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Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Obtaining Public Procurement Contract Awards

Asha McGlashan
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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Asha McGlashan

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Obtaining Public Procurement Contract Awards

by

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MS, Kaplan University, 2011

MBA, American InterContinental University, 2007

BS, Virginia State University, 2002

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2018

Abstract

The dominance of federal and state contracts by large enterprises reduces the share of contracts small and medium-sized enterprises' (SMEs) business leaders obtain. As of the last census reading in 2016, SMEs received only 23% of contracts. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies of 3 small business leaders, operating in south Florida, for obtaining state contracts through public procurement. The thematic findings were in the context of the principal-agent theory as the conceptual framework. The participants answered 10 questions in semistructured interviews and provided organizational procurement documents for review. The methodological triangulation of multiple data sources and data analysis led to the identification of 3 primary themes: business performance, overcoming barriers, and strategic initiatives. Enabling proper business performance protocols for revenue, company reputation, pricing, and compliance benefitted the 3 participants as a strategy for successfully winning state contracts. The participants first identified the barriers they experienced, which included access, bargaining power, funding, and labels. The barriers encountered by the participants became less overwhelming with the implementation of strategic initiatives based on knowledge, relationship building, skilled personnel, and taking action. Findings included the importance of SME business leaders and personnel educating themselves on the public procurement process and building relationships with individuals in the various agencies. Application of the findings may lead to a social change of higher small business employment rates, increased revenue, and improved innovation for business leaders.

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When I first started this program, I could not envision the end; it appeared to be a colossal task and I had bitten off more than I could chew. Alas, here I am at the end and it is by God's grace. Know Him in all your paths, and He will keep your ways straight (Proverbs 3:6). Thank you to my other half, Paul Fearon, your encouragement and support kept me sane (ish). I knew I found my Chair, Dr. Beverly Muhammad, at my 1st residency where she made a phenomenal first impression. You were the force I needed to excel. To my cool cheerleading squad, we may not all talk every day, every week, or every month but I am so thankful for the motivational texts and calls or the quick check-ins: Kadeem Blackwood, Cathrianna Datz, Natasha Lonsdale, Denia Lee Hing, Dicky Sykes, Cavine Phillips, Dr. Judy Schmelzer, Bridget Thomas, Liza Jimenez, Jerilyn Ward, Gracie Washington Bogar, and Dunstan McGlashan. You can't have a cheerleading squad without a Captain and that is Lieutenant Commander Rolanda "Ro" Findlay. Our mutual pep talks, girls' getaways, lunches, brunches, dinners, and anything else we could get into were great motivators and reenergizers. The laptop was usually by my side but when you were in the mix you made sure my breaks were stress free good times (TYFBAF). To my committee members, Dr. Gaytan and Dr. Blando, your honesty and direction significantly improved my work. Lastly, this study would not be what it is without the three amazing individuals who participated in the interviews. Due to confidentiality reasons, I cannot list names but you know who you are and you were amazing. For the roles everyone played, no matter how big or small, it was truly appreciated. THANK YOU!!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses within the United States are essential to continue economic growth (Shoraka, 2014a; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2015). A deficiency in research addressing contracts awarded through public procurement to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) establishes a need for further exploration. Findings from this study may provide the strategies SMEs' business leaders have used successfully to obtain contracts awarded through public procurement. The findings could also highlight any barriers to attaining contract awards.

Background of the Problem

Regardless of the existence of a formal procurement department in an organization, business leaders continue their participation in the procurement and acquisition of goods and services. Organizations that integrate a procurement department into their infrastructure move toward a centralized platform allowing increased accountability (Azmi & Rahman, 2015). Centralization is essential to businesses because business leaders use centralization to create standardization, increase buying power, develop areas of expertise and specialization, reduce personnel and related work, secure prices, and heighten control (Thomas, 1919). The United States government outlined the requirements of proper procurement etiquette under the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR).

The FAR, issued under the Office of Federal Procurement Policy Act of 1974, included uniform policies and procedures for acquisitions, contract formations, and contract administration (Contract Cost Principles and Procedures, 2001). As shown in the

Contract Cost Principles and Procedures (2001), the requirements of the FAR are in government regulation 48 C.F.R. 31. At the state level, Florida must comply with the government requirements of statute 287.057, which includes details related to the procurement of commodities or services regarding bidding, new contracts, or contract renewals (Procurement of Commodities or Contractual Services Act of 2015). Some Florida SMEs' business leaders lacking knowledge of the public procurement process and guidelines miss the opportunity to obtain state government public contracts.

Problem Statement

The dominance of federal and state contracts by large enterprises reduces the share of contracts SMEs' business leaders obtain (Spiler, Kvrjic, & Vujadin, 2016). As of the last census reading in 2016, while SMEs in the United States constituted 99.7% of all businesses, SMEs only received 23% of contracts (Mijid, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The general business problem was that SMEs were not taking advantage of the opportunity to gain contracts awarded through federal or state public procurement, negatively affecting SMEs' revenue. The specific business problem was that some south Florida SMEs' business leaders lacked strategies to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to reveal strategies that south Florida SME business leaders used to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement. I explored the strategies of three SME business leaders from three companies in south Florida; the leaders possessed successful and consistent experience

(i.e., three consecutive years) in obtaining state contracts awarded to their organizations through public procurement. The implications for positive social change included the potential opportunity for business leaders, in any sector, to acquire state procurement contracts; increasing their revenue and enhancing the lifestyles of their communities' members. An increase in revenue leads to innovative activities, collaboration, and a more competitive market (Bouhdary, 2014). Every dollar spent at an SME in the local community stays in the community, generating improved economic value (Robu, 2013). According to Bouhdary (2014), well performing SMEs in a community lead to more charitable giving and promote neighborhoods with a unique atmosphere such as knowing the people behind the products and services, developing one-of-a-kind businesses instead of chains, keeping dollars in the local economy, and experiencing a better level of service.

Nature of the Study

The three common research methodologies are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. I chose the qualitative method for this study. Researchers use the qualitative method to provide rich, thorough descriptions and interpretations of the phenomena (Sousa, 2014). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because, according to Yin (2017), researchers use the quantitative method to examine relationships, identify cause and effect, differentiate among variables, and compile numerical data. Yin also noted using the mixed-methods research method requires both qualitative and quantitative research methods, more resources, and extensive time. The

mixed-methods research was not appropriate to address the purpose of my study because I did not need the quantitative aspect of the method.

I considered three research designs: case study, phenomenology, and ethnography. I chose the case study design for this study. The objective of a case study is to provide in-depth data collection through the interaction of participants in their physical space (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Stake, 1998). As noted by Yin (2017), researchers use the case study design because they seek a level of flexibility (i.e., the ability to modify the study based on new information or discovery during data collection). Phenomenological researchers seek to capture the meanings of lived experiences and worldviews of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological design was not suitable because I did not want to capture the lived experiences of the participants. Ethnographic researchers must immerse themselves in the culture, continuously observing and interacting with participants (Yin, 2017). I did not intend to study the culture of a group and did not use the ethnographic research design. The most appropriate design for this research was a case study.

Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was as follows: What strategies do south Florida SMEs' business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement?

Interview Questions

1. What were the strategies you used to increase the number of state contracts awarded through public procurement?

2. What strategies worked best when you initially applied for a state contract through public procurement?
3. What barriers did you experience when you first attempted to increase the number of state contracts awarded to your company?
4. How did your organization address the barriers to obtaining state contracts through public procurement?
5. How has your business performance improved since increasing the number of state contracts through public procurement?
6. What documents can you share with me that will help me understand your strategies for obtaining state contracts?
7. What strategies do you use to maintain contract compliance?
8. What strategies, if any, do you use to maintain bargaining power?
9. What, if any, additional strategies have you found to be helpful in gaining state contracts through public procurement?
10. Is there something that I have not asked you that you think is important regarding effective strategies to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement?

Conceptual Framework

Jensen and Meckling (1976) formalized the principal-agent theory. The principal-agent theory is a variation of the theory of the firm and the combined theories of economic and institutional, developed concurrently in 1972 by Stephen Ross and Barry Mitnick, respectively (Mitnick, 1973; Ross, 1973). The principal-agent theory includes

two constructs concerning the relationship and general contractual obligations between buyer and supplier. According to Laffont and Martimort (2001), under the principal-agent theory, two assumptions exist: (a) the principal makes the contract, removing bargaining power, and (b) the courts will impose penalties if the principal or agent fails to uphold the contract terms.

Zardkoohi, Harrison, and Josefy (2017) expanded on the opportunism possible in a principal-agent relationship without penalties or checks and balance. The principal can behave opportunistically against the agent, the agent can behave opportunistically against the principal, and when the principal and agent have a shared interest, this interest can affect third-party stakeholders. The principal-agent theory applied to this study because the buyer-supplier relationship found in public procurement was analogous to the principal-agent relationship identified in the principal-agent theory. While the state holds the procurement contracts, as the contracting authority, buyer, or principal, the SMEs' business leaders were the suppliers or agents that bid on the contracts. The agents or SMEs' business leaders must meet the needs of the state's or principals' procurement contracts.

Operational Definitions

Adversarial contract: An adversarial contract is a short-term contract in which the principal maintains primary control, resulting in increased principal-agent friction (Regan, Love, & Smith, 2015).

Contracting authority: Contracting authority is the body (i.e., a public institution, state, regional, or local authority) governed by public law; contracting authorities provide

rules and other relevant information for bidding on a contract (Panagiotidou & Intzesilglou, 2016; Panagoret & Ivanoff, 2016).

Information asymmetry: Information asymmetry occurs when one party to an economic transaction possesses greater knowledge than the other party (Neupane, Soar, & Vaidya, 2015).

Nonadversarial contract: Nonadversarial contracts are used by individuals to encourage the principal and agent to work together for a resolution that benefits both parties, and the contracts are long-term (Regan et al., 2015).

Organizational resiliency: Organizational resiliency is the ability of organizational leaders to anticipate, respond, and adapt to changes and sudden disruptions internal and external to the organization (Valero, Jung, & Andrew, 2015).

Pareto efficiency: Pareto efficiency, also known as Pareto optimality, is the economic state in which one party's situation cannot improve without making the other party's situation worse (Shang, Feng, Ke, & Chan, 2016).

Public-private partnerships (PPP): Public-private partnerships are cooperative business relationships between private sector companies and government agencies to complete projects that serve the public (Vinogradov, Shadrina, & Kokareva, 2015).

Public procurement: Public procurement is the process that any government agencies or departments of the public sector use to purchase goods, services, or work (Panagiotidou & Intzesilglou, 2016).

Small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME): Small- and medium-sized enterprise is a business that employs a small number of workers and does not have a high volume of

sales; usually privately owned and operated sole proprietorships, corporations or partnerships (Richards-Gustafson, 2017).

Transformational leader: A transformational leader works with subordinates to identify needed change, individually and socially; creating a vision to guide positive changes with the end goal of developing followers into leaders (Valero et al., 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions and limitations are out of the control of the researcher and delimitations are within the control (Grant, 2014; Manescu, 2014). Assumptions are accepted as true but cannot be confirmed and if they disappear the study irrelevant (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Limitations are the possible weaknesses of the study out of the researcher's control (Manescu, 2014). Manescu (2014) also noted that delimitations are used by the researcher to define the boundaries of the study.

Assumptions

Assumptions are the uncontrollable elements of a study (Grant, 2014). Though the researcher cannot verify, assumptions are things that the researcher considered true (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers assume that research participants will present their authentic voice related to their lived experience (Grant, 2014). I assumed the participants would answer the interview questions honestly. Based on the completed interviews the participants were knowledgeable and provided honest answers about the procurement field and their methods for obtaining state contracts.

Another assumption was that the participants were bias-free in their responses. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), researchers are taking their best guesses and

hunches about the behaviors of the participants. During the interviews the three participants shared the positive and negative experiences of both leading a SME and working with various agencies. The participants appeared to share information not to create bias but to illustrate the details of the full contracting process through public procurement. Information was provided based on the participants' experience and sharing their knowledge.

Limitations

Limitations are significant to acknowledge within a study because they are the potential weaknesses not within the control of the researcher (Bailey, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Limitations can negatively affect the study methodology and conclusions. The limitations of this study were access to all three participants company procurement documents, the condensed geographic area for selecting participants, and industry confinement.

Only one of the three participants could share procurement documents. P1 shared the company's capability statement and government catalog, which provided an administrative overview of the public procurement process tailored to each contract bids that were submitted. The other two participants were unable to share any procurement documents because the information was proprietary but the two participants advised me to review their websites for general information. All three participants confirmed they also abide by the guidelines of the federal and state public procurement process. The geographic area was limited to south Florida and the industries of the three participants were marketing and promotion, medical, and consulting services.

Delimitations

Delimitations are controllable and include factors such as the chosen objectives, research questions, theoretical perspective and selected population (Manescu, 2014). The delimitations of this study included the sample size of only three SME business leaders in south Florida and the business leaders possessing knowledge of successful business strategies that positively affect state contracts awarded through public procurement. The restriction of participants to SMEs' business leaders meant that the participants' subordinates could not participate in the study.

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study may be of value because organizational leaders could use the findings to identify successful strategies employed by SMEs' business leaders to obtain state contracts through public procurement. Improved contracting performance can positively affect the profitability of a company and economic growth. The innovative and entrepreneurial actions of SMEs stimulate the economy (Leyden, 2016). The application of the study findings could also improve internal procurement procedures, increase awareness of state public procurement policies, and enhance community lifestyles.

Contribution to Business Practice

The contribution to the practice of business could enable business leaders to enhance their understanding of the state procurement process, recognize potential barriers in contracts awarded, and find ways to implement the identified strategies as possible solutions to those obstacles. The information could help SME business leaders and contracting officers to improve their decision-making. My articulated findings may also

provide strategies that some south Florida SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement to present opportunities to other business leaders.

Implications for Social Change

The strategies the SMEs' business leader participants use to obtain state contracts through public procurement are significant to the growth of the economy. The implications for positive social change include a potential increase in the number of state contracts through public procurement awarded to all SMEs, led by male or female leaders, minorities, and other underrepresented populations, growing their revenue and presenting new chances. The second implication for positive social change is the potential for increased diversity of SMEs within the local communities, increasing local employment opportunities and benefiting the local economies. SME diversification occurs when all business leaders have access to the same information and prospects because of the awarding of state contracts through public procurement to the most qualified business.

An increase in revenue leads to innovative activities, collaboration, and a more competitive market (Bouhdary, 2014). SME business leaders help to enhance the lifestyles of their communities' members. Every dollar spent at an SME in the local community stays in the community, generating improved economic value (Robu, 2013). According to Bouhdary (2014), well performing SMEs' in a community lead to more charitable giving and promote neighborhoods with a unique atmosphere such as knowing the people behind the products and services, developing one-of-a-kind businesses instead

of chains, keeping dollars in the local economy, and experiencing a better level of service.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Thomas (1919) noted the primary concerns for government leaders, since the 20th century, were profits and savings. Organizational leaders established goals based on finding methods to reduce costs. Strategization in the decision-making process for purchases and vendor application was either minimal or nonexistent (Lianbo, Zhuqiang, Pengfei, & Wenzhong, 2014).

The introduction of purchasing departments led to increased attention on organizations buying without accurate, in-depth analysis of the transactions (Mogre, Lindgreen, & Hingley, 2017). According to Lee and Rim (2016), the establishment of the procurement process within organizations was to increase transparency in contract activity, permit equal access to contracts, enhance accountability, and improve analytical data. Lianbo et al. (2014) added that the implementation of procurement processes maximizes quality and minimizes costs.

Organization of the Review of Literature

The research question of this qualitative multiple case study was: What strategies do south Florida business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement? Based on the organization of related topics, the literature review began with (a) a brief overview of procurement, (b) information on the search strategy, (c) summary of the frequency and percentages of peer-reviewed articles, (d) the application to the applied business problem, (e) analysis of the conceptual framework, (f) critical

analysis of small- and medium-sized enterprises, and (g) overview of government purchasing and public procurement. Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017) stated that the literature review is a systematic way to summarize and critique the literature, providing a foundation and inspiration for substantial research.

Search Strategy

The purpose of the search strategy was to illustrate its application to the business problem. I used the Walden University Online Library for gathering the sources, searching the business and management databases. I conducted a critical analysis and synthesis of potential themes associated with public procurement contracts. I used key search words in the Academic Search Complete database.

Other databases I searched included ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Complete, and government databases. The primary government database used was the Small Business Administration (SBA) site, sba.gov. The SBA site included resources and rules, regulations, policies, and procedures for small business owners. I included seminal books and doctoral studies from Walden University to the literature review.

I also used online search engines such as Google and Google Scholar. Though the peer-reviewed literature consisted of thorough research, the studies included few publications about SMEs and public procurement contracts. However, many works of literature were available regarding SME business practices, procurement, and federal contracts in general. The key word search included combinations of *public procurement*, *small- and medium-sized enterprises*, *purchasing*, *government contracts*, *state contracts*, *principal-agent*, *leadership*, *innovation*, *sustainability*, and *governance*.

Summary of Frequencies and Percentages of Peer Reviewed Articles

This study includes 169 references within the literature review, of which 86% are peer-reviewed, and 91% are within five years of expected CAO approval in 2018.

Illustrated in Table 1 are the percentages of all sources including peer-reviewed journals and seminal books. Other references within Table 1 are websites, papers, and reports, which comprise 14% of total references. I used the references not peer-reviewed or within the five years of CAO approval for the added historic perspective and to supplement context to the more recent findings.

Table 1

Type, Total, and Percentages of References

Reference Type	Total	% of references	Less than five years	More than five years
Scholarly and peer-reviewed journals	145	86%	133	12
Other sources (i.e., seminal books, papers and reports, government, company, and international websites)	24	14%	20	4
Total	169	100%	153	16

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to learn strategies some SMEs' business leaders used to obtain state contracts through public procurement. As of 1997, per Federal Government mandate, the State of Florida requires that SMEs acquire at least 23% of public procurement contracts. My critical analysis and synthesis of the literature about public procurement contracts included supporting and contrasting

theories and possible themes concerning the public procurement contract phenomena using other researchers' perspectives.

Principal-Agent Theory

Agency relationships are standard (i.e., employee and employer, the state and the governed, and contractor and contractee). Ross (1973) posited that an agency relationship occurred between two or more parties when one, designated as the agent, acts on behalf of the other, named the principal. According to Ross, all contractual arrangements comprise a principal and agent relationship; though, Mitnick (1973) suggested a sociological conception of agency theory rather than the economic paradigm.

Mitnick (1973) identified the fiduciary norm as a standard social norm, noting how such norms economized on agency cost. Mitnick focused on social relationships such as lawyers negotiating with one another, diplomats negotiating with foreign governments, and advisers and clients. The principal-agent theory, which was formalized by Jensen and Meckling (1976), is a variation of the theory of the firm (Casson, 2014) and a combination of Ross' (1973) economic theory and Mitnick's institutional theory. Some individuals refer to the principal-agent theory as agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pouryousefi & Frooman, 2017; Yukins, 2010). According to Eisenhardt (1989) and Yukins (2010), the principal-agent relationship is found in many areas, such as accounting, economics, finance, marketing, political science, organizational behavior, and sociology; explaining successes and failures in organizations.

The principal-agent theory, as an economic theory, is opportunistic ("How to bid," 2018; Steinle, Schiele, & Ernst, 2014). The relational characteristics of the

principal-agent theory results in both parties pursuing their separate interests. The principal should monitor the agent to ensure alignment with the principal's interest. Gailmard (2014) posited that while the principal may place restrictions on the agent, the limits may be counterproductive to the principal's interest.

The principal lacked the expertise and resources to produce a service in-house and selected an agent to enter a contract. The principal-agent theory was an appropriate construct for describing SMEs' business leaders strategization in obtaining contracts through public procurement. According to Steinle et al. (2014), the principal-agent theory was used to explain the relationship between the two parties regarding contract management. The principal-agent theory is a derivative of contract law and can best define the contractual relationship between buyers and suppliers.

Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) used the principal-agent theory to analyze rebel groups in wartime atrocities and civilian abuse. Salehyan et al. explained Foreign funding of rebel groups in principal-agent terms. Salehyan et al. also found that the principal, democracies and states with strong human rights lobbies, characteristics influence agent, rebel groups, actions. Sng (2014) also used the principal-agent theory for analysis on the dictatorship in imperial China. Sng posited that a ruler governing a vast country encounters agent problems because of difficulties with agent transparency. Without transparency, the agents can extort taxpayers. Sng found that the principal, China, during its imperial years, taxed sparingly to minimize agents' corruption. Both the principal and agent can become corrupt and opportunistic ("How to bid," 2018; Kauppi & Van Raaij, 2015).

Rehmatulla and Smith (2015) studied the principal-agent problem in shipping. Rehmatulla and Smith posited that inefficiencies in cost-effective measures and shipping contracts led to difficulties between the principal (i.e., charterer) and agent (i.e., ship-owner). Rehmatulla and Smith identified two problems: (a) the split incentives problem, where the goals of the principal and agent divide and (b) the informational problem, where the principal cannot verify the agent's actions. Sng (2014) also noted the informational problem of the principal-agent relationship in the dictatorship in the imperial China study. Rehmatulla and Smith advised the first step in overcoming challenges in the principal-agent relationship are to identify the situations where a problem could occur and determine resolutions in alignment with both parties.

A mutually beneficial principal-agent relationship was achievable in government procurement with these three procedures: monitoring, training, and guidance (Kauppi & Van Raaij, 2015). Principal-agent problems arise because one or both parties may have information not provided to the other side. Kauppi and Van Raaij (2015) found guidance and training help to reduce employees' noncompliance in government procurement.

Supplementary theory. Another theory to consider when analyzing the principal-agent theory and public procurement was transactional costs theory. This theory is not a rival to the principal-agent but supplementary. To reduce costs and increase cost-effectiveness in public procurement, business leaders need to understand transactional costs (Jasko, Jovanovic, & Cudanov, 2015; Patrucco, Luzzini, & Ronchi, 2017). Ronald Coase discussed the concept of transaction costs in the 1937 paper, *The Nature of the Firm*, though the term was made official in the 1970s.

Through Oliver Williamson's 1987 work, *Transaction Cost Economics*, transaction cost became widely known. Some researchers use transactional cost theory as a contractual approach to studying economic organizations (Coase, 1973; Williamson, 1987). According to Williamson (1987), transaction cost economics (a) is microanalytic, (b) is aware of behavioral assumptions, (c) introduces and develops the economic importance of asset specificity, (d) relies on comparative institutional analysis, (e) regards the organization as a governance structure and not a production function, (f) places greater weight on ex post institutions of contracts, and (g) uses a combined law, economic, and organization perspective. Jasko et al. (2015) and Strange (2016) concluded that the transactional costs theory could serve as a benchmark for organizations to increase efficiency by monitoring and rewarding agents for obeying directives.

Individuals use contractual relationships to define governance, and public procurement is central to the process (Roman, 2015). Public procurement specialists are fundamental in shaping the practice (Brooks & Rich, 2016; Roman, 2015; 2017). According to Roman (2015), public procurement specialists have responsibilities that were once out outside of their decision-making capabilities and can provide valuable information.

Procurement is a subfield of the supply chain management (SCM) field. Within SCM and procurement, the principal and agent identified in the principal-agent theory were revealed as interdependent because they often switch roles within the relationship (Fayezi, O'Loughlin, & Zutshi, 2012). Kavak, Tunçel, and Özyörük (2015) concluded that the principal-agent relationship should provide transparency, loyalty, and

communication quality. The reduction of transaction costs between the principal and agent was a benefit of using the procurement process (Neupane et al., 2015).

Resource-based view theory versus principal-agent theory. Birger Wernerfelt introduced the resource-based view (RBV) theory to mainstream attention in 1984. Though Wernerfelt officially named the theory, elements of the theory were in the earlier works of Coase (1973) and Williamson (1975) in which the emphasis was on the value of resources for organizational performance. Under RBV, tangible and intangible resources within the organization are measured to determine the value and influence they have on the organization's competitive advantage (Hussain, 2018; Min, Homaid, Minai, & Md Zain, 2016). According to Almarri and Gardiner (2014) and Sodhi (2015), the RBV theory received increased attention for its influence on the strategic management field and enabling leaders to understand how unique resources drive competitive advantage.

SMEs' leaders could use the RBV theory to improve marketing performance through product innovation and the ability to adapt to changes in the business environment (Meutia & Ismail, 2015). Almarri and Gardner (2014) and Kellermanns, Walter, Crook, Kemmerer, and Narayan (2014) did raise an issue with the lack of definitional criteria and generalizability of the RBV theory. Business leaders can use RBV theory to identify unique assets such as diverse human resources which have valuable knowledge (Hashimoto & Nassif, 2014) or to discover small business strategy and innovation (Montiel-Campos, Haces-Atondo, & Ruisenor-Quintero, 2014). Nadkarni (2017) surmised that the RBV theory supports management of resources while the principal-agent theory supports management or control of business relationships.

Rival theory. A rival theory to the principal-agent is the theory of auction. Paul Milgrom and Robert Weber founded the theory of auction in 1982. The elements of the theory of auction are the bid format, the scoring rule, and the settlement rule (Chao, 2015; Milgrom & Weber, 1982; Patrucco et al., 2017). The bid format is the sealed bid an organization submits that consists of the unit price bid reflecting the marginal cost and the fixed priced bid reflecting the fixed cost (Chao, 2015). The scoring rule converts the two-part bid (unit price and fixed price) into a score.

The settlement rule is the selection of the winning bidder and settlement of the payment (Chao, 2015). Under the theory of auctions, the development of a model of competitive bidding detailed the payoff for the winning bidder may depend on their preference, the preferences of others, and the fundamental quality of the item up for sale (Milgrom & Weber, 1982). Auctions benefit business leaders not risk-averse and can outbid their competitors. According to Chao (2015), an assumption exists that the regulations of the theory of auction commit to all the details of the procurement process.

The theory of auction pertains more to an efficient market organization for awarding to monopoly franchises than to SMEs. Chao noted that the two-stage auction design (ex-ante and ex-post efficiency) ensured that the company with the best technology was selected, operating at the least cost and priced at the marginal cost. Auction environments tend to have costly entry fees (Gentry & Li, 2014). The auction design enables larger enterprises to reap the most benefits. The theory of the auction was not applicable to this study because SMEs' business leaders were not paying entry fees to obtain contracts through public procurement. The principal-agent theory was valid for

this study in identifying the relationship between the contracting authority (principal) and SME (agent).

Principal-agent theory in contracting. The principal-agent theory is the most applicable theory to understand the dynamics of public procurement processes involving the government and the selected suppliers (Neupane et al., 2015). Principals use contracts to define their scope of work for acquiring goods and services from agents. Ross (1973) determined the level of which each participant holds perfect information without making anyone worse off. Pareto efficiency specifies the calculation of the level at which both parties maintain ideal information.

Pareto efficiency is an economic state where resources are allocated optimally among all parties (Ross, 1973; Shang et al., 2016). The contracting authority or principal must have rules, regulations, and processes in place that enable SMEs or agents to have equal access to contracts like larger enterprises. Pareto efficiency increased the chances of SMEs obtaining contracts in public procurement.

The principal has difficulty monitoring the agent at any given time, and if many agents have a contract, the fees may be the only detail available for information (Ross, 1973; Schneeweiss, 2003). Public procurement regulations enable the leaders of government entities to monitor contracts awarded to suppliers (Schneeweiss, 2003); in which government leaders are the principal and suppliers are the agents. Jensen and Meckling (1976) sought a structured contractual relationship between the principal and the agent. A structured contract between the principal and agent increase transparency and accountability. According to Hussain, Rigoni, and Orij (2018) and Neupane et al.

(2015), incomplete contracts lead to information asymmetry. When the principal has more information than the agent or vice versa, information asymmetry is evident.

Information asymmetry is the unequal distribution of information.

Two forms of contracting exist, classical and relational (Never & de Leon, 2014). Classical contracts are short-term and specific, clarifying how conflicts are resolved in the future and hold that actions can separate from connected actions, both in the present and in the future (Never & de Leon, 2014; Van de Walle, 2017). The resolution of disputes in classical contracts occurs through formal arbitration. Andrews and Barron (2016), Baldenius, Glover, and Xue (2016), and Never and de Leon (2014) agreed that relational contracts are more complex and may or may not include the original contract, with adjustments required that one cannot plan. Negotiations under relational contracts require trusting that all parties will operate in good faith and find mutually beneficial solutions.

Two contracting methods exist, adversarial and collaborative or non-adversarial. Regan et al. (2015) found that the adversarial contracting method was most common in public infrastructure procurement. Owida, Byrne, Heavey, Blake, and El-Kilany (2016) and Regan et al. noted that adversarial contracting includes the following characteristics: principal ownership, short-term contracts, agent selection, defined scope of work, and penalties. Regan et al. posited that adversarial contracts increase principal-agent friction.

Non-adversarial contracting methods deliver a better procurement outcome for the government. According to Regan et al. (2015), non-adversarial contracts improve long-term relationship management for capital-intensive services such as infrastructure

services. Traditional or classical procurement contracts are the default option for the government (Regan et al., 2015; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a; Van de Walle, 2017). According to Kai, Wei, and Meng-lin (2014), the principal-agent model provided a framework to establish the goals of a contract. Goal alignment and rapport are essential factors in the principal-agent relationship because of the increase in satisfactory performance. Regan et al. (2015) stated that the typical procurement contract has the principal, owner or client contract with the agent or main contractor, managing the sub-contractors carrying out the work.

Well-developed countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have legislation on public procurement with related bylaws; however, developing countries that include Ghana, Thailand, and Kenya, must adopt special laws (Vinogradov et al., 2015). Because developing countries adopt special laws, Vinogradov et al. (2015) posited that developing countries are more apt to implement public-private partnerships (PPP) regulations as an unofficial form of public procurement. According to Torvinen and Ulkuniemi (2016) and Vinogradov et al., PPP permits projects not feasible through public procurement, providing access to additional resources, increasing end-user value, and minimizing bureaucratic burden.

Lewis and Bajari (2014) focused on the use of proper contract terms to incentivize the principal-agent relationship. Deadlines and late penalty terms are used by the principal to encourage higher effort from agents. Agents adjust their effort level throughout the contract dependent on unexpected delays and other circumstances (Lewis & Bajari, 2014). Obtaining contracts through the procurement process includes more

transparency of actions than what is typically realized by principals. According to Feldman (2018) and McCue, Prier, and Swanson (2015), the minimization of the principal-agent problem within procurement contracts occur by creating incentives for the agent to act in the best interest of the principal; assisted by guidelines that include a code of ethics, internal policies, and statutes.

Principal-agent theory and incentives. Incentives within the principal-agent relationship enable the parties to work hard, save, invest, or produce quality products and service. Laffont and Martimort (2001) noted what was missing from principal-agent relationships was incentivizing economic agents. Chang (2014) expanded on Laffont and Martimort's view, positing that high-powered incentives tap into the principal's efficiency improvement potential. The principal may not witness the agent's true ability pre-contract and cannot predict the level of effort the agent will expend post-contract (Chang, 2014; Laffont & Martimort, 2001). The tasks delegated to agents turn problematic when the agent has different objectives from the principal (Steinle et al., 2014).

Contracts between the principal and the agent created some control over the agents. According to Chang (2014) and Till and Yount (2018), incentives were used to develop incentive compatibility constraint, increasing agent output. Full disclosure from the agent to the principal was not possible and, to overcome this lack of knowledge, the principal could either try to improve the state of information or moderate the consequences of not being informed (Schneeweiss, 2003; Yukins, 2010).

According to Schneeweiss (2003) and Till and Yount (2018), decision makers should also screen the environment for additional information as the environment was

actively disclosing (correct or incorrect) information. Alternatively, Chang (2014) posited that the principal-agent model might lead to biased decision-making with incentives in procurement because incentives are used to help reduce costs for the principal. Chang also found that contract termination, another aspect of any agreement, was not entirely addressed in the principal-agent literature. Ramifications were necessary to address the poor performance of either the principal, agent, or both.

According to Korman (2014), the government used a termination for convenience clause in traditional contracts, legally enabling them to breach contract terms and recover certain costs. Literature published since 2011 listed advantages of applying the principal-agent theory to government contracting. Flynn and Davis (2014) noted opportunities to present viable frameworks to study public procurement. Numerous scholars applied the principal-agent theory to government contracting and cited many advantages.

Yukins (2010) reviewed the principal-agent model to assess its influence on the procurement system and procurement rules. Under the principal-agent theory, the principal entered a contract with an agent to achieve a specific goal. According to Hussain et al. (2018) and Yukins, the principal used various monitoring methods to reduce conflict of interests. A residual loss exists in any principal-agent relationship (Never & de Leon, 2014; Schneeweiss, 2003; Yukins, 2010). Yukins concluded that the principal-agent model enhanced understanding of procurement (i.e., breaking down barriers between legal policies).

Principal-agent theory and corruption. Neupane, Soar, Vaidya, and Yong (2014) reviewed the relationship of the principal-agent theory to reducing corruption in

the public procurement process. According to Alzola (2018), Neupane et al., Okubena (2016), and Steinle et al. (2014), public procurement can aid in minimizing power dominance, information asymmetry (one party possessing more information than the other), and increase transparency and accountability. Steinle et al. explored the opportunism in supplier selection, which often favors larger organizations. Politics tend to dominate contracts awarded (Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2017; Krahmann, 2016; Roman, 2017; Thomas, 1919) in public procurement.

Beale (2014) noted another reason for SMEs lack of access to federal procurement contracts is that the government often relies on larger and well-known organizations. But Tammi, Saastamoinen, and Reijonen (2014) suggested that SMEs failure to secure procurement contracts could stem from limitations of capacity, lack of relatable skills, or apathetic attitude about public procurement. SME business leaders may fear a loss of autonomy and will avoid government contract bidding (Nicholas & Fruhmann, 2014). Small businesses sometimes fail to plan and apply to formal bidding processes (Mosoti & Kaman, 2014; Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). SME resources are often limited, especially in technology. According to Harris and Patten (2014), the submission of most contract bids happens with the use of technology (i.e., computers) on a secure website; SME business leaders with limited technological know-how and capabilities become crippled in competing for contracts.

Organizations use government contracts to gain legitimacy and stabilization of revenue (Never & de Leon, 2014). Never and de Leon (2014) questioned the effectiveness of partnerships via contracts if some organizations cut salaries and jobs

because of a reliance on government contracts, which impedes trust. Never and de Leon and Kavak et al. (2015) believed trust was essential for the principal-agent relationship in contracting.

Agents may attempt to expand their organization and increase their power and influence at the principal's expense (Krahmann, 2016). Krahmann (2016) and O'Donoghue and Somerville (2018) posited that principals could increase control through checks and balances systems, incentives, and the threat and imposition of sanctions. Neupane et al. (2015) noted that finding practical measures to increase the trust between the government and suppliers is an anticorruption factor. Principals need a balance of control and entrustment.

Principal-agent influence on relationships. The building of alliances with the principal would facilitate positive aspects of successful organizational performance and alignment with the principal-agent theory framework. Achieving success in procurement creates value for both the stakeholders and the principal (Latham, 2014). Grudinski, Sintonen, and Hallikas (2014) added that partnerships were indispensable to public procurement. Collaborative relationships provide value to both buyers and suppliers in public procurement. Procurement plays a positive role in the principal-agent relationship in reducing transaction costs, shortening procurement cycles, increasing information availability, and enabling a common management framework (Neupane et al., 2015).

According to Taneja et al. (2016), developing relationships and partnerships strengthen competitive advantage, improve business performance, and increases innovation. SME business leaders must be professional and flexible when collaborating

with others (Nicholas & Fruhmann, 2014; Taneja et al., 2016). Flexibility increases SME business leaders' chances of obtaining contracts through public procurement. While agents should follow rigorous procedures to win a contract award, Taneja et al. (2016) noted that vendor adaptability and flexibility are also essential to quickly respond to changing circumstances.

Also, business leaders that support their local communities and maintain a high standing are more likely to be successful (George, Dahlander, Graffin, & Sim, 2016; Taneja et al., 2016). Hayakawa and Ito (2018) and Taneja et al. (2016) posited SME business leaders collaborating with external organizations, such as other local businesses, charities, or government programs, enhance the strategization and performance of the organization. Business leaders are the force behind successful partnership outcomes; their knowledge management ensures unity in communications, vision, mission, marketing strategies, and consistent branding (Kihl, Tainsky, Babiak, & Bang, 2014). Knowledge management is essential to SME success. Garriga (2014) stated that knowledge management is necessary for the appraisal of business capabilities, evaluation of practices, and obtaining feedback to enhance performance and profit.

Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have an essential role in the United States economic development (Bressler, Campbell, & Elliot, 2014; Chamberland & Witchel, 2016; Williams, 2016); but SMEs rarely dominate their respective industries. SMEs encourage diversification, which is often missing from large enterprises, as many minorities and women make significant contributions to the small business world (Clark

& Moutray, 2004; Richards-Gustafson, 2017; Schimpp, 2016). Though Caucasian men account for much of SME ownership (Bressler et al., 2014), diverse demographics, including age, gender, and race, has increased in the entrepreneurial landscape (Williams, 2016). Schimpp (2016) expanded on the changes in the SME culture, noting that different funds outperformed non-diverse competitors, diverse teams out-innovated their peers, and the fastest growing sectors are women and minority-owned businesses. According to Richards-Gustafson (2017), SMEs range from mom-and-pop shops to manufacturing plants, law firms, inns, construction, and restaurants, a mix as diverse as the owners.

SME business leaders employ a small number of workers and do not have a high volume of sales; SMEs are privately owned and operated (Richards-Gustafson, 2017; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017b). The definition of SME varies by country (see Table 2) and industry. Of the 5.73 million employers in the United States, SMEs account for 99.7%, employing a staff of 500 individuals or less (SBE Council, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Table 2

SME Size by Country

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES
U.S.	500 <
Australia	15 <
Europe	250 <
Asia	100 <
Africa	50 <

Richards-Gustafson (2017)

The recognition of SME business leaders increased because of the value their businesses afford the economy. For SMEs that only operate for a short term, the longevity of these businesses was the center of other research studies (Bressler et al., 2014; Loo, 2015; Williams, 2016). Financial difficulty is the primary reason for most SME failures. The owners' use checking, savings, or a personal loan from the bank secured by the owners' assets as collateral for the SME start-up funds (Jagtiani & Lemieux, 2016). Massa, Farneti, and Scappini (2015) and Miller, Hoffer, and Wille (2016) observed that after the 2008 financial crisis bank loans became harder for SME owners to acquire.

SMEs business leaders who can build long-term relationships with their banks can significantly alleviate financial difficulties (Han, Benson, Chen & Zhang, 2014). But according to Miller et al. (2016), most SME business leaders seek out internal sources such as friends and family to minimize dependence on external sources. SME growth signifies customer loyalty, service quality, product quality, market position, revenue generation, and effective leadership (Singh & Pattanayak, 2014).

While SMEs represent a high percent of the employers in the United States (99.7%); the business leaders experience challenges related to growth, sustainability, and profits (Loo, 2015; Massa et al., 2015; Williams, 2016). According to Bressler et al. (2014), Massa et al. (2015), and Williams (2016), multistrategic initiatives could assist SME business leaders to achieve a higher probability of revenue generation and meeting growth objectives. Rice, Liao, Galvin, and Martin (2015) emphasized dynamic capabilities and that business performance links to purposeful strategies. Oyeku,

Oduyoye, Olalekan, Kabuoh, and Elemo (2014) noted that a few factors contribute to business performance: leadership, industry, geography, and business history.

According to Walsh and Cunningham (2016), the blame for small business failure lies in the nature of the business rather than the business owner. Chamberland and Witchel (2016) disagreed, stating a lack of managerial skills and limited financial resources are factors of small business failures. SME business leaders encounter numerous internal and external barriers to success. Bressler et al. (2014) noted the top five barriers as misaligned goals and objectives, lack of formal business education, limited access to capital, possible discrimination, and poor communication skills. Fear, lack of support, and insufficient education and training are also factors of small business failures (Walsh & Cunningham, 2016). Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) and Loi, Castriotta, and Di Guardo (2016) agreed that experiential and collaborative learning is necessary for successful business owners because owners with more education are more likely to maintain a long-lasting business.

A gap in the literature is relevant to entrepreneurial exits. According to Wennberg and DeTienne (2014), entrepreneurial exits are planned exits by business owners wanting to fulfill a short-term goal. Wennberg and DeTienne explained that empirical models do not account for entrepreneurial exits and calculations and estimates regarding small business failures are not accurate. Mason and Botelho (2016) highlighted the need for further studies on entrepreneurial exits, using the findings to distinguish the concept from small business failures.

The Small Business Act of 1953 include free competition as necessary to free markets and the government must ensure small businesses receive a fair portion of their total purchases and contracts (Beale, 2014; Clark & Moutray, 2004). When reviewing the Small Business Act of 1953, evidence showed the progress that small businesses have made and the challenges that still lie ahead. Clark and Moutray (2004) also highlighted the reforms of the 1990s that affected the small business community, such as the Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 (FASA), the Federal Acquisition Reform Act (FARA), the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996, and the Small Business Reauthorization Act of 1997. These reforms excluded SMEs' business leaders' participation and continue to influence the government procurement marketplace. Additional information is available for review in Figure 1, which displays a brief description of each reform and the effect on small business.

Acquisition Reforms of the 1990s

Legislation	Highlights	Impact on Small Business
Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 (FASA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authorized multiple-award contracts. - Created new procurement category for micro-purchases up to \$2,500. - Exempted micro-purchases from the Buy American Act. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multiple-award contracts hurt 8(a) companies. - The dollar volume and size of multiple-award contracts are beyond the reach of many small businesses. - No competition is required for micro-purchase contracts.
National Defense Authorization Act of 1994	Authorized use of “other transactions.” This term refers to transactions other than contracts, grants or cooperative agreements, which are entered into under the authority of 10 U.S.C. 2371.	These are not governed by FAR and the Small Business Act requirements for small business participation. A recent example would include the Army’s Future Combat Systems overhaul, where Boeing has signed a \$14.78 billion “other transactions” agreement and serves as the general contractor.
Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authorized credit cards for use by more employees for purchases up to \$2,500. - Authorized use of multi-agency contracts for information technology. - Repealed GSA’s central acquisition authority for information technology. 	The Act specified no small business requirement for credit card purchases.
Administrative Dispute Resolution Act of 1996	District court jurisdictions on bid protest cases were sunset on January 1, 2001.	There are a limited number of places where small businesses can file a claim.
Small Business Reauthorization Act of 1997	Increased annual goal of small business procurements by federal agencies from 20 to 23 percent.	This increases the number of opportunities for small businesses to do business with the federal government.

Note. From “The future of small businesses in the U.S. federal government marketplace,” by M. Clark and C. Moutray, 2004, *Journal of Public Procurement*, 4, 453. Copyright 2004 by PrAcademics Press. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 1. Acquisition Reforms of the 1990s.

The United States federal government implemented various initiatives to meet public procurement goals for small businesses, women-owned businesses, minority-owned businesses, and veteran-owned businesses. Clark and Moutray (2004) detailed how contract bundling and purchase cards restricted small business opportunities even

further because the business leaders had no requirements for the use of credit cards. According to the researchers, the five steps that small business leaders should pursue to remain viable and robust are (a) train new acquisition workforce and retrain on the latest acquisition tools, (b) ensure that task orders issued under multiaward contracts are within scope, (c) step up from subcontracting level to prime contractor as contracts become more substantial and longer in duration, (d) reinvigorate and fortify the various SME sectors and develop federal mandates that sustain long-term initiatives, and (e) have the Small Business Administration (SBA) and federal government reevaluate the definition of small business. If SMEs are the backbone of the economy, the time has come to structure programs accordingly.

According to Badal (2013), in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, SMEs are 90% of the private sector; yet only contribute less than 40% to the respective gross domestic products (GDPs). Robu (2013) and Silva and Scott (2014) noted that in Latin America, the United States, and the United Kingdom, SMEs accounted for 95% to 99% of businesses. SMEs have the potential to generate jobs but encounter limitations because of the dominance of government opportunities by large organizations. Badal, Bouhdary (2014), and Robu posited that SMEs are the backbone of economies and when governments implement policies, which encourage SMEs to compete for contracts against larger enterprises; the policies help to increase SME growth, strategization, and profits.

According to Badal (2013), the low GDP contribution of SMEs was because of

locations in less profitable, less capital-intensive, and low-tech sectors. SMEs foster an improved economy and large corporations benefit from their success as well. Badal determined the four steps large enterprises should follow to help SMEs as (a) identify and support talent, (b) provide financial help, (c) create a transparent procurement process, and (d) simplify the application and selection process. Barber, Metcalfe, and Porteous (2016), Flynn and Davis (2016), and Robu (2013) posited that SMEs could rapidly respond to environmental changes because of their sizes; but without the implementation of programs, SMEs are at a disadvantage to obtain additional resources and external financial assistance.

Large enterprise leaders had the advantage of inclusive networks providing access to information that SME business leaders were not privy. The standardization of e-commerce for goods and services has provided unlimited access to SMEs. E-commerce is a commercial transaction conducted electronically on the Internet. Bouhdary (2014) noted that the use of e-commerce in business networks enable companies to create a shared community, increasing access to information and improving efficiency. Business networking increased collaboration opportunities, which drove innovation and competition (Bouhdary, 2014; do Carmo Farinha, de Matos Ferreira, & Borges Gouveia, 2014). Business networks provided SME business leaders with current leads to qualified buyers, enhanced customer retention, increased transaction visibility, and insight into better decision-making.

The SBA was established in 1953 to assist SME business leaders in obtaining more federal procurement contracts and contribute to the economy (Shoraka, 2014b). 15

U.S. Code § 644 mandated the awarding of an annual goal of 23% of all federal contracts for SMEs, effective since 1997 (Shoraka, 2014b; 2015). Before the mandate in 1997 the annual target goal was 20%. Small business goals, enacted under the Small Business Act of 1953, are the driving force behind SME participation in public procurement. Deficient contracting opportunities for SMEs in the 1940s led to the implementation of small business goals (SBA, 2014). For the first time since the annual target of 23% was set in 1997, that goal was met and exceeded four consecutive years with 23.39% in 2013, 24.99% in 2014, 25.75% in 2015, and 24.34% in 2016 (see Table 3 for additional data).

Table 3

10-Year Review of SME Procurement Scorecard

YEAR	%	DOLLARS (in billions)
2007	22%	\$83.27
2008	21.50%	\$93.30
2009	21.89%	\$96.83
2010	22.66%	\$97.95
2011	21.65%	\$91.50
2012	22.25%	\$89.90
2013	23.39%	\$83.10
2014	24.99%	\$91.70
2015	25.75%	\$90.70
2016	24.34%	\$100

U.S. Small Business Administration (2017c)

According to Silva and Scott (2014), SME business leaders bring innovations to market but are limited in international markets because larger enterprises have the resources and capability to compete internationally. do Carmo Farinha et al. (2014) and Jalali, Jaafar, and Ramayah (2014) expanded on the need for SMEs to have an international presence, stating collaboration with SME business leaders increase

networking access, innovation, strategization, and competition. According to Tan and Ding (2015), from the start of the twenty-first century, economic globalization, fast development of technical innovation and the introduction of the information age made strategic management a requirement. The unions of public and private sector businesses create new standards of competitiveness, and SME business leaders play a central role in promoting competition and market dynamism (Cruz & da Cruz, 2017; do Carmo Farinha et al., 2014; Hodge & Greve, 2017; Silva & Scott, 2014). While change can produce positive outcomes, resistance to change is universal among all organizations, large and small; business leaders need to emphasize adaptability (Barber et al., 2016; Ceptureanu, 2015). According to Sykes (2017), the problem SME business leaders encounter is that while entrepreneurship is attractive, growing a business is hard work and small businesses need consistent work to hire employees and grow the economy.

Organizational leaders' willingness to move their companies in new directions enable growth and advancement. Public procurement opportunities open the door to changes for SMEs. Equal access to contracts awarded through public procurement ensures fairness and a level competitive field (Davis & Brady, 2015; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a). Procurement is a form of strategic sourcing permitting tracking of organizations' purchases, storage, quality control, invoicing, and other activities (Azmi & Rahman, 2015; Davis & Brady, 2015; Lianbo et al., 2014). The awarding of government contracts was a significant opportunity for SMEs to obtain sales and revenue (Never & de Leon, 2014; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a). The four primary objectives of government contracting are (a) encouraging fair and open competition, (b)

competitively pricing products and services, (c) ensuring the government receives what they pay for, and (d) confirming that both government and contractors remain compliant with the law (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a).

Government contracting professionals offer breaks to SMEs ensuring (a) large businesses do not dominate contracts, (b) the government has access to new ideas from small companies, (c) support of small businesses as engines of economic development, and (d) disadvantaged socioethnic groups receive equal opportunities (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a). The compliance of public buyers toward SMEs under public procurement require periodic evaluation. Compliance was high in open tendering and self-declaring financial capacity, but low in contract division and consortium building (Flynn & Davis, 2016).

According to Flynn and Davis (2016), Panagoret and Ivanoff (2016), and Usai (2014), SME access to public procurement could achieve a higher priority with policies having more competitive terms and less as public sector organizations lending assistance. A conflict exists between SME friendly public procurement objectives and the economic and regulatory truths facing public buyers. Economists made the justification that increasing the number of public procurement contracts awarded to SMEs will encourage innovation (Nicholas & Fruhmann, 2014).

SME business leaders who seek growth will actively pursue public procurement contracts. SMEs are the backbone of the United States economy; SMEs are critical for jobs, entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, and competitiveness (Bissola, Imperatori, & Biffi, 2016; Leyden, 2016; Nicholas & Fruhmann, 2014). Improving SME participation in

public procurement and awarding more procurement contracts is necessary for economic growth (Nicholas & Fruhmann, 2014).

The SBA publishes data, categorized by agencies, showing the procurement rates (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2015). Beale (2014) and Tammi et al. (2014) believed that small business' failure to meet contract award goals was because of underutilization and underrepresentation. According to Beal, Congress, to determine why small business goals were unrealized, ordered an independent assessment. Beale and Fergusson and Kerr (2014) noted the assessment, completed under the National Defense Authorization Act of 2013, included: (a) description of the domestic industries, sizes, and socioeconomic compositions of federal prime contractors and subcontractors; (b) processes used to establish procurement goals; (c) the quality and availability of data on contracting and subcontracting; and (d) barriers to procurement practices that prohibit small businesses from implementing.

Stakeholders demand accountability from organizations of all sizes and measure this through innovation, entrepreneurship, and responsible social actions (Hadad & Gauca, 2014). Stakeholders (internal and external), involved in the decision-making and strategic direction, determine organizational growth (Burga & Rezania, 2016; Van Looy & Shafagatova, 2016). Stakeholders also recognized the need for corporate sustainability as a means for organizational development (Maletic, Maletic, Dahlgaard, Dahlgaard-Park, & Gomiscek, 2015). Some organizations regard sustainability as a strategic business opportunity to increase profits and market share (Bulgacov, Ometto, & May, 2015). The ability of SMEs to secure more public procurement contracts leads to

improved sustainability. According to Maletic et al. (2015), a boost in sustainable activities and practice can lead to heightened innovative performance, which leads to value-added financial and market performance.

Understanding the factors that contribute to buyer decision-making in public procurement is important for the process. According to McKevitt, Flynn, and Davis (2014), to maximize SME participation in public procurement business leaders need an understanding of the processes and conditions that support different supply arrangements. McKevitt et al. believed the transition of public organizations to strategic procurement and supplier engagement helped to promote equality for SME participation. SMEs do not usually have a separate purchasing department to channel the attainment of public procurement contracts (Kavak et al., 2015). For the most part, the owner takes on the role of purchaser. According to Barber et al. (2016) and Lee, Lin, and Pasari (2014), SME growth is dependent on leadership adaptability, market awareness, technological development, and maximization of internal and external sources.

Technology. Sun and Ifeanyi (2014) posited the optimization of technology could help small businesses compete across a variety of industries. The use of technology improves efficiency and productivity. The Internet enables access to other sources of capital and revenue generation (Miller et al., 2016). Technology increases flexibility with expanded services to a broader market, more options, and instant access to the business and consumer (Alijani, Mancuso, Kwun, & Topcuoglu, 2014; Sun & Ifeanyi, 2014).

Sun and Ifeanyi (2014) promoted the implementation of e-business tools to increase efficiency and revenue generation for SMEs. E-Business strategization led to

higher levels of interactivity between buyers and suppliers, increased opportunities to unite businesses, and reduction in operating costs (Alijani et al., 2014; Sun & Ifeanyi, 2014; Taneja et al., 2016). Information technology is a significant part of strategization to help business leaders manage rapid change (Novikov, Pykhtin, Gureva, Sozinova, & Prokhorova, 2016). The success of any business, large or small, is dependent on how quickly business leaders respond to change.

Government Purchasing and Public Procurement

The advancement of SMEs in public procurement is reliant on teamwork and access. Public procurement opportunities must be equally accessible to businesses of all sizes, ensuring fairness with a level competitive field (Davis & Brady, 2015). The SBA and other federal agencies have collaborated to help build an environment in which SMEs can progress (Shoraka, 2014a). Laws such as the Small Business Job Act of 2010 and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2013, enable SMEs to grow. According to Shoraka (2014a) and Tammi et al. (2014), SMEs were underrepresented in the awarding of public procurement contracts. Tammi et al. added that the benefits to the government for awarding contracts to SMEs include an increase in efficiency, better access to market knowledge, and growth in innovative ideas and solutions.

Procurement is the combination of different methods for buying goods and services (i.e., contracts); involves many participants; and variables, such as demand, supply, and price (Lee et al., 2014). When uncertainty exists in the supply chain, indecision occurs in procurement decision-making. According to Lianbo et al. (2014), the

optimization of procurement strategies leads to improved coordination internally and externally of the business. Procurement has an essential role in supply chain resilience.

Supply chain resilience is the alternative way management can develop strategies for preventing and coping with different disruptions (Roberta-Pereira, Christopher, & Silva, 2014). Procurement is more than a sales function; procurement is cross-functional and includes the collaboration and information sharing side of the buyer-supplier relationship. Procurement is a source of strategic sourcing and enabler of economic growth (Davis & Brady, 2015). According to O'Donoghue and Somerville (2018), risk aversion is relevant in principal-agent models as an incentive source for trade-offs. Lack of commitment from business leaders, lack of monitoring, contrasting political agendas, and a risk-averse culture were some of the causes of ignored procurement implementations.

The awarding of contracts required strategization from SME leadership. SME business leaders must have a market orientation (MO), and the ability to obtain information on competitors and consumers for competitive advantage (Tammi et al., 2014). A strong MO allows SME business leaders to find information about business opportunities in public procurement. Procurement integrated with business functions such as strategization, marketing, supply chain management, and decision-making (Lee et al., 2014; Lee & Rim, 2016; Mogre et al., 2017; Roberta-Pereira et al., 2014).

According to Mogre et al. (2017), the merger of procurement and other strategic functions within the organization help to identify trends in purchasing practice. Business leaders must be cognizant of sustainable purchasing, ethical purchasing, and purchasing

in the digital economy (Mogre et al., 2017; Ruparathan & Hewage, 2015). Ruparathan and Hewage (2015) found that sustainability can aid in improving procurement practices and heighten sustainable performance.

The cohesiveness of any organization is reliant on common goals. A centralized administration will have a positive effect on the functionality of procurement (Jenkins, 2016; Roberta-Pereira et al., 2014). The purpose of the procurement department was to analyze transactions (i.e., buying behavior, vendors, and costs) and enhance competitive advantage with suppliers to improve the purchase decision-making process (Cresswell et al., 2013; Gillett, Fink, & Johnson, 1997). Davis and Brady (2015) identified the functions of procurement as purchasing, storage, quality control, invoicing, and other activities.

Challenges. Procurement has numerous benefits, but the problems also require acknowledgment. Cresswell et al. (2013) and McCue et al. (2015) noted the following challenges: (a) lack of change management expertise, (b) delegating purchasing responsibility while maintaining control and accountability, (c) limiting fraud while reducing operational constraints, (d) increasing economic efficiency as political demands for minority/small/local and women-owned business participation achieve fulfillment, (e) increasing transparency while attaining best value, and (f) applying best practices while meeting legal limitations. Public procurement law, an economic and social system, involves purchasers and bidders (Spiler et al., 2016). Large business organizations use public procurement as a strategy for the growth and development of the organization,

while SME business leaders use public procurement strategies to encourage innovation and domestic harmonization (Spiler et al., 2016).

Miller et al. (2016) noted SME business leaders might not endure the same pressure placed on leaders of larger organizations because SMEs have limited capital and less human resources. The ability to have systems and processes implemented for purchasing activities increases an organization's efficiency. Fazekas and Toth (2016), Milosavljevic, Milanovic, and Benkovic (2016), and Qiao, Thai, and Cummings (2009) analyzed the range of equality and efficiency in public procurement within various government, examining patterns of practices and trends.

Procurement is an integral part of obtaining contracts. Business owners, provided with a procurement strategy for guidance, can maneuver the complicated process of public procurement (Sandada, Pooe, & Dhurup, 2014; Sonfield, 2014a). Bublak (2014) noted that SME business owners' limited knowledge about contracting resulted in their complacent attitudes. Williams (2016) also indicated that SME business owners were concerned about the barriers in the procurement process. According to Olang and Gerald (2014), adequate procurement procedures are still in the development phase.

Business leaders establishing the proper public procurement process could enable implementation of efficient practices and trends within the organization, but a struggle exists with inequality and inefficiency in the public procurement processes. Qiao et al. (2009) and Neupane et al. (2014) agreed individuals use purchasing power to achieve social and political gain within the government. The creation of preferential procurement programs increased access to the disadvantaged. The programs included the promotion of

fair labor conditions, promoting the use of local businesses to prevent discrimination against minority groups, and encouraging equality between men and women (Milosavljevic et al., 2016; Qiao et al., 2009; Sonfield, 2014b). The preferential programs were not without controversy.

As Qiao et al. (2009) explained, the application of preferential laws can create disorder in competition, and many view preferential laws as a violation of the principles (i.e., impartiality, open competition, and cost efficient to the consumer) of public purchasing. According to Nicholas and Fruhmann (2014), the economic justification for small business policies arises from the premise that awarding government contracts to small businesses promotes entrepreneurship and innovation that leads to job creation and economic growth. Mentoring programs would help SME business leaders compete for government contracts (Williams, 2016), with mentors sharing experience, expertise, and resources (Small Business Administration, 2015) to enhance competitive advantage. Mentors work closely with business leaders to address gaps in the business (Boxer, Perren, & Berry, 2016). According to Giacomini, Janssen, and Shinnar (2016), Lahti (2014), and Martin and Wilson (2016), mentors were industry professionals knowledgeable in their field and provide valuable information.

Separation of departments. Gillett et al. (1997), Jenkins (2016), and Thomas (1919) noted a necessary efficiency practice was the separation of purchasing and accounting departments. Thomas believed restrictions on purchasing officers would be a necessity for both public and private organizations. The centralization of purchasing mitigated other departments creating agreements with suppliers, in some cases even

offering favoritism (Thomas, 1919). According to Thomas, the purchasing department employees issued orders and the accounting department staff were responsible for receiving the invoices, reviewing the purchase order for any discrepancies, and making the payment. The role of the purchasing and accounting departments ensured a checks and balances system. If there were no boundaries, the accounting staff may contribute to a dysfunctional public procurement accountability system (Jenkins, 2016).

The scope of public procurement transitioned from the traditional goal of cost and value to broader economic, social, environmental, and ethical concerns (McKevitt et al., 2014; Steinfeld, Prier, & McCue, 2015). The procurement process plays a vital role in ensuring supplies or services are received in a timely manner, at the best price, and free from bribery (Mohd Izhan, 2018). Procurement is no longer a single focused system but a complex and interactive process. To achieve organizational outcomes the structure and organization of procurement are fundamental (McKevitt et al., 2014). McKevitt et al. (2014) found that centralized buying decisions can polarize SME involvement and those supply arrangements which are efficient, adapted, central, and balanced support SME participation in public procurement. The government has a yearly expenditure of approximately half a trillion dollars on goods and services (Shoraka, 2015). SME business leaders deserve the same access as larger enterprises to the contracts available from the government, federal and state, for goods and services.

Shoraka (2015) reviewed the procurement contracting goal established by the 2008 executive administration and referenced the minimum of 23% of the half a trillion dollars spent with SMEs. Shoraka stated SME business leaders who acquire the ability to

have an integral role in the national supply chain is a win for the American economy. Shoraka determined the collaboration of the SBA, the President's administration, and federal agencies led to the enhancement of small business access to federal contracts. Flynn and Davis (2016) and Williams (2016) added that support for small businesses stimulates innovation and job creation, leading to a healthier economy.

The role of leadership in public procurement. SME business leaders often hold multiple positions within their organizations. Owners of SMEs were usually the managers (Barber, Metcalfe, & Porteous, 2016). Owners of SMEs are sole proprietors who own and operate all facet of the business. SMEs with more than one employee need leaders who do more than delegate by also serving and working alongside their subordinates. Person-oriented leaders are the link between employees and organizational effectiveness (Acevedo, 2018). According to Acevedo (2018) and McCann and Sweet (2014), effective leaders improve organizational performance and resiliency, helping the company to affect the economy positively.

Service and visionary leaders attract and inspire followers to pursue shared goals, shaping organizational culture, and enabling the efficient handling of future disruptions (Howard & Ulferts, 2017; Strand, 2014; Valero et al., 2015). According to Lourenco, Callen, Branco, and Curto (2014) and Valero et al. (2015), stakeholders found inspiration in leaders who believed in and work toward cohesively accomplishing goals. Leaders must possess traits that help them to respond better and adapt to catastrophe. Organizational resiliency is one of the outcomes of a visionary or transformational leader at the forefront.

According to Jaouen and Lasch (2015), the traits of SME business leaders will affect (either negatively or positively) the business, strategization, and profitability. Leaders should efficiently use all available resources to achieve organizational goals and objectives (Khan & Adnan, 2014). A successful business starts with a strategic and transformational leader. Jayawarna, Jones, and Macpherson (2014) posited that SME success was dependent on owners' knowledge, experience, and managerial skills, and Davee, Hannon, and Penaluna (2016) suggested entrepreneurial education to enhance leadership traits of SME business leaders. Williams (2016) considered educational courses, association memberships, and planning strategies as success oriented approaches for continuous leader and organizational improvement.

Summary

After an extensive literature review, I found studies conducted on public procurement contracts and small businesses; but a gap existed in the research on strategies for SME business leaders to obtain contracts through public procurement. In 2016, SMEs received 24.34% of public procurement contracts, and larger enterprises awarded 75.66% (U.S. Small Business administration, 2017c). Researchers addressed aspects related to participation of SMEs in public procurement and lack of SME representation in public procurement. The conceptual framework for the study is the principal-agent theory, which I used to illustrate the principal-agent relationship regarding contracts. The objective of this study was to identify the strategies that some SMEs' business leaders use to obtain public procurement contracts from the state (i.e., buyer-supplier relationship); and the principal-agent theory was appropriate.

I did not find a solution to the central research question in the selected articles. The themes that emerged from conducting a literature review include (a) SME business leaders aligning goals with the principal, (b) networking and implementing other actions to create value and growth, (c) building collaborative partnerships, (d) identifying and overcoming barriers, and (e) stakeholder influence. Using the information from the literature review and data collected allowed me to answer the research question.

Transition

Section 1 began with the foundation and background of the study to provide a historic understanding of the research topic. Next, the problem and purpose statements expanded the scope and direction of the study. The nature of the study included a brief synopsis for selecting a qualitative case study. Section 1 also consisted of the research and interview questions; conceptual framework; operational definitions for technical terminology; assumptions, limitations, delimitations; and significance of the study. I concluded the section with a review of the literature, which included the following subsections: organization of the review, search strategy, summary of frequencies and percentages of peer-reviewed articles, application to the applied business problem, principal-agent theory, small- and medium-sized enterprises, government purchasing and public procurement, and summary.

In Section 2, I clarified the rationale for the procedures followed to conduct a systemic study. Section 2 includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher, the participants, research methodology and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data

analysis, and reliability and validity. Section 3 comprises the findings with an overview of the prospect for application in professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations, reflections, and study conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2 a summation of the research process for this qualitative case study is available. The information will serve as a roadmap for describing how I identified the strategies SMEs' business leaders used to obtain state contracts through public procurement. I discuss participant selection, the research design and method, how I ensured data saturation and explain in the population and sampling subsection how and why the participants will benefit from the study. I also provide clarification on the selected sampling technique, give a synopsis on adhering to ethical research, specify the data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to reveal strategies that south Florida SME business leaders used to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement. I explored the strategies of three SME business leaders from three companies in south Florida; the leaders possessed successful and consistent experience (i.e., three consecutive years) in obtaining state contracts awarded to their organizations through public procurement. The implications for positive social change included the potential opportunity for business leaders, in any sector, to acquire state procurement contracts; increasing their revenue and enhancing the lifestyles of their communities' members. An increase in revenue leads to innovative activities, collaboration, and a more competitive market (Bouhdary, 2014). Every dollar spent at an SME in the local community stays in the community, generating improved economic value (Robu, 2013).

According to Bouhdary (2014), well performing SMEs in a community lead to more charitable giving and promote neighborhoods with a unique atmosphere such as knowing the people behind the products and services, developing one-of-a-kind businesses instead of chains, keeping dollars in the local economy, and experiencing a better level of service.

Role of the Researcher

The data collection process consisted of semistructured interview questions, notes, recordings, and company procurement documents provided by the participants. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Denzin, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. Researchers use semistructured interviews to help discover unforeseen information with opportunities for further exploration (Leko, 2014). Semistructured interviews were used to find new insights. My role involved obtaining data by following a systematic method of collecting, organizing, and analyzing information to answer my central research question.

Researchers are susceptible to bias if they allow cultural or social assumptions or relationships to influence the interview (Ibrahim & Edgley, 2015). Regarding my relationship with the topic and participants, I am not currently a business leader or employed by any SME. I live in south Florida but have not met the business leaders that participated in this study. This topic was of interest to me because the individuals who work in my department, Business Services and Resource Management, work closely with the Procurement Department, which was a field I planned to advance in the future.

The Belmont Report of 1979 outlines the role of ethics in human research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (NCPHSBBR), 1979). The purpose of the Belmont Report is to protect the rights of all research subjects or participants (Miracle, 2016; NCPHSBBR, 1979). The three ethical principles involving human subjects to abide by during this study are (a) respect of persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (NCPHSBBR, 1979). According to Miracle (2016), respect of persons consists of the researcher allowing participants' autonomy and making allowances for vulnerable persons. Under beneficence, the researcher does not harm the participants' and aims to decrease risks while increasing benefits. Finally, in abiding by justice, the researcher must provide equal treatment to all participants.

Researcher bias must not diminish the study. According to Ibrahim and Edgley (2015), researchers need the ability to be open and honest about their presumptions. Yazan (2015) noted that recognizing bias enhances the validity of a study. Cairney and St Denny (2015) posited that researcher bias, if not identified and documented with protocols established beforehand, could negatively influence the information received, verbal or behavioral, during an interview. To mitigate bias the interview questions did not incur a reaction, I had no previous relationship with the participants, and the interview protocol (see Appendix A) was the same with each participant. Dikko (2016) and Castillo-Montoya (2016) noted the interview protocol is a tool for limiting bias by achieving consistency and accuracy within a study. The interview protocol mitigated bias and enhanced the reliability of this study.

Participants

A researcher selects a participant based on the assumption the individual possesses the knowledge to answer the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants eligible for this study were business leaders of SMEs in south Florida, 21 years old and older. The business leader held a leadership position for a minimum of five years. The SME met a minimum requirement of not employing over 250 employees and open at least three years. The methodology used determine the number of participants as each method has different expectations and standards (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The participants for this study were three business leaders from three SMEs in south Florida. The meaning participants give to their strategization will allow access to the participants' decision-making (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). A crucial component of successful access in a study is the researcher knowing an individual or individuals, known as gatekeepers; these gatekeepers can help the research by providing contacts (Hoyland, Hollund, & Olsen, 2015). According to Creswell and Poth (2017), the gatekeepers have trusted relationships with their contacts and can refer the contacts as potential study participants. Access to participants occurred using Broward College's, my place of employment, public supplier database. Having created the database, the staff in the office of Supplier Diversity maintained the information and were the gatekeepers. The information kept in the database included the SME names, business leader names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses.

Before the interview, a researcher must obtain participant permission (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Once the study is approved, the researcher contacts the potential participants

(Brayda & Boyce, 2014). The business leaders of the companies I selected received an introductory email from myself to participate in the study. The use of email as a research tool is essential to the interview process (James, 2017). Initially, the business leaders received an invite to participate in the study via email (see Appendix B). Once participants responded in the affirmative to move forward with the study another email was sent to schedule the interview date and time. One step in the interview process is building rapport with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). To establish rapport for a working relationship with participants, established guidelines and open communication were important. Email use enabled the forwarding and exchange of necessary forms such as the invitation to participate and informed consent, which provided an overview of the research and process, or procurement documents. The procurement documents were any written processes, guidelines, or rules in which the organization abided. Informed consent is a guiding principle for conducting research that researchers use to promote participants' autonomy and protect them from harm (Check, Wolf, Dame, & Beskow, 2014; Tam et al., 2015). According to Kaiser (2009), the use of informed consent enables participants to present rich and detailed accounts of their experiences.

Preliminary discussions between the researcher and potential participants will determine the participants' ability to relate to the research study (Hoyland et al., 2015). Business leaders were desirable as participants because they were the organizations' decision-makers and possessed the knowledge to answer the overarching research question. The ability to study the experiences and responses of the participants will provide insight into the research topic (Kitto, Chesters, & Grbich, 2008). The participants

selected for this study aligned with the overarching research question because they had the required characteristics of (a) a business in south Florida and had successful and consistent experience (i.e., three consecutive years) obtaining state contracts awarded to their business through public procurement, (b) the business was open for at least three years, and (c) the business leaders had strategies used to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

I selected the qualitative research method because according to Yin (2017), researchers use the qualitative research method to bridge the research question and literature review with the data collection and analysis. Throughout the years, the use of procurement enabled innovative initiatives that enhance operational and administrative excellence within an organization (Lee & Rim, 2016). Researchers use the qualitative research method to formulate open-ended questions, permitting the collection of in-depth answers.

According to Yin (2017) and Leko (2014), the use of open-ended questions and face-to-face interviews is the appropriate means to obtain the data needed to understand participants' viewpoints and opinions. Cairney and St. Denny (2015) found the use of quantitative research methodology as a hindrance for in-depth analysis because researchers use this method to test variables and their relationships, typically reporting findings using statistics. Cairney and St. Denny explained further that a purely quantitative approach would not capture details in a meaningful way through observation

and the encouragement of interviewee expression, which is evident in the qualitative approach. The quantitative method was not appropriate because I was not testing the relationship between variables or reporting statistical findings.

The mixed-methods, which combine both quantitative and qualitative methods, require more time and resources (Yin, 2017). The time commitment and integration of the quantitative method within the mixed-methods were not feasible for this study. The detailed analysis of the qualitative method was the appropriate method to conduct this study.

Research Design

I considered three different research designs, which were case study, ethnographic, and phenomenological. The research design I chose for this study was a multiple case study. Researchers use case studies for empirical inquiries to explain, explore, or describe a phenomenon; a case study is especially beneficial in supporting previously developed theories (Amerson, 2011; Cronin, 2014; Dasgupta, 2015). Using a multiple case study showed the strategies business leaders used to obtain public procurement contracts.

The design of the initial questions is to build rapport and inspire the interviewees to speak freely and is a guideline of the case study design (Comi, Bischof, & Eppler, 2014). The ethnographic research design is a method that requires continuous and ongoing observation by the researcher, who fully immerses themselves in the cultural lives of the participants, as the researcher does not rely on simulations or personal accounts (Hampshire, 2014; Lopez-Dicastillo & Belintxon, 2014). The ethnographic

design was not appropriate for this study because I did not immerse myself in the lives of the participants.

The phenomenological design captures the lived experiences or worldviews of the participants and has a longitudinal scope (Bevan, 2014; Gill, 2014; Snelgrove, 2014). The phenomenological design was not suitable because I did not capture the worldviews of the participants. My use of a multiple case study design helped in the identification of data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the participants reiterate the same information without the presentation of new data (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014). Once each participant received and reviewed my transcribed interpretation of the interview, confirmed my understanding was correct, and had no corrections or new information then data saturation was met.

Population and Sampling

The use of purposeful sampling in this qualitative multiple case study ensured the appropriate population answered the central research question. Purposeful sampling supports a qualitative case study and enables the selection of information-rich cases to explore strategization (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). According to Robinson (2014), researchers must delineate a sample population coherent with the study purpose, questions, and available resources. The sample of three business leaders were selected with the supposition they understood the topic under study and had valuable strategies to share. Access to participants occurred using Broward College's, my place of employment, public supplier database. The participants eligible for this study were business leaders of SMEs in south Florida, 21 years old and older. The

business leader held a leadership position for a minimum of 5 years. The leaders possessed successful and consistent experience (i.e., three consecutive years) in obtaining state contracts awarded to their organizations through public procurement. At a minimum, the SME had at least 3 years of consistent operation, and the business was currently open. The participants acknowledged meeting the criteria when they accepted the informed consent form, which lists the participation requirements.

Creswell (2003) recommended 3-5 participants for case study research, along with other types of data. Three business leaders from three SMEs in south Florida were selected to participate in this study. Interview researchers with an idiographic aim use a sample of 3-16 participants to give each a defined identity within the study, provide scope for developing cross-case generalities, and prevent data overload for the researcher (Robinson, 2014). The selection of too many business leaders for my case study could lead to an inefficient study. Limitations to the sample size occur because the researchers' time available for data gathering is restricted, not enough resources, and constrained objectives (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The selection of three business leaders for this multiple case study was because of time constraints and available resources.

Business leaders were those who had roles as CEOs, presidents, owners, or executives and were recipients of at least three public procurement contracts. Interviewing leaders employed by SMEs that obtained public procurement contracts helped to identify themes in strategies as they pertain to contracting opportunities. The target population and sample size were critical to answering the central question of exploring strategies used to obtain public procurement contracting opportunities.

Data saturation is one of the factors that determine most qualitative sample sizes (Morse et al., 2014). To reach data saturation, the use of member checking confirmed my interpretation of each participants' response to the interview questions. Data saturation happened once the participants confirmed the accuracy of my paraphrase of their responses and gave no new information. Data saturation is not the number of participants interviewed but the clear understanding that once the participants start repeating information, then no new thematic codes exist (Morse et al., 2014; Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). Data saturation is an ideal guideline for purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). Data saturation was the confirmation that I could not gather new information from my purposeful sample of participants. According to Roy et al. (2015) and Fugard and Potts (2015), a high likelihood exists of reaching data saturation and finding sufficient themes when participants' rich information becomes repetitive and predictable.

According to Anderson and Hartzler (2014) and Robinson (2014), participants possessing knowledge about the specific subject provide expert insight into the general structure even with their identities protected. Semistructured interviews occurred with three SME business leaders with the collection of procurement documents used by each leader in their respective organizations. The business leaders I selected were 21 years old and older, came from a mix of industries, and possessed public procurement experience. Consideration of the interview place and setting are necessary, as they can affect the relationship between the interviewer and the participant and data collection (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). Participants need an environment where they are comfortable in

sharing openly and honestly (Brewis, 2014). The selection of a location was the participants' choosing to ensure their comfort during the interview. The second option was for the interview to occur over a securely recorded telephone line, for anyone unable to meet face-to-face. Ideally, the location will have minimal background noise to lessen distractions, allow for precise recording, and foster a safe and nonthreatening environment that enable participants to feel comfortable opening up (Brewis, 2014; Hess et al., 2017). For this study, a familiar setting to the participant provided the most advantageous environment conducive to sharing.

Ethical Research

To adhere to ethical considerations, I educated myself on ethical principles in research by completing the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research (NIHOER) Human Research Protections training (see Appendix C). According to Hammersley (2014), researchers' use of ethical principles in a study ensures minimal harm, respect for autonomy, preservation of privacy, and acting equitably. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure adherence to ethical practices (Hammersley, 2014; Morse & Coulehan, 2015).

The procedures for obtaining participants' voluntary informed consent included steps for participants to withdraw from the study and maintain confidentiality. The use of informed consent forms increases research quality by preserving protection for participants (Hammersley, 2014; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Pletcher, Lo, & Grady, 2015). The informed consent form consisted of details including disclosure of the purpose and use of the study to participants; the need of the participant consenting to

participate in the study by replying “I consent” via email; the ability to withdraw from the study by sending an email to asha.mcglashan@waldenu.edu; the voluntary nature of the study, with no offer of incentives for participation; safekeeping of the data for five years; and the confidentiality of the findings.

According to Hammersley (2014), participants should always have the freedom to withdraw or modify their consent and to ask for the destruction of all or part of the data they have contributed. Participants could withdraw from the study in writing or verbally but no participants withdrew from the study. While incentives may increase study participation, a downside is an increase in participant fabrication of answers to receive the incentive (Robinson, 2014). I did not offer an incentive for study participation because I did not want to encourage false responses.

Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) received communication of the information pertinent to the study and my plan of action. The role of the IRB was to oversee human studies research in alignment with federal and state regulations and with their policies and regulations (Check et al., 2014; Cseko & Tremaine, 2013). Upon completion of the IRB form, I directed attention to the identified principles that addressed ethical concerns explicit to the research topic. Information, such as the location, participation time, population, instruments for data collection, and methodology were relevant facts requiring identification for the IRB. A checklist included information regarding the release of results to the participants, with an explanation on the use of the data collected. Researchers and review boards must ensure adequate provisions are in place to protect participant privacy and maintain confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009). I used the

letter-number combination of P1, P2, and P3 to identify the three participants, preserving confidentiality. The data will remain in a safe place for five years to safeguard participants' privacy. After five years, I will destroy the consent forms and interview documentation. My final doctoral study included the Walden IRB email with the approval number (see Appendix D).

Data Collection Instruments

The primary data collection instrument for a qualitative study is the researcher (Denzin, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. Denzin (2014) and Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited the researcher, as the data collection instrument, sees, hears, and interprets the data. The researcher sets the appropriate boundaries and protocol for the study (Stuckey, 2014). The secondary and tertiary data collection instruments were semistructured interviews and company procurement documents, respectively. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) in conducting the face-to-face interviews. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), the use of open-ended questions during the interview will aid in the quest for data saturation.

Member checking is a quality control process that ensures the reliability and validity of the research findings by using a participant validation technique for demonstrating the credibility of a study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations (Andraski, Chandler, Powell, Humes, & Wakefield, 2014; Harland, 2014; Harper & Cole, 2012). To enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument process, I used member checking. Member checking occurs when the researcher interprets what the

participants stated when answering interview questions and shares that interpretation with participants for validation and confirmation of accuracy (Harvey, 2015). Participants reviewed and verified the accuracy of my written interpretation of the interview.

The use of interview protocols will increase the consistency and accuracy of the interviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Dikko, 2016). The interview protocol enhanced the reliability of the study. Printed documents and other materials are essential to address the researchers' need to mine data (Harland, 2014; Yin, 2017). Acquiring procurement documents from each participant, I gained an understanding of organizational processes. The participants' responses to the ten semistructured interview questions were audio recorded, as I wrote notes on a notepad. For member checking purposes, I wrote my interpretation of each participant's interview responses in a Microsoft® Word document.

Data Collection Technique

According to several researchers (Gravlee, Maxwell, Jacobsohn, & Bernard, 2017; Guterbock, Benson, & Lavrakas, 2018), face-to-face and telephone interviews are suitable techniques to obtain in-depth information in qualitative studies. The data collection techniques for this study were semistructured interviews and company procurement documents. Before the scheduled interviews, each participant received a request to provide procurement documentation sharing information on any of the following: the company's procurement process, procurement rules, regulations, or methods for obtaining public procurement contracts.

P1 shared a clean copy of the capability statement and government catalog, which provided an administrative overview of the public procurement process and filled in based on the needs of each agency requesting bids for contracts. P2 and P3 were not able to provide any documentation, advising the information proprietary, but they offered a verbal summary of their internal documents, procedures, and referred me to their company websites to view general information, which was not proprietary. P2's website included contact information, an overview of services offered, a two-minute video synopsis of business and government contracts in the public and private sectors, and customer feedback. P3's site also included contact information, a list of available products, service partners, customer reviews, buyers guide process, a blog, and contract details available to those with an account.

Reviewing the websites helped to answer the overarching research question for this study: What strategies do south Florida SMEs' business leaders use to obtain state contracts through public procurement? The website content provided a visual representation of some of the strategies discussed by P2 and P3. Both websites for P2 and P3 aligned with the major theme of strategic initiatives.

The video overview on P2's website included information to external and internal stakeholders on how the company operates with business and government contracts in the public and private sectors. P2 listed services available as consulting, training, and licensing. P2 collaborated with partners to offer sustainable and innovative processes for a global reach. P2's website highlighted the following steps taken when the company obtained a contract for consulting services related to performance and process

improvement: (a) focusing on improving engagement in management teams, (b) streamlining processes, (c) obtaining buy-in from the top executives, and (d) creating customized training.

P3's website listed 48 agencies that are service partners and illustrated the importance to the organization of building and maintaining relationships. Other organizational leaders desiring to work with P3 also have the option to complete an online application. The buyer's guide section of the site described the different medical items available, providing detailed knowledge to external customers about the products. The inventory was searchable by category or brand. P3's blog covered the latest innovations and gave expert medical tips from skilled personnel within the company.

All three participants confirmed they also abide by the federal and state public procurement statutes and regulations. The use of semistructured interviews, the collection of P1's capability statement and government catalog, and review of P2 and P3's company websites comprised enough information to answer the central research question regarding what strategies do south Florida SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement.

The interview protocol contains the outlined steps of the interview including the introduction and explanation of the process, presentation of the consent form, acknowledgment of voice recording device, interview questions, wrap up, and scheduling of member checking interview for confirmation of interpretation (Guetterman, 2015; Morse et al., 2014; Roy et al., 2015). The interview protocol (see Appendix A) served as

a guide in conducting the semistructured interviews. The following paragraphs describe the step-by-step data collection technique.

First, I gained access to participants using Broward College's public supplier database. Participants received an introductory email (see Appendix B) providing an overview of the study and requesting participation. According to Brandon, Long, Loraas, Mueller-Phillips, and Vasant (2014), email recruitment increases access to interviewees. The introductory email ensured participants understood the criteria for involvement in the study.

To establish a working relationship, participants who responded in the affirmative to move forward with the study, received a second email to schedule the interview date and time. Following the participants' confirmation to take part in the study, each participant received the details of the study and interview questions. P1 was able to meet face-to-face and chose P1's business office. Because of busy schedules, P2 and P3 were not able to meet face-to-face and, consequently, I conducted phone interviews with P2 and P3. The interview process consisted of 10 predetermined interview questions with 45 minutes allotted for the interviews, but all three participants answered the questions within 30 minutes. The participants were knowledgeable and eager to share the information they learned over the years for the public procurement process and obtaining state contracts. Incentives were not offered for study participation because I did not want to encourage false responses.

MP3 recorders, digital recorders, ipads or tablets, and cell phones enable researchers to record the audio from interviews (Flint et al., 2016; Oates, 2015). I used

my cellphone, an Apple iPhone X as an audio recorder to capture details my note taking missed and took notes of key terms, phrases, and participants' behaviors on a notepad. Note taking is suitable for general comments but to ensure no details are missed audio recording equipment is essential and must be fully charged (Flint et al., 2016).

My Apple iPhone X had a full charge before each interview with the charger easily accessible. For the two phone interviews, I called each participant from a landline in a private office. I placed the landline on speakerphone, and after advising the participants, I activated the Apple iPhone X audio recorder. Lastly, I conducted member checking. The participants were given three days to review my transcribed interpretation; however, one participant was out of town on a business trip and responded in five days. Member checking ensured validity by enabling participants to review, correct, and approve the data collection before data organization and data analysis. The three participants confirmed I provided an accurate interpretation of the interview.

According to Yin (2017), the advantages of the data collection techniques include control, direct observation is not required, and words of the participants are obtained serving as written evidence, which saves time and money. The interviews were audio recorded, and after our face-to-face meeting, P1 emailed a clean copy of the company's capability statement and government catalog, which provided an administrative overview of the public procurement process. I preserved the data in audio and print. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) for structure and provided each participant with a copy of the interview questions. Moustakas (1994) and Yin (2017) noted well thought out questions, and interview structure allows the researcher to obtain comprehensive

accounts from participants. My ten interview questions and my use of an interview protocol enabled me to get rich details from the participants.

The disadvantages of the data collection techniques are that participants may not articulate their responses clearly, documentation may not be available for external review, and participants may indirectly filter information (Yin, 2017). The three participants were knowledgeable about the research topic and articulated themselves well. Only one of the three participants could provide documentation used in the company's procurement process, but the details provided by the other two participants on the procedures their companies abide were succinct in presenting a clear understanding. P1 could share the company's capability statement and government catalog, which provided an administrative overview of the public procurement process. P2 and P3 advised their procurement documents were proprietary and unavailable for sharing, but they offered a verbal summary of their internal documents, procedures, and recommended visiting the company websites. P2's website included contact information, an overview of services offered, a two-minute video synopsis of business and government contracts in the public and private sectors, and customer feedback. P3's site also included contact information, a list of available products, service partners, customer reviews, buyers guide process, a blog, and contract details available to those with an account. Reviewing the participating organizations' websites helped to answer the overarching research question of this study: What strategies do south Florida SMEs' business leaders use to obtain state contracts through public procurement? The website content included a visual representation of some of the strategies discussed by P2 and P3.

Both websites for P2 and P3 aligned with the major theme of strategic initiatives. All three participants confirmed they also abide by the guidelines of the federal and state public procurement process. The rapport I built with the participants encouraged a less filtered dialogue during the interview.

Member checking is the process of obtaining participant validation to confirm reliability and validity (Andraski et al., 2014; Harland, 2014). According to Harvey (2015), member checking occurs when the researcher interprets what the participants stated when answering interview questions and shares that interpretation with participants for validation and confirmation of accuracy. I emailed each participant a copy of my transcribed interpretation of their interview to review to ensure I had an accurate understanding. The participants were given three days to review my transcribed interpretation; however, one participant was out of town on a business trip and responded in five days. The participants confirmed my interpretations were accurate.

Data Organization Technique

Data organization is the way researchers organize and document data (i.e., audio recorders, transcripts) and plan the procedures for analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Yin, 2017). Gibbins, Bhatia, Forbes, and Reid (2014) agreed organized interviews should have an audio recording, verbatim transcription, and are anonymized. I labeled my participants as P1, P2, and P3. The data organization also consisted of individual participant notes with a short-hand summary of the business leaders' response to each interview question. Other files included P1's capability statement and government catalog, my transcribed interpretations from the interviews, and the audio recordings. The electronic information

was organized on a password-protected USB into files labeled audio recordings, interview transcription, and documents. The hand-written notes were transcribed in a new notepad, which was stored in a locked file cabinet with the USB.

Notes are the written highlights from the interview that summarize participant answers and capture researcher observations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Note taking is crucial in research. I used a notebook to record the day, time, and location of the interview. During one face-to-face and two phone interviews, I looked and listened to note how comfortable each participant was in discussing the topic. The participants' knowledge of the subject was evident with their ease and comfort in answering the questions, and the richness of information detailed. The discussions occurred without any rush and the participants were surprised at how quickly the time passed. Each participant was gracious and unanimous with thanking me for allowing them to be a part of my study and requesting an update on when they can access the full study.

The NVivo software is useful to researchers with the management and organization of data (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014). I imported my interpretations of the interviews into the NVivo 12 software, creating electronic folders that identified themes from participants' responses. According to Margarian (2014), software is appropriate for documentation and development of systematic folder systems.

The storage of data should adhere to common standards (Margarian, 2014). To ensure compliance, I followed Walden's IRB requirements for data collection and storage. Walden University requires participants' information to remain confidential and all data, electronic and hard copies, stored securely for five years. For qualitative

researchers, the preservation of participant confidentiality is critical (Kaiser, 2009). I was the only person with access to the participants' data. The written and electronic data is in a secure file cabinet and the electronic data saved on a password-protected USB. Planning for data destruction is an integral part of data organization (Tammi et al., 2014). I will keep all data, paper and electronic, for 5 years and after that time destroy the information. After shredding the paper data in a shredder, I plan to throw away the remnants in the trash. The selection of the reformat option on the USB storage device, for the electronic data, will erase the data after which water submersion of the reformatted USB will ensure the destruction of the data. I plan to also dispose of the reformatted and water submerged USB in the trash.

Data Analysis

Yin (2017) noted the five stages of data analysis as data collection, separating the data into groups, regrouping the data into themes, assessing the information, developing conclusions. A researcher's use of methodological triangulation for data analysis increases validity and expands readers' understanding because it affords multiperspective metainterpretations by using more than one option to gather data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Modell, 2015). I used methodological triangulation for this multiple case study. I created the interview questions to align with the central research question to collect the appropriate data. I gathered and analyzed data from the interviews, audio recordings, and P1's capability statement and government catalog document.

P1's capability statement and government catalog, which provided an administrative overview of the public procurement process. P1's capability statement and

government catalog were similar to the statement of work P2, and P3 discussed, as well as the comparable templates used by other organizations. P2 and P3 were unable to share any procurement documents because the information was proprietary, but they advised me to review their websites for general information. P2's website included contact information, an overview of services offered, a two-minute video synopsis of business and government contracts in the public and private sectors, and customer feedback. P3's site also included contact information, a list of available products, service partners, customer reviews, buyers guide process, a blog, and contract details available to those with an account.

Reviewing the websites helped to answer the overarching research question of what strategies do south Florida SMEs' business leaders use to obtain state contracts through public procurement. The website content provided a visual representation of some of the strategies discussed by P2 and P3. Both websites for P2 and P3 aligned with the major theme of strategic initiatives.

The video overview on P2's website included information to external and internal stakeholders on how the company operates with business and government contracts in the public and private sectors. P2 listed services available as consulting, training, and licensing. P2 collaborated with partners to offer sustainable and innovative processes for a global reach. P2's website highlighted the following steps taken when the company obtained a contract for consulting services related to performance and process improvement: (a) focusing on improving engagement in management teams, (b)

streamlining processes, (c) obtaining buy-in from the top executives, and (d) creating customized training.

P3's website listed 48 agencies that are service partners and illustrated the importance to the organization of building and maintaining relationships. Other organizational leaders desiring to work with P3 also have the option to complete an online application. The buyer's guide section of the site described the different medical items available, providing detailed knowledge to external customers about the products. The inventory was searchable by category or brand. P3's blog covered the latest innovations and gave expert medical tips from skilled personnel within the company. The three participants confirmed they also abide by the guidelines of the federal and state public procurement process.

According to Bailey (2014), member checking ensures the meaning and word choice are correct. After completing the interviews, I interpreted the audio recordings, and each participant received an email of the electronic copy of my interpretations and reviewed my interpretation of their responses for accuracy. The participants reviewed and returned the interpretation of their responses within three days. Member checking increases the reliability of a study by enabling participants to validate or correct the researcher's interpretation (Anney, 2014; Morse, 2015). Once each participant confirmed the accuracy of the interview via member checking, the audio recording was uploaded to a password protected USB for storage.

NVivo is beneficial for analyzing nonnumerical and unstructured data (Sotiriadou et al., 2014; Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015; Zamawe, 2015). I used the NVivo

12 software to organize the data I collected. Feng et al. (2018) successfully used NVivo 12 to group verbal comments and find keywords frequency. Marathe and Toyama (2018) added the use of automated coding software, such as NVivo 12, to assist in the transparency of recommendations.

NVivo software is one of the longest used qualitative data analysis software (Woods et al., 2015). Researchers' use of the NVivo software enables them to understand the data in greater depth, which is paramount in qualitative studies (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). Using NVivo 12, I analyzed my written interpretation of the interviews and the recorded audio files to find themes and subthemes. I used the ideas found in the literature review to help in the composition of my primary themes from my findings for analysis. I recommend NVivo 12 to other researchers because of the organization and analysis capabilities. I used NVivo 12 to upload my files, group comments, identify themes and subthemes, and graph words frequency.

The data analysis process is progressive, beginning informally and continuing until themes become evident based on participant responses (Denzin, 2014). Within the literature review section, I conducted a critical analysis and synthesis of potential themes associated with public procurement contracts. Data cleansing removes any irrelevant information not conforming to the search criteria (Harvey, 2015). The themes revealed in the literature review included (a) SME business leaders aligning goals with the principal, (b) networking and implementing other actions to create value and growth, (c) building collaborative partnerships, (d) identifying and overcoming barriers, and (e) stakeholder influence. Items B, C, and D aligned with the three primary themes identified from the

NVivo analysis; and A and E aligned with the subthemes of the study, discussed further in Section 3.

The information reviewed in combination with the data collected helped me answer the overarching research question of this study. After the interviews were completed, I used member checking to confirm my interpretation of participants' answers. The participants received a copy of my transcribed interpretation of the interview via email and responded within three business days, except for one participant who was out of town on business and replied in five days. According to Thapa et al. (2017), assessing the data against the conceptual framework and previous literature should lead to significant findings for a research topic. I analyzed data, and three primary themes and 12 subthemes emerged. I correlated the themes and subthemes with the conceptual framework and current research studies.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

In this qualitative multiple case study, I demonstrated my research as dependable, credible, and transferable; establishing the study's confirmability by maintaining notes of the interviews, assessments of my steps and processes, and member checking. Creating quality and dependability in a doctoral study is pertinent to ensuring reliability and validity. According to Anney (2014) and Fan and Sun (2014), reliability includes measures of consistency, strategies used to measure, and analysis of the findings. A technique that ensured dependability in this study was member checking.

Member checking increases the trustworthiness of data collected (Anney, 2014; Birt et al., 2016). I used member checking to interpret what the participants stated when answering interview questions and shared that interpretation with participants for validation and confirmation of accuracy. Fan and Sun (2014) noted that generalizability is a comprehensive framework for measuring reliability and validity by including other methods. I aimed for generalizability through thorough context descriptions. According to Guetterman (2015), Morse et al. (2014), and Roy et al. (2015), the use of an interview protocol reduces bias in the collection of meaningful information from participants in a systematic way and reaching data saturation will help to confirm the dependability of the findings. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to minimize bias and member checking to check the accuracy of my interpretations of the participants' responses.

Validity

Credibility. Validity is a central issue in qualitative research (Gregori-Giralt & Menendez-Varela, 2015). Member checking increased credibility. Credibility is the confidence readers have regarding the truthfulness of the findings and the plausibility of interpretations and conclusions drawn from the research (Anney, 2014; Hyett et al., 2014). Research experts recommend strategies such as purposeful sampling, peer review, methodological triangulation, member checking, and interview protocols to enhance credibility (Anney, 2014; Eno & Dammak, 2014; Takyi, 2015; Yazan, 2015). I used the above-recommended strategies within my study.

Recognizing bias increases credibility (Yazan, 2015). Prior experience with the subject help to facilitate purposeful sampling that also adds to credibility (Palinkas et al.,

2015). My use of peer reviewed literature promoted transparency and openness to other points of view. According to Anney (2014), peer review involves scholarly guidance from committee members, review boards, and other research experts, who work to improve the improve the credibility of the research process, findings, and conclusion. Methodological triangulation is the collection of different data that will enhance the study, leading to more accurate and insightful results (Yazan, 2015). Anney stated member checking is essential to eliminate researcher bias during the data collection and organization.

Transferability. Transferability is how the results of the study appropriately transfer to readers and future research (Anney, 2014; Morse, 2015). Transferability is dependent on how well the researcher conducts the study. According to Morse (2015) and Palinkas et al. (2015), the detailed descriptions and documentation of the study help readers to make an informed decision about the appropriate transferability. I used rich descriptions in areas such as population and sampling, research method and design, and incorporated the proper documentation to ensure readers had the opportunity to make an informed decision about my study findings. Another researcher can use the same process in another setting by following my interview protocol and reviewing the detailed description of procedures outlined in my study.

Confirmability. The representation of confirmability in research occurs through activities such as audit trail, triangulation, or peer review to amplify credibility (Anney, 2014; McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014; Morse, 2015). I addressed confirmability by by maintaining notes of the interviews, assessments of my steps and

processes, and member checking. Data saturation is the point where no new information is discovered from the additional data collected (Fugard & Potts, 2015; Morse et al., 2014; Roy et al., 2015). The interviews continued until the information became repetitive, indicating I had reached data saturation.

Transition and Summary

I summarized the research process in Section 2. I provided an overview of the role of the researcher, a description of the participants, and a detailed justification for the research method and design sections. I also covered population and sampling, completing ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization, data analysis, and reliability and validity. In Section 3, I summarize the themes and strategies SME business leaders used to obtain contracts awarded through public procurement. Section 3 includes a presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, the implication to social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for future research, reflections, and conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify strategies that south Florida SME business leaders used to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement. The data came from business leader interviews and company procurement documentation at three SMEs in south Florida. The findings include strategies the business leaders used to obtain state contracts awarded to their organizations through public procurement.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do south Florida SMEs' business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement? I used qualitative data analysis to identify the three major themes in this section. Three participants completed the informed consent process and answered the interview questions. I downloaded the recorded audio from the interviews onto a password-protected USB and transcribed the audio into my interpretation of the participants' answers from the interviews.

My interpretation of the participants' answers was written in a Microsoft® Word document, providing each participant with the opportunity to edit if necessary. None of the participants had any changes after completing member checking, which occurred after the interviews, and each confirmed my interpretation was accurate. I used NVivo 12 to support my identification and coding of the themes and subthemes.

Selection of the three participants were because of their established success in obtaining state contracts through public procurement. Topics discussed as additional data for triangulation included personal biographies, business plans, and resources (financial, time management, and personnel). The discussions of the thematic findings for this study occur with consideration of the conceptual framework, the principal-agent theory. The data gathered from the three SME business leaders found three overall themes associated with the findings from the study. The major themes identified were (a) business performance, (b) overcoming barriers, and (c) strategic initiatives. The three themes and twelve subthemes were in alignment with the five themes identified in the literature review section.

Table 4

Literature Review Themes vs Interview Themes

Literature Review Themes	Interview Themes
Networking and implementing other actions to create value and growth	Business performance
Building collaborative partnerships	Strategic initiatives
Identifying and overcoming barriers	Overcoming barriers
SME business leaders aligning goals with the principal	
Stakeholder influence	

Theme 1: Business Performance

The major business performance theme includes subthemes relevant to revenue, company reputation, pricing, and compliance. Two of the three participants were not able to provide any documentation in support of business performance, but P1 allowed me to view on a computer terminal the newest contracts awarded to the company, including how much the contracts were worth and current statuses. P1 also provided a clean copy of

the company's capability statement and government catalog, filled in based on the need of each contracting authority or agency requesting bids for contracts. As previously noted, P2 and P3 were not able to provide any documentation for proprietary reasons and I reviewed the company websites to view general information about the product and services offered and procurement process. Table 5 includes the findings that led to the first major theme. There were four references to the idea of business performance.

Table 5

References to Business Performance

Major Theme	Subtheme	Frequencies
Theme 1: Business performance		4
	Revenue	2
	Company reputation	4
	Pricing	6
	Compliance	5

The notion of enabling proper business performance protocols benefitted the three participants as a strategy for successfully winning state contracts. Regarding state contracts improving business performance, P1 said, "businesses with local, state, and government contracts are perceived as more reliable, and business leaders receive respect; the company is also stabilized with the consistent income." P2 added about their improved business performance, "we have adopted a strategy . . . use the master service agreement contract to ensure if work goes to another company there are still other contracts coming down the line that we can quote on and win." P2's business used the

public procurement process to get vetted with a specific agency enabling them to sign on as a vendor through a master service agreement. The master service agreement includes a number of preapproved businesses and departments within the agency can source the preapproved businesses for various projects that arise in the future. P3 simply stated business performance had “significantly” improved since increasing the number of state contracts obtained through public procurement. Rice et al. (2015) emphasized the concept that business performance improved in part from purposeful strategies, consistent with the findings in this study. The three participants noted the importance of planning a purposeful and strategic approach to obtaining contracts.

Considering the principal-agent theory and the findings of Kauppi and Van Raaij (2015), I found the participants’ use of strategic posturing to improve business performance as mutually beneficial when there is monitoring, training, and guidance. For example, P1 monitors all contracts in an internal database that lists the employee assigned to the contract, includes status, value, and a link to the full agreement. With this system in place, P1 can readily provide updates to the agency when requested. P3 has regular training sessions that ensure the representatives have the knowledge base to work with the various agencies effectively and remain compliant. And vice versa the agencies also hold networking events and conferences, providing information and training opportunities to suppliers who wish to bid on contracts. Regarding guidance, both parties, buyer and seller, have documentation in place (i.e., request for bids, statements of work, and so on) that outline processes and procedures, increasing transparency thus minimizing opportunism.

Revenue. Diversification is essential for strong SME business performance and increased revenue. P3 advised, “the company is 70% federal, state, and local government contracting and the remaining balance commercial and nongovernment entities.” P1 also has a portfolio that includes a larger number of federal contracts and local contracts over state contracts. P2 stated, “our company is comparable to Deloitte or BearingPoint because that type of business model and level of consultancy and training is in practice here . . . we educate clients that size does not matter because we are able to compete against some of the larger firms.”

Diverse demographics, including age, gender, and race, have increased in the entrepreneurial landscape (Williams, 2016). Richards-Gustafson (2017) and Schimpp (2016) stated minorities and women make significant contributions to the small business world. Solely relying on state contracts will not expand SMEs’ revenue pool. State contracts are limited. Florida statute 287.09451 includes the stipulation that small businesses be awarded a minimum 24% of the contracts available through the public procurement process (Procurement of Personal Property and Services, 2017).

The participants discussed contract diversification. All participants encouraged obtaining contracts from a variety of agencies (i.e., federal, state, local, and nongovernment), not limiting the growth potential of the company. The participants did not emphasize product or service diversification. Instead, the focus was on creating specialized products and services to win state contracts and improve revenue. P2 uses *master service* agreements to find buyer needs. P3 researches potential agencies to, “identify products our company can offer potential agencies, investigates if there is an

incumbent currently providing the product, and if so, determine how our company is better.” P1 was also in the position of providing niche products based on client needs.

According to Nicholas and Fruhmann (2014), pursuing 99% of a market is unrealistic. As a business leader with a company specializing in marketing and promotional materials, P1 offers specialized products for government agencies based on contract requirements. The creativity and authenticity of P1’s products have created an increasing influx in revenue.

Company reputation. P1’s company is five years old and caters to the marketing and promotional sector. P2 owns a consulting business and open 28 years. P3’s company supplies products to the medical field and open over 20 years. All three participants agreed that providing quality service and products enhanced company reputation. According to P1, a strong reputation provides “credibility,” “and reliability,” and P2 added, “you must be somewhat of a known entity to your buyers.” P3 said, “the company stands out from the competition by understanding the needs of the customer.” According to Cruz and da Cruz (2017) and Hodge and Greve (2017), SME business leaders play a central role in promoting competition and market dynamism. The quality products and services offered from P1, P2, and P3 have enabled these leaders to compete and beat out large companies for state contracts.

Pricing. Knowing internal and external pricing is necessary for SMEs’ business leaders to make effective and strategic decisions that will improve performance and the companies bottom line. P2 stated:

Understanding pricing in the marketplace is a necessity when presenting services.

The reputation built eliminates the need to negotiate or haggle over pricing.

Knowing thresholds helps to determine the cost to participate as well as an opportunity to educate clients.

One primary objective of government contracting is to competitively price products and services (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a). Suppliers should have a grasp on how contract prices are determined and what factors contribute. According to P1, SME business leaders should “understand the difference between retail pricing and wholesale pricing.” P3 added, “it is important to determine how the state buys, what procurement methodology is used to buy, and who are they buying for.” Organizational leaders use procurement as a tool for economic development. The procurement process is a combination of different methods for buying goods and services; involves numerous participants; and variables, such as demand, supply, and price (Woldesenbet & Worthington, 2018). The participants illustrated the scope of the public procurement process through P1’s offering of various products, P2’s use of external partners when the contract requires more human resources, and P3’s initiative in studying demand and supply in the medical field to ensure the best customer service to buyers.

Compliance. Participants referred to compliance in five instances during the interviews. P1 said compliance was maintained “through the agencies because the regulations and policies were established by the government entity.” The SBA also helps to ensure compliance between the agencies and SMEs with periodic evaluations of the

public procurement process (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a). P2 stated their business used the “master services contracts to go in and present value proposition and get vetted, which in turn provides a formal license to market with the organization and win business.”

Both P2 and P3 noted the importance of carefully reading solicitation documents to address intricacies of client requests and complying with solicitation or request for proposal (RFP) guidelines. The establishment of the procurement process within organizations was to increase transparency in contract activity, permit equal access to contracts, enhance accountability, and improve analytical data (Lee & Rim, 2016). Also, P3 advised compliance is “maintained through internal processes overseen by Compliance Department . . . all must act within the confines of the FAR and or state regulations.” FAR outlines the requirements of the proper procurement process.

Findings related to the conceptual framework. The findings noted in Theme 1 aligned with the findings of Regan et al. (2015) that collaborative contracts advance long-term relationship management. The three participants agreed collaborative contracts improve business performance because the contracts are structured for the benefit of both parties. Collaborative contracts between the principal and agent foster an accountability culture, influence policies and performance, and the ability of the agent to meet the principal’s need positively impact the agent’s reputation (Williamson, 2018). P1, P2, and P3’s compliance with public procurement contracts and their understanding of internal and external pricing also led to an improved company reputation and increased revenues.

According to Kai et al. (2014), the principal-agent model outlines the creation of goals for a contract. Kai et al. explored the effect of various parameters change on the contract formation conditions. Information asymmetry is a nonfactor when contracts are structured and transparent. The principal shares the product demand information and the agent shares the production technology and production process, sharing knowledge mutually and maintaining compliance (Kai et al., 2014). The equal distribution of information boosts compliance. Ensuring compliance with written policies and strategies decreases risks (Wanga, 2017) and the sharing of information from both sides, principal and agent is complementary (Kai et al., 2014). P3 heightened the compliance required within the public procurement process by creating a department to oversee the compliance of employees.

Revenue growth is a byproduct of the SME business leaders' decisions to bid and take on specific state contracts. An objective of the principal-agent relationship is making decisions to maximize wealth (Hussain et al., 2018). The strategic decision making of the three participants led to obtaining additional contracts which in turn increases the revenue of the company, built a strong company reputation, and enhanced compliance with the principals or buyers.

Theme 2: Overcoming Barriers

Some SME business leaders experience preferential treatment from state or government support, but others encounter barriers. Table 6 includes a summary of the subthemes that emerged from the data that led to the identification of the third major theme. Participants discussed the idea of overcoming barriers nine times.

Table 6

References to Overcoming Barriers

Major Theme	Subtheme	Frequencies
Theme 2: Overcoming barriers		9
	Access	3
	Bargaining power	5
	Funding	1
	Labels	2

The participants first identified the barriers they experienced. P1 discussed funding as a barrier; P2 discussed being identified as a SME, minority ownership, and being female as barriers; and P3 discussed connecting with clients as a barrier. These barrier discussions led to the identification of the following subthemes in overcoming those barriers: access, bargaining power, funding, and labels.

Access. All three participants agreed on the importance of gaining access to state contracts. P3 stated, “engaging in significant preplanning homework to learn how best to approach or create an opportunity” is necessary to gain access. The benefits of increased contracts awarded to small businesses include heightened efficiency, improved access to market knowledge, and a more substantial number of innovative solutions (Hansen, Langevang, Rutashobya, & Urassa, 2018). Access can pose an issue for business leaders both externally and internally.

SMEs’ business leaders can circumvent external and internal access issues by educating themselves on the processes and requirements of public procurement and the specific client organization. SME business leaders access to obtaining contracts,

according to Hansen et al. (2018), is blocked by the inability to network correctly. Continued Bouhdary, business networking increased collaboration opportunities. The three participants emphasized the importance of collaboration and building relationships several times throughout the interviews.

Bargaining power. The three participants confirmed having limited to no bargaining power. Bargaining power, according to P1, is “usually held by the agency unless there is something proprietary our business owns.” Additionally, P1 stated “however, in cases where the government agency requests a voluntary reduction of price, we now have the option to adjust or decline.” P2 stated, “The reputation we have built eliminates the need to negotiate or haggle over pricing.”

P2 continued, “Understanding pricing in the marketplace is a necessity when presenting services. Clients procure our company’s services already understanding the value.” Bargaining power, P3 added, is “achieved through relationships.” Concurred Mijid (2017) partnerships were indispensable to public procurement.

Funding. P1 confirmed the company has “partnered with vendors, manufacturers, or service providers to obtain 30 to 60-day lines of credit or opted to pay half the cost upfront and the other half later.” According to Song, Yu, and Lu (2018), SMEs business leaders who can build long-term relationships with their banks can significantly alleviate financial difficulties. While SME business leaders want to have access to state contracts and receive the award, business leaders must recognize they may need to decline some offers if the contract is not feasible.

P3 stated the importance of “ensuring the company has the resources to fulfill contract obligations.” To reduce costs and increase cost-effectiveness in public procurement, business leaders need to understand transactional costs (Jasko et al., 2015; Patrucco et al., 2017). The costs related to fulfilling a contract may be more than the SME can handle. P3 declines a contract if the company does not have the resources to complete the work accurately. P1 does not bid on a contract if the expenses outweigh the potential profit.

Labels. To bypass labels such as *minority business owner* or *women-owned* or *small business*, P2 noted the importance of gaining “expertise” and showing “a proven track record” of the business’ success. P2 also advised, “we educate clients that size does not matter because we are able to compete against some of the larger firms.” Business success and innovation originate when diversity and knowledge sharing are present (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2018). According to Bressler et al. (2014), women, minority, military veteran, and disabled business owners are increasing the number of small businesses opened. The three participants were minority owners, two female and one male.

P1 found it beneficial to capitalize on the labels to overcome the barrier. Registration with the different agencies exclusive to small businesses, minorities, women, veterans, and the disabled creates an opportunity to obtain more contracts and increase networking. According to P1, registration “opens more doors.” P1 registered with several agencies including SBA, US Business Leadership Network (USBLN), state of Florida, National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC), and others. According to

Gibbons (2015), small business owners collaborating with governmental programs may experience feelings of a more productive purpose in their roles. P1 confirmed the company has an increased purpose, splitting into two divisions to handle the influx of local, state, and federal contracts.

Findings related to the conceptual framework. The findings noted in Theme 2 aligned with the findings of Rehmatulla and Smith (2015) that the first step in overcoming challenges in the principal-agent relationship is to identify the situations where a problem could occur and determine resolutions in alignment with both parties. One of the objectives of the principal-agent model was to enhance the understanding of procurement by breaking down the barriers between legal policies (Yukins, 2010). SMEs' business leaders encounter with barriers can lead to negative business performance and subsequently lost opportunities to obtain state contracts through public procurement.

Wang (2017) found training and skills development was a necessity to a successful principal-agent relationship, and thus overcoming barriers. Both buyers and suppliers need training and reciprocity. Williams (2016) stated small business representatives and government officials need more training and access to information. Access for SME business leaders has improved because of the requirements of federal and state laws ensuring SMEs receive a percentage of public procurement contracts. Quality products and services and word of mouth improved access for the three participants. The annual public procurement contract goals for SMEs at the federal and state level are 23% and 24% respectively (Procurement of Personal Property and

Services, 2017; Shoraka, 2015). Williams added the government increased funding to SMEs with tax dollars available through contracting opportunities.

The principal-agent theory includes the premise that because the principal made the contract, bargaining power is removed (Turkina, 2018) from the agent. The three participants' responses aligned with the premise of the principal-agent theory, noting minimal to no bargaining power. However, SME business leaders have the power to determine whether or not they will accept a contract if not mutually beneficial. The principal-agent theory helps with limiting and determining power in organizations and identifying contractual expectations and performance measures (Williamson, 2018). The findings of the study highlight areas of improvement between buyers and suppliers such as the barriers mentioned above the study participants experienced. Contract transparency and equal access help to advance the principal-agent dynamic.

Theme 3: Strategic Initiatives

The development of strategic initiatives appeared from the data as a third major theme. Table 7 lists the subthemes falling under the major theme of strategic initiatives. The four subthemes identified were knowledge, relationship building, skilled personnel, and taking action. Participants discussed strategic initiatives 25 times, which the participants also related to relationship building, cited 13 times. P1 shared a document supporting this theme, a generic bid packet template outlining the company's capability statement and government catalog, which provided an administrative overview of the public procurement process.

Table 7

References to Strategies Used

Major Theme	Subtheme	Frequencies
Theme 3: Strategic initiatives		25
	Knowledge	6
	Relationship building	13
	Skilled personnel	3
	Taking action	3

Knowledge. The participants used their knowledge as an asset to obtain state contracts through public procurement. P1 said, “knowing how to bid, understanding the difference between retail pricing and wholesale pricing, learning the terminologies, and creating a template to form bid packets” is how they use knowledge as a strategy. P2 stated they “research the contract itself to see if it is a fit, ensuring external strategic partners are in place to fulfill the requirements of the contract if in-house associates are not sufficient.” Knowledge management is necessary for the appraisal of business capabilities, evaluation of practices, and obtaining feedback to enhance performance and profit (Chen et al., 2018). P2 continued “we also confirm someone on the team has a relationship built with someone within the buyers’ organization or understands the organization.”

Like P1’s view on pricing, P2 added, “understanding pricing in the marketplace is a necessity when presenting services. Knowing the thresholds helps to determine the cost to participate as well as an opportunity to educate clients.” P3 said the following about using knowledge as a strategy, “As part of a stringent planning process we review

individuals and agencies . . . identify products our company can offer potential agencies, investigate if there is an incumbent currently providing the product and if so determine how our company is better.” Understanding the bureaucracy of the government is necessary; agents must be flexible, compliant, and competent with strong interpersonal skills to navigate the public procurement process.

When networking events happen, P3 “touches base with the agency before the event or conference to provide an overview of the company, all of this is designed to familiarize the agency with our products and services before the official face-to-face meeting takes place at the event.” Business networks enable companies to create a shared community, increasing access to information and improving efficiency (Turkina, 2018). P3 posited, “If you do not know your customers’ challenges, goals, and strategies, then you cannot communicate effectively, nor do you know how your product or service will fulfill a specific need.”

Relationship building. The three participants had much to say about the importance of relationship building, partnerships, and networking as a major strategic initiative for their business. The principal-agent theory centers on the relationship between the principal or buyer and the agent or supplier. All contracts comprise a principal-agent relationship. Till and Yount (2018) and Zardkoohi et al. (2017) all discussed the opportunism that could impact one or both parties in a principal-agent relationship. However, the three participants shared information on the successful relationships they forged with the various principals they have obtained contracts.

To build relationships P1 stated it is necessary to “attend discovery days, community outreaches, prebid conferences, and other similar events hosted by the agencies.” P3 agreed and said, “there are many outreach activities the different local, state, and federal agencies host.” P2 stated obtaining contracts “is about the relationship.” P2 advised “get to know the buyers before the solicitation goes public. Reach out to make introductions or send information to the company letting them know you will respond to the solicitation request.”

Success for SMEs occurs from the cultivation of networks and relationships with a focus on strategic sustainability (Hussain et al., 2018). P2 stated, “we have strategic partnerships, teaming with former executives in corporate America and government.” P3 added “we are partnered with over 2,000 manufacturers. We sell our government experience and specialization to the manufacturers to outsource federal and state procurement activities to the company.” P3 continued, “we build relationships with state customers, buyers, and technical users.”

According to P2, a relationship should not end if no contract is awarded. P2 said, “ask for feedback if you don’t win the bid. Ask where you fell short.” Developing relationships and partnerships strengthen competitive advantage, improve business performance, and increases innovation (Taneja et al., 2016). P3 concluded, “we understand the importance of building and sustaining relationships.” Getting feedback helps to strengthen your chances of winning the next time around by being supplied with vital information.

The knowledge received from aligning with external partners can enhance business performance (Pitsis, van Marrewijk, Ybema, Smits, & Clegg, 2016). The three participants expressed the same thought process as Pitsis et al. during the interviews. Surmised P2, “organizations obtain repeat contract awards because relationships were built. SMEs do not grow when they do not partner and only have one person doing everything.”

Skilled personnel. Personnel are a major resource. P1 employs a local staff of two and seven internationally. P2 has a total of three employees and works with external strategic partners when additional staff is needed. P3 has a team of 200. Attracting the right people, retaining them, and properly training them increases the business’ success. P3’s business uses “Alternate Site Reps, they are assigned specific geographic territory and are responsible for the state bids within that segment.” According to Turkina (2018), leaders should efficiently use all available resources to achieve organizational goals and objectives.

P3 continued, “we work with the sales reps to ensure success by enacting the anatomy of the sales call method, focusing on the importance of listening to the customer to tailor solutions to their needs, and helping them to understand which set of products or services will meet the specific need of the potential customer.” Continuous organizational improvement boosts the business’ competitive edge. Guidance and training help to reduce employees’ noncompliance in procurement (Kauppi & Van Raaij, 2015). Adding to this subtheme, P3 concluded, “Sales reps are encouraged to stand out by asking questions or

making a relevant comment or otherwise connect with key decision makers when in attendance at a conference.”

Taking action. Without action, growth is not possible. P1 advised the primary strategy used to increase the number of state contracts obtained through public procurement is taking actions “such as increasing the number of bids we submit and registering with the appropriate agencies (i.e., DemandStar or BidSync).” P3 echoed the sentiment stating, “it is important to be proactive rather than merely reactive to bids.”

According to Leyden (2016), the innovative and entrepreneurial actions of SMEs business leaders stimulate the economy. P1 noted another important strategy in obtaining state contracts is “certification.” Educational courses and association memberships increase organizational improvement (Williams, 2016).

SME business leaders aligning with mentors place the business in a position to succeed. SME growth signifies customer loyalty, service quality, product quality, market position, revenue generation, and effective leadership (Woldesenbet and Worthington, 2018). Mentors share experience, expertise, and resources to help the SME business leader to compete for government contracts. P3 is also a mentor to other business leaders, leaders in a variety of stages within their respective businesses.

Findings related to the conceptual framework. The findings noted in Theme 3 aligned with the findings of Steinle et al. (2014) that the principal-agent theory has broad implications, but the primary focus is on the respective relational assignments. The relational characteristics of the principal-agent theory are advantageous when both parties’ interests are aligned. Placing limitations on the agent may be counterproductive

for the principal (Gailmard, 2014). The principal lacks expertise in an area in which the agent has the knowledge and resources. P1, P2, and P3 have won state contracts with various agencies because they have a commodity (i.e., marketing and promotional items, medical devices, or consulting services) the buyer was missing. The three participants agreed relationship building and maintenance were also an integral part of obtaining contracts through public procurement.

To successfully execute the requirements of a contract according to Buchanan (2017), the business leader cannot be oblivious to the scope and demands of the project. The three participants confirmed the first step completed when deciding to bid on a state contract is to review the requirements of the project thoroughly. SME business leaders need skill and competence to execute the requests in public procurement contracts effectively. Added Chen et al. (2018), guidance and training increase employee compliance and knowledge base with government procurement.

SME business leaders taking action to bid on state contracts do so for strategic decision-making. Public procurement can aid to minimize dominance of power and information asymmetry, and increase transparency and accountability (Neupane et al., 2014; Okubena, 2016; Steinle et al., 2014). The principal-agent theory supports control of business relationships. The buyer-supplier relationship requires according to Kavak et al. (2015), transparency, loyalty, and communication as evidenced in the principal-agent model. The three participants keep communication open and transparent with the agencies even with no contracts awarded. Goal alignment and rapport are necessary factors in the principal-agent relationship because both lead to an increase in satisfactory

The most important strategy the participants found to aid in their competition to win state contracts is relationship building. The interviews also provided evidence the participants rely on skilled personnel to help facilitate the awarding of state contracts. Training and resource development were additional strategies the participants used to augment their competence and compliance with state contract rules and guidelines. The data collected from the three participants implied knowing the customer, assets on both sides, and niche were essential to successfully obtaining state contracts.

The findings confirm and extend the knowledge of the strategies SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts through public procurement. The cross-functionality of procurement was evident during the interviews as the participants spoke of partnering and sharing information internally and externally. The relationship building strategy the three SMEs business leaders discussed was a clear indication of pareto efficiency, as both parties, SME and state, share information and use resources optimally between themselves. Pareto efficiency resulted in the three SMEs business leaders obtaining an increase in state contracts awarded through public procurement. According to Davis and Brady (2015), procurement is a source of strategic sourcing and enabler of economic growth.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this qualitative multicase study have some important implications for professional business practice. Business leaders may enhance their understanding of the state procurement process, recognize potential barriers in obtaining contracts, and offer ideas to implement the identified strategies as possible solutions to those obstacles.

Additionally, the information may help SME business leaders improve their decision-making skills. In this study, I provided strategies that some south Florida SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement to present opportunities to other business leaders.

The three major themes that emerged from the data analysis process were business performance, overcoming barriers, and strategic initiatives. The 12 affiliated subthemes apply directly to the professional practice of business. This study is significant to the public procurement field, contributing to existing research about SME business practices in obtaining state contracts in public procurement to leverage the competitive field against larger enterprises. According to Nijmeijer, Huijsman, and Fabbriotti (2014), access to government contracts and a reliable reputation help to legitimize SMEs, increasing financial performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Using the findings in this study, I contribute to knowledge about SME business practices. Business leaders gain an understanding of strategies used to improve participation in obtaining state contracts. According to Arney (2014), using strategic procurement practices to secure government contracts may lead to long-term contracts or smaller recurring purchase orders. Knowledge about obtaining state contracts through public procurement can help SME business leaders consider diverse sources of revenue they may otherwise overlook. The applications of these findings by SME business leaders may help them become competitive for state contracts and aid in meeting or exceeding state contracting goals for small business commodities. The findings support continuing

education and research for business leaders to participate in public procurement successfully.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include a potential increase in the number of state contracts awarded through public procurement to all SMEs, led by male or female leaders, minorities, and other underrepresented populations, growing their revenue and presenting new opportunities. SME business leaders and scholars can use research findings of business processes to expand their role in supporting American economic development (Van Looy & Shafagatova, 2016). Another implication for positive social change was the potential for increased diversity of SMEs within the local communities, improving local employment opportunities and benefiting the local economies. SME diversification occurs when all business leaders have access to the same information and prospects because of the awarding of state contracts through public procurement to the most qualified business.

An increase in revenue leads to innovative activities, collaboration, and a more competitive market (Bouhdary, 2014). SME business leaders help to enhance the lifestyles of their communities' members. Every dollar spent at an SME in the local community stays in the community, generating improved economic value (Robu, 2013). According to Bouhdary (2014), well performing SMEs' in a community lead to more charitable giving and promote neighborhoods with a unique atmosphere, such as knowing the people behind the products and services, developing one-of-a-kind businesses instead

of chains, keeping dollars in the local economy, and experiencing a better level of service.

According to Bressler et al. (2014), SMEs benefit society because they are a key source of diverse employment, innovation, and job creation. Bressler et al. and Nicholas and Fruhmann (2014) added that positive social change is possible if measures are implemented to reduce inequalities in government contracting that benefit diverse SMEs, which help to sustain employment, fuel competition, improve innovation, and contribute to the economy. The formal procurement process used at the federal and state levels minimizes the need for PPP regulations, used when there are no formal public procurement processes in place. The public procurement process enables equal competition not generally available in developing countries using unofficial PPP regulations. Use of these findings by SME business leaders can assist in meeting states' contracting goals while also expanding opportunities for business leaders across a variety of industries and locations.

Recommendations for Action

The three major themes emerging from the data analysis in this study led to the recommendations for actions. The ultimate goals of business leaders are the growth of the organization and increasing revenues. The idea of improved business performance requires planning, preparation, research and identification, and the pursuit of goals. According to Gugler, Weichselbaumer, and Zulehner (2015), planning should include government sources to ensure sustainability. Compliance is necessary for SME business leaders to navigate the public procurement system successfully by understanding contract

scopes, budgets, the intricacies of the required deliverables, and aligning goals with the principal or buyer.

The identification of barriers is the first step to overcoming those obstacles. In most instances, bargaining power is a primary barrier. SME business leaders should be flexible in supporting the needs of the customer to comply with the current contract requirements and obtain future contracts. Strategic initiatives significantly contribute to obtaining state contracts through public procurement. Taking actions such as knowledge enhancement, relationship building, and personnel training would help SMEs' business leaders thrive. Multistrategic initiatives could assist SME business leaders to achieve a higher probability of revenue generation and meeting growth objectives (Bressler et al., 2014; Massa et al., 2015; Williams, 2016).

The leadership in SMEs, government agencies, and the SBA are in the best positions to make use of the study results because they serve as strategic decision makers within their organizations. The relationship established among the leadership of the various platforms is an essential resource. Business leaders maintaining positive contract performance will obtain new and repeat business.

According to Novikov et al. (2016), to efficiently impart knowledge and manage rapid change, business leaders should continuously restructure, reorganize, and reengineer. The three participants discussed the importance of strategic and organizational leaders. The strategies (i.e., certification, collaboration, education, contract diversification, and more) each has implemented has led to their SMEs' successes and organizational resiliency. Between the three SME business leaders, there were over 45

years of experience, each having learned from mistakes and finding new or improved ways to continue growing the organization and themselves.

Business leaders at every level would benefit from understanding the strategies used to help obtain state contracts through public procurement. I plan to disseminate the findings through professional publications, such as the *Journal of Public Procurement*, *Journal of Commerce*, *Journal of Financial Economics*, *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, and *Journal of Public Sector Management*. The circulation through small business conferences also offer a means to reach the SME business community, providing best strategies.

Recommendations for Further Research

Small business leaders should add to their knowledge-base with continuous research to maximize success (Miron-Shatz, Shatz, Becker, Patel, & Eysenbach, 2014). This study contributes to the understanding of the buyer-supplier relationship established from contracts awarded through public procurement. However, while I assumed within the study that participants experienced a substantial increase in the number of state contracts awarded through public procurement, I did not gather financial documentation comparing organizational profits before the inclusion of state contracts and after obtaining state contracts. Future researchers may seek to investigate the financial impact of state contracts for small businesses. This limitation could be addressed examining data through a quantitative or mixed-methods research methodology in future studies.

I also studied the strategies used from the viewpoint of SME business leaders. The lack of information from the viewpoint of leaders or buyers within government agencies

was another limitation of this qualitative discussion. Future researchers could explore, from the perspective of the principal or contracting authority, the successful strategies SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts through public procurement. Input from the contracting authority (i.e., primary) may confirm or expand upon the strategies used by the seller (i.e., agent).

In Section 1, the limitations identified were the access to company procurement documents, the condensed geographic area for selecting participants, and industry confinement. The participant size limitation, condensed geographic area, and industry confinement were because of time constraints and limited resources. The population for this study consisted of three SME business leaders in south Florida. A more extensive exploration of the specific contract types and strategic initiatives for obtaining state contracts may further assist small businesses within more industries. Future researchers may overcome the access to company documents by exploring the business over a significant period to efficiently record the public procurement process the organization follows.

Reflections

My engagement with the DBA research process has been nerve-wracking, humbling, and rewarding. When I first started the study, I was overwhelmed by the scope and complexity of doctoral research. My immersion in the literature, case studies, and analysis formed a greater appreciation for the roles of scholars.

I have had the chance to meet and learn from many talented and intellectually diverse individuals. I have grown in my ability to evaluate the credibility of various

resources and recognizing data saturation. I understand the importance of complying with ethical standard requirements and becoming a reliable data collection instrument. At the start of the program, I assumed the many steps we had to follow were unnecessary, but once my study was in progress, I fully comprehended the importance of using supporting references, writing in temporal order, using proper APA formatting, and attaining appropriate permissions. I am proud to have participated in a research study that others can apply to their professional business practices and contribute to positive social implications.

Conclusion

SME participation is a benefit to the U.S. economy. SMEs constitute 99.7% of all businesses in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The industry has limited information for SME business leaders to obtain state contracts. Understanding the strategies some SMEs' business leaders use to increase the number of state contracts obtained through public procurement provides an educational opportunity to business leaders not currently bidding on state contracts. I discovered the strategies three SME business leaders used to obtain state contracts through public procurement to contribute to the literature deficiency. The principal-agent theory aligned with what the participants expressed as necessary to obtain state contracts. The data contained each participant's understanding of small business assets and resources required for the development of successful strategies for obtaining state contracts through public procurement. Ongoing research can help to alleviate concerns about state contract access, participation, and equity.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What I will do	What I will say
Introduce the interview and set the stage	<p>This interview is taking place to identify the strategies south FL SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consent form presented, reviewed, and a copy provided to participant; 2. Voice recording device is activated (participant is introduced by coded identification and date and time are noted).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch for non-verbal queues • Paraphrase as needed • Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What were the strategies you used to increase the number of state contracts awarded through public procurement? 2. What strategies worked best when you initially applied for a state contract through public procurement? 3. What barriers did you experience when you first attempted to increase the number of state contracts awarded to your company? 4. How did your organization address the barriers to obtaining state contracts through public procurement? 5. How has your business performance improved since increasing the number of state contracts through public procurement? 6. What documents can you share with me that will help me understand your strategies for obtaining state contracts? 7. What strategies do you use to maintain contract compliance? 8. What strategies, if any, do you use to maintain bargaining power? 9. What, if any, additional strategies have you found to be helpful with gaining state contracts through public procurement? 10. Is there something that I have not asked you that you think is important regarding effective strategies to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement?

Wrap up interview thanking
participant

Schedule follow-up member
checking interview

Appendix B: Introductory Email

Dear XXXX,

I am in the process of completing my doctoral study to attain a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree from Walden University. I am requesting your help in obtaining data. In conducting this study, I am not seeking intellectual property, confidential, or proprietary data. I want to explore the strategies some small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement.

Your input will provide valuable insight into answering the primary research question “What strategies do south Florida SME business leaders use to obtain state contracts awarded through public procurement?” My research indicates that your company may have been successful in using strategies to obtain state contracts through public procurement.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to join the study now, you may still change your mind later and withdraw. Whether you choose to participate in the study or not, your decision is respected. No personal identifying information will be used when you participate in the study. Participation in the study means you are asked to:

- Review the attached consent form, which includes additional information about the study, and if you choose to participate reply to this email with the words “I consent.”
- Participate in a 45-minute face-to-face interview, which is audio-recorded.
- Review the interview questions (included on the consent form) prior to the scheduled interview.
- Perform a review of the transcribed audio from the interview (this may take up to 1 hour of your time).

Your participation is helpful and the time you provide is appreciated. Please feel free to contact me at asha.mcglashan@waldenu.edu or [REDACTED] with any questions or concerns. Again, your help and contribution are greatly valued.

Sincerely,

Asha McGlashan

Asha McGlashan

Appendix C: NIHOER Training Certificate

