

2019

Small Business Leaders' Strategies for Obtaining United States Government Subcontracts

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Damian C. Dunbar

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

Small Business Leaders' Strategies for Obtaining
United States Government Subcontracts

by

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MBA, Colorado Technical University, 2008

BA, Baker College, 2006

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2019

Abstract

Small business leaders (SBLs) underutilize billions of dollars of U.S. government funding for small business subcontracting. The role of small business in the United States is important to local economies as well as a major contributor to the U.S. economy. Using the resource-based view as the conceptual framework for this study, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies 5 government support sector SBLs in the mid-Atlantic region used to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The selection criteria for this study consisted of small businesses in the mid-Atlantic region that have obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts. The data-collection process included a review of the small business documents and participants' responses to semistructured interviews. The data analysis process included case study analysis and cross-case comparisons using methodological triangulation. Based on the data analysis, themes that emerged from the results of this study included education, experience, and networking related to strategy creation and implementation by the SBLs to obtain subcontracts on prime contracts. The findings of this study may contribute to social change by providing SBLs an opportunity to learn strategies to obtain subcontracts, which could increase organizational opportunities, promote job creation, and help to improve local economies through increases in tax revenues that could help the elderly, children, and others within the community.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to thank God (Allah) for guiding and protected me when I needed it most. Next, I would like to thank my grandparents Riley Taylor and Clarice Taylor for being role models on how to care for those closest to you. I love and miss you beyond measure. Then, a healthy thank you to my siblings Harry Barnes, Yvonne Dunbar-Jackson, and Yvette Hayes for being a pillar of support throughout my life. Lastly, to my daughter Damiana Dunbar and the gift she gave me, that being my grandson Mr. Elijah Davis. Being your father has been the greatest gift I have ever received. I love you two so much!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

Small business leaders (SBLs) have underutilized funding specifically set aside by the U.S. government for small businesses to obtain subcontracts on prime contracts (U.S. Department of Defense [DOD], 2017). The funding used and allocated specifically for small businesses by the U.S. government has a term known as a *set-aside*. The U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) Small Business Set-Aside program assists small businesses in competing for and winning government contracts and assists small businesses with being subcontractors on prime contracts (SBA, 2017a). One of the goals of the SBA is to work with the federal government to award at least 23% of all prime contract dollars to small businesses in the United States (SBA, 2017b). Additionally, Congress has passed laws along with regulatory guidance that make it mandatory for the U.S. government to award contracts fairly to all types of businesses (SBA, 2017c). The SBA also has the option available to assist small businesses with a wider range of credit accessibility than in prior years (Dai, Ivanov, & Cole, 2017; SBA, 2017a).

The SBA Government Contracting Program (2017d) has the goal of increasing small business subcontracting opportunities through established regulations. There is an interest in small business gaining access to federal government contracts and to participating in the process (Green & Kohntopp, 2016). However, some SBLs may fail to understand the government acquisition process and a lack of strategies may be the issue underlying why some small businesses do not obtain subcontracts on prime contracts.

Problem Statement

Small business leaders underutilize billions of dollars of U.S. government funding for small business subcontracting (SBA, 2017a). In 2015, more than \$133 billion was available for subcontracting; however, small business subcontracting accounted for only \$43.1 billion of the available funds, leaving more than \$90 billion available for non-small businesses to use (DOD, 2017). The general business problem is that some small business leaders do not use the federal acquisition process and proper strategy implementation to obtain government subcontracts, which can threaten the organizations' sustainability. The specific business problem is that some governmental support sector small business leaders lack successful strategies to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the successful strategies some government support sector small business leaders use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The target population consisted of SBLs from five organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector that are verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and have used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable. The implications for social change included the opportunity for small business leaders to learn strategies that allowed them to obtain more government subcontracts, which could increase organization opportunities, promote job creation, and help to improve local economies.

Nature of the Study

The methodology for this study was the qualitative method. Researchers use the qualitative method to better understand the issues that are critical to participants' decision-making (Gerring, 2017). The quantitative method, having a foundation based on enumerative deductions, was a primary concern and a reason for its exclusion from this research study. Conversely, the qualitative research method has a foundation of concepts, which was a primary reason for the selection of this research method. The quantitative method was too rigid, and the researcher using this method may not put enough importance on the research topic as well producing generalized data largely due to the data emanating from large sample sizes (Gergen, 2015). Additionally, the quantitative method does not provide insight as to why certain phenomena react well to the approach (Barnham, 2015; Goertzen, 2017). The mixed methods researcher combines qualitative and quantitative methods (Tsai, 2016; Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2015). Researchers prefer to use the qualitative method when their goal is to understand the meanings that both individuals and groups assign to their life experiences (Christenson & Gutierrez, 2016).

The multiple case study was the design most appropriate for this study. The results of the case study design may allow researchers the opportunity to research with the participants in their day-to-day environment. The case study design involves exploratory research some researchers use in obtaining a detailed analysis of a phenomenon (Yin, 2016). Researchers make use of the case study design when the research question consists of what, how and why, and the researcher has little or no

control of the events related to the study (Yin, 2018). Ethnography and narrative designs also received consideration for this research study. The ethnography design involves longer-term research, is cultural group-centric, and involves immersion of the researcher (Haradhan, 2018). Ethnography was not selected for this study because of the extended period needed to conclude the data gathering, as well as because the research question for this study did not require immersion. Researchers use the narrative design by having the participants reflect on their past by telling their stories (Anderson, 2017). The narrative design was not selected because of the production of nonobjective data and the reliance on interviewees' first-person stories of past events. For research such as this study, which requires obtaining an in-depth analysis involving a phenomenon or group, the case study is the best design to identify and explore strategies used by SBLs to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study:

What strategies do some governmental sector small business leaders use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable?

Interview Questions

The following eight questions were used in the semistructured interviews:

1. What strategies did you use to learn about the U.S. government's procurement system and the various support elements designed to assist small businesses?
2. How do you formulate your strategy to gain a competitive advantage in obtaining subcontracts?

3. What were the essential resources used during your strategy implementation to obtain U.S. government subcontracts?
4. What is your alternative option to this funding when resources are scarce?
5. What obstacles or barriers did you experience when implementing strategies to obtain subcontracts?
6. How did you overcome the key obstacles or barriers to implementing strategies to obtain government subcontracts?
7. How did you use your assets to increase your chances of obtaining government subcontracts?
8. What additional information would you like to provide regarding the strategies used by your business to succeed in obtaining U.S. government subcontract awards?

Conceptual Framework

The resource-based view (RBV) was the conceptual framework selected for this study. Penrose (1959) established the concepts of the RBV, Wernerfelt (1984) formally named the RBV, and introduced the concept of studying a firm's resources as a source of competitive advantage; Barney (1991) moved the theory forward as a strategic planning paradigm. The foundation of the RBV theory relies on the relationship between resources of the firm and the firm's agility and competitive advantage (De Almeida et al., 2018; Hemmati, Feiz, Jalilvand, & Kholghi, 2016). Firms apply the RBV theory to understand further how to create and maintain a competitive advantage by using their resources (Angulo-Ruiz, Donthu, Prior, & Rialp, 2018; Kaufman, 2016; Kor, Mahoney, Siemsen,

& Tan, 2016). In this study, resources refer to effective strategies and knowledge SBLs implement when trying to obtain work as a subcontractor on prime government contracts. The four tenets of RBV theory consist of resources considered as (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) imperfectly imitable, and (d) nonsubstitutable (Rengkung, Pangemanan, & Sondak, 2018). The RBV theory applies to this study in the two principal approaches. I expected the successful SBLs to have demonstrated a competitive advantage through unique knowledge, experiences, and skill sets. Additionally, I expected the RBV theory to enable me to understand the findings from my study. Both of the approaches proved correct as they pertain to this study.

Operational Definitions

Prime contractor: The prime contractor title is the chief contractor on the contract awarded by the government (FAR, 2017a).

Small business set-aside: The set-aside program reserves an acquisition solely for business deemed as small by the North American Industry Classification System (FAR, 2017a).

Small business subcontractor: A business with 500 or fewer employees and has obtained a subcontract on a prime contract (FAR, 2017a).

Solicitation: A request from any business to submit offers or quotes to the United States Government (FAR, 2017a).

Subcontract: A subcontract is a contract between the primary party, known as the *prime*, and a third-party contractor, known as the subcontractor (FAR, 2017a).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs that some consider as facts but have not been theoretically proven (Crawford, Aguinis, Lichtenstein, Davidsson, & McKelvey, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Two assumptions were made in completing this scholarly work: (a) The qualitative method of study was the best method for researching the strategies small businesses use to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts; (b) those small businesses included in this study would be able to provide pertinent information in a manner that was both insightful and truthful.

Limitations

Limitations refer to uncontrollable conditions, which can be a catalyst for both threats and weaknesses in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The participants for this study on small business subcontracting consisted of those small businesses that have received subcontracts on prime government contracts in the mid-Atlantic region. Because of the broad spectrum of small businesses in the area, the results of this study are not generalizable beyond those businesses that agreed to participate in this study. Due to my limited experience as a qualitative multiple case researcher, some basic and rudimentary aspects of the scholarly research and investigation process may not become a part of this study. Researchers make use of the qualitative case study to analyze complex issues and interventions based on the viewpoints of the diverse cases involved in the research (Yin, 2016).

Lastly, another limitation in this qualitative, multiple case study was due to the size of the population. The target population consisted of SBLs from five organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector that are verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and have used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable. There are many small businesses in the mid-Atlantic region that may have factors associated with success in obtaining subcontracts that are different from the SBLs used for data collection in this study.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the bounds or scope of the study (Yin, 2016). There were 681,517 small businesses in the state of Virginia in 2016 (SBA, 2017e). The research study included only those small businesses that have met the requirements for the federal acquisition regulations. The small businesses that supported this study came solely from mid-Atlantic region. By the definition of small business, any business having more than 500 employees could not become a part of this study. The last delimitation concerned the source of data: no data came from work provided to private industry but only from U. S. government.

Significance of the Study

Increasing Operational Effectiveness

SBLs may obtain subcontracts by learning and following the paths of those leaders that have previously obtained subcontracts. Business leaders make use of strategies to achieve strategic objectives and to develop derivative business plans

(Holmberg-Wright, Hribar, & Tsegai, 2017). The study findings may be of value to businesses by allowing SBLs to review the strategies used successfully by other SBLs in obtaining subcontracts. In contributing to business practices, SBLs may have a better understanding of the rules and policies associated with strategies and processes to obtain government subcontracts and how to use this knowledge in their planning and strategies in attempting to obtain subcontracts. Small businesses are important to the U.S. economy.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study may contribute to positive social change. The success and health of small businesses can stimulate both local economies as well as the overall economy of the United States (Hayes, Chawla, & Kathawala, 2015). Increases in economic development are important to all communities, regardless of size, and creating jobs can catalyze growth (Somsuk & Laosirihongthong, 2014). In summary, the findings from my study could increase SBLs' ability to implement effective strategies to increase and retain more employees, which could benefit the employees, employees' families, and communities.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies used by SBLs in obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts. In using the foundational construct of references related to small business and federal contracting, I created a literature review on SBLs' strategies for obtaining subcontracts. The review includes scholarly and other appropriate literature on small business, small business subcontracting, resources, and financing-related topics. In 2015, more than \$133 billion

was available for small business subcontracting; however, small business subcontracting accounted for only \$43.1 billion of the available funds leaving more than \$90 billion available for non-small businesses to use (DOD, 2017). Exploring why there are billions of dollars unused by small business for subcontracting purposes served as a catalyst for the study.

The following keywords were used to retrieve information from government websites and the various databases: *prime contractor*, *small business set-aside*, *small business subcontractor*, *solicitation*, and *subcontracts*. The following databases and websites were used: ABI/Inform Complete, Business Source Complete, SAGE Premiere, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and U.S. government websites, such as the Small Business Administration and the Federal Acquisition Regulation websites. Ulrich's Serials Analysis Systems website helped ensure that articles were peer-reviewed. The literature review portion of this study consists of 120 total references of which 110 are peer-reviewed and within 5 years of anticipated CAO approval date. The percentage of peer-reviewed sources within 5 years in this literature review is 92% (see Table 1).

Table 1

Sources of Study

Reference type	Published 2015-2019	Published 1959-2014	Total sources	Peer-reviewed articles > 5 years	Lit. review Peer-reviewed articles > 5 years
Peer-Reviewed Journals	252	19	271	93%	91%
Seminal Works	28	2	30	N/A	N/A
Government	15	N/A	15	N/A	N/A

Government organizational information about small business included data retrieved from the SBA website. The SBA provides policies, procedures, rules, and regulations for those interested in becoming small business owners and established small business owners. Additional data used in this research study came from the Federal Procurement Data System from the 66 agencies that input procurement data into the database (U.S. Federal Procurement Data System, 2017). Considering the rigorous research that went into obtaining peer-reviewed articles referencing small business, only a small number have a central concern on small business and subcontracting. There are a large number of articles addressing small business and U.S. contracting in general but very few with a focus on the subcontracting aspect of the U.S. government procurement system. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate the strategies some financial sector SBLs use to succeed in obtaining U.S. government

subcontract awards. My article selection process focused on those articles related directly to the research question and research topic.

Four themes originated from the literature review into small business subcontracting: small business, financing, small business origins, and innovation. Subthemes that emerged from the main themes include conceptual framework considerations, set-aside and small business rules, catalysts for employment, and strategy significance. Within this literature review, exploration of each theme and subtheme from the empirical literature is reviewed in detail on small business subcontracting, as well as of the RBV as the conceptual framework.

The literature review analyzes and synthesizes existing literature and organized in the following manner to include sections (a) the conceptual frameworks that support this scholarly work and (b) small business strategies and the set-aside program. Additionally, some themes and subthemes of this work includes but not limited to (a) small business history in the United States, (b) small business success and failures, (c) strategy importance, and (d) small business strategies and the set-aside program. Many factors may have an effect on whether some businesses receive subcontracts or whether some businesses do not and, this study may yield results that detail the phenomena of subcontracting awarding. Another goal of this study is to explore the various options offered by the SBA and how the conceptual theory may aid business in their chances of obtaining subcontracts on prime contracts. The research that went into establishing the concepts and constructs were derived primarily from the most recent and prominent peer-reviewed literature, and when used in unison created the background information

necessary for understanding the goals and context of this research into small business research subcontracting.

Conceptual Framework Considerations

The first component of this scholarly work is on the selection of the framework for this study. Regardless of the type of business or industry a person may want to perform an investigation on, there is one component that if it is nonexistent will be an essential factor in the misfortune of the business endeavor (Karim & Capron, 2016). Resources are a necessity, and if said resources are not used in a manner that best benefits the business, there may be little resources in existence to fund the actions and objectives essential to the firm's stabilization and future growth (Löfsten, 2016). Research data from the Strategic Management Society which encompassed 35 years of data collection on resources and business indicate that resources may not only relate to financial resources but may relate to a bevy other groups or items needed for the firm to operate optimally (Karim & Capron, 2016).

Additionally, the ability of businesses to alter their resources based on varying situations also plays an integral role in success or failure (Karim & Capron, 2016; Löfsten, 2016). Some other resources that may cause some leaders and researchers to overlook consist of human resources, educational resources, physical resources, and emotional resources (Pearson, Pitfield, & Ryley, 2015). The theory selected as the conceptual framework of the current study is the RBV. The importance of the RBV theory to this study consists of the theory's founders focusing on the principle of using a firm's resources to generate net worth and as well as to gain a competitive advantage.

The first section of this literature covers resources and is dedicated to the foundation's concepts first set forth by Edith Penrose in 1959.

The conceptual framework used as the foundation for this study of small business subcontracting is the RBV. Three researchers have a primary stake in the establishment and acceptance of the RBV theory. Penrose (1959) was the first to suggest that businesses bundle their internal and external resources and that if utilized correctly these resources can assist the company in creating a competitive advantage. Within the RBV theory, arises a concept about a firm and the purpose of the firm. Businesses are created by leaders to serve people and businesses operate in an uncertain model of organizational growth and must maintain a healthy relationship with the shareholders to achieve and then maintain a competitive advantage (Alexy, West, Klapper, & Reitzig, 2018; Kor et al., 2016; Kull, Mena, & Korschun, 2016). There is a link to competitive advantage and superior performance originating from the firm's solid relationship with the stakeholders (Kull et al., 2016).

Wernerfelt (1984) was the next to add on to what Penrose established in 1959. Wernerfelt looked at the resources of a business as well as the products of the business as two sides of a coin with the economic tools that support competitive advantage on one side of that coin. Regarding research on the RBV theory, Wernerfelt was the first to analyze a firm by studying the resource side of a business' capital and how businesses may utilize this aspect to gain a competitive advantage. The last researcher that theorists and economists regard as contributing to the understanding of the RBV theory is Barney (1991). Before Barney, managers in the industry looked at external considerations as a

means to gain an advantage over the competition. Barney (1991) was the first to place in writing that competitive advantage may occur by a firm's processes and products being superior to those that are competitors.

Resource-Based View Framework

Within the framework of the RBV consists of a categorization of resources known as valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable or VRIN (Alexy et al., 2018; Hemmati et al., 2016; Kaufman, 2015). The valuable and rare components pertain to those resources that can support a competitive advantage (Rengkung et al., 2018). The last two components of the VRIN are inimitable and nonsubstitutable which are measures used to determine if the resources are sustainable (Kaufman, 2016). For the RBV theory to be effective, managers must specify which assets fall into the VRIN and how the lack of said resources could affect competitive advantage (Lazzari, Sarate, Goncalves, & Vieira, 2015; Nason & Wiklund, 2018). Important aspects managers may consider before adopting the RBV theory is to understand how to determine how to categorize the firm's resources into the VRIN application (Barney & Mackey, 2016).

At its core, the RBV theory is how a firm establishes a relationship between valuable, rare resources and business resources. (Cullen & Parker, 2015). A small business owner may identify and allocate strategic resources in a manner that may create a competitive advantage. There is a common theme among researchers that investigate the RBV theory. Strategies appear similar between smaller firms and those listed as large firms (Carraresi, Mamaqi, Albisu, & Banterle, 2015).

The RBV theory's foundational existence is on the basis that a firm's creation of net worth and competitive advantage may originate from available resources (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1959; Nason, & Wiklund, 2018). The activities associated with using the RBV theory are contingent upon interactions between both the external and internal environments; included in all of the interactions derived from the leader's visions, and the reliance upon authoritative communication as well as the coordination of the administration (Penrose, 1959). The application of the RBV theory to this qualitative multiple case study is to compare and also contrast the participants' data received from the three interviews to garner a better understanding of how each of the leaders utilized their assets, capabilities, and resources to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts.

The application of the RBV as a theory of strategy management by various firm's leadership is commonly and widely used in attempting to gain a competitive advantage over the competition (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2018; Lazzari et al., 2015). Firms' leadership may make use of the RBV theory to review and classify resources that may assist in stimulating favorable advantages, principally for those long-term undertakings that are organization-specific (Sodhi, 2015). The RBV theory has maintained its status as one of the eminent management theories that allow a firm's leadership to analyze their resources to achieve a competitive advantage (Jensen, Cobbs, & Turner, 2016).

There are some critics of the RBV that support the claim that there is a wide acceptance of the RBV theory without the establishment of an appropriate level of defined criteria as well the narrowness of the competitive advantage concept (Almarri & Gardiner, 2014; Nason, & Wiklund, 2018). Even with the noted concerns about the RBV, Almarri and Gardiner (2014) supported the revitalization of the theory in practice and the ongoing application of the RBV theory to a diverse mix of organizations. Even with the noted concerns about the theory, Almarri and Gardiner accepted the theory by taking an analytic approach to the RBV's robust conceptual and empirical results published within many peer-reviewed articles, journals, and books.

Another aspect of concern is the central theme of the RBV having a foundation of using the internal environment to create the advantage with industry and that it does not rely upon external factors strongly enough to support the creation of the advantage (Napshin & Marchisio, 2017). In addition, the RBV theory encompasses the notion of strategic management concepts along with entrepreneurship that has some researchers questioning the validity of application to support small businesses since the framework seems to fit those larger firms (Kellermanns, Walter, Crook, Kemmerer, & Narayanan, 2014; Rashidirad, Soltani, & Salimian, 2015). To answer questions about the theory versus application, Kellermanns et al. (2014) performed an analysis of the resources and looked at said resources as building blocks to display an analytical-content comparison. The contrast of the resource conceptualizations from the entrepreneurs' perspective and the researchers' perspective led to a greater understanding and appreciation of both the similarities and the differences between the small business practices and the theory.

Contrasting Approaches

There are many theories used in researching business strategies and concepts. The theory best suited for this multiple case study on the successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable SBLs is the RBV; however, three other frameworks/strategies reviewed before the selection of the RBV. In this study, resources refer to effective strategies, and knowledge SBLs implement when trying to obtain work as a subcontractor on prime government contracts and this is the primary reason for the selection of the RBV as the conceptual framework for this study.

Competitive strategy theory. The competitive strategy theory from Porter (1980) has provided a foundation based on the notion of leaders looking to gain a competitive advantage over the competition by utilizing their long-term strategic plan. Within a company's industry, the position the business holds has a direct effect on where the business stands regarding their level of profitability in comparison to the industry's average (Jones, Harrison, & Felps, 2018; Lillestol, Timothy, & Goodman, 2015; Porter, 1980). Both small and large businesses are now operating in a highly turbulent environment that is often changing and requires the leaders to operate more efficiently and effectively to outperform the competition (Veblen, 2017).

Some critics have questioned the applicability and durability of the competitive strategy theory in the era of modern business. When the competitive strategy theory first entered the lexicon of business in the 1980s, recurrent growth was commonplace in the U.S. and abroad, as well as most of the industries developing at a predictable rate (Prasad

& Warrier, 2016). Some critics have questioned the foundation of the theory by challenging the competitive strategies based off the firm using a defensive posture within their given industry to gain a competitive advantage (Elmes & Barry, 2017; Gould & Desjardins, 2015). Some of the same critics stated that some business and economic scholars argue that Porter's insistence on businesses competing using the strategies is not accurate (Gould & Desjardins, 2015). Factors such as competitive analysis, resource access, as well as the size of the leader's business also come into play in leaders adopting a strategy for their business (Gould & Desjardins, 2015).

Cost leadership theory. Business leaders that cater to cost-conscious customers have a priority to have greater returns over the competition and wish to achieve greater profitability that coincides with a high level of sustainability. These types of leaders find the cost leadership strategy as their policy to gain a competitive advantage (Hernández-Perlines, Moreno-García, & Yañez-Araque, 2016; Kyengo, Ombui, & Iravo, 2016; Porter, 1980). The key strategic point with this theory stems from the business leaders producing items and providing services more efficiently than the competition, and this then drives market share increases (Ensari, 2016; Micheli & Mura, 2017; Zollo, Minoja, & Coda, 2018). Results of studies indicate that when business leaders of both small and large businesses fail some aspects of the cost strategy, there is a higher likelihood of the strategic plan not yielding what the business needs to survive, grow, and gain on the market share (Cooper, 2017; Ensari, 2016). Minimizing cost is an effective way to increase profits, increase stability for a longer duration, as well as allowing the business leader to expand their operations (Ensari, 2016).

Differentiation strategy. Making the business owner's business marketplace unique, placing customer satisfaction as the main priority and gaining customer loyalty are reasons some leaders choose to make use of the differentiation strategy (Linton & Kask, 2017; Ze, Abbas, Hussain, & Jiao, 2018). Leaders in small businesses may have the ability to attract more customers as well as a more diverse customer base by offering services and products not offered by the competition (Gorondutse & Hilman, 2017). There are many ways a small business leader may diversify their products and services by using technology, dealer network, international trade, and brand image to name a few (Laari, Töyli, & Ojala, 2017; Lin & Chang, 2015). There is preparation involved when leaders use the differentiation strategy. SBLs must ensure there is adequate training of the employees on the products and services sold as well as ensuring there is a strong market need for these products and services (Haddad, Wu, & Wingender, 2015; Pehrsson, 2016). SBLs in the U.S. in many different industries have successfully implemented the differentiation strategy as a vehicle to maximize profits (Haddad et al., 2015).

The RBV theory's foundational existence is on the basis that a firm's creation of net worth and competitive advantage may originate from available resources (Barney, 1991; Nason, & Wiklund, 2018; Penrose, 1959). The use of the resources of small businesses is critical and vital assets that if used correctly, may create the advantage the small business leader may need to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. In some instances, resources may be scarce for some small businesses so utilizing what is there can go a long way in determining the success or failure in obtaining subcontracts.

Set-Aside and Small Business Rules

The second component of this scholarly work is on the set-aside program and, the strategies that some SBLs may use with this assistance from the U.S. government to obtain government contracts. SBLs have underutilized funding specifically set-aside by the U.S. government for small businesses to obtain subcontracts on prime contracts (DOD, 2017). The funding used and allocated specifically for small businesses by the U.S. government has a term known as set-aside. The SBA Small Business Set-Aside program assists small businesses in competing for and winning government contracts and assists small businesses with being subcontractors on prime contracts (Carol, 2017; SBA, 2017a). Research indicates that performance levels of small businesses are no less than that of large businesses (Gravier, Hawkins, & Randall, 2018). Establishing government spending for small businesses serves as a critical component to the local economic health of the community in which the small business operates (Gravier et al., 2018).

Table 2 (DOD, 2017) shows the amount available for subcontracting each year from 2003 through 2016 in the total awards column while the SB awards column indicates how much of the available dollars small businesses received for that year. To allow the reader to comprehend Table 2 fully, the following is a breakdown of what each of the columns means in relation to subcontracting.

Table 2

Subcontracting Dollars by Year – Dollars in Billions

Fiscal Year	Total awards	Small business awards	% of total
2016	\$123.5	\$41.80	33.9
2015	\$133.40	\$43.10	32.3
2014	\$133.80	\$44.40	33.2
2013	\$147.10	\$52	35.4
2012	\$158.50	\$55.70	35.5
2011	\$151.60	\$53.50	35.3
2010	\$139.50	\$52.20	37.4
2009	\$144.60	\$49.50	34.2
2008	\$160.70	\$50.90	31.7
2007	\$127.80	\$46	36
2006	\$106.60	\$39.60	37.2
2005	\$121.10	\$43.70	36.1
2004	\$101.80	\$35.20	34.5
2003	\$86.50	\$32	37

Table 3 (DOD, 2017) are the goals set by the U.S. government in relationship to subcontracting goals for small businesses. The chart above comes from DOD (2017) and indicates the goals set by the government for small businesses and each of the different set-aside categories. In comparing Table 1 and Table 2, the U.S. government has failed to reach their subcontracting goals every year from 2012 - 2016 for small businesses. In addition, because of this delta, there have been hundreds of billions of dollars available for small business subcontracting but were used for non-small businesses (DOD, 2017). The charts showing the goals and the achievement rates are important for SBLs and receive further investigation within this second component.

Table 3

Subcontracting Goals by Fiscal Year for Small Business

Goals	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	F2018
Small Business	31.70%	36.70%	36.70%	36.70%	36%	34.50%	34.00%	33%
Historically Under-utilized Business Zone-HUBZone	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Small Disadvantaged Business	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Women-Owned Small Business	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%

Small Business Association's small business rules. The federal government has placed the SBA as its source for contracting affairs to include disaster loans, subcontracting guidance, and small business support for both primary contracts as well as subcontracts (Curry, 2016; Davis, Hansen, & Husted, 2018; DeYoung, Gron, Torna, & Winton, 2015). In correlation with small business subcontracting, the SBA provides support that some SBLs may use to understand the process of procurement as well as what advantages are available for them. Businesses make use of information to create strategies to achieve strategic objectives and to develop derivative business plans (Holmberg-Wright et al., 2017).

Based on the information and tools provided by the SBA, three items are noteworthy regarding the basic rules of the role of the SBA to SBLs looking to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts (SBA, 2017d). First, the SBA gives SBLs the ability to receive loans, contracts, subcontracts, counseling sessions and other forms

of assistance that SBLs may need. Secondly, the SBA allows anyone to log on to their website or contact them via phone to obtain the rules and regulations regarding establishing the small business to conduct business with the federal government. Lastly, on their website, the SBA offers the following directories that support small business subcontracting: (a) subcontracting network database, (b) general services administration's subcontracting directory for small businesses, (c) Department of Defense subcontracting opportunity directory, and (d) the SBA's directory of federal government prime contractors with a subcontracting plan. The information provided may help some SBLs with their strategy by understanding the rules that apply to small business subcontracting and what resources are available for them to obtain a subcontract on a prime government contract.

The last section of this component is on the groups selected by the SBA to become part of the set-aside program. The SBA (2017a) lists four groups that fall under the category to receive benefits of this program. First, 8(a) Business Development consists of businesses listed as small and disadvantages. To register as an 8(a) small business, the government must list the business as owned by economically and socially disadvantaged people or entities (McIver, Metcalf, & Berg, 2018; SBA, 2017a). Second, HubZones are small businesses located in historically underutilized business zones. For a small business to receive the benefits of HubZones through SBA, the business' principal office must be in an area considered a HubZone by the U.S. government (SBA, 2017a). Third, businesses that are at least 51% controlled and owned by women who are U.S. citizens (SBA, 2017a; Shrestha, Sharma, Karakouzian, & Singh, 2015). The last and

fourth category has the title of Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned small business. For a small business to qualify for this type of set-aside, the small business must have an owner or owners rated as service-disabled veterans and must have at least a 51% share in the small business (Fletcher, 2015; Lewis, 2017; SBA, 2017a).

Understanding the basics to federal contracting and procurement may assist those small businesses interested in obtaining subcontract work with the government.

Additionally, a small business may not have an awareness of the SBA and the resources the SBA has reserved for small businesses. Lastly, the government has established four groups that can receive set-aside subcontracts on prime government contracts to assist in obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable.

Small Business

Catalyst for employment. The first theme of this scholarly work is small business. For centuries, American small businesses have served as a tool for stimulating the economy (Anastasia, 2015). In the U.S., there is one standard undisputedly recognized by the U.S. government for characterizing small businesses, and that standard coincides with the rules set by the SBA (SBA, 2017c). Officially, the maximum number of employees allowed within an organization to have considerations as a small business is 500 (SBA, 2017c). With 500 as the set standard, those businesses that fall in the microenterprise category such as the local Mom and Pop business, as well as self-employed businesses, may not receive recognition as a small business (Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017).

Small businesses represent 99.9% of all U.S. firms, and they employ 48% of the private sector and 41.2% of the total U.S. private payroll (Turner & Endres, 2017). In Virginia, small businesses employ 1.4 million people and approximately half of the private sector workforce (SBA, 2017b). In the U.S., approximately 55% of business employees are male, and 45% are female (SBA, 2017e).

Based on the number of small business in the U.S. as of 2016, the results of the data from the SBA indicated that the economy of the U.S. depends on a large number of successful small businesses (Hayes et al., 2015; SBA, 2017b; Turner & Endres, 2017). The success and health of small businesses can stimulate not only the larger total U.S. economy but also the local economies within the U.S. (Hayes et al., 2015; Turner & Endres, 2017). Based on data from a study of businesses in several metropolitan areas in the U.S. from 1993-2002, employment sustainability, fostering the entrepreneurial spirit, increases in competition and innovation promotion are aspects of small businesses that affect communities in a multitude of ways (Samila & Sorenson, 2017). The creation of revenue stemming from small businesses is a strategy used by local governments as an additional resource of revenue creation as well as a vehicle to create jobs (Bruce, Xiaowen, & Murray, 2015; Williams, Martinez-Perez, & Kedir, 2017). The data from a quantitative study completed by Bruce et al. (2015) that included tax data from all 50 states from 1978 – 2009, reflected that tax breaks from small businesses do not catalyze performance with the organization.

Small business and economic expansion. Small businesses affect many of the local economies in the U.S. through the creation of jobs and innovation. In creating job

opportunities, small businesses not only help people achieve financial independence but also serve as a tool to assist local governments by increasing the revenue stream commonly referred to as taxes. Small businesses have the ability and often foster a high degree of job growth, positive impact on local communities around the U.S., and more ethnically diverse businesses (Samila & Sorenson, 2017). Small businesses often compete with those larger firms that offer similar support for businesses. Research data from a large U.S. sample comparing credit availability and financing among small businesses and entrepreneurs indicated that entrepreneurs seem not to limit themselves by lenders but with organizations such as the SBA have a greater range of credit accessibility than in prior years (Dai et al., 2017; SBA, 2017a). The U.S. government has implemented financial policies to support small businesses to affect economic growth positively (Lee, 2018).

The results from a study conducted by Burga and Rezanian (2016) using a semistructured interview indicated that internal and external stakeholders play an integral part in the success or failure of a business. West, Hillenbrand, Money, Ghobadian, and Ireland (2016) indicated from their research on the stakeholder perspectives that stakeholders have an active role in the organization's failure or success. Small business is important to individuals, businesses, and the local economy as well as the national economy (SBA, 2017b; Turner & Endres, 2017). Based on articles researched for this study, small business researchers view the basic context as looking at the trends in small business and the entrepreneurship field over the past decades and how this knowledge can affect small businesses moving forward (Volery & Mazzarol, 2015). Additionally,

small business research still needs further investigation and applying themes to the research may assist new researchers in linking future research with that of the past (Volery & Mazzarol, 2015).

Since the 1980s, the owners of small businesses and entrepreneurs have received recognition as drivers for economic growth within their respective communities and regions (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Small businesses bring several positive factors into economies whether local or at the national level. Economic growth, future growth, support for the local community, and the ability to change as the environment changes are important factors in determining the long-term sustainability of a business (Martinez-Martinez, Cegarra-Navarro, Garcia-Perez, & Wensley, 2019; Summers, 2015). Regional economic development functions as a catalyst for economic growth and has a direct relationship with the success or failure of small businesses within that region (Lee, 2018). Additionally, small businesses influence the area in which it is operating and influences the population level and the level of the population employed (Amolo & Migiro, 2017). Researchers acknowledge that for a region to sustain prosperity and economic growth, participation from entrepreneurs and small business is necessary (Johnson, Faught, & Long, 2017).

Societal response. A by-product of job creation and economic independence are the effects on society that increases in employment bring to the community. Societal changes that originate from small businesses have a connection with the varying factors of economic input. Many economists reflect that the federal procurement system is a regulation tool that affects the economy, and this is the system mandated by the

government for small businesses to conduct business with the federal government (Gennadyevna, Vladimirovna, & Yuryevich, 2015). Small business is integral to the integration of both the economic and moral values that acceptably assist capitalism in this society. Economic input is critical to the success of many local economies; however, support for these small businesses must support those areas within the U.S. that are hardest hit by poverty which is often a by-product of low employment rates (Harper-Anderson & Gooden, 2016; Ye, Xiao, & Zhou, 2019).

Both small business and entrepreneurship are critical and fundamental components in the creation of employment, economic growth, and innovation (Bruce et al., 2015). The economic input of small businesses has an importance to the health of the U.S. economy, which is the catalyst for the 99.7% of total businesses in the country (Hayes et al., 2015). Even with the high percentage of U.S. small businesses, there is still a need for these firms to have some sort of competitive advantage to create net income and to maintain a market presence (McDowell, Harris, & Geho, 2016). In the U.S. and in developing economies around the world, governments both large and small have used the tax policies to entice entrepreneurship in their regions (Williams et al., 2017).

Additionally, to assist in the government's long-term economic vision, start-ups are often reduced tax rates as an incentive to create job growth, become a stimulant for economic growth, and allow business leaders an opportunity to innovate and compete (Mallett & Wapshott, 2017).

There are many factors in determining the success of a new business (Amato, Baron, Barbieri, Bélanger, & Pierro, 2017; Leković & Marić, 2015). One such factor is

the insertion of innovation into the industry to which the business belongs. Innovation can occur in a myriad of fashions such as technological advances, process improvements with or without the use of computers, and the advancement of tools used within the industry (Campbell & Park, 2017). Based on the study from Campbell and Park (2017) who used the resource-based strategy and factors such as corporate social responsibility and self-interest, the results from the researchers indicated that using innovation to create net income and serve as a catalyst for job growth are factors SBLs may need to consider. Conversely, Amato et al. (2017) reflected that the data from a mediation model that consisted of 120 SBLs supported that assessment and locomotion were two factors used to enhance the success of a small business.

Environmental factors affecting small business. Many factors may affect small businesses in both in the U.S. and abroad. There is an abundance of investigations performed by researchers regarding a business leader's ability to manage and advance the growth of the business in various types of environment. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis study conducted by Shirokova, Bogatyreva, and Beliaeva (2016) consisted of 163 Russian and Finnish small and medium-sized businesses indicated that for a small business leader to achieve a sustainable level of success, the leader must take into account the environment in which the business resides and then make the necessary adjustments to take advantage of the environment. Additionally, the results from the study by Shirokova et al. indicated that an environment in which there is a low hostility level and an environment with high market growth have terms known as a benign, favorable, or encouraging environment. Lastly, the results from the study from Shirokova

et al. also showed that an environment, which is high in hostility along with surroundings that make the chances of failure greater, has a term known as an unfavorable environment. The three factors listed by Wang, Hermens, Huang, and Chelliah (2015) that may affect a business consist of demand uncertainty, competition, and technology or disruptive technologies. As with many industries and businesses, SBLs often lack any influence and control over external environment conditions (Shirokova et al., 2016).

To show how environmental turbulence affects small and medium-sized businesses, the results of a quantitative resource-based view study consisting of 325 small and medium exporting businesses in the United Kingdom by Zulu-Chisanga, Boso, Adeola, and Oghazi (2016) revealed several findings. First, results indicating the degree of turbulence in which the small and medium-sized businesses were operating in had a profound effect on the relationship between financial performance and the success of new products. Secondly, based on the study, by Zulu-Chisanga et al., a lower degree of turbulence was associated with higher financial performance and new product success.

Success in small business. Success in business may appear in many forms. Success may appear as establishing a profit or may appear as the actual establishment of the small business itself. A foundation for the success or failure of small businesses impact on local economies are the decisions established by the U.S. and local governments about the operation of small businesses (Amato et al., 2017). Often, SBLs must fill several roles to keep the business operating (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2019). Terms such as performance, growth, success, and profit in business research are synonyms. The results of a qualitative small business funding gap research completed by Fraser,

Bhaumik, and Wright (2015) indicated that some leaders lacking sufficient capital consider the business is surviving as successful although failure is fast approaching. The high number of small businesses have contributed to mixed data on the number of successful small businesses as well as the number of failed small businesses (Omri, Frikha, & Bouraoui, 2015). To build resources to finance small businesses, some business leaders may have to borrow money from relatives and friends, use personal savings and investments, or limit the amount of money received from the business for the small business to survive (Fraser et al., 2015).

For a small business to attain the status of successful, the SBLs may have to make use of human capital and training for sustainability (Albuquerque, Escrivão Filho, Nagano, & Junior, 2016; Obeng, 2019). Whether the size of the business is small, medium, or large, people are critical to the success of the organization. The employees often referred to as human capital also have an important role in economic growth (McGuirk, Lenihan, & Hart, 2015). One term of sustainability refers to an organization working on their short-term goals while ensuring the future of the business will not suffer due to these actions (Font, Elgammal, & Lamond, 2017). All businesses regardless of size must contend with and address factors such as the environment, the economy, and social issues to maintain market share, maintain their competitive advantage and place the organization on a sound path to ensure the likelihood of achieving sustainability (Hussain, Rigoni, & Oriji, 2018).

Success comes in an array of terms, measures, and metrics but it is important for SBLs to address what the term success means for their particular business. SBLs must not

only have concerns about the profit margin but also place social and environmental issues into their strategic planning, short and long-term goals, succession planning, and sustainment planning (Fraser et al., 2015; Hussain et al., 2018). SBLs and factors they deem as necessary for the leader to obtain a subcontract on prime contracts have an effect on the success of a small business obtaining subcontracts. For some leaders, obtaining the first subcontract is successful while other leaders may look at the dollar amount of the subcontract to make this determination.

Failures in small business. The causation for small business failures are numerous and come in a wide array of themes. Since there is no uniformity or universally accepted definition of failure, there is not a clear comprehension as to why some small business charities fail (Besser, 2016). Research has shown that negative reputation along with rumors may serve to cause a business to fail (Amankwah-Amoah, Antwi-Agyei, & Zhang, 2018; Sheng & Lan, 2019). There are some indicators as to what may be the catalysts for some small business failures. The results of a mixed methods study of 182 ex-heads of charities and 356 current head of charities conducted by Bennett (2016) revealed that some SBLs attribute failures to both external and internal factors that are out of their control. Bennett opined that some small business failure research makes use of the attribution theory to explain and compare what experts believe to what SBLs believe are the causes of these failures. The results of a qualitative study investigating entrepreneurial decision- making conducted by Maine, Soh, and Dos Santos (2015) indicated that some SBLs failed due to a self-serving attribution bias; failure linked itself to the experiences learned by SBLs that they viewed as negatively affecting the business

owning process. The results of a theoretical analysis consisting of a qualitative study of 15 Austrian firms conducted by Hiebl (2015) resulted in the data reflecting that SBLs that hired a manager to handle the daily operations caused a significant number of small business failures. The failures came from the managers focusing on their activities and not monitoring the activities of the business.

Some small business failures may occur for a myriad of reasons but may ultimately fall solely on the decisions made by the small business leader (Barnes, & Spangenburg, 2018). The data from a study by Zacca, Dayan, and Ahrens (2015) using a theoretical model along with a survey as the data collection instrument suggested that certain business failures among small businesses were due to the inability of the leader to promptly and adequately adjust to constant changes in the market. The authors also attribute another cause for small business failures as the lack of the SBLs to acquire and make use of marketing channels so they could compete with the better-established business in their industry and local area (Zacca et al., 2015). Wickert, Scherer, and Spence (2016) reviewed SBLs' views of corporate social responsibility and business ethics and noted that these SBLs concerned themselves more with forming the business culture and the enactment of values over the business of making a profit.

As stated earlier and throughout this literature review, there are many factors for business successes and business failures. Ultimately, the leaders of small business must create a plan before the start of business that includes marketing, financial, resources, human capital, succession planning, sustainment planning, and both short and long-term planning that takes advantages of current innovation as well as innovations on the

horizon (Bennett, 2016; Wickert et al., 2016; Zacca et al., 2015). The failure of a small business leader in obtaining a subcontract may have a myriad of reasons including but not limited to not knowing the rules and regulations as they pertain to subcontracting and the services offered by the leader may have a large saturation factor in the region in which the business intends to apply their work.

Financing

Many small businesses have an arduous time staying afloat due to what some small businesses say as not having enough access to both non-financial and financial resources (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015; Lee, 2018). The results of a qualitative case study conducted by Horne and Ivanov (2015) indicated that methods of some SBLs use for their financial and non-financial assistance is often a determining factor in the short and long-term success of the business. Some possible solutions for small businesses to have greater success consist of improving formal protocols, focusing on long-term goals not solely on short-term goals including profits, and expanding industry knowledge and not solely on the known (Horne & Ivanov, 2015).

Regarding incentives from local governments and municipalities, some new small businesses receive enticements from localities with reduced tax rates as an incentive to create job growth, become a stimulant for economic growth, and give the businesses an opportunity to innovate and compete (Mallett & Wapshott, 2017). Financing for subcontracting is important for the small business leader due to the requirements agreed upon in the subcontract and the resources needed to fulfill these obligations. Additional

lines of funding may assist the business in expanding their current product lines and increase the differentiation within their product lines.

Financing small business. A key component of any business is to have access to funding and, this includes SBLs have obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts in direct support of government operation in the mid-Atlantic region. SBLs must find new and creative methods to pay for the initial costs associated with the startup as well as the standard daily operational expenses associated with every business (Lee, 2018; Turner & Endres, 2017). Businesses starting up for the first time along with small business has many challenges regarding their ability to find financing options (Herciu, 2017). Unlike the larger and well-established businesses, small businesses do not have access to capital markets or the ability to create a funding stream via initial public offering (IPO) or borrow large amounts of money from banks (Herciu, 2017).

In some cases, the small business leader self-finances the first phase of the business. There are some financial options available for small business, and they consist of bricolage, which is the use of whatever financing sources are available at that particular time and crowd funding (Fraser et al., 2015). Liu and Wang (2018), referred to crowd funding as a business persuading people and businesses to provide a small donation for the startup or small business. Xiang and Worthington (2015) remarked that it is often difficult for small businesses to receive the appropriate financing options available at the time the small business leader needs the funds. Likewise, McDowell et al. (2016) reflected that there is little access to finances for small businesses. In their research about small business financing, Xiang and Worthington researched 2,732 small and medium-

sized businesses in their study focusing on the exploration of behaviors associated with the search for financing. The results of the study indicated that growth and profitability were dominant factors linked to the behaviors of the SMEs (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Not having enough options for financing may stymie small business leader's efforts in introducing technology and innovative products to the market (Lee, Sameen, & Cowling, 2015).

The financial crisis of 2008 affected financing opportunities for businesses large, medium, and small (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2018). After the worldwide financial crisis in 2008-2010, declines in both equity financing and debt of small businesses occurred, which adversely affected the performance of many businesses (Fraser et al., 2015). After the financial crisis, a small business looking into equity financing as a vehicle to obtain funding, now had to prove their track records before receiving funding or a line of credit (Fraser et al., 2015).

Expanding financial security. The role of small business in the U.S. is important to local economies as well as a major contributor to the U.S. economy. Based on the results of descriptive, qualitative multiple case study conducted by Turner and Endres (2017), the data reflected that small businesses represent 99.9% of all U.S. firms, and they employ 48% of the private sector and 41.2% of the private sector payroll. With the large number of small businesses in the U.S. and the importance of these small businesses to the economy, the ability of these major job creators to have financial security is critical. Small businesses are not solely strong contributors to job growth; small businesses allow many individuals the ability to reach the plateau of financial

independence also a financial success. Forty-four percent of the total number of U.S. paychecks comes directly from small businesses (SBA, 2017c; Small Business and Entrepreneurial Council [SBEC], 2016). The importance of the contributions from small business stems from the fact that U.S. payroll stimulates the economy in part by ensuring the employees receive the funds for hours worked. Since small business is a critical part to the success of the local and U.S. economies via worker's payroll, the U.S. economy would suffer without the contributions of small business (SBA, 2017c; SBEC, 2016). It may take some time, but a small business leader's goal is an expansion of their business to include the hiring of new employees (Eijdenberg, Paas, & Masurel, 2015).

External finance. A focal point of the RBV theory rests on a firm's ability to use their resources to create a competitive advantage. The RBV theory has a core understanding that a firm's internal resources take precedence over the external resources regarding the business' effort to create an advantage within the industry (Sodhi, 2015). In the RBV lexicon, resources are defined resources as either tangible or intangible (De Almeida et al., 2018).

The results of a quantitative study using the knowledge-based view conducted by Contractor, Yang, and Gaur (2016) showed that tangible assets refer to those physical assets a firm has and include items such as machinery, land, and buildings and intangible assets include intellectual property, trademarks, and the firm's networks. In the U.S., there are external resources that businesses can use to assist them in creating net worth and competitive advantage (DeYoung et al., 2015). SBLs must keep constant awareness

of not to overextend their ability to pay for those external resources applied for and received.

The SBA is an external resource that provides support for both small businesses and entrepreneurs in the form of loans and contract set-asides (Lee, 2018; SBA, 2017a). The SBA supports the government procurement system with a primary goal of operating most efficiently and effectively as possible while at the same time assist small business and entrepreneurs (Herrington, 2016; SBA, 2017a). The SBA does not provide loans to small businesses and entrepreneurs; however, the SBA makes use of collaborating lenders and sets guidelines for the loans to occur (SBA, 2017g). A major component of the SBA program to assist small businesses is the set-aside program. The government places restrictions on certain small business contracts, so that small businesses have a greater chance of receiving the award (SBA, 2017a). In some of the contracts, those that are \$150,000 or less are set aside exclusively for small businesses (SBA, 2017a). In most cases, most of the contracts issued by the federal government are competitive meaning companies, and firms contend with each other to obtain the government award (SBA, 2017a). The SBA offers some small business sole-source contract meaning that a small business will not have to compete for the award and the government selects the small business based on their capabilities (SBA, 2017a; Wilcox & Yasuda, 2019).

United States Small Business Origins

There are many challenges that new SBLs face as they attempt to create and then sustain their business endeavors. Part of the issue with small business is the inability to obtain credit. In addition, the interest rates for some small businesses are well above the

national standard as well as the tax burden associated with business ownership (Hayes et al., 2015). SBLs in the U.S. and abroad have the same issues of not obtaining a satisfactory amount of financial and non-financial resources (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015; Wilcox & Yasuda, 2019). The short and long-term success of a small business is incumbent on the leaders correctly addressing the problems within their business and then executing a precise and exacting plan to solve the issue (Horne & Ivanov, 2015).

Monitoring small business. The organized tracking of small businesses and their activities were non-existent before the 1950s (Ahl & Nelson, 2015; SBA, 2017h) The Congress of the U.S. founded the SBA on July 30, 1953 (SBA, 2017e). The establishment of the SBA served a multitude of purposes. First, there came to fruition an external source supported by the government to assist small businesses in their efforts to start and sustain businesses (SBA, 2017e).

Additionally, in 1964, the Congress approved the SBA to make business loans and guaranteed bank loans to a business listed as a small business (SBA, 2017e; Wilcox & Yasuda, 2019). Until the early 1980s, there was little concern for the research into small business failures and how knowledge gained on the subject would serve as a pathway to linking the U.S. economy to these types of businesses (Gaskill, Van Auken, & Manning, 1993). The results from a quantitative study, which consisted of 60 small businesses in the mid-western U.S. and conducted by Mueller and Naffziger (2015), indicated a correlation between SBLs planning and the financial performance of the business (Gaskill et al., 1993; Mueller & Naffziger, 2015).

Small business trends. The results from a quantitative study using a questionnaire conducted by Gadene (1998) indicated that success and performance in several different industries consisted of varying different factors for the organization's success. First, regarding the retail industry, money served as the most important concern for small businesses. Secondly, regarding the service industry, implementation of reward and punishment system was an essential concern for small businesses. Lastly, regarding the manufacturing industry, an emphasis on the pricing of products that were lower than the competition served as a driver for small businesses. Results from a study conducted by Lussier, Sonfield, Corman, and McKinney (2001) seemed to counter that of Gadene. The results from Lussier et al. (2001) indicated there were little differences between the manufacturing industries and the service industries. In addition, in another study, Fiore and Lussier's (2015) data from their study indicated some trends about recurrent strategies and they were fully exploiting innovation, finding methods to create a competitive advantage, decreasing costs, maintaining the quality level of the products and lastly, being the first to introduce products and services to the market.

Aside from the differences across the industries noted by Gadene (1998), Fiore and Lussier (2015) reflected in their study several variables associated with those wanting to start a small business and well as those that have started a small business regarding business success and failure. The variables may serve as predictors of the fate of the business venture, and they included financing, education, planning, industry experience, as well as age (Fiore & Lussier, 2015). Lastly, a quantitative study conducted by Lussier and Corman that consisted of six New England states resulted in data that revealed that

there are few differences between successful and failed small businesses and that some data obtained from research study indicates that no sound and reliable list of variables exists that can properly predict small business success or failure.

Small business and human capital. Regardless of the size of the business, people are critical to the success of the organization. The employees often referred to as human capital also have an important role in economic growth (El Shoubaki, Laguir, & den Besten, 2019). Human capital and SME growth: the mediating role of reasons to start a business. McGuirk et al. (2015) noted in their research that the data reflected that economies with a greater number of human capital assets often experienced a faster rate of growth than those areas with lesser amounts of human capital assets. There are several definitions of human capital used when researching small business. First, human capital refers to not only the personnel but also all the skills and knowledge that each brings in completing the assigned tasks (Dimov, 2017). Another definition of human capital centers around defining human capital as knowledge, levels of creativity, and skills that create ideas that an individual brings to the organization (Prajogo & Oke, 2016). A further definition of human capital involves the use of certain indicators such as work experience, industry experience, and managerial experience as factors contributing to defining human capital (Dimov, 2017). The first milestone for small businesses consists of the actual start of the small business itself. An important goal, objective, and mission of small businesses are to serve as an economic catalyst for the economy but also to adapt to change and incorporate new methods to create a competitive advantage (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). The results from a qualitative comparative analysis using fuzzy-set

methodology conducted by Dimov (2017) concluded that there is a relationship with education and experience with an increase in small business survival. Another asset attributed to human capital is using it as a competitive advantage by exploiting disruptive technologies as well as innovation (Prajogo & Oke, 2016).

Strategy significance. In the beginning phase of a business, businesses are at their lowest point regarding survival (Cole & Sokolyk, 2018; Gong, Zhang, & Xia, 2019). Additionally, Cole and Sokolyk (2018) mentioned in their work that it is imperative for small business owners to develop and put in place effective measures and strategy implementation to ensure the business will exist for years to come. There are several components to business strategies (Kowalkowski, Windahl, Kindström, & Gebauer, 2015). The first component consists of the decision makers of the organization committing themselves to both the short and long-term success of the organization by using both aggressive and defensive actions. Secondly, the leadership of the organization must support the maximization of returns on the investments.

The importance of a proper strategy is tantamount to the organization becoming a leader in the chosen industry (Eker & Eker, 2019; Ibrahim, 2015). The reason why strategy is important it is the plan set forth by the leadership that encompasses organizational goals, objectives, and purposes they deem as necessary for organizational success as well as future sustainability (Cullen & Parker, 2015; Ibrahim, 2015). In the study of 220 small firms, Ibrahim (2015) attempted to identify certain stereotypes that correlate with successful small business efforts. Based on the data obtained during the research study, Ibrahim identified four strategies that correlated with successful small

businesses. The four strategies identified are (a) niche, (b) differentiation, (c) prospector, and (d) defender (Ibrahim, 2015). Mullane (2015) gave a rich description of the four strategies identified by Ibrahim. Prospector refers to an organization looking to exploit new products and new markets. Businesses considered prospectors analyze their industry to look to take advantage of future actions that bear profits now. The term defender refers to organizations wanting to protect their current market share by emphasizing the current product line and at the same time limiting the number of items produced. Niche refers to organizations concentrating on a specific market and group to provide their products and services. The competitive advantage of this concept is narrow and well defined to avoid competition with larger businesses in the same locality and industry. Lastly, differentiation refers to the organization wanting to a narrow domain for their producers and services by using comprehensive planning measures and a high level of formalization.

Small Business Innovation

Innovation. Innovation has many facets of the economy that it affects. First, innovation in business not only may create for successful firms an additional revenue stream but also has created an additional revenue stream for both local and state government (Bruce et al., 2015; Kiss, Fernhaber, & McDougall–Covin, 2018). Using innovation as a tool within RBV is not new to researchers who have argued that small firms with certain dynamic capabilities may revise and reconfigure these internal capabilities to address the uncertainties of the chosen industry (Vinit, Pejvak, & Stefan, 2016). One of the building blocks to using and understanding the RBV is to apply those

internal resources to create net worth and competitive advantage (Barney & Mackey, 2016). Small firms must make use of the available technologies and use them as one of the resources in the VRIN model for small firms to fully and properly utilize the internal resources fully (Lazzari et al., 2015; Vinit et al., 2016). SBLs vying for subcontracts may use technology and innovation as tools to assist them in obtaining subcontracts by networking and possibly extending their customer base.

The RBV theory's foundation stems from firms using what resources are available to place the firm in a better position within the local area and the industry. One method to aid firms in creating a shift to create an edge is to make use of an available resource such as technology. Information technology if used correctly can change the firm's chances for success by having said firm deploys material resources in a better manner (McGinnis, 2016). Material resources may eventually end; however, but technologies functionality will not. As stated many times prior, the utilization of resources in a manner, which improves the firm's ability to create net worth and create a competitive edge, is one of the pillars of the RBV theory. Firms must become and remain cognizant that eventually, this new and disruptive technology will become common usage among the competition; thus, decreasing the effectiveness in the competitive advantage process (Cozzolino, Verona, & Rothaermel, 2018; Popa, Soto-Acosta, & Loukis, 2016). Firms must also remain aware that because there is information technology readily available for use does not designate it as a resource that can support the firm's efforts in establishing and maintaining a competitive advantage. Firm leadership may also create innovation to use in the creation of a competitive advantage. The generating of new

technologies along with understanding the capabilities associated with the new technology can reinforce the positive aspects of the firm's performance and growth (Sabden & Turginbayeva, 2017; Stenholm, Pukkinen, & Heinonen, 2015).

Exploiting innovation. The leaders of small businesses have an important and critical impact as a catalyst for economic growth due to the presence of and the ability of these small businesses to become leaders in technological advances (Taneja et al., 2016). One aspect of innovation that organizations exploit is creating new ideas to create value (Holt & Daspit, 2015; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Herrera (2015) and Mirvis, Herrera, Googins, and Albareda (2016) surmised that through the use of innovation, business leaders might differentiate themselves as well as improve themselves by (a) creating and sustaining a competitive advantage and (b) by discovering limitless possibilities. Herrera opined that because of the endless benefits of embracing innovation, business leaders have the possibility of their organizations continuing to thrive and achieve a long-term and continuous business growth by using innovation to streamline processes, which may result in efficiencies and cost savings.

Small businesses now have the ability to position themselves and formulate new ideas because (a) SBLs do not have to consult with anyone to make changes, (b) incentives such as professional and personal rewards, and (c) the lack of bureaucracy assist in making changes to products and services (Colombelli, Krafft, & Vivarelli, 2016; Holt & Daspit, 2015; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Colombelli et al. (2016) and Memili, Fang, Chrisman, and Massis (2015) reflected that market-driven innovative small businesses tend to respond to advances within their respective industries faster than those businesses

that are not innovative and market-driven. González-Benito, Muñoz-Gallego, and García-Zamora (2016) opined that for small businesses to grow and sustain such growth, SBLs must include innovative measures and strategies that institute innovative strategies from the inception of the business.

Small businesses that use innovation and include technology in their strategic planning experience high-growth rates compared to small businesses that do not (Santos, Afonseca, Lopes, Félix, & Murmura, 2018; Taneja et al., 2016). The SBA (2017e) revealed some facts about small business that relate to innovation and the statistics are as follows: (a) from the period of 2007-2012, 96% of small businesses constituted the high-patenting manufacturing industry; and (b) in 2012, 98.5% of high-tech industries consisted of small businesses. Programs that individuals use that have a basis in innovation and technology often look at small businesses first to adapt to this new technology (Memili et al., 2015; Taneja et al., 2016).

Small businesses are catalysts for innovation and disruptive technologies well before larger businesses' embracement of the new technology (Memili et al., 2015; Santos et al., 2018). Innovation may serve as a positive for small businesses in regard to market share and competitive advantages. Lastly, small businesses have an important and critical impact as a catalyst for economic growth due to the presence of and the ability of these small businesses to become leaders in technological advances (Taneja et al., 2016).

Summary of the Literary Review

The first element of this literature review are sources that focused on the conceptual framework theory for this study, which was identified as the resource-based

view. The RBV was the conceptual framework selected for this study. Within the framework of the RBV consists of a competitive power capability also known as the VRIN (Kaufman, 2015). The VRIN is a break down on the categorization of resources as are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (Hemmati et al., 2016).

The Resource-Based View Framework subsection of the literature review required the use and creation of several components attached to the RBV, and they are as follows: External Resource, Small Business and Economic Expansion, Societal Response, and Small Business Innovation. Within the subthemes, I included information on the SBA, largely due to this agency providing support for both small businesses and entrepreneurs in the form of loans and contract set-asides (SBA, 2017a; SBA, 2017f). The SBA supports the government procurement system with a primary goal of operating most efficiently and effectively as possible while at the same time assist small business and entrepreneurs (Herrington, 2016; SBA, 2017a). Regarding small business and economic expansion, research supports the notion that small businesses have the ability and often foster a high degree of job growth, positive impact within local communities around the U.S., and more ethnically diverse businesses (Samila & Sorenson, 2017). Job creation affects the success of many local economies; however, support for these small businesses must support those areas within the U.S. that are hardest hit by poverty, which is often a by-product of low employment rates (Harper-Anderson & Gooden, 2016). Small business innovation must use factors within the RBV to create net worth and to gain a competitive advantage. Small firms must make use of the available technologies

and use them as one of the resources in the VRIN model for small firms to fully and properly utilize the internal resources fully (Lazzari et al., 2015; Vinit et al., 2016).

In addition to the RBV and the components referenced from the conceptual theory, there are four themes associated with this literature review. Also, within the themes are several subthemes that support each theme as well as provide peer-reviewed support as well as governmental website support. The four themes associated with this scholarly work on small business subcontracting: small business, financing, small business origins, and innovation. Subthemes that emerged from the main themes included external resource, small business and economic expansion, societal response, small business innovation, exploiting innovation, monitoring small business, human capital, trends, expanding financial security, and strategic importance.

The first theme of small business has components related to the small business experience of the researcher, catalyst for employment, small business and economic expansion, societal response, environmental factors affecting small business, success in small business, and failures in small business. There are several key points within this section. First, for a small business leader to achieve a sustainable level of success, the leader must consider the environment in which the business resides and then make the necessary adjustments to take advantage of the environment (Shirokova et al., 2016). Then, both small business and entrepreneurship are critical and fundamental components in the creation of employment, economic growth, and innovation (Bruce et al., 2015). Next, small businesses have the ability and often foster a high degree of job growth, positive impact within local communities around the U.S., and more ethnically diverse

businesses (Samila & Sorenson, 2017). Last, small businesses represent 99.9% of all U.S. firms, and they employ 48% of the private sector and 41.2% of the private sector (Turner & Endres, 2017).

The second theme financing and consists of the following components: financing small business, expanding financial security, and external resource. There are three key points within this second section titled financing. First, there are many challenges that new SBLs face as they attempt to create and then sustain their business endeavors. Part of the issue with small business is the inability to obtain credit, and when granted by the lending institution the interest rates are well above the national standard as well as the tax burden associated with business ownership (Hayes et al., 2015). Next, some possible solutions for small businesses to have greater success consists of improving formal protocols, focusing on long-term goals not solely on short-term goals including profits, and expanding industry knowledge and not solely on the known (Horne & Ivanov, 2015). Then, unlike the larger and well-established businesses, small businesses do not have access to capital markets or the ability to create a funding stream via initial public offering (IPO) or borrow large amounts of money from banks (Herciu, 2017). Last, with the large number of small businesses in the U.S. and the importance of these small businesses to the economy, the ability of these major job creators to have financial security is critical. Small businesses are not solely strong contributors to job growth; small business allows many individuals the ability to reach the plateau of financial independence and financial success. Forty-four percent of the total number of U.S. paychecks come from small businesses (SBA, 2017c; SBEC, 2016).

The third theme of this small business scholarly work is U.S. small business origins. There are three key points within this third section of this scholarly work on subcontracting. First, the organized tracking of small businesses and their activities were non-existent before the 1950s (Ahl & Nelson, 2015; SBA, 2017h). The Congress of the U.S. founded the SBA on July 30, 1953 (SBA, 2017e). The establishment of the SBA served a multitude of purposes. Additionally, in 1964, the Congress approved the SBA to make business loans and guaranteed bank loans to a business listed as a small business (SBA, 2017e). Next, an important goal, objective, and mission of a small business are to serve as an economic catalyst for the economy but also to adapt to change and incorporate new methods to create a competitive advantage (Taneja et al., 2016). The SBA is an external resource that provides support for both small businesses and entrepreneurs in the form of loans and contract set-asides (SBA, 2017a). The SBA supports the government procurement system with a primary goal of operating most efficiently and effectively as possible while at the same time assist small business and entrepreneurs (Herrington, 2016; SBA, 2017a). Lastly, some data obtained from research study indicates that no sound and reliable list of variables exists that can properly predict small business success or failure (Lussier & Corman, 2015).

The fourth theme of this small business scholarly work is small business innovation, which encompasses the components of innovation and exploiting innovation. There are two key points within this third section of this scholarly work on subcontracting. First, innovation has many facets of the economy that it affects. First, innovation in business not only may create for successful firms an additional revenue

stream but also has created an additional revenue stream for both local and state government (Bruce et al., 2015). Last, the leaders of small businesses have an important and critical impact as a catalyst for economic growth due to the presence and the ability of these small businesses to become leaders in technological advances (Taneja et al., 2016).

Summary and Transition

Section 1 consisted of the introduction to my research study about strategies used by SBLs in the governmental support sector to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. Section 1 consists of both the foundation for this scholarly work and the literature review. In addressing the foundation portion of this work, the following information is critical: Some SBLs have underutilized funding specifically set aside by the U.S. government for small businesses to obtain subcontracts on prime contracts (DOD, 2017). The funding used and allocated specifically for small businesses by the U.S. government is known as a set-aside. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The results of the qualitative case study design may allow for additional investigations into factors associated with small business and subcontracting.

The RBV was the conceptual framework selected for this study. The study findings may be of value to businesses by allowing SBLs to review the strategies successfully used by other SBLs in obtaining subcontracts. The results of this study may also contribute to positive social change through the creation of jobs.

The literature review consisted of four emerging themes: small business, financing, small business origins, and innovation. Several key points were addressed within this literature review and they are as follows: The conceptual framework used as the foundation for this study of small business subcontracting was the RBV. Also, the SBA Small Business Set-Aside program assists small businesses in competing for and winning government contracts and assists small businesses with being subcontractors on prime contracts (Carol, 2017; SBA, 2017a). Lastly, the SBA gives SBLs the ability to receive loans, contracts, subcontracts, counseling sessions and other forms of assistance that SBLs may need.

Section 2 contains the Purpose Statement of the research study along with the Role of the Researcher. Additionally, Section 2 contains the selection process of the participants for this research study as well as the research methodology and design. Next, Section 2 contains information on the Population and Sampling methods in addition to the following topics: Data Collection, Ethical Research, Data Collection Instruments, Data Collection Technique, Data Analysis Technique, and lastly the Data Organization Technique. The study's Reliability and Validity section will conclude Section 2. Section 3 includes the findings along with applications for professional practice and social change implications. The section ends with the results and the research findings.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I present the purpose of the project and the importance of the researcher's role. I provide information on the participants and on the selection process. Next, I discuss the method and design of the research, along with the population, sampling, research procedures, ethics, instruments used for data collection and the collection technique, data organization technique, and lastly data analysis. I conclude this section with an analysis of the reliability and validity of the project.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the successful strategies some government support sector small business leaders use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The target population consisted of small business leaders from five organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector that are verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and have used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable. The implications for social change include the opportunity for small business leaders to learn strategies that allow them to obtain more government subcontracts, which could increase organization opportunities, promote job creation, and help to improve local economies.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is to provide the framework for his or her research which includes the problem statement, purpose statement, and the conceptual framework of the research (Roller, 2015). For this research study, the qualitative method served as

the best method to use to answer the research question. The qualitative method also serves as one of the most used methods for obtaining data from participants through reviewing their life experiences (Gentles & Vilches, 2017; Lauritsen & Perks, 2015). Researchers requiring an in-depth analysis of a study tend to choose the qualitative method over other methods (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Gergen, 2015). The qualitative method differs from other research methods in that the researcher takes the experience of the individuals and forms an understanding of each reality through the perspectives of each of the individuals (Maxwell, 2015; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In qualitative research, the researcher is responsible for data collection, data organization, as well as data analysis (Guetterman, 2015; Yazan, 2015). According to Galvin (2015), the semistructured interview yields an understanding of the participant's experiences. The development of interview questions for the semistructured interviews was important for the data collection process. The qualitative method was a tool to obtain in-depth information from the participants regarding the strategies that led them to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts.

Personal familiarity and experience with small businesses and subcontracts occurred through work as a military member. While serving on active duty from 1989-2009, the U.S. Army provided basic and advanced training to senior level personnel in the fields of accounting, business, and federal contracting. At the time of this study, there was some familiarity with small businesses in the mid-Atlantic region. During my employee tenure as a budget analyst for the DOD from 2010-2016, experience came from serving as an analyst for small business set-asides for DOD. It was my responsibility to

place funds, monitor, and report fund usage on quarterly reports. Because of interactions with small businesses in the past, ensuring an environment free from influence, personal thoughts, and beliefs served as a cornerstone for this research study into small business subcontracting.

Important components of modern research are legal and ethical matters that relate to the researcher and the subject matter (Greenwood & Freeman, 2018). The publishing of the Belmont Report in 1979 allowed researchers to use the report for ethical guidelines, as well as ethical issue mitigation that may arise during research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research [NCPHSBBR], 1979). In addition to the establishment of the Nuremberg code after World War II, the Tuskegee Study catalyzed what later became the Belmont Report (Annas, 2018). The Belmont Report was an important response to the ethical climate of the time; however, the research ethics into human subjects have expanded since then, and the report may not cover the full spectrum it once covered (Friesen, Kearns, Redman, & Caplan, 2017; Harrison & Gannon, 2015). The fundamental concept of the Belmont Report was to ensure that patients were fully aware and given the truth about the experiments (NCPHSBBR, 1979).

Some of the key principles of the Belmont Report are respect for persons, justice, and beneficence (NCPHSBBR, 1979). Respect for persons mandates the researcher must inform all persons participating in the study they must receive informed consent. Justice mandates that the researcher apply methods to identify risks and benefits and inform the participants of the dissemination of the findings whether good or bad. Beneficence

requires the researcher to identify all risks and inform the participants of these risks (NCPHSBBR, 1979). The participants had ample time to read the invitation letter and the consent form, indicate their understanding of the requirements, and had the ability at any time to cease participation in this research. By providing the participants with time and the ability to stop, this ensured the adherence to the standards of ethics. All of the participants had an awareness of the research topic along with the research question. All of the participants involved in this study agreed to contribute to this small business contracting study before establishing a relationship of data provision and gathering. One of the basic principles of research is for the researcher to safeguard all of the participants' confidentiality (Kirilova & Karcher, 2017). Ethical treatment of all of the participants remained a constant and essential component of this research study at all times.

In any method of research, it is imperative for the researcher to reduce bias. Any form of bias in qualitative research reduces the credibility of the study (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). It is important for the qualitative researcher to understand their personal bias may influence the outcome of the study (Clark & Vealé, 2018). The role of the researcher requires protocols and procedures (see Appendix) that are consistent in the data collection process to mitigate bias and to retrieve both relevant and significant information retrieval in a systemic manner (Guetterman, 2015). The design of the researcher's interview questions and approach should allow the study participants to speak openly and freely to establish rapport (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). While proceeding through the data collection process, controlling researcher emotions and the emotions of the participants can help to reduce many forms of bias (Guetterman, 2015).

One form of bias is non-dissemination bias, which is the exclusion of pertinent material to affect the result of the studies adversely (Toews et al., 2017). Additionally, caution is of the foremost importance while taking notes when conducting the interviews, recording the interviews, and transcribing the data gathered from the participants (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018).

During this research process, the goal was to avoid use of my personal lens to mitigate bias; I made a conscious effort first to recognize and then place aside from those preconceived notions learned from approximately 30 years as a member of the military and as a civilian performing budget building and contract approvals. It is important to ensure the data collection is impartial, and solely and accurately reflects the viewpoints of the participants (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). The worldviews of those interviewed during this process may have views opposed to those that I hold due to serving 20 years in the U.S. Army as a financial manager; however, this did not interfere or create any form of bias in this research study. The qualitative researcher collects data through in-depth interviews resulting in a strong representation of the participant's feelings and perspectives (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Windsong, 2018).

I used semistructured face-to-face interviews as reflected in the interview protocol (see Appendix). The method used to obtain participant information during a study is vital for the researcher to collect the needed information to answer the research question. Kallio et al. (2016) made use of semistructured interviews to collect data with a method that contributed to both trustworthiness and objectivity of their studies, while also making the results more credible and believable. Kallio et al. (2016) argued that the

semistructured interview assists the researcher to understand the research topic by observation better and allows for two-way communication.

Interview protocols are necessary to maintain a systematic method to obtain information related to the research question (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended interview questions and the process guidelines for use with the business leaders in the mid-Atlantic region (see Appendix). Interview protocols are important because they include the interview questions used by the researcher to extract detailed and rich data in attempting to understand the experiences of the participants (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The interview questions were incorporated within the interview protocol along with other items important to this research study on small business subcontracting including the consent form, protocol for setting a collaborative tone in interviews, explaining rights, confidentiality, and ensuring consistency in the interview process to strengthen the reliability of the process. Interview protocols may assist the qualitative researcher in providing quality and in-depth information about the participant's viewpoints and experiences (Turner, 2010). The plan was to make use of the multiple case study design to collect data from the business leaders to assist in answering the underlying research question. To understand the participants, the use of interview questions served as the best method to obtain information. After the interviews, I gathered the information from the participants during the interview, organized the data, and then analyzed the data to understand the participant's experiences better. In understanding the participant's experiences, I served as the primary data collection instrument in this study and continually reminded myself to

be aware of the participant's feelings during the research. The use of an interview protocol (see Appendix) assisted in the interview portion of this research study into small business subcontracting.

Participants

In addressing the criteria for this study, the characteristics of the participants consisted of SBLs in the governmental support sector who have succeeded in obtaining multiple government subcontracts on prime government contracts. The study population was SBLs in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States from five governmental support sector organizations who had a demonstrated history of implementing strategies to succeed in obtaining government subcontracts on prime government contracts. Those small businesses selected to participate in this study were all competitive, and some were unsure if they want to divulge their strategies to their competition. It is important to have participants that are willing to share their perspectives and experiences as they relate to small business subcontracting and the process used to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable. Disclosing business strategies could result in less competitive advantage and more competition for those small businesses looking for subcontracting work in the mid-Atlantic region.

To gain access to the SBLs who have obtained subcontracts, I made use of both professional networks such as LinkedIn, Monster Communities, Fed Biz Ops, Fed Bid Government Bids, U.S. Contractor Registration, and Indeed, as well as personal networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and networks developed through my approximately 30 years of financial experience. I contacted the SBLs whom I met while serving as a pay manager

in the U.S. Army, those met while assigned as a budget analyst and financial analysts in the federal government, and the System for Award Management (SAM) database, which is an official website of the U.S. government. First, the use of personal and professional networks served as the first method to obtain participants who obtained subcontracts. Secondly, a query of small businesses commenced using the SAM database and other U.S. Government databases (those previously mentioned in the professional network list) to determine what businesses meet the criteria established in this study. In establishing a working relationship with the participants, possible participants received either a telephonic communication or an email asking about their willingness to participate in this doctoral study and to ensure they meet the established criteria. Ensuring acceptance to participate consisted of a face-to-face meeting with the business leaders to discuss their role in this study. The letter contained an explanation of the focus of the research study and the level of involvement of each of the participants.

One of the challenges in qualitative research is establishing a relationship between the researcher and the participants (Nusbaum, Douglas, Damus, Paasche-Orlow, & Estrella-Luna, 2017). There are certain skills a researcher may implement to establish a relationship with the participants. A researcher's listening skills and their ability to receive feedback may assist in rapport building, trust, and understanding that may lead to the participants being honest about their experiences and how those experiences add to the credibility and soundness of the study (Weller, 2017).

A working relationship with the participants is important in all facets of research. Additionally, the relationship between the respondents and the researcher must remain

positive and serves as a key to a successful interview using the qualitative method (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Narui, Truong, & McMickens, 2015). Some business leaders may have skepticism about an outsider asking for information about how they were conducting business. To break down the barriers of acceptance, I informed the business leaders that obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts of my background as an Army retiree, a civil servant for nine years, and that I am 100% service-disabled veteran working towards my doctoral degree. It is important for the researcher to establish a working relationship with the participants while during the data collection process (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). Hoyland, Hollund, and Olsen (2015) opined that the information provided to study participants that is clear and concise serves as a sound foundation for the researcher to make informed decisions. Lastly, I used member checking to ensure the data obtained from the participants properly conveys exactly the thoughts and views of the SBLs.

Birt, Walter, Scott, Cavers, and Campbell (2016) noted that member checking supports the validity of research through verification of responses and then by ensuring the researcher transcribes the participant's responses as they intended. Prior to the start of the interview, I informed each of the participants the member checking process included each small business leader receiving an entire transcription of their responses based from the interview and they had two weeks to review and make comments. Once the review was complete, the participants contacted me via email or phone, so we then could arrange a date and time to review their comments as they pertained to the transcript. I then

created a new transcription based on the updates and completed the member checking process.

I performed member checking in several ways. After the interview was complete, there was a review of both the interview questions, as well as their responses, to ensure that how the SBLs responded was captured by both recording devices, as well as what was written down as notes. In addition, after completion of the interview, a detailed listening to the recorded interview session ensued, and then a comparison of the written interview notes occurred to ensure the small business leader's responses were as they answered. After the interview was over, reviewing and interpreting the transcription of the interview commenced. The last phases of member checking consisted of two steps. First, the small business leader received an entire readable copy of the synthesized responses in which they shared during the interview for all of the questions asked during the interview. Secondly, each small business leader received a phone call after they receive a copy of the synthesized responses to determine the correctness of the written responses. Lastly, member checking ended once there was a determination that there is no disclosure of any new information from the small business leader.

To complete this study, there was a need to find and receive consent from SBLs from organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and have used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. The small businesses within the study met the qualifications of a small business as established by the U.S. government and as defined by the Federal Acquisition Regulation. The goal was to receive five acceptances

of SBLs in the mid-Atlantic region that have received subcontracts on prime government contracts. The majority of the SBLs have obtained at least three subcontracts and have at least 10 years of experience subcontracting on prime government contracts.

There are no set rules for the researcher to determine the proper sample size while using the qualitative method (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Yin (2016) suggested that a small sample size for a research study is suitable for qualitative research is appropriate enough to address the research question and to describe the phenomenon of the study. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) suggested that there are four components in determining the proper sample size while using the qualitative method. First, what is it the researcher needs to know to answer the research question? Secondly, regarding the study, what is at stake? Thirdly, what information is credible? Lastly, what does the researcher consider as useful in answering the research question of the study? The reaching of data saturation in qualitative studies occurs when the collection of additional data and coding yields no additional discovery, and further data gathering is not necessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Once the data from the participants become repetitive and fewer, new questions need addressing is the point data saturation is near completion. The participants consisted of five SBLs that have obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts. Based on the number of small businesses in the financial sector in the mid-Atlantic region authorized to do business as a subcontractor on prime government contracts, five participants served sufficiently to ensure data saturation. The point of data saturation comes from the experience and judgment of the researcher (Tran, Porcher, Tran, & Ravaud, 2017). Instead of using additional participants in trying to

reach data saturation, collecting additional information throughout member checking from the five SBLs who agreed to be a part of this study aided in achieving data saturation. In qualitative research, relying on a high number of participants is not necessary for data saturation due to the researcher focusing on the opinions and the perspectives of the participants (Hancock, Amankwaa, Revell, & Mueller, 2016). Data collection continued until the strategies used by the five SBLs in the governmental support sector became clearer to me.

Semistructured interviews that include open-ended questions along with an accompanying script served as the primary means of data collection. Utilizing a semistructured interview process along with open-ended question are both respectable and acceptable vehicles for obtaining data for a multiple case study research (Guetterman, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Yin, 2016). The selection of the interview setting consisted of locations behind closed doors, away from everyone, and free from any form of distractions. The selection of the interview locations accommodated the comfort level of the participants. I scheduled the interviews on Mondays through Sunday between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time at a time and location that worked best for the participant. The interview environment is important, and the setting allowed the participant to communicate openly (Pacho, 2015). The interview setting can also assist with instilling trust and comfort with the participant and at the same time allowing them to reflect on experiences that affected their business moves regarding obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts (Dikko, 2016). In the qualitative

method environment, the interview is an important tool in which to understand the participant's past and what lead them to make the decisions made.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

The method selected for this study is the qualitative method. The quantitative method has a foundation based on using samples that represent populations whereas the qualitative method has a foundation based off of the use case studies (Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares, & Tomicic, 2017; Violante & Vezzetti, 2017). Using the qualitative method allowed for a better understanding of the participant's ideas; thus, creating an atmosphere for a more detailed and in-depth data collection process (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Businesses are frequently investigated using the qualitative method due to business behaviors, and their practices are often dynamic, situational, and shift based on the environmental changes (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Daher et al., 2017). The qualitative method uses different forms of data collection such as observations, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and artifacts to come to a more detailed conclusion from the comprehensive data extracted from the method used (Gerring, 2017; Guetterman, 2015; Roller, 2015). Researchers make use of the qualitative method because participants have the ability to link in their experiences with their decision-making process as it pertains to small business subcontracting.

Before the selection of the qualitative method, there was much consideration about applying the quantitative method to this study. The nonselection of the quantitative method is due to it being too rigid, and the quantitative method does not put enough

importance on the research topic. The quantitative method differs from the qualitative method in that the data collected is representative of known variables from a large group of samples; additionally, the function of statistical hypotheses testing in the quantitative method has data that generalized the results from the samples (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). There are also differences between the qualitative and the quantitative method such as data collection approaches to data analysis, and the reliability and validity issues (Daher et al., 2017; Violante & Vezzetti, 2017). The quantitative method contains both hypothesis testing and generalizations (Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

Another method up for consideration was the mixed methods approach. The mixed method approach is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Almalki, 2016; Mabila, 2017; Tsai, 2016). Applying the mixed methods approach requires additional time along with additional resources that the average doctoral-level student can provide at the time of research (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2016). The mixed methods approach is more useful to the researcher when the measured results of the study support the inquiry method (Archibald, 2015; Fetters, 2016; Patton, 2015). The mixed methods approach was a non-selection because this research is an exploratory study and the mixing of the data would conflict with the research design and the research question. Lastly, the research question for this qualitative study was not appropriate to the incorporation of mixed methodology into this study of small business. The mixed methods approach allows for the exploration of both narrative and quantifiable standpoints by combining both methods in the interpretation of data; however, the qualitative approach serves this research project the best.

Based on the research question and the information needed from the participants' experiences, the strategies used by SBLs to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts aligned more with the qualitative method than the quantitative method. The qualitative method of research is to understand the phenomena through direct perception meaning to understand how various elements of the environmental impact the phenomena (Murshed & Zhang, 2016). Placing a focus on the lived experiences of the participants is one of the primary criteria used for the selection of the qualitative method over the quantitative and mixed method research methods (van de Berg & Struwig, 2017). Both the quantitative method and the mixed methods approaches are valuable methods; however, the qualitative method may assist better in the answering of the research question.

Research Design

The multiple case study was the design selected for this research study with several other designs coming into consideration; however, the multiple case study was the most appropriate for the research question about small business subcontracting. The case study is a constant choice of business researchers and other fields of study since the onset of the 20th century (Çakmak & Akgün, 2018; Gammelgaard, 2017). The case study is appropriate for exploring a study by utilizing multiple data sources to provide detailed accounts of the real-life phenomena at the heart of the investigation (Morgan, Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay, & Gray, 2017; Yin, 2016). Researchers may use the case study to support their efforts for both single case, and multiple case studies for their research project (Guetterman, 2015). Yin (2016) suggested that the case study has a foundation,

which has a design to allow for the study of the participants in their normal environment. Additionally, case study design also allows for in-depth research of real-life phenomena and allows for empirical research for a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Çakmak, & Akgün, 2018; Herron & Quinn, 2016).

The ethnography design involves longer-term research, is cultural group-centric and involves immersion of the researcher (Córdoba-Pachón & Loureiro-Koechlin, 2015; Haradhan, 2018). Researchers to analyze and gain a rich and detailed description of the culture of the studied group use the ethnography design (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Ethnographic researchers go into the field and stay with the studied group for an extended period, normally for several years (Lichterman, 2017; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Ethnography was not the best choice for this study because of the extended period needed to conclude the data gathering, as well as the research question for this study not requiring immersion.

Researchers use the narrative design by having the participants reflect on their past by telling their stories (Anderson, 2017). Lichterman (2017) asserted one negative aspect of this design is that the participants may elaborate on their experiences, which in turn may flaw the data. Haradhan (2018) and O' Toole (2018) opined that the information received from the participants in the narrative design may not always have a chance for verification, which is an issue regarding reliability and validity. First, the narrative design was a nonselection because of the production of nonobjective data and the reliance on interviewees' first-person stories of past events. Secondly, the narrative design has a foundation based solely on the reliance on the interviewee's first-person perspective of

past events, which may lead to a high probability of not obtaining objective material (Guetterman, 2015; McAlpine, 2016; Ngozwana, 2018). For research such as this study, which requires obtaining an in-depth analysis involving a phenomenon or group, the case study is the best design to identify and explore strategies used by SBLs to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The two designs mentioned above do not allow the greatest opportunity to answer the question of strategies used by leaders to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts.

The reaching of data saturation in qualitative studies occurs when the collection of additional data and coding yields no additional discovery, and further data gathering is not necessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Once I determined that the data from the participants was repetitive, and fewer or no questions needed addressing, was the point of data saturation was near identification. The participants consisted of five SBLs who had obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts. Based on the number of small businesses in the governmental support sector in the mid-Atlantic region authorized to do business as a subcontractor on prime government contracts, data from five participants served as a sufficient number to ensure data saturation. The point of data saturation comes from the experience and judgment of the researcher (Tran et al., 2017). Instead of using additional participants in trying to reach data saturation, collecting additional information throughout member checking from the five SBLs who agreed to be a part of this study aided in achieving data saturation. In qualitative research, relying on a high number of participants is not necessary for data saturation due to the researcher focusing on the opinions and the perspectives of the participants (Hancock et al., 2016). Data

collection continued until the strategies used by the five SBLs in the governmental support sector become clearer using triangulation and data saturation.

Population and Sampling

For this particular study, the target sample and population were five SBLs from five organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and have used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. The small businesses within the study have met the qualifications of a small business as established by the U.S. government and as defined by the Federal Acquisition Regulation. The goal was to receive five acceptances of SBLs in the mid-Atlantic region that have received subcontracts on prime government contracts. The majority of the SBLs have obtained at least three subcontracts and have at least 10 years of experience subcontracting on prime government contracts.

Purposive sampling was the sampling method best suited to assist in answering the research question. Purposive sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique used in qualitative studies (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, researchers use when the characteristics of the participants are familiar (Etikan et al., 2016). The researcher using purposeful sampling may achieve the engagement of the appropriate participants that are willing to share their information and experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015).

When using the qualitative method, sample sized should consist of a large of enough sample that allows the researcher to obtain a sufficient amount of data necessary to answer the research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Yin (2016) suggested that small

sample sizes for a research study are suitable for qualitative research is appropriate enough to address the research question and to describe the phenomenon of the study. Marshall et al. (2013) suggested that there are four components in determining the proper sample size while using the qualitative method. First, what is it the researcher needs to know to answer the research question? Secondly, regarding the study, what is at stake? Thirdly, what information is credible? Lastly, what does the researcher consider as useful in answering the research question of the study? The reaching of data saturation in qualitative studies occurs when the collection of additional data and coding yields no additional discovery, and further data gathering is not necessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Once the data from the participants became repetitive and fewer, new questions need addressing was the point data saturation is near completion. The participants consisted of five SBLs that have obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts. Based on the number of small businesses in the financial sector in the mid-Atlantic region authorized to do business as a subcontractor on prime government contracts, five participants was believed enough to ensure data saturation. The point of data saturation comes from the experience and judgment of the researcher (Tran et al., 2017). Instead of using additional participants in trying to reach data saturation, collecting additional information throughout member checking from the five SBLs who agreed to be a part of this study aided in achieving data saturation. In qualitative research, relying on a high number of participants is not necessary for data saturation due to the researcher focusing on the opinions and the perspectives of the participants (Hancock et al., 2016). Data collection continued until the strategies used by the five SBLs in the governmental support sector

became clearer to me when the collection of additional data and coding yielded no additional discovery.

Semistructured interviews that include open-ended questions along with an accompanying script served as the primary means of data collection. Utilizing a semistructured interview process along with open-ended question are both respectable and acceptable vehicles for obtaining data for a multiple case study research (Guetterman, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Yin, 2016). The selection of the interview setting consisted of locations behind closed doors, away from everyone, and free from any form of distractions. The selection of the interview locations accommodated the comfort level of the participants. I scheduled the interviews on Mondays through Sundays between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time at a time and location that works best for the participant. The interview environment is important, and the setting should allow for open communicate (Pacho, 2015). The interview setting can also assist with instilling trust and comfort with the participant and at the same time allowing them to reflect on experiences that affected their business moves regarding obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts (Dikko, 2016).

Ethical Research

The rights of those selected to participate in this small business study coincided with the rules and standards set forth by the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB). Blackwood et al. (2015) opined that research consent from the participants of the study is a critical component before the start of the research. The Walden IRB approval number was 01-22-19-0728231. All of the SBLs received the consent form in enough time for

them to review it and ask for clarifications before asking them to sign the forms. The information contained in the consent form included the purpose of the research, why the selection to participate in this study, the study is on a volunteer basis, the required time for the interviews, and the fact each leader could stop or decline to participate at any time in the process. I provided written assurance to all of the participants of this study that stopping or declining the interview did not interfere with any established relationships. Withdrawing from the study via email or phone was an acceptable method for withdrawing from the study. There were no incentives, money, favors, or any other type of benefits offered by the researcher or the participants.

During the interview process and throughout the entire research process, the practice of maintaining the highest ethical standards remained a constant. To maintain the participant's privacy, the use of ethical research procedures during the data collection process as discussed by Cascio and Racine (2018) and Ngozwana (2018) remained a constant throughout this portion of the research study. The interviews occurred at a pre-selected location and time convenient for each of the participants as discussed by Rosenthal (2016).

Approval for participation in this study from each of the five participants was mandatory before the start of the data collection process, which consisted of interviewing the five participants. Lancaster (2017) reflected that gaining access to participants for a research project is daunting at times. The participants were the only people scheduled to appear during the five separate interview sessions. There were some risks associated with research. Wallace and Sheldon (2015) noted there are some risks such as personal worth

devaluation and damage to networks and relationships. Wolf et al. (2015) opined that data collection might place participants at risk of disclosure and researchers must take the necessary steps to minimize the risk. Lancaster (2017) noted that one of the key principles in research studies consists of confidentiality and the protection of the participants. Researchers have now used data protection regimes to aid in the protection of the participants and their rights (Bailey & Bailey, 2017; Williams & Pigeot, 2017). The participants' company names and their locations remained unidentified throughout the study and any disclosure of either association within this study did not receive, and this served as a measure of protection against risks during this study. The participant's names and the names of their organizations did not appear in this scholarly as a form of confidentiality to secure and maintain privacy. A different sequential identification replaced the participant's names as well as the company names assigned through the study as Company 1, Company 2, Company 3, Company 4, and Company 5.

To protect participant confidentiality, all written data obtained from the participants remained secured in a safe and shred after 5 years. Walden University (2016) policy stated that students must maintain all raw data to include questionnaire results as well as interview tapes for no less than 5 years. Protection of the individual during the entire research process is critical (Bailey & Bailey, 2017; Oye, Sorensen, & Glasdam, 2016). The potential benefits assessed against the risks and burdens are a determining factor if the participants are protected (Oye et al., 2016; Williams & Pigeot, 2017). The data obtained through the data collection process remained housed in an electronically

secured, password protected external hard drive and placed in a separate safe from the written data. The electronic data will remain stored for 5 years and then deleted.

Data Collection Instruments

I served as the primary data collection instrument for this research study on strategies government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. To further gather data for this research study, I obtained data from two sources and those being semistructured interviews and document reviews. I obtained documents verifying these SBLs have authorization to work for the government through the SBA and SAM websites. Additionally, the SBLs provided a copy of their business document certifying that they have a current subcontract or a business document verifying they previously were able to obtain a subcontract on a prime government contract. Yin (2016) reflected that document reviews and semistructured interviews are primary tools used for qualitative research. Yazan (2015) reflected that the researcher by collecting the data and recording the data creates a record for the study. Yin also suggested that records, documents, direct observations, answers to the interview question, participant observation, and artifacts are six types of data used in qualitative research studies.

The proper use of an interview protocol is important in the research process. In following the interview protocol, during the semistructured interview, a determination of the interview process came to fruition by answering additional follow-up questions to the original seven. Additionally, the accompanying questions aided in satisfying the research question. In addition to the semistructured interview, document review of the business'

documents, served as additional sources of information in maintaining the interview protocol. The process of using the data collection method of the semistructured interview is to gain an understanding of the participant's experiences (Galvin, 2015; Vaughn & Turner, 2016). A challenge during interviews is to maintain a bias-free relationship with the participants (Derous, Buijsrogge, Roulin, & Duyck, 2016).

By following the interview protocol (see Appendix), I collected the data using semistructured interviews with open-ended interview questions along with a discussion script. Baškarada (2014) and Hyett, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift (2014) reflected that interview protocols are routine in business-oriented case studies. The interview protocol located in the Appendix consists of eight open-ended interview questions that assisted in obtaining data from the semistructured interview. The participants received the interview questions within the week in which the interview convened. Each participant and I agreed upon a place, date, and time that were most convenient to each of the SBLs. Additionally, the place agreed upon by the small business leader had enough privacy so that the small business leader and I were the only two in the room during the interview session for two reasons. First, both recording devices recorded the questions as well as the responses. Second, as another level in maintaining privacy, having only the small business leader and I in the room increased the level of privacy during the interview session.

Reliability and validity are two important aspects of a sound research study on strategies government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. To enhance the reliability and validity, as the primary data collector, I relied upon the accurate collection of data through the semistructured

interviews, in addition to the collection and the interpretation of document data.

Therefore, I put into practice the method known as member checking. Member checking is a method used to enhance the reliability and validity of data collecting (Harvey, 2015; Livari, 2018). By incorporating member checking, researchers can help ensure the proper capturing of the participant's answers to the research question (Madill & Sullivan, 2017).

I performed member checking in several ways. After the interview was complete, there was a review of both the interview questions, as well as their responses, to ensure that how the SBLs responded was captured by both recording devices, as well as what was written down as notes. In addition, after completion of the interview, a detailed listening to the recorded interview session ensued, and then a comparison of the written interview notes occurred to ensure the small business leader's responses are as they answered. After the interview was over, reviewing and interpreting the transcription of the interview commenced. The last phases of member checking consisted of two steps. First, the SBLs received a readable copy of the synthesized responses for all of the questions asked during the interview. Secondly, each small business leader received a phone call after they receive a copy of the synthesized responses to determine the correctness of the written responses. Lastly, member checking ended once there was a determination there was no disclosure of any new information from the small business leader (Livari, 2018).

Data Collection Technique

For this qualitative study, data came from participant interviews and document review. Document reviews were essential in this case study because it allows the

researcher to look at relevant information from a historical perspective (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). A researcher using documents reviews as a part of their data collection method has the ability to examine and then interpret the data to gain an understanding and meaning on how the data relates to answering the research question (Harding, 2018). The data received from the interviews consisted of face-to-face semistructured interviews, which took place depending on the participant's schedule and meeting restrictions. Adhering to the interview protocol (see Appendix), SBLs received and signed an informed consent form. After the participant's meet the eligibility requirements and after receiving the signed consent form by mail, in-person, or email, follow-up contact occurred to set the time and place of the interview. Follow-up contact is a procedure that assists in the participants feeling more informed and prepared about the interview process (Kallio et al., 2016).

With many data collection techniques, there are advantages as well as disadvantages. Dikko (2016) reflected that an advantage of using semistructured interviews for data collection lies in the participant expressing authentic knowledge on the research question, perceptions, understandings, and expertise to the interviewer that may then ask for additional information as well as clarification on the subject matter. Yin (2016) reflected that a disadvantage with interviews is that the participant may have poor recall and articulation of experiences may appear poor. Kallio et al. (2016) opined that interviews might involve an additional time when compared to some other data collection methods and that interviews can create voluminous amounts of data that requires an overwhelming and time-consuming transcription process.

Pacho (2015) noted that one advantage of document review is that it is an inexpensive source in which to obtain background information. Pacho also noted that there are also disadvantages to document reviews involving the case study design. Berrang-Ford, Pearce, and Ford (2015) opined that a disadvantage may arise from documentation being outdated and some documents not having any importance to the study. Additionally, some form of bias may arise from the document selection process including the lack of access to some of the small business leader's documents (Michaud, 2017).

Member checking is an important tool in this study on strategies government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The integration of the concept of member checking into the research study can serve as a method to enhance the reliability and validity of data collecting (Livari, 2018). The SBLs participated in member checking by having the participants review and analyze the data interpretation. Participating in member checking is one method used to increase the trustworthiness of the research process used in studies (Kornbluh, 2015). After the interview was complete, there was a review of both the interview questions, as well as their responses, to ensure that how the SBLs responded was captured by both recording devices, as well as what was written down as notes. Also, after completion of the interview, a detailed listening to the recorded interview session ensued, and then a comparison of the written interview notes occurred to ensure the small business leader's responses are as they answered. The last phases of member checking consisted of two steps. First, the small business leader received a readable copy of the synthesized

responses for all of the questions asked during the interview. Secondly, each small business leader received a phone call after they received a copy of the synthesized responses to determine the correctness of the written responses. Lastly, member checking ended once there was a determination there was no disclosure of any new information from the small business leader. With member checking, the creation of a new transcript arose which then would label the previous transcript void and destroyed.

Data Organization Technique

The data collected for this research existed on several software platforms such as NVivo QSR 12, Excel, Access, and Word to organize and manage the data collected for this study as well as the interview transcripts obtained for this scholarly work on small business strategies. Ensuring that each piece of data receives proper cataloging by relevance to the study and by date along with any supporting peer-reviewed references, government websites, or seminal works assisted in continuing the process of data management occurred throughout this research process. The plan was to have the data organized into manageable sections that I can easily access and analyze. The process of placing data into manageable areas allows researchers to break down, analyze, rebuild, and then reflect on the data to understand the realities of the said data (Yazan, 2015).

The use of reflective journals and research logs served as tools to use to review data and information obtained throughout this research process. Reflective journals are a chronological record of events and experiences of both the research and the participants (Dyment & O'Connell, 2014; Majid, 2016). Anney (2014) remarked that researchers using the case study design recommend reflective journaling. Both reflective journaling

and research logs started at the beginning of this research study into a study on strategies government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. Both of these documents remain housed as electronic files and received an update once any additional information comes to fruition such as additional references and business documents that need review, as well as the interview transcripts.

Adding to the data organization technique is to make use of Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, NVivo QSR 12, and two Samsung recording devices to enable the organization of data. The plan was to house the files from the study into several databases from the software mentioned above and cataloged/labeled according to the source, scholarly work theme and the date of discovery. Additionally, along with computer-assisted analysis programs such as NVivo QSR12 and Excel allowed for data that well organized to transfer from one program to another as necessary. Creating a database allows the researcher to maintain an audit trail, which receives, numerous recommendations by experts in research (Yazan, 2015).

By researchers making use of semistructured interviews, established is a minimum level of structure in research (Yazan, 2015). There is data obtained from observations during the interview. Using technology such as recording devices along with verbatim transcription may reduce bias related to the efforts of the data collection process. A recorder used to capture the participant's responses and in-depth note taking occurred which lead to the creation of the reflective journal that experts in the field recommend (Anney, 2014).

The notes taken during the interview were transferred into the databases mentioned earlier. Direct observation is a tool often used by researchers using the qualitative method (Wildemuth, 2016). The participants of this study received direct observation during the interview with a set time, set date, and set location for each of the three businesses. Direct observation during the interview allows the researcher to direct the analysis as well as obtaining cognitive data (Yin, 2018).

An electronic password protected file contained all five SBLs' organization information to include reflective journals and research journals used to answer the research questions. It is important to store and protect data from the research study in a password-protected computer and for the data to remain secure for 5 years (Tammi, Saastamoinen, & Reijonen, 2014). Additionally, after using NVivo and verbatim transcriptions to transcribe the interviews, I placed them in a password-protected file along with all of the other data collected for this study. Confidentiality along with anonymity are challenging in many respects in qualitative research; however, they are two components of research that protects the privacy of the subjects that agreed to participate in the said study (Grossoehme, 2014; Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015). In the files, the organizations consisted of the small businesses listed by a fictitious name as Company 1, Company 2, Company 3, Company 4, and Company 5. The files gave me the ability to observe, study, and read the data. Microsoft Works and Microsoft Excel have options to label data, store, and set themes for the data collected pre and post-interviews.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data occurred through within the case study analysis and the cross-case comparisons using the methodological triangulation method. Several noted researchers support the use of methodological triangulation in qualitative research studies (Anney, 2014; Baškarada, 2014; Hyett et al., 2014). Baškarada (2014) and Yazan (2015) reflected that methodological triangulation may strengthen both the findings and the conclusions and may yield more in-depth results, which could lead to a better understanding of the phenomena for the researcher and the participants. Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, and Gonzalez (2018) noted that researchers use methodological triangulation as a method of enhancing the credibility and reliability of the research study more than one source of data used to investigate a phenomenon.

Yazan (2015) reflected that the logical and sequential process for the data analysis consists of first of reading over the interview transcripts and notes taken during the interview several times along with reviewing relevant documents obtained. Through this research process to formulate ideas about the various categories, coding, and correlations with the data as a foundation for theme creation. The process above served as the basis for the data analysis for this research study on small business strategies. Next, Guetterman (2015) opined that cross-case analysis and synthesis applies to certain case studies that involve data collection of more than one case and involves the coding of the data after the first data review. Baškarada (2014) noted regarding the qualitative data analysis process, how critically important descriptive, topic, and analytical coding to the creation of themes. The identification of general topics was the reason for the use of

descriptive coding. Lastly, the use of analytical coding assisted in the arrangement of data in an abstract form. I applied descriptive, topic, and analytical coding to this qualitative multiple case study on the successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable

The plan was to use the QSR NVivo 12 and Excel as the primary tools for coding. QSR International (2015) and Houghton et al. (2017) noted that NVivo 12 allows the researcher to code data sources in a manner that references data that may have similar topics of interest. The plan was to use NVivo to assist in the creation of nodes. One of the primary benefits of NVivo 12 QSR is the option for auto-coding as well as the query-based coding assisted in moving through vast amounts of data more efficiently. QSR International also noted that NVivo 12 QSR has an application to create reports and extracts along with the creation of visualizations that correlate patterns of the data to set the foundation for the creation of themes. Helping to establish nodes, themes, and sub-themes of the data used throughout this study appeared easier using this software. The interview protocol included the use of a face-to-face semistructured interview and member checking. The questions were open-ended about how the small businesses located in the mid-Atlantic region were able to obtain subcontracts on prime contracts to remain sustainable. The data obtained before the research, the interview questions, along with the document review served as the basis for the methodological triangulation, which may result in the mitigation of bias along with increasing the legitimacy and the credibility research studies. To enhance the rigor of this study, I received authorizations

from all five participants and crafted a plan to support the execution of the data collection become a part of the execution plan.

Olson, McAllister, Grinnell, Gehrke Walters, and Appunn, (2016) and Glaser and Strauss (2017) made a note of a process called the constant comparative method regarding data analysis. The process is the discovery of various patterns in the words of several participants with critical attention to the possibility of differences in the interpretations or between the reports of the participants in the case study. Regarding the constant comparative method, Yazan (2015) reflected that the main tool used for data analysis when using the qualitative method is comparisons and applied with the intent of recognizing and then identifying constructs that served as a basis for the creation of themes. Guetterman (2015) opined that the primary goal of data analysis using the qualitative method is to identify both conceptual differences and similarities of the data to expose and reveal patterns and processes that may have the ability for the researcher to group into major themes.

Identifying key themes remained the focus regarding data analysis to include the various methods of coding mentioned previously. One point of note regarding key themes was to look at the prior literature in addition to the newer studies published after the proposal approval and link those to the key themes established by using both NVivo, Excel and the conceptual framework of this study, which is the RBV. Grant and Osanloo (2015) conveyed in their work that considering both the findings along with the conceptual framework in addition to prior literature might lead to the addition and inclusion of important context; interpretation using the lens of the conceptual-theoretical

framework may contribute to the purposefulness of the findings along with their conclusions.

Reliability and Validity

Several different approaches assisted in validating this study, as a means to support the reliability and validity of this scholarly work. Using the qualitative method, member checking, methodological triangulation, transferability, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and data saturation ensured the reliability and validity of this research on small business subcontracting. There are several aspects of trustworthiness included in the following validity and reliability subsections.

Reliability

Dependability in research ties to the trustworthiness of the research due to the establishment of research findings as repeatable, defensible, dependable, and consistent (Flake, Pek, & Hehman, 2017; Pierre, 2017). To increase the likelihood of similar works with similar contexts arriving at a similar finding, triangulation, audit trail, and peer scrutiny supported this research throughout this study. A thorough tracking of the decisions, research steps, and activities is the basis of an audit trail (Yazan, 2015).

I performed member checking in several ways. The integration of the concept of member checking into the research study can serve as a method to enhance the reliability and validity of data collecting (Livari, 2018). Participating in member checking is one method used to increase the trustworthiness of the research process used in studies (Kornbluh, 2015). After the interview was complete, there was a review of both the interview questions, as well as their responses, to ensure how the SBLs respond to the

interview questions are captured by both recording devices, as well as what was written down as notes. Also, after completion of the interview, a detailed listening to the recorded interview session ensued, and then a comparison of the written interview notes occurred to ensure the small business leader's responses are as they answered. In addition, after the interview is over, reviewing and interpreting the transcription of the interview commenced. The last phases of member checking consisted of two steps. First, the small business leader received a readable copy of the synthesized responses for all of the questions asked during the interview. Secondly, each small business leader received a phone call after they receive a copy of the synthesized responses to determine the correctness of the written responses. Lastly, member checking ended once there is a determination there is no disclosure of any new information from the small business leader.

Replication of the study is not a necessity in this research on successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. Morse (2015) opined that the use of triangulation, peer scrutiny along with an audit trail might improve upon future studies that are similar in context and similar conditions finding similar results. An audit trail also includes the organization of various types of data as well as the safekeeping of data for a specific period that may allow others the ability to verify the findings by crosschecking (Flake et al., 2017; Yazan, 2015). In the creation of an audit trail, several actions must happen. First, the recording of data, organization along with safekeeping of information about this study for at least 5 years will occur. Lastly, allowing others interested in this study the ability to crosscheck

and verification of the findings based on the data, including all persons involved in the peer-scrutiny undertaking.

Validity

In qualitative research, one objective is foremost in the analysis. Validation consists of the process of data verification, analysis, and interpretation to assist the researcher in establishing credibility along with authenticity (Andersen, Dubois, & Lind, 2018). The researcher must establish a perspective of the participants that is believable while ensuring the intended purposes of the research are emblematic of the experiences of the participants (Elo et al., 2014; Gibson, 2017; Tzafrir, Enosh, & Gur, 2015).

Validation consists of the process of data verification, analysis, and interpretation to assist the researcher in establishing credibility along with authenticity (Andersen et al., 2018).

Credibility. Credibility in research is another important component within the research process. Kornbluh (2015) noted that member checking addresses the issues associated with credibility. Credibility refers to the confidence levels of the reader of the work (Anney, 2014). Member checking is a form to use to receive feedback but more importantly validate the answers provided (Bergh, Sharp, Aguinis, & Li, 2017; Birt et al., 2016). Validation of the responses by the small business leader is another important role of member checking in research studies (Bergh et al., 2017). After the interview was complete, there was a review of both the interview questions, as well as their responses, to ensure that how the SBLs responded was captured by both recording devices, as well as what was written down as notes. Also, after completion of the interview, a detailed

listening to the recorded interview session ensued, and then a comparison of the written interview notes occurred to ensure the small business leader's responses are as they answered. After the interview was over, reviewing and interpreting the transcription of the interview commenced. Anney (2014) surmised that member checking serves the purpose of quality enhancements, especially after the researcher's use of recorded data goes through a transcription process that produces textual data. The last two phases of member checking consisted of two steps. First, the small business leader received a readable copy of the synthesized responses for all of the questions asked during the interview. Secondly, each small business leader received a phone call after they receive a copy of the synthesized responses to determine the correctness of the written responses. Member checking ended once there was a determination there was no disclosure of any new information from the small business leader. Lastly, with member checking, there existed a likelihood that an additional transcript would result from this process, which was added to the overall accumulation of data for analysis.

Transferability. Replication of the research by other researchers is important in the research process. Morse (2015) noted that transferability pertains to how the results of a researcher's study may transfer to other contexts; this concept has some familiarity with the use of generalizability in the results of quantitative studies. Anney (2014) opined that the appropriateness of transferability regarding qualitative research is incumbent on the judgment of the person reading the study. Morse also reflected that an in-depth and thick description about the method, design, sample, and population some experts believe might increase the likelihood that other readers of the study having the ability to make well-

informed judgments about the transferability. The dependability and transferability are high if a different researcher can use the decision trail of the initial researcher (Elo et al., 2014). By providing the reader with in-depth descriptions along with the use of purposeful sampling, the researcher may increase the likelihood of readers appropriately judging the study. The sampling methods used throughout this multiple case qualitative research study involving in-depth descriptions and information about participant selection; therefore, the reader may have the ability to make prudent judgments about the appropriateness of the transferability as it pertains to the study.

Confirmability. Anney (2014) along with Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that the meaning of confirmability is that other researchers can support or confirm the findings of the study. Cope (2014) noted that researchers could describe in detail how the conclusions came to fruition as well as theme emergence. In following the steps identified by Cope, I documented in detail both the logical references in addition to the interpretations used throughout the study with the study making sense to those who investigated the study on strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. Additionally, making sure all of the research decisions received careful documentation was of critical importance to this study. A research journal has every decision made during this research process with the goal of providing an adequate amount of detail so that future researchers may understand why certain decisions within this study made sense to make.

Data saturation. Obtaining data saturation of is a critical component of the research methods used to ensure the research study includes an adequate amount quality

data (Constantinou, Georgiou, & Perdikogianni, 2017; Tran et al., 2017). The reaching of data saturation in qualitative studies occurs when the collection of additional data and coding yields no additional discovery, and further data gathering is not necessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The participants consisted of SBLs that have obtained subcontracts on prime government contracts. The point of data saturation comes from the experience and judgment of the researcher (Tran et al., 2017). Hancock et al. (2016) noted that instead of using additional participants in trying to reach data saturation, collecting additional information throughout member checking from the five SBLs who have agreed to be a part of this study would aid in achieving data saturation. In qualitative research, relying on a high number of participants is not necessary for data saturation due to the researcher focusing on the opinions and the perspectives of the participants (Hancock et al., 2016). Lastly, as stated earlier, once the data from the participants became repetitive and fewer and no new questions need addressing was the point data saturation is near completion.

Summary and Transition

Section 2 consisted of areas that related to the research on exploring SBLs' strategies for obtaining United States government subcontracts. In addressing the information within Section 2, the information was critical in understanding the roles along with the decision-making process of this qualitative, multiple case study on successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. For this research study, the

qualitative method multiple case design served as the best method and design to use in attempting to answer the research question.

For this particular study, the target sample and population were five SBLs from five organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and have used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. The small businesses within the study met the qualifications of a small business as established by the U.S. government and as defined by the Federal Acquisition Regulation. Also, I obtained data from the small business owners by using two sources those being semistructured interviews and document reviews.

Dependability in research ties to the reliability and consistency of the findings of the research as well as the ability of different researchers to follow what was done and to assess the research process (Flake et al., 2017; Pierre, 2017). Morse (2015) opined that the use of triangulation, peer scrutiny along with an audit trail might improve upon future studies that are similar in context and similar conditions finding similar results. Lastly, obtaining data saturation is a critical component of the research methods used to ensure the research study includes an adequate amount quality data (Constantinou et al., 2017; Tran et al., 2017).

Section 3 includes the findings from the data obtained throughout this research process on strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. Additionally, Section 3 includes the application of the results for professional practice. The conclusions of this qualitative

multiple case study along with the data used to formulate the conclusions may lead to social change which then may lead to expert and peer-reviewed recommendations and future research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The population for this study consisted of five mid-Atlantic SBLs from five organizations in the governmental support sector verified to conduct business with the U.S. government and who used various strategies to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. Section 3 encompasses the particulars of the sample along with the data analysis that eventually formed the thematic findings of this study on small business subcontracting. The major themes that relate to strategy identification were experience, education, and networking. Later in Section 3, I provide explanations for some the minor themes associated with this study.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question was: What strategies do some governmental sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable? The SBLs were from five separate government support businesses in the mid-Atlantic region. All of the SBLs had obtained one or more subcontract of a prime government contract at the time of participant recruitment and data collection. As a measure to ensure confidentiality, the organizations consisted of the small businesses listed by fictitious names: Company 1 (C1), Company 2 (C2), Company 3 (C3), Company 4 (C4), and Company 5 (C5). C1 was the owner of a business consulting firm. C2 was the owner of an IT business. C3 was the owner of an enterprise resource planning (ERP) governmental

support business. C4 was also the owner of an ERP governmental support business. C5 was the owner of a cost-estimating business.

The major findings of this study along with the three themes of experience, education, and networking used by the SBLs to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts corresponded with the conceptual framework of this study, the RBV. The data obtained during document reviews and interviews revealed a correlation with the findings, the three themes, and the RBV. Evidence from the data revealed that all of the SBLs made use of their resources of experience, education, and networking in strategizing a plan to obtain subcontracts. The following sections contain the three major themes and their association with the conceptual framework of this study as well as existing literature.

I identified the three themes associated with this study on strategies some SBLs use to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable. The three themes were identified using NVivo 12 software. After coding my transcripts, the NVivo 12 software linked the responses of all of the answers that correlated, called coding stripes. Table 4 represents the nodes from these various colored coding stripes. In Table 4, I included the major factors associated with the responses from the SBLs to (a) identify the factors linked to SBLs and (b) show the conceptual links that formed the foundation for both themes and subthemes.

Table 4

NVivo 12 Code Striping – Factors Determined by Data Analysis

Associate Prominent Factors NVivo 12 Stripings	SBLs' Correlation				
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
Competitive Rates	X	X			X
Affected by Government Shutdown	X	X	X	X	X
Capacity	X			X	X
Education					
Collegiate	X	X	X	X	X
Informal Learning	X	X	X	X	X
Experience					
Contractor Government Experience		X	X	X	X
Government Civil Experience	X				X
Military Affiliation				X	
Exposure					
Conferences and Symposiums	X				
Networking	X	X	X	X	X
First Subcontract	X				X
Networking					
Professional Networking		X	X		X
Strategic Alliance	X			X	X
Market Adaptation			X	X	X
Multiple Subcontracts		X	X	X	
SBA Rules Modification	X	X	X		X
SBA-Set Aside Provision Utilized					
8a		X			
Service-Disabled		X		X	
Women-Owned	X				X

Before the detailed explanation for each of the three major themes, a macro-level analysis provided me with a clearer understanding of how each theme related to multiple small business owners. There was a large amount of data obtained through the semistructured interviews and document reviews, due to the many factors associated with the success of each of the small business owners. As the lone researcher, I decided to include only those major factors identified and listed in the NVivo 12 code striping.

Theme 1: Using Experience as a Strategic Tool

The small business owners using experience as a resource for strategic purposes was the first prominent factor identified based on the data results from this study. The first major theme of this study pertained to how the participants leveraged their experience to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. Data from the documentation offered by the SBLs included past and current subcontracts in addition to company specific information obtained earlier through research on the following government and state websites: SBA, SAM, and Virginia SBDC. All of the SBLs acquired knowledge of the resources necessary to create a strategy to obtain subcontracts through their experiences. The data from the document review and the interviews were consistent in support of the importance of experience as a strategic tool in obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts.

All five of the SBLs who participated in this study had backgrounds that included some experience associated with the federal government. Business leaders apply the RBV theory to understand further how to create and maintain a competitive advantage by using their resources (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2016; Kor et al., 2016). All five participants were successful in obtaining contracts and attributed this success to their previous experience as a civil servant, military member, or federal contractor. For example, C1 had experience as a federal civil servant for a defense agency for 5 years and additional time as a federal contractor. C1 stated, "I spent about 5 years as a government employee working for government agencies." C2 and C3 had experience solely as federal contractors before becoming SBLs. C4 had experience in the Air Force. During

document review, C4 allowed me to review several documents such as Solicitation Synopsis and the SOW from previous subcontracts and listed these documents as factors in the continuing success in obtaining subcontracts. C4 noted that the awareness of such documentation was through their experience with the Air Force. C5 had experience as a federal civil servant and worked as a contractor on a prime government contract for 10 years. C5 also worked in private industry performing cost estimation functions. During the interview with C5, I was able to review documents from previous work with the government such as RFPs and POs used previously that C5 identified as factors used to start the small business and obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. C5 shared that it was through their previous experiences that they became aware of what documents were pertinent in obtaining subcontracts. C5 replied in referencing experience, “I was both a government employee and a contractor. As a contractor, I worked at both a well-known large business... and a small business.” As with the other SBLs interviewed for this study, varying levels of experience contributed to the strategies used to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable.

In referencing experience, human capital as a strategic tool ties into the experience used by the SBLs in their strategy to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. The SBLs all stated that experiences helped them to understand how human capital can aid in the overall success of strategy implementation. Dimov (2017) reflected that human capital along with the skills and the knowledge of the leader often set the tone for task completion. Research has shown that using human capital as a strategic human resource and in strategic planning may assist business leaders in

influencing efficiency and performance growth with their given industry (Collings, Wood, & Szamosi, 2018; Nieves & Quintana, 2018). Again, the use of resources within the organization by personnel within the organization correlates to the RBV conceptual framework of this study. Table 5 includes the results of the data from NVivo 12 that correlate to the first major theme of this study in which the SBLs applied experience as a factor in their overall strategy.

Table 5

Frequencies from NVivo 12 for Using Experience as a Strategic Tool

Major Theme	Node	Frequencies
Theme 1: Using Experience as a Strategic Tool	Experience	26
	Government	23
	Strategies	10
	Company	8
	Federal	10
	Contractor	16
	Military	6

Industry-specific experience. There are two subthemes associated with the major theme of the SBLs using their experience as a strategic tool, which are industry-specific experience and business experience. Industry-specific experience proved to be a critical tool used in all of the strategic planning of the SBLs. First, as stated throughout this study, making use of readily available resources to gain a competitive advantage is a core competency of the RBV conceptual framework. Also, creating a business that is similar to the background of previous occupations often leads to business success (Koster & Andersson, 2018). All five of the SBLs had an affiliation with the federal government in some respect. Based on data received from the semistructured interviews, all of the SBLs

held positions as federal contractors before the establishment of each of their businesses.

There were several points noted during the interviews and document reviews. All of the SBLs identified documents they reviewed and processed in previous jobs and earlier subcontracts as a tool that was necessary to understanding the nuances of the federal procurement system. The documents shown were primarily Solicitation Synopsis, SOW, RFP, QASP, and PO, which are all documents associated with the procurement of a federal contract to include subcontracts. All of the SBLs identified their experience in knowing what the documents were and how to fill them out proved vital in strategizing on how to obtain subcontracts. In addition to the documents and their importance to this study, there was also data obtained from the interviews.

Participant C1 identified an industry need in grant writings as well as needs in general business operations that were lacking within the federal government. Participant C2 identified a systemic weakness in the IT field, chose to become knowledgeable on the issue, and by doing this was able to serve the government as a specialist in this area. Participant C3 and C4 further defined their capabilities by establishing their organization as not only a business that has a foundation in government financial matters but also as an expert in ERP. Participant C4 added that experience from previous jobs in the performance of government procurement and accounting assisted in starting a small business as well as obtaining subcontracts. Participant C4 also stated that experience within the industry allowed them as a small business leader to gain insight on customer needs whether short term or long term, that some customers may require travel and sometimes the contract rate is not at market. Participant C4 stated in response to strategy

using experience stated, “By providing technical support for a Government Contractor Business Development team, I learned what tools and resources were needed to become more successful in winning contracts.” In answering the interview question regarding obstacles in strategy implementation, C4 responded, “My years of experience, education, and building strong relationships with my colleagues in the industry were key to my obtaining a government subcontract.” Based on the data obtained from the SBLs, experience of various sorts contributed to all of their strategies associated with obtaining subcontracts.

Experience with the government was also a factor the SBLs used in their strategic planning. C5 stated that, “Working as a contractor for 10 years allowed for inside knowledge which I then applied in the establishment of the small business.” Additionally, all of the SBLs indicated that to separate themselves from the competition they had to redefine their skill sets to create somewhat of a *niche* specialty to make their small business more diverse than what was currently in their respected industries. Niche refers to organizations concentrating on a specific market and group to provide their products and services (Bidmon & Knab, 2018). The competitive advantage of this concept is narrow and well defined to avoid competition with larger businesses in the same locality and industry. The documents presented for this case study by C5 they stated, “were integral” in their experience in understanding of what was necessary to become eligible for work within the federal government. As previously stated, experience in understanding documents such as Solicitation Synopsis, SOW, RFP, QASP, and the PO

served a positive point in developing a strategy to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts.

Additionally, C5's explanation of experience provided awareness of the functionalities between contracting and government experience. C5 stated,

As a contractor, I worked at both a well-known large business (SAIC) and a small business. It gave me an understanding of streamlining and consistency and checks and balances in the large business corporate structure. The SB structure showed me flexibility, but also where pitfalls are when you don't have enough oversight and no documented processes and procedures. My government experience gave me insight into both the procurement process and the actual technical aspects of the service I provide as a small business owner.

There were several items of note about education as a strategic factor. First, the SBLs found a niche within their given industry through various educational avenues. Secondly, education seemed critical in the awareness of small business leaders in understanding the difficulties and risks associated with the federal acquisition process as it pertains to subcontracting.

Business experience. The second subtheme associated with the first major theme of using their experience as a strategic tool is business experience. The SBLs used experience in their strategic planning to gain a competitive in obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts. Out of the five SBLs interviewed for this study, three had prior experience as SBLs at the time of the interviews. An important topic noticed during the data collection process included capabilities and market challenges. C1, C2, and C3

specifically adapted their business model and business plan to take advantage of federal government shortcomings and used these noted shortcomings to their advantage, which aided them all in obtaining subcontracts. During documents reviews, several of the small leaders allowed for the review of business plans that changed due to the plans not being successful in obtaining subcontracts. C1 stated, "Business plans tend to have several iterations before the leader obtaining a subcontract." In response to a member checking question about prior contracts and subcontracts, C4 responded, "Earlier in my career, I held commercial contracts providing Federal Contractor accounting and audit support services and held subcontracts supporting U.S. Air Force." C5 shared that their experience in business had a positive effect on their ability to stay current with the government's needs in their industry and field. C5 made note that an obstacle recently encountered was the closing of the government in early 2009 and what she did to prepare for the work stoppage. Business leaders with experience in their given industry are better in the detection and the ability to cope with changes in the market better than those leaders with no or limited experience (Pucci, Nosi, & Zanni, 2017).

As the interviews progressed and the documents reviews continued, there was a term that resonated that applied to all of the SBLs and that term was intellectual capital. Intellectual capital has two areas of prominence with this subtheme and the overall all three of the three emergent themes. The term refers to the leaders and employee's knowledge of the customer's wants and needs, the awareness and application of knowledge and abilities, and the application of creativity (Madhavaram & Hunt, 2017). The document reviews revealed that all of the SBLs had several iterations of all of the

forms needed to do conduct business with the U.S. government. The small business leader's experience in placing in writing on the proper form what their business had to offer the U.S. government was essential in strategizing on how to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. The association with the small business leader's knowledge is coordinated with the conceptual framework in that the owner's knowledge as a resource helped all of the leaders gain a competitive advantage thus the creation of subcontracts on prime government contracts. Experience served as a valuable tool for all of the SBLs in their strategic planning efforts.

Theme 2: Education as a Strategic Factor

The small business owners using education as a resource was the second prominent factor identified for use a strategic factor based on the data results from this study. The second major theme of this study included two subthemes that pertained to the SBLs utilizing their education as a strategic tool in obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts. Within this second major theme, two subthemes emerged which were university/college education and functional (industry specific) education. In general terms at the internal level, the SBLs listed education as one of the most important factors for the success of small business along with human capital and experience. All of the participants included their college education as part of the document review. The results of a study performed by Hunady, Orviska, and Pisar (2018) indicated that there is a relationship between the skills obtained through education and the success of operating a business both large and small.

The two subthemes have significance with their individual strategies for several reasons. First, all of the SBLs have at least a bachelor's degree, and some have obtained a master's degree. Also, of the five SBLs, four of them have a degree in a business-related field. Second, all of the SBLs also spoke of contract specific training through the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) that supports both federal and international entities through formal and online modules used for continuous learning (DAU, 2019). Lastly, all five of the SBLs stated the courses and information listed on the SBA websites and as well as the FAR website were instrumental in understanding the complexities of the federal acquisition process as it relates to subcontracting on prime government contracts. Based on the results of the data obtained from the SBLs, experience listed as one of the primary factors in the successful obtainment of subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable. Table 6 includes the results of the data from NVivo 12 that correlate to the second major theme of this study.

Table 6

Frequencies from NVivo 12 for Using Education as a Strategic Tool

Major Theme	Node	Frequencies
Theme 2: Education as a Strategic Tool	Education	25
	College	8
	University	12
	Knowledge	7
	Acquisition	12
	Contracting	10
	Financial	8

Collegiate learning. One fact in this study is that all of the SBLs have at least a bachelor's degree and some have obtained a master's degree and use this education in

their strategic planning efforts. Additionally, four of the five participant SBLs indicated that their bachelor's degree major was in a business-related field. Entrepreneurial education changes based on new approaches and perspectives due to technological advances and the learned experiences from business failures (Gonul & Litzky, 2018). Research has indicated that one reason for the failures in entrepreneurship startups is due to the non-updating of business education courses and methods that are not suited to meet the needs of the oft-changing business landscape of the 21st century (Dobson, Jacobs, & Dobson, 2017). The following paragraphs are indicators of the importance of formal education within the scope of obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts based on the data from the SBLs.

The SBLs perceived education as an asset in the obtainment of subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable by several of the SBLs. Research has indicated that some universities previously may not have adequately prepared their students on entrepreneurship but now have placed an emphasis in their curriculum to address the matter so that students could receive an education that prepares them for their future as entrepreneurs (Burch, Batchelor, Burch, & Heller, 2015; Clayton & Clopton, 2019). Based on the data from the SBLs, education seemed to be a foundation that they used to achieve their professional goals.

Company1, responding to education as a strategic resource, stated, "I have a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and an MBA with an emphasis in Procurement and Acquisition." C1 also stated that the degrees obtained matched the industry of their small business and that they served as a solid foundation in successfully

obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts. C1 saw a need within the federal government and took college courses that would eventually support their understanding of how the federal procurement system works and took that knowledge and then applied it to their small business.

C2 explained that their business in the IT field had a foundation based on what knowledge they received from their formal education and was an influencing factor in their ability to successfully operate a small business. When asked about their educational accomplishments, C3 replied, "My bachelor's degree is in business administration. In college, I did an internship, where I received an introduction to the challenges and rewards of running a small business from business development to training employees and completing projects." Also, in answering about the importance of education, C4 replied, "I would categorize my MBA in accounting degree as a factor in building substance in becoming a small business owner." In response to formal education C5 responded, "Yes, my master's is very specific and directly related to the services I provide in my small business." C5 also stated, "I obtained my Master's program in Cost Estimating and Analysis through Naval Postgraduate School, and it provided me a niche for becoming a small business owner, where I could compete because of the degree." The findings indicate that formal education received served catalyzed the foundation of knowledge that the small business owners used to start their business and obtain subcontracts. The knowledge used by the SBLs correlates to the conceptual framework of the RBV by using these resources to gain a competitive advantage. The RBV theory has maintained its status as one of the eminent management theories that allow a firm's

leadership to analyze their resources to achieve a competitive advantage (Jensen et al., 2016). Strategies appear similar between smaller firms and those listed as large firms (Carraresi et al., 2015). In the case of the small businesses within this study, the previous statement does hold true.

Functional learning. In addition to the formal education process, functional education assisted all of the small business owners with understanding how to maneuver through the federal acquisition process for their strategic advantage in obtaining subcontracts. All of the SBLs took the initiative to become self-taught on the fundamentals of both the establishment of the small business as well as the requirements needed for obtaining subcontracts. One concept between the SBLs became apparent during the interviews and document reviews. All of the SBLs showed documentation of courses taken that were federal procurement centric. Most of the courses taken by the SBLs were on the acquisition process and how to apply for the set-aside program. All five of the SBLs revealed their functional learning certifications as part of the document review process. The use of government websites related to procurement and federal acquisitions were the primary sources used by the small businesses to familiarize themselves with the various processes associated with subcontracting. Some of the U.S. government websites included the SBA, SAM, the Virginia SMDC, and Acquisition.gov to name a few. Research performed by Boyd, Royer, and Goto (2019) suggested that understanding knowledge related to a particular industry in which a business owner is contemplating investing resources can serve as a competitive advantage. Additionally, some business may apply the use of their human resources along with their human capital

gained through functional education to catalyze innovation (Rupietta & Backes-Gellner, 2019).

The SBA provided policies, procedures, rules, and regulations for those interested in becoming small business owners and established small business owners (SBA, 2017d). In addition to the SBA, DAU supports both federal and international entities through formal and online modules used for continuous learning (DAU, 2019). All of the SBLs made use of both the SBA and DAU to gain knowledge, process employment, and regulatory insights to use as resources to gain a competitive advantage, which relates to the conceptual framework of this study. To learn about subcontracting, C1 made use of the following organization websites and their instructional tools to gain the knowledge that leads to successfully obtaining subcontracts:

- Defense Logistics Agency Procurement Technical Assistance Centers
- SAM
- Small Business Administration
- National Contract Management Association

C2 responded to functional education by stating, “I read about the Procurement process by reviewing material online on several different websites. I also read the Fedbizops.gov and the Federal Procurement Data System - Next Generation websites.” C3 indicated that using several government websites about the federal procurement process was instrumental in setting a strong foundation in the intricacies of federal subcontracting. C4 stated that the following items came to their knowledge through functional education: (a) defining company business capabilities, (b) developing a

specialty and expertise, (c) obtain working experience for past performance requirements, (d) important to find a teaming partner that will enhance, (e) actively target solicitations 6 months to a year in advance, and (f) visit the agency's small business liaison. Much in the same fashion as the formal education used by the SBLs, there was just as much importance associated with functional education both in class, online, and information obtained through these government websites in helping in obtaining subcontracts. C5 indicated the following regarding functional education:

I took advantage of as much online training as possible from the Defense Acquisition University training offerings. Anything that did not require component sponsorship I took. Some of the courses were recommended cross-training within the Business - Cost Estimating career field in which I received Level III certification with courses taken through DAU.

Similar to the first theme of using their experience as a factor in obtaining subcontracts, the second theme of education also has a direct link to the RBV framework used as the centerpiece for this study. Business leaders apply the RBV theory to understand further how to create and maintain a competitive advantage by using their resources (Angulo Ruiz et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2016; Kor et al., 2016). All of the SBLs made use of their education as a positive factor in their strategic planning. Lastly, the SBLs based their success in the obtainment of subcontracts on prime government contracts on their education.

Theme 3: The Use of Networking as a Strategic Factor

The small business owners using networking as a strategic factor resource was the third and last prominent factor identified based on the data results from this study. The third theme associated with this study was using networking, as a strategic tool is business experience. Out of the five SBLs interviewed and that presented documents for review, all made use of networking to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable and create a competitive advantage. All of the SBLs shared some of their professional networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook to validate the importance of networking in the success of obtaining subcontracts. Within this major theme, two subthemes emerged from the data collected from all of the SBLs. The use of professional networks along with strategic alliances played major roles in the starting their small business but also obtaining subcontracts. Research for this study revealed that networking and strategic alliances are similar but not the same. The realization of this item came from document reviews and semistructured interviews. Based on the data from both sources, strategic alliances assisted the SBLs in learning the U.S. procurement system but more importantly how to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. Once again, the iterations of business plans and procurement-specific documents previously showed the progression of knowledge and ability when answering a government solicitation for work. The data from this study indicated that strategic alliances were used more to understand the inner working of business ownership, industry-specific information, as well as the requirements to obtain subcontracts.

Conversely, some of the SBLs used professional networking as rudimentary steps in understanding the federal procurement process to include the introductory steps in small business subcontracting. Huda et al. (2019) opined that business leaders use strategic alliances to become aware of possible competitive advantages in the industry as well as engaging in cooperative engagement as a means to enhance productivity. Networking is a relationship used by managers and business owners to become more knowledgeable in industry-specific and the impact of global changes to the industry, support, and other resources needed for competitive advantages and sustainment (Franco, 2018). Additionally, networking may decrease the likelihood of business failures by using other's experiences and knowledge to avoid the hazards associated with small business ownership (Anwar & Ali Shah, 2018).

In further investigation of this case study, there were needs by SBLs for both professional networking and strategic alliances. Data from the document reviews indicated that the new small business owners relied more on professional networking more so than those better established small businesses. The SBLs used these networks as a means to know what documents were pertinent to submitting their businesses for work with the U.S. government and more importantly how to fill them out properly. Additionally, some of the small business owners felt that using experienced persons within their network that are also SBLs assisted in avoiding some of the difficulties associated with paperwork and the federal government. The following two paragraphs will inform the reader how each of the SBLs effectively used professional networks and strategic alliances to gain a competitive advantage in securing subcontracts on prime

government contracts. Table 7 includes the results of the data from NVivo 12 that correlate to the third major theme of this study.

Table 7

Frequencies from NVivo 12 for Using Networking as a Strategic Tool

Major Theme	References	Frequencies
Theme 3: Using Networking as a Strategic Tool	Networking	25
	Organization	17
	Contracting	8
	Government	30
	Contractor	8
	Company	8

Professional networks. Several of the small business leader's data reflected a positive connection and outcome using professional networking in planning their strategy for obtaining subcontracts. In speaking about the importance of networks, C1 stated, "I attend networking events to meet and build potential relationships with key players in the government as well as the prime contracting industry." In responding to the use of assets, C1 replied, "I attended Government and industry conferences and workshops. I also became a member of several professional organizations." C1 made use of conferences and symposiums and networking as a means to gain exposure and stated this point during the interview session.

C2 reflected regarding the use of networking, "I also reached out and spoke in person and on the phone to people experienced with resources related to funding, small business, and procurement activities. C2 also noted, "There was one resource that I used, and that was personal and professional networks." In response to alternative options for

resources, C2 responded, “I would contact my government clients from my previous projects that I worked on as a contractor on a prime contract. I would also look at several job sites for contracting opportunities.” C2 is a new small business owner on the first subcontract on a prime government contract and used their professional networks in the same manner as most of the SBLs interviewed in this study.

C3 had a similar experience in using their professional networks. When answering question three regarding essential resources, C3 replied in the following manner:

The most essential resource in my effort to obtain subcontracts was my network. In my previous positions in the IT and FM industries, I worked with small business employees that worked for small business owners that have found success obtaining subcontracts in a similar niche workspace.”

C3 also noted that in answering question eight regarding additional information, “The majority of the leverage associated with operating as an independent contractor came from expertise and networking.” C3 is a small business leader that at the time of this interview was on their second subcontract on a prime government contract.

C4 also indicated the importance of networking, “Having a network of colleagues, associates, past performance customers is key to continued, uninterrupted contract opportunities.” C4 stated the importance of the affects not only professional networks but also strategic alliances, which precedes this subtheme. In one of the responses to networking, C4 replied, “It is important to build relationships through the various networks in the government space.” During the interview, C4 placed an essential level of

importance on networking and building strategic alliances to keep up with new industry technology and trends.

In answering the topic regarding strategies used to gain a competitive advantage, C5 replied, “I do, however, have a network of former co-workers that work out of Huntsville in aviation supporting the Army that I regularly meet with, in case something does come up that they can use any of my skillsets.” C5 also noted that having familiarity with the acquisition process can save a small business owner months in time and reduce the losses from not obtaining subcontracts. The document review revealed paperwork that showed how the SBLs used networking to identify their business as a need for the U.S government. Many of the SBLs made use of their professional networks to differentiate their business from what is already there for the U.S government to see. Part of the strategy used by the SBLs came from knowing their networks are well versed in federal procurement and were more than willing to assist. In answering the question regarding essential resources used in strategy implementation, C5 responded, “I used my network of small and large businesses that were willing to personally sponsor me, due to the level of trust they had in my ability from doing former work together.” Both C1 and C5 created self-promotion using both contracting networks and government networks assisted in the successful obtainment of subcontracts on prime government contracts to remain sustainable.

The use of professional networks is a resource used by all of the SBLs interviewed for this study. The document reviews and the semistructured interviews revealed two important factors in networking. First, there is no business if the paperwork

is not correct. Second, knowing people that have been where the small business owner has plans for going can save both time and money. The RBV is the conceptual framework for this study. The use of organizational resources in gaining a competitive advantage is the cornerstone of the RBV conceptual framework (Mwai, Namada, & Katuse, 2018).

Strategic alliance. Similar to the use of professional networks, several of the small business leader's data reflected a positive connection with strategic alliances and its use in obtaining a competitive advantage. Several of the SBLs used their strategic alliances in their plans to obtain subcontracts on prime contracts. Regarding the process for strategy identification, C1 replied,

I conducted market research to ensure that I chose the right client and teaming partner, and to identify subcontracting opportunities. I clearly defined my value proposition by formulating proposals that identify my ability to provide competitive pricing, a technical capability with added value, low risk potential, and adequate past performance.

In responding to question two regarding the formulation of strategy, C2 responded, "I made calls to former personnel on previous contracts that I came to know through my 14 years as a subcontractor on a prime contractor. I also reached out to determine the frequencies in which the new contracts came about for more opportunities." In responding to question seven regarding increasing the likelihood of obtaining subcontracts, C2 responded, "Along with talking to my network, I also learned what the requirements were, and as a result, I became certified as an 8A and small business company in SAM and the SBA." In the concept of influencing factors, C2

reflected that several ex-colleagues in the IT field started their own small business before the start of C2's small business.

Participant C3's responses referenced the use of strategic alliances. In responding to question four regarding alternatives options for resources, C3 responded, "If or when resources become scarce in the ERP contracting workforce, I will try to find similar work and government solicitations associated with Financial Management, budget formulation, or audit readiness." The associations referred to by C3 were those affiliations used in support of starting a small business as well as obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts. Participant C3 also used a strategic alliance in becoming a small business leader after a career as a federal contractor. In responding to overcoming obstacles, C3 responded, "I was able to overcome the obstacle with my employer and prospective client by striking a deal among all parties involved." C3 utilized their network as a strategic alliance to partner with an organization in which there was some familiarity.

Additionally, in response to overcoming obstacles, C3 responded, "The companies involved agreed to trade assets in exchange for my services, and this allowed me to finally get a chance to start my own company and transition into an independent contractor." In the case of C3, the alliances from both the government entity and the prime government contractor enabled C3 to remove efforts from a contractor to those of a small business owner. Most of the SBLs supporting this study stated that contracting companies are not inclined to lose an asset and then have that asset become part of the competition in the same industry. Based on the interviews, only personnel with a critical

skillset and a solid work history with the government and the contracting organization can transfer in the manner of C3.

In responding to strategies used in learning the government's procurement system in successfully obtaining subcontracts, C5 responded,

I obtained my first client as a small business owner through networking partnerships I built over the years, specifically with a small business and a large business I worked with in-depth during my Federal position. Both of these entities unofficially sponsored and mentored me through the process of setting up a limited liability corporation (LLC) and going through the process of bidding on their contract with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Technically, I did not have to hunt for this work by looking for a request for proposals that matched my offerings and cold bidding for this work. The leadership of the agency added me to the scope of the work previously established.

In responding to formulating a strategy to gain a competitive advantage, C5 responded, "My relationship with a FEMA executive gave them the time and leverage they needed to revamp their internal team while the FEMA program was on a pause and I was at the Department of Homeland Security." In answering interview question six, C5 noted that alliances created from previous jobs and positions assist in overcoming obstacles in obtaining subcontracts on prime government contracts.

The use of strategic alliances is a resource used by all of the SBLs interviewed for this study. As the framework for this study on exploring the successful strategies some

government support sector SBLs used to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable, the RBV supports this effort. Hoskisson, Gambeta, Green, and Li (2018) reflected that the business leader using the RBV makes use of resources in creating and sustaining a competitive advantage through value creation from organizational resources. All of the SBLs made use of the resources of professional networks and strategic alliances in gaining a competitive advantage.

Influencing Factors

In addition to the three emergent themes, there were several constant elements outside of the themes that require some attention due to their importance in the SBLs' decision-making processes. The leaders used all of the following influencers for strategic purposes, which resulted in obtaining subcontracts. The following three influencers played an integral part in the success of these SBLs in which three relate to the conceptual framework of this study. First, the U.S. government partially shut down from December 22, 2018, through January 25, 2019 (SBA, 2019). The furloughs concerned all of the SBLs that participated in this study. The issue that concerned the SBLs is two-fold. First, if the small businesses leaders paid their employees during the furlough, the government may not reimburse them when it reopens and, if they receive back payments, some business may experience significant delays (SBA, 2019). Second, if the employees do not receive pay, they may decide to opt out and find employment outside of those agencies affected by the shutdown.

Next, four of the five SBLs understood and took advantage of the government set-aside program. Table 4 reflects which SBLs applied this resource successfully in

attempting to obtain subcontracts on prime government contracts. Lastly, exposure was a common undertone amongst all of the SBLs using networking as a tool for exposure; however, C1 implicitly stated this usage. Two forms of exposure received recognition from the data. The first form consists of using conferences and symposiums to network and gain exposure and, this is the method selected by C1 has a listing as a women-owned business under the set-aside program. The second form is the utilization of networks for exposure purposes. There were several purposes expressed by a few of the SBLs for using networking. The two prominent reasons were for the individual as well as business exposure, which served as catalysts, and the driving force behind the use of networking for exposure based on the analysis of the data. The SBLs wanted to gain several insights based on exposure. First, to get their name and capabilities out to a broader audience. Second, to obtain knowledge of disruptive technologies and what industry changes were coming soon. Networking is a resource that supports the conceptual framework of this study, which is the RBV.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This qualitative multiple case study involved the triangulation method that consisted of multiple methods that evolved into three major themes. Table 7 includes a summary of both the themes and the subthemes of this qualitative multiple case study on exploring the successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. In the process of analyzing the data obtained from the five small businesses leaders, the use of experience became a common thread that united all of them and became the first theme of this study.

Document reviews revealed that the SBLs that were experienced in the federal procurement and understood contract documentation did not experience the drawbacks that others new to the federal procurement system may have faced. The most advantageous experience based on the data reflected two things. That federal contracting experience as well as serving as a civil servant placed the SBLs in a position to learn the intricacies of the federal procurement system.

The data from the document reviews and the semistructured interviews supported two forms of education as being essential and fundamental to the success in obtaining subcontracts. The two forms of education were formal education, which consists of college/university training, and then functional education learned through the various government websites and education centers. Documents presented for review during this study had two strong factors used by the SBLs regarding their strategy. First, the SBLs on their own time educated themselves on the basics of federal procurement. Secondly, by reviewing other industry-like businesses on several government websites, the small business owners were able to attach a niche presence to their small business. The SBLs emphasized formal education as the dominant factor in starting a business and functional education as the main reason for the success of the small business. During the interviews, it became evident that all of the SBLs obtained at least a bachelor's degree in the industry of the small business. Also, all of the SBLs used similar government websites related to contracting and procurement to learn about the federal procurement system and where to find the training they thought was necessary for their success.

The third and last theme became the most dominant of all of the themes. Based on the data from the interviews and data analysis using NVivo 12, networking served as the most significant strategy used by all of the SBLs. There was a consensus on networking as a tool for success due to 1/3rd of the questions having answers that listed networking as a prime catalyst for the success of obtaining subcontracts. The SBLs used networking to gain insight on how to start a small business, how to obtain knowledge about the federal procurement system, as well as how to gain strategic alliances so that all stakeholders take a share of the success of the others. The term mutually advantageous came to mind during the data analysis portion of this study. In the obtainment of subcontracts on prime government contracts, experience, and education along with networking were crucial instruments in the leader's strategic planning.

Table 8

NVivo 12 Master Frequency Chart

Word	References	Frequencies
Business	8	57
Small	5	41
Government	16	30
Experience	19	26
Networking	18	25
Subcontracts	12	18
Organization	16	17
Obtain	6	13
Education	10	12
University	12	12
Acquisition	6	12
Prime	5	12
Strategies	10	11
Owner	5	11
Federal	7	10
Procurement	11	10
Subcontract	11	10
Contractor	10	10
Obtaining	9	9
Performance	11	9

Table 8 above comes from the ending of the data analysis portion of the study and illustrates what nodes resulted in the creation of themes and subthemes. Within NVivo 12, when producing word frequencies taken from the interview transcripts, NVivo 12 can take the words in the transcript directly as well synonyms of that word. The benefit is two-fold. First, this feature allows the researcher to address nuances of the words that they may not have uncovered otherwise. Second, this feature expands the base for which the nodes, themes and, subthemes originated. Chart 7 shows the top 20 words that received the highest number of frequencies. Chart 7 is not all-inclusive.

During this research process, there were several points of interest identifiable with the conceptual framework for this qualitative multiple case study on exploring the successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. It is important for businesses to understand their resources and allocate them properly for maximum benefit (Alexy et al., 2018). In the case of the small business owners, they were able to capitalize on the experience, education, as well as their networking to create a successful strategy. Research showed that by a business leader using social and intellectual capital as resources the leader may yield positive results in small business performance (Campbell & Park, 2017). All of the SBLs in this study utilized both human capital, which in many cases were themselves and intellectual capital as a valuable resource in the strategy process. In some form or another during this case study, all of the SBLs expressed their interest in expanding their name to strengthen their strategies in obtaining subcontracts. Research showed there are positives associated with brand recognition in most industries if the recognition is favorable (Laari et al., 2017; Lin & Chang, 2015). With experience, education, and networking, all of the SBLs used the RBV theory and applied the use of their resources in their strategic planning and, it worked to their benefit. Lastly, the RBV has a foundation built upon the use of strategic resources in a manner that creates competitive advantage for the business leader.

Applications for Professional Practice

Based on the data received and the coding process that then ensued, there were three themes along with the associated subthemes that apply to professional practices.

The first findings associated with this study that apply to the professional practices of strategies government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable is alignment of resources. Acknowledging and aligning known resources serves as the foundation in the strategic planning and also correlates to the conceptual framework of this study, which is the RBV. The application of resources for a competitive advantage relates directly to strategic planning. Strategy is critical because of the competition in most industries, plus the negative effects of a failed business venture (Lin & Wang, 2018). This study has a significance on small business management, which contributes to current research related to strategies used to obtain U.S. government subcontracts. Influencing factors such as reputation along with government assisted funding can serve as legitimizing influencers for small businesses and may escalate the likelihoods of survival for the small business, positive growth and performance, and the ability to take advantage of identifiable advantages (Nijmeijer, Fabbriotti, & Huijsman, 2014). Whether there is a positive or negative connection associated with the business can be the difference between success and failure (Mukherjee, Makarius, & Stevens, 2018). SBLs may review this study and evaluate the practices of those that were successful in obtaining subcontracts, then use similar resources for their strategies.

The second application to professional practice relates to the small business leader engagement levels as they relate to obtaining U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable taken into account the current economic situation. The SBLs having an understanding of the federal procurement and acquisition rules and how this

knowledge may lead to advantages using disruptive technologies, addressing certain needs of society, along with reducing the likelihood of failure by using the available government resources that if used correctly may increase the likelihood of success (Liotard & Revest, 2018). Research has shown that SBLs initially use influence at the onset of the business but eventually transfer into enabling behaviors during the organization phase of the life cycle of the business (Kesidou & Carter, 2018). Influence in the strategy creations was two-fold. First influencing the employees of the small business was one aspect. Another aspect was using influence along with their reputation or brand is how the government rates them based on their previous works. C5 noted an issue with the rating system for new small businesses. For a small business, one bad review may stymie all other efforts for government work. All of the SBLs that participated in this qualitative multiple case study exploring the successful strategies took full control of the strategic planning through self-study initiatives and use of professional networks.

The third application to professional practice relates to strategic acquisition and federal procurement practices that may lead to obtaining subcontracts on these prime government contracts that will then support the bond between the government and small businesses. Strategic management is essential for the long-term success of the business (Ansoff, Kipley, Lewis, Helm-Stevens, & Ansoff, 2019). The ability of the small business leader to make use of the available knowledge regarding the federal procurement system may lead to obtaining more subcontracts and new and more diverse revenue sources that may have in other times would have remained unknown. Leaders of

businesses must keep in mind the business worlds are rapidly evolving and with this change so should their strategic plan (Steiss, 2019). Understanding and implementing the changes to the federal procurement system may be a need for most SBLs in their strategic planning. By using this application for professional practice, the small business leader may become more competitive in obtaining subcontracts along with assisting the government with meeting the needs of the country.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this study have applications that affect both the small business owner, the employees, the local government, and the nation. The success and health of small businesses can stimulate not only the larger total U.S. economy but also the local economies within the U.S. (Hayes et al., 2015; Turner & Endres, 2017). One concern when addressing social change and small business is the possibility of uneven development that one group accumulates wealth while other groups may become underdeveloped (Bond, 2018). The implications for social change include the opportunity for SBLs to learn strategies that allowed them to obtain more government subcontracts, which could increase organization opportunities, promote job creation, and help to improve local economies. In creating job opportunities, small businesses not only help people achieve financial independence but also serve as a tool to assist local governments by increasing the revenue stream commonly referred to as taxes. Small businesses have the ability and often foster a high degree of job growth, positive impact on local communities around the U.S., and more ethnically diverse businesses (Samila & Sorenson, 2017).

The more SBLs who obtain subcontracts thus expanding their level of importance to the U.S. government by assisting in meeting their needs, the more SBLs can compete with each other in addition to larger firms fueling competition, which may lead to an increase in positive and beneficial social changes. Most of the small businesses produced businesses plan that associated their niche work for government approval. As a catalyst for social change, SBLs may want to implement strategies within their business plan that supports social change within their respective communities (Barnett, 2019; Soundararajan, Jamali, & Spence, 2018). Lastly, in comparing Table #2 and Table #3 on pages 22 and 23 of this work, the U.S. government has failed to reach their subcontracting goals every year from 2012-2016 for small businesses. Also, because of this delta, there have been hundreds of billions of dollars available for small business subcontracting but were used for non-small businesses (DOD, 2017). By putting into practice measures that may increase the likelihood of obtaining subcontracts, there is a mutual benefit for the small business leader, the community, as well as the local government.

Recommendations for Actions

Based on the results obtained from the data from the SBLs, the three applications to professional practice, and the implications for social change, three recommendations for action emanated from the research. Persons contemplating owning and operating a small business may want to look into the results of this study on successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. Small business owners interested in subcontracting opportunities in

the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. can benefit from the strategies used by the five successful SBLs used in this study to assist in formulating a strategy to obtain subcontracts successfully.

First, the SBA has made understanding the rules as they pertain to small business subcontracting straightforward; however, verbiage associated with the FAR and other information available on other government websites related to federal procurement may seem confusing. A recommendation is to provide a tutorial on the basics of the federal procurement system for the new small businesses. Also, create a separate listing of opportunities specifically for small businesses with no history of government work. The use of disruptive technologies such as the emergence of social media may serve as a platform for small businesses to receive additional education centered around the federal procurement system (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Bakar, 2018; Julien, 2018). The use of social media as a tool for business is trending upwards. A study of 664 businesses that used social media in the past showed data reflecting that both Facebook and Twitter seemed to have the most advantageous effect for the businesses that participated in the study (Julien, 2018; Tajudeen, Jaafar, & Ainin, 2018). There are links on the SBA website but nothing to provide the reader with instructions and a systematic presentation where there are intermittent checks on learnings to ensure the reader has fully comprehended the lesson. The tutorial mentioned would be similar to classes already provided by the SBA and contracting agencies but would have just the basic concepts and principles associated with the subcontracting process. The dissemination would occur by the SBA having a link to the training courses relating to subcontracting.

The second recommendation for action advocated by the SBLs had concerns that correlated. Some of the SBLs suggested the current manner in which small businesses compete in the federal procurement system gives an advantage to larger business over other businesses mainly those registered as small. In the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2014, instead of the prime contractor receiving credit only for having a small business subcontractor at the first tier, the prime can now receive credit for having small business subcontracting at lower tiers (SBA, 2017i). The complaint by the SBLs is, based on the NDAA of 2014, as long as any of the subcontractors associated with the prime uses a small business subcontractor, then the prime contractor receives credit. Some of the SBLs say this is advantageous for the prime contractor and takes the pressure off them to hire small business subcontractors. Research indicates that the performance levels of small businesses are no less than that of large businesses (Gravier et al., 2018).

The SBA should look into the effectiveness and the efficiencies of small businesses in comparison to larger more well established businesses. Some of the contractors also stated that there might need to be a modification to how the federal government small subcontracting currently operates. The suggestion by some of the SBLs is that the federal government needs to examine the role of subcontractors in the federal procurement and acquisition system and make a separate procurement vehicle for only small business subcontractors for them to become a prime contractor. One factor that seemed to be a nonfactor with some of the SBLs was social responsibility. Having a strategy that may create an increase in profits and has an element of social consciousness

and welfare may help in increasing the likelihood of obtaining work with the federal government (Flammer, 2018). After 9/11, there were significant changes made in procurement spending in which small businesses did receive a share (Taylor, 2019).

Additionally, there were comments on small business evaluations. Some of the SBLs suggested that the rules should not have such a lasting affect an effect on the business considering its newness. A bad evaluation for a new small business may make it extremely difficult to obtain more subcontracts and virtually makes it impossible to become a prime contractor working directly for the government.

The third and last recommendation for action is for the local contracting offices to assist the SBLs in aligning their assets in resources in a manner that best prepares for them to receive the subcontracting award and this relates directly to networking. It is important for all stakeholders of the small business to obtain the training to gain the knowledge; however, based on the results of the study, networking was an important aspect to the small business leader obtaining a subcontract over the competition. Also, it is imperative that small business owners are aware of rules and regulations that may favor their business with government work over others in the same industry (Josephson, Lee, Mariadoss, & Johnson, 2019). Prime contractors can hand select subcontractors to support the effort to provide the government their needs; however, selecting small businesses that fall into the set-aside categories with those being Disadvantaged Businesses (8a), HUD, Woman-Owned, and Service-Disabled Vets has a mutual gain for both the agency and the small business owner (SBA, 2017f; SBA, 2017h). Establishing government spending for small businesses is critical to the local economic health of the

community in which the small business operates (Gravier et al., 2018). Several of the small business owners that participated in this study fell into one or more of the categories associated with the set-aside program established and supported by the SBA. Research has indicated that changes in the strategy implementation of the set-aside program may lead to increases in the overall number of SBLs utilizing the congressionally approved program (Blount, Seetharaman, & Brown, 2018). The set-aside program is a valuable tool for those SBLs aware of how to use it in their strategic planning. Social responsibility and business

The dissemination of these actions would rely on local SBA offices and small business support organizations to develop a plan to provide those businesses that have attended the training sessions and meet the criteria for the award a greater ability to obtain the subcontract. There are two purposes served. First, attending the training and meeting other small and large business would increase the amount of exposure for the businesses. Secondly, due to the possibility of larger crowds attending the meeting, the chance of increasing the small business owner's network multiplies exponentially. There is a possibility that SBA would have literature linked to their website for SBLs contemplating working with the government. Lastly, conferences held by the SBA and the other organizations that support small business could have a pamphlet ready for all those in attendance that explains the new strategies considering implementation to affect training positively.

The results from this multiple case study on successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to

remain sustainable will have a dissemination process that will occur through several forms. First, I will have the results of my scholarly work turned into a literary book and disseminated via several of the online book services. Lastly, I will disseminate the results through conferences and training events attended by the small businesses in the local area and organized through some of the contracting offices in the mid-Atlantic region.

Recommendation for Further Research

The participants for this study on small business subcontracting consisted of five small businesses that have received subcontracts on prime government contracts in the mid-Atlantic region. There are two areas recommended for further research. First, because of the broad spectrum of small businesses in the area, the results of this study are not generalizable beyond those businesses that have agreed to participate in this study. The target sample and population consisted of five SBLs from five organizations in the mid-Atlantic region in the governmental support sector verified to conduct business with the U.S. government. Because of this study applying only to SBLs in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., also needs to exist studies outside of the mid-Atlantic region to explore the successful strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. Since this is a qualitative study, the data may have some interpret the results as subjective (Velte & Stawinoga, 2017). In direct connection with subjectivity, data rigidity may also pose an issue. Due to the experience and perspectives of the researcher in qualitative studies, the resulting data may only be as thorough what the researcher comprehended (Bertaux & Thompson, 2017).

In 2015, more than \$133 billion was available for subcontracting; however, small business subcontracting accounted for only \$43.1 billion of the available funds leaving more than \$90 billion available for non-small businesses to use (DOD, 2017). Similarly, in 2016, more than \$123.5 billion was available for subcontracting; however, small business subcontracting accounted for only \$41.8 billion of the available funds leaving more than \$82 billion available for non-small businesses to use (DOD, 2017). Based on the data from 2015 and 2016, researchers can take the results of this study on strategies some government support sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable, then apply the strategies to their regional area to aid in assisting those SBLs in obtaining subcontracts.

The second issue that limited this study was the process of validating the truthfulness of what the participants' responses were to the questions presented before them. As a researcher, the lack of detailed knowledge about the subject and am unable to ascertain the truthfulness of the responses, which is a strong indicator of a lack of bias with the results of this research (Downey, 2015). More research could commence to prepare future researchers on methods they may implement to ensure the data received is rich in quality and truthfulness. One method used that may serve as a catalyst to ensure truthful data is for the researcher to make detailed transcriptions of the interview as well as investigate the best manners in which to analyze the data (Silverman, 2017). Providing the SBLs with enough time to review the material presented to them proved a motivational factor in their openness and willingness to provide truthful information.

Reflections

Obtaining a doctoral degree was not even in my deepest dreams. I conducted this research on strategies some financial sector SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable as a true novice researcher with a limited understanding of any aspect of scholarly research. Also, because of my experience of 29 years of government financial work, I did not want my opinions to bias this research. Still, my uncertainty derived from not understanding what was required to complete this program versus my skill set in completing the DBA program. Not to spell out the obvious, but there was a major delta. During this journey, two items were a catalyst in getting to this ending point of the program. First, my Chair, Dr. Land has been my rock through this entire process. Dr. Land is demanding, but she will get all of her mentees across that graduation stage, mad, but across that stage. Secondly, software such as Grammarly and Reciteworks (once I started using them) made this process so much more effortless than before. My advice to new students, try your best to have Dr. Land as your mentor and make use of the available software that you have at your disposal.

I worked diligently to produce results that reflected the answers from the SBLs. I did not find it difficult to find SBLs who met the criteria; however, the SBLs began to grow impatient waiting on me to receive the IRB approval. Initially, a concern was that I would lose some of the SBLs but I did not, and they were more than willing to provide their input.

Conclusion

The RBV is the conceptual framework selected for this study. In this study, resources refer to effective strategies and knowledge SBLs implement when trying to obtain work as a subcontractor on prime government contracts. Within the framework of the RBV consists of a competitive power capability also known as the VRIN (Kaufman, 2015). The VRIN is a break down on the categorization of resources as are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (Hemmati et al., 2016). Based on the fundamentals of the RBV, this was the perfect conceptual framework because it seems simple that a business leader should evaluate and then make use of readily available resources. The RBV conceptual framework aligned exactly with the data taken from the five small business owners that agreed for me to interview them. During the data collection and analysis, it became clear that each small business owner had a keen awareness on how to utilize their assets, which consisted of networking, resources, and other dynamic capabilities that allowed for the successful subcontract attainment. Utilizing the proper strategies revealed two items previously unknown to me as the lone and new researcher. There is credibility associated with those SBLs that strategize on local business and examine what the prior contracts required and then reached out to the prime contractor. A common theme amongst all of the participants seems to be some form of experience with the federal government that either directly or indirectly led to their success. For the small business leader contemplating subcontracting or SBLs that thus far are unsuccessful in obtaining subcontracts, review the themes and expand the presence and network in the local area. Lastly, learn the rules of the SBA and then strategically plan and then there should exist

an increased probability of SBLs obtaining a U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interviewee:

Time of Interview:

Date:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the successful strategies some SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontract awards to remain sustainable. The interviewees consisted of SBLs that are responsible for making decisions involving obtaining subcontracts on U.S. government prime contracts. This study intended to explore strategies SBLs use to obtain U.S. government subcontracts awards to remain sustainable. The questions asked included:

1. What strategies did you use to learn about the U.S. government's procurement system and the various support elements designed to assist small businesses?
2. How do you formulate your strategy to gain a competitive advantage in obtaining subcontracts?
3. What were the essential resources used during your strategy implementation to obtain U.S. government subcontracts?
4. What is your alternative option to this funding when resources are scarce?
5. What obstacles or barriers did you experience when implementing strategies to obtain subcontracts?
6. How did you overcome the key obstacles or barriers to implementing strategies to obtain government subcontracts?

7. How did you use your assets to increase your chances of obtaining government subcontracts?
8. What additional information would you like to provide regarding the strategies used by your business to succeed in obtaining U.S. government subcontract awards?

After each interview, I thanked the participants for the inclusion in this study and reminded them again that there is no incentive associated with participating in this study; however, each participant received a summary of the findings at the first interpretational stage. A few weeks after the initial interview, I contacted each of the participants with the findings of the interview after my analysis. The plan consisted of allowing each participant to comment on the analysis and then provided input on the accuracy of the analysis. The participants had the option of clarifying any information they deem as misinterpreted.

During member checking, I asked the participants about adding any further information to help with clarity, accuracy, and relevance to the analysis of the interviews. The questions asked included:

1. Based on the interpretation from the analysis, is everything correct? If anything?
2. Based on the interpretation from the analysis, do you see any errors or misinterpretations? If anything?
3. Would you challenge any of the interpretations from the analysis? If anything?

4. What aspects of the interpretation of the analysis do you believe are more adequate or accurate?
5. What additional information might add more clarity to the interpretations from the analysis?

I thanked each of the participants and reminded them once again that there is no incentive with this study on small business subcontracting; however, all participants of this study received a summary of the final published findings.