

2019

# Small Service Business Strategies to Win Open Federal Competitive Contracts

Mark Anthony Mitchell  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Mark A. Mitchell

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Small Service Business Strategies to Win Open Federal Competitive Contracts

by

Mark A. Mitchell

MPA, Wayland Baptist University, 2013

BS, Wayland Baptist University, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2019

## Abstract

Despite policies for U.S. federal agencies to use open competitive procedures that increase small business participation in federal contracting, some small businesses do not win open competitive federal contracts. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies some leaders of small businesses in the service industry have used to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The conceptual framework for this study was agency theory. The participants in this study were 6 leaders of small businesses in the state of Washington who successfully implemented strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. Data were collected through face-to-face, semistructured interviews and a review of company documents. Data were analyzed using Yin's 5-phase cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data, resulting in the 3 key themes: opportunity identification strategy, requirements strategy, and bid submission strategy. The findings indicated that leaders of small businesses win U.S. federal contracts by identifying contracting opportunities that meet their business model and risk tolerance, strengthening their knowledge of contract requirements, and increasing their participation in competitive public procurements. The implications of this study for positive social change include the potential for leaders of small businesses to lower the unemployment rate through the creation of jobs, increased innovation, and contribution to the economic growth of the local community.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my parents, Bertha and Curtis Mitchell, who taught me to pray and honor my lord and savior, Jesus Christ! My parents are not here to witness this achievement, but I know they are smiling down on me and still helping me succeed. I want to dedicate this study to my soulmate and rock, Freda, who had to endure the long nights of me writing and for listening to my complaints. I dedicate this study to my two wonderful daughters, Brittany and Alysha, for always cheering their father on and tolerating my absences due to studying. I want to dedicate this to my family, friends, and coworkers that supported me through this journey. Lastly, a special dedication to my brothers John, Eddie, and my sister Linda, I miss and love all of you!

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The economy of the United States depends on the success of small businesses. Most of the jobs created in the United States occur through actions of small business leaders (Lawless, 2014). The U.S. government supports the success of small business growth through ensuring active participation in federal contracting. The Small Business Act of 2013 supports full and open competition for small businesses to ensure growth prospects for small businesses and to ensure that small businesses receive a fair percentage of federal contracts, which strengthens the U.S. economy through job creation and economic development (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017b). Officials within U.S. federal agencies seek and open competition in federal contracting to promote economic growth (Krivda & Bogart, 2014; Smirnova & Leland, 2016). Small business leaders contribute to the economic development of communities in the United States by winning federal contracts, creating jobs, and promoting innovation.

### **Background of the Problem**

The Competition in Contracting Act of 1984 mandates that federal agencies use full and open competition procedures that permit maximize participation from small businesses (Woods et al., 2014). Federal contract awards based on the act's mandates establish the best value for taxpayers and agencies through more competitive pricing for goods and services (Krivda & Bogart, 2014). Further, most federal agencies adhere to the guidance in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) or an agency supplement that codify the requirements of the Competition in Contracting Act (Krivda & Bogart, 2014). FAR subpart 6.1, Full and Open Competition, outlines the requirement federal

contracting officers must follow to ensure contracts include competitive procedures (FAR, 2016a). Through provisions in FAR, federal agencies can bypass competition requirements under certain conditions. For instance, federal agencies allow contracting officers to earmark certain procurements for small businesses through a process called set-asides (FAR, 2016b). Federal set-aside is small business preference programs that are open to all classification of small businesses that allow contracting officers to award partial or total contracts to small businesses (FAR, 2016c).

The U.S. Small Business Administration established federal agencies' wide small business participation goal of 23% for prime contracts (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017a). When agencies meet their small business goals, approximately \$4 million dollars per percentage points of the 23% goes to small businesses (Shoraka, 2014). However, there is the need for future research to investigate the benefit of set-aside policies that refashion policies to meet national small business goals better (Gansler, Lucyshyn, & Burdg, 2015) as well as small businesses participation in public procurement (Loader & Norton, 2015). The inclusion of small businesses in federal procurement increases the value to the taxpayers by promoting competition and lowering prices for goods and services.

### **Problem Statement**

Small businesses are not winning open competitive federal contracts despite policies for U.S. federal agencies to use open competitive procedures that increase small business participation in federal contracting (FAR, 2016a). In 2015, U.S. federal agencies spent over \$500 billion dollars for goods and services in contract awards with only \$35

billion or 7% awarded to small businesses using open competitive procedures (Shoraka, 2014; U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2017). The general business problem was that some small business leaders experience reduced profitability because of not winning open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The specific business problem was that some small business leaders in the service industry lack strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The targeted population was small business leaders in six service industry companies located in the state of Washington who successfully implemented strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The implications for positive social change include the potential for improved local job creation, local economic stability, and lower local unemployment. Improved local job creation, lower unemployment, and greater local economic activity occurs when small business owners win U.S. federal contracts (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Karadag, 2015; Reijonen, Tammi, & Saastamoinen, 2016; Walker & Preuss, 2008).

### **Nature of the Study**

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Almalki, 2016). Qualitative researchers seek to discover meaning of phenomenon through exploration, understanding, analysis, and interpretation (Ejimabo, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015). I selected the qualitative method to discover meaning of a phenomenon

through exploration and interpretation. In contrast, quantitative researchers use numeric data to test hypotheses for relationships or differences among variables (Ingham-Broomfield, 2014). Mixed method researchers use a qualitative method combined with a quantitative approach (Landrum & Garza, 2015). I did not statistically test hypotheses using quantitative, numeric data; therefore, a quantitative or mixed method approach was not appropriate.

I considered four research designs: (a) phenomenology, (b) ethnography, (c) narrative inquiry, and (d) case study. Phenomenological researchers explore the meanings of lived experiences of participants (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Phenomenological research was not suitable for this study because I was not studying the meanings of participants' lived experiences. Business researcher use ethnographic research to explore a phenomenon of a culture or group (Draper, 2015). I did not explore a culture or group; therefore, ethnographic research was not appropriate for this study. Narrative researchers present a chronological interpretation of the life stories of participants (Singh, Corner, & Pavlovich, 2015). Narrative research was not suitable for this study because I did not focus on the life stories of participants. Case study researchers explore a phenomenon in real life, bounded settings using a variety of data sources (Yin, 2018). Case study research was appropriate for this study because I explored a phenomenon in a real-life, bounded setting using multiple data sources.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies do you use to identify U.S. federal contracting opportunities?
2. What strategies do you use to prepare proposals and bids to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?
3. What strategies do you use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?
4. What strategies are most effective in winning open competitive U.S. federal contracts?
5. How do you measure the effectiveness of the strategies you use to win U.S. federal contracts?
6. What challenges do you face in implementing strategies to win open U.S. federal contracts?
7. How do you overcome the key challenges of implementing strategies to win U.S. federal contracts?
8. What other information can you provide regarding the strategies you use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Agency theory, developed by Jensen and Meckling (1976), was the conceptual framework for this study. The key concepts of agency theory are (a) explaining the relationship between principals and agents, (b) conflicts of goals, (c) risk, and (d) contractual relationships (Bhattacharjee, 1998; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Principals delegate some decision-making authority to agents through contractual relationships (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Principals use incentives to ensure agents work in their best

interest (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The principal–agent relationship occurs when agency cost increases because of money paid to principals, the bonding costs incurred by agents, and the residual loss (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Competition reduces self-interested behaviors of agents, especially when businesses monopolize the product (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The agency theory aligns with the purpose of the study because principal–agent contractual relationships influence small business relationships with federal agencies. I found that agency theory served as an effective lens to explore strategies small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive federal contracts.

### **Operational Definitions**

The terms in this study are common to federal small business contracting.

*Contracting officer:* A contracting officer is the person authorized to bind the government through contractual agreements (FAR, 2016a).

*Federal acquisition regulation (FAR):* FAR is a regulation that provides the guidelines for those who procure goods and services for the U.S. Federal Government (FAR, 2016a).

*Open competition:* Open competition is a procurement process that maximizes unrestricted competition in federal contracting (FAR, 2016a).

*Public procurement:* Public procurement is an acquisition process that allows public entities to purchase goods and services (Georghiou, Edler, Uyarra, & Yeow, 2014).

*Set-aside:* Set-aside is a procurement process that preferential treatment for specific small businesses to meet social economic policies (FAR, 2016a).

*System for Award Management:* System for Award Management is the official U.S. government website for registering to do business with the federal government (U.S. General Service Administration, 2017).

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

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are presumptions assumed as true, yet the researcher lacks the ability to verify (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Six leaders in the service industry in the state of Washington volunteered to participate in a 45-minute interview. I assumed that the small business leaders answered questions truthfully and comprehensively. Another assumption was that the small business leaders possessed the knowledge to allow collection of credible data to determine the strategies use to win open competitive federal contracts. Finally, I assumed that the company documents reviewed were accurate, up-to-date, and complete.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are weaknesses within the study out of the researcher's control (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A limitation was that the integrity of the interview data remained dependent on the knowledge and experience of the leaders of the six small service companies; therefore, the interview data did not represent the total population of leaders of small service companies. Because of the limited boundaries of this case study, there is limited, if any, transferability by future researchers to other cases, settings, or

industries. Another limitation was that the sample population was small service business leaders; therefore, the sample population did not include large business leaders with successful strategies for winning open competitive federal contracts. The sample population was also restricted to the state of Washington.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the boundaries of the study that the researcher can control (Abramson, 2015). The geographic region of the state of Washington limited the scope of this study. The sample population of six small business leaders in the service industry was a delimitation. The eligibility criteria for participants of this study also limited the scope of this study. Another delimitation was answering the research questions that required my concentration on successful strategies leaders used to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts; therefore, I did not address other situations such as when strategies did not win open competitive U.S. federal contracts or other operational issues within small service companies.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Small business owners in the service industry might benefit from this study because of exposure to strategies for winning open competitive U.S. federal contracts. Small business owners who consistently win federal contracts can experience greater sustainability (Walker & Preuss, 2008). Additionally, procuring goods and services saves federal dollars when contracts are competitive, so U.S. government officials could increase or sustain efficiencies (Alonso, Clifton, & Díaz-Fuentes, 2015). Government

contracts frequently have a limited number of contractors providing bids for goods and services (Chever, Saussier, & Yvrande-Billon, 2017). The findings of this study might be of value to leaders of federal agencies to increase competition for contracts to provide value through obtaining efficiency through lower cost. Federal contracting officers might use the findings of this study to increase competition in federal procurements. Further, small business owners improve innovation and sustainability through winning U.S. federal contracts (Karadag, 2015; Walker & Preuss, 2008). Federal contracts awarded to small businesses positively affect business strategies, innovation, and business sustainability.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The potential positive social change resulting from my study includes the enrichment of competition in federal contracting that provides cost savings, as more bidders tends to reduce costs. Small business owners who win competitive federal contracts create more jobs and contribute to the economic development of the communities in which they operate (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Karadag, 2015). Successful small business owners contribute to a lower unemployment rate and an increased standard of living in their local communities (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Spence, 2016). The success of small business owners winning federal contracts might contribute to more job growth, innovation, business sustainability, and an improved standard of living for residents of their local communities.

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

The purpose of the literature review was to examine pertinent and significant existing literature to explore strategies some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The reviewed literature consisted of peer-reviewed journals articles, government reports, doctoral studies, dissertations, and seminal books. Additionally, I scrutinized literature concerning public procurement, government contracting, and competition to establish the foundation for answering the central research question of this study.

I identified articles for review by using the following keywords: *small businesses, contract, government procurement, government contracting, competition, public tendering, and public procurement*. I searched the following databases: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, EBSCO Host, Google Scholar, Business Source Complete, Sage Premier, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. I also used Ulrich's Global Serial Directory website to verify peer-reviewed articles. I reviewed literature from government publications, journal articles, books, and dissertations (see Table 1).

Table 1

#### *Sources and Percentages*

| Source                                  | Total      | Percentage |
|---|------------|------------|
| Peer-reviewed articles                  | 201        | 92%        |
| Articles published from 2015-2019       | 185        | 85%        |
| Conference proceedings                  | 1          | 3.6%       |
| Nonpeer-reviewed articles               | 4          | 1.9%       |
| Seminal books                           | 4          | 1.9%       |
| Government Publications                 | 8          | 3.7%       |
| Sources unique to the literature review | 88         |            |
| <b>Total sources in the study</b>       | <b>218</b> |            |

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. Small business leaders from six service companies located in the state of Washington who have found success employing strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts represent the target population for this study. Small businesses that regularly win federal contracts might experience larger sustainability of their businesses (Walker & Preuss, 2008). The benefits to local job development, unemployment reduction, modernization, and local economic improvement also occur when small business owners win U.S. federal contracts (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Karadag, 2015; Reijonen et al., 2016; Walker & Preuss, 2008). Small business leaders inspiring job growth, improving innovation, and boosting the local economy are some of the potential benefits of this study.

The literature review starts with a comprehensive synthesis of the origins of agency theory, which was the conceptual framework for this study. I summarize agency theory and contrasting theories. I also review relevant literature related to small business success factors that answered the central research question.

### **Agency Theory**

Agency theory, developed by Jensen and Meckling (1976), is the conceptual framework for this study. Agency theory is one of the most accepted theories in management research (Bosse & Phillips, 2016). Agency theory is also the primary theoretical framework used to study executive compensation (Pepper & Gore, 2015). Researchers use agency theory to address conflicting goals and reduce conflicting

interests (Coletta, 2013). However, some researchers have questioned whether agency theory can address modern business phenomena (Bendickson, Muldoon, Liguori, & Davis, 2016) because some applications of agency theory for long-term relationships do not help develop solutions that allow principals and agents to meet goals like stewardship theory (Aßländer, Roloff, & Nayır, 2016). Additionally, researchers need foundational knowledge to apply agency theory across various disciplines (Bendickson et al., 2016). Moreover, another limitation of the theory involves the inability to account for a principal's capacity to interpret an agent's intentions, knowledge, and beliefs (Foss & Stea, 2014).

Agency theory is the establishment of a reciprocal agreement in which the principal contracts with the agent to perform a service for the interest of the principal that includes assignment of decision-making authority to the agent (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Steinle, Schiele, & Ernst, 2014). Agency theory stems from conflicts between the principal's encounter attempting to motivate agents to perform in the optimal interest of the principals (Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014). For example, managers act as agents to stakeholders motivated to work toward self-interest versus the interest of principals (Njuguna, 2016). It is also important for researchers to include a microeconomics foundation to agency theory to achieve cooperation among various actors (Coletta, 2013). Some researchers also use behavioral agency theory to avoid monitoring costs and incentives alignment by using behavioral economics (Pepper & Gore, 2015). Agency theorists and practitioners apply the tenets of agency theory to reduce agency cost, eliminate self-interested behavior, and improve relationship trust.

Agency theory is applied to principal and agent relationships to align the interest while reducing opportunistic behavior. Agency theorists have implied that the agent, if left unmonitored, would work toward self-interest at the cost of the principal (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Though monitoring agents increases agency cost for the principal (Bosse & Phillips, 2016), it is important for the principal to monitor the agent (Bøe, Gulbrandsen, & Sørebo, 2015). For example, principals may have insufficient information about the agent's ability to create value for the principal's business if the agent withholds key information (Bosse & Phillips, 2016; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Establishing a contractual relationship between principals and agents prevents opportunistic behavior by the agent (Njuguna, 2016). Thus, principals use monitoring and control mechanisms to align an agent's goals with the objectives of the principal (Ditillo, Liguori, Sicilia, & Steccolini, 2015). However, agency problems arise when the goals of the principal and agent diverge, and the principal cannot verify the behavior of the agent due to information asymmetry (Battisti & Williamson, 2015).

With agency theory, investigating the principal and agent framework captures the link between transactional costs and information asymmetries (Peterson, Smith, Leatherman, Hendricks, & Fox, 2015). Researchers have used transactional cost economics to examine the economic factors required to protect contractual relationships and governance structures versus that single focus of agency theory (Luo, Liu, Yang, Maksimov, & Hou, 2015). The utility of agency theory applies to understanding relationships in various transactional agreements between self-interested parties (Bøe et al., 2015). For example, the government as the principal in public procurement has

encountered agency problems related to information asymmetries, moral hazards, transaction costs, budget limitation, and cost inefficiencies (Vedel, Jacobsen, & Thorsen, 2015). In contrast, small and medium enterprises establish single ownership and management structures without separations, preventing agency conflicts usually attributed to separating management and ownership (Yahya, Ali, & Ghazali, 2016).

The contractual relationship between government principals and small business agents provides another transactional contract benefiting from applying the tenets of agency theory. Agency theory can allow researchers to explore the contractual relationship between the buyer (principal), and seller (agent), as it helps explain that the core of a business is the contractual relationships with customers, merchants, banks, investors, and other interested parties (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). For example, Bendickson et al. (2016) investigated principal–agent contractual relationships, finding that conflicts between agents and principals become imperfect when there are information asymmetries, increased cost resulting from monitoring activities, and principal’s difficulties asserting ownership rights. Principals and agents develop contractual relationships across industries that depend on balanced information between the actors to eliminate unnecessary monitoring that might increase agency costs.

Agency theory applies to other principal and agent relationships aside from traditional business settings (Bøe et al., 2015). Sarhan, Pasquire, Manu, and King (2016) used agency theory as the foundation to investigate government agencies in the United Kingdom seeking to award contracts that eliminated waste and opportunistic behavior. Additionally, the U.S. federal government purchases more goods and services through

contracts than any other government in the world (Shoraka, 2014). In a contractual relationship, the principal establishes terms through contract development that bind the behavior of the agent; therefore, governments influence contractual relationships through legal constructs the government establishes using contracts (Bøe et al., 2015; Carpenter & Krause, 2015). The goal of developing the terms and condition of the contract is to provide the principal mechanisms of control and opportunities to monitor the behavior of the agents such as linking compensation to the agent's performance to accomplish goals (Bøe et al., 2015; Lu, 2016). Principals also impose enrollment requirements on agents that grant the principal consent to monitor and apply consequences for noncompliance with the terms and conditions of the contracts (Peterson et al., 2015).

The U.S. government, as the principal, uses warranted contract officers as agents to write and administer contracts for the procurement of goods and services. Contracting officers, principals of the U.S. government, use federal acquisition policies to monitor the financial status of contractors (agents) when the contractor's financial stability indicate that subcontracts may not receive timely payments (FAR, 2017). For example, Peterson et al. (2015) studied payment for environment service contracts utilized by the United State Forestry Service for land conservation policies and discovered that conflicts arise when the landowners (agents) withhold information the U.S. Forestry Service needs before awarding contracts, which forces the principal to price the contracts at the lowest acceptable price to reduce all associated cost. This conflict reduces the pool of landowners willing to participant in conservation programs and creates a trust imbalance. But principals achieve cost savings when fair competition among agents exists (Hanák &

Muchová, 2015), as prices increase when competition decreases in the market (Lu, 2016). Costs also increase when public buyers petition for more bidders compared to publishing solicitations that invite competition (Kang & Miller, 2015). Thus, practitioners use information from bidders to make decisions related to competition in procurements and monitoring actions after contract awards.

Leaders use agency theory to explore organizational issues (Eisenhardt, 1989). The central theme of agency theory is goal disagreement that consists of opposing objectives, risk tolerance levels, and separation of labor in contractual relationships (Sarhan et al., 2016). Principal and agent relationships conflict due to differences in goals, monitoring activities resulting in increased agency cost, and risk acceptance levels (Eisenhardt, 1989). Further, agents may exploit relationships for their self-interest due to the perceptions of fairness (Bosse & Phillips, 2016). Agency theorists have declared that modern entrepreneurial organizations' pursuit of competitive advantage creates new agency problems beyond opportunistic behavior (Bendickson et al., 2016). When agents withhold information, the principal needs to assess the value of the relationship that increases agency costs related to monitoring activities by the principal (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

Agency theory is important to creating beneficial relationships that meet business and organizational goals. Three problems embody the key concepts of agency theory: (a) goal conflict, (b) information asymmetry, and (c) risk tolerance disparities (Bhattacharjee, 1998; Bøe et al., 2015). The key concepts of agency theory also include

(a) explaining the relationship between principals and agents, (b) conflicts of goals, (c) risk, and (d) contractual relationships.

**Principals and agents' relationships.** Researchers and practitioners use agency theory, especially management agency theory (Foss & Stea, 2014), to understand relationships between principals and agents in various organizational settings. Principal and agent conflicts originate from the Industrial Revolution (Bendickson et al., 2016). Researchers use the principal–agent model to explain the behaviors of the parties in business relationships when goal achievement by the principal depends on the agent's actions toward meeting the interest of the principal (Bhattacharjee, 1998). Researchers use agency theory in two approaches: the positivist viewpoint and the principal and agent viewpoint (Eisenhardt, 1989). The positivist researcher focuses on large public organizations and seeks to understand the circumstances of the principal and agent's conflicting goals that require instituting governance structures to restrict opportunistic behavior (Eisenhardt, 1989). The positivist researcher's concerns are on governance structures versus solving principal–agent problems (Eisenhardt, 1989). Researchers use the principal and agent viewpoint to determine the right contract type that will generate the highest value from the relationship (Eisenhardt, 1989). Organizational leaders who contract with private industry to provide goods and services form principal and agent relationships.

Researchers use agency theory to increase understanding of the dynamics of the principal and agent relationships. For example, Allen, George, and Davis (2018) utilized agency theory to investigate the role trust plays at the firm level in family firms. Agency

theorists have suggested that the firm provides the legal foundation for the principal and agent relationship (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The closeness in family firms increases the level of commitment, cooperation, and flexibility, and reduces transaction costs that improve performance outcomes (Allen et al., 2018). Le Breton-Miller, Miller, and Bares (2015) also postulated that researchers emphasize the aligning of the firm's ownership with management goals while permitting owners to reduce agency costs through cost effective monitoring of agents. In the principal and agent's relationship, Jensen and Meckling (1976) asserted the agent will disregard the interest of the principal and seek to maximize their self-interested goals gained from the contractual agreement. But the principal and agent relationship becomes beneficial to both parties through the alignment of the objectives and the reduction of opportunistic behavior.

**Conflicts of goals.** Agency theorists have claimed that a central purpose of agency theory is to help identify the exchange agreement that addresses opportunistic behavior that leads to conflicting goals (Tumbat & Grayson, 2016). The accomplishment of business objectives requires unity of goals between business owners and the managers hired to ensure business performance objectives. Conflicts between principals and agents occur when there is a separation of management and the ownership of a business (Yahya et al., 2016). Therefore, researchers use agency theory to minimize conflict between management and ownership in governance structures (Njuguna, 2016). Traditionally, agency theorists have concentrated on the separation of ownership and management structures aimed at increasing the possibility of limiting agency costs by monitoring agent's activities by the principals (Allen et al., 2018). Conflicting goals burden the

agency relationship and result in increased cost associated with the principal monitoring the agent's opportunistic behavior (Musau, 2015). Researchers apply the tenets of agency theory to minimize goal conflicts that occur in nonstandard governance structures, which disturbs principal and agent relationships.

The conflicting goals of principals and agents magnify when the equilibrium of objectives in the relationship changes from a one-on-one relationship to a relationship with many actors. Agency theory generally applies to a singular viewpoint of the conflicting goals that occur when agents seek opportunistic behavior (Zardkoohi, Harrison, & Josefy, 2015). However, Hodari, Turner, and Sturman (2017) applied agency theory to agreements where there are a single agent and multiple principals in hotel operations. In hotel operations, the general manager is the agent who works to balance the conflicting goals of the principals that consist of the management company and the hotel ownership (Hodari et al., 2017). Further, small and medium enterprises establish single ownership and management structures that eliminate conflicting goals (Yahya et al., 2016). The success of organizations depends on the ability to achieve goal congruence by aligning the goals of the principal and the agent in an interconnected manner that allows achievement of the greatest value and organizational performance.

Conflict in principal-agent relationships also consists of (a) agents behaving opportunistically against the principal interest, (b) principals behaving opportunistic against the interest of agents, and (c) partnerships between agents and principals to work toward opportunistic goals at the expense of society and stakeholders (Zardkoohi et al., 2015). The ability to generate optimal business value relies on reducing the moral hazard

of self-interested behaviors, created by ex-ante and ex-post information irregularities (Steinle et al., 2014). Agency conflicts occur when agents hide information from principals that allow the agent to pursue goals opposite of those of the principal (Njuguna, 2016). Conversely, common goals foster collaborative relationships (Boukendour & Hughes, 2014). When all parties in the agency relationship understand and work toward a common goal, the areas of conflicts decreased, allowing value creation for the business.

Businesses and organizations that fail to reduce conflicting goals and curb opportunistic behavior struggle to create value for stakeholders. Musau (2015) agreed with Le Breton-Miller et al. (2015) that conflicting goals between the principal and the agent resulted in increased monitoring costs for the principals resulting from a lack of trust in the relationship. Small and medium enterprises seeking financing from lenders might withhold information from the lenders, which creates conflict due to the lack of transparency and trust (Yahya et al., 2016). The arrangement of the family business where the agent holds an equity stake in the firm enables the agent to embrace the goals of the principals as their own (Bendickson et al., 2016). Bhattacharjee (1998) argued the use of varying levels of incentives to align the goals of the agents with those of the principals facilitates linking performance outcomes and the transferring of risk to the agent by the principal.

**Risk.** The success of the principal and agent relationship relies on the risk tolerance of the parties in the relationship. In buyers and supplier's relationships, buyers expect suppliers to contribute to the value offered to the customer by ensuring timely and

quality service delivery, whereas, the supplier that provides late distribution or poor-quality products hinders the buyer's ability to create value for their customers, and risk increases for the buyer's business (Prosman, Scholten, & Power, 2016). Buyers with power over suppliers offer suppliers a choice of monitoring based or collaborative-based risk mitigation approaches with the goal of shifting the risk from principal to agent (Hajmohammad & Vachon, 2016). Auriol, Straub, and Flochel (2016) advocated in developing nations that lack the legal framework to enforce policies to prevent corruption promote risk in public procurement. Supporters of agency theory advised resolving conflicts between the principal and the agent occurs through the aligning of objectives using incentives to transfer risk to the agent (Prosman et al., 2016). Agency theorists declared supply chain managers gain an understanding of how to manage risk in supply chains and support the use of incentives to avoid supply issues (Prosman et al., 2016). The ability to manage risk determines an organization's ability to generate value and achieve organizational success.

Business leaders' aptitude at controlling risk internally and externally influences the ability of principals and agents to align goals and create value for the organization. Agency theorists asserted sharing risk between principals and agents is a central assumption of agency theory that reduces agency problems caused when goals conflict and actors behave opportunistically (Bendickson et al., 2016). The differences in the level of risk tolerance between principals and agents exacerbate the conflict of principals and agent relationships (Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014). Boukendour and Hughes (2014) investigated risk in construction projects that separate the design component from the

actual construction project, which increases the risk for the project, especially when risk sharing is unfair. Le Breton-Miller et al. (2015) observed utilizing behavioral agency theory as a foundation that family owned businesses are risk averse and avoid risky endeavors opting instead to protect their current endowments. Agency theorists suggested several organizational approaches to managing the risk that includes (a) avoidance, (b) monitoring, (c) collaborating, or (d) acceptance of the risk (Hajmohammad & Vachon, 2016). Researchers and practitioners combat the magnitude of risk on organizational performance through using the tenets of agency theory to comprehend individual risk tolerance of principals and agents that minimize opportunistic behavior.

Business leaders pursue strategies that allow the cost effective monitoring and curtailing of opportunistic behavior through alliances and contracts that alter the behavior of agents and increase the principal risk bearing capacity. Carpintero and Petersen (2015) studied the ability of government agencies to transfer risk in public-private partnerships compared to transferring risk in traditional procurement methods. The risk bearing capacity differs from other governance models due to the ability to quantitatively fuse delivery systems, risk-sharing ratios, and insurance coverage (Chang, 2015). Public procurement officials balance the risk sharing capacity between public and private entities that account for information asymmetries before awarding contracts (Saussier & Tirole, 2015). Government agencies transfer the risk to private businesses in public, private partnership compared to retaining the risk in traditional procurement models (Carpintero & Petersen, 2015). Principals seek to share risk when information asymmetry is present that improves the level of contract accountability (Saussier & Tirole, 2015).

Researchers utilizing agency theory seek to determine the most efficient contract to use when the outcome is uncertain, risk tolerance differs, and an unbalance of information exist (Eisenhardt, 1989). When the objectives of principals and agents diverge along with risk inequities, the formation of agency problems arises that hinder performance and the contractual relationship.

**Contractual relationships.** The ability to realize goal congruence between principals and agents rises through legal bonds that ensure accountability of the parties in the relationship. Jensen and Meckling (1976) proposed the development of contractual relationships form the foundation of value creations for firms. Researchers and practitioners held users of agency theory could determine the appropriate contract to mitigate conflict in principal and agent relationships through contract governance (Eisenhardt, 1989). Agency theorists argued the use of agency theory is useful when contracting issues are difficult (Musau, 2015). The agency problem of goal incongruence, information asymmetry, and risk tolerance reduces when the parties establish a contractual relationship that includes incentives for the agent based on the outcome of the contract (Bhattacharjee, 1998). Jensen and Meckling (1976) agreed with Bhattacharjee (1998) in that using incentives in contracts reduces the opportunistic agent's behavior and ensures performance aimed at maximizing the principal's interest. The value of a contractual relationship is contingent on the ability to manage and transfer risk between principals and agents.

Principals incur increased agency cost from administering contracts that require provisions and payment mechanisms aimed at controlling an agent's potentially

fraudulent behavior. Eisenhardt (1989) observed outcome contracts work best when the agent is risk averse; therefore, measuring behavior becomes easy as the principal transfers risk to the agent. However, when the agent is prone to opportunistic behavior and the principal lacks information, the contract type is a behavior to combat the moral hazard of the agent (Eisenhardt, 1989). Principals add contract provisions to discourage noncompliance by the agents that might exceed the original requirements of the service contract (Peterson et al., 2015). Steinle et al. stressed the principal seeks to reduce risk by influencing the behavior of agents by establishing contractual relationships that include social controls that continue throughout the contract duration. Zardkoohi et al. (2015) argued that deceit is a human tendency that applies to principals and agents equally. Principals might act opportunistically by omitting provisions that protect the agent's self-interest resulting in contract breaches (Zardkoohi et al., 2015). Pepper and Gore (2015) asserted agency theory includes behavioral components that reimagine the model of man bounded rationally with consideration for loss, risk, and tradeoff concerning intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Contractual relationships vary based on the level of risk tolerance of the principal and known opportunistic behavior tendencies of agents.

### **Supporting Theories**

**Bounded self-interest.** Researchers and practitioners suggested principals and agents overcoming opportunism in principal and agent relationships occurs when the actors act with bounded self-interest. Bosse and Phillips (2016) argued in competitive environments, some agents display behavior influenced confined by the perception of fairness resulting in a bounded self-interest. Roach (2016) agreed with past researchers

that rationality relates to information asymmetry resulting in principals' increased agency costs due to uncertainty and their bounded rationality aimed at monitoring the agents' performance and behavior. A further agreement with Bosse and Phillips comes from including fairness to enhance understanding of agency theory application to governance. Researchers portrayed the principal and agent relationship as one bounded rationally with dependence on the division of contract risk tolerances and conflicting goals due to the principal's lack of control over the agent (Aßländer et al., 2016). Researchers and practitioners argued reducing opportunism depends on the reciprocal perception of fairness and information equality between the contractual parties.

Pouryousefi and Frooman (2017), in disagreement with Jones et al. (2016), noted that bounded self-interest is a natural assumption of agency theory. Researchers suggested game theory offers an alternative to agency theory by studying social conflicts of interests where players participate in a prisoner's dilemma game that require rational players making strategic decisions to cooperate or defect the game (Soutschek, Sauter, & Schubert, 2015). In studying construction contracts, Boukendour and Hughes (2014) argued traditional procurement facilitated collaborative relationships despite goal incongruence and warned the parties might still pursue self-interested behaviors. Agency theorists claimed agents display a bounded self-interested behavior that adds a *motivation to do the right thing* component to the self-interest actions embedded in the original Jensen and Meckling's (1976) application of agency theory (Bosse & Phillips, 2016). Principals and agents act with bounded self-interest to make decisions critical to achieving desired goals and maximizing value creation from the relationship. Agency

theorists introduced bounded self-interest and rationality to enhance agency theory compared to researchers that seek to replace or compete with agency theory.

**Transaction cost economics.** Researchers and practitioners use various conceptual frameworks to understand governance structures that curb opportunism and goal conflicts while generating value. Researchers contended transaction cost economics is widely used to study organizations, strategic management, and governance structure selection (Ping, Levitt, Tsui, & Hsu, 2015). Yigitbasioglu (2014) asserted researchers focusing on trust and uncertainty in exchange relationships find transaction cost economics an ideal conceptual framework. Researchers and practitioners use transaction cost economics to help determine make or buy decisions and business capabilities required in strategic planning (Gulbrandsen, Lambe, & Sandvik, 2017). Ketokivi and Mahoney (2016) emphasized researchers and practitioners seeking to eliminate opportunism and reduce transaction costs employ transaction cost economics. Contractual relationships between principals and agents incur transaction costs from the development of the contract, negotiating the contract, and implementing the contract, which includes monitoring and control mechanisms (Peterson et al., 2015). Researchers and practitioners exploit transaction cost economics to lessen the influence of opportunistic behavior and to align organizational interest.

The ability to develop productive relationships between buyers and suppliers allows organizations to achieve strategic objectives and competitive advantages. Ping et al. (2015) claimed when researchers and practitioners use transaction cost economics, they assume people are bounded rationally and opportunistic. Agency theorists agreed

that transaction cost economics shares similar assumptions concerning bounded rationality and opportunism; however, differ in economic viewpoints (Eisenhardt, 1989). Eisenhardt (1989) submitted the focus of agency theorists is economic factors between cooperating actors, while transaction cost economists focus on organizational economic factors. Researchers focus is on the legal and government system that regulates credible transactions institutionally that reduces cost and risk (Bai, Sheng, & Li, 2016). Gulbrandsen et al. (2017) asserted transaction cost economists overlook supplier trustworthiness and dynamic capabilities of businesses in make or buy decisions, which limit transaction cost economics in contractual relationships. Researchers and practitioners argued transaction cost theory fails to curb opportunism by overlooking the social aspects of contractual relationships (Luo et al., 2015). A business understanding of contractual relationships and how to reduce self-interested behaviors requires understanding various conceptual frameworks to develop optimal contracts.

**Contract theory.** Globally, researchers and practitioners define contractual relationships through the use of contracts that provide the legal foundation of binding agreements. Contract theorists maintained contract theory originated in the field of economics with an emphasis on comprehending financial exchanges (Brady, Li, & Yoder, 2015). Mirakhor, Ng, Dewandaru, and Hamid (2017) declared contract theorists dissect principal and agent conflicting interests resulting from the incompleteness of the contracts that both parties failed to ensure their interests and behaviors align. Contract theorists argued contracts are complete or incomplete with the latter influenced by ex-post decisions of the parties (Wu, 2014). Brady et al. (2015) and Wu (2014) agreed that

exchanges in contractual relationships when following a complete contract approach necessitate accounting for all possible contingencies up front at contract formation. Further, agreement comes from Christensen, Nikolaev, and Wittenberg-Moerman (2016) who proclaimed the central tenet of contract theory is contracts are fundamentally incomplete because of principal and agents' inability to predict or plainly define future behavior. Contract theorists who attempt to isolate all possibilities create an impracticable and incomplete contract.

Researchers utilizing contract theory understand that the level of contract completeness is central to the effective use of contract theory (Brady et al., 2015; Zhang, Pan, Song, Dawy, & Han, 2017). Researchers concluded customarily contract theory mimics mainstream agent behavior with the agent choosing between economic advantages and decisions to perform or not perform (Brady et al., 2015). Zhang et al. (2017) discovered the use of incentives linked to performance might boost contract participation. Contract theorists asserted unless contracts include incentive structure forcing participants to work together, contracts become unachievable (Mirakhor et al., 2017). In agreement, Wu (2014) argued contracts structures include incentives allowing eliminating information asymmetry problems like moral hazard and adverse selection. Agency theorists reasoned incentives eliminate conflicting interests when combined with outcome-based contracts (Eisenhardt, 1989). Researchers and practitioners explored other conceptual frameworks to understand the contractual relationship and investigated stewardship theory as an alternative competing theory.

## **Alternative Theories**

**Stewardship theory.** Researchers and practitioners utilize agency theory to resolve principal and agent relationships by resolving conflicting goals and reducing opportunism in the relationships. Bosse and Phillips (2016) offered bounded self-interest to enhance agency theory compared to researchers replacing agency theory with stewardship theory. Abländer et al. (2016) professed that researchers and practitioners use stewardship theory to gain a different viewpoint to diminish opportunism and conflicting goals in principal and agent relationships. Researchers maintained agency theory and stewardship theories are derivatives of the concept of the modern man (Glinkowska & Kaczmarek, 2015). Madison, Holt, Kellermanns, and Ranft (2015) suggested researchers and practitioners struggle to apply agency theory to family businesses due to noneconomic goals and family involvement results in behavior and governance that are better suited for stewardship theory. Vallejo-Martos and Puentes-Poyatos (2014) agreed with Madison et al. that applying stewardship theory to family owned businesses results in the steward's willingness to work for the good of the family organization without consideration for their self-interest. Agency theorists warned researchers and practitioners that owners in family firms might use their power and knowledge to manipulate minority shareholders to redirect resources for narrow objectives that benefit the owners (Le Breton-Miller et al., 2015). Researchers argued agents act as stewards and work towards the interest of principals willingly without a desire to seek self-interest.

Researchers and practitioners use stewardship theory to align the agent's interests with the interests of buyers in supply chains contractual relationships, resulting in increased trust and compliance (Abländer et al., 2016). Stewardship theorists contended the motivation of agents as stewards to meet the terms and conditions of contracts occurs independently because of the alignment of self-interest with the objectives of the principals (Abländer et al., 2016; Vallejo-Martos & Puentes-Poyatos, 2014). The findings of stewardship theorists contrast with Jensen and Meckling's (1976) argument that agents who remain bounded by self-interest restrict the agents or stewards' interests. Glinkowska and Kaczmarek (2015) advised agency theorists encounter rational individuals attempting to maximize their self-interest compared to stewardship theorists' focus on management's desire to achieve business objectives versus self-interest behaviors. Researchers and practitioners contrast the themes of stewardship theory and agency theory to determine how to reduce goal conflicts.

The control mechanism principals use to monitor and direct the agent's behavior towards the interest of the principal conflict with the independence stewards' experience under stewardship theory (Abländer et al., 2016). Vallejo-Martos and Puentes-Poyatos agreed with Abländer et al. (2016) in that the use of stewardship theory is a means for researchers and practitioners to eliminate costly monitoring and control mechanisms. Klay (2015) maintained federal contracting officers follow procurement laws to add control mechanism in contracts and to curve vendors (agent) self-interest tendencies. Public agencies that enter into contractual relationships aimed at securing goods and services with public funds must exercise caution when assuming vendors and managers

are stewards in their behaviors. Stewardship theorists focus on the manager's ability to identify with the organization, adopting organizational objectives as their own, and the manager's motivation to perform duties toward accomplishing organizational objectives (Abländer et al., 2016). Glinkowska and Kaczmarek (2015) upheld organizations discover the use of motivators to align the agent's interests with the interests of the organization becomes unnecessary when applying a stewardship theory approach. Practitioners use incentives to motivate stewards to align their interests with the organization which eliminates costly monitoring.

Researchers and practitioners cautioned, in contractual relationships, principals and agents might exhibit behaviors ascribed to agency theory and stewardship theory that requires users to establish a comprehensive foundation of both theories (Snippert, Witteveen, Boes, & Voordijk, 2015). Schneider (2015) proposed in risk environments faced by businesses, stewardship theory lacks the foundation to address risk challenges. Snippert et al. (2015) questioned stewardship theory's appropriateness in contractual relationships when buyers and suppliers must align interests to generate the best value. Agency theorists disputed the mutual respect and trust focus of stewardship theory to generate value for stakeholders compared to agency theory's use of monitoring and control to create value for stakeholders (Abländer et al., 2016). Opponents of stewardship theory stated the best value approach is a procurement and project management tool designed to obtain the best value for goods and services while paying the lowest cost (Snippert et al., 2015). Another opposing view of stewardship theory researchers highlighted is the limited focus of the theory to particular stakeholders which shows the

theory lacks the capacity to reappropriate risk (Schneider, 2015). Critics of stewardship theory suggested principals revert to the normal tendency to control and monitor agents which contradicts the best value approach (Snippert et al., 2015). Organizational leaders seek agreements that allow maximization of competitive advantages while permitting control and alignment of objectives to increase value.

**Resource-based theory.** Researchers and practitioners use the resource-based theory to highlight a business's ability to gain and maintain competitive advantage depending on the use of resources (Battisti & Williamson, 2015). Researchers suggested resource based theory is a critical structure that explains and predicts a business's competitive advantage and performance through the business's accumulation of valuable, unique, and unduplicatable resources (Hitt, Xu, & Carnes, 2016). Le Breton-Miller et al. (2015) maintained family businesses with entrepreneurial behavior will stockpile resources and capabilities allowing survival of the business during periods of uncertainty, inactivity, and innovation for the next generation of family owners. Researchers and practitioners explained the resource based theory requires businesses to incentivize employees and other stakeholders that motivate firm specific investments used to cultivate the resources and capabilities used for competitive advantage (Hoskisson, Gambeta, Green, & Li, 2018). Researchers and practitioners contended business leaders exploit their unique resources to achieve advantages over competitors.

Battisti and Williamson (2015) held small business's competitive advantage resides with owners and managers requiring the use of intermediaries to develop the resources to develop and sustain competitive advantage. Agency theorists implied

resource based theory's reliance on intermediaries permits managing some of the risks and information asymmetries in principal and agent relationships (Battisti & Williamson, 2015). Van Rijnsoever, Kempkes, and Chappin (2017) argued researchers and practitioners use resource based theory traditionally to understand the resources within a business; however recently emphasis on partnerships outside of the business gained attention. Small businesses and family firms seeking competitive advantages discover resource based theory limits their ability to achieve objectives without help from agency theory or other theoretical foundations.

**Game theory.** The success of contractual relationships depends on the quality of decision making between buyers and suppliers that ensure the optimal business strategy allowing the optimal benefit. Schmidt (2015) maintained public procurement is a formal process with strict laws governing decision making. Researchers used game theory to contend with conflict of interest and to support cooperative decision making (Soutschek et al., 2015). Samuelson (2016) discussed how researchers and practitioners consider game theory a model to investigate individual behaviors grouped to study complex phenomena. Researchers and practitioners apply game theory to public procurement to explain the behaviors of tenderers' decisions on bid price when considering competitors (Schmidt, 2015). Practitioners using game theory resist conflicting interests through decisions that accommodate the interest of all parties in the contractual relationship.

Budde and Minner (2015) expressed service providers encounter various games for countless procurement opportunities which permits alternative strategies. Soutschek et al. (2015) outlined game theory as a competition that offers four possible outcomes that

include the outcome of cooperation between the players. Schmidt (2015) alleged each player in the game seeks the optimal strategic decision based on the information available to establish Nash equilibrium. Samuelson (2016) disagreed with Schmidt and argued that games include several equilibria, which agreed with Budde and Minner. Game theorists exploit game theory to support the discovery of optimal contract pricing (Moradi, Abedini, & Hosseinian, 2016). Researchers and practitioners utilize game theory to help understand the diversity of procuring goods and services at the best value.

### **Application to Business Practice**

Small businesses fail to win open competitive federal contracts despite policies directing U. S. federal agencies to use open competitive procedures designed to increase small business participation in federal contracting (FAR, 2016a). Small business advocates contended the Small Business Act requires federal agencies to ensure procurements are competitive which help secure the nation's economic stability (Shoraka, 2014). Chever et al. (2017) offered federal buyers purposely restrict competition opting to negotiate with a single supplier. The European Commission reported increasing small and medium business participation in public procurement through competition creates economic value and promotes job creation (Saastamoinen, Reijonen, & Tammi, 2017). Lamothe (2014) indicated competition reduces information asymmetries and promotes agents to submit bids closer to actual production cost. Government buyers embed monitoring and control instruments in public procurement opportunities while promoting competition to increase small business participation.

**Competition.** Supporters of competition in federal contracting advocate that competition reduces costs and add value for the purchasers of goods and service. Lamothe (2014) suggested federal procurement buyers define fair competition as procurement with at least three acceptable bidders. In contrast, Kang and Miller (2015) argued most federal procurements include weak competition and contracts awards usually occur with one bidder. Further disagreement with the contribution to procurement from adopting competitive procedures comes from Krivda and Bogart's (2014) assertion the requirements of the Competition in Contracting Act hinders federal agencies in the United States from procuring efficient information technology. Correa and Ornaghi (2014) maintained the benefits of competition dates back to Adam Smith and promotes reduced costs, manufacturing efficiency, and increased innovation. Government buyers utilize the Competition in Contracting Act and other procurement policies to include competition in procurement actions permitting inclusion of small businesses in the process.

The addition of small businesses in public procurement through competitive procedures finds opposition from researchers and practitioners. Reis and Cabral (2015) claimed there are uncertainties related to competition and the government's ability to attain economies because small business inclusion discourages larger and more efficient businesses from participating in public procurement. Competition supporters maintained public procurement must include qualification standards that allow participation from qualified candidates while generating adequate competition for the procurement (Hanák & Muchová, 2015). Reis and Cabral expressed the belief that small businesses are less

capable but dominate competitive public procurement which increases contracting costs for governments. However, the evidence supporting increased competition on the variances in what the government expects to pay versus the actual contract award price emphasizes the need for public agencies to use open competitive procedures (Hanák & Muchová, 2015). Albano, Cesi, and Iozzi (2017) asserted public buyers use of open competitive procurement procedures promotes awarding contracts to the most efficient business in the market. Researchers and practitioners declared the use of competitive methods in public procurement allows the government to achieve value and lower market prices for goods and services.

**Public procurement policy.** Public agencies around the world use policies to increase small business participation in public procurement and to realize social objectives. Grandia and Meehan (2017) maintained public agencies use public procurement to accomplish social goals such as minimizing long-term unemployment, improving working conditions, promoting innovation, and increasing participation for small and medium enterprises. Researchers asserted government agencies design policies to increase small business participation in public procurement that is straightforward; however, problems arise when public buyers fail to adhere to the policies (Flynn & Davis, 2016b). Borowiec (2017) championed developing public procurement systems that include all participants without increasing agency cost. Researchers and practitioners determined, despite standardize policies to increase small business participation in public procurements, small businesses face entry barriers. Researchers and practitioners understand the contributions of small businesses to a nation's economy; therefore,

increasing access to public procurement programs that allow open competitive tendering determines the success of policies.

Government agencies utilize procurement policies to increase competition and to eliminate obstacles that prevent or reduce small business participation in public procurement. Saastamoinen et al. (2017) argued small businesses experience various barriers despite inclusion policies that hinder active participation in public procurement that range from lack of adequate knowledge to limited performance capacity. Researchers claimed public buyers create barriers that prevent small businesses from participation through deliberate acts of improperly evaluating bids (Hanák & Muchová, 2015). Researchers explained small businesses experience issues participating in public procurement due to a lack of knowledge about tendering opportunities (Loader & Norton, 2015; Saastamoinen et al., 2017). Small business leaders experience barriers that prevent inclusion in public procurement that reduces competitiveness.

**Public procurement process.** Government agencies at the local, state and national levels use contracts to meet the needs of citizens through the economical acquisition of goods and services. Georghiou et al. (2014) argued public procurement accounts for a large portion of the demands for goods and services around the world. Researchers explained public procurement links political and policy to economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (Flynn & Davis, 2014). Budde and Minner (2015) suggested private and public agencies use reverse auctions to purchase services resulting in lower procurement costs. Public buyers conduct auctions under public scrutiny that requires supplying all information to suppliers before the start of the

auction (Gretschko & Wambach, 2016). Grandia and Meehan (2017) maintained insufficient information about the factors of success and efficiency is available related to public procurements and the conflicting goals embedded into the process. Agency theorists contend when public buyers as principals lack information, the use of a behavior contract to combat moral hazards of agents is common (Eisenhardt, 1989). Agents promote the cost effective procurement of goods and services through sharing adequate information.

Public agencies use preference programs and specific evaluation criteria to align the goals and reduce moral hazards in public procurement. Public buyers use their discretionary power when selecting businesses for participation in public procurement tendering (Chever et al., 2017). Reis and Cabral (2015) discussed the use of preference programs that either restrict participation to small businesses only or preferred businesses. Researchers and practitioners determined public buyers use a discriminatory competition process that selects suppliers based on price and past performance to improve contract award efficiency (Albano et al., 2017). Sumo, Valk, Weele, and Duysters (2016) claimed contracts represent a method of mitigating hazards created by the opportunistic behavior of agents. Agency theorists recommended designing public procurement programs that require public buyers to select suppliers from multiple agents to reduce information asymmetries and adverse selection (Bhattacharjee, 1998). Public buyers embed monitoring and control terms and conditions in contracts to curb opportunistic behaviors of agents allowing fulfillment of government and societal goals.

### **Transition**

In Section 1, I introduced the study and provided the background of the problem. I proceeded to identify the problem, the purpose of the study, the nature of the study, and the central research question that I used to guide this research study. Section 1 included interview questions that link to the central research question of this study. Section 1 included the conceptual framework, definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study in which I addressed the potential benefits to the business community and impact on social change. Section 1 concluded with a comprehensive review of relevant professional and academic literature. In Section 2, I explain the role of the researcher, participant criteria, and an outline of the research methods and design. I discuss the data collection, organization, and analysis procedures, and the actions undertaken to ensure dependable, credible findings. In Section 3, I present the findings of my study. Further, Section 3 contains an analysis of the data, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for further research.

## Section 2: The Project

### **Introduction**

In Section 2, I restate the purpose statement of this qualitative multiple case study, explain my role within the research, and discuss the eligibility criteria for participants. I also describe the research method and design. Additionally, I discuss population and sampling, ethical research, data collection, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders in the service industry use to win full and open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The targeted population was small business leaders in six service industry companies located in the state of Washington who successfully implemented strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The implications for positive social change included the potential for improved local job creation, local economic stability, and lower local unemployment. Improved local job creation, lower unemployment, and greater local economic activity occurs when small business owners win U.S. federal contracts (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Karadag, 2015; Reijonen et al., 2016; Walker & Preuss, 2008).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to serve as the primary data collection instrument (Cope, 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2018). I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. Qualitative researchers also conduct face-to-face interviews to explain meaning and to confirm interpretations while asking follow-up

questions and observing nonverbal behavior (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). I conducted face-to-face interviews with follow-up questions and observed nonverbal behavior to collect data. The researcher's background, locale, and association might influence the recruitment of participants and the results; therefore, researchers' acknowledgments of biases limit the impact on study participation and findings (Robinson, 2014). As the primary data collection instrument, my experience in soliciting, evaluating, negotiating, and awarding federal government contracts influenced my role as the researcher. The qualitative researcher exemplifies ethics in their actions to protect participants by not pressuring and applying unwarranted encouragement to participants in research (Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, & Khodyakov, 2015). I protected participants by ensuring no unwarranted encouragement or coercion occurred in my research study.

The Belmont Report's main principles include autonomy, beneficence, and justice (Yearby, 2016). The role of researchers is to ensure that the identification and depiction of participants are truthful (Elo et al., 2014). Researchers protect participants ensuring the participants are knowledgeable of the research process and their right to voluntarily consent to participate (Robinson, 2014). I protected participants by obtaining informed consent before conducting interviews. I followed the principles of the Belmont Report when conducting interviews and throughout the research study to ensure full protection of study participants. Researchers hinder data collection when they insert their worldview and biases, which may influence the way they ask questions, interpret meaning, and shape findings (Berger, 2015). As the primary data collector, I recognized and identified my biases to ensure data collection was trustworthy and to provide protection of research

participants. Qualitative researchers may also conduct self-evaluations and internal dialogues of their bias to acknowledge how biases may affect the research process as a processed term reflexivity (Berger, 2015). A method of reflexivity used by qualitative researchers is bracketing, which allows researchers to acknowledge their past backgrounds and suspend any personal biases that might influence the study (Kuntz, Seitz, & Nelson, 2015; Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Astedt-Kurki, 2015). I used bracketing to acknowledge and mitigate any potential personal biases in this study.

Finally, my role as the researcher included being an interviewer. Qualitative researchers develop a collection of questions that are open-ended that allow them to explore the phenomenon with participants freely expressing their insights without the limitations of close-ended questions (Chenail, 2011). Additionally, qualitative researchers who write down their thoughts before and after conducting interviews in a journal lessen biases in addition to using the interviewing-the-investigator method (Chenail, 2011). Researchers also use an interview protocol to establish the method of investigation by outlining the procedures and strategies used by researchers to conduct interviews (Dikko, 2016; Yin, 2018). Furthermore, researchers use an interview protocol to elicit detailed information related to the purpose of the study and as a method to start a conversation about a phenomenon (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I used an interview protocol to gain consistency throughout the interview process that ensured fairness for all participants and avoided injecting personal biases.

## Participants

Researchers select participants for qualitative studies who understand the phenomenon under investigation and can provide new ideas and themes related to the central question of the study (Boddy, 2016). The eligibility criteria for this study are (a) small businesses leaders seeking federal contracts, (b) leaders who implemented successes strategies to win federal contracts, and (c) small business leaders located in the state of Washington. Business leaders include CEOs, members of a board of directors, and a member of an upper management team who influence the organizational structure, revenue-generating ability, and the sustainability of the business through strategic decision-making related to how and when the business makes decisions (Simsek, Jansen, Minichilli, & Escriba-Esteve, 2015). The participants consisted of small business leaders of service companies that include CEOs, presidents, general managers, and business owners who implemented strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. I used the Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation (FPDS-NG) to access small businesses leaders in the service industry who received open competitive federal contracts awards in the state of Washington. The FPDS-NG database includes federal acquisitions with the dollar value of the contract award, the product or service code, contractor name, competition requirements, the place of performance for the goods or service, and if the contractor is a small business (Moore, Grammich, & Mele, 2015). I selected participants who understand the strategies required to win open competitive federal contracts.

Qualitative researchers develop positive relationships with participants to build trust, respect, and to establish working relationships (Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015), and the ability to establish a bond with study participants is essential in qualitative research (Dikko, 2016). I used an interview protocol to develop a relationship with the participants (see Appendix). Qualitative researchers also improve the creditability of their study by building a rapport with participants that encourages honest disclosure and willingness to share information (Yin, 2018). I established rapport by personally visiting the small businesses selected from the FPDS-NG to invite them to participate in this study. During my visit with the small business leaders, I explained the purpose of my study and explained confidentiality and the informed consent form process required for voluntary participation in the study. Lastly, I asked to interview potential participants to understand the successful strategies they have used to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

Three primary research methods exist: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Almalki, 2016; Groeneveld, Tummers, Bronkhorst, Ashikali, & van Thiel, 2015; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). I used the qualitative research method to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies some small business leaders use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. In qualitative research, the researcher explores the meaning of phenomenon through exploration, information, evaluation, and interpretation (Ejimabo, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Researchers use qualitative methods to collect

open-ended, developing data used to create themes (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The central focus of researchers using the qualitative method is to explore a phenomenon from the viewpoints of participants in the context in which the participants experience the phenomenon (Ejimabo, 2015). Qualitative researchers conduct in-depth interviews using *how* and *why* questions to elicit understanding of the phenomenon of the study (Lewis, 2015). The researcher takes a snapshot of participants' insights in natural settings (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Qualitative researchers can gain a deeper understanding of decisions or processes and use thick descriptions to explain, analyze, and understand participants' viewpoints (Yin, 2018). A concern of the qualitative researcher is acquiring a level of realism from participants not possible in quantitative research (Muylaert, Sarubbi, Gallo, Neto, & Reis, 2014), but I acquired this realism through thick descriptions of participants' viewpoints.

Researchers conducting quantitative research emphasize numerical data and testing hypotheses to determine relationships or differences between variables (Ingham-Broomfield, 2014; Sutton & Austin, 2015). This can mean that quantitative researchers are distant from the phenomenon under study and enter the study with preconceived ideas of the findings (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). In the use of the quantitative approach, researchers also focus on testing theories using scientific methods (Antwi & Hamza, 2015) and emphasize causation and correlation to establish a statistically significant relationship (Ingham-Broomfield, 2014). My focus was not to test theories or use scientific processes; therefore, the quantitative research method did not meet the objective of this study.

Combining elements of qualitative research methods and quantitative research methods result in a mixed method (Landrum & Garza, 2015). Researchers use mixed methods to link the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods while compensating for the limitation of both methods (Kaur, 2016). In the use of the mixed-method approach, researchers seek answers to complex questions (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Additionally, mixed-method researchers seek to understand a phenomenon while measuring trends, causes, and effects (Kaur, 2016). I rejected the use of the mixed-method approach because I was not testing hypotheses or seeking to understand the cause and effect common in quantitative methods while I explored the strategies used by some small business leaders in the service industry used to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts.

### **Research Design**

A research design is the reasoning used by the researcher to connect the data and results to the central research question of the study (Yin, 2018). I selected a case study design for this study. A case study design is a realistic process that allows the use of various approaches and information sources to achieve insight of the phenomenon studied (Doody & Doody, 2015; Yin, 2018). Case study research was appropriate for this study because I sought to explore a phenomenon in a real-life, bounded setting using multiple data sources. Researchers conducting multiple case studies examine each participant's narratives of their real-life experiences and perspectives (Uiboleht, Karm, & Postareff, 2016). I used a multiple case study to explore successful strategies some small business service leaders used to win open competitive federal contracts.

Phenomenological researchers explore the meanings of lived experiences of participants (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Phenomenological researchers focus on the internal thoughts, viewpoints, opinions, outlooks, and structures of the thinking processes and not the factors that cause the cognitive process (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Researchers conducting a phenomenological study emphasize the accurate experiences of the study as more important than the ability of the researcher to relate the finding across other studies or people (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I did not choose a phenomenological design because I was not exploring the lived experiences of small business service leaders.

A business researcher uses ethnographic research to study a phenomenon of a culture or group (Draper, 2015). Ethnographic researchers study social groups that require the researcher to develop a closeness with the participants and happenings to generate thick accounts of the phenomena (Liao, Soltani, Wang, & Iqbal, 2017). Researchers using the ethnographic design highlight the influences of conduct and interfaces to discovery inside meaning related to a phenomenon (Eika, Dale, Espnes, & Hvalvik, 2015). My study interest was the successful strategies of individual small business service leaders, not the collective group; therefore, the use of ethnographic research design was inappropriate for this study.

The narrative researcher chronicles the life stories of participants (Singh et al., 2015). Researchers using narrative designs seek a chronological order that binds events in a significant manner to provide understanding of a phenomenon (Sahni & Sinha, 2016). Narrative researchers contemplate the entire storyline related to the relationship between

the presenter's experiences and the dual construction of meaning of the presenter and the researcher through a social context (Dumay & Rooney, 2016). The use of narrative design for this study was not appropriate because I was not studying the life stories of participants.

Another consideration in my research design was data saturation. Data saturation occurs when no new themes or data are obtained and there are enough data for replication of the study by others (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Saturation builds rich data within the conceptual framework of the study by exploring all sides of the phenomenon repeats among study participants (Morse, 2015b). Conducting interviews is one method researchers use to achieve data saturation in qualitative research (Fusch & Ness, 2015) that can pair with member checking to ensure data saturation (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Member checking allows the researcher to return a summary of the transcribed interview to participants that allow validation of the trustworthiness of the data (Birt et al., 2016). I conducted semistructured interviews to ask follow-up probing questions to elicit rich data, and I used member checking to ensure data saturation. Data saturation also helped the results of this study, as the optimal outcome of a multiple case study depends on prior knowledge by the researcher on *how* and *why* a result of the cases might occur from case to case (Yin, 2018). I conducted interviews with business leaders in the service industry who have successfully used strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts until no new themes or data emerged.

## **Population and Sampling**

Qualitative researchers select data informants to collect the data required to address the study objective (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015). Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling to identify and select data rich cases linked to the phenomenon of the study (Duan, Bhaumik, Palinkas, & Hoagwood, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling is appropriate when researchers are interested in participants who have firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon (Elo et al., 2014). Purposeful sampling allows researchers to limit a larger population down to a smaller sample population based on participants' experience related to the topic of the study (Etikan, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). Researchers use purposeful samplings to select participants who meet specific criteria and who have knowledge of the phenomenon explored in the study instead of selecting participants based on convenience (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016; Etikan, 2016). Researchers' use of snowball sampling will potentially allow one participant to know who subsequent participants are and violates confidentiality of study participants (Yingling & McClain, 2015). I used purposeful sampling to select small business leaders who have successfully used strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. Small business leaders include CEOs, presidents, general managers, and business owners with the authority to make decisions that affect revenue generation and business operations (Simsek et al., 2015). To be eligible for this study, participants had to have been leaders who (a) sought federal contracts, (b) implemented successful strategies to win federal contracts, and (c) be located in the state of Washington.

Determining the optimal sample size for qualitative studies depends on the purpose of the study, central research question, and the depth of the data (Elo et al., 2014). The sampling size for multiple case studies is effective at six to 10 case studies (Yin, 2018). The sample size for my study was six small business leaders in the state of Washington. Akindoju (2016) explored small business strategies in Halifax, Nova Scotia and used a sample size of six small business leaders. Asoh (2016) conducted a qualitative multiple case study of small business owners using a sample size of six small business owners. Roman (2016) studied strategies to control internal factors affecting information systems projects with the telecommunication service industry, using six participants as the sample size. Because my study was similar in method, design, and scope to the research of Akindoju, Asoh, and Roman, six participants was an appropriate sample size.

Data saturation occurs when the qualitative researcher collects no new data or themes signaling to the researcher that the sample size is sufficient (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In qualitative research, data saturation occurs when no new data applicable to the purpose of the study is obtainable (Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). Morse (2015b) maintained saturation builds rich data within the conceptual framework of the study by exploring all sides of the phenomenon repeats among study participants. Collecting data from a variety of participants to gain different viewpoints and to validate data refers to data triangulation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I used semistructured interviews to collect rich data during interviews and verified data saturation by using member checking. The optimal outcome of a multiple case study depends on prior knowledge by the researcher as *how* and *why* a result of the cases might occur from case to case (Yin, 2018). I conducted interviews of

six business leaders in the service industry until the information provided by the participants became redundant or no new data appeared.

The interview site must be convenient for the participants to ensure their involvement in the study (Darwin et al., 2017). After obtaining informed consent, participants may select an interview location that is suitable for them and their schedules (Darwin et al., 2017; Thorneloe, Bundy, Griffiths, Ashcroft, & Cordingley, 2017). Researchers must ensure the interview location is secure, safe, quiet, and free from interruption (Doody & Noonan, 2013). To facilitate the participants selecting a location that was private and convenient, I suggested a publicly available site, such as a library or community center, depending on the availability.

### **Ethical Research**

Qualitative researchers must obtain informed consent from participants before conducting research (Lorell, Mikita, Anderson, Hallinan, & Forrest, 2015). Acquiring informed consent from participants increases participants' trust that the researcher will protect their information (Pacho, 2015). Informed consent is a means for competent participants to agree or disagree to participate in the research voluntarily (Pacho, 2015). Qualitative researchers ensure there is a balance of the benefits of the research and the potential harm to the research participants (Roberts, 2015). Researchers should inform potential participants of the purpose of the study, note that participation is voluntary, provide the steps required to protect their information, describe the type of questions in the interview, and review the requirement for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before conducting the study (Robinson, 2014). I visited participants and provided them

with an invitation to participate and provided a copy of the informed consent form to study participants, which contains content regarding participation in this study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Researchers must inform participants that they have the right to decline to participate in the study, and they can quit at any time without the need for a reason (Pacho, 2015). Participants may withdraw from the research study if they feel apprehensive or troubled (Doyle & Buckley, 2016). Qualitative researchers must inform participants of their right to withdraw and refuse to answer specific questions (Sabar & Ben-Yehoshua, 2017). I informed study participants of their right to refuse to answer certain questions and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Researchers must obtain IRB written approval before conducting the study and interviews (Wiehle et al., 2014). I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB prior to conducting the study. The Walden University IRB approval number is 09-27-18-0104252.

Another ethical issue qualitative researchers must address is the use of incentives that may stimulate participants, but cause distress (Robinson, 2014). I did not offer any incentives to participants, monetary or otherwise for participating in this study. I provided study participants with a PDF copy of the published study. Qualitative researchers must follow the principles of the Belmont report of autonomy and protection to ensure the confidentiality of participants' names and businesses (Fiske & Hauser, 2014). Researchers experience ethical issues when conducting interviews (Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2016). Ethical issues include the protection of participants from mental or

emotional harm and safeguarding private and confidential information shared by the participants (Fiske & Hauser, 2014). The researcher may use different methods to preserve participant confidentiality, such as using aliases or codes, when analyzing the data (Petrova et al., 2016). I replaced study participants' identifying information with the codes P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 to protect their identities. I saved all data on a password-protected flash drive and locked the flash drive in a secure file cabinet in my home office. I will retain all research records for 5 years, after which time I will destroy the flash drive and shred the paper documents.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Researchers conducting qualitative research are the primary data collection instruments (Cope, 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2018). As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. Qualitative researchers utilize various data collection instruments that might include questionnaires, field notes, observation, reflective journaling, focus groups, archival records, documents, physical artifacts, and semistructured interviews (Cope, 2014; Nassaji, 2015; Yin, 2018). The most dominant data collection instrument qualitative researchers employ is the interview; especially when conducting case study research (Yin, 2018). The majority of qualitative research interviews are in-depth and semistructured (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). I acted as the primary data collection instrument and used semistructured interviews along with reviewing company documents for this study.

In qualitative research, the use of semistructured interviews provide researchers with a flexible and accommodating data collection tool useable in individual and group

interview settings (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Researchers use semistructured interviews to ask open-ended questions that provide participants the freedom to answer questions without feeling pressure from the researcher (Kallio et al., 2016). Researchers pose each interview question to participants in the same way that follow an exact order, but the researcher has the option to deviate from the planned question order based on the participant's responses (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Wethington & McDarby, 2015). I used semistructured interviews that follow the interview protocol (see Appendix) to collect data for this study. I used semistructured interviews to ask probing questions and follow-up questions that enhanced my ability to gather additional information and clarification from the participants.

Qualitative researchers use documents to validate and supplement evidence collected from other sources (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Yin, 2018). Researchers use multiple data sources to triangulate and examine the same phenomenon from various perspectives (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers might use documents to contradict or collaborate information gathered from interviews (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) listed several types of relevant documents that researchers might review during data collection that include e-mails, administrative documents, letters, reports, proposals, and other internal documents. I collected company documents that included contracts awards, contract proposals, and statement of work used to outline business strategies used to win open competitive federal contracts. I gained access to the company documents through an authorized official of each company signing a letter of cooperation and confidentiality agreement.

Qualitative researchers establish trustworthiness by ensuring the data collection is dependable, credible, confirmable, and transferable (Morse, 2015a). Researchers use methodological triangulation to gather data using multiple data collection instruments during data collection to attain a complete view of the phenomenon (Cope, 2014). The use of multiple data sources in qualitative research improves consistency and credibility in the data collection (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Singh, 2015). In a qualitative approach, researchers use triangulation to confirm the data, ensure the data is extensive, and enhance credibility (Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers utilize member checking to confirm the accuracy of findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015) and during data collection to verify data between participants (Morse, 2015a). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix), methodological triangulation, and member checking to ensure dependability, credibility, and confirmability in this study. I transcribed the recorded interviews, composed a summary page of the interview data, and provide the interpreted summary to the participants via e-mail three days before the 30-minute, member-checking meeting. During the member checking session meeting, I asked the participants if the summary of the interview was accurate and if there was any additional information they wanted to add.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Qualitative researchers must understand various data collection techniques when conducting case study research (Yin, 2018). Researchers use interviews to gather information for case studies (Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers have the flexibility to follow a predesigned protocol or deviate during interviews to probe for more in-depth

understanding from participants (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Wilson, 2016). An interview protocol is a step-by-step guide that researchers use to facilitate detailed data collection (Benia, Hauck-Filho, Dillenburg, & Stein, 2015; Yin, 2018). The interview protocol contains an outline of the procedures and strategies used to conduct interviews (Dikko, 2016). Further, the interview protocol contains content regarding the obligations to protect human subjects and requirements to obtain voluntary informed consent before conducting interviews (Yin, 2018). I obtained informed consent from each participant before conducting interviews. I conducted face-to-face, semistructured interviews using the same interview protocol for each interview (see Appendix).

Researchers must receive approval from the Institution Review Board (IRB) before collecting data. Study participants must voluntarily provide their willingness to participate in the study after receiving all relevant information concerning the study through a process term informed consent (Bhattacharya, Dhiman, & Chaturvedi, 2016). After obtaining IRB approval, I visited each participants and provided an invitation to participate and provided the informed consent form. I afforded participants the opportunity to provide informed consent through replying *I consent* to the e-mail containing the informed consent form, sign, scan, and return the informed consent form through e-mail or U.S. Postal Service, or through signing the informed consent just prior to the interview. I coordinated with participants to select a location to conduct face-to-face semistructured interviews. Before the beginning of the interviews, I explained the purpose of the interviews, the benefits of the study, the purpose of recording the interviews, and the reason for reviewing company documents. I obtained the signature of

each business owner or authorized representative on the Letter of Cooperation and the Confidentiality Agreement. During the interview, I asked probing and follow-up question to gather a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. After the interview, I thank participants for their time and their willingness to participate in my study. I explained the need for a 30-minute follow-up meeting that allowed the participant a chance to review a summary of the interview to verify the accuracy of the interview and to provide additional information if needed.

Researchers may use multiple sources to collect data during case studies that include reviewing company archival records and documents (Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers use documentation as a stable, low profile, and precise source of data collection (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). To support data collected using interviews, researchers use secondary data sources, such as company documents, which might add value to the interviews and promote triangulation of the data (Renz, Carrington, & Badger, 2018). I requested company documents that included contracts awards, contract proposals, and statement of work. I obtained access to the company documents through the business owner or authorized representative signature on the letter of cooperation and confidentiality agreement.

An advantage of face-to-face, semistructured interviews is the ability for the researcher and participant to establish a mutually beneficial relationship that allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). I used semistructured interviews to ask follow-up questions of participants that ensured I gathered rich data and gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of this study. A disadvantage of

conducting face-to-face, semistructured interviews occurs when participants refuse to answer interview questions (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Participants refusing to answer questions might occur that will prevent gathering rich data to answer the central research questions in my study. Qualitative researchers use multiple sources of data to investigate a broader range of data and to improve credibility (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Yin, 2018). The review of company documents supports triangulation of the data (Renz et al., 2018). I reviewed company documents to triangulate participants' interview responses related to this study. Researchers might face the disadvantage of participants deliberately withholding relevant documents (Yin, 2018). Participants did not withhold access to contract proposal documents and actual copies of federal contracts awarded to their companies in this study.

Researchers conduct pilot case studies to develop, examine, or improve the research questions and processes used in a later official case study (Yin, 2018). Researchers conduct pilot studies to establish the feasibility and initial value of their prospective research study (Moss et al., 2015). Qualitative researchers might gather evidence to correct the interview protocol instruments and address biases discovered during the small-scale study (Chenail, 2011). Researchers might utilize a pilot case study to refine the data collection processes to ensure collection of rich data and to collect data following an established protocol (Yin, 2018). The limited scope of this study eliminated my need to conduct a pilot study.

Qualitative researchers provide participants with a transcribed summary of the interview session that allows for participant validation of the trustworthiness of the

interview (Birt et al., 2016). Researchers use member checking to reduce errors in interpreting the collected data and to improve the dependability and credibility of the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I conducted a 30-minute follow-up session with each participant to conduct member checking of the summary of transcribed interview data. I provided a summary page of the transcribed interviews to the participants for review during the follow-up meeting. I asked participants to validate the accuracy of the summary and to provide any additional information required.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Qualitative researchers generate a large volume of data in the form of transcripts and notes, which becomes a labor-intensive process (Zamawe, 2015). The development of computer-assisted data analysis software (CAQDAS) provides a system to handle, store, and manipulate data retrieved by researchers (Houghton et al., 2013; Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016; Zamawe, 2015). Researchers use CAQDAS, such as NVivo and ATLAS.ti, because of the ability to visually display data and study findings (Woods et al., 2016). NVivo and ATLAS.ti have features for researchers to create text files, transcribe audio and video files, transcribe field notes, and transcribe interviews inside the software (Woods et al., 2016). The NVivo software's strength is the ability to link with multiple qualitative research designs and data analysis methods (Zamawe, 2015). The use of NVivo supports data retrieval and search using queries that permit researchers the ability to ask questions and test developing themes (Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers establish themes to capture and unite related attributes of the phenomenon along with their interrelationship (Houghton et al., 2013). I used NVivo

12 software in data analysis to transcribe interview data and to search for emerging themes. I stored notes, interview audio files, transcription of interviews, copies of company documents, and reflective journals in a locked filing cabinet in my home office that only I have access to the key. I stored all electronic files via a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive cloud-based storage drive. I will store data for 5 years and then delete all the electronic files and shred all paper files.

### **Data Analysis**

Graue (2015) defined qualitative data analysis as a process of reporting, categorizing, and connecting the phenomena with the researcher's interpretation. Data analysis includes coding, sorting, and examining of qualitative data (Chowdhury, 2015). Qualitative researchers analyze case study data by scrutinizing, grouping, tabularizing, testing, and recombining data (Yin, 2018). Graue stated triangulation occurs when researchers use data from an assortment of sources that use a variety of methods. Yin (2018) discussed four types of triangulation that included (a) data triangulation, (b) researcher triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. Qualitative researchers use methodological triangulation to gain a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon through collecting data from multiple sources that includes face-to-face interviews in case studies (Haddock-Millar, Sanyal, & Müller-Camen, 2016). Researchers triangulate within the same method to test the reliability of data sources (Amankwaa, 2016). Researchers employ cross-case comparison to increase the validity of case studies using methodological triangulation (Amankwaa, 2016). I used

methodological triangulation in this study to improve the dependability of the data and the credibility of the findings.

Researchers use multiple sources of data when using methodological triangulation that might include interview data, observations, videos, newspapers, letters, books, and documents (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Graue, 2015). Fusch and Ness (2015) maintained methodological triangulation ensures researchers collect data that is full and robust. Graue (2015) asserted researchers conducting case study research use in-depth interviews, data coding, and methodological triangulation to ensure reliability and validity in data analysis. Yin (2018) contended that case studies allow researchers to concentrate in-depth on a case while maintaining a holistic and real-world view of the phenomenon using multiple sources of data. Qualitative researchers analyze case studies using pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018). I analyzed the data in this multiple case study using cross-case synthesis by compiling data, disassembling data, reassembling data, interpreting data, and concluding as suggested by Yin.

### **Compiling Data**

Qualitative researchers obtain critical information from case studies by conducting face-to-face, semistructured interviews (Yin, 2018). Researchers use recording devices to verbatim capture data during interviews and use transcribed recordings to understand the interview data (Renz et al., 2018). I followed an interview protocol to conduct face-to-face semistructured interviews to obtain data (see Appendix). Zamawe (2015) used NVivo software to create a new project to compile all interview

transcripts, interview audio files, and notes. I used NVivo 12 software to compile and code interview audio files, transcriptions of interviews, copies of company documents, reflective journals, and results from member checking with participants.

### **Disassembling Data**

St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) suggested coding transcribed interview data and sorting into themes. Researchers search for themes that capture and join associated elements of cases with links to how the themes related to each other (Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers code, sort, and scrutinize collected data to increase understanding of the phenomenon (Chowdhury, 2015). I disassembled data by coding and sorting the data using NVivo 12 software to search for emerging themes.

### **Reassembling Data**

Qualitative researchers group and categories dismantled coded data with similar themes into higher level concepts and classifications during the reassembling data stage (Ciemens, Brant, Kersten, Mulette, & Dickerson, 2015; Yin, 2015). Yin (2015) argued that CAQDAS, like NVivo 11, enhance researchers's ability to reassemble data. I used NVivo 12 to group coded data into hierachical nodes to show the interactions of coded data to reveal emerging themes.

### **Interpreting Data**

Researchers interpret data from the themes and patterns from coded data that capture and organize the intentions of participants (Houghton et al., 2013; Yin, 2015). Qualitative researchers employ qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo 11, that might add rigor and support the systematic coding, organizing, and interpreting of large

amounts of data faster than manual methods (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Woods et al., 2016). I interpreted the coded data by comparing and contrasting the themes and patterns using NVivo 12 software.

### **Concluding Data**

Qualitative researchers finish the data analysis phase by linking the data interpretations and the central themes of the study that provide rich conclusions (Graue, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015; Yin, 2015). I concluded data analysis by scrutinizing the data for patterns and developing themes that align with my conceptual framework of agency theory. I connected my research questions of what strategies small business leaders in the services industry used to win open competitive federal contracts with the emerging patterns and themes from the data. Yin (2015) discussed comparing conclusions to previous research in the literature and similar recent studies. I concluded data analysis by comparing my conclusions to previous research in the literature and recent studies like my topic.

### **Software Plan**

The use of CAQDAS, such as NVivo 11, is a means for the qualitative researcher to compile, organize, develop themes and patterns, and interpret data (Chowdhury, 2015; De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Yin, 2015). Woods et al. (2016) claimed researchers' use of CAQDAS might improve the rigor and trustworthiness of the data analysis. Zamawe (2015) maintained researchers prefer NVivo software because of being able to analyze data from multiple approaches. Qualitative researchers use NVivo to code and develop patterns and themes (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Woods et al., 2016). To facilitate the use

of NVivo 12, I uploaded the interviews and company documents to develop codes and themes using Microsoft Word and Excel software.

### **Key Themes**

Researchers identify repetitive patterns and important themes during data analysis that link to the phenomenon of the study (Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers investigate relationships between interview data, company documents, and observations to the central research question (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Cope (2014) argued researchers compare existing literature and the emerging themes, patterns, and concepts seeking agreements and disagreements. I used key themes from the interviews and company documents to link to the conceptual framework of agency theory. I used NVivo 12 to import the research questions, interview transcripts, and company documents to search for agreement and disagreement of the key themes found in the literature on agency theory. I compared the findings of this study to the findings within studies published in 2017-2018, noting whether my findings confirmed or refuted the outcomes published by these recent researchers.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Researchers conducting a qualitative method study seek dependability instead of reliability (Morse, 2015a). The qualitative researcher strives to ensure the findings are credible, confirmable, and trustworthy rather than seeking internal or external validity (Cope, 2014; Morse, 2015a). In this research study, I strived to ensure the dependability of the data and that the findings are credible, confirmable, and trustworthy.

**Dependability**

Cope (2014) expressed that dependability is the steady application of data in comparable situations. Morse (2015a) asserted some methods researchers use to ensure dependability include triangulation and member checking. Triangulation denotes using numerous methods that expand the investigator's depth of understanding of the phenomenon (Morse, 2015a; Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2016). Cope maintained allowing participants to verify the trustworthiness of the data is member checking. To achieve dependability in my study, I used methodological triangulation to deepen my understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, I used member checking to ensure the data truthfully represents the meanings the participants shared during data collection.

**Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative case study research requires researchers to provide robust conceptual substance and clear study design that maintains the meaning of a case study (Bengtsson, 2016). Cope (2014) asserted that credibility improves when researchers explain their experiences and confirm the results with the participants. Houghton et al. (2013) suggested using triangulations that employ various methods to verify the data completeness. To ensure credibility in my study, I used purposeful sampling, member checking, and methodological triangulation.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability indicates that data is unbiased and truthful (Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers establish confirmability through recounting how assumptions and analysis occurred and by illustrating that the findings resulted from the data (Cope, 2014). To

ensure confirmability, the researcher may use triangulation, audit trails, and member checking (Houghton et al., 2013; Rapport, Clement, Doel, & Hutchings, 2015). To ensure confirmability, I used member checking, methodological triangulation, and audit trails to ensure data was unbiased and truthful.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the ability of others to use the findings of a research study by applying the results to other situations or groups (Elo et al., 2014; Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, & Blackman, 2016). Elo et al. (2014) suggested the research originators might suggest transferability of the results, but transferability occurs when future researchers extrapolate the findings in the same or similar setting; however, the final decision resides with the reader if the results are transferable. In contrast, Moon et al. (2016) argued that the researcher is liable for providing adequate information to facilitate conclusions about the relative relationship to allow transferability. As the researcher, I provided rich data that provides sufficient proof of the transferability of my study results.

### **Data Saturation**

Qualitative researchers achieve data saturation when participants provide the same information in response to interview questions that contain no new information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Researchers aim to gather enough data with no new themes that allows replication of the study by others (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). Interviews provide one method of achieving data saturation in qualitative research that can pair with member checking to ensure data saturation (Birt et al., 2016; Fusch &

Ness, 2015). Researchers use member checking to allow returning a summary of the transcribed interview to participants that enables validation of the trustworthiness of the data (Birt et al., 2016). Researchers collect data using multiple sources that merge themes and information to achieve methodological triangulation to link data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2018). I conducted semistructured interviews to ask follow-up probing questions to elicit rich data and utilized member checking and methodological triangulation to ensure data saturation. The qualitative researcher needs previous information about the cases selected in a multiple case study as to how and why the ideal outcome of the cases might occur that allows duplication from case to case (Yin, 2018). I conducted interviews with business leaders in the service industry who have successfully used strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts until no new themes or data emerged.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I restated the purpose of the study, listed the different research methods, and provided the rationale for the research method for this study. Additionally, Section 2 included the reasoning for the research design, population and sampling, and requirement to ensure ethical research. I described the data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data organization techniques for this study. Section 2 concluded with my data analysis procedures, the plan to ensure dependability, credibility, and confirmability, and the means to reach data saturation. Section 3 contains (a) the presentation of the findings, (b) how the findings of the study are important to professional practice, (c) social change, and (d) recommendations for future research.

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

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open, competitive U.S. federal contracts. I collected data from six small business leaders in the state of Washington by conducting face-to-face, semistructured interviews and reviewing company documents. I employed methodological triangulation to compare the company documents with the interview data. I engaged in member checking with each participant to validate data collected and to obtain additional information. I continued data collection until no new themes, patterns, or codes emerged to reach data saturation.

I used Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis process of scrutinizing, grouping, tabularizing, testing, and recombining the data. I used NVivo 12 software to code transcribed interviews for themes. Three strategies developed as key themes: (a) opportunity identification strategy, (b) requirements review strategy, and (c) bid submission strategy. The findings in this section present the strategies some leaders used to win open, competitive U.S. federal contracts. I also link the findings to Jensen and Meckling's (1976) agency theory.

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

The overarching research question for this study was "What strategies do some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?" I asked the six small business leaders eight prepared interview questions along with probing follow-up questions to provoke a natural conversation. I obtained the

consent of each participant to record each interview. I transcribed the recorded interviews into an MS Word document and then uploaded the transcripts to NVivo 12 for coding and analyzing for themes. I prepared a summary of the transcribed interviews and conducted member checking with each participant until no new data or themes emerged. I triangulated the data by reviewing awarded contracts, statements of work, company capability statements, company websites, preaward bid proposal documents, and the FPDS-NG website to confirm the data gathered from the interview. I determined I reached data saturation when no new themes or patterns surfaced after the fifth interview. I completed the sixth interview to substantiate that I achieved data saturation as of result of new themes or patterns occurring from the data.

I used the conceptual framework of agency theory to understand the strategies some small business leaders use to win open competitive federal contracts. Agency theorists explore the relationship between principals and agents, differences in goals, and risk tolerance in contractual relationships (Bhattacharjee, 1998; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The three major themes of this study support the tenets of agency theory, which I used to answer my research question: (a) opportunity identification strategy, (b) requirement review strategy, and (c) bid submission strategy. I used the first theme to understand how the participants attempted to establish a contractual relationship by taking steps to locate contracting opportunities. All the participants in this study employed strategies to identify federal contracting opportunities. I used the second theme, requirements strategy, to understand how the participants manage their tolerance for risk. All the participants indicated they employed a strategy of reviewing contract

requirements to ensure they had a comprehensive understanding of the requirements and evaluate the risk associated with the contract. I used the third theme of bid submission strategy to understand how the participants attempted to align their business goals with the goals of the federal agencies. Each of the participants said that they used a bid submission strategy to achieve their business goals through winning contracts. In Table 2, I display the major themes of this study.

Table 2

*Major Themes: Strategies Use to Win Open Competitive Federal Contracts*

| Strategy                            | Participants # | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| Opportunity identification strategy | 6              | 100        |
| Requirements review strategy        | 6              | 100        |
| Bid submission strategy             | 6              | 100        |

**Theme 1: Opportunity Identification Strategy**

Agency theorists defined the contractual relationship as a mutual contract where the principal hires the agent to deliver or perform a service that includes delegated decision-making (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Steinle et al., 2014). The participants in this study expressed the need for small businesses to have a strategy of identifying federal contracting opportunities that fit their business model and risk tolerance. The participants in this study use a variety of tactics to identify opportunities. Some of the participants stated that finding the right opportunity requires using several different tactics to achieve business goals. My comments regarding the use of tactics denote a method the participant used to identify opportunities for contracting. The participants utilized three tactics to implement their opportunity identification strategy (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Tactics for Executing the Opportunities Identification Strategy*

| Tactic                                | Participants       | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Access Federal Business Opportunities | P1, P2, P3, and P5 | 66         |
| Direct Email from Contracting Officer | P1, P4, and P6     | 50         |
| Third Party Subscription Service      | P1 and P2          | 33         |

**Access federal business opportunities.** Federal contracting agencies are required to post federal contracting opportunities over \$25, 000 to the Federal Business Opportunities (FBO) website, which is known as FedBizOpps (Ferris, Houston, & Javakhadze, 2019). Four of the six participants detailed how they used the FBO website to find opportunities to contract with the federal government. The FBO website was the preferred method utilized by participants P1, P2, P3, and P5. P1 explained, “FBO keeps us in the know on what is coming up that is where all the federal government post almost all their sources sought.” P1 provided me access to their current lists of contracting opportunities retrieved from the FBO website. I used the FBO printout of contracting opportunities to sort the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code from P1 to triangulate the information obtained during the interview and to compare the preawarded bid proposal documents. I found a list of contracting opportunities from various federal agencies seeking companies to perform services related to the NAICS code used by P1. I clicked on several of the opportunities, finding the synopsis of the project, the solicitation listing the contract requirements, the contracting officer contact information, and questions other potential vendors have asked related to the opportunity.

I found that the FBO site only stores opportunities for a year, and then FBO archives the opportunities. P1 and other business leaders can select to watch opportunities or add themselves to a list of interested vendors through a free registration process. The participants who accessed FBO to identify opportunities admitted to monitoring of the website to ensure the identification of the right contracting opportunity that fits their business goals. P3 stated, “I have a team member that deals with federal opportunities and responds to them.” P5 added, “I have a designated person who works probably 30 to 35 hours week . . . [that] primary responsibility is to respond to RFPs.”

**Direct email from contracting officer.** Some of the participants indicated they receive direct e-mails from the federal contracting agency. P1, P4, and P6 indicated that they received direct e-mails from federal contracting officers providing them insight into potential federal contracting opportunities. P1 stated, “Many solicitations are just emailed to us.” P4 commented, “We are on an email list that sends us all the federal and state bids opportunities to our office.” P1 remarked, “A lot of solicitations are just emailed to us.” P5 added, “I get daily emails that correspond to our NAICs codes.” The participants who received the e-mail notices indicated their past performance on previous contracts earned the trust of the federal agencies, prompting a personal invitation to bid on future contracts. The findings confirm the research of Njuguna (2016) that opportunistic behavior is limited when principals and agents build contractual relationships.

**Third-party subscription services.** Contracting officers in federal agencies make contracting opportunities accessible to small businesses, which small business leaders use to identify opportunities and submit timely bids (Flynn & Davis, 2016b). Some of the

participants indicated that finding the right contracting opportunities requires relying on others to locate and supply them with potential contracting opportunities. P1 and P2 commented that they signed up for a subscription service through the third-party website, FedConnect. P2 said, “We signed up at the FedConnect website for notification, and the site sends out notices when there are upcoming bid opportunities” P1 added, “We just go through daily notifications from FedConnect, so they know what [opportunities] are coming up.” P2 permitted me to view the FedConnect website on their office computer, and P1 allowed me to view paid invoices from FedConnect to confirm the use of the service. The findings uphold the research of Josephson, Lee, Mariadoss, and Johnson (2019) in that businesses must manage contractual relationships with their government customers to achieve the greatest business value. Figure 1 is a display of how small business leaders implement the key tenets of the opportunities identification strategy.

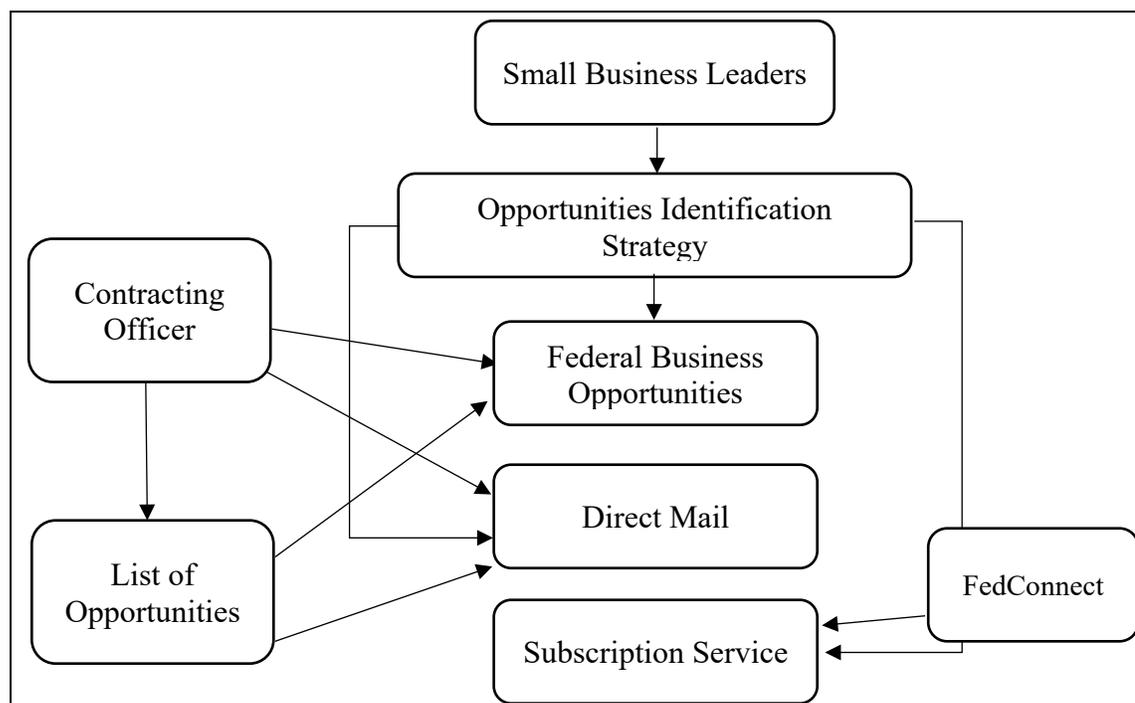


Figure 1. Opportunities identification strategy implementation.

The ability of small business leaders to establish a contractual relationship with federal contracting officers is a critical step in the small business finding public procurement tendering opportunities. Small business leaders must understand that public procurements differ from private sector procurements due to the political environment, which stimulates opportunistic behaviors resulting from contrasting goals (Adjei Bamfo & Maloreh Nyamekye, 2019). Small business leaders' ability to establish a trusting relationship with federal contracting officers might reduce information asymmetries due to the open and candid communication established between the contracting parties (Flammer, 2018). The findings support the research of Bergh, Ketchen, Orlandi, Heugens, and Boyd (2019), who noted that in contractual relationships, one party attempts to exploit information while the other party attempts to mitigate opportunistic behavior and work towards uniform goal attainment.

The opportunity identification strategy also aligns with Jensen and Meckling's (1976) agency theory in that the participants employed strategies to review contract solicitations to determine the bonding costs from contract monitoring that might impact their business goals. Jensen and Meckling asserted that principals would incur increased bonding costs as they employ provisions that limit self-interested agent behaviors that harm the principal. A consistent theme from the six participants was the use of a variety of tactics to locate and evaluate contracting opportunities that met their business model and level of risk acceptability. During the precontractual stage, risk increases due to hidden information that influence the principal's use of monitoring that raises the agency cost (Solheim Kile, Lædre, & Lohne, 2019). Jensen and Meckling argued that principals

control agency costs through monitoring activities and the use of incentives in attempts to decrease opportunistic agent behavior. The six participants conveyed doubt that federal contracting officers shared all the information required to win open competitive contracts in the solicitation, which is why they used multiple tactics to secure a contracting prospect with an opportunity identification strategy. Small business leaders' ability to assess contracting opportunities for risk, business model alignment, and agency costs that occur due to the principal's monitor activities is important to achieving balance to make decisions to seek contracts. Jensen and Meckling stated that a firm's leader who fails to achieve equilibrium from information asymmetry should avoid the contract opportunity.

## **Theme 2: Requirements Review Strategy**

Principals and agents establish risk expectations through the development of formal contracts (Eckerd & Girth, 2017). All the participants said that they review contracts requirements or specifications to ensure they understood the requirements of the contracts and to establish how risk will impact their business. The participants in this study used the words *requirement*, *scope*, and *specification* synonymously. P1 stated, "We go through and analyze the requirements to determine if the project is suited for us." P4 added, "Some specifications are written that are outdated from what is required for the contract." P5 affirmed, "I start by scanning the requirements to see who they are written for . . . half of the ones we review are written for someone else." Federal agencies use specifications to influence vendors before award, during contract execution, and after completion of the contract (Bruno, Gelderman, Lambrechts, & Semeijn, 2018). P3 said, "You have to understand your capital needs to determine if the requirements will impact

your bottom line.” P1, P3, P4, P5, and P6 all indicated they use a team approach to reviewing and evaluating contracts requirements to determine if the risk of attempting to meet the requirements benefits their business goals.

Agency theorists have also maintained that shifting risk between principals and agents reduces agency problems related to conflicting goals (Bendickson et al., 2016). P1 declared, “We put together a team to scrutinize the requirements for the project; there are a lot of in-house people that get involve.” P5 expressed, “My team reviews and considers specifications, and we discuss the appropriate opportunities for our company.” P4 added, “We review the specific job and then decide as to whether we wanted to bid the project or not.” P6 commented, “We are looking for a job that has a lot of the components we are used to working with, so we know we can be efficient.” The participants of this study discussed the consequences of failing to scrutinize the contract requirements before submitting a bid. P3 indicated, “There are challenges when you fail to understand the scope and which impacts your ability to provide adequate pricing.” P6 stated, “A senior level employee failed to sufficiently review and analyze the scope of the job that resulted in extra work and cost for them.”

I used the proposal and statement of work documents to verify the statements made by the participants. The statement of work contained an outline of the requirements of the contracts and how the contract monitoring would occur. I reviewed printouts of the statement of work that the participants used to compare with the contract solicitation before writing their proposals. I found that the statement of works contained the technical requirements the participants were required to accomplish for successful contract

completion. I found that some of the federal agencies use a statement of objectives or a performance work statement that gave the participants more discretion in the method of performance to meet the government requirements.

The statement of work, performance work statements, and statement of objectives I reviewed distinguished the responsibilities of the government and the participants. I found that the government listed the contract monitoring procedures in each document reviewed. I crosschecked with the participant's capability statements against the requirements in the solicitation and statement of work to verify if the requirements match the business function of the participants. The findings of this study support the claim that businesses incur increased risk if they fail to meet the minimum requirements of contracts (Eckerd & Girth, 2017). Figure 2 shows how small business leaders implement the requirements review strategy.

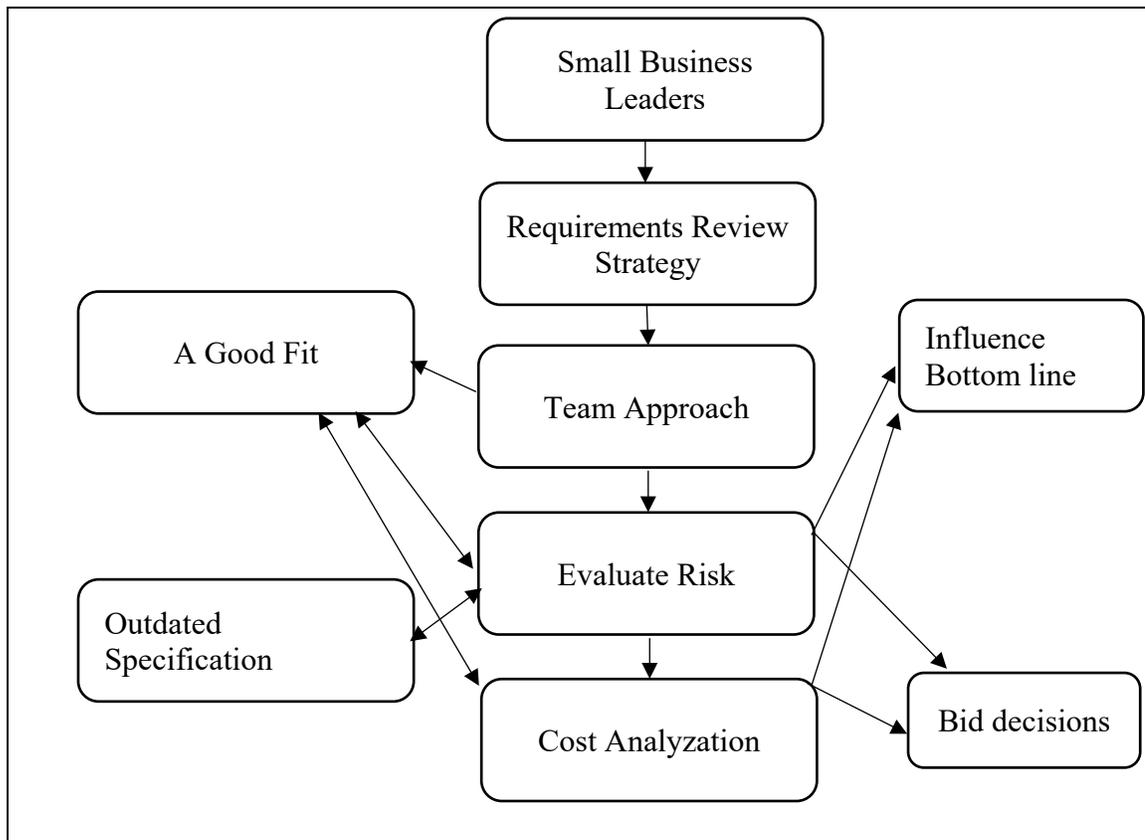


Figure 2. Requirements review strategy implementation.

Small business leaders that scrutinize contract requirements develop an understanding of the risk and monitoring requirements associated with the contracts. Federal contracting officers insert monitoring mechanism in contracts to alleviate vendors' opportunistic behavior (Reim, Sjödin, & Parida, 2018). Small business leaders that establish relationships with federal contracting officers before reviewing contracting requirements that could resolve disagreements in the solicitation before the awarding of the formal contract (Solís Rodríguez & González Díaz, 2017). Leaders who conduct comprehensive analysis of contract specifications gain an understanding of the costs they will incur to comply with monitoring requirements and to mitigate contract risk (Reim et al., 2018). The findings confirms the research of Eckerd and Girth (2017) that small

businesses that fail to meet the minimum contract requirements experience increased cost, monitoring, and contract risk.

This key finding aligns with Jensen and Meckling's (1976) agency theory because reviewing contract specification through the use of a requirements review strategy provides small business leaders insight into the implicit and explicit rights and behaviors to meet delivery and performance standards of the contract. The participants in this study expressed that the specifications might fail to address the services they offer, which increases their investment of resources to meet the contract requirements. Jensen and Meckling expressed to accomplish information symmetry the contract requirements must express the ability of the principal to limit the actions of the agent. Bhattacharjee (1998) added the agent might decide to accept or reject the contract depending on the amount and type of incentives, the level of effort to require to achieve optimal performance, and monitoring activities in the contract requirements. The six participants agreed that failing to perform a comprehensive review of the contract requirements will increase their costs and risk; therefore, they utilized the requirements review strategy.

### **Theme 3: Bid Submission Strategy**

Small business leaders make decisions to use limited resources to win public contracts despite the inherent risk associated with fulfilling the contract requirements (Woldesenbet & Worthington, 2018). The participants in this study stated the bid decisions requires consideration of their initial outlay of funds, the project time frame, and the level of effort required to win and complete the contract. P1 stated, "It comes down to estimating and if we have prior experience with this type of project." P1

continued, “The more experience we have with the type of project, the better understanding we have of the true cost for this type of work.” P4 added, “We try to obtain the previous contract price from public records to aid us in preparing our bid proposal.” Federal agencies have policy driven goals requiring agencies to award contracts that reduce the overall contract cost and risk to the government which means many federal agencies award contracts to the business that provides the lowest price technical acceptable bid (Josephson et al., 2019). P3 said, “It boils down to the numbers; whereas, the receiver of services could be better off if the criteria were based on a different range of factors besides price.” P2 indicated, “Our prices are competitive, and we have a solid reputation based on our prior performance.” All the participants expressed they felt their past performance or reputation with the contracting officer help their bidding strategy. This finding confirms the research of Flynn and Davis (2016b), who noted small businesses ability to exploit their resources through the improvement of their tendering abilities and the development of actionable strategies.

Agency theorists acknowledged the goal incongruence between principals and agents influences contributes to opportunistic behaviors (Uenk & Telgen, 2019). The study participants articulated their desire to provide the best service to the government at a reasonable and fair price while sustaining their businesses. The study participants agreed that the government has a goal of awarding to the lowest price versus the best quality in order to save money. P4 stated, “We try to submit bids that focus on our quality, our supervision for the job, and then we focus on price.” P1 added, “We ask for clarification in the specifications up front, so the contracting officer is forced to provide

the answer to all bidders which forces everyone to bid the project like they are supposed to bid.” P3 expressed, “The receiver of services could do a lot better if the criteria were based on a range of factors of service besides price.” I compared the contract awards with a printout from FPDS, which I used to compare the value of the contracts won by the participant with the reported value in the FPDS database. I found a complete list of all the federal contracts that the participants won from 1999 to present. I was able to confirm the amounts of the award of the contract that the participants provided me and to see which federal agency had made the award. I found the contract type listed along with the North American Industry Classification System codes and the date of award and the period of performance. I then crosschecked the contract values from FPDS with the participants’ preaward proposal documents to see if the initial bids corresponded with the value of the contract award reported in FPDS. The findings of this study are consistent with the agent desire to align their goals with those of the principals by balancing quality, cost, and schedule to assist the principal in obtaining their goals at an affordable cost (Kim & Brown, 2017). Figure 3 shows how small business leaders implement the bid submission strategy.

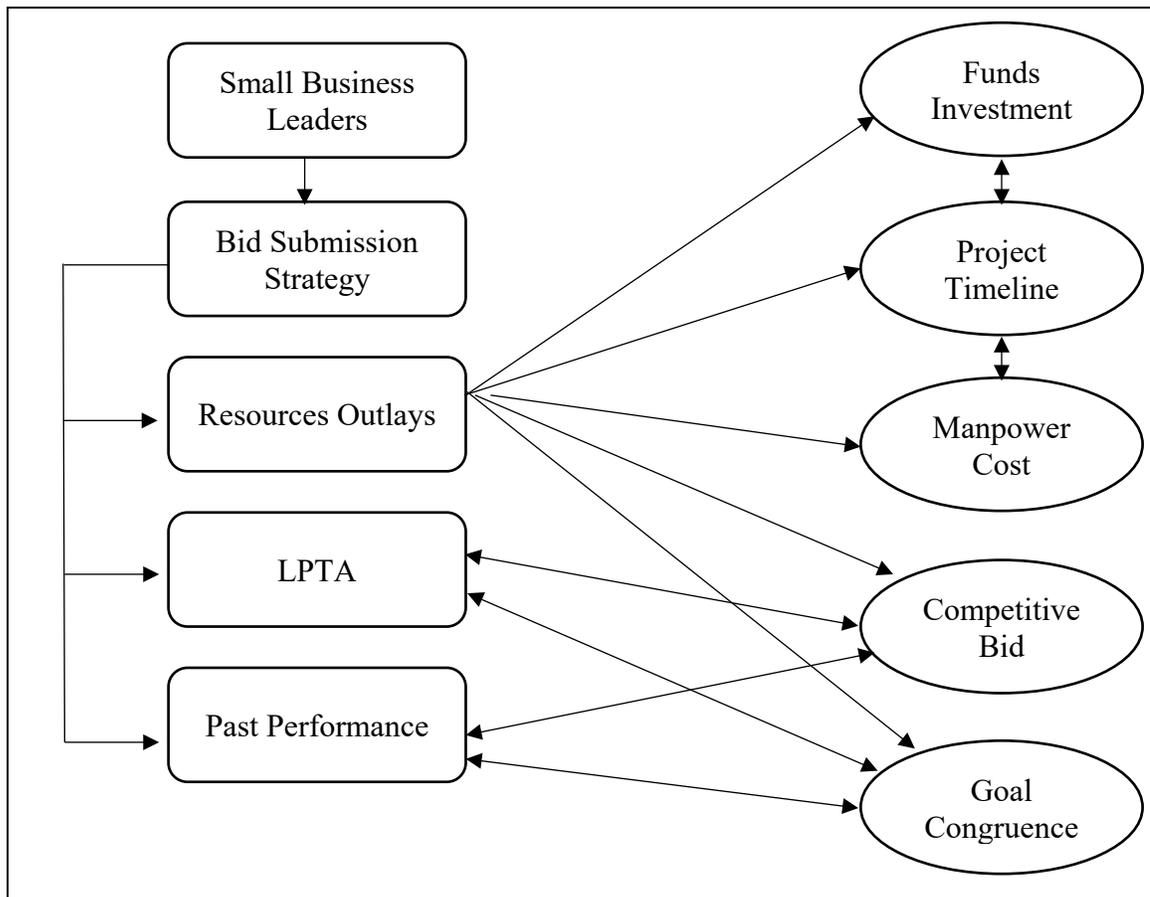


Figure 3. Bid submission strategy implementation.

Small business leaders and federal contracting officers often approach public procurements with different goals that require the parties to align their goals to achieve shared goals. Federal contracting officers follow statutory requirements that habitually impose strict guidelines before permitting contract awards (Patrucco et al., 2017). Small business leaders depend on their understanding of markets that are competitive and that require negotiations and the ability to building relationships to sell their products and services (Elston, MacCarthaigh, & Verhoest, 2018). Federal contracting officers follow legal guidance from the FAR and other policy mandates to ensure competition and the inclusion of small businesses in public procurement; although, competition might

influence some business leaders to engage in opportunistic behaviors to win contracts (Flammer, 2018). The findings of this study confirm the research of Parker, Dressel, Chevers, and Zeppetella (2018) in that principals and agents have conflicting goals due to opportunistic behaviors of the agent which is curbed by the use of a formal contract by the principal.

The bid submission strategy aligns with Jensen and Meckling's (1976) agency theory in that the six participants in this study were successful in establishing contractual relationships with federal agencies. Jensen and Meckling argued that principals and agents develop contractual relationships that incur effective monitoring with monetary and non-monetary agency cost intended to limit opportunistic agent decisions and benefit the principal. The participants agreed they submitted bids understanding the federal government awards contracts to the lowest price technically acceptable offer not necessarily the best service. Jensen and Meckling suggested that the legal framework that aligns the agent goals with the principal's goals is the establishment of a contractual relationship. The six participants used the bid submission strategy to align their goals with the goals of the federal agencies by offering the lowest pricing for the government's required services.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

Small business leaders seeking to win U.S. federal contracts might apply the findings of this study to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. Small business leaders expressed fears when participating in competitive tendering that result from incomplete information related to the benefits that public procurement has on small

business success (Woldesenbet & Worthington, 2018). Small business leaders might apply the findings of this study to reduce small business leaders' concerns in participating in competitive public procurements. Leaders might use the findings of this study to increase their understanding of the contract requirements and the terms and conditions employed by public buyers to monitor contract performance (Flynn, 2017). Leaders might use the findings of this study to duplicate the success of some small business leaders in the service industry that have successful use strategies that won open competitive U.S. federal contracts.

Leaders' ability to create value for their organization increases when they seek knowledge from sources inside and outside of their organization through knowledge sharing activities (Eidizadeh, Salehzadeh, & Chitsaz Esfahani, 2017). Small business leaders might apply the findings of this study to increase their knowledge of open competitive public procurement. Leaders reading this study might find the opportunity identification strategy useful in finding contracting opportunities for their businesses. The ability of small business leaders to connect with federal agency buyers through the establishment of contractual relationships reduce biased and barriers that reduce small business participation in competitive public procurements. Leaders might apply the findings of this study to establish a contractual relationship through the employment of successful strategies used to select and win open competitive contracts. Small business owners need effective strategies to participate in the public procurement process and obtain contracts with the U.S. government (Woldesenbet & Worthington, 2018). The

findings of this study might apply to leaders with different business models and a willingness to participate in public procurement.

Small business leaders might use the findings of this study to develop strategies they need to overcome the barriers to public procurement participation. Researchers noted that small business leaders experience challenges participating in public procurement tenders because they lack strategies specific to public procurement (de Souza Dutra et al., 2017). Leaders might utilize the findings of this study to improve their communication with federal agencies and gather more information about public procurement tenders. Small businesses lack information about public procurement opportunities and access to the federal contracting officers that control public procurement (Saastamoinen et al., 2017). Leaders might use the findings of this study to establish open lines of communication with federal contracting officers and gain information related to the qualification standards required for competitive procurements.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Federal agencies achieve cost savings through the use of open competitive tendering in public procurement when two or more businesses to compete for a contract (Moe, Newman, & Sein, 2017). Small business leaders benefit from public procurement when the tendering process is competitive (Glas & Eßig, 2018). Small business leaders are reluctant to compete for public procurement contracts due to an inability to identify suitable opportunities (Flynn & Davis, 2016a). The implications of the research for positive social change include the potential for small business leaders to create jobs and increase economic growth in local communities through the successful implementation of

an opportunity identification strategy. The findings of the study could result in social change through the strengthening of local communities economically and the increase of employment. Small business leaders are critical to economic growth, poverty reduction, innovation, and job creation (Ribeiro Soriano, 2017). Small business owners might use the findings of this study to increase growth within their local economy through successful engagement in the public procurement process for U.S. government contracts.

Small business leaders might use the findings of this study to influence social change through the implementation of the requirements review strategy. Federal agencies write contract requirements with the minimum acceptable standards that small business leaders must meet to compete for contracts (Bruno et al., 2018). Federal agency leaders use the contract requirements to list the contract data, product and service expectations, general specifications, delivery schedule, and monitoring conditions (Dilawo & Salimi, 2019). Small business leaders contribute to the economic growth of their local communities by employing local talent and sourcing goods and services from local suppliers (Parker, 2017). The implications of the research for social change include the potential for small business leaders to contribute to the lowering the local unemployment rate and improving the standard of living of the local community through implementation of a requirements review strategy. Leaders use extensive planning to ensure they address all the requirements of the contract (Gajjar, Smithwick, & Sullivan, 2018). The findings of the study could result in positive social change through the lowering on the unemployment rate and raising the standard of living of the local community.

The success of small business leaders depends on the utilization of all human, social, and financial resources to compile a bid that meets the contract requirements (Flynn & Davis, 2016a). Some small business leaders view participating and bidding in public procurement competitive tenders as unnecessarily complicated and expensive (Saastamoinen et al., 2017). Small business leaders' ability to innovate increases when they participate in competitive federal procurement (Patil, 2017). The implication of the research for positive change includes the possibility for small business leaders in providing more innovative products and services to government buyers through the implementation of a bid submission strategy. The findings of the study could result in positive social change through the creation of innovative products and services and increase participation in competitive tenders that reduces the cost of procuring the products and services the government needs to operate.

### **Recommendations for Action**

I recommend small business leaders use an opportunity identification strategy to find contracting opportunities. Small business leaders benefit from competitive and trustworthy public procurements through reliable payments for their products and services (Orser, Riding, & Weeks, 2019). Small business leaders benefit when they aggressively gather information on public procurement opportunities (Saastamoinen et al., 2017). Based on the findings of the study, small business leaders use an opportunity identification strategy to mitigate risk and to find opportunities that fit their business models. I recommend small business leaders use the FBO website to search for contracting opportunities because federal agencies must publish all procurement

opportunities over \$25,000 to this website and searching this website is free. Based on the findings of the study, I recommend small business leaders attempt to establish a relationship with the federal contracting officers to receive advance notice of contracting opportunities. Small business leaders that commit to exchanges with their government customers realize performance benefits (Josephson et al., 2019). Small business leaders seeking U.S. government contracts might improve their business practices by implementing an opportunity identification strategy.

Based on the findings of the study, I recommend that small business leaders use a requirements review strategy to evaluate the resources requirements and the risk associated with the contract. Federal contracting officers write contract requirements with the minimum standards that small businesses must meet for consideration for contract awards and success after award (Bruno et al., 2018). Small business leaders face a complex federal contracting system that includes numerous provisions, clauses, and terms in the solicitation requirements (Ferris et al., 2019). Some of the requirements used by federal contracting officers might include provisions for protecting proprietary information, how past performance effects contract qualifications, and narrowly written technical requirements (Schilling, Mazzuchi, & Sarkani, 2017). I recommend that small business leaders use a team approach to implement a requirements review strategy to help scrutinize contract requirements to evaluate the risk associated with contract performance. Federal contracting officer utilizes firm fixed price contracts to shift risk to suppliers of products and services (Eckerd & Girth, 2017). Small business owners might

use the findings of this study to recognize the exacting requirements within U.S. government contracts.

Federal contracting officers utilize prerequisites for bid submissions that differ considerably from bid requirements in private sector procurements (Schilling et al., 2017). Small business leaders that establish relationships with federal agencies and engage in prebid conferences experience above average bid results (Flynn & Davis, 2016a). Based on the findings in the study, I recommend small business leaders implement a bid submission strategy to help determine the internal funding for successful contract performance, the human resource cost, and the amount of time need to complete the contract requirements. The selection of contract awardees in competitive public procurement often occur based on the lowest price (Bruno et al., 2018). Small business leaders that implement a bid submission strategy could increase their chances of submitting winning bids that meet the federal agencies requirements and allow the small business leaders to achieve financial objectives.

The dissemination of the research findings provides the researcher with an opportunity to provide the findings to a broader audience of stakeholders (Carter, 2017). The participants of this study will receive an executive summary of the finding of the study. I will provide the local Chamber of Commerce a copy of the executive summary for their small business contracting assistance office. I will seek publication of the findings in the Journal of Contract Management published by the National Contract Management Association. I intend to publish the findings in the Journal of Public

Procurement. I plan to present the findings to a group of local federal contracting officers at their quarterly National Contract Management Association chapter meeting.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A limitation of this study was the sample population of six small service business leaders who implemented strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. Future researchers could increase the scope of this study by using a larger sample size of small service business leaders. Another limitation of this study was the transferability of the findings by future researchers to other cases, settings, and industries due to the limited geographic region, which limits the scope. I recommend that future researchers explore the winning strategies of small services business leaders in a different geographic region to measure the transferability of the findings of this study. In this study, I explored the winning strategies used by small service business leaders. I recommend future researchers explore the winning strategies used by large service business leaders. I also recommend future researchers could examine the winning strategies used to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts using quantitative methods. I recommend that future researchers use quantitative methods to investigate how contract values influence small business leaders' participation and their success rate in open competitive procurements. I also recommend that future researchers use a quantitative approach that examines how government set-asides and sole source contracts affect small business success rate in federal procurements in non-competitive environments.

## Reflections

My decision to earn a doctorate while working fulltime has been the most challenging journey so far in my life. The journey has been long and demanding, but as I reflect, I have never wanted to quit. I have learned a lot about myself and my ability to push myself through adversity. I spent over 22 years of active duty in the U.S. Air Force, and I faced danger and hardships but earning my doctorate challenged me psychologically in ways and levels not realized during my military career. My most significant challenge was securing face-to-face interviews for data collection. I contacted over 70 potential participants for the six interviews I needed to complete data collection only to have interviews scheduled and then canceled. The failure to secure interviews challenged my resolve, but I never felt I would quit. Now, as I contemplate my future, I am excited that I earn a doctorate, and I understand how conducting rigorous research helps find answers. I have gained a deeper appreciation for the researchers around the world that spend their lives conducting research studies and publishing their findings to educate the world.

I changed careers from managing airports to writing federal contracts in 2012, and completing this doctoral study has increased my knowledge in a new career in federal contracting. I have gained an understanding of how some small business leaders view the federal contracting process. I have gained an informed view of how policies enacted by our government impact the economy and business development. I feel that my experience at Walden University has provided me with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to society positively. I have made some lifelong friends and collaborators

during my doctoral journey. I am looking forward to communicating and working with some of my doctoral peers as we embark on making positive social change. The decisions to pursue a doctorate fulfill a lifelong dream of becoming a doctor and impacting the world. I will use my experience at Walden University to continue pursuing my dreams and staying true to myself and desire to impact people. I believe my doctorate experience has inspired my children to never give up on their dreams.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders in the service industry use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. I explored the winning strategies used by small business leaders through an agency theory conceptual framework. I gathered data from six small business leaders in the state of Washington that had implemented successful strategies to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. I conducted face-to-face, semistructured interviews, and I reviewed awarded contracts, statements of work, company capability statements, company websites, pre-award bid proposal documents, and the fpds.gov website. I used member checking and Yin's five-phase cycle of (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding the data.

Based on the findings of this study, I concluded that small business leaders use (a) an opportunity identification strategy, (b) a requirements strategy, and (c) a bid submission strategy to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts. The findings indicated that small business leaders that might find contracting opportunities that meet their business model and risk tolerance, strengthen their knowledge of contracting

requirements, and increase their participation in competitive public procurements. Small business leaders might use the findings of this study to impact positive social change by implementing the strategies noted in this study to lower the unemployment rate through the creation of jobs, increase innovation, and contribute to the economic growth of the local community.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

**Interview preparation.** After receiving approval from Walden University's institutional review board, I will send an email to participants that include the informed consent form asking them to respond *I Consent*, if they agree to participate. When the participants agree to the interview, I will suggest a publicly available site, such as a library or community center, depending on the availability and a location that works with the participants' schedule and preference.

**Opening the interview.** I will thank the participants for agreeing to participate in my study and the interview. Next, I will introduce myself to the participants by providing them with my full name and providing them with the purpose of my study. I will explain the potential social and business benefits of my study. I will ask the participants if they have any questions before we begin the interview to ensure they are comfortable.

**Informed consent.** I will verify that the participants received the informed consent by email. I will verify the participants responded *I consent* via email and that they have no objection to continuing the interview. If the participants have not responded *I consent*, I will have the participant sign the informed consent just before starting the interviews. I will inform the participants that I will be recording the interview for transcription purposes.

**Conducting the interview.** I will conduct a semistructured interview with the following open-ended questions.

1. What strategies do you use to identify U.S. federal contracting opportunities?

2. What strategies do you use to prepare proposals and bids to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?
3. What strategies do you use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?
4. What strategies are most effective in winning open competitive U.S. federal contracts?
5. How do you measure the effectiveness of the strategies you use to win U.S. federal contracts?
6. What challenges do you face in implementing strategies to win open U.S. federal contracts?
7. How do you overcome the key challenges of implementing strategies to win U.S. federal contracts?
8. What other information can you provide regarding the strategies you use to win open competitive U.S. federal contracts?

I will provide participants plenty of time to fully answer each question.

**Follow up with probing questions.** I will ask follow-up probing question for clarity and to gather additional information.

**Theme verification.** I will ask the participants about the major themes discussed in the interview to ensure that I understood the intent of the participant

**Coding.** I will code participants using alphanumeric characters to protect confidentiality. For example, I will use P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 to represent the participants. I will inform the participants that all the raw data, transcripts, and recordings will be secured using a password protected Microsoft OneDrive, a cloud-based storage

drive for a period of 5 years. I will remind them that only I will have access to the Microsoft OneDrive and the password.

**Recording reflexive notes.** During the interview, I will observe the participants and take reflective notes of my thoughts and observations.

**Ending the interview.** At the end of the interview, I will turn off the recorder. I will thank the participants for their time and the sharing of their experiences. I will inform the participants that I will contact them for a follow up session that is approximately 30 minutes to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. I will restate that I will secure all the raw data, transcripts, and the recording will be secured using a password protected Microsoft OneDrive, a cloud based storage drive for a period of 5 years. I will remind them that only I will have access to the Microsoft OneDrive and the password. I will reiterate that the no participants' names or company names will be published in the study.