

Impact of sustainability strategies on small- and medium-sized enterprises in Zimbabwe

Impact of
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Donnemore Majukwa

Malbereign, Harare, Zimbabwe, and

Susan K. Fan and Rocky J. Dwyer

*College of Management and Technology, Walden University, Minneapolis,
Minnesota, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – This qualitative multiple-case study aims to explore strategies that owners of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zimbabwe use to sustain their businesses.

Design/methodology/approach – The participants of this study consisted of owners of SMEs purposefully selected who were successful in implementing sustainable strategies for over five years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to gain a deeper understanding of their experience in implementing sustainable strategies for SMEs. The general systems theory, which specifies the relationship and interaction of a system and its environment, was applied as a framework to explain the sustainability strategies for SMEs in Zimbabwe.

Findings – Four major themes emerged from data analysis: passion and dedication, quality of products and services, customer satisfaction and employing staff with the right skills.

Practical implications – This study may lead owners of SMEs to create growth strategies for their businesses, increase revenue for the country and create long-term job opportunities for the communities.

Originality/value – The findings from the study addressed the gap on the existing literature and contribute to the body of knowledge on effective business practices, particularly for SMEs in Zimbabwe and other developing economies. The results of the study could catalyze a positive social change by improving workforce capabilities, creating awareness of the success of entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe and increasing the interest of financial institutions in lending to SMEs.

Keywords Sustainability, Strategies, Entrepreneurship, Effective business practices, Small- and medium-sized enterprises

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Owners of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an important role in the sustainable development of emerging economies (Wang, 2016). The owners of most SMEs control and manage the day-to-day operations of the business. Some business decisions that owners of SMEs make may affect the potential growth of the business and lead to failure (Efferin and Hartono, 2015). The owners of SMEs face many challenges to gain profitability and sustain their businesses. In Zimbabwe, entrepreneur owners of SMEs comprise approximately 94 percent of business owners, but contribute only 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product (Majoni *et al.*, 2016). Entrepreneur owners play an important role in strengthening Zimbabwe's economy because they create approximately 60.80 percent of employment opportunities (Tinarwo, 2016). The owners of SMEs in Zimbabwe operate in a difficult and uncertain business environment because of the country's economic instability (Majukwa *et al.*, 2016). SMEs foster entrepreneurship and do not demand high capital or high technology, but instead require management skills and knowledge to develop the business



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(Tinarwo, 2016). SMEs contribute to the economy through employment creation, development of appropriate technologies and gross domestic product (GDP). Small businesses are a significant source of technological innovation and new product developments (Foghani *et al.*, 2017). The owners of SMEs can provide a strong foundation for developing new industries and can strengthen existing businesses to promote wealth creation and productivity in the economy.

Research thrust

The overarching research question explored by this paper was as follows: What strategies do the owners of SMEs in Zimbabwe use to sustain their businesses?

Method and limitations

This paper used a qualitative research method that included data collection and analysis of qualitative narratives from purposefully selected owners of SMEs. The participants were based in Harare, Zimbabwe, and had succeeded in implementing sustainability strategies for over five years.

Conceptual framework

In this study, the general systems theory (GST) was applied to explore the sustainability strategies for SMEs in Zimbabwe. The GST specifies the relationship and interactions of the system and its environment. The GST is an open complex of elements interacting within their environments (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The systems theory was further developed as the basis of unifying science and an integrated approach for analyzing the phenomenon (Kast and Rozensweig, 1972). In the systems theory, the researcher treats systems as whole combinations of related parts. Yurtseven and Buchanan (2016) articulated that the systems theory has been modified to suit varying organizational settings, eventually adopting goals that include to formulate generalized systems theories, to establish the method of describing the function and behavior of the systems objects and to elaborate the generalized models of the systems. Dominici (2017) highlighted systems thinking as the meaningful way to detect complex and less distinct interactions faced by contradictory tendencies wherever management acts. Rousseau (2015) found that system thinkers focus on processes, relationships and interconnections of the components in the system.

Small- and medium-sized enterprises in Zimbabwe

In some countries, starting up an SME is a choice or a passion. In Zimbabwe, it is about survival for employment, but if the outcome results in wealth creation for the entrepreneur, then that is a bonus (Zvarivadza, 2018). For the local state and the government, SMEs are about employment of local communities and the contribution that must be made to the fiscus. SMEs are the centerpiece of economic growth and poverty reduction (Khosa and Kalitanyi, 2017). The SME sector in Zimbabwe is a mixture of self-employment outlets and dynamic enterprises mainly concentrated in urban areas involved in an array of activities, including manufacturing, services, food processing, agriculture, safari and tourism, restaurants and retail sectors (Moyo and Mandizwidza-Moyo, 2017). Most SMEs are focused on the domestic market, given their limited international competitiveness. Mungozhi and Hlabiso (2017) expressed that hard-economic conditions affecting the country have resulted in many big companies closing businesses, creating a high level of unemployment and leaving SMEs as the only hope for survival. In most SMEs, owners do not separate their ownership and control of the business operations; usually, the business has no separate or external equity owners. Zvarivadza (2018) described the governments' tax regimes and regulatory frameworks as

conditions affecting the smooth operations, the development and the growth of SMEs. The operations of SMEs are compounded by challenges, including the shortage of raw materials, competition from large corporations and unavailability of financial assistance from financial institutions. Chigora and Zvavahera (2015) discussed the SMEs' fundamental role in promoting and developing homegrown economies and equitable sustainable development. Some SMEs evolve to become large enterprises as the countries develop and the economy matures; therefore, development initiatives are a panacea to the economic growth. Wadesango (2015) revealed that, in Zimbabwe, stimulating and sustaining the development of SMEs has been an important issue, the center point of which is the SME Development Corporation. A parastatal is formed through an act of parliament to promote the development of SMEs and cooperatives in the country through lending and capacity-building. However, contrary to the situation in industrialized economies such as in the USA, in Zimbabwe, the approach to SME development and promotion lacks commitment on funding research and promoting technological innovation efforts (Makanyeza and Dzvuke, 2015).

Leadership styles in small- and medium-sized enterprises

Leadership refers to the abilities and behaviors that can be discovered, developed and promoted toward certain objectives and environment (Ozkan, 2015). Lack of leadership skills can lead to the collapse of businesses mainly due to poor decision-making. Garavan *et al.* (2015) revealed that performance in an organization lies in the leadership styles of the management. Missioura (2015) revealed that leadership is about encouraging and inspiring individuals and groups to do their best in accomplishing a targeted objective. Leadership must have a consistent pattern of behavior different from management, where management is about coordinating activities, monitoring the operations and resources allocation in line with achieving organizational goals (Deschamps *et al.*, 2016). Managing SMEs requires solid leadership skills. Karadakil *et al.* (2015) revealed that successful entrepreneurship goes beyond basic leadership practice. The owners of SMEs must create business processes and strategies from nothing and lead the people to meet the goals of the business. Leadership has been the key interest of entrepreneurial and management studies and has gradually become a topic of increased concern (Lai *et al.*, 2018). SMEs require strong owners who can build competitive strength for the business and compete in the market to sustain their businesses. Szczepańska-Woszczyzna and Kurowska-Pysz (2016) found that the success or failure of an SME depends on the owners' choices and his or her behaviors. All successful SMEs need effective owners who can formulate and communicate new strategic direction of the business and motivate employees. Lai *et al.* (2018) asserted that leadership in SMEs is associated with the capability of one or several individuals at the top of the organization. SMEs have small structures; the nature of leadership style assumed can determine the performance of the business. Allameh *et al.* (2015) revealed that SMEs require pragmatic owners who focus on the processes behind the business goals and tasks needed to get the things done. Karadakil *et al.* (2015) articulated the importance of leadership in an organization, which includes to formulate the company's strategy, to maximize profits and to ensure the smooth flow of the business operations. Muenjohn and McMurray (2016) reiterated that owners of SMEs must be problem solvers who can guide the organization in any situations through the challenges and achieve goals through other people. Allameh *et al.* asserted that the ability to unite the organization to work toward the organization's goal is the role of an effective leader, and it is critical to the organization's success and performance. Lawal *et al.* (2016) revealed that the role of leadership in SMEs can influence the day-to-day operations of the businesses and subsequent performances. The way small business managers establish and utilize leadership information might improve to be the key to success or failure.

Dabke (2016) asserted that great leaders communicate the organization's future path to a certain group of people effectively and get them to work as one toward common goals. Leadership is important to an organization's success and business performance in the competitive environment in which SMEs operate (Mgeni and Nayak, 2015). The organization's success or performance is influenced by the difference in the leadership styles. Efferin and Hartono (2015) highlighted three types of leadership styles that include transactional leadership, transformational leadership and passive-avoidant leadership. Tajasom *et al.* (2015) concluded that transactional, transformational and passive-avoidant leaders are part of the SMEs environment; they influence individual and organizational performance. Transactional leadership involves guiding and motivating the followers to achieve the goals of the organization (Garavan *et al.*, 2015). Transactional leaders focus on their tasks and are receptive to the performances of their followers. Chatterjee and Kulakli (2015) postulated that transformational leaders identify the need for change, to set goals and to provide guidance toward the change while effectively managing the transition. Leadership is necessary to provide the direction and to ensure that all members of the team participate and move in the same direction. Sainis *et al.* (2017) asserted that effective leadership involves leading and directing people to use their talents, abilities, knowledge, skills and attitudes most effectively and efficiently to accomplish organizational objectives. Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy (2015) postulated that leaders need to realize the important linkage between leadership and organizational performance; most organizations are paying more attention to the need to develop effective leaders in their organizations. SMEs need effective owners to sustain their profitability and growth; they will create the context that will enable their employees to take on new challenges and achieve superior business results (Suriyankietkaew and Avery, 2016). SMEs without effective leadership risk their chances of achieving maximum productivity to gain a competitive urge in the market. The size of SMEs means a simple managerial mistake can lead to the collapse of the business with minimal opportunity to learn from past mistakes (Sainis *et al.*, 2017). Coordinating SME business activities involves chances of success and failure. Luu (2017) asserted that leadership means the ability of a leader to perform the tasks and goals achieved through the work of other people under his or her command. Leadership is needed when there is an objective to be achieved, or a task to be performed, and when more than one person must execute those tasks. Garavan *et al.* (2015) asserted that all managers are leaders, in that they use influence to maintain and ensure the support of their teams who need to be inspired to follow them.

Contribution of small- and medium-sized enterprises to economic and social development

The success of the economy in a country can be measured through a variety of indicators, which include: the level of national income, per capita income and employment opportunities (Zamfir *et al.*, 2017). The most important steps in developing these indicators are through the business sector. The role of the SMEs in developing countries, including Zimbabwe, has been established; such businesses contribute immensely to the economic and social development of a country. Ribeiro-Soriano (2017) found that SMEs can transform and develop the communities in developing countries. SMEs provide a platform for training of indigenous entrepreneurs, which drives the wealth creation process at all levels. Peprah *et al.* (2016) established that SMEs promote local knowledge by utilizing locally available raw materials that would have been discarded. SMEs are the nursery of entrepreneurship where individual creativity and innovation are the driving force. Suárez-Ortega *et al.* (2016) highlighted the importance of SMEs in a country, which includes crucial for spearheading national industries, creating more jobs and contributing to the foreign exchange and tax.

SMEs are engines of economies; they create employment opportunities, develop the countries and ensure social stability (Hyder and Lussier, 2016). SMEs utilize labor-intensive technologies and thus have an immediate impact on employment generation. Ndikubwimana (2016) asserted that SMEs support economies in strengthening entrepreneurship and innovation and contribute to the economy by employing many people and play a big role by increasing economic development. Tonis (2015) propounded that SMEs stimulate an entrepreneurial spirit, innovation and are important in promoting competitiveness and employment. Given the importance of SMEs in an economy, Cant and Wiid (2016) proposed that policymakers should aim to promote entrepreneurship initiatives to create a favorable business environment, allowing the owners of SMEs to realize their full potential in the market. Musa and Chinniah (2016) posited that SMEs are flexible and responsive to frequent changes that occur in the contemporary global environment than large enterprises.

Some SMEs are involved in primary and secondary economic activities that depend heavily on locally sourced materials (Muzamwese, 2016). As such, they achieve high value-added operations activities, which are the key roles in the growth and development of any economy. Afrifa and Tauringana (2015) articulated that the crucial role of the SME sector in the economy can only be realized if there are strong supportive government policies to help them increase access to resources. The owners of SMEs must formalize their business activities to attract investors and get financial support from the financial institutions. Eniola and Entebang (2015) asserted that SMEs are recognized as the engines in which the growth of the middle-income group of the economy can be achieved to sustain the country's economic growth.

Factors inhibiting the growths of small- and medium-sized enterprises

SMEs are the veritable tool of economic development; however, challenges hinder their business performance and growth. Suárez-Ortega *et al.* (2016) revealed that there is a high rate of failing SMEs in Zimbabwe and a low rate of start-ups every year. Asongu and Tchamyou (2016) expressed that homegrown businesses often face a challenge of not able to acquire goods and services from suppliers in the market. Margaretha and Supartika (2016) asserted that the owners of SMEs need to understand the determinants of profitability to develop effective growth strategies for their businesses. Sarwoko and Frisdiartara (2016) identified internal and external factors that hinder the growth of SMEs arguing that internal factors include a variety of organizational characteristics, while external factors include barriers related to access to credit. Wang (2016) revealed that there is a considerable range of barriers that affect the growth of SME businesses depending on conditions of specific markets. Sadeghi (2018) alluded that factors that hinder the growth of SMEs are determined by a variety of factors, and the conditions vary from country to country. Kusi *et al.* (2015) discussed the factors that hinder the growth of small business, which include individual characteristics, environmental characteristics, strategy development and organizational development.

Asongu and Tchamyou (2016) alluded that the personality traits of a leader, his or her competences, motivational growth and personal background are the most important determinants that determine the growth of SMEs. Gancarczyk and Gancarczyk (2018) concluded that most of the SMEs in developing countries have no clear modalities in place to measure their organizational performance. Singh (2014) established that most SMEs in developing countries are created out of the economic necessity, principally after the owners were not employed for a long time or needed to supplement their inadequate incomes, which force them to operate without following the right procedures. Baporikar *et al.* (2016) discovered that in most developing countries, the entrepreneurial orientations of the communities made up mostly of disadvantaged people driven by the need and desperate

desire to survive. The underprivileged desire to start businesses can be both a gift and a curse, as survival provides enough drive for progress to a positive degree, but it also helps as a limiting factor of innovation and diversification.

Most SMEs have limited access to foreign exchange and institutional credits. [Ndikubwimana \(2016\)](#) expressed that the inability of SMEs to access financing remains one of the key constraints to business growth. With industrial change and government policy shifts, increased integration of global markets and business, many enterprises are experiencing increasing pressure to remain sustainable as their markets grow, and they compete with a larger number of firms. This has hurt SMEs' scale of operations. [Gebremariam \(2017\)](#) concluded that most SMEs lack creditworthiness and management capacity, so they have difficulties to secure finances from financial institutions, and such institutions or banks are reluctant to lend to small business to avoid perceived high credit risks. Most SMEs are predominantly sole proprietorship; bank authorities view them with caution.

[O'Connor and Kelly \(2017\)](#) identified access to finance, lack of marketing strategies, lack of skilled manpower and poor customer service as barriers to the growth of SMEs. SMEs contribute to the economic growth. [Seo and Chae \(2016\)](#) concluded that the major challenge affecting the growth of SMEs includes how to improve their performance through innovation management in the long term. The death of the owner of most SMEs result in discontinuity of their operations, as there are usually no succession plans in place. The lack of potential continuity for most SMEs after the demise of the owner raises the risk of financing such establishments. [Seeletse and MaseTshaba \(2016\)](#) highlighted leading causes of failure of SMEs, which include lack of basic skills and establishing an SME for wrong reasons, lack of adequate market, lack of or inadequate business plan, lack of financial literacy and poor money/financial management and inability to secure funding. [Kulemeka et al. \(2015\)](#) discussed the common challenges affecting performance and growth of SMEs, which include limited accessibility and availability of finance, as most SMEs are owner capitalized; lack of the capacity to conduct research and development; weak business structures; poorly defined legal and regulatory frameworks; poor marketing channels; difficulties in adapting to environmental changes; insufficient management resources; and absence of supportive institutional structures.

Sustainability strategies for small- and medium-sized enterprises

Survival is the objective of most SMEs at high risk of failure. [Ifekwem and Adedamola \(2016\)](#) conducted a strategic analysis on SMEs by dividing them into three broad categories that include those that might cease to trade soon, those that are small but have the potential to survive and those that will endure the challenges then grow rapidly. [Kloviene and Speziale \(2015\)](#) concluded that the development and sustainability of most SMEs emanate from the external support or financial boosting from their external networks. [Garba and Aliyu \(2017\)](#) asserted that high-growth SMEs are positioned in selected markets where they thrive using sophisticated innovation technology. [Odoom \(2016\)](#) expressed the importance for SMEs to introduce new products in the markets in which they serve. The chances of business growth are limited if owners do not create activities for new products development. [Hazudin et al. \(2015\)](#) advocated for entrepreneurs to possess the traits of a risk-taker to tackle the economic challenges inhibiting the growth and survival of SMEs. [Brem et al. \(2016\)](#) articulated the ingredients of developing an SME to gain competitive advantage, which include market focus, financial plan, management structure and established roles of the business owners. The sense of initiative and ability of the leader to turn ideas into actions can determine the growth of the business ([Ogarca, 2015](#)). Owners of SMEs need to articulate their visions and align them with organization's strategies to achieve high output, gain market shares and increase more profit to attract the market. [Sachitra \(2016\)](#) articulated the importance of

measuring the competitiveness of the business and concluded that owners of SMEs must put the tools in place to continuously measure the performance of their business. Owners of SMEs can gather information regarding the performances of their businesses through applying competitive advantage measurements.

Ribeiro-Soriano (2017) stressed the importance of success strategies for SMEs, suggesting that entrepreneurs must create business ideas that resolve economic and social challenges to achieve growth for their businesses and improve the quality of life for the people. van Scheers (2016) revealed that gaining the leadership skills through education and experience is very important to developing SMEs and the economy. Ifekwem and Adedamola revealed three essential strategies for SME growth, which include focus, cost leadership and differentiation. Ingley *et al.* (2016) proposed four critical areas that future owners of SMEs need to build competitive strengths and expand into new markets, which include applying technology, agility, accelerated innovation and attracting and retaining talent. Navickas *et al.* (2015) concluded that policymakers need to support entrepreneurial activities to solve the factors that inhibit the growth and survival of SMEs. Bilal *et al.* (2017) asserted that the importance of growth for SMEs involves the ability to survive major changes in its environment.

Key findings analysis

An extensive analysis of data collected resulted in the generation of four major themes: passion and dedication of the owner, offering quality products and services in the market, customer satisfaction and employing staff with the right skills.

Discussion of findings

The intent of this study was to explore the strategies owners of SMEs use to sustain their businesses to achieve competitive advantage. SMEs are a vehicle through which the local knowledge is promoted, and local raw materials are used that would otherwise be neglected (Peprah *et al.*, 2016). SMEs have the potential to contribute substantially to the economy and can provide a strong foundation for the growth of new industries and strengthen existing businesses to promote wealth creation and productivity in the economy. The findings from the study could catalyze a positive social change by improving workforce capabilities, creating awareness of the success of entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe and increasing the interest of financial institutions in lending to SMEs.

Passion and dedication

The first theme that emerged revealed the importance of passion and dedication for owners of SMEs to succeed in business. All five participants mentioned passion and dedication as a success factor in developing and surviving in business. The participating owners of SMEs indicated that they were highly motivated individuals, and they faced many challenges that inhibited the growth and development of their businesses and continued to strive and succeeded. The theme, *passion and dedication* aligned with the literature on effective business strategies. Fisher *et al.* (2018) posited that passion and dedication are the biggest drivers for an entrepreneur's motivation. Passion and dedication are the drivers that keep the owners of SMEs pushing forward with perseverance every day. Participant 4 revealed that the belief of the owners of SMEs in their businesses allows them to see it through to the end. Bhansing *et al.* (2018) concluded that without passion and dedication, it becomes almost impossible for small business owners to overcome the odds of victory when failure is almost guaranteed. Passion evokes belief, which is one of the strongest emotions an entrepreneur can experience (Participant 5). The findings of this study aligned with the literature. Dedication is the engine to creative ideas that help the owners of SMEs to keep shifting gears from objectives and

creativity to get them to their destinations (Warnick *et al.*, 2018). Owners of SMEs must continue to have a positive vibe throughout the challenging decisions they pursue in business (Participant 5). Passionate leaders become absorbed in their businesses, which shows a great deal of dedication. Hachana *et al.* (2018) posited that passion promotes desire, and the owners of SMEs have the desire to succeed in their endeavors by putting their hearts and souls into their ideas. A passionate owner of an SME is driven, takes initiative, will work long hours and is persistent when faced with obstacles.

Quality products and services

The second theme included the importance for owners of SMEs to offer quality products and reliable services in the market. All five participants mentioned *quality products and services* as critical for their businesses to be distinguished in the market and gain competitive advantage. The theme *quality products and services* aligned with the existing body of knowledge. Providing quality products and reliable services in the market can help increase the reputation of the business for consistently delivering the customer experience *above and beyond* (Sithole *et al.*, 2018). "I carefully manage the quality of the products that I offer in the market, those who fail to meet customers' expectation, may risk driving customers away to look for alternatives" (Participant 1). Pierre and Fernandez (2018) propounded that the quality of products is critical to satisfying the customers and retaining their loyalty, so they continue to buy. All the participating owners of SMEs showed a strong understanding of the reasons to make quality a top priority of their business strategies. The trust, credibility and loyalty that come from happy customers build repeat sales and ignite positive recommendations about a product that helps a business to reach new customers (Fisher *et al.*, 2018). The poor quality of products in the market can increase the costs of operating a business (Participant 5). Mukherjee (2018) posited that quality of the products can help small business owners to contribute to long-term revenue and profitability.

Participant 3 mentioned that she operates her business in a crowded market, and the quality of her product is the key differentiator, and it reflects on her business reputation. Cherkos *et al.* (2017) posited that the growing importance of digital marketing tools such as social media means that customers and prospects can easily share both favorable opinions and criticism of the product quality on social media forums. Participant 3 explained that a strong reputation for the quality of the products can be an important differentiator in competitive markets. Rajapathirana and Hui (2018) propounded that poor quality of products in the market can lead to negative publicity and damage the reputation of the business. This aligned with the findings of the study. Owners of SMEs need to consistently deliver their promises to the customers.

Customer satisfaction

The third emergent theme included the importance for owners of SMEs to better position their products in the market. All five participants mentioned *customer satisfaction* as a critical strategy to gain profitability and sustainability in business. Participant 1 explained that she uses customer satisfaction to measure how her business products and services meet or surpass the customers' expectations to survive in the market. The theme customer satisfaction aligned with the existing body of knowledge. The owners of SMEs must exhibit varying strategies to satisfy their customers, remain viable and survive in the market (Sleep *et al.*, 2018). All the participating owners of SMEs showed their knowledge of the importance of implementing creative and decisive strategies to catch up with the prevailing winning marketing strategic practices suitable for their economic environment.

Nobar and Rostamzadeh (2018) posited that obtaining the attention of prospective customers, gaining their interest and converting them can cost more than retaining existing customers. This aligned with the findings of this study. Participant 3 explained that she

focuses and spends her business resources on keeping existing customers satisfied with quality goods and services. Bahadur *et al.* (2018) posited that customers choose the company that made them satisfied even if it offers higher prices over a cheap, but low-quality product or service option. Participant 5 revealed that customer satisfaction is important because it provides him with the metrics he uses to manage and improve his business strategies. Obi, Ibiidunni *et al.* (2018) propounded that in a competitive marketplace where businesses compete for customers, customer satisfaction becomes a key differentiator. The performance of the participating owners of SMEs showed that they used customer satisfaction as a key element of their business strategies. Tseng (2019) concluded that customer satisfaction is the best indicator of how likely a customer will make a purchase.

Employing staff with the right skills

The fourth theme included the importance of hiring staff with the right skills for their businesses. All participants mentioned *hiring staff with the right skills* as a key business survival strategy. The theme *hiring staff with the right skills* aligned with the existing body of knowledge. Narteh (2018) propounded that having the right quality of employees is central to the success of a business. The participating owners of SMEs showed their knowledge of the importance of hiring employees with the right skills. Participant 1 explained that the most important step to finding the right employees is to know what she wants and craft accurate job descriptions. Burcharth *et al.* (2017) posited that having the right staff can mean the difference between long-term, sustainable growth and failure.

Larger businesses may cope with staffing hiccups, but these difficulties can have a greater impact on SMEs with fewer resources. Participant 2 explained that he aims at delivering quality work for his business needs and having employees committed to the same goals is the key. Happy clients and a lasting reputation depend on hiring the right employees (Gong and Yi, 2018). This aligned with the findings of this study. Participant 3 revealed that employees can influence the culture of the business; the right employees work hard, they are loyal and can inspire others to do the same. Wilkinson *et al.* (2018) posited that employees are the pillars of the business and play a critical role in determining its long-term growth potential. The right experience, the right work ethics and the right social skills have a significant impact on business growth (Narteh, 2018). The quality of employees does more than simply ensuring a company has enough bodies to handle the work. It can also directly affect a company's culture and a company's financial worth.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the strategies owners of SMEs use to sustain their businesses. SMEs are the backbone of sustainable economies (Karadag, 2016). Owners of SMEs must learn the strategies others use to sustain their businesses. The governments in developing economies need to put in place support mechanisms and policies aimed at promoting the growth and development of SMEs (Wadesango, 2015). The four critical success factors to achieve sustainability and development of SMEs include passion and dedication of the owners, offering quality products and reliable services in the market, customer satisfaction and employing staff with the right skills. The findings of the study might catalyze a positive social change by improving workforce capabilities and increasing revenues to support the communities, local state and governments.

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About the authors

Dr. Donnemore Majukwa holds a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) in Global Supply Chain Management from Walden University, School of Management and Technology. He is a Global Supply Chain Management Expert with more than 20 years of experience managing complex supply chains in diversified sectors in Africa and the Middle East. Donnemore holds a Master of Science degree in Operations and Supply Chain Management from the University of Liverpool, School of Management in the UK. He was awarded the Chartered Fellow membership at the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT), UK; a Chartered Procurement and Supply Chain Management Professional membership by the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS), UK; a Professional membership by the CIPS, UK. Donnemore Majukwa is the lead author and can be contacted at: donnemore.majukwa@gmail.com

Dr. Susan K. Fan is DM in Organizational Leadership. She has worked as a management professional in various leadership positions for several Fortune 100 companies. Dr. Fan is currently working as a Contributing Faculty and Doctoral Mentor with the DBA Program at Walden University and as an Adjunct Faculty with Purdue University Global's MBA program. Her research interests include, but are not limited to, leader-follower relationships, organizational leadership, change management, leadership in sustainable organizations. Dr. Fan is also enrolled in a Counseling Psychology Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) Licensing Program to equip herself to work with the local communities toward preventive mental healthcare initiatives.

Rocky J. Dwyer, PhD, FCPA, FCMA, is a Contributing Faculty Professor at Walden University College Management and Technology. Dr. Dwyer is an award-winning writer, editor and educator, who has consulted and undertaken research for private, not-for profit and public sector organizations to examine and validate corporate social responsibility, poverty-reduction initiatives, strategic organizational capacity and performance management. His research has been presented and published for conferences and symposiums in Canada, the USA, South America, Germany, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. Rocky J. Dwyer is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: rocky.dwyer@mail.waldenu.edu