begins with a vision for the organization and ends with naming specific actions required for implementation of that vision. The entire process includes vision and mission development, an exhaustive review of the internal and external contextual environment, strategy development, and execution of detailed, measurable plans.

Small business finance. A part of the small businesses process is gaining access to funding to ensure the initiation and growth of the venture. Small businesses should identify the funding options for their businesses. The funding option chosen by the owner should align with the business strategy. Blackburn et al. (2013) noted that small businesses' identities were favorable when they were distinctive. Small businesses needed to distinguish themselves from others in the marketplace when seeking capital. (Blackburn et al., 2013 also noted that achieving legitimacy was necessary for young entrepreneurs. The availability of funds for new ventures declined sharply due to the economic decline in 2008 (Byrd, Ross & Glackin, 2013).

Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) recommended understanding the importance of identifying investors who could provide long-term funds. People who were knowledgeable about business were not so knowledgeable about potential investors. Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) discussed angel investors as a source of funding for entrepreneurs.

A typical strategic topic for small businesses was financing. Chhibber (2013) reviewed existing literature to determine how small business leaders financed their organizations. Most researchers working on financing approaches focused on large business with access to equity markets. Chhibber (2013) discovered the primary financing sources for small businesses included profits and traditional bank loans. External financing was the costliest alternative.

Value chain activities required specialized focus; therefore, pricing was an opportunity for small businesses. Hulbert, Gilmore, and Carson (2013) discovered a

pricing opportunity through a defined long-term focus on process and skill development.

Sakas, Vlachos, and Nasiopoulos (2014) identified the importance of pricing strategy to

overall product management success in small businesses. Byrd et al. (2013) demonstrated

a connection among factors, including pricing, and supply chain relationship. Hulbert et

al. 2013 recommended development of an improved method for determining customer

value and its linkage with the pricing process.

Factors Contributing to Small Business Failures

New businesses failed at a significantly higher rate than existing businesses, and

small businesses have failed at a significantly higher rate compared to large corporations

(Goetsch & Davis, 2014). Small businesses failure was the subject of considerable

debate; however, there is no single accepted theory (Blower & Mahajan, 2013). The lack

of uniformity or consensus on a definition of failure contributed to the confusion about

the causes (Besser, 2016). First time entrepreneurs were as likely to fail in a new business

venture as seasoned one (Cassar, 2014).

Causes of failure of small businesses included internal or exogenous factors

beyond managerial control (Bennett, 2016) Researchers used attribution theory as a

framework to compare what entrepreneurs perceived as leading causes of business

failures to what experts perceived (Bennett, 2016). Researchers concluded entrepreneurs

exhibited a self-serving attribution bias; failure was a part of the business experience that

affected entrepreneurs negatively (Maine, Soh, & Dos Santos, 2015). Delegating day-to-

day operational tasks to a hired manager was a perceived cause of small business failures,

as managers tended to pursue personal interests at the expense of the owners (Hiebl, 2015).

According to Zacca, Dayan, and Ahrens (2015), small businesses failed due to the lack of commodity marketing and their inability to adapt to the changes that were essential to maintaining a competitive advantage. Lack of marketing channels prevented businesses owners from competing with more substantial and established businesses. Zhou, Zhang, Zhuang, and Zhou (2015) suggested that the formation of collective marketing could assist in establishing stronger marketing channels. Such a strategy could help small businesses establish organize channels of marketing and gain competitive advantage.

Researchers reviewed managers' views of business ethics and corporate social responsibility and noted that small business managers shaped business culture and enacted values other than profit (Wickert, Scherer, & Spence, 2016). Wickert et al. (2016) indicated strong managerial leadership within organizations was important, as was integrating business ethics and social responsibility in the decision-making process. Mom, Fourné, and Jansen (2015) studied the role that top managers played in small businesses and noted that these managers possessed three characteristics: a high tolerance for risk, a favor of innovation, and a high degree of personal experience.

Being capable of framing flexible adaptation to change was unabiguous given the contextual environment existed in varying perspectives, including the business owner's ability to demonstrate flexibility. According to Achtenhagen, Melin, and Naldi (2013), flexibility refers to the capability of a business owner to adapt to changing contextual

environments. Having flexibility provided advantages for operating in continually

changing contexts. Achtenhagen et al. concluded leaders had to ensure internal cultures

and activities were consistent with competitive externalities. Owners had to understand

and focus on value creation in the marketplace to develop competitive advantages and to

thrive.

Leadership was a factor in the success or failure of a business (Mom, Fourné, and

Jansen 2015). Leadership was also the variable that could cause success and failure of

sustainable actions. Effective leadership was absent in many businesses, and owners

needed clarity and to have specific goals. According to Mom et al. (2015), the

fundamental questions of inquiry were who, how, and what needed particular focus from

managers and leaders related to long-term business missions. A recent trend in leadership

has been the emergence of the team concepts, including virtual or information technology

teams. The competitive nature of global business pushed the virtual team concepts

offshore and led to increased cost savings and synergy (Woehr, Arciniega, & Poling,

2013). Woehr et al., 2013 argued for greater diverse and heterogeneous traits for teams

with leaders having a clear corporate vision and promoting open communication.

Although the style of leadership varied with each situation, applying the appropriate style

was required for success (Nordqvist et al., 2013). Nordqvist, et al., 2013 argued for the

consideration of culture in leadership and management education. In this regard, the

approach to leadership education should consider the context and culture.

Knowledge was a primary production resource in the 21st-century economy.

Knowledge was an intangible and infinite resource that through systematic use and

application could generate increasing returns. Unlike other economic resources, land, labor, and capital, knowledge was regenerative and imperishable. Knowledge also provided a competitive advantage to those who possessed it at the right time and place (Marchi, Maria, & Micelli, 2013). The intensification of competition and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy have combined to require that organizations' leaders provide more informed and agile responses to 21st-century challenges.

Team environments were suitable for the empowering leadership style. With the advent of small businesses, global expansion, and cross-cultural engagement, the virtual team has become a necessary means of meeting efficiency standards (Anderson & Sun, 2015). The empowerment style of leadership included the distribution of power through knowledge sharing to elicit positive synergy and a coordinated effort to a common purpose. The knowledge-sharing process resulted in team cohesion and trust. The trust factor was a component of developing a nurturing climate and ensuring the success of the virtual team (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015).

Business owners must be aware of the effect of delegated power. The empowering leader provided guidance and fair treatment to all followers and considered the inputs of followers as valued contributions to the common purpose. According to Zhu, He, Treviño, Chao, and Wang (2015), some firms used team-based knowledge management as a way of seeking improved competitiveness. Empowering leadership fostered the sharing of knowledge and expertise among the workers and generated innovation and new ideas (Zhu et al., 2015).

Packard and Jones (2015) discovered small business leaders acquired 80% of their leadership development through on the job experience, whereas the remaining 20% developed from education and training programs. Patel, Messersmith, and Lepak (2013), in a study involving small businesses, examined the relationship among strategic elements such as the development of vision statements, management of stakeholder relationships, and strategic intent. Patel et al., 2013 discovered an association between the strategic elements and small business owners' performance. Thus, leadership and strategy have become increasingly sophisticated in a constantly changing global marketplace.

Lack of human capital. Developing a model to explain why small businesses fail in the first few years, Hsu, Wiklund, and Cotton (2015) cited the lack of commensurate human capital during the growth stage and risk aversion as possible causes of business failure. Robert's approach was similar to the resource-based theory and further supported the notion that the entrepreneur failed to recognize that the business was outgrowing its existing stock of human capital, both regarding quality related to strategies, and quantity regarding the labor force required to sustain the growth in demand. At a higher human capital level, and in the absence of other expert help, the entrepreneur failed to be proactive when faced with threats and missed market opportunities. The literature on small business assistance programs lags behind the rapidly growing nature of the programs. Therefore, a researcher who seeks to advance understanding of the effects of small business assistance programs contends with limited data (Ntalianis, Dyer, & Vandenberghe, 2015). Also, evaluation of entrepreneurial support programs has been a

source of dispute among scholars, as there is a lack of a consensus on the criteria for measuring the costs and benefits of such programs (Helmig et al., 2016).

Summary

Explanations of the nature of the study, the research question, and the conceptual framework are a part of Section 1. Operational definitions included key terms, and there is an explanation of how this study fit into the research continuum. I used current literature to explore the SCT and EOT of small businesses. In Section 2, I included descriptions of the research method and design, as well as identification of the research participants. Also included in Section 2 are discussions of ethics, data collection, reliability, validity, and analysis. The information in Section 3 will include the doctoral study findings, including applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for future study.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 1, I identified the specific business problem and research question. Included in the section were a statement of the problem, purpose, the nature of the study, and an exhaustive literature review. This section includes a discussion of the research plan, acknowledgments of the researcher's roles and responsibilities in this project, information about my role as the researcher, the purpose of the study, and the criteria for selecting participants. Section 2 also contains a discussion of the research design, including key methodological and design considerations. Also, I include a discussion of the population and sampling, the process of ensuring ethical research, and the tools used during the data organization, collection, and analysis process. Section 2 also encompasses a discussion on my plan to ensure the reliability and validity of the study findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. The target population consisted of four owners of small service businesses in Arlington, VA, with fewer than 50 employees who have succeeded in business beyond 5 years. The implications for positive social change could include the potential to strengthening business practices which may lead to economic opportunities in local communities because of the sustained success of small business owners and increased job security for potential employees.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers play a vital role in the development of a study. Leedy and Ormrod

(2013) identified the goals of a qualitative researcher including gathering, organizing, and interpreting data. The role I fulfilled included: (a) collecting and coding data, (b) identifying themes and patterns, and (c) drawing conclusions about strategies small service business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation.

I resided in Arlington County, VA, until 2001 and worked for a small business owner. Familiarity with a research area can be motivating for a researcher (Bryman, 2015). The relationship that exists between a researcher and a research area helps the researcher gain a better understanding of participants' perceptions (Berger, 2015). Therefore, the familiarity and professional experience acquired from previous employment is a motivator, which may help to achieve an in-depth understanding of collected data.

The Belmont Report summarizes the ethical principles identified by committee members from the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) during their deliberations. The Belmont Report is a statement of principles including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice that researchers should use to resolve ethical problems that may occur during the research process involving human participants (Nicolaides, 2016). Respect for persons refers to two separate moral requirements including the acknowledgment of autonomy and the protection of persons with diminished autonomy (Nicolaides, 2016). Exercising beneficence ensures the ethical treatment of each person by respecting their decisions, protecting each from harm, and making efforts to secure individual wellbeing (Nicolaides, 2016). Meeting the measure of justice means that participants are not

unfairly burdened by the research process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Nicolaides, 2016). Consequently, the principles outlined in the Belmont Report shaped my work with participants in a way that respected their participation and minimized risks associated with the research process.

A qualitative researcher must execute their role as interviewer, observer, moderator, and facilitator without bias (Lee, 2014). Bracketing is a technique used to minimize researcher bias. According to Yin (2014), bracketing occurs when the researcher puts aside their personal views of the phenomenon when collecting data. Hammersley (2013) recommended the use of bracketing to mitigate the effects of the researcher's preconceptions and to weaken the influences of the researcher's bias on the study's outcome. A qualitative researcher should be openly aware of self, must not be overly self-critical, and must understand the self as a defective and unique instrument (Kidney & McDonald, 2014; Schmidt, 2016). As suggested by Oikonomidoy and Wiest (2015), I bracketed my viewpoints when listening to participants to avoid bias and generate a deeper understanding of the research topic. The use of an interview protocol helps reduce inherent biases in the interview process (Lee, 2014). As described by Baskarada (2014), a researcher uses an interview protocol to standardize interviews and minimize the deviation of interviews between each participant. Therefore, I used an interview protocol to standardize the face-to-face interviews with each participant (Appendix A).

Participants

The individual small service business owners who participated in this study had to

match the eligibility criteria I established. Established eligibility criteria are useful for ensuring that the data collected from the participants aligned with the overarching research question (Yin, 2014). Robinson (2014) noted that the selected participants must have personal experience with the explored problem for the resulting discoveries to reflect reality. According to Yin (2014), participants must have problem-specific knowledge. When participants have a working knowledge of the research question their insights add value to the study (Katz & Vinker, 2014). An additional critical criterion, as supported by Robinson (2014), Palinkas et al. (2015), and Yin (2014), is that participants must be willing to participate. Thus, the criteria for participation in this study included having a small business that succeeded beyond the first 5 years of operation, sufficient knowledge of the research question, and a willingness to participate.

An appropriate strategy to gain access to participants is through acquaintances and referrals (Shwed & Kalev, 2014). Moustakas (1994) suggested that the solicitation of participants can evolve from initial inquiries of interest and availability and by matching each potential participant with the qualification criteria. Researchers usually gain access to potential participants through gatekeepers (Gülmez, Sağtaş, & Kahyaoğlu, 2016). Gatekeepers make decisions about the availability of participants within an organization (Whicher, Miller, Dunham, & Joffe, 2015). I worked directly with business owners. There were no gatekeepers restricting access to potential participants. Through my network of business associates, I identified potential participants and contacted each person directly by e-mailing a letter of introduction . The letter contained explanations of the focus of the study and descriptions of the degree of the potential participant's

involvement. According to Powell, Wilson, Redmond, Gaunt, and Ridd (2016), a letter of introduction is part of participant recruitment.

Developing working relationships with participants is essential to the collecting of quality data (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). O'Reilly and Parker (2013) cautioned that time constraints, fear, and anxiety could hamper the development of a productive working relationship between the researcher and a participant. An ongoing working relationship with participants facilitates the interview process, encourages followup questions, and allows for member checking (Siu, Hung, Lam, & Cheng, 2013). During the research project, I planned to maintain a working relationship with participants through *what* and *how* I communicated. I explained the purpose of my study along with what role the participants were to have in the interview process. Also, I honestly answered any questions or concerns participants might have.

Research Method and Design

The qualitative researcher seeks to explore strategies people use to deal with existential problems and develop awareness related to problems or events (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). The qualitative method is suitable when researchers seek the meaning or nature of experiences rather than measure relationships of data for hypotheses testing (Moustakas, 1994). An adequate flow of data from interviews occurs when researcher use the qualitative method (Moustakas, 1994). The research design is a blueprint that connects the elements of research in the process of exploring questions and drawing conclusions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

Research Method

The qualitative method of study allows for the development of ideas through interaction with selected participants; researchers use this method in explorations of ideas that pertain to a chosen topic (Moustakas, 1994). Case studies are explorations of the experiences of participants to understand the similarities in meaning, the existence of patterns, and collective behaviors revealed in the responses (Abma & Stake 2014; Yin 2014). Using a qualitative method is beneficial when the researcher's goal is to capture the meaning of a particular experience (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). Events and processes are the guiding themes of all qualitative studies. The focus of this study was on the processes and events associated with the skills and operational strategies necessary to succeed in business beyond the first 5 years of operation.

According to Moustakas (1994), qualitative techniques are useful to researchers who attempt to clearly and vividly to describe the participants and the life processes as each relates to the topic of interest. A researcher may conduct a case study using a holistic or an embedded approach (Yin, 2014). Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in a complex and interconnected family of concepts, terms, and subject matter (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). In contrast, quantitative research is numbers-based; this method is useful when a researcher seeks to determine the relationships between data and observation (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The goal of quantitative researchers is to find an objective truth and single reality. The quantitative method is useful when compartmentalizing research questions (Bernard, 2013). Quantitative researchers test theories by measuring and analyzing relationships between variables and

presenting those relationships as numbers and statistics, which was not relevant to the present study (Bernard, 2013). A mixed-method approach is another method useful for building knowledge. The mixed-method approach might be acceptable when data collection for measured results complements the method of inquiry (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). The flexibility of mixed method affords researchers the ability to explore a research problem both from quantifiable and narrative standpoints by combining both approaches to interpreting the collected data. However, quantitative inquiry did not match the goal of this study. Thus, a qualitative methodology was appropriate to explore the research question.

Research Design

I used the case study design to provide the framework to investigate an actual situation in a specific context or scope. The strength of the case study design permits a researcher to provide contextual perspective to a situation or a problem. This research design serves as a logical plan for collecting and analyzing data relevant to the research question. An appropriate research design will add strength to the validity of a study (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). The case study design is time-intensive and focuses on situation (Barclay & Stoltz, 2016).

The research design options for qualitative methodology also include both ethnography and phenomenology (Baskerville & Myers, 2015; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). An ethnographic design is interpretive and appropriate when a researcher studies the shared beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of a group over time (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The ethnographic design was not appropriate because this study does not involve

observing social interactions among ethnic groups (Baskerville & Myers, 2015).

A researcher may fail to have valid results if the collected data is not sufficient (Moustakas, 1994). Kornbluh (2015) described saturation as a method to ensure sufficient and quality data to sustain a study. Data saturation is evident in a qualitative study when no new information, coding, or themes emerge (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). There is no set number of participants required to reach a point of saturation (Guetterman, 2015). I reached data saturation after interviewing four small service business owners. At the conclusion of the four interviews, I had sufficient and rich data from which to develop themes.

Population and Sampling

A researcher's sampling strategy must support the purpose of a study (Elo et al., 2014). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) claimed purposeful sampling allows researchers to use a criterion-based judgment strategy when selecting participants. According to Katz and Vinker (2014) and Yin (2014), using criterion-based sampling strategies allows for the selection of participants who might provide rich information and in-depth explanations because of their unique knowledge of the constructs of the research question. The sampling strategy for the study was purposive or criterion-based because the goal was to select individuals who met a specific criterion for participation.

The determination of sample size does not follow a set rules in qualitative research. Sampling depends on (a) what a researcher wants to know, (b) what information will have credibility, (c) what is at stake, and (d) what is useful for answering the research question (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). There is no fixed

number of required participants for qualitative studies (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). According to Martino, Elvira, and Louzada (2017), a desirable sample size in qualitative research is between 5 to 50 participants. Eighteen service organizations in the Arlington, VA, business district met the study criteria of fewer than 50 employees. From this population, I recruited four small business owners who met the eligibility criteria.

Justifying sample sizes by modeling similar research designs helps researchers set a precedent to determine the point of data saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). According to Fetters (2016), a researcher's goal is to select a sample size sufficient to achieve data saturation. The saturation point refers to the acquisition of sufficient data from which no new information, coding, or themes emerge (Elo et al., 2014). Additionally, saturation occurs when a researcher can replicate findings (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). I determined the point of data saturation in this case study when the data appeared to be robust, with no gaps or unexplained phenomena.

I collected data by interviewing each participant in an environment that was comfortable and nonthreatening for the participant. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and occurred at a time and place convenient to the participant. A participant-selected setting might have fewer distractions (Baskerville & Myers, 2015). Participants have fewer fears and frustrations when interviews take place in familiar environments (Schmidt, 2016). According to Schmidt (2016), participant-selected interview settings allow the researcher to pay attention to the participant's time constraints, culture, space, and emotions. I created an at-ease environment where the participants showed a willingness to participate and share information relevant to the

phenomenon of the study. The comfort of participants was a critical concern as I

identified a space to conduct interviews. All interviews were at the participants' locations

where they could focus in an environment free of distractions. Regalla (2016) suggested

that a researcher might develop expertise on the topic through engaged listening.

Engaged listening might lead to deep comprehension of the participants' responses and

increases the likelihood of the collection of valuable data.

Ethical Research

According to Elo et al. (2014), a researcher must comprehend and consider ethics,

integrity, and honesty in a qualitative study. A researcher should not infringe upon

participants' rights (Smalley et al., 2015). Providing an informed consent document helps

both researcher and participant understand their individual roles which minimizes risk to

the participant and preserve privacy (Beskow, Check, & Ammarell, 2014). A part of the

participant engagement process involved gaining written permission in the form of a

consent agreement before beginning interviews. Once the participants indicate their

willingness to contribute to the study, they signed the consent forms. The consent form

contains (a) details of the interview process, (b) a statement that there is no compensation

for participation, and (c) the name and telephone number of the faculty advisor whom

they may contact for additional information about the study.

Gibbins, Bhatia, Forbes, and Reid (2014) indicated that a researcher must allow

participants the ability to withdraw from the study without fear of harm. The consent

form contains language about the voluntary nature of participation and a statement that

participants are free to withdraw at any time without penalties; participants can decline. I

made it known to participants that they were free to withdraw at any point during the study without consequences. I reiterated to participants that participation in the study was voluntary and there were no incentives offered.

Some researchers effectively used incentives to encourage potential participants to take part in a study (Lewin, 2015). Small monetary payments may serve as an incentive to gain access to participants (Smaglik, 2016). Incentives could induce participants to join a study; however, I did not offer incentives to participants.

The researcher must treat all participants with respect, fairness, non-maleficence, and beneficence (Elo et al., 2014). I maintained respect during all aspects of participant contact. I considered and respected participants' time constraints, culture, space, and emotions during the study to ensure their comfort. All interviews were at the convenience of participants. Attending to participants emotional and physical needs might encourage enthusiasm for the research (Schmidt, 2016). An interview that takes place in a location and time that is agreeable to, and comfortable for, the participant supports respect for participants (Perkins, Burton, Dray & Elcock, 2013). Demonstrating my understanding of ethical standards was critical to the successful completion of the research for NIH Certificate. I completed certification 2017 (see Appendix B).

According to Morse and Coulehan (2015), the researcher must consider the participants' privacy and take responsibility for the security of data. Researchers set security procedures to protect research documents, the research journal, signed consent forms, and digital recordings (Slavnic, 2013). I complied with the implied privacy contract of the consent form and ensured the ethical treatment of participants. The use of

labels or identifiers simplifies data tracking while protecting the privacy and

confidentiality of the participants (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3).

There were no references to participant's name or business. I advised participants not to

mention their names or any details that could identify them or their business. I entered all

interview data, including digital and audio files on to a password-protected computer, and

burned the interview data onto a zip drive. Preserving the consent forms for 5 years will

maintain the agreement between the participants and me. Security procedures will include

digital conversion of all paper documents and the research journal. At the end of the

required 5-year storage period, I will destroy the electronic storage device, the research

journal, and the signed consent forms.

The IRB approval number assigned to this study is 08-30-17-0248290.

Maintaining ethical principles throughout research process is critical (Gibson & Gross,

2013). I took caution to protect the rights of the participants. Walden University's IRB

(Walden University, 2014) approved the study before I administered the one-on-one

interviews with participants. I strictly followed the IRB protocol as I completed the

interviews. There are no references to the participant's name or organization in my notes.

I had a system to assign names to the participants (P1 through P4) to track the collected

data and to maintain the anonymity of the participant.

Data Collection Instruments

Executing case study research requires the use of multiple sources of evidence

(Yin, 2014). Qualitative researchers serve as the primary instrument of data collection

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Thus, I was the primary data collection instrument. Data

collection instruments are tools that a researcher uses to gather information. The primary tool I used to collect data in this study was a set of semistructured interview questions (see Appendix C). As part of the interview protocol (see Appendix A), I presented seven open-ended questions and audio record the resulting data during the face-to-face interviews. I adopted the semistructured approach of the in-depth interview as proposed by Starr (2014) that allowed me to collect, record, and transcribe the discussion using an approved ethical framework. I designed these questions to facilitate the collection of narrative data. The questions are in inoffensive language and pose no physical or psychological risks or threats to the participants. Padilla and Benitez (2014) noted that semistructured interviews are valid data collection method in obtaining the relevant information from a study. De Massis and Kotlar (2014) reminded researchers of the benefits of the case study approach and the structure that will allow the researcher to engage in interactions to produce data for analysis and interpretation.

Case study researchers supplement interviews with secondary data sources (Yin, 2014). I supplemented interview data with data collection technique-sources to support my investigation. Semistructured interviews allow participants the freedom to express views in their words (Harvey, 2015). Documentation may include business' documents, publically available records, and external sources. Industry-specific information and Internet websites may also contain data that complement the information gathered from the semistructured interviews. Using publically available data collection technique-sources as a research item creates a data source that demonstrates support for comments coming from participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

I enhanced the validity of the data collection process by using member checking. Marshall and Rossman (2016) defined member checking as a process where the researcher provides participants with the opportunity to review the interpretation of the participants' responses in support of data completeness and interpretation accuracy. The use of member checking allows the researcher to validate and verify interpretation of the information collected during the initial interview (Yin, 2014). The process of member checking allows the researcher to restate the question, or ask additional related questions to clarify responses (Harper & Cole, 2012).

Data Collection Technique

Exploring rich, in-depth narratives of participants' experiences is the objective of a qualitative study (Gaya & Smith, 2016). Ensuring the accuracy and completeness of data collection is supportive of research quality (Yin, 2014). Steps in data collection began with utilizing a criterion-based sampling technique. Establishing rapport and gaining the consent of participants is a critical step that demonstrates the researcher's ethics and conformability to research standards (Slavnic, 2013). After gaining the consent, I scheduled and audio-record the semistructured face-to-face interview with each participant.

Each participant selected the site for the interview; according to Schmidt (2016), participant's autonomy leads to truthfulness and openness during the interview. The interview is an opportunity for respondents to tell their story related to the research problem (Obi, 2013). Each interview took place at a small service business owner's location whose establishment is in the business district of Arlington, Virginia. Each

interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes. Following the interview protocol (see Appendix A), I

journalized the key points that emerge during the interview; this step facilitated theme

identification during data analysis.

Recording interviews and journalizing emergent concepts during an interview

supports data analysis and interpretation (Perkins et al., 2013). The journal record of each

interview included date, time, and location along with notes about casual observations of

the participant and interview environment. Researchers can use cues like body language,

demeanor, and tone to gather supporting information (Yin, 2014). I monitored the

interview time using the digital timer on the tape recorder. I transcribed the interview

recording as soon as practicable after the interview was over. Using a password-protected

computer and storing the interview data on an encrypted zip drive, the data will remain

secure for 5 years after the completion and acceptance of this manuscript.

The advantage associated with using audio-recorded face-to-face semistructured

interviews is that this method gives voice of the participants (Close, Smaldon, Fennor,

Reame, & Grey, 2013). Additionally, researchers can address any gaps,

misinterpretations, or misunderstandings that emerge during the interview by asking

additional probative questions (Close et al., 2013). The advantage of conducting

individual interviews is the elimination of the possibility that participants can consult

with one another before responding to the same questions (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman,

& Pedersen, 2013). Individuals often respond readily to requests for personal interviews

as opposed to filling out mailed questionnaires (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). A

disadvantage of data collected during an interview is the critical role the researcher has

which can lend to the interjection of researcher bias (Symon, Cassell, & Johnson, 2016).

There are potential disadvantages to semistructured interviews including the time

necessary to arrange and conduct the interviews (Campbell et al., 2013). Using the

guidance of Leedy and Ormrod (2013), I created an atmosphere of active participation

and foster skills of careful listening, nonverbal communication, and observation.

There are inherent problems in qualitative research data collection including

managing researcher bias, controlling costs, and attending to participants' needs.

Researchers mitigate personal bias by bracketing or epoché (Overgaard, 2015).

Additionally, the cost of travel and time required to conduct interviews could be high.

Researchers should be flexible and allow the participant to choose the interview location

(Herz, Peters & Truschkat, 2014). Good listening skills coupled with a solid

conversational approach as suggested by Yeldham and Gruba (2014) will strengthen the

methods of data collection and the quality of data collected. The researcher's flexibility in

attending to the emotional comfort of the participant can reduce bias.

I accessed the available documentation in a variety of ways. First, after verifying

a potential participant's suitability for inclusion in this study, I performed a site visit to

establish a working relationship. At the time of the site visit, I took note of and

journalized information from posters and signage, and collected written information (e.g.,

pamphlets, flyers, and business cards). Other publically available records available

information may be accessible through the Internet. This type of virtual documentation

might include the participant's business website, search engine listings, social media

presence, and customer reviews. The advantage of collecting data in this manner is that

the documents can provide historical or time-sensitive information (Meier & Calderon, 2016). The costs associated with this form of data collection are minimal. According to Meier and Calderon (2016), the researcher can develop a broad view of the problem by reviewing the publically available information. Moreover, Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2013) claimed the manner of data collection might have potential disadvantages like the inapplicability, unreliability, and lack of verifiability.

As part of the data collection process, I recorded the interviews using a software audio recording program, with the permission of the participants, and later transcribed the recording to a paper form. After I wrote my interpretation of the interview, I asked participants to validate my preliminary conclusions. Once the data was verified through member checking, I sorted and coded into common patterns and themes for analysis. I analyzed the data using a third party software system, Dedoose ™. By using a semistructured approach and open-ended questions for the interview process, a pilot study was not necessary for this research study.

Data Organization Technique

The need for new techniques and technologies in data organization is vital to ensuring researchers have a system for logical grouping of data (Chen & Zhang, 2014). I used an Excel spreadsheet to track data. The purpose of data organization is to create orderliness in the research process to facilitate inductive or deductive reasoning and discovery (Elo et al., 2014). Data included respondents contact information, consent form, e-mail and personal communication record, data and time of the interview, and participants' transcribed narratives. Within Microsoft Excel, and on separate tabs, I

tracked each participant's response by pairing it with the semistructured interview question. Additionally, I attached notes to specific cells within the spreadsheet created linkages and associations with the publically available data.

I treated all information as confidential to ensure participants' protection as recommended by Morse and Coulehan (2015). The use of labels or identifiers simplifies data tracking while protecting the privacy and anonymity of the participants (e.g. P1, P2, P3, or P4). Similar to Walshe (2016), I stored data using locked storage, password protection, and encryption. A researcher must follow the data retention policy of the sponsoring university (Briney, Goben, & Zilinski, 2015). Thus, at the end of the 5-year storage period, I will delete all data and destroy the storage device.

Data Analysis

In this study, I used methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation occurs when a researcher uses two or more data collection methods during analysis (Yin, 2014). The data collection methods I used in this study include interviews, casual observations, and document reviews. Researchers use different data collection techniques to develop answers to the research questions based on the selected research design (Bromiley et al., 2015; Regalla, 2016). Methodological triangulation is the use of multiple data collection techniques to ensure the collection of comprehensive information to answer a research question (Cairney & St. Denny, 2015). Selecting a variety of data helps to facilitate triangulation and validation of the results (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). Triangulation of data occurred during the comparing and contrasting phases of analysis of the participants' narratives data with the documentary evidence. The use of

methodological triangulation, when conducting case study research, enhances data analysis through precise comparisons (Manganelli et al., 2014).

Yin's (2014) analysis process included the following five steps; (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding. The compiling phase involves organizing of the data to create a database while the disassembling phase involves breaking down the compiled data into narrative segments and labels. The reassembling process involves clustering and categorizing the labels into a sequence of groups. The interpretation stage involves in creating narratives from the sequences and groups for conclusions.

The process of labeling and compiling data into specific groups will lead to developing a database (Yin, 2014). I first created a centralized database of all collected information as recommended by (Kaefer et al. 2015). Data analysis occurred within a web-based software. I incorporated analytical software into the research process by uploading the semistructured interview questions and responses to the Dedoose ™ application. Dedoose ™ is web-based computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that researchers use to facilitate the sorting of data (Herz et al., 2014). Programmers designed this software to interface expertly with word processing programs, various types of document format files, and digital audio files.

Secondly, I disassembled the data that involves a formal procedure of coding data as described by Yin (2014). As recommended by Kong, Law, Kwan, Lai and Lam (2015), I executed the data analysis by coding the data, defining the codes, determining the frequency of code occurrence across the data set until themes and patterns are

identifiable. Coding and searching data systematically to identify and categorize specific

actions or characteristics relative the research question occurred concurrently with data

collection, as recommended by Campbell et al. (2013). Following the advise of Kaefer et

al. (2015), coding consisted of looking for patterns in the data that give meaning to the

case study (Kaefer et al., 2015). I uploaded the publically available data collected from

site visits and Internet sources to Dedoose™, and then used the same coding processes as

applied to the narrative data.

Once the disassembling phase was complete, I began the process of reassembling

the data. I grouped the individual pieces of data to identify similarities and conflicts.

These newly arranged groups or configurations will lead to the emergence of themes.

Reassembling the data occurs when the researcher considers or manipulates all

information in several arrangements or configurations until the emerging themes are

satisfactory and consistent (Yin, 2014). Successful reassembling is evident in the

emergence of themes in data analysis. Program designers configured the Dedoose ™

software so that researchers have the option of graphically displaying data to develop

themes and support findings. The program had versatile features useful for creating

relational maps and diagrams, which, according to Kaefer et al. (2015), can enhance the

presentation of qualitative data. However, De Massis and Kotlar (2014) cautioned

researchers and authors by stating that the overuse of the displays, relational maps, and

diagrams might lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

The next step of data analysis phase is interpreting the data (Yin, 2014).

Interpreting the data occurred through the lens of the conceptual framework of SCT and

EOT. I interpreted the data about the central research question and compared the information to the exhaustive literature review. Matching the discoveries from this study to known concepts related to the themes will contribute to scholarship. Interpreting is the process of making sense of the data (Herz et al., 2014). Campbell et al. (2013) discussed the challenges of data interpretation and suggested that researchers should remain focused on defining of the codes. Another challenge in qualitative research is the potential to introduce personal bias while attempting to understand and interpret the data (Overgaard, 2015).

The final step in the data analysis was concluding the data (Yin 2014). Concluding is the development of a sequence of statements noting the findings of the study from the viewpoint of a broader set of ideas (Moore & Buchanan, 2013). Throughout the progress of the study, and as recommended by (Overgaard, 2015), I bracketed my preconceptions to guard against bias and to increase the reliability of the study's results.

Reliability and Validity

Marshall and Rossman (2016) identified four features of quality in qualitative research including dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. I established how to address these qualities in a study. Kruse, Bolton, and Freriks (2015) suggested that establishing, implementing, and maintaining a quality measure within a study was vital to ensuring trustworthy and reliable results. According to Kidney and McDonald (2014), the foundation of qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to present persuasive arguments and facts. In this study, I addressed these quality criteria

using a combination of member checking, participant transcript review, and methodological triangulation.

Reliability

Researchers primarily use the term reliability in quantitative research; however, reliability also applies to qualitative research (Hafeez-Baig, Gururajan, & Chakraborty, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) used dependability as a term that closely resembles reliability. Both reliability and dependability relate to the quality of research (Hafeez-Baig et al. 2016). The dependability of a research study links to reliability and occurs when an audit trail exists; therefore, enabling a future researcher to repeat the work if not necessarily to gain the same results (Elo et al., 2014). Merriam (2014) described dependability as the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs. Merriam (2014) claimed dependability was a quality indicator. I conducted an audit trail by listing detailed descriptions of the research methods such as (a) purpose of the study, (b) discussion of participant's selection, (c) data collection techniques, and (d) research findings. Researchers demonstrate dependability by conducting member checking of the data gathered from interviewees.

Member checking is the process where the researcher shares the interpretation of collected data with the interviewee (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As part of member checking, I provided participants a two-page summary of the key findings. This process helped validate interpretations of the data. Member checking serves as a useful tool to increase the accuracy and credibility of the data (Reilly, 2013). Throughout the analysis phase, careful consideration of design, approach, and processes will help to ensure the

study results will be reliable. Based on the emerging trends, I was able to focus on the central themes and compare these discoveries to the known literature and the conceptual framework. Following this process may uncover gaps in the literature review, so I continued to add newly published articles that are relevant to the research question.

Validity

Validity refers to the data accuracy (Shekhar, 2014). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) claimed credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity enhances study validity. Researchers can increase the validity of results by focusing on consistency and accuracy (Elo et al., 2014). Thus, I addressed validity by focusing on credibility, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility. Credibility is in research to connote the value and believability of research findings (Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013). A qualitative study is credible when individuals share the same experience immediately recognizing the descriptions of human experience (Cope, 2014). For this research study to be credible, I selected the appropriate participants, selected the appropriate data collection methodology, and ensured that the participants' responses are open, complete, and truthful. To ensure credibility, Yin (2014) suggested the need for researchers to document the procedures during the study development process carefully. Doing so will allow the researcher to trace back and verify any questionable areas that have the potential to threaten the credibility of the study. Additionally, Leedy and Ormrod (2013) highlighted member checking as a strategy for verifying the credibility of a study. Yin (2014) further stressed the importance of triangulation as a validity strategy that allows the researcher to

strengthen the credibility of a study. Fusch and Ness (2015) and Durif-Bruckert, Roux,

Morelle, Mignotte, Faure, and Mourmjid-Ferdjaoui (2014) supported methodological

triangulation as a means of verifying the credibility of a study. Thus, I enhanced the

credibility of the study by using member checking and triangulating data collected

through interviews with additional data sources including casual observations and

documentary evidence.

      Confirmability. According to Boesch, Schwaninger, Weber, and Scholz (2013),

confirmability entails using thick, rich description as a data presentation technique to

offer in-depth, contextualized interpretive descriptions of study findings. Confirmability

is the degree to which the results of the study might apply to other populations (Yin,

2014). The documentation of the results of the study should promote future opportunities

for repetition of outcomes and determine relevance (Houghton et al., 2013). I ensured that

results of this study emerge from the data and not personal predispositions, as cautioned

by Shane and Nicolaou (2015). Carefully documenting the results ensured that the data is

the product of the experiences and ideas of the participant, rather than personal

impressions or preferences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). As described by Baskarada (2014),

the use of an interview protocol minimized the risk that researcher bias emerges in

interviews. Therefore, I used an interview protocol for managing the participant

interviews. Additional process steps such as member checking and triangulation increase

the confirmability of a study (Boesch, 2013). As described earlier, both member checking

and triangulation are intended process steps in the study.

      Transferability. Transferability occurs when a researcher develops valid and

trustworthy results by developing thorough and robust descriptions of an event or phenomenon (Cope, 2014). The concept of reliability in a qualitative case study relates to results that have transferability to other contexts (Vance, 2015). Cope (2014) suggested that researchers should offer thorough descriptions of the framework of the study. Readers and researchers validate the applicability and transferability of the study by replicating results in a similar context as related to or aligned with, other studies. Affirming the transferability of research occurs by validating the applicability and feasibility of a research method or design in a similar context or with other participants to ascertain the possibility of subsequent studies yielding identical results (Elo et al., 2014). I implemented transferability by leaving the transferability of the findings to the reader and future researchers to determine.

Data saturation occurs when no new data or themes emerge from additional data collection (Marshall et al., 2013). Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that additional interviews might be required until the researcher achieves data saturation. According to Houghton et al., (2013, p. 13), a researcher's goal is to continue to collect data until "no new concepts" emerge. Thus, I collected data until reaching a point when additional data collection did not expose any new concepts or themes.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 contains a restatement of the study's purpose, a definition of the role of the researcher, and a description of the research participants. I provided the reasoning for selecting the qualitative method and multiple case study research design. Also included in Section 2 was a description of the population sampling technique, followed by a

discussion on ethics. Finally, there was a discussion of data collection technique;

specifically, there is a discussion about data analysis technique, reliability, and validity.

The presentation of the study's findings, including a synopsis and detailed discussions,

are in Section 3. In Section 3, I report these identified actions and characteristics, and

they will become the central findings in the study. Section 3 will also include a discussion

of how the research may apply to professional practice, the Implications for Social

Change, offer recommendations for action and further study, and add reflections.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Section 3 contains a brief introduction to the study and a presentation of the findings. Section 3 includes discussions of applications to professional practice and implications for social change. The discussions in this section may provide small business owners with recommendations for action. Section 3 includes recommendations for further research on the strategies small business owners can use to succeed in business. In the reflections, I describe my experiences during this doctoral study journey. I conclude the study with a summary of perspectives on the importance of implementing strategies for succeeding in business beyond 5 years.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. I interviewed four small business owners using face-to-face semistructured interviews and open-ended questions. Participants signed informed consent forms indicating their willingness to be part of the study. Adhering to the principles of confidentiality, the names of the participants will remain anonymous; alphanumeric codes obscured identities. The letter *P* stands for the participant, and a number represents the order of the interviews. Each interview included observations of the business environment and reviews of internal policies, financial statements, marketing materials, and external web pages. I followed the guidance from Yin (2014) and observed the surroundings and environment in each of the locations, levels of sales activity, interactions with customers, the organization of each retail space, and environmental surroundings.

The semistructured interviews consisted of asking seven questions to gain an understanding of the strategies used to improve the probability of success beyond the first 5 years of operation (see Appendix C). Each interview lasted less than 45 minutes. After receiving permission from each participant, and a signed consent form, I audio recorded each interview and transcribed the narrative data. Additionally, I transcribed research notes from observations and member checking reviews. Data organization and analysis followed the research plan outlined in Section 2. Data coding occurred within Dedoose™ software and the resultant segments were grouped into themes. After using member checking, I needed to make adjustments to the original interpretation of themes based on participant comments. The remainder of this section includes (a) documentation of the findings, (b) discussions of applications to professional practice, (c) a discussion of implications for social change, (d) recommendations for action and further study, (e) reflections, and (f) conclusions.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question that guided the study was: What strategies do small successful business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation? The sample for this study consisted of four owners of small service and retail businesses in Arlington, VA; the owners had fewer than 50 employees and had succeeded in business for more than 5 years. Table 1 contains an overview of each of the organizations.

Data collection included (a) narratives from face-to-face semistructured interviews with participants, (b) observations of the research sites, and (c) a review of

internal and external documentation. I recorded the interviews and used a research

journal to notate observations and document reviews. Before coding application and

thematic analysis, there was the preparation of an MS Word document containing the

transcribed interview data and research notes. Table 2 is a summary of data sources used

for each location.

Table 1

Overview of Organizations

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
Description	Boutique hair salon	Window treatment	Tax preparation	General merchandise
Number of employees	< 15	< 25	< 15	< 25
Number of years of operations	> 5 years	> 5 years	> 5 years	> 5 years

Table 2

Data Sources

Data sources	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
Face-to-face semistructured interviews	X	X	X	X
Observation of customer and co-worker interactions and the external environment	X	X	X	X
In-store and external advertising	X	X	X	X
Financial and marketing documents	X	X	X	X
Organization webpage		X	X	
External consumer blogs (Yelp and Angie's List)		X	X	

The conceptual framework for this qualitative multiple case study was SCT

developed by Fiedler in 1964. The theory created a lens for the interpretation of data

collected from participants and further supported the develop themes. Seen through the

lens of SCT, there were three emergent themes. The emergent themes were (a)
developing a unique marketing strategy, (b) developing strategic leadership skills, and (c)
required business skills for sustainability.

Theme 1: Developing a Unique Marketing Strategy

The first emergent theme was the importance of developing a unique marketing
strategy. All four participants developed marketing strategies unique to their business to
address customers' needs. P1 stated, "There will always be challenges, therefore having a
marketing strategy help[s] to predict the market and evaluate the business environment,
therefore understanding the needs of customers helps when preparing a marketing
strategy."

Samples of advertising and marketing documents from each location and a review
of the implemented strategies confirmed that each of the business owners had a focus on
their customers. An example of this focus was evident at Site 3; the owner explicitly
included comments from customers' Internet posts in their advertising including "great
location," "extended business hours," and "thank you for having the variety of products."
Included in the marketing plan for Site 1 were strategies to "identify trending styles." At
Site 1, the observed contact with personnel confirmed the owner's commitment to
identifying trending styles.

The businesses at Sites 2 and 3 had one commonality: P2 and P3 actively
promoted online business operations. Both participants emphasized that online marketing
activity increased brand awareness. The participants agreed the Internet had become the
primary marketing communication medium between businesses and customers. P2 stated

that business owners invested in integrating an online marketing strategy because "almost 75% of our customers read online reviews before visiting us." Participants 2 and 3 recommended exposing the company's brand by sending customers complimentary products in exchange for Internet publicity. Both P2 and P3 encouraged customers to post on sites like Yelp and Angie's List to increase exposure on public channels. Participant 2 had a 5-star rating from 58 of the 60 customers that took time to post their reviews.

Building a reputation with customers is a part of developing a unique marketing strategy. Participants 2 and 3 were proud of the reputation that they had built for themselves on the Yelp (www.yelp.com) and Angie's List (www.angieslist.com) websites. During triangulation of data, a review of the comments from customers and responses from the business owners confirmed this. There were instances where P2 and P3 responded to comments within minutes. When the customer comments were negative, the business owners responded in constructive ways and worked to resolve the issues and regain customer confidence. P2 and P3 considered these reviews as ways to increase their revenues and online visibility. P1 stated, "By posting on sites like Yelp and Angie's List we educate our customers and help them provide us with the information necessary to create a product that wows them." Additionally, P3 stated, "Using Yelp and other social media to monitor customer feedback and informing customers of current happenings are used for marketing announcements."

P2 shared that understanding business trends helped owners and managers adjust to the unforeseeable changes in the business. Small business owners must think strategically when developing marketing plans, and to prepare for unexpected changes by

setting contingency plans. Each participant expressed the importance that a well-developed marketing strategy has in their business. I was able to observe these strategies in action at each of the businesses.

The interviewed business owners underscored the importance of developing a unique marketing strategy to enhance and develop a close business relationship with customers. P1 stated, "To build a good customer relationship, it is essential to give an ear to customer feedback and critiques." As noted by Han, Bonn, and Cho (2016), small business owners who make an effort to ask customers for feedback end up providing and satisfying customer needs, which builds a good long-term relationship with customers. A focus on high-quality relationships with customers was evident during site observations. Observing the environment, including how coworkers discussed ideas to retain existing customers, gain new customers, and develop marketing strategies confirmed P1's statement. Site 1 was a calm and relaxing environment as the customers entered the site and interacted with employees. An observation of the physical locations of Sites 2 and 4 communicated the business owners' choice to serve customers; owners had located the businesses specifically to serve local neighborhoods. Each of the participants specifically noted that deciding where to place their business was a part of their *focus-on-the-customer* strategy.

Participant 4 expressed that small business owners needed to display a friendly and caring attitude because an effective interaction with people had a significant effect on business success. I observed how each business owner spent time before opening their site assessing the viability, relevance, and performance of the products provided to the

customers. Participant 4 expressed a desire to promote a welcoming feeling when customers entered the site. P3 stated, "[S]howing appreciation in very simple ways such as thanking customers for coming has contributed to having long-time repeat customers." I journaled one observation of customers entering Site 4 who appeared happy with the available product selection. Additionally, as each customer exited the site, both the business owner and the customers were smiling. The smiles were confirmation of pleasure with the interaction and purchases. P4 provided a detailed report on the daily activity and demonstrated how the management team reviewed each detail to make decisions related to inventory management, upcoming advertisements, and product placement.

Effective marketing strategies combine creativity, analysis, planning, and learning (Abdalkrim, 2013). P2 discussed the importance of catering to customers to create repeat business and make a profit. P3 indicated that focusing on customers and keeping them happy is a requirement for success in business; this participant also noted that repeat business created stability. I observed and documented at Site 2 and Site 4 how workers catered to the customers as they entered each site by checking on each customer regularly and providing quick service when needed to reduce wait times. Each participant understood that customers are essential; it was the customers who bought the products and services and provided business owners with revenues. Business owners who are profitable for over the first 5 years of operation possess the ability to sustain and grow profits and deploy effective strategies (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013).

P1, P3, and P4 emphasized that having a unique marketing strategy allows owners and managers to align marketing products to specific demographics. P3 reported conducting ongoing market surveys to adapt to changes. P3 asked customers to rate products and service satisfaction along with the quality of employee interactions at the end of each transaction through a brief survey. Participants noted the necessity of providing customers with products they want at a competitive price, and the associated strategies with this business approach. P2 noted that the marketing strategy used at this site included researching direct competitors, and looking for suppliers to acquire quality products at lower prices.

Participants stated that increasing customer satisfaction was a strategic focus they used to succeed in business. P1, P2, and P3 indicated that business owners should focus on buyer satisfaction, needs, and providing professional and quality service when doing business with existing and potential customers. P3 stated, "The need of the customer is essential whether it is with existing or potential customers." I observed at all sites how each customer received quality service; this was evident by how employees gave detailed attention to each person entering the location, whether an existing or potential customer. Customer care, building a good reputation, capital investment, the products, and the location are factors related to consumer satisfaction that participants mentioned. Venture and first-product success are higher when the business owner's ideas reflected the technological development and customer needs (Löfsten, 2016). P1, P2, and P3 suggested that business owners should put customers first by communicating effectively and in a

friendly way. P2 stated, "We provide customers the products they want and making sure they stay loyal and come back regularly. This is essential to our business success."

During the site observations, I noted how owners and employees committed to their focus on the customer. At each site, business owners were smiling, friendly, and directly attentive to customer needs. P1 stated, "Listening to the customers and understanding their needs and concerns is important for a business owner." I also observed how P2 and P4 handled customer issues. P2 and P4 addressed customer issues efficiently and quickly. P4 stated,

I make sure I address any issues so that the customers continually come back to me in the future, and their family members. In my book, the customer is always right; therefore, I always do my best to meet their needs.

Participant1 often sought customers' input by using surveys to measure satisfaction with products and services. P3 noted, "Communicating regularly with customers to understand their needs and concerns is a strategy used to succeed in business." As suggested by Yeldham and Gruba (2014), excellent listening skills, coupled with a conversational approach, is essential for managing consumers' needs.

Each participant indicated that they used advertisement as a success strategy. All owners had budgeted advertising expenses embedded in financial statements. P1 used customers' word of mouth, referrals, and the Internet to create specific marketing strategies to target identified demographics. P2 and P3 used professional advertisers to develop marketing strategies customized to fit specific customers. Lack of marketing channels prevented businesses owners from competing with larger and established

businesses (Will, 2016). Participants used signage outside and inside of Sites 2 and 3. Triangulation of the web pages with the recorded narratives demonstrated cohesive and adaptive messaging to customers. Communication between each business owner and customer served as an effective advertisement for those business owners who chose not to outsource these functions to a professional advertiser. P4 stated,

> The use of advertisement was great but to minimize expenses did not use professional advertisers. Such a strategy could help small businesses establish organized channels of marketing and gain competitive advantage but decided to use more word of mouth and referrals instead advertisement signs.

External signage at Sites 2 and 3 were useful for attracting customer attention and enticing them to enter the location. P2 and P3 had unique and colorful advertisements outside, listing discounts and bargains inside, to get the attention of the customer. Once a customer entered the store, they could select from an assortment of literature to use as guides as they walked through the site. The Internet, strategy and analysis, product and service differentiation, competitive pricing, and use of business technology are some of the factors of aggressive marketing mentioned by the participants. P1 and P4 shared similar comments about dealing with the highs and lows of business. P4 stated that "as long as one has a marketing strategy and understands marketing trends, the potential for success increases." Both participants also indicated the importance of thinking strategically to prepare their businesses for the unexpected. P1 stated, "Building quality relationships with a customer is an important [marketing] strategy to achieve success."

Correlating the theme to existing literature. Prior research supports the first

emergent theme of a unique marketing strategy. The results of an effective marketing strategy developed by management include opportunities to generate brand awareness and improve relationship marketing (Jaidka, Khoo, & Na, 2013). Participant comments support prior research, including Wu, Wen, Dou, and Chen (2015), who suggested that listening to what customers have to say, is a critical part of the overall marketing strategy. Small business owners must learn how to retain customers through a healthy relationship to sustain their business customer focus (Kurian & Muzumdar, 2017). According to Gensler, Völckner, Egger, Fischbach, and Schoder (2015), providing superior customer service is the key driver to the success of small businesses.

Bogren et al. (2013) stated that it is necessary to build quality customer relationships to achieve success. Zaefarian, Thiesbrummel, Henneberg, and Naude (2017) also supported the importance of customer loyalty to small business success. Paltayian, Gotzammani, Georgiou, and Andronikidis (2017) suggested that customer satisfaction is a crucial definer of optimal customer service; the findings showed the direct relationship between planning and business survival. Zaefarian et al. found that customers are the foundation for a small business. Small business owners strategically attract and maintain customers trust for optimal business performance and profitability. Zaefarian et al. found that establishing business relationships, both internal and external to the business, are a prime driver of business performance.

The owners of the sites had posters displayed on the front door, postings on the Internet to inform customers of upcoming events hosted by the company. Zhou et al. (2015) suggested that the formation of collective marketing could assist in establishing

stronger marketing channels. Such a strategy could help small businesses establish

organize channels of marketing and gain competitive advantage. According to Zacca et

al. (2015), small businesses failed due to the lack of commodity marketing and their

inability to adapt to the changes that were essential to maintaining a competitive

advantage.

      Correlating the theme to conceptual framework. According to the developers

of the SCT theory, leaders should be able to employ strategies that are suitable for

businesses' operating environments (Jokipii, 2010). The basis of the theory is that an

organization's success depends on the presence of a diplomatic business leader who uses

strategic decision making that reflects the context of which the business is operating. By

spending time at each business owner's site, I observed how advertisement could lure

customers to buy the product and services because of the promoted value and benefits

that the customer will derive.

      This theme of focusing on a unique marketing strategy supports the conceptual

framework. The theme also ties to existing literature on effective business practice.

According to Pai (2017), marketing is an activity and process for engaging and

communicating. Marketing creates customer value and includes an emphasis on building

close relationships with consumers and society. Small businesses must have a marketing

strategy based on meeting customers' needs and exceeding the quality of the services or

goods from the competition to generate a consumption relationship with customers in a

competitive marketplace (Yu, Ramanathan, & Nath, 2014). Marketing activities help

increase the efficiencies of marketing managerial actions and providing innovation and

collaboration to businesses (Galphin, Whittington, & Bell, 2015). Marketing improves and maintains customer relationship and helps fulfill market needs, and as a result, reduces business failures.

This theme reinforces the conclusions reached by Will (2016), who used the SCT to suggest that the management style and strategic orientation of the business leader should align with the volatility and dynamism of the operating environment. Participants agreed that focusing on the customers contributes to the profitability and operational success. It is necessary for empowering leader provided guidance and fair treatment to all followers and considered the inputs of followers as valued contributions to the common purpose.

Business approaches that address customer needs appear as the most effective strategy to meet the challenges in a competitive business environment. Fiedler (1964) stipulated that the effectiveness of leaders' strategies depend on situational or environmental factors. Jokipii (2010) stated leaders ought to be flexible in their obligations to prevent organizations from failing. Thus, focusing on customer needs results in a marketing strategy that is unique to the business.

Theme 2: Developing Strategic Leadership Skills

The second theme that emerged from data analysis, as critical to surviving beyond 5 years, was strategic leadership skills. Business owners must use strategies that fit the nature of their businesses and customers (Fiedler, 1964). Participants shared their sincere commitment to business success. Inextricably related to success was the diplomacy used during interactions between the participants and customers. Each participant indicated the

alignment of strategies to fit the nature of the business, current factors, and employees. Resilience is a part of good leadership, according to P1. P1 believed the business owner must be dedicated and remain resilient in seeking new customers and selling products. P2 stated, "Without strategic leadership, I would fail; there is no success in life without discipline in what you do."

Every business owner encounters some turbulence at one time or another. Without an owner or leader developing resilience, it is difficult to survive the uncertainty and the downturns in a changing market. Sarasvathy et al. (2013) reviewed business owners' self-effectiveness after failure and noted that although many business owners failed, they recovered and persevered to start another business. P3 noted that without effective strategic leadership in a business, it is impossible to make a profit. However, not all small business owners have the skills necessary to sustain their businesses and remain profitable, according to P4. P4 stated, "You may not be able to control what happens in the marketplace or how events affect your business, but you can control your responses."

I observed each business owner's leadership skills through how they collaborated and showed assertiveness; there was genuine excitement in owners' voices as they shared information about products and services. I reviewed creative marketing plans (Internet and printed materials at each location), and written policies shared by the owners; this included a review of the 2017 year-end financial statements and budget variance reports for Site 3 and Site 4. Financial statements included some periods with temporary losses; revenue was less than expenses. The budget report from Site 3 included notes written by the owner on budget variances. Notes from P3 included comments like "review sales data

with staff" and "review ordering pattern for supplies." These comments confirmed the business owners were strategic leaders.

Both P3 and P4 prepared monthly financial statements with the assistance of a CPA. These owners committed to business continuity; they did not allow temporary setbacks to sidetrack the overall mission. While P3 and P4 experienced some months with losses, they were interested in sharing information about success in the interviews. P3 noted the importance of having a professional advisor: "It is critical to tap into the expertise of a professional to assist in running their day-to-day operations." The comment exemplifies that strategic leadership requires understanding the importance of building of a team of professionals to help the company to be successful.

Each participant pointed out that the success of businesses based on the diplomacy skills of leaders and decision-making strategies to succeed. As a result, customers will remain loyal to the business and will become consistent customers, as noted by P1: "Remaining honest and loyal to customers for the past 5 years in business and offering products they wanted at a reasonable price is a good strategy to use to remain successful in a business." P3 and P4 noted that if a small business owner provides leadership, customers will notice. P3 stated, "If you don't know the answer to a question when asked by a customer just say you are not sure but will find out rather than giving a false answer or lead the customer in the wrong direction." P4 stated, "Providing leadership to customers doesn't mean you have to know answers to every question asked just be honest when you don't know the answer and let the customer know you will do your best to get them an answer."

At Site 2, customers had the opportunity to bring in ads showing competitors prices. The business owner had the policy to use price matching to promote customer retention; this policy promoted learning and analysis activities to assess competitors. Similarly, the business owner offered customers products at a fair price; this practice resulted in keeping the customer happy. During the interview with each business owner, a common subtheme was the customer should come first and having honest, and integrity is a shared goal for all team members. Nevertheless, one owner had to tell a customer that a requested service was not available at the company. The customer appeared disappointed, but the business owner was diplomatic and honest with the customer.

All participants were aware of the value of leadership skills as an element of managing overall strategy; these included creativity, analysis, planning, and learning. Leadership skills were on display at each location; owners were aware of the constant need to hone and develop this skillset. For example, P1 focused on creative ways to use social media and glean information from conferences to meet potential customers. P1 communicated to customers directly by during follow-up calls rather than sitting and waiting for a potential customer to return a call to build quality customer relationships; P1 used information gathered during these calls to learn about customers, and plan ways to boost customers' interests. P2 planned social events, referrals, and advertisements to gain new customers. P3 used the Internet, attended different community events, and attended different churches to learn about customers' needs and expectations. P2 stated, "Leadership skills are an essential factor for a small business operation … to operate through riotous times, small businesses need strategies focusing on issues."

Business strategy should be a combination of creativity, analysis, planning, and learning. Small business owners considered formal and informal leadership skills and connectivity opportunities as part of the strategy. P2, P3, and P4 demonstrated their leadership skills by being proactive and thinking several steps ahead of the present situation to enhance customer relations. All four participants agreed that honesty and the ability to communicate contributed good leadership skills. I also observed how leadership skills were not just for getting leads and referrals, but were also about establishing core values such as honesty, respect, and encouraging the team to follow these values by setting an example as a mark of a good leader. P2 stated, "Leadership skills also require the ability to inspire a team to be passionate about the vision and mission of the job." Leaders can develop creative, innovative solutions to unexpected and complicated problems, and maintain a light-hearted and positive attitude in the business.

Correlating the theme to existing literature. The findings of this study were consistent with the literature I reviewed that indicated strategic leadership as a strategy for business success beyond 5 years. The findings were similar to those of researchers like Anderson (2015), Mom et al. (2015) and Wickert et al. (2016); these scholars emphasized the linkages between an effective leader and the success of a small business. According to Anderson (2016), strategic leadership helps organizational leaders to formulate the ways that could help their business towards the achievement of business objective. Wickert et al. (2016) also supported the importance of leadership in the decision-making process within an organization. A business succeeds when the owner of invests in members and leads employees to create dedication and emotional connection.

Mom et al. (2015) studied the role that top managers played in small businesses and noted that leaders possessed three key characteristics including a high tolerance for risk, a favor of innovation, and a high degree of personal experience. Holt, Marques, Hu, and Wood (2017) expanded on leadership from the concept of creating leadership for quality as a strategy to enhance the efficiency and performance of a small business as well as the growth and well-being of the employees which leads to business success. The findings also indicated that Strategic skills are essential to the growth of a small business. Showing skills in leadership decision and strategy to manage the day-to-day business operations plays an active role in the success of a small business.

Correlating the theme to conceptual framework. The theme of strategic leadership skills supports the conceptual framework. Using the SCT framework, Despin (2017) stated that leadership in small businesses is imperative to sustaining the business. A leader must decide on the appropriate manner of handling a particular situation based on employee skills. Wang et al. (2015) showed that focusing on training that increases customer service skills directly related to customer loyalty. Having a good reputation for the business enables trust and confidence into the customers. Participants routinely attended workshops, webinars, conferences, and engaged in reading activities for personal growth and development of leaders' skills and capabilities.

Strategic leadership is the core of SCT. The essence of the SCT paradigm is that organizational effectiveness results from leaders effectively using the characteristics of the organizations to develop a successful strategy (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Will (2016) used the SCT to suggest that the strategic orientation of management is critical to

Participants emphasized that innovation is a mindset acquired over time and must be continuously nurtured. P1 shared, "Innovation is another factor that contributes to … profit margin." Participants 1, 2, and 3 agreed that constantly bringing new and creative ideas to customers increased competitiveness. Further, P1 suggested that innovation is "[a] skillset that increases over time." According to Bello and Ivanov (2014), small business owners who constantly seek upgrades have innovative intent, thus are more likely to succeed. As a result innovative practices, customers returned to the store to buy the new products. P3's market research strategy was continuous and informed decisions about trends; P3 used the collected information to know what was coming next and what adaptations or *reinventions* could be worthwhile. P2 stated, "There are abundant sources of good ideas, and [if] the smaller business owners pay attention, the more they will appear. Small business owners can evaluate ideas by listening to their sources such as those who think differently than themselves." Martini, Neirotti, and Appio (2017) emphasized that small business owners would not be able to implement their strategies if they did not already have a system in place to exploit creativity.

Each business owner started the day, before customers would enter, by trying to plan for improvements to their site. Both P2 and P4 set aside time each week to strategize and exercise creativity into their site which consisted of setting goals that focused on improving products and processes. P1 and P2 explained how they continued to educate themselves concerning innovation by attending workshops, webinars, conferences, and reading. The use of creativity and innovation can provide solutions to business problems

and owners alike. P3 stated, "It's not enough to say that innovation is a priority; you have to actually work at it."

The Schumpeterian skills of the entrepreneur overlap strategic leadership skills in some areas (Block et al., 2017; Schumpeter, 1934). According to Dai et al. (2014), entrepreneurship is an approach to management that focuses on innovation, proactivity, and risk-taking. The similarity between the entrepreneur and the innovative business leader is stark. A small business owner who exhibits socially responsible behaviors (innovation and sustainability) may encourage and maintain a positive relationship with customers (Helmig et al., 2016). Mason and Brown (2013) indicated that to promote growth, customers must be conscious of quality-of-life concern as they relate to the small business image; thus business owners must demonstrate a focus on innovation and sustainability by investing in maintaining a sense of community. According to Dai et al. (2014), the social trend on the focus of innovation and sustainability resulted in calls for businesses to move beyond good citizenship to become community leaders and agents of change.

Education relates to the strategy of developing business skills. According to Fillis, (2015), a lack of business knowledge is a threat and a barrier to the success of a small business. Participants shared their thoughts about strategies that drive customer satisfaction and performance for sustained success. P1 stated, "I once had an unsuccessful business because I did not have an understanding of what it took to run a business." P4 had a similar experience as P1stating, "I mistakenly thought all I needed when starting a business was passion." Wilburn and Wilburn (2014) argued that technological knowledge

and expertise were determinants of a business owner's ability to adopt new technologies into operations while P2 and P4 suggested that understanding the business, industry, and customer trending assisted in growing their business. Consumer-based knowledge, product-based knowledge, industry-based knowledge, and prior industry experience are some business knowledge factors participants mentioned. P3 stated, "Continued education is a requirement of a successful business."

According to Zhu et al. (2015), some firms used team-based knowledge management as a way of seeking improved competitiveness. Empowering leadership fostered the sharing of knowledge and expertise among the workers and generated innovation and new ideas (Zhu et al., 2015). Sonfield and Lussier (2014) found that the owner's formal education level has an impact on the choice of strategies for the business. P3 stated, "Business owners are responsible for staying as informed in their business as possible, and business owners and marketing teams need to receive formal business training with a background or underlying education in marketing." All but one of the four participants received some formal business strategy training or education before starting their businesses. P1 and P2 attended a community college and took marketing courses. P4 had a marketing degree.

Gaining skills over time is part of the evolution of a successful business enterprise. P1 and P3 expressed, "learning from the experiences of other businesses can be invaluable in helping develop strategies and advance knowledge about sustainability and growth." Small business owners need to position themselves for growth. I observed the business owner's marketing plans at each site. Each business owner made it known

that it crucial to know what lies ahead to be able to plan and execute ideas that will

sustain operatiosn. I also viewed each small business' company policies. Each business

owner agreed that making their policies known is part of having an effective strategy.

Business owners look for other ways to address business problems instead of choosing to

close those businesses permanently. All participating business owners used unique

targeted customer-focused advertising as a component of their overall business strategy.

Correlating the theme to existing literature. The findings of this study were

consistent with the literature on business success, innovation, and business knowledge.

Block et al. (2017) found that entrepreneurs who prepare for advancements in innovation

are more likely to be successful because they are capable of finding solutions to business

problems. When business owners fail to fulfill customers' needs, they risk losing

potential business. Innovation is a key factor to entrepreneurial success (Alstete, 2014).

Continuous organizational learning within the small business context can lead to an

increase in innovation (Brettel & Rottenberger, 2013).

Small business owners that continue to increase their education can overcome

barriers they encounter while operating those businesses. Dimov (2017) found that both

education and work experience increased the chances of small business survival.

Additionally, the results of this study may reduce gaps in the literature by increasing the

knowledge useful to owners of service businesses during the initial phases of activity.

Employee development and training can increase the productivity of the employees in the

business (Nelissen, Forrier, & Verbruggen, 2017). Gaining a competitive advantage

required owners to invest in, and use technology to create innovative products

(Srivastava, Franklin, & Martinette, 2013). Business owners maintain a customer relationship through organizational performance and knowledge of the customer's needs and wants.

Correlating the theme to the conceptual framework. The theme of required business skills for sustainability is consistent with the SCT. According to Baron et al. (2015), innovation occurs over time as the business leader gains knowledge and experience. This view aligns well with Fielder's (1964) SCT theory. Lussier (2014) proposed that failure to adapt is a result the business leader not understanding or being aware of changes in the business environment. The only way to adapt is to have a lifelong pursuit of knowledge (Potts, 2018). The literature of Potts (2018) suggested that innovation is the process businesses use to achieve and maintain success. According to Radipere, (2014), within the realm of entrepreneurial orientation, innovation is the firm's usage of proactive measures to implement new products and services. Small businesses that focus on continually increasing their business skills can adapt to changes in business environment.

Mom et al. (2015) studied the role that top managers played in small businesses and noted that managers possessed three characteristics: a high tolerance for risk, a favor of innovation, and a high degree of personal experience. Mom et al. (2015) revealed that top managers to have characteristics for their business to be successful. Innovative strategies helped each participant to acquire an identity and attract customers for sustainability. According to Baron et al. (2015), innovation would imply formulating

business operating strategies that best fit the operating environment of the business. The theme of required business skills fits well with Fielder's (1964) SCT theory.

Applications to Professional Practice

Emergent themes including developing a unique marketing strategy, developing strategic leadership skills, and required business skills apply to professional practice. Milosevic (2018) emphasized the importance of skills to business success. Additionally, Rita, Priyanto, Andadari, and Haryanto (2018) suggested that small business leaders must have a future orientation regarding products, technologies, and markets. To accomplish this orientation, entrepreneurs must focus on strategies and skills related to leadership and marketing strategies (Rita et al., 2018). I identified themes that directly relate to strategies that sustain success. Successful unique marketing strategies emerged from understanding customer needs. Additionally, I identified the importance of the owners developing leadership skills. All emergent themes relate to strategies for business sustainability.

These results of the study were relevant to understand the strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. The specific business problem was that some small service business owners lack strategies necessary to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. Few small business owners have enterprises that survive beyond the first 5 years of operation (SBA, 2014). The results of this study apply to professional practice. By following the recommendations of this study, small business owners could improve organizational stakeholders' understanding of strategies of the small business owners.

The research findings supported the theory of SCT that provides an appropriate framework for the research question. Through the application of SCT, researchers frame the success of businesses based on the diplomacy skills of leaders and decision-making strategies. Fiedler (1964) stipulated that the effectiveness of leadership strategies depend on situational or environmental factors in which the organization operates. The servant leadership theory and the EOT both provide addition construct related to the success of small businesses. The servant leadership theory provides a framework for understanding how a manager may interact with employees. The EOT applies to all business regardless of size, age, or formation type; entrepreneurship orientation exists independent of the small businesses objectives. The proposition of the theory is that managers have to use strategies that fit the nature of the business and employees (Andersen, 2016).

The results are relevant to this study because the study can help identify what skills and operational strategies small service business owners need to succeed in business beyond the first 5 years of operation. Additionally, the results of this study may reduce gaps in the literature by increasing the knowledge useful to small service business owners during the initial phases of business activity. The findings can serve as a practical guide to struggling small service business owners to change and improve their business practices. Small service business owners can also use the findings to improve their business strategies to succeed in business beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Implications for Social Change

The results from this study could benefit society by increasing business success rates, which could have a positive effect on the community, including job creation, and

sustainable stability. Improving business success rates would have economic effects on the community, including job creation, and sustainable stability. The findings in this study may contribute to positive social change through the creation of recommendations that might lead to the reversal of the business failure trends.

Communities and society could benefit from the results of this study by improving small business success rates. However, not all small business owners have the skills necessary to sustain their businesses and remain profitable. Since 2014, only half of all small service businesses survived beyond five years, and only one-third survived beyond 10 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The discussions and conclusions in this study may be of value to businesses by providing strategies for success. Once learned by business owners, these strategies could put improves the economic equality of communities. Improving business success rates would have economic effects on the community, including job creation, and sustainable stability.

Recommendations for Action

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. Few small business owners have enterprises that survive beyond the first 5 years of operation (SBA, 2014). Statisticians used labor force data from 2014 to show that only half of all small businesses survived beyond the first 5 years of operation, and only one-third survive beyond 10 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). I identified three recommendations that could benefit current and potential small service business owners. Existing and potential small service business owners should focus on (a) unique marketing strategy,

(b) strategic leadership and skills, and (c) increase business skills for sustainability to survive beyond the first 5 years of operation.

The first recommendation for action is for owners of small service businesses to develop marketing strategies to understand business trends, customers' needs, and the business environment. Possessing a marketing strategy could help business owners develop methods to gain new customers and remain successful as owners of small service businesses. Participants recommended using market research strategy as a contributing factor in business operations. The second recommendation for owners of small service businesses is to be sincere when interacting with employees, customers, and other stakeholders of the business. Understanding the results of this study may uncover the benefits of demonstrating sincerity in business. The findings indicated that sincerity and interacting lead to business success. Participants in this study remained resilient through adversities and demonstrated that sincerity and interacting contributed to business success.

The final recommended action learned from this study for the owners of small service businesses is to innovate and adapt continuously to the changing business environment. Embedded in this theme is the importance of innovative responses to market conditions. Responses from participants indicated that product differentiation is a contributing factor to business success. Business owners, leaders, and entrepreneurs who adapt to changes can remain competitive. The findings in this study may also be useful to business owners who struggle to develop strategies for success.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study include the strategies small service business owners used to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation in Arlington, Virginia with fewer than 50 employees. Conducting additional qualitative studies could help identify other skills necessary to help small business owners succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. As this study included only the City of Arlington, researchers should conduct further studies beyond the delimited geographical region of this study. I recommend further exploring the strategies small service business owners use to succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation in a different geographic location to compare strategies. I used a qualitative research method with a multiple case study design to conduct this study. Future researchers can use other methodologies and designs for further research on the success of a small service business.

I will use several methods to disseminate results of this study. Sharing a summary of the findings with the participants may contribute or confirm their understanding of how to stay successful. I will also publish this study through the ProQuest/UMI dissertation database for future researchers to use. Finally, I plan to present this study at academic and professional conferences and publish this and similar research in peer-reviewed journals.

Reflections

I had the opportunity to interview small service business owners who succeed beyond the first 5 years of operation. During this research process, I acquired knowledge that increased the understanding small business success factors. The experiences during

the research process will shape future inquiry in the field. Conducting interviews was enjoyable, and this challenge will influence future pursuits. The skills gained from conducting this study will help develop career goals after graduation. The future remains unwritten; however, consulting or teaching are possible avenues from this point. I will incorporate the knowledge gained from conducting this study in future endeavors and activities.

Conclusions

The findings from this multiple case study confirm that small business owners must gain essential skills necessary for establishing and sustaining successful businesses. Based on the participant's responses and supporting data, essential skills include developing a marketing plan unique to business objectives, developing strategic leadership skills, and continue to increase business skills. Since 1992, the rate of small business failure paced the number of startups (SBA, 2014). Few small business owners have enterprises that survive beyond the first 5 years of operation (SBA, 2014). The finding relates to the theory of SCT as introduced by Fiedler (1964). Fiedler stipulated that the effectiveness of leaders' strategies depend on situational or environmental factors. Applying a particular leadership style to all organizations or situations is not universal. The alternative theory that provided value to this study was the EOT; the EOT applies to all businesses regardless of size, age, or formation type; entrepreneurship orientation exists independent of the business objectives.

The findings from this study verified that small business owners need to meet customers' expectations by providing superior service and quality products. Participants

revealed that owners need to build quality customer relationships to achieve success. A

unique marketing strategy creates customer value and includes an emphasis on building

close relationships with society. Strong leadership skills are necessary to improve and

maintain customer relationship and helps fulfill market needs and reduce business

failures. The recommendations for further studies and action may contribute to positive

social change if used by struggling small business owners to reverse failure trends.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What you will do	**What you will say—script**
Introduce the interview and set the stage—often over a meal or coffee	My name is Diana Ratcliff, and I am a student at Walden University. I am requesting a one-on-one interview. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour and will occur at a time and place convenient to the participant. In addition, each interviewee if recording the session will be acceptable for research purpose only. There will be no references to participant's name or business.
• Watch for non-verbal queues • Paraphrase as needed • Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth	1. What strategies do you use to succeed in business?
	2. What strategies did you use to overcome obstacles you encountered?
	3. What skills are critical to your success?
	4. What strategies do you use to attract and retain customers?
	5. What planning process do you use during your first 5 years in business?
	6. What skill sets were most important to improve the profitability of your business?
	7. What other information can you add concerning your skills and knowledge as contributing to a successful small business owner beyond 5 years?
Wrap up interview thanking participant	This is the end of the interview and I would like to thank you for your time.
Schedule follow-up member checking interview	I would like to schedule a date and time for us to meet again for any follow questions needed. What is a good date and time for you?

Introduce follow-up interview and set the stage	Hello, I am glad you could meet with me again. I would like to go through each question you answered during the last interview and what I captured for the answer.
Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question Bring in probing questions related to other information that you may have found—note the information must be related so that you are probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walk through each question, read the interpretation and ask: Did I miss anything? Or, What would you like to add?	Below is a copy of our questions and answers.
	1. What strategies do you use to succeed in business? Participant Reply -
	2. What strategies did you use to overcome obstacles you encountered? Participant Reply -
	3. What skills are critical to your success? Participant Reply -
	4. What strategies do you use to attract and retain customers? Participant Reply -
	5. What planning process do you use during your first 5 years in business? Participant Reply -
	6. What skill sets were most important to improve the profitability of your business? Participant Reply -
	7. What other information can you add concerning your skills and knowledge as contributing to a successful small business owner beyond 5 years? Participant Reply -

Appendix B: National Institutes of Health Certificate

Certificate of Completion

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

Date of completion: 03/18/2017.

Certification Number: 2354577.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to succeed in business?

2. What strategies did you use to overcome obstacles you encountered?

3. What skills are critical to your success?

4. What strategies do you use to attract and retain customers?

5. What planning process do you use during your first 5 years in business?

6. What skill sets were most important to improve the profitability of your business?

7. What other information can you add concerning your skills and knowledge as contributing to a successful small business owner beyond 5 years?