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Strategies for Small Energy Consulting Business Survivability

SCHOLASTICA NWABUEZE

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Walden University

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Scholastica Nwabueze

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Walden University
July 2019

Abstract

Strategies for Small Energy Consulting Business Survivability

by

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MS, Strayer University, 2005

MBA, Enugu State University of Science and Technology Business School, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2019

Abstract

Small businesses are critical to economic development. Small businesses create job opportunities and training and innovative products and services, but they encounter significant challenges and many fail in the first 7 years due to lack of sustainable strategies. The purpose of this single-case study was to explore strategies owners used to sustain small energy consulting businesses for longer than 7 years. The population in this study consisted of 5 senior executives of a small energy consulting firm in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. The conceptual framework for the study was the transformational leadership theory that deals with vision and empowerment aimed at increasing both employee effectiveness and well-being to positively aid employee outcomes, commitment, role clarity, and prosperity. Data were collected through face-to-face semistructured interviews and a review of company documents. After data analysis using thematic analysis and methodological triangulation, 7 themes emerged: functional vision, planning, skilled human resources, match approach to strategy, create market share, good leadership, and staying in tune with innovation. Implications of this study for social change include the potential for small energy consulting businesses to improve in the quality of life in the local environment by playing a vital role in the culture and economy of the community. Implementing the strategies may result in improving a firm's profitability and sustainability and contributing to social change for the local communities by reducing unemployment, offering competitive compensation, providing improved working conditions, and improving work-life practices.

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my late mom and dad, Rose and Fidelis Nwabueze. I wish you both were here to see this milestone. I love and miss you both dearly. To Perry, and my children, Barbara, and Stephen, I couldn't have done this without your love, support, and inspiration. To my siblings, Justina, Mary, (both of blessed memory), Kate, Austin, Ann, Vincent, and Dr. John, thank you so much for all the love, inspiration, support, and encouragement.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are known for their contributions toward the growth and development of a country's economy and are generally recognized as the watershed toward achieving sustainable social and economic advancement in underdeveloped and developing countries (Alarape, 2014). SMEs encourage local entrepreneurship, support indigenous technology, decrease rural-urban labor migration, and provide employment for a vast segment of the industrial workforce (Alarape, 2014). The estimated number of jobs created in small businesses between 2003 and 2012 was 56.1 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The significant role SMEs play in an economy cannot be underestimated, especially with their social and economic advantages (Wang, 2016). The U.S. government created the Small Business Administration (SBA) to establish the value of small enterprises to the U.S. economy and to support owners of small business ventures. In fiscal year 2017, the U.S. government exceeded the service-disabled-veteran-owned small business and small disadvantaged business goals (SBA, 2018). The SBA is budgeted to receive \$105 billion from the U.S. government in 2019 (SBA, 2018).

Background of the Problem

Business failure affects small business owners throughout the United States and understanding the factors that lead to small business failure is imperative (Lofstrom, Bates, & Parker, 2014). A firm's profitability centers on the expertise of the owners, who can identify critical issues and strategize to solve the problems plaguing practitioners in the field (Kraemer, Gouthier, & Heidenreich, 2016). Kraemer et al. (2016) held that small

business executives lack strategies to sustain their organizations. Thus, small businesses continue to face more considerable challenges than other businesses despite their importance to the economy, and these problems significantly limit their development (Wang, 2016). According to Anderson and Ullah (2014), small firms—including small energy consulting firms—face challenges that include lack of resources and absence of managerial expertise as critical problems. These issues, in turn, affect the growth, development, and profitability of the SMEs. For SMEs to remain profitable, owners and executives must identify and pursue specific clientele needs and solutions (Chofreh, Goni, Shaharoun, Ismail, & Klemes, 2014). The energy field may constitute a specialization for a small consulting business, so extensive knowledge is required for the business to operate long-term, beyond 7 years. This qualitative exploratory single case study may contribute to an understanding of successful strategies that may maintain and improve small energy consulting businesses' profitability through the implementation of best practices.

Problem Statement

Small businesses fail at high rates (SBA, 2014). From a survivability perspective, over 30% of new ventures go out of business in the first 2 years of operation (Hunt, 2015). About 50% of small businesses fail to succeed (SBA, 2014). The general business problem is that multiple small business owners embark on strategic business initiatives without adequate planning and training. The specific business problem is that some small energy consulting business owners lack strategies to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies small energy consulting business owners use to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses. The sample of the study consisted of five executives at one small energy consulting company in Washington, DC, who have achieved profitability and sustained their business. These high-ranking management staff members participated in the study to explore successful strategies used to sustain their business. The results from this research may help to develop a business model that small business leaders can use as a guide to build successful businesses. The findings from this research may contribute to positive social change by helping small business owners sustain profitability, provide employment, and improve the economic activities and wealth of the communities they serve.

Nature of the Study

The three research methods researchers use are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. The research method for any selected research must suit the business problem and the context of that study (Yin, 2018). Yin maintains that researchers usually select research methods based on the research questions. A quantitative research method would not be proper for this study because quantitative research requires empirical measurement, deductive testing, and testing of statistical hypotheses of variables' relationships or differences (Lach, 2014). Mixed-method research is a combination of numerical and textual data, which involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Yin, 2018). The qualitative process is useful in understanding fundamental

causes, views, and motivations (Yin, 2018). Using qualitative research methods can help the researcher explore the study of social and cultural phenomena (Yin, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2017) noted that the qualitative research method involves the use of diverse approaches or research designs. These designs are (a) ethnography (involving context or culture), (b) narrative (involving individual experience and sequence), (c) phenomenological (including people who have experienced a phenomenon), and (d) case study (involving an entity, organization, or multiple organizations). The research design here was a single case study. Case studies could also be explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used the exploratory case study design for this research. Because the focus of this research was an organization, I used a single case study, which required a focused exploration to reach a profound understanding through interviewing participants, observing the business process, and reviewing pertinent archival data.

Research Question

The research question for this study is the following: What strategies do small energy consulting business owners use to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses? The interview questions I used are aligned with this research question.

Interview Questions

The interview questions I asked of the study participants to obtain data for this study were the following:

Warm-up Questions

1. Where did you acquire the management skills for a career in energy consulting?

2. What motivated you to invest in an energy consulting business?

3. What is your experience as a small energy consultancy business owner on the viability of your business?

Interview Questions

1. What specific strategies did you use to sustain your energy consultancy business organization?

2. What policies did you initially implement to ensure your business survival from year 1 to year 7?

3. At what point during the first 7 years did your profitability occur?

4. What were the key barriers to implementing your survival strategies?

5. How did your organization address the principal obstacles to successfully achieving your profitability strategies?

6. How did you assess the effectiveness of your approach to survival, profitability, and sustainability?

7. Having attained profitability, are there elements of your strategy that guarantee the viability of your business into the future?

8. What creative or unconventional steps did you take at the different stages of your business such as the forming, surviving, and profiting stages?

9. What else can you share concerning your development and deployment of the strategies your organization used to achieve profitability and sustainability?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was the transformational leadership theory introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978. The notion of transformational leadership concept deals with stimulating, empowering, and inspiring teams to achieve extraordinary outcomes and to develop and excel in their leadership capability. According to Burns (1978), the transformational leadership approach effects change in people and societal systems, helping employees grow and develop into leaders by aligning the objectives and goals of the employees with those of the organization. Burns believed that transformational leadership demonstrates that employees can exceed expected performance and advance high levels of team's commitment to an organization.

The transformational leadership theory reveals tendencies such as extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Extraversion involves inculcating in followers the propensity to connect with others and with the organizations employing them (Engelen, Gupta, Strenger, & Brettel, 2015). Neuroticism involves creatively coaching followers who view the world through a negative lens—such as distressing, threatening, and unsafe—to be calm, even-tempered, and relaxed. Openness to experience means that a leader allows followers ample latitude to invest their spirit in the work. Agreeableness involves a leader's capacity to ensure all stakeholders agree without being gullible. Conscientiousness is a leader's ability to focus on the work at hand.

Transformational leadership, in its ideal form, involves creating a helpful and positive attitude in the members with the goal of developing followers into leaders

(Northouse, 2014; Neumann, 2018). Through this process, executives identify needed change, develop clear strategies to facilitate the transition, and create and communicate a vision to guide the transformation through motivation and inspiration (Birasnav, 2014). With the employees' commitment, executives administer the innovative processes to achieve profitability, maintain cost-effectiveness, and promote the company's sustainability (Birasnav, 2014). Transformational leadership inspires people to reach unanticipated and remarkable results and can provide employees independence for specific job assignments so they develop skills and the authority to make decisions once trained (Northouse, 2014). With transformational theory, leadership can mobilize workers into groups with common objectives, build morale, and promote the well-being and motivation level of the team through excellent rapport (Northouse, 2014). Transformational leadership theory is relevant to explaining the findings in this study because a transformational leader can convert challenges to opportunities in an organization (Neumann, 2018). Consequently, consultancy staff must have high morale and experience, demonstrating a leadership touch in piloting the affairs of the consultancy.

Operational Definitions

Business failure: Takes place when an enterprise closes because the owner no longer earns a profit and has insufficient funds to meet expenses (Frid, 2015)

Business success: Occurs when business executives decide they have met or exceeded their objectives and made earnings enough to cover costs and enlarge the size, scale, or market shares of their trade (Carlsson & Martinetti, 2015).

Business sustainability: A firm's ability to respond to the long-term profitable needs of the organization (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014)

Competitive advantage: The benefit enjoyed by owners of a business who are more successful than their competitors at creating revenue streams and retaining clientele (Mahdi & Almsafir, 2014).

Consulting: The business engagement in which a service expert listens to a potential client to learn their needs with the intent of providing solutions (Lemke & Luzio, 2014).

Entrepreneurship: Related to risk-taking, the ability to see opportunities where others see chaos, and the creation, renewal, and enhancement of value not merely for an owner but for all stakeholders (Robinson & Stubberud, 2015).

SME: An organization with capacity and size designation such that it does not compete in the mainstream business arena (Rodríguez-Bolívar, Garde-Sánchez, & López-Hernández, 2014).

Strategic planning: A means to prepare for and survive a significant threat to a company or its stakeholders (Taneja, Pryor, Sewell, & Recuero, 2014).

Survivability: The demonstrable capacity to keep a business functioning in the face of challenges (Holt & Powell, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions are unproven beliefs people hold about matters attractive to them (Yin, 2018). Small energy consulting business owners perceive large energy conglomerates need help at lower levels that do not make business sense to such large

organizations. Such an assumption places a possible limitation on all parties, and a scholarly investigation may help to ascertain the frontiers of such premises.

Assumptions

An assumption is an element of the fact that appears to be true without actual verification and the speculation of an idea that lacks validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Assumptions in a study are facts relevant to the research that the researcher has little control over or cannot verify (Yin, 2018). The first assumption for this study pertains to the participants' attitude toward the research and the researcher's beliefs, preconceived notions, and knowledge of activities in the energy sector. The second assumption relates to the relevance of the information I obtained from the business owners. I assumed that all information obtained from the participants would be useful, usable, and relevant in the data analysis and would help answer the research question. The third assumption was that a case study was an appropriate design for the study. The fourth assumption was that the study participants, who are experienced energy practitioners, would provide accurate and comprehensive responses to the interview questions and would not deliberately introduce bias.

Limitations

Limitations are conditions that influence the interpretation of study results that cannot be controlled by the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The first limitation in this study was that the participants may experience discomfort in disclosing information about the failure or success of their business and may not accurately recollect their experience. The second limitation was that I could misinterpret findings, thereby

creating research bias. The third limitation was the reliance on the knowledge and experiences of successful business executives and owners. Finally, a limitation of this research was that the participation was voluntary and participants could choose to discontinue their participation at any time, a factor that could not be controlled by the researcher.

Delimitations

Conscious and unavoidable boundaries are commonplace in academic research. Delimitations are parameters researchers impose on the research and analysis process to ensure a study does not pertain to antecedents outside the topic (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). An effort in delimiting the study is necessary to ensure focus.

Three identifiable delimitations exist for this study regarding the leaders who participated. The first delimitation was that I selected the participants in the study from the Washington, DC, metro area of the United States. The second delimitation was interviewing owners and leaders of energy consulting firms with over 10 years of experience in a thriving small energy consultancy. The third delimitation was the scope of the review that included only the skills and strategies small business owners need to be successful in their respective industries.

Significance of the Study

In a global economy, sustainable development has been a growing trend that companies cannot ignore. SMEs can make a contribution to the realization of sustainable development goals (Tayal, 2016). These goals, achieved through the implementation of sustainable business practices, can provide companies with a competitive advantage. The

sustainability change process is a significant factor in the quest to maintain growth and promote business sustainability with a competitive advantage (Doppelt, 2017). Using a qualitative exploratory single case study, I sought to reveal practical business strategies and practices. The findings of this study may provide strategies to help businesses ensure sustainability and achieve profitability. The energy industry is steadily facing power transmission and distribution challenges while trying to contain costs and sustain business. Some leaders, especially in the energy industry, view sustainability as a strategic challenge (Doppelt, 2017), and rising costs are becoming inevitable (Tayal, 2016). Businesses in the energy market have been navigating fast technology innovation, slowing demand, and rising electricity prices (Tayal, 2016). A steady shift toward renewable energy products is exacerbating the disruption of utility business models. Organization viability hinges on the expertise of entrepreneurs who can pinpoint critical issues and strategize to solve problems plaguing practitioners in the field (Kraemer et al., 2016). Whether business organizations survive first few years depends on factors specific to the industry or the company (Ahmeda & Mmolainyane, 2014). Having more buyers tends to increase competition, pushing prices higher. Economic growth and innovation require dependable energy resourcing and sustainable energy systems (Abdulraheem & Muammed, 2014); the outcome of this study benefits energy consultants.

Contribution to Business Practice

Consulting businesses play essential roles in servicing mainstream organizations. The existence of small energy consulting firms might be a positive development in the energy sector of the economy. The collapse of small business enterprises in their first 7

years often happens because entrepreneurs have insufficient management skills, lack direction and planning for the business, or have inadequate capital and human resources to ensure sustainability (SBA, 2014). I explored the strategies that small energy business owners use to sustain their businesses, providing information for the nature of niche market, required management skills, financial planning, and marketing strategies. Business leaders may use the findings to improve their understanding of the sustainable approach as a driver of profitability. Business owners and executives may use the findings to identify key strategies such as training, compensation, recruitment, and inspiring practices. Results may also help leaders compare and contrast the various tested tactics and choose those that are viable and discard those that do not apply to them. The results could build innovative strategies with transformational organizational modifications and advancement to further promote business growth and employees' loyalty. Business owners may review and potentially use or adapt the findings to create employee developmental and skill enhancement goals to increase an organization's performance.

Implications for Social Change

A suitable management approach is necessary to drive a successful small business enterprise. The level of profitability a business experiences in a community reflects the culture, and when members of a community are successful in business, their contributions to their community can elevate the society's status (Galpin, Whittington, & Bell, 2015). Small businesses play a vital role in the welfare and the culture of local communities and the economy, so when they fail, employees who are members of the society lose jobs and

income (Galpin et al., 2015). A successful small business will impact its local community with employment opportunities, an increase in the local government tax base, and potential for lowering unemployment rates. The outcome of this study may assist business owners, especially small energy consulting enterprises, in developing strategies to sustain their businesses, reduce turnover rates, boost the performance of their trade, and enable economic growth.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Researchers explore literature as a source of knowledge for their studies (Yin, 2018). Scholars use a literature review to add to the summary of the subject matter and the development of topics that contain further research directions (Creswell & Clark, 2017). A literature review reveals what others have already explored on a specific subject, which provides researchers new ideas to use in their research to enable them to determine problems or flaws in existing research. Scholars generate a literature review to place their study in a broader context.

The purpose of this qualitative single explorative case study is to explore strategies small energy consulting business owners use to achieve profitability. Data for this research came primarily from the experiences of five carefully chosen small energy consulting business leaders in the Washington, DC, metro area. My search strategy focused on peer-reviewed articles written in the last 5 years. I concentrated on keywords, such as *management style, motivation, best work strategies, employee satisfaction, employee morale, small businesses survival, personal characteristics, and entrepreneurial ventures, innovation, education and training in SMEs, financial planning*

in SMEs, leadership skills, small business survival strategy, the utility industry, and small energy consultancy best practices. I searched the academic literature in Google Scholar, Sage Premier, ABI/INFORM Complete, EBSCO Primary, Business Sources Complete, ProQuest, government websites. I also searched Walden Library's databases, Emerald databases, and local libraries in the Washington, DC, area to find relevant review articles. I considered the same keywords in abridged form with an asterisk inserted to include all variations of the word. My use of Boolean operators—such as and, or, and not *, including, and exact—significantly broadened the scope of data available. I used Ulrich's Periodical Directory as a tool to verify if articles were from peer-reviewed journals.

The literature review consists of 189 reviewed journal articles, seminal books, and relevant government websites as shown in Table 1. The purpose of numerous sources ensured scholarship, thoroughness, and depth with references drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, books, and web pages. Of the 189 unique sources referenced in the literature review, 185 (98%) are current peer-reviewed research and articles published from 2015 to 2019.

The literature review section has the following subsections: overview, conceptual antecedents, small business success and sustainability, small business failure, small business operator characteristics, and small business and the economy. Other sections are small business training and staff retention, small business technology and innovation, small business finance and human capital, small business and social network, external environment challenges, and small energy consulting survivability.

Table 1

Summary of Literature Reviewed by Year of Publication

Sources	Within 5 years of 2019	Over 5 years of 2019	Total
Peer-reviewed journals	178	4	182
Non-peer-reviewed articles	2	0	2
Books	5	0	5
Dissertations	0	0	0
Other web pages	0	0	0
Total	185	4	189
Percentage of total	98%	2%	100%

Overview

Small business leaders face challenges that hinder the survival and growth of their businesses (Mutoko, 2014). Small businesses are vital to and have been known to contribute immensely to the U.S. economy (SBA, 2014). Small business enterprises have played fundamental roles in the development of the U.S. economy: providing employment, especially for about 66% of minorities, 70% of seniors, disabled labor force and rural workers (Hunt, 2015). SBA (2014) noted that from a survivability perspective, about 50% of small businesses fail to succeed despite their importance to the economy. Small companies provide products and services that big companies cannot benefit from through economies of scale, and they help create innovative concepts, products, and services (SBA, 2014). According to Hunt (2015), over 30% of new businesses fail in the first 2 years. When averaged across all industries, about 75% of new business failure

occurs in the first 5 years and could have a devastating impact on the U.S. economy (SBA, 2014).

New business ventures are among the leading and driving forces for innovation in the country. Companies like Facebook and Google are examples of innovative new business changing the landscape of media and communication (Clemons & Madhani, 2010). Small business ventures are among the most creative and entrepreneurial forces in the economy, leading in innovative technology and patent creation in the United States. The impact of small business failure can trigger a chain reaction on the individual credit and net worth of the owners. The collapse of small business ventures precludes the owners and leaders from benefiting from the increasing percentage of contracts awarded to small businesses by federal, state, and local governmental entities (SBA, 2014). Mutoko (2014) held that small businesses fail for numerous reasons, primarily due to a lack of entrepreneurial understanding and an inability to create and execute a business strategy. Some small businesses also fail due to a shortage of resources, poorly managed personnel and materials, and dealing with low-quality products and services (Mutoko, 2014; Williams, 2014). Mutoko argued that small business failure rates have remained consistent since the 1950s, and the number of failed businesses over time has doubled due to the continuously increasing number of companies. Essig (2014) revealed that raising the prospect of survival would be an elusive objective for business owners who do not have sufficient management expertise with financial and human resources.

Conceptual Framework Antecedents

Transformational leadership theory is the conceptual framework I used in this study. Transformational leadership theory effects change in people and societal systems (Northouse, 2018). A conceptual framework outlines the input, process, and result of the entire study and expresses the course by which to conduct research (Casanave & Li, 2015). Conversely, a theoretical framework provides a general representation of the relationships among aspects in a given phenomenon (Casanave, 2015). Scholars have established an interest in the subject of transformational leadership. I believe the transformational approach is suitable for exploring leadership styles and helping managers develop followers, build relationships, and effect positive employee performance (Okyere, 2017). Northouse (2018) discovered that employees expect leaders to perform several functions in addition to having a vision and to offer guidance to employees toward meeting organizational goals.

Transformational Leadership Theory

In this qualitative case study, I explored and analyzed factors that leaders used to maintain and sustain their businesses. Along with these factors, I focused on themes participants brought up that are relevant or align with transformational leadership practices. Transformational leaders provide an inspirational drive to their followers, encouraging them to achieve individual and organizational goals (Casanave, 2015). The essential perceptions of transformational leadership theory are (a) following a vision, (b) need fulfillment, (c) self-determination, and (d) self-efficacy (Casanave, 2015). Northouse (2018) studied the impact of transformational leadership on followers' self-

efficacy and found that effective leaders practicing transformational leadership use their power to advance their followers and organization's objectives. Transformational leadership is a model of leadership based on vision and empowerment aimed at increasing employee effectiveness and well-being (Tafvelin, Hyvönen, & Westerberg, 2014). Results from Tafvelin et al. (2014) demonstrated that transformational leadership positively aids employee outcomes, commitment, role clarity, and prosperity. Northouse (2018) identified the usefulness of an increase in understanding of the transformational leadership process in the context of social service organizations by exploring factors that explain when and why transformational leadership develops. Tafvelin et al. also discovered that leader continuity improves the influence of transformational leadership on role clarity and commitment, indicating that it takes time before transformational leaders influence employees.

Tafvelin et al. (2014) noted that coworker support enhanced the effect on engagement, reflecting the role of followers in the transformational leadership process. Similarly, Northouse (2018) maintained that the transformational leadership style concentrates on the development of followers and their needs. Northouse further explained that transformational leadership inspires people to achieve unanticipated and remarkable results and provides employees independence for specific job assignments and the expertise to make decisions. With the theory, leaders can mobilize workers into groups that can accomplish goals, build morale, and promote the well-being and motivation level of the team through excellent rapport (Northouse, 2018).

With transformational leadership, the focus is on identifying and creating valuable and positive change in individuals, with the end goal of developing clear strategies to facilitate transition, creating a vision to lead change through motivation, inspiration, and the commitment of employees (Northouse, 2018; Mgeni, 2015). According to Birasnav (2014), transformational leadership theory supports the execution of innovative processes to achieve profitability and maintain cost-effectiveness while promoting sustainability in the organization. Birasnav also demonstrated the usefulness of transformational leadership, which is associated with positive employee attitudes and well-being, and acknowledged factors that may both help and hinder the transformational leadership process. Major factors that may prevent the emergence of transformational leadership addressed by Tafvelin et al. (2014) and Northouse include the organizational structure, ongoing change, and leaders' working conditions.

Alternative Theories to Transformational Leadership

In addition to the central guiding theory in their research, qualitative researchers may use multiple theories to explore the phenomenon under study. Two other theories that support and contrast the application of the transformational leadership theory are systems theory and entrepreneurship theory.

Systems theory. Systems theory offers a framework to describe and analyze groups of objects that work together to produce results (Denzin, 2017). Systems theory delivers a managerial tool used for societal interaction (Deichmann & Stam, 2015). It also provides a basis for business owner participants to use multiple processes and skill sets to create a sustainable and profitable business connecting with individuals and

corporate entities in the external environment (Deichmann & Stam, 2015; Engelen et al., 2015). An analysis of systems theory compares the past and present methods and strategies used by individuals to sustain their businesses (Dzisi & Ofosu, 2014). A review of how business owners employ strategies to nurture their businesses identifies themes that support the sustainability of their small trade and how those specific issues assist in the wholeness of their business ventures. According to Hughes, Anund, and Falkmer (2015), an understanding of a theoretical basis and description of the various facets of a business type is required for strategies to be accurately structured and developed.

Understanding how the processes can be replicated to address the problem for future and existing small businesses remains necessary to the application of systems theory and to the topic of small business sustainability. Deichmann and Stam (2015) recognized that systems theory is different from conventional analysis techniques due to the focus on the relationship between parts. Deichmann and Stam believed that systems theory provides an accurate picture of a business phenomenon, where business owners could work with the system's natural forces to achieve the desired outcome. Some small business owners lack the expertise to successfully balance the management of business operations and financial reports (Haines, 2016). Therefore, only a correct implementation of systems theory could result in effective decision making.

Entrepreneurship theory. Ayala and Manzano (2014) argued that small business owners should incorporate the entrepreneurship theory principles in their corporate processes to meet the goals of their business: sustainability, motivation, and skills management. The entrepreneurship theory, conceived by Schumpeter, defines

entrepreneurial advancement as the source of economic growth. Entrepreneurial innovation contributes to economic development and rise in productivity (Autretsch, 2015; Mgeni, 2015).

According to Ayala and Manzano (2014), entrepreneurship theory is made up of innovative principles and other elements of entrepreneurship, including the initiation of a new method of production, the opening of a new market, the creation of a new organization in an industry, or the monopolization of a different source of raw material. Ayala and Manzano maintained that the use of entrepreneurship theory principles might bring specific business benefits, including the critical elements of the sustainability, motivation, business education, management skills, and small business success.

Small Business Success and Sustainability

A small business is a firm created because of the inventiveness and determination of an entrepreneur, who envisions an attractive future for the original, innovative ideas and technologies and works through the challenges to make it happen in large dimensions (Carlsson & Martinetti, 2015). Management understanding, accountability, and tactical ability are essential for successful small business ownership (Frid, 2015; Rodríguez-Bolívar et al., 2016). Small businesses often fail because of the owners' lack of management skills, leadership capabilities, and strategies for growth (Mueller & Shepherd, 2016). Rodríguez-Bolívar et al. (2014) argued that lack of accountability is a significant cause of failure among small businesses, and some owners operate in a situation that creates a lack of accountability. As small business management continues to face challenges (Jenkins, Wiklund, & Brundin, 2014), representatives at SBA (2014)

believed that the maturity of business might add to continuous improvement, business sustainability, and success. Research has shown that the increase of self-employment continues to contribute, to some extent, to the overall determination of small business success (Frid, 2015).

Small business owners need a combination of factors to succeed, including recognition of opportunity, risk-taking ability, leadership, education, and dedication to the company (Robinson & Stubberud, 2015). Small business owners must also readily react to changes, such as political factors, technological issues, economic concerns, and environmental problems, just like their counterparts in large organizations (Tsitsiklis & Xu, 2015). Ramukumba's (2014) results showed that resource-constrained small businesses need to focus on creating a niche for the business and building a competitive advantage to stay viable amid the challenges from globalization. Ramukumba recognized that attracting repeat customers and maintaining excellent product performance are crucial to small business survival.

According to Linton and Kask (2017), firm sustainability depends mainly on differentiation strategy combined with innovation and proactiveness. Linton and Kask conducted a qualitative study of 67 small firms, and their results supported the premise that emphasis on differentiation strategy, innovation, and proactiveness and a mixed approach with risk aversion, reactivity, and low innovativeness are some of the best strategies for small business survival. Linton and Kask went on to confirm that entrepreneurial orientation as a construct enables firm performance once matched with competitive strategy. Small business owners achieve sustainability and profitability by

creating awareness of their objectives and by launching a powerful guiding coalition with employees (Okyere, 2017).

Successful business executives must pay attention to government regulations, ethics, and social responsibility to ensure business sustainability (Kolk, 2016). Globally, small businesses should strive to use strategic innovation to create a niche and develop and maintain a presence in the marketplace by exerting a strong influence on economic growth and producing opportunities, employment, and technological development (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). Successful small business owners build opportunity and advantage-seeking activities that help create and sustain small enterprises performance (Minello, Scherer, & da Costa Alves, 2014). Minello et al. (2014) confirmed that appropriate training tends to decrease the incidence of business failure, and with adequate education and training, entrepreneurs develop creative leadership and direction and learn to act and reason strategically. Creative leadership allows entrepreneurs to innovate, capture a niche in the market, and acquire and develop learned behaviors toward business survival (Minello et al., 2014).

Small Business Failure

Business failure is a process, and identifying the symptoms in time is essential for survival (Mueller & Shepherd, 2016). Many researchers agree to one common theme in small business research, that the failure rate of small businesses is high. Goffee and Scase (2015) held that small companies have a significantly higher failure rate than larger firms, and the reason is mostly as a result of the owners' lack of leadership skills, and strategies for progress. So many small businesses fail in the initial 2 to 7 years, based on the

assumption that such ventures lack good leadership skills and strategic planning to sustain a business (Mas-Verdú, Ribeiro-Soriano, & Roig-Tierno, 2015). In uncertain economic climates, the priority for the small business entrepreneur is survival. (Mas-Verdu et al., 2015), investigated firm survival and the degree to which business innovation, size, sector, and export activity affect firm survival. The result showed that when combined with sector and technology, business size is a sufficient condition for firm survival. Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) held that entrepreneurs' lack of management skills, leadership skills, and strategies for growth usually impact small business sustainability.

According to Mutoko (2014), small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) encounter challenges that deter the survival and progress of their companies. Mutoko pointed out that SMMEs face a variety of challenges which includes difficulty accessing financing and operating capital, high labor costs, excessive regulation, and taxation, lack of marketing knowledge, limited management skills, poor work ethics, and lack of competitiveness. Mueller and Shepherd (2016) discovered that low sales, profit loss, decreased liquidity, reduced market share, and high operating costs, and high level of debts, are some of the causes of business failure. Bengesi and Le Roux (2014) identified customer focus and lack of adequate financial and human resources as some of the problems resulting in small business failure. Psychogios and Garev (2015) recognized additional factors, such as lack of flexible job structure and rotations, and absence of teamwork as contributors to business failure.

Different industries and types of companies would require different strategies to achieve sustainability (Hosseininia & Ramezani, 2016). Frid (2015) revealed that understanding the administrative and strategic ability of a firm is essential to business sustainability. Keasey, Pindado, and Rodrigues (2015) believed some small ventures fail as a result of the owners' overestimated demand and undercapitalization. As the surge for self-employment continues to add to the determination of small business growth, owners of insolvent small businesses are forced to invest personal assets, borrow from friends and relatives, and even reduce their compensation to remain in business (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Sometimes, small business owners faced with financial challenges may refuse to accept the financial situation of the firm but consider the business successful even when there are indications the company is on the brink of collapse. Small business executives should have a good understanding of financial and accounting policies relating to their enterprise (Keasey et al., 2015). Keasey et al. recommended that small business owners should study the principles of the four Ps of business: product, price, place, and promotion to succeed. Frid advised that small business proprietors must learn from each other's successes and shortcomings to obtain the requisite perception and information to sustain their companies.

Small business executives must be adept in managerial decision-making processes and consider personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to thrive in any competitive market (Keasey et al., 2015). Owners of a viable small business can establish a sense of urgency in their financial visions while creating and recognizing short-term successes. The unique strategic innovation is intended to strengthen the firms'

competitive capabilities so they can achieve long-term sustainability (Taneja et al., 2016). The use of financial ratios could help predict and detect early warning signs on the economic well-being of a business and where these financial indices remain unmanaged adequately can result in insolvency and failure of the company (Karadag, 2015). The result of his study on financial management challenges in SMEs revealed that the financial ratios of the companies help to disclose the company's financial position, indebtedness, and capital structure.

Sometimes failure in a business could be a result of the unpreparedness of the owners who cannot tackle the rigors of the marketplace (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Some company executives use specific behaviors to implement change following environmental demand. Jenkins and McKelvie recognized that a leader's conduct could impact organizational success. According to Psychogios and Garev (2015), lack of role clarity, uncertainty, and the absence of a well-defined vision are some of the factors that adversely affect a firms' survival. Psychogios and Garev confirmed that large firm owners and stakeholders have been found to nurture new business models with an objective to compete for smaller projects at acceptable profits and that some executives are deficient in handling direct competition both from large corporations and with comparable companies in the same industry. Understanding leadership behaviors and the impact they have on organizational goals is very relevant to small business success.

Regardless of size, firms that lack an innovation capability are unlikely to become genuinely sustainable (Shevchenko, Lévesque, & Pagell, 2016). Firms incrementally offset rather than eliminate their negative impacts on the environment and society, hence,

a firm's response to external pressure to become genuinely sustainable predominantly depends on its internal capabilities and that of the stakeholders (Shevchenko et al., 2016). The decision to become viable especially for innovative large firms remains driven by their ability to manage external stakeholders' expectations while the difference with small innovative firms, however, is the decision-making ability based on their internal readiness to change (Shevchenko et al., 2016). According to Goffee and Scase (2015), SME entrepreneurs who enjoy their independence are unlikely to want to expand their businesses because expansion will lead to the need for more formalized structures, financial controls, and other procedures. Goffee and Scase argue that small business owners prefer to be entrepreneurs rather than managers of human, financial and technical resources so to avoid all the structures necessary for growth, many small business owners sell off or abandon the business when confronted with problems of growth.

Small Business Operator Characteristics

Small business owners need a combination of factors to succeed, including recognition of opportunity, risk-taking ability, leadership, and dedication to the company (Robinson & Stubberud, 2015). The characteristics of a small business owner are significant for the sustainability of the organization (Keasey et al., 2015). The traits include individual personality, personal characteristics, entrepreneur orientation, and demographic characteristics (Keasey et al., 2015). Van Vugt and Ronay (2014) believed small business owners must reflect on a global scale the capability of its employees which primarily is the biggest asset for any firm, large or small. Keasey et al. (2015) held that the more experience the entrepreneur has, the better business decisions that would be

made to lead the company to greater heights. Business executives may need to make tough but essential decisions regarding the business, such as financing, selling the existing firm, launching a new product, or acquiring another company. Small business leaders should know their limitations and continuously strive to improve their knowledge and skills through further education or training (Phillips et al., 2014). As part of his or her resume, an entrepreneur must be talented and passionate about his or her trade, have required education, and continuous vocational training (Alrhaimi, 2015). Alrhaimi (2015) concluded that a small business leader must have a flair for advancement and be always ready to innovate. Okyere (2017) argued that transformational leaders stimulate innovation and creativity among teams. The leader values and appreciates the contribution of new ideas and strategies for success by employees for the benefit of the organization. Business executives of Apple (Steve Jobs), Microsoft (Bill Gates), and Amazon (Jeff Bezos) experienced challenges at some point in their career but were able to steer their companies to success and drive their businesses toward profitability (Hetrick, 2014). Relevant training promotes personal development for small business owners, and in turn helps them become successful and sustain their businesses (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). Lin and Nabergoj (2014) are convinced that business owners who change the management structure with the available leadership knowledge can improve organizational performance.

Small business ownership proficiencies, skills, motives, traits, self-image, leadership ability, specialized knowledge, and social roles enable business owner success and sustainability (Mitchelmore, Rowley, & Shiu, 2014). Many governments provide

educational programs to enhance change by creating small business owner-entrepreneurs with capable leadership skills and abilities such as problem-solving capability, self-direction and initiative, critical thinking, innovation, adaptability, communication and collaboration skills respectively (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). Successful small business owners must focus on potential business opportunities, learn from failure and have the desire to achieve with the intention to turn their vision into action (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). Small business executives should learn to create an idea, recognize personal strengths, take risks, overcome threats and weaknesses, and exploit opportunities (Mitchelmore et al., 2014). Mitchelmore et al. (2014) maintained that small business owners must be equipped with relevant industry expertise, financial budgeting skills, human relationship skills, drives, behaviors, self-image, management ability, specialized knowledge, and social responsibility roles that empower and yield business sustainability. SMEs owners who seek prosperity might embrace strategies that expand entrepreneurship abilities (Mitchelmore et al., 2014). In addition small business executives should always maintain a free flow of communication with any involved stakeholders to discuss risk/benefit effect (Goldman & Bounds, 2015).

Small Business and the Economy

Small businesses contribute to economic development and are critical initiators of innovation (de Jong, 2018). Small companies can offer large organizations access to new customers, innovative products, and management practices, and opportunities to reap from the small business's contemporary image (Barringer, 2015). Due to their significant role in the creation of new jobs, the rise in GDP, entrepreneurship and innovation, small

businesses are recognized as the drivers of socio-economic growth, both in developed and developing economies (Keasey et al., 2015). Small firms require support principally from the government for their survival. According to Gobble (2016), understanding small business development stages are essential for the government to appreciate the challenges entrepreneurs encounter and further affords the platform to offer support.

Seo, Perry, Tomczyk, and Solomon (2014) in their study on the effects of managerial assistance on high- and low-performing small businesses confirmed that there exists a relationship between outside administrative support and small business performance. Seo et al. revealed that small businesses that received external managerial or technical assistance for primary business functions such as marketing, financial management, and operations are more useful compared to those firms that did not get outside assistance. Seo et al.'s findings also discovered that outside assistance for secondary business functions such as human resources and raising capital funds affected firms with better fiscal performance. Based on the results, Seo et al. concluded that owners of small enterprises should adopt different approaches to optimize business performance bearing in mind the goals, objective, programs, and capacity of the firm. Seo et al. argued that smaller firms have successfully demonstrated to be very proficient at anticipating business trends, capitalizing on new technologies, and using their lean structures to provide the required products and services. The small structure of small enterprises enables them to evade the usual bureaucracies that prevent the actions of all but the most larger companies (Seo et al., 2014).

Small businesses make substantial contributions to the progress of the economy in various areas (Barringer, 2015). The U.S. Small Business Administration report shows that of the 5.73 million businesses in the United States, 5.635 million, have a workforce of less than 100 employees (SBA, 2014). This number can be favorably compared with just over 99,000 companies that have more than 100 employees (Barringer, 2015). Researchers, government, policymakers, and the business community as a whole recognize the importance of the small business sector to the U.S. economy (Barringer, 2015). Van Vugt and Ronay (2014) maintained that the characteristics and business drivers of small business are understandably different from those of larger companies and as such requires specific, targeted policy initiatives.

In the United States, the number of small business startups consistently outpaced small business closures between 1992 to 2016 (SBA, 2014). The critical success factors for setting the pace in most industries include:

Firms must have keen practices to sustainability services (Epstein, 2018).

There should be extensive portfolios of services and solutions in the areas of management, sustainable data centers, social and environmental performance, and financial performance (Epstein, 2018).

There should be a deep and experienced bench of strong sustainability leadership skills (Epstein, 2018).

Some of these tasks involve taking the appropriate steps to implement associated policies and how those issues affect the management of corporate change, and identify

the benefit on businesses and their owners, predominantly those involved with the development and implementation of the change strategies (Epstein, 2018).

Small Business Education and Training

Education and training are two of the essential factors that a small business owner must acquire to ensure sustainability of a firm (Phillips et al., 2014). Education constitutes a potent tool for business growth (Chatterji & Patro, 2014). Chatterji and Patro (2014) discovered that understanding the importance of training as an essential element in a business increases the chances of profitability, and the antecedents of practice would, therefore, capture survivability and stabilization before profitability. Chatterji and Patro argued that the profitability stage is a confirmatory phase when survivability is possible and has occurred; while training should stay a constant rather than a variable as the company marches toward profitability. Goyal, Rahman, and Kazmi (2015) confirmed that when a business is profitable, the firm is said to have achieved survivability. Phillips et al. (2014) found that appropriate skill sets are essential to the wholesome performance of a company just as lack of leadership prevents a small business's organizational results. Phillips et al. held that small business executives must continue to acquire new skills as they become available; therefore should remain current with education and training relating to their field of business. In this way, SME leaders can positively influence their business with a relevant-to-date skill set and expertise (Mueller & Shepherd, 2016). Some small firm owners advance their knowledge through failed experiences around them and learn to adjust and improve future decisions regarding the business. Results indicate that learning from failure is allowed for small

business owners who must maintain an excellent intellectual ability to understand and work with opportunities that are available to ensure the survival of the business (Mueller & Shepherd, 2016). Tan, Nadarajah, Sim, and Ng (2014) established that a firm that invests in their workforce boosts their retention in the company by preparing them to take advantage of advancement potentials and likelihoods to move ahead in the chain of command.

Lack of knowledge or discipline to business operations is another significant cause of failure in SMEs (Tan et al., 2014). According to Mueller and Shepherd (2016), small business owners who are deficient in administrative and business skills are more apt to fail than those with sound skill sets. Mueller and Shepherd further acknowledged the importance of knowledge as a critical element in ensuring the growth, success, and sustainability of a business. In addition to a focus on possible business prospects and learning from disappointments, Lin and Nabergoj (2014) disclosed that entrepreneurs must stay motivated by the desire to achieve goals, which helps mold their vision into action. The small business owners must pursue resources that will bring the understanding of critical success factors to help them implement their ideas, succeed, and sustain their organizations (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). Alrhaimi (2015) found that critical prerequisites a small business proprietor must bring to the business are talent, education, and continuous vocational training for the staff. Alrhaimi further argued that education and progressive training encourages personnel development and will in turn promote their business to achieve success and sustainability.

Phillips et al. (2014) noted that the following indicators demonstrate the growth of a company: (a) market expansion and competitive advantage, (b) an increase in income and profit, and (c) the corporate culture and attitudes reflect the structure and organizational growth. Small business executives can further advance the success of their firms by continuously improving their skills set and those of their employees through several means, such as mentoring program and volunteer opportunities, taking up positions as a board member, or becoming part of a committee for a local community (Drucker, 2014). Drucker believed that the provision of pro bono services and interacting with other industry leaders could give much-needed opportunities for growth.

Small Business Technology and Innovation

The digital age is highly relevant for small businesses. Small business leaders must stay in tune with developments in the global digital technology (Al Badi, 2014). The need to be innovative remains critical for the sustainability of a business (Al Badi, 2014). Epstein (2018) discovered that as a firm is sufficiently well-known, innovation becomes critical for advancement. Hence, only those consultancy outfits that interpret strategy into action in the form of change, training, and research and development (R&D) can attract and motivate the best-skilled workforce and provide equilibrium to boost their proficiencies in diverse areas particularly in high-knowledge segments (Aykol & Leonidou, 2014).

Huang, Wu, Lu, and Lin (2016) analyzed the relationships between innovation, technology creation, quality management, information management capability with regards to company profitability. Huang et al. provided a useful understanding of how

business owners reinforce their collective actions toward enhancing their competitive advantages. Huang et al. held that diversification is key to organizational performance and sustainability, arguing that firms benefit from either low or high levels of diversification due to efficiencies in processing innovation knowledge or access to extensive information management skills. The problem of innovation exists due to the inability of business owners to promote a corporate culture of change, and such owners elect to maintain the status quo despite the known risk of failure (Mazzei, Flynn, & Haynie, 2016).

According to Ehrenberger, Koudelkova, and Strielkowski (2015), innovations stimulate future growth and move boundaries through the advancement of quality, readiness, diversity, and measure of products and services. Businesses use change to create new products, technology, or services or add value to existing products. The creation of new product categories fosters company efficiency and sustainability; so far, R&D expenditures have been on the increase giving insights into new technologies and connecting such to business models while preparing analyses for new competitive landscapes for the future (Ehrenberg et al., 2015). Bointner (2014) discovered that adequate funding for research and change related programs with a subsequent promotion of the market distribution of a niche technology might lead to a breakthrough of the respective technology. Curado, Muñoz-Pascual, and Galende (2018) confirmed that the experiences in information technology support and knowledge sharing impacts a company's culture positively and consequently influencing an organizations' bottom line.

Curado et al. maintained that two dimensions, efficiency, and efficacy, arise from innovation performance and this help determine a company's sustainability prospects.

Cobo-Benita, Rodríguez-Segura, Ortiz-Marcos, and Ballesteros-Sánchez (2016) discovered that corporate innovation is one of the keys to the success of an organization. Cobo-Benita et al. argued that variables, such as expenditure on R&D for each employee or the status of the company, do not affect the success of innovation projects. This process would undoubtedly bolster the company's competitive advantage, enhance preference for its brand and vastly improve its survivability. Small business owners must recognize and embrace the opportunity to foster innovation and may need innovative management processes to advance the productivity and efficiency of the company to protect the business niche and remain competitive in the market (Zhao, 2014). New technologies need innovative and evolving skill sets for industry personnel, especially with the growing levels of retirees (baby boomers) who leave the workforce with all their industry expertise (Skouloudis & Evangelinos, 2014). These challenges have caused some disparities among the needed and existing workforce and could generate skills gaps for the industry and labor force, and staffing challenges in attracting proficient and competent employees (Park & Levy, 2014; Stewart & Gapp, 2014). Olanrewaju and Jomoh (2014) argued that the survivability of SMEs might rely on diverse business factors but would benefit from the effective deployment of technology. Kasemsap (2017) believed that the survivability of businesses often depends on industry performance and rating and argued that what promotes or hinders the sustainability and success of a company in one industry might vary from those in another company. Technology and

innovation can both be crucial differentiators between business leaders and their competitors, so small business proprietors must pick systems that are malleable for the company's progress (Al Badi, 2014).

Small Business Finance and Human Capital Matrix

An inevitable bond exists between energy, finance, and human capital (Chollet, Geraudel, & Mothe, 2014). Policy reforms encapsulate all three factors. These factors contribute independently to the potential success of any industry especially energy sector (Chollet et al., 2014). Studies carried out on small firms had steadily established that a substantial impediment to business success occurs where a considerable lack of financial skills and resources exists (Kozan & Akdeniz, 2014). One characteristic among small businesses remains the absence of suitable financing, and it is recognized to be the major challenge that affects the growth and profitability of companies (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). The economic and social importance of the SMEs sector relative to being underserved financially is a significant concern for policymakers and business leaders. Alarape (2014) argued that the finance role is the most important of all activities and as such remains a focus of all activities of the firm (Alarape, 2014). SMEs arguably have inadequate access to funds. According to Alarape, financing SMEs has acquired enormous importance in the contemporary world of business (Alarape, 2014). Advancement among small firms could result in highly specialized firms that can carve out strongholds in niche markets.

Kozan and Akdeniz (2014) noted that SMEs depend significantly on private funding which makes the business operations challenging. When executives source for

finance, it enables the industry operators to deploy acquired funds to the appropriate sections of business to turn a profit (Lantos & Spertus, 2014). Finance sources wishing to vend services to small business operators would provide conditions friendly enough to endear them to the point of doing business. Challenges in SMEs creditworthiness may prevent the firm from raising the required capital for the company (Lantos & Spertus, 2014). Relationships with numerous financial organizations can serve as leverage for SMEs looking for funds from various sources. Angel investors are known to be an answer for small business owners seeking funding sources with a barrier of creditworthiness (Rahman, Yaacob, & Radzi, 2015). Operative financial risk management remains critical to the sustenance of a small business while the use of venture capital as a means of finance for a business may be a difficult task for a small proprietor due to the conditions (Rahman et al., 2015).

Small business owners' inability to access adequate capital for their firms always pose challenges for growth opportunities that are available in the industry of their choice. External financing, such as bank loans, is another crucial factor in the survival and growth of small businesses (Baradwaj, Dewally, & Shao, 2015). Business owners who do not have enough startup funds may incur fiscal burdens (Feenstra, 2014). Sihite and Simanjuntak (2015) believed it is always advisable to have a financial plan that can be reviewed timely as necessary to assist small entrepreneurs to have a handle on the cash flow, break-even point, opportunity assessment, strategic development, and profitability prospects of the enterprise. The financial plan helps business executives to perform

different financial data analyses, calculate financial ratios such as gross profit margin, return on investment, and return on owner's equity (Sihite & Simanjuntak, 2015).

Results from the ratios can disclose a company's liquidity position, operating performance, cash flow, profitability, debt, and investment valuation (Sihite & Simanjuntak, 2015). Frid (2015) discovered that budding entrepreneurs follow paths of least resistance when acquiring financial resources and also held that the business owner characteristics could affect company financing. Owners could help their enterprise by seeking financing from diverse sources to keep afloat and sustain their business (Karaarslan, Bayar, & Ozdeveci, 2016). Entrepreneurs may not have access to capital markets, due to higher costs, and various additional criteria required for loan acquisitions than those for larger enterprises (Frid, 2015). Beyond small business owners savings, obtaining money from others such as friends and family, will involve trust and affordability, and may result in management and relationship problems (Frid, 2015). Rahman et al. (2015) held that SMEs require effective financial risk management for the survival of their enterprises. To avoid financial risk, Rahman et al. advised that small business owners need an accounting system that is accurate, consistent, timely, and complete.

The survivability of any industry depends mostly on human resource and innovation strategies (Aykol & Leonidou, 2014). Barringer (2015) argued that in addition to qualified staff, good business leadership and mentoring, an improved competitive positioning of a firm with the primary focus on the quality of goods and services, are some of the strategies that can improve business performance and assure sustainability.

Small business leaders must ensure they have a committed and skilled team that will deliver on the firm's goals. Human capital in the energy sector would be available to the extent that the universities produce engineering and finance graduates who ultimately work in the energy sector long enough to become business resources and experts in the industry (Matthews, 2014). Human capital germane to the energy sector would consist of human resources from diverse areas of the economy, especially those who have interacted with the energy segment over an extended period (Dagogo-Jack, 2014).

Small Business and Social Networks

A social network is a valuable tool that allows small business owners opportunity to advance business and relationship development even outside of their immediate localities (Marlow et al., 2015). Qiu and Gupta (2015) discovered that understanding how to build a client base, and a value chain network is critical, therefore for a small business to benefit from the start-up effort, the owners could use the global social network to exploit the public's native knowledge and seek market opportunities both at home and abroad. Qiu and Gupta argued that the social network effect provides the motivational opportunities that are essential to a firms' success. The network helps facilitate business connections, information on a local and national level and culture, links, and competitor data. Qiu & Gupta believed social media serves as a primary marketing and resourceful tool for small business owners including creating a niche for the business.

Some of the most valuable and notable implications of social networks are prospect identification and resource enlistment in the locale of the business (Kapucu & Demiroz, 2015). Song (2015) held that social networks are some of the best avenues for

the flow of information and the medium facilitates and fosters innovation. Hassan, Nadzim, and Shiratuddin (2015) discovered that strategic use of social media for small business based on the attention, interest, desire, and action (AIDA) model, can indeed be useful in strategizing the use of social media for marketing purposes. Hassan et al. maintained that the proposed strategy could become a standard for small business owners to use for social media marketing. Entrepreneurial orientation has a positive relationship to social network usage. Eggers, Hatak, Kraus, and Niemand (2017) explored antecedents of social network usage in small businesses and individual performance outcomes and discovered that social network usage facilitates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SME growth.

Small business owners must strive to develop healthy social networking skills to increase the chances of business sustainability. There appears to be a relationship between tactical small business leader, social networking, and profitability in business (Eggers et al., 2017). Every business owner must develop a strategy for the development of social networking skills and the capability to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships (Hassan et al., 2015). Social media has provided business owners with the ability to widen their networking footprint outside the geographical setting (Song, 2015). Facebook, My Space, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Google+ are some of the examples of social media to network tools and other internet websites. Membership in specific industry specific groups and blogging either personal or collectively about a business's products and services can increase business bottom line (Kapucu & Demiroz, 2015).

Small Business and External Challenges - Customers

According to Sahut and Peris-Ortiz (2014), unforeseen factors influencing the external environment, pose challenges in any standard business process. Sahut and Peris-Ortiz held that a small firm would face more extraneous factors than a large corporation. Customers are considered external components of a small firm. Therefore the internal determinants would remain less than the outer elements (Sahut & Peris-Ortiz, 2014). The need to stay profitable as a small business must compel the leaders of such firms to identify the clientele specific needs and pursue solutions to achieve such needs with particular focus on the enterprise to manifest in the growth continuum of business over the initial years (Chatterji & Patro, 2014).

The difficult task of sustainability and survivability in small firms remain driven at various levels of social and environmental responsibility and performance. Markman, Russo, Lumpkin, Jennings, and Mair (2016) maintained that sustainability is justified and motivated by moral considerations and pioneered by entrepreneurial engagement. Markman et al. advocated that the natural environment should remain the foundation on which society resides, and the economy operates. Similarly, Goyal et al. (2015) upheld that small consulting firms in the energy sector could leverage the human resources of corporations receiving services to inject knowledge relevant to the operation.

According to Oladokun and Asemota (2015), customers were found to be the mainstay of all businesses. Many small business owners channel their efforts toward identifying customer needs and focus their services and strategies on customer satisfaction (Stewart & Gapp, 2014). A small energy consulting company would need as

many large energy corporations as possible to stay in business. Stewart and Gapp (2014) found that while most successful companies focus on their products and profits, small business owners perceive satisfying customer needs as the key to achieving success in the ever competitive market. Conversely, SMEs may have much work to do from just one corporation, depending on the size of the account. Oladokun and Asemota argued that customers are known to come in diverse configurations, and each customer base reveals the productivity level of the servicing company. Hence the importance of productivity spans across human and material resources in an organization. Businesses always aim to maintain cordial relationships with customers. Oladokun and Asemota (2015) believed customers are the heart of companies' marketing strategy. When a company retains existing customers while gaining new customers, it will continue to build a competitive edge in the industry.

It is vital for businesses to meet the expectations of customers and to attract and retain them to afford the organization an opportunity to continue to acquire more market share (Stewart & Gapp, 2014). Customers would constitute part of a small energy consulting company's external environment because the consulting company may be unaware of the customer's needs until the customers present the consulting firm with a brief. The small energy consulting company would regard the environment as challenging until the consulting company comprehends the crux of the submission from the customer.

Small Energy Consulting Survivability

Energy industry survival centers on world population growth of nearly 2 billion, a doubling up of global economic output in addition to a rapid expansion of the middle

class in emerging economies (Woods, 2017). According to Anderson and Ullah (2014), the existence of small energy consulting enterprise might be a positive development for the energy industry and the U.S. economy. With the advent of distributed generation technologies like solar energy posing a threat to electric utilities, the small energy firms are becoming increasingly optimistic and ready to provide the skill sets required for the emerging solar technologies to their clients (SeekingAlpha, 2016).

Electric utilities have long implemented the same business model of centralized generation but all that will change if such companies need to remain operational in the energy market, especially with the new energy technologies beginning to threaten their existence (SeekingAlpha, 2016). Small energy consulting firms seem to have become more vital in the energy industry trajectory with expert demands from the utilities, which are witnessing massive competitive headwinds on the answers to the perceived threats posed by distributed generation and new technologies.

Chofreh et al. (2014) argued that when robust energy information is available, public and private enterprises can make decisions that deliver meaningful savings and environmental benefits. Chofreh et al. identified relevant and accurate energy information as the bedrock of any energy efficiency and integrated energy management plan. Lemke and Luzio (2014) held that energy independence and security are essential components of national security and energy policies. According to Wilson and Stammer (2016), small energy firms focus on providing energy operators with standardized holistic solutions based on the action plan, and roadmap to support the implementation of the energy operators' goals.

The antecedents of a successful energy business such as energy production, transmission, and distribution capacity must be comprehensible to the small energy consulting enterprise (Bonney, Davis-Sramek, & Cadotte, 2016). The strategies small energy consulting firms employ to survive must be in alignment with the needs of energy companies that they serve, with considerations of sustainability and profitability (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). The specialization requirements to run an energy consultancy constitute obstacles to individuals who have no training in the engineering, fiscal discipline or long-term experience in power related systems (Ndu & Agbonifoh, 2014).

Small energy consulting companies offer an unbiased, diverse, and unique perspective and clarity when tough calls are needed and as authorities in their specialized industry, help companies realize goals, improve clients bottom lines and alleviate challenges companies face in quantifiable and unquantifiable ways by servicing mainstream energy organizations especially in financing and risk investment (Holt & Powell, 2015; Kivimaa & Kern, 2016; Ndu & Agbonifoh, 2014). Consultants have the drive to leave companies in a better position than where they started from by seeking to understand client needs and then deliver essential and needed solutions (Goyal et al., 2015). Small energy consultants provide accurate tax reports, financial reporting, and capital forecasting in addition to various innovation policy blends and sustainability transitions thereby facilitating their contribution to the advancement of reliable, diverse, and sustainable energy system (Kivimaa & Kern, 2016). Sustaining a business in the energy sector would require considering environmental nuances. Servicing energy clients must involve a consideration of long-term survival and eventual profitability of the client

(Goyal et al., 2015; Holt & Powell, 2015). Clients in the energy segment must operate on a mission and a vision that revolves around survival and profitability (Dogl & Behnam, 2014). The level of profitability of a business in a community reflects on the culture of that community and the wellbeing of families in the geographic area where the energy consulting businesses serve (Dogl & Behnam, 2014). For a small energy consulting company to survive, the antecedents such as energy production capacity, energy transmission capacity and energy distribution capacity must be understandable to such a company (Bonney et al., 2016). Small energy ventures focus a great deal on continuous training and R&D to meet the challenges of the times while procuring critical tangible and intangible resources to make energy operations succeed (Dagogo-Jack, 2014). According to Dagogo-Jack (2014), active involvement in the quest for success in the energy sector usually lead to booming progress in the energy market. The key to success for small energy consultancy firms will be developing agility that allows them to serve customers with greater responsiveness, speed, and precision (Boulouta & Pitelis, 2014).

Aykol & Leonidou (2014) held that the survivability of the small consultancy business depends mostly on human resource expertise in innovative strategic planning, organization and talent management, operations improvement, and technology management. Small energy consulting must ensure they have a committed and skilled team that will deliver on the client goals. Small energy consultants must be well equipped and positioned to monitor and advise on government policies and industry best practices to facilitate the adoption of advanced technologies (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). The successful servicing of energy SMEs would depend on modern and innovative

technology (Napp, Gambhir, Hills, Florin, & Fennell, 2014). Napp et al. (2014) believe that continuous investment in innovative technology in the energy sector would advance reforms, competition, growth, energy efficiency, and profitability.

Transition and Summary

Every small business owner is valuable to the U.S. economy for the reason that they generate employment and capital in the communities. Evolving strategies that will help small business owners thrive could be of great value to our local communities and economy and provide stability to families across the country. Researchers have found that from a survivability perspective, over 30% of new ventures go out of business in the first 2 years of operation (Hunt, 2015). Also, 50% of small enterprises fail during the first 7 years (SBA, 2014). Some owners can sustain their businesses, provided they have an understanding of the approaches and strategies used by successful small energy consulting business to sustain profitability.

Section 1 is the repository of the foundation for this study. The need to pinpoint the problem warrants a careful articulation of the underlying motivator for undertaking the research. The foundation and background of the survey contain the essence of this project. The problem statement and other antecedents span through Section 1. Other precursors are the nature of the study, underlying assumptions, limitations, delimitation, research and interview questions, conceptual framework, and a review of the scholarly literature.

Section 2 includes the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection

instruments and techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity. In Section 3, I provided the presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, the implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, reflections and a conclusion to the study.

Section 2: The Project

In this section, I present the methodology used for exploring and interpreting the following business problem: What strategies do small energy consulting businesses use to survive? In Section 2, I address several topics, including the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population, sampling, data collection, organization and analysis, and reliability and validity of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case research was to explore the strategies small energy consulting business owners use to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses. The target population consisted of five executives at one small energy consulting company in Washington, DC, who achieved profitability and sustained their business beyond 7 years. These five high-ranking management staff members participated in the study to explore successful strategies they used to become profitable beyond 7 years of operation. The results from the proposed research may help to develop a business model that small business leaders can use as a guide to build successful businesses. The findings from this research may contribute to positive social change by helping small business owners sustain profitability, provide employment, and improve economic activities and wealth for the communities they serve.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the inductive nature of the investigation warrants the researcher's involvement in every stage of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Consequently, I served as the principal investigator, responsible for coordinating all parts

of the investigation. I made contact with prospective participants; I screened, qualified, and converted prospects to research subjects; I conducted all types and aspects of data collection pertinent to this study; I organized, interpreted, analyzed, and reported raw and processed data; and I secured the data.

My relationship with this topic is multifaceted and comes from my experience working in an energy utility. Business relationships require professionalism, and parties owe each other trust and allegiance in the context of their relationship. Research into the survivability of a small consulting company would require an inquiry into the factors capable of helping or hindering a consulting firm from achieving sustainability. Managing such elements would require a thorough understanding of and compliance with ethical rules (Vitak, Shilton, & Ashktorab, 2016).

I took several steps to guarantee the protection of research participants in this study. First, I began to collect data for this study only after I received approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Connolly (2014) held that the IRB provides oversight and ensures that research complies with ethical standards along the three ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report. According to Wessels and Visagie (2017), the Belmont Report offers rudimentary principles that guide the conduct of research involving human participants to protect participants with limited capacity for decision-making and self-determination, such as underage children, people with mental health issues, elderly people, or prisoners. Vitak et al. (2016) argued that protecting and managing these groups of participants would require a detailed understanding of and

compliance with ethical rules. Full compliance with the Belmont Report's ethical principles is a means to attest the research is ethical (Wessels & Visagie, 2017).

According to Wessels and Visagie (2017), the Belmont Report has three foundational principles: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence and nonmaleficence, and (c) justice. The principle of respect for persons deals with respect and protection of participants. A researcher is expected to use informed consent to ensure that research participants are mindful of the purpose of the study. The principle of beneficence and nonmaleficence confirms the avoidance of risking more harm than good, to assure the maximization of the benefits of the research and the mitigation of the risk of harm. The principle of justice helps ensure equal treatment for all (Wessels & Visagie, 2017).

As another step for protecting participants, I provided them with an informed consent letter with a detailed explanation of the study. Each participant was assigned a participant code that replaced their name at the time of interview transcription and data analysis. Although anonymity cannot be guaranteed in this study because participants are known to the researcher, confidentiality of responses can be assured by removing any identifying participant characteristics, such as names from the data transcripts.

The inductive nature of qualitative research lends any study to the possibility of bias. Having personally worked in small business energy consulting, consulting bias and SME bias may exist. While my interpretation of the data may be influenced by prior experiences, I first examined and identified my personal biases and then made every effort to set them aside as I interviewed the participants and interpreted the data. I used interview protocol to ensure consistent focus on the recorded interview and to

consciously separate my perspective from the objectives of gathering data. Interview protocols contain steps in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. The use of an interview protocol increases the reliability of a case study (Yin, 2018).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to achieve objectivity in qualitative research, the researcher must adhere to rules and, in particular the interview protocol (see Appendix B). The rationale behind interview protocols is that an interviewer may stay on course without veering off topic and collecting worthless data. A proper interview protocol would contain a researcher's provisions for follow-up questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Such a feature enables a researcher or interviewer to precisely return to the central issue and main research direction rather than lose bearing and continue down a path with little or no value for the research.

Participants

Participants must meet eligibility criteria to join the research (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014). As a qualitative single case study, I used the purposeful sampling method to identify eligible participants in the appropriate case: a small consulting firm in the energy sector of the economy. The case consisted of one energy consulting firm in the Washington, DC, area. Interviewees included five individuals with the following ranks: two co-owners, two partners, and a senior management associate. Participants must have worked in an energy consulting firm for a minimum of 10 years and have experience running a consulting firm. A researcher would predetermine the criteria appropriate for ensuring the use of the right individuals (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014).

To gain access to participants, I searched chamber of commerce publications for energy consulting firms in the Washington, DC, metro area and conducted a similar search on both the website and directory of the Better Business Bureau. I used the phone numbers and email addresses to contact the prospects. I visited the location addresses in the publications. After I approached the candidates, interested individuals became participants after receiving information about the study. Through this process, I began to exchange views with the prospects to confirm their level of knowledge, longevity in the energy consultancy industry, and other identifying factors. This engagement through phone exchanges served as an avenue to establish a working relationship with participants. Once the individuals satisfied the predetermined criteria for participation, the prospects were invited to participate in the study. Of critical importance was the prospects' alignment with the research study antecedents, such as the purpose of the research, the nature of the study, the research question, and interview questions.

Research Method and Design

In this section, I present the research method and design and the rationalization for the study. According to Robinson (2014), the critical emphasis of a qualitative technique is to build an all-inclusive appreciation of all possibilities available in a study. I explored the business problem and the research question to determine sustainable and confirmed strategies for small energy consulting businesses' survivability beyond 7 years.

Research Method

I used the qualitative research method for this study. Researchers use the qualitative method to explore phenomena through inductive reasoning and to extract multiple facets of subject matter under investigation (Yin, 2018). In the process of such research, ideas, personal thoughts of participants, diverse media sources, and private communications may be useful. To explore the strategies small energy consulting business owners used to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses beyond 7 years requires discovering from such business owners what strategies they used to meet such results. In line with Yin's (2018) postulations, fundamental causes, motivations, and views are critical in the pursuit of understanding the subject of this research study. The qualitative research method includes subjective processes that enable a researcher to have close contact with the research participants. This close contact allows the researcher to capture facial expressions, implied meanings, and other nonverbal cues that emerge during a face-to-face interview (Denzin, 2017).

A quantitative research method is an option in scholarly investigations. A broad spectrum of phenomena would require the use of a quantitative approach (Singh, 2015). Under such circumstances, the study would be deductive, requiring quantified logical steps, numerical assignments for factors and variables, and statistical configurations (Singh, 2015). The quantitative process would be inappropriate for the study underway because the consulting firm is a single entity. The breadth is narrow and requires no quantification. Under quantitative research circumstances, hypotheses would be

necessary to frame the academic borders of the study. In that process, a researcher would search for correlations or causes and effects (Mertens, 2104).

Mixed-method research involves the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in one research study. Wium and Louw (2018) found the combined approach beneficial in contradicting and comparing data. Such juxtaposition of studies enables a researcher to achieve research credibility because of the multiple platforms of quantitative and qualitative. The researcher may conduct mixed-method research in any order, quantitative process before the qualitative or vice versa, thereby obtaining a deeper understanding of the qualitative element (Yin, 2018). Mixed methods was not used in this study. In the current study, the numerical measures of the business owner's success, such as revenue, are not the focus. Instead, the focus of this study was the strategies business owners use to be successful, which need to be described using interviews and content-based data.

Research Design

The research design for this investigation was a single case study. I used an exploratory single case study design for this research because it gives the opportunity to recognize the strategies that business leaders use to ensure the profitability and survival of their companies. Investigations have various nuances. When conducting a case study, a researcher focuses on results that add to a real-life phenomenon with no apparent limit to the perspective (Yin, 2015). Such nuances determine which design would be most appropriate among several. The appropriateness of the case study design arises from the need to understand accurately what and how a specific small energy consulting firm

operated from inception and beyond. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that case studies, in particular, are usually explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive; a researcher determines which specific approach would serve the purposes of the study. Using this design, I was able to explore, analyze, and interpret strategies used by participants from the energy consulting firm to ensure sustainability.

Ethnography is a research design dealing with the culture and context of a set of people in their group's natural habitat (Moher et al., 2015). An ethnography researcher embeds in the habitat over a period to learn firsthand what the group does and their behavior. This research design is appropriate for understanding the way of life of people from different ethnicities (Bryman, 2016). The ethnographic model is inappropriate for this study on a small energy consulting company firm in Washington, DC, because I'm not researching the nativity, culture, or way of life of the consulting firm participants.

Phenomenology is a research design for exploring the lived experiences of people (Ager, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2015). This design is appropriate in situations where research participants have undergone similar or the same lived experiences of a phenomenon or life event. In such cases, a researcher uses the phenomenological design to explore the pains, struggles, obstacles, and failures inherent in the participants' experiences (Yin, 2018). The design also serves to elucidate how the participants' lived experiences occurred. The phenomenological model was inappropriate for this study because the subject of research is not focused on any circumstances affecting them psychologically or physically. The case study design is more appropriate for the study than the phenomenological plan.

Narrative design is appropriate to sequence the experience of a research participant (Padgett, 2016). The need might merely be to highlight the actions of the research participant, but must have scholarship value worthy of research time and resources. In using the narrative design, a researcher focuses on the research subject or participant. The researcher narrates the participant's antecedents pertinent to the research topic (Padgett, 2016), and the researcher is responsible for organizing the research content in chronological order. In this study, I considered the small energy consulting company a case for scholarly investigation, but I did not need to tell the story in a chronological way; rather, my intent was to describe the strategies the business owners used to achieve success and sustainability. Therefore, narrative design would be inapplicable and inappropriate for this study.

Data saturation is the exhaustion of data in the investigative process whereby no new information emerges in the process of successive data mining (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Failure to reach data saturation impacts the content validity and quality of any research. Fusch and Ness (2015) explained that scholars do not all agree on any specific limit to describe data saturation. The standard measure is a point in the data collection effort where each successive participant says the same thing one or more prior participants have already said. In the context of data saturation, interviews, document reviews, and observation are data sources to culminate rich, full data.

A researcher can combine interviews with observation, archival data, field visits, and any other sources or acts a researcher deems pertinent to collect all possible data. Because logic alone is not sufficient to confirm the quality of a study, a researcher must

find and use multiple data sources, up to exhaustion point, to see the basis for logical conclusions in line with the inductive process. Maine, Soh, and Santos (2015) used the case study design in their investigation of business decision complexities. I used multiple data sources to achieve data saturation. I used a qualitative, exploratory single case study and continued with the collection of data by interviewing each participant individually, thoroughly jotting notes, recording the sessions, and repeating this method until the point of data saturation when new information or themes occurred, ensuring a replication of the study could be possible.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this research consisted of a consulting firm in the energy field in Washington, DC metro area. The research population is the grouping frame of prospects from which a researcher looks for participants (Yin, 2018). A researcher considers all the ramifications of the research to determine the description of potential research subjects. The researcher postulates the qualities and quantities to best frame individuals before searching for specific research participants (Yin, 2018). Identifying parameters enables a researcher to select participants with the requisite knowledge to add value to the available data in the field of the study (Elo et al., 2014). A research sample is the specific group a researcher adjudges appropriate to participate in the survey (Elo et al., 2014). The population was a small consulting firms, whereas the example will be a particular case of an energy consulting firm.

Sampling is the process of identifying, determining, and committing a specific individual for participation in a research study (Elo et al., 2014). The sampling method

for this research study was purposeful. When the description of potential participants is clear, the researcher will not search blindly for possible participants.

According to Khan (2014), the sample size will depend on the nature and method of a research study. Because of the nature of this study, the qualifications for participation simplified the search for participants. In justifying the number of participants, the size of the population is critical. Sampling and data collection are significant in determining the quality of a study (Robinson, 2014). I selected five participants to ensure there were sufficient data to conduct the research. With a large population serving as participant pool, recruitment of participants involved a sampling method. Snowball sampling method included beginning with a prospect that referred the researcher to other potential participants. Such referrals could lead a researcher to the number of participants appropriate for the study (Yin, 2015). Incidentally, the snowball sampling method is not suitable for this study because the population is known. The purposeful sample method for this study involved making contact with a small energy consulting company in which there are two co-owners, two partners, and a senior management associate. This company served as the case in the present study.

The suitable sample size for a qualitative study depends on what a researcher seeks to understand (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). The criteria I used for selecting participants in this study were as follows: first, I ensured the case is a small consulting company. Second, the organization is operating in the energy sector of the economy. Third, the company is operational in the Washington, DC metro geographic area. Fourth, the company had survived and sustained its business over 7 years. Last,

each participant for an interview was one of the owners or high ranking executives of the consulting firm. Interview setting will be the business premises of the consulting firm. Using the assumptions of a participating organization facilitates the conduct of observation and document reviews (Pforr et al., 2015).

Ethical Research

Informed consent is a necessity in academic research, especially when human subjects are to commit to participating in the research study (Weinberg & Campbell, 2014). I first followed the sampling method to contact prospects. Once a prospective participant shows interest in the study, I then provided the candidate with the Consent Letter. Subsequently, the participant became ready for the interview sessions.

I earned certification from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) demonstrating proficiency in this area. A letter of invitation was sent to study participants and a confidentiality agreement. Participant withdrawal from the study was without recourse. A participant may have withdrawn from the study by merely indicating such an intention. An email or text message to me was sufficient medium to convey the plan to be removed as a participant. A participant would not have suffered consequences for withdrawing from the study.

Incentives did not accrue to any participant for taking part in the study. The study is for academic purposes. The results of the research will constitute part of a scholarly body of knowledge available to public readers. With an incentivized participation in a research activity, participants are likely to respond in line with a researcher's perceived interest (Trujillo, Arroyo, & Carrete, 2014). Such a direction can derail research and

render the study unusable. Because of the capacity to introduce bias in research, incentives were unnecessary.

Research subjects are human beings with preferences; researchers are also humans with biases; human feelings could skew research activities (McDermott, 2014). It is crucial to ensure that the ethical protection of participants, which rests on the researcher of the study, is adequate (Weinberg & Campbell, 2014). The consent letter clearly stated that the participant's privacy will be protected in the study. To ensure that I had permission to conduct this research study, the Institutional Review Board provided an approval number to signal permission to commence the research. The IRB approval number for this study is IRB#04-22-19-0437656.

Protecting the name of the organization and names of the interviewees involved shrouding such identifiers with participant numbers. For instance, John Smith P1. If John Smith were to participate in a second interview, his name had to remain coded as P1B (where A, B, or C would represent the interview iteration). Through such camouflage strategies, participants' and organizations' names were kept confidential and private, and plans are in place to store the data safely for 5 years to further protect the confidentiality of participants.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection apparatus in this study. The secondary data collection instrument was a list of interview questions. As the primary data collection instrument, I administered the interview questions, captured the responses, organized the responses, analyzed the answers, and produced the results and findings. The secondary

data collection instrument was a list of open-ended questions for participants to answer (see Appendix A). The interview took place in a semistructured interview format, thereby enabling each participant to express knowledge and experience in full while answering questions. In achieving the feat, I tailored interview questions toward the expertise of participants to fully understand the subtleties of a small consulting company operating in the energy segment of the economy. I used archived records review including the analysis and evaluation of business owner's journal notes, internal business records, and external information such as websites, annual reports, and other documents available for public use. Meier and Calderon (2016) held that archived records support the use of triangulation and enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings. The primary advantage of a review of documents is to assure the validity of the applicable participant's interview response. Another advantage is that the researcher can gain an understanding of the participant's business activities as to how the company survived the first 7 years of operation and obtain a broader view of the problem for this study by reviewing the publicly available information (Meier & Calderon, 2016). Meier and Calderon found that the inapplicability, unreliability, and lack of verifiability of data are some of the possible disadvantages of the use of archival records. Finally, an observation of the company's process will help to match operational activities with participants' verbal responses to questions.

The use of the data collection involved steps. The interview questions served as prompts; and the researcher asked follow-up questions if participants' responses to the central prompting questions are unclear. I asked the questions in the order they appear in

my notepad. If the questions generate new thoughts or replies, I followed up and ask questions associating with that new thought or reply.

The confirmation activity of qualitative research studies characteristically subsists in the validation processes of member checking or transcript review (Jones & Sherr, 2014). To accomplish this validation process, I used member checking after the interview to ensure the correct transcription of the data that were collected during the interview.

Data Organization Technique

Techniques for the collection of data rest on the researcher (Yin, 2018). The researcher identifies tools and resources appropriate for the specific investigative activities with ultimate goals in view. I employed various techniques such as the interview protocol (see Appendix B) to streamline the investigative process. With the deployment of an interview protocol, the stepwise interviewing activity occurred without the inadvertent elimination of any questions or follow-up questions. Singh (2015) held that to assemble a compelling collection of data, a researcher must deploy all credible tools and not miss any opportunities that may occur during interviews.

The mechanisms for collecting data in this study included interview questions, digital audio recorder, and interview protocol. Advantages accrue to a researcher when using diverse data collection techniques (Creswel & Clark, 2017). Disadvantages might arise from the use of the methods. Advantages of an interview protocol are that (a) the interviewer will not miss any steps, (b) the questions are easy to identify at every step of the interview, and (c) returning to a prior question poses no problem.

The disadvantages of interview protocol are that a researcher might focus on the order much more than on the interview, and any error in the sequence of the protocol will create an imbalance in the interview process which is capable of leading to insufficiency of data. The advantages of interview questions are that (a) a researcher can stay on point from topic to topic, (b) follow-up questions will not pose a problem to an interviewer because the interviewer will always know the base question, and (c) the use of interview questions is a sign of a researcher's ability to organize thought patterns. Other benefits are that each interview question is representative of specific components of the foundation, background, problem statement, and other critical parts of the study, and interview questions give direction to the researcher. Video and audio recorders are advantageous to qualitative research interview activities, as a researcher may have a way to capture nonverbal cues occurring when a participant is answering questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Video and audio recorders are technical gadgets that can demand much of an interviewer's attention, primarily if a technical hitch occurs during the interview. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

Member checking is of great value to qualitative research activity. Member checking is a process by which a researcher verifies meanings from participants after such participants have answered the interview questions (Jones & Sherr, 2014). I used member checking by summarizing the participants' responses to the interview questions to ensure the meaning I captured during the interview activity reflected the participant's intention. Under certain circumstances, there may be need to verify from a participant the correctness of the participant's responses obtained (Creswel & Clark, 2017). Transcript

review would be appropriate for pursuing such clarifications. Therefore, while member checking was the choice for verification, the need to deploy transcript review did not arise, and that activity did not take place.

Data Organization Technique

Data organization begins and ends with a decision to protect the privacy of research participants (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014). Participant information is at the heart of qualitative research data, as interview responses come from individuals. Protection of research data was defined when I dedicated a USB-based 1-Terabyte external drive accessible to fit on all computers with USB ports. I used the following measures to ensure an adequate organization of data: (a) code the names of prospects while they are still prospects, (b) record names of candidates who convert to participants, (c) ensure the real names belonging to those codes are saved using participant numbers, (d) create folders on the computer to indicate categories of data and other resources, (e) create files under the respective folders to reflect specifics of investigative activities, (f) generate spreadsheets for prospects, (g) create spreadsheets for participants, and finally, and (h) continuously file any document related to these activities.

The spreadsheets for the investigative activity was an open system which allowed me the opportunity to open the file on any computer, in case I was not at my home base. The most popular database software is Microsoft Excel. However, because of the nature of this case study, I prepared for all computing circumstances. Open source products are more flexible than closed systems, such as Microsoft products. With such a spreadsheet such as Libre Office spreadsheet, I was able to use my external hard drive in any system

and securely work on the hard drive. The investigative activities led to generating raw data. After data analysis, refined data emerged. At the end of the entire research activity, I saved the papers, hard copy documents, digital media such as flash drives, compact discs, digital video discs, and audiotapes in a filing cabinet I dedicated to the study. These materials will remain in the secure storage for 5 years before destruction. At the end of the 5-year storage period, I intend to destroy all the materials from the study by using all forms of destruction appropriate for each medium, such as deleting, shredding, breaking, and incinerating.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis varies from methodology to methodology. This research study is a qualitative single case study focusing on the strategies for a small consulting firm in the energy sector to survive the first 7 years of operation. The data would require a data analysis process to ensure validity and reliability. Data coding must occur in a manner that assures sequential harvesting of meanings, especially through emerging themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In case study designs, specific steps are recommended to analyze data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Yin, 2015). I performed three steps to analyze data in this study as recommended by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003).

Step 1: Create a data repository. In order to effectively analyze data, it must be arranged in a way that is easy to manipulate (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Yin, 2015). Authoritative sources in the field of case study recommend using a software, such as NVivo or MAXQDA to organize qualitative data. In this study, I used NVivo software to

assist with data analysis. All transcripts were entered into the NVivo software for further coding.

Step 2: Coding. The second step in data analysis was data coding. In this study, coding was performed as suggested by Miles et al. (2014) who recommended that the researcher should develop initial codes based on the research questions and the phenomenon that is being studied. Once the initial codes are generated based on the research questions and the nature of the phenomenon, actual data coding will begin. I read all of the transcripts before applying any of the initial codes to the data. Then I read the transcripts again and applied the initial codes to the data working sequentially by participant transcript. In this process, I encountered chunks of data that cannot be coded with any of the initial codes that were created in the beginning of this data analysis step. When this happened, a new code was developed and incorporated into the coding scheme as suggested by Miles et al.

Step 3: Analyzing the coded data. In this step, I conducted an analysis of the coded data. The first task in this step was to group both the initial codes and the additional codes that emerged in the coding process into emergent themes (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2015). The themes were made up of codes rather than specific cases and then were reported as the answer to the research question.

Triangulation is an important technique to ensure richness and robustness in the quality of qualitative research data; different triangulation methods are necessary for describing phenomena in research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A researcher could use data, methodological, theoretical, or analytical triangulation techniques (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2015). The essence is to ensure capturing the maximum level of robust data by combining multiple methods. Data triangulation requires the use of various data sources to guarantee a full coverage of research topic. A researcher could achieve this by capturing data from different sources such as observation, archival records, and interviews (Landu, 2014).

Methodological triangulation involves collecting data from multiple sources to establish validity in case studies and to ensure that what would otherwise elude the researcher would eventually become visible and go into the account (Landu, 2014). Hoque, Covalski and Gooneratine (2013) described methodological triangulation as using more than one method for gathering data. I used methodological triangulation in this case study. Theoretical triangulation involves using multiple theories to circumscribe the perspectives of the research study (Landu, 2014). A researcher could access various assumptions to provide lenses outside the ordinary or traditional perspectives (Landu, 2014). Such an action would enable a researcher to ask questions on peripheral essentials directly or remotely connecting the study topic.

I associated principal and emergent themes with scholarly postulations in academic literature. I found associations among participant comments, emerging themes, scholarly works, and meaning from participant comments. I matched the various outcomes of the analysis against the conceptual framework to learn any emerging patterns.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research studies, the reliability and validity of the study would require a four-way test: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Yin, 2018).

Reliability

Dependability is a reliability element arising from the confirmation of data accuracy and meanings. Yin explained that the dependability of research must arise from the alignment of study factors with current happenings in the applicable field. Participant confirmation of data is at the center of this qualitative study effort. I followed replicable patterns of execution in conducting a study that will pass dependability tests. I used member checking after the initial interview to have the participants confirm my interpretations of their responses. I collected data, transcribed the data, secured participant confirmation of transcript accuracy, extracted the meanings, secured participant confirmation of the meanings, and enhanced dependability of this study. The member checking activity is critical to the achievement of dependability (Landu, 2014).

Checking for meanings from the participants formed part of the quality assurance steps focusing on reliability for this research. I used the process of bracketing to double-check the dependability factor in this study. Bracketing involves setting up conceptual borders to exclude the researcher's ideas conscientiously (Mörtrl & Gelo, 2015). Through this process, a researcher can mitigate bias (Mörtrl & Gelo, 2015). While bias can be mitigated, it can never be entirely eliminated.

Validity

Credibility is an element of validity in qualitative research (Landu, 2014). A study may be valid when research participants confirm the truth of the content. A researcher would present to each participant the meanings emanating from the participant's responses (Landu, 2014). An interpretation by the researcher might contain some inaccuracies. Thus, the need exists to confirm the meanings with the respective participants. I used a double-layered approach of data interpretation and confirmation of correct understanding through member checking to ensure transcript accuracies and interview meanings before NVivo 11 loading. For data enrichment, I used data triangulation to ensure other data sources corroborate participant responses.

Transferability is another element of validity in qualitative research (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014). A researcher may not be in a position to confirm the transferability of the study. Readers, research users, and professionals can determine the applicability of a study to any platforms or situations they deem appropriate (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014). I followed member checking and other quality assurance steps to pursue rich and robust data and secure the confidence of readers and research users. The final determination as to the transferability of this study will rest on the readers, research users, future researchers, and energy consulting professionals.

Confirmability is also an element of validity in qualitative research (Landu, 2014). When a researcher takes steps to seek external and differentiated lenses with which to interpret data, such a researcher is making an effort to achieve confirmability (Landu, 2014). Moving away from the study for a moment and viewing the study from

different angles contributes to the confirmability of the study (Landu, 2014). Failure to reach data saturation has an impact on the quality of the research conducted and hampers content validity (Fusch & Ness 2015). Data saturation occurs when there is enough information to replicate the study, and further coding is no longer feasible, and the ability to obtain additional data attained. (Fusch & Ness 2015). I collected data until reaching a point when additional data collected did not show any new concepts or themes.

A researcher should be able to conduct an exercise similar to bracketing (identifying potential questions and querying the data and process) and pick holes in the study data and method (Mok & Clarke, 2015). After conducting the bracketing-type activity, a quality audit of the investigative activity becomes possible (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). Such exercises contribute to confirmability of a study. I followed those processes to ensure the confirmability of this study. I audited every activity in the research chain, beginning with the prospect list, converting to the participant list, alphanumeric coding, and all the way to reporting the findings.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 comprised of the methodological distinctions of the study. I provided the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, research method and design, population and sample, participants, ethical considerations, data collection, organization, and analysis and reliability and validity. Section 3 contains a presentation of the findings, recommendations for action and further research, implications for social change and applications to professional practice.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of the qualitative exploratory single case study was to investigate the strategies that small-firm owners use to sustain their businesses. The data came from interviews with owners and senior executives and from documentation at one energy consulting company in Washington, DC metro area. The findings showed strategies these business leaders used to increase productivity, improve profitability, and drive efficiency and survivability. In Section 3, I present the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action. I end the section with reflections on my experience, recommendations for further studies, and a summary of study conclusions.

Presentation of the Findings

A case study methodology serves as a resourceful way to investigate a phenomenon in real-life settings (Yin, 2018). The overarching inquiry question for this study was the following: What strategies do small energy consulting business owners use to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses? I coded the interviewees as P1 through P5. Data analysis of the interviews and archival company documentation indicated seven major emerging themes for achieving profitability and sustaining business beyond 7 years: (a) functional vision, (b) planning, (c) skilled human resources, (d) matching approach to strategy, (e) creating market share, (f) good leadership, and (g) staying in tune with innovation.

Theme 1: Functional Vision

Vision is an idea or mental picture of what the future can hold (Northouse 2018). According to Scanlon (2017), a right fit with core strengths and vision can create an idea or mental picture of what the future can hold. A strong vision coupled with a viable mission statement helps an individual pursue dreams, creates a desire to grow, and gives a sense of purpose to achieve what is possible (Scanlon, 2017). P1, P2, P3, and P4 stressed that a clear and robust vision brings about the purpose of a company and influences the future state of the organization or the reason for its existence. This theme's findings align with Peter and Donnelly (2011), who affirmed that purposes make clear the mission statement of a company, which represents a particular set of policy, programmatic, or management objectives for the programs and operations covered in the strategic plan. P2 and P5 believed that a healthy vision coupled with a strong mission statement is great for the success of any business. Both P2 and P5 also attributed the company's success to its strong vision and mission statement. According to Sakiru (2013), owners of successful businesses use available intelligence to transform the management idea that can sustain the business to achieve positive organizational performance. The theme of functional vision emerged from Warm-up Questions 2 and 3 and Interview Questions 2, 6, and 7.

P2 disclosed that having the foresight to follow the vision was a focal idea. P4 and P5 also added that a strong vision with a pivotal statement implies a desire to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. P4 surmised that, for the business, the primary obligation was to set a realistic and achievable vision for the organization and to have a

distinctive competency and a world-class service delivery process. Each participant agreed that the company's primary goal was to achieve a unique proficiency and force the competition into a reactive mode by delivering products of better value in a timely manner. Each participant decided that the distinctive competency addresses various performance dimensions, which include the firm's service quality process that exceeds customer expectations, the technology that enhances that service, and an empowered workforce to implement and operate that technology. In addition to these performance measurements, all participants noted, is a management that listens to customers' feedback and facilitates efficient work flows.

Each participant shared their thoughts about the vision of what they imagined was a great business. The vision is effectively communicated to the members of staff, eliciting a sense of commitment and purpose. The results are consistent with transformational leadership theory, where every staff member buys into the common vision, with the management strongly guiding the organization in the right direction. Each participant maintained that effectively implementing the vision statement propels them to introduce strategies that support productivity with a sense of purpose. The theme findings align with Scanlon (2017), who argued that by focusing on the vision and goal to succeed, employees are ready to perform multiple functions to meet business objectives.

Neumann (2018) indicated that when working toward goals, transformational leaders simplify the process showing the vision and encouraging teams to pursue that vision and not pay attention to distractions. The study results connect with the idea that leaders have focus and hope (Neumann, 2018). The participants acknowledged that as

leaders and owners with a goal to succeed in the business, they must always stay ahead of industry's best practices. The theme is consistent with Cäker and Siverbo (2018), who held that lack of role clarity, uncertainty, and the absence of vision had an undesirable effect on the overall performance of a company and its employees. Leaders transform the management design with the available acumen that can sustain the business and achieve positive organizational performance (Neumann, 2018).

Theme 2: Planning

Planning emerged as the first of the strategic qualitative indicators for small business owners and part of the business procedural workflow from the firm's business plan (Bae et al., 2014). The theme of planning emerged from Warm-up Question 3 and Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9. According to Baum et al. (2016), planning is an important precursor to action in a new business, assisting owners in making useful decisions, turning abstract goals and objectives into concrete operational steps, and balancing resources where necessary. Having a good business plan reduces the likelihood of business failure and quickens firm growth. Planning could be tactical or strategic (Kaufman, Herman, & Watters 2002). Tactical plans have shorter time frames and narrower scopes than strategic plans; they offer the particular concepts for executing the strategic plan and are supported by a company's operational plan, which includes tools such as policies, procedures, and rules for executing daily, weekly, and monthly activities (Kaufman et al., 2002). Each participant recognized that a detailed business plan should be the first phase of any startup to ensure business success. P2, P3, P4, and P5 reiterated that planning defines an organization's strategy, or direction, and guides decisions on

allocating its resources to pursue the strategy. P2, P3, P4, and P5 also agreed that there are many benefits to a business having a formalized strategic decision-making plan. These four participants supported the importance of paying attention to market forces, especially in a fast-developing industry like energy.

The most notable remarks connected to this theme were the admission by each participant of their involvement in structuring the business operations plan, which included finance, incentives, benefits, business procedures, and workflow of the company. Each participant stated that companies that set strong business plans with long-term goals assume fewer risks because they are able to track results and make needed adjustments. All the participants insisted that their firm's well-structured business plan, processes, and workflow policy during its first 7 years played a major role in its breaking even and achieving profitability in 3 years of business. P1 acknowledged that, as a rule, each employee is required to draw up a business plan every quarter. P1 also revealed that, through planning, the executives could determine what projects, companies, and business leads the firm will pursue and what areas to pay extra attention to. P4 noted that in addition to helping management create an efficient business model to achieve the firms' objectives over the years, planning continues to be crucial for directing and controlling company activities. P2 and P3 stated that the firm's long-term strategy allowed them to budget over extended periods for new and upcoming initiatives, thereby spreading operational costs. As a result of good planning, P2 and P5 disclosed that changes in workflow are completed in phases and small segments, allowing for tests and loss reductions in areas of failed projects, leads, or strategies. P2, P3, and P5 reiterated that a

strong business plan allows management to focus on specific assignments without distractions from daily workplace interruptions. P4 emphasized that adequate planning afforded the company an improved appreciation of the business in a rapidly changing environment.

P1 and P4 indicated that with their prior assignments, as management executives of large corporations, they were designated to lead the structuring of the business plan before the inception of the company. P1 and P4 also pointed out that their prior relationships provided some assistance in the area of accessing financing. In addition to each participant's contribution, the majority of the financing came from banks P1 and P4 were associated with in the past. Through networking, they have maintained and grown these relationships since the inception of the firm. The study results align with Hassan et al. (2015), who stated that every business owner crafts a strategy for the development of social networking skills and the capability to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. This theme is also consistent with Bonney et al. (2016), who stated that finance sources work together with consultants for standardized solutions offering suitable business conditions. This theme finding aligns with the literature that there appears to be a relationship between tactical small business leaders and profitability in business (Eggers et al., 2017).

Theme 3: Skilled Human Resources

The education level of entrepreneurs and their employees is one of the most active drivers that determines the success of a small business venture. A dynamic business leader must make vital decisions, such as in employment and human resources. Each

participant stated that survivability of a consultancy business depends mostly on human resources. According to Nasr and Boujelbene (2014), the level of education business owners have is critical for a small business and influences management styles and growth. Nasr and Boujelbene (2014) believed that appropriate training, coaching, and development should be made available for employees to maximize their potential and optimize their performance, so they are positioned for success to achieve impressive results. The general observation in the firm was that all employees hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Each participant admitted that some owners fail in business because they do not have the requisite education and understanding of how to run a business. The theme of skilled human resources emerged from Warm-up Questions 1 and 2 and Interview Questions 1 and 2. This theme result aligns with Mueller and Shepherd (2016), who stated that small business owners who are deficient in administrative and business skills are more apt to fail than those with sound skill sets.

Education and training emerged as critical factors in this study because industry-specific education is a predominant issue for business success. The theme findings support Njaramba and Ngugi's (2014) emphasis on the vital role of education in the success of small businesses. All the participants indicated formal education as one of the strategies that led to their business success, and skilled staff, who will deliver on the firm's goals, are sought after and retained with incentives and benefits. This theme finding aligns with Mueller and Shepherd on the importance of knowledge as a critical element in ensuring the growth, success, and sustainability of a business. Leadership must expeditiously replace team members who consistently fail to perform with

productive employees (Ben-Amar & McIlkenny, 2014). Thus, delivering on major products and services becomes the mantra of sustainable small energy consultancy business.

This theme result agrees with Aykol and Leonidou (2014) in that only those consultancy outfits that interpret strategy into action in the form of training, coaching, and R&D place great emphasis on attracting and motivating the best-skilled workforce. Business owners who obtain higher levels of education perform better than business owners with lower levels of education do (Sarkar, Rufin, & Haughton, 2018). All five participants responded that they had formal and informal training. This research theme aligned with Nasr and Boujelbene's (2014) conclusions that the level of education of business owners is a crucial factor for small business survivability, which influences management styles and growth (Sarkar et al., 2018).

Theme 4: Match Approach to Strategy

According to Nasr and Boujelbene (2014), teams need to be appropriately aligned to ensure that a firm's business approach stays fully supported. Each participant acknowledged that a firm's business approach should remain reinforced by company policy and structure, and the right plan must be complemented by efficient processes and workflow to help the system and structure. P3 also stated that being proactive has greatly enabled the executive management of the firm to achieve success amid chaos in the industry. P3 also added that the company anticipates and averts risks with its regular analysis of work. P1 and P4 mentioned that they practice inspirational motivation as a strategy in the company. P4 further pointed out that due to the diversity of business

ventures, they use different approaches that are in turn matched to the appropriate project. P2, P3, and P4 stated that positioning a firm is critical in a highly competitive environment. Each participant remarked that, for the future of the company, management considers the pros and cons of every decision or strategy before communicating it to employees. P2, P3, and P4 noted that management considers different options to determine the direction of the organization, to understand the firm's current position, and to decide possible avenues to pursue a particular course of action.

In the answer to the creative or unconventional steps taken at different stages of the business, such as the forming, surviving, and profiting stages, each participant disclosed that to complement the right strategy further, they designed and implemented efficient processes and workflows to support the policy and structure. Each participant identified that leaders who need to succeed in the current economic climate must learn multiple strategies that are effective and sustainable and that match the firms' strategic approach to their environments. Meanwhile, all the participants stated that the central focus in their dealings rests on the approaches used, which certainly has endeared both clients and employees to stay engaged and encouraged to do business. P2, P3, and P5 contended that in addition to creating the right approach at the right time, they implemented various procedures to ensure the processes are revisited continuously and updated depending on the project and the client. P4 and P5 further cited instances where they introduced cost-saving measures, such as hiring contractors to execute contracts that are not germane to the firm's daily responsibilities and instead of spending money to hire staff for a one-off job. P3 specifically pointed out that the company uses product

differentiation strategies in situations where they have a competitive advantage, specifically to reinforce superior quality delivery or service. This theme emerged from Warm-up Question 3 and Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, 5. and 8.

As a company that has been operating for over 10 years as a thriving entity conducting business with notable corporations, especially electric and gas utilities, all participants maintained that their level of performance is unrivaled and speaks for itself. They have a competitive advantage over other less known energy consulting companies. Each participant stressed that this fact has collectively helped them to build brand loyalty for the company. The theme evidence supports Deichmann and Stam (2015) and Engelen et al. (2015): Strategic application in transformational theory where owners make challenging decisions has the ability to take the right risks and employ numerous processes and expertise to create a sustainable and profitable business through the years.

Theme 5: Create market share

According to Jhang et al. (2012), the goal of business development is primarily to identify and understand target clientele and effective marketing methods. It is particularly necessary to determine the business uniqueness from its competitors and create a niche in a competitive market. This theme emerged from Warm up question 3 and Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9. Any business that wants to succeed in a highly competitive environment such as the energy sector, must self-position because according to P2, “You have to know what you are good at and what advantages your competitors have.” Small businesses survive by seeking market niches that larger operators overlook (Arnold et al., 2015). P5 noted that effective marketing is a significant tool in consulting

businesses so as an energy consultancy, marketing assignment is a significant instrument, and all participants agree that their principal duty is to bring in new clients and projects for the business. P5 confirmed that every employee at the firm except for those in the marketing department has marketing as a second role and that “the company encourages training aimed toward all sorts of marketing tips and tricks for effective and efficient marketing.”

P4 stated that “the firm has carved out a niche in the competitive marketplace which happens to be one major element of the firm’s strategy that guarantee the viability of its business sustainability.” P4 asserted that the company having determined what makes its business distinct from the rest of the competitors had focused all efforts toward those features. The other participants admitted there are unique features which have put the firm way ahead of its competitors such as outstanding customer service mobility, top notch R&D, specialized industry knowledge and of course good networking and marketing contacts. The importance of marketing emerged from Interview Questions 1, 2, 6, 8, and 9. Each participant admitted that their primary assignment is to bring new clients and projects.

As part of additional creative and unconventional steps the firm’s management took at different stages of the business development to assure survival and profitability, P1, P2, P4, and P5 admitted using a price-skimming strategy in the period where they have a novel product or service or client. P2 specifically described this plan as an advantageous strategy and a perfect way to protect their niche in the marketplace. Price skimming, according to P2, is using research to find leads, drop prices to beat

competitors, and create opportunities to land new projects. P2 also explained that each time they have a new breakthrough from their R&D, they used price skimming to their best advantage. P4 insisted that the company maintains a viable R&D unit that thrives on identifying the next new project, client, or idea in the industry. This theme results are in line with Birasnav (2014) who emphasized that a business should develop clear strategies, create a sound vision through motivation, inspiration, and with the commitment of employees, execute the innovative processes to achieve profitability, maintain cost-effectiveness, and promote sustainability in the company. This theme findings also agree with Arnold et al. (2015), that small businesses survive not by competing with large corporations but seeking market niches that larger operators overlook. This type of strategy requires constant attention to detail, necessitating self-analysis well beyond the operational level.

Theme 6: Good leadership

Management can build morale, galvanize workers into groups to get work completed, and arouse the motivation level of workers (Northouse, 2018). Successful small business owners take on leadership style by motivating others. Transformational leadership emboldens teams to achieve unexpected and surprising results (Northouse, 2018). The theme findings are consistent with Hamstra et al. (2013) on the fact that small business leaders agree that the relationship between a supervisor and the employee can significantly influence business performance. As transformational role models, each participant insisted the firm is equipped to efficiently implement the vision which allows them to motivate, inspire, and provide the necessary elements to their employees and

clients for the success of the business. This theme emerged from Warm up Question 3 and Interview Questions 1, 5, 8, and 9.

The theme evidence shows that there has been a continuous update and modification of procedures, workflow schemes and strategies in the company. Rana and Malik (2016) maintained that leaders identify, alter, and craft strategies following any changes in an organization. This theme results support Birasnav (2014) that the transformational leadership concept identifies change, advance vibrant strategies to enable the transition, create a vision to guide the shift through motivation and execute the innovative processes to attain success, maintain cost-effectiveness, and promote sustainability in the company.

According to Northouse (2018), transformational leadership theory encourages people to achieve unanticipated and remarkable results and, in this case, provides employees independence for specific job assignments and the power to make decisions once trained. Each participant confirmed that leadership has been an essential element in the success of the firm. The findings in this theme align with Northouse (2018), who held that employees share the same belief that leadership can mobilize workers into groups to complete work, build morale, and promote the well-being and motivation level of teams through high affinity. P1 and P3 pointed out that leading by example is important because the leader is making decisions that affect the organization. The team follows the pattern, develops an idealized image of the leader, and tries emulating the leader's behaviors (Wang et al., 2013). P1 and P5 also added remarked that having the knowledge that it takes efforts to adjust to change is vital in the small business industry. For this reason,

transformational leadership is a form of command that involves causing a change (Bass, 1985). According to Rana and Malik (2016), leaders recognize change and then create strategies for those changes. P1, P3, P4, and P5 recalled they had used several practices and skill sets through the years connecting with clients to create a sustainable and profitable business.

The theme results are consistent with leadership application to transformational theory because the owners work with teams to identify needed change based on the identified goal, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, motivation, hard work and executing the change in tandem with committed members of a group. Good leadership is a fundamental part of the full range leadership model where employees in furtherance of stated objectives, use multiple processes and expertise to create a sustainable and profitable business through the years with their clients and entities in the external environment (Deichmann & Stam, 2015; Engelen, et al., 2015). All five participants acknowledged there has been a constant update and transformation of processes, workflow designs and strategies in the company. P3 and P5 emphatically stated that such changes are necessary and have been vital to the firm's success through the years. The theme findings agree with Birasnav (2014) who affirmed that the transformational leadership theory guides the transition through motivation and execution of innovative processes to achieve profitability, maintain cost-effectiveness, and promote sustainability in the company.

Theme 7: Staying in tune with Innovation.

Innovation fulfills a means of providing service and product and service differentiation which offers the ability to recognize a niche market to drive business sustainability. According to Epstein (2018), as a firm is sufficiently well-known, innovation becomes a critical issue for development. Innovation activities are directed toward the creation of services addressing customer needs and in-house improvements. P3 and P5 argued that winning customer loyalty based solely on price is challenging. Rather focusing on the actual service delivery process will ensure long-term customer loyalty which is part of the company's ongoing business strategy. The findings in this theme are consistent with Neumann (2018), who held that the transformational leadership concept identifies that success is dependent on the effort of the entire team hence management must be open and receptive to innovative ideas to succeed. This theme emerged from Interview Questions 6, 7, 8, and 9.

One major problem with innovation is usually the reluctance of business leaders to accept and promote a corporate culture of change even when it is clearly necessary for the success of the business (Mazzei et al., 2016). P2 agreed that growth only happens in a company with a culture of openness to new ideas from all levels. P2 and P3 surmised that as executives of the company, they all make conscious efforts to seek new ideas from staff members and use their insights in making decisions. Theme findings agree with Curado et al. (2018) that innovation presents two dimensions, namely efficiency, and efficacy, which helps determine a company's sustainability prospects.

According to Davcik and Sharma (2015), the use of innovative technology to implement product differentiation is a significant marketing strategy. Each participant reiterated the importance of innovation as a means of providing product and service differentiation in the firm. Each participant also indicated that the ability to identify products and a market niche is supreme to the company sustainability. P1 determined that consultants are supposed to give valuable insights into the existing problems at any time and to develop an integrated strategy framework aligned with a company's corporate vision. P1 and P4 admitted that technology and innovation are both critical elements for any small business survival. Findings are consistent with Al Badi (2014) that technological innovation sets apart the successful business leaders and those businesses that will fail. P1 explained that the firm has an advanced technology system and a fully established R&D department. P4 also noted that the firm's R&D primary function is to discover new innovative ideas in the energy industry which are strategically implemented by the firm either in piece-meal approach or in a comprehensive structure tactic based on the information. Each participant upheld that the firm's comprehensive R&D is always proactive with advancement in the energy industry such as smart grid technology and renewables and the industry's best practices. The theme results align with study according to Tayal (2016), that businesses in the energy industry have been navigating fast technology innovation, slowing demand, and rising electricity prices. Findings from the theme also revealed that the leaders' ability to perceive, comprehend, predict, and adapt to market elements leads to higher firm performance. Outcomes from the theme are consistent with Neumann (2018) transformational leadership concept, which argued that

innovation improves the understanding of the roles of leadership and affect individual behavioral outcomes by helping employees and leaders encourage the promotion of innovative ideas in a firm.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this study may be important to professional business practice in various ways. Business owners and executives may borrow from the findings of the study to create a better work environment, boost morale and productivity and improve employee expertise and proficiency. Business leaders could use the findings to acquire appropriate management skills, direction and knowledge for running their business successfully. Business leaders may also use this study to discover best means of attracting adequate capital and human resources to ensure profitability and sustainability of their firm.

Business executives could use the findings to obtain necessary data to help create a comfortable market niche for their business. The study results could serve as a basis for business owners to promote their understanding of the sustainable approaches as a driver of profitability. Business leaders and executives may use the findings to identify key strategies that could include training, compensation, recruitment, and incentive practices. Results may also help leaders to compare and contrast the various tested tactics and choose viable ones that apply to their companies. The results of the study, when published, may afford business leaders important data on good leadership, employee efficiency, and drive.

Implications for Social Change

The results of the study may contribute to social change by establishing that suitable management approach drives a successful small business enterprise. The study data support the notion that the level of profitability of a business in a community reflects on the culture of that group, and when members of the community are successful in business, their contributions to their community can offer benefits that will elevate the status of such a society (Galpin et al., 2015). Such benefits may include helping to stabilize the local economy and the nation at large. Some implications could be generating new employment opportunities, staff training, competitive compensation, better working conditions and improved work life practices.

Data analysis from the study indicated that a thriving firm provides an improvement in the quality of life in the immediate environment by playing a vital role in the welfare, culture, and the economy of local communities. A successful and profitable enterprise increases the local government tax base and lowers unemployment rates. The result of this study constitutes the body of knowledge on tested successful strategies for business owners especially small energy consulting enterprises to develop, implement, grow profits, and sustain their businesses. These strategies help to reduce turnover rates, boost employee performance, and contribute to the general welfare of the community through viable investments and philanthropic activities.

Recommendations for Action

Leadership style usually has an impact on organizations (Northouse, 2018). In the course of this research, I found that good leadership bears positively on a firm. Findings

from the study revealed that employees react to the firm's leadership style, hence business owners and executives should focus on the key elements of good leadership in an organization. A firm's leadership style should be apparent in the vision of the company for employees to subsequently imbibe the dictates of such policy. Having the foresight to inculcate a good leadership policy was a focal idea that each participant in this study seemed to indicate in their responses. Business executives can establish and enhance rapport among and with employees by improved communication, interpersonal and management skills.

Business leaders should provide human resource policies that drive efficiency, maximize productivity, and work life balance. Involving employees in the decision making process helps exhibit the level of respect the management has in their contribution and feedback, and as such, promotes loyalty, motivation and performance. This study may benefit both business owners and employees. Results of this research will be shared with the study participants and business owners through email and platforms such as conferences, small business lectures, seminars, business journals and magazines, etc. The publication of the approved study in the ProQuest/UMI dissertation database may assist interested students and researchers to access the study. Furthermore, I will send a summary of study results and recommendations to study participants. I will seek opportunities to discuss study findings at business, professional and leadership forums and provide an article based on my results to be published in an energy peer-reviewed journal.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative single study was to explore strategies small energy consulting business owners and executives use to sustain their businesses beyond seven years. The findings of this study may provide ample information for further researchers to explore strategies small energy business executives use to ensure sustainability, profitability, and long-term growth of their firms.

This research was limited to five top management executives of a small energy consulting firm in the Washington, DC, metro area. The conduct of further research that expands beyond the geographical and sample population boundaries of this study might lead to additional clarity and insight pertaining to strategies for small business sustainability. Future studies may include a larger population with more participants from other parts of the country. Additionally, this study applied to small energy businesses with unique sustainable strategies that may differ from other sectors and industries. Future studies may explore small business survival strategies that focus on other fields such as telecommunication, education, manufacturing, or agriculture.

Reflections

In this study, I explored strategies small energy business leaders use to make profit, ensure growth and survival. I learned that small business practitioners employ different practices to ensure profitability and long-term growth. The participants use various administrative and managerial approaches that turn out to be sustainable strategies.

In the course of this research, I found that networking is key to achieving success in the business environment. I ran into some road blocks trying to get appointments from potential participants. I discovered, however, that in the Washington, DC metro area it is not easy to gain access to the small business executives especially those in energy sector. Use of email and phone calls was not quite sufficient to convince small business leaders to make time and share experiences with researchers. Face-to-face interaction was necessary to get the attention, confidence, and trust of these executives.

One major takeaway from the study is the fact that relationships and trust are crucial in achieving business success. Participants in this research could not have achieved their goal of owning a thriving small business without the two executives of the firm who used their good standing relationships to get finance assistance from banks, which in turn propelled the firm to expand its business reach and break even in 3 years of inception. I recommend that future study in this area should be conducted to include the perspective of employees.

Conclusion

The energy industry is at the crossroads of tradition and innovation, and leaders must continue to adapt to changing times and provide leadership and sustainable strategies to steer the business in the right direction. Seven main themes emerged from the data analysis of this study. These themes include (a) finding the right functional corporate vision, (b) strategic planning, (c) skilled human resources, (d) ability to match approach to strategy, (e) creating a market niche, (f) good leadership, and (g) staying in tune with innovation.

Consultants are expected to offer solutions and develop integrated strategy framework consistent with an organization's corporate vision. Current and prospective small business owners and managers could obtain help to achieve profitability from understanding and using the approach as reflected by the themes expressed by the participants in this study. Researchers may use the findings of this study in further research to help small business owners to develop strategies necessary for sustainability. The results of the study relate to the fact that for a small energy consulting company to survive, they must adapt their business strategy to a constantly shifting economic environment. Evidence indicated that strategies that provide successful businesses are interwoven. A well implemented business plan coupled with a functional vision, matched with the correct approach and strategy and innovative good leadership should be components of successful small business strategic tools.

Small business leaders must pay attention to the developments in the world business environment due to its connection with market forces that affect consumers and demand. Business leaders must adapt their business strategy to a constantly shifting environment. Sustainability therefore remains the primary goal for small business survivability and profitability. Small business leaders use and implement different approaches, strategic tools, and policies to drive their long-term goals and achieve its objectives. A successful company strategy enables owners and management to position their company in its chosen market area, to satisfy customers, employees, and stakeholders, create a market niche, compete successfully, and create wealth and achieve good business performance. Therefore, sustainability results in long-term growth,

competitive advantage, and profitability, despite market threat. Changes in strategy become necessary only when it is clear achieving a strategic goal is either impossible or no longer desirable.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Questionnaire

Warm-up Questions

The warm-up questions will be

1. Where did you acquire the management skills for a career in energy consulting?
2. What motivated you to invest in an energy consulting business?
3. What is your experience as a small energy consultancy business owner on the viability of your business?

Interview Questions

1. What specific strategies did you use to sustain your energy consultancy business organization?
2. What policies did you initially implement to ensure your business survival from Year 1 to Year 7?
3. At what point during the first 7 years did your profitability occur?
4. What were the key barriers to implementing your survival strategies?
5. How did your organization address the principal obstacles to successfully achieving your profitability strategies?
6. How did you assess the effectiveness of your plan for survival, profitability, and sustainability?
7. Having attained profitability, are there elements of your approach that guarantee the viability of your business into the future?

8. What creative or unconventional steps did you take at the different stages of your business such as the forming, surviving, and profiting stages?

9. What else can you share concerning your development and deployment of the strategies your organization used to achieve profitability and sustainability?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

A. Case Study Introduction

1. Research Question: What strategies do small energy consulting business owners use to survive, achieve profitability, and sustain their businesses?

2. Conceptual Framework: Transformational Leadership Theory

B. Protocol Purpose and Intended Use

1. The above-mentioned is the study protocol to be used by the researcher as a guide to all study data collection, analysis, findings, and conclusions preparation efforts.

2. A researcher will use the protocol to ensure the dependability and credibility of the case study methods, findings, and conclusions

C. Data Collection Procedures

1. Data collection will from conducting of semistructured interviews with healthcare managers with a record of success, a review of company documents, and participant observation for augmentation.

2. The researcher will recruit five high ranking officers of a small energy company in Washington, DC

3. The researcher will determine the specific study department and contact persons after sending letters and getting responses back.

4. Preparation activities to take place before site visits to conduct interviews:

- Identify the participant pool,
- Obtain consent and inform participants about audio-recording,

- Inform participants about privacy, confidentiality, and security of their information.

- Reiterate to the participants about audio-recording of the interview, and tell them that they could request to turn it off at any time,

- Schedule and conduct the interviews for 30 to 60 minutes

- Participants can ask questions or make corrections,

- The interview will take place only one time unless participants have additional information to provide.

- Transcribe the entire audio-recorded interview,

- Give the transcript for review to ensure that the answers you gave are correct.

5. Data collection tools:

a. Digital audio recorder

b. Analog audio recorder

c. Research field notes

d. Case study database NVivo.

D. Case Study Interview Questions:

Warm-up Questions

1. Where did you acquire the management skills for a career in energy consulting?

2. What motivated you to invest in an energy consulting business?

3. What is your experience as a small energy consultancy business owner on the viability of your business?

Interview Questions

1. What specific strategies did you use to sustain your energy consultancy business organization?
2. What policies did you initially implement to ensure your business survival from year 1 to year 7?
3. At what point during the first 7 years did your profitability occur?
4. What were the key barriers to implementing your survival strategies?
5. How did your organization address the principal obstacles to successfully achieving your profitability strategies?
6. How did you assess the effectiveness of your plan for survival, profitability, and sustainability?
7. Having attained profitability, are there elements of your approach that guarantee the viability of your business into the future?
8. What creative or unconventional steps did you take at the different stages of your business such as the forming, surviving, and profiting stages?
9. What else can you share concerning your development and deployment of the strategies your organization used to achieve profitability and sustainability?

E. Data Analysis Techniques and Tools.

1. Coding (deductive and inductive).
2. Analysis tools: NVivo 11

F. Study Dependability, Credibility, and Transferability Methods.

1. Dependability methods
 - a. interview protocol use

- b. Case study database creation
2. Credibility and transferability methods
- a. Multiple data sources (credibility)
 - b. Assessment of rival explanations, research bias identification, and transcript review (credibility)
 - c. Rich description of study sample population, context, and use of field review panel (transferability)