

2019

# Small Business Sustainability for Longer Than 5 Years

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Matthew Godwin

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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2019

Abstract

Small Business Sustainability for Longer Than 5 Years

by

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2016

BS, Anderson University, 2007

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

June 2019

## Abstract

Over half the U.S. labor force is employed by small business owners, yet only 50% of small businesses survive beyond 5 years. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore sustainability strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to sustain their organization for longer than 5 years. The research population included 5 owners of small businesses in the construction industry in Georgia, who have been in operation for a minimum of 5 years. The conceptual framework for this study was general systems theory. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, organizational documentation reviews, and business plan reviews. Yin's (2014) 4 principles of data collection were used to collect the data: use multiple sources of evidence, create a case study database, maintain a chain of evidence, and exercise care when using data from electronic sources. Data were triangulated using Yin's 5-step analysis process: collecting data, grouping data into codes, grouping data into themes, assessing the themes, and developing conclusions. Member checking, transcript review, and triangulation of data were used to further validate the study. The 4 themes that emerged from the study were internal relationships, building the brand, specialization, and planning. The implications of the study for positive social change include the potential for small businesses in the construction industry to survive for longer than 5 years and to increase the number of individuals employed.

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## Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my family, Jess, Landon, and Brayden.

Without their support, I could have never achieved this monumental task.

## Acknowledgments

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses are a large part of the U.S. economy. Small businesses employ most of the workforce in the United States, but they often fail in the first 5 years of operation. Small businesses are implementing successful strategies across the world, and these strategies can help increase their sustainability.

### **Background of the Problem**

Small business owners employ the majority of the civilian labor force in the United States, yet they have fewer resources and less experience than larger businesses do (Small Business Association, 2016). Small businesses are a critical component of the U.S. economy, and the sustainability of these businesses is important. Most small businesses fail during their infancy, so increasing the sustainability of these businesses can strengthen the U.S. workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d). The U.S. economy needs small businesses, and small business owners need successful strategies for sustainability.

Small business owners need to implement successful strategies to improve the sustainability of their businesses. They need to know how to help their organizations grow and survive. Globally, successful small businesses thrive, but not all strategies work for all businesses. Small business owners use different strategies that can depend on their geographic location and industry. The failure rate of small businesses begins to decrease at 5 years, so this is an important milestone for owners. Most of the small businesses that survive beyond 5 years continue to survive the next 5 years, so it is important to develop strategies for success early and continue to grow (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d).

### **Problem Statement**

The first 5 years of operation are the most critical for small businesses because the rate of failure is the highest in this period (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a). Only about 50% of U.S. small businesses survive past 5 years (Small Business Administration, 2017). The general business problem is some small business owners lack innovative strategies for long-term sustainability, which can lead to small business failures. The specific business problem is that some small business owners in the construction industry lack successful innovative strategies for sustainability beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners in the construction industry used for sustainability beyond 5 years. The target population was owners of five successful construction businesses with fewer than 100 employees located in Georgia, who implemented successful sustainability strategies to increase their survival rate beyond 5 years. Small business owners can use this study to increase positive social change in the construction industry by aiding in their sustainability beyond 5 years. Small business sustainability affects the job market due to the large number of people small businesses employ. A stronger job market could lead to a stronger economy, which may have a positive effect on society.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used the qualitative methodology to explore strategies small business owners implemented to sustain their operations beyond 5 years. Qualitative researchers use data collection methods such as interviews, document analysis, or focus groups to find new

areas of understanding (van den Berg & Struwig 2017). A quantitative researcher explains what is happening using numerical data and examines relationships by testing multiple hypotheses (Barnham, 2015), and a researcher using a mixed method combines quantitative and qualitative information and data (Mabila, 2017). The quantitative method was not appropriate because I did not analyze numerical correlations between small business sustainability and business strategies. The qualitative method was appropriate for this study because the purpose was to determine strategies that successful small business owners in construction used to increase sustainability beyond 5 years.

The qualitative researcher uses a variety of designs, which include phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, and case study (Yin, 2014). A phenomenological researcher explores a phenomenon or situation that is unique to the environment (Yin, 2014). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because I studied what strategies small businesses implemented rather than the meanings participants associate with experiencing phenomena. Ethnographic researchers explore cultural aspects, such as beliefs and behaviors (Yin, 2014). I did not study the cultural aspect of business sustainability; therefore, the ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study. Researchers using the narrative approach explore experiences through participants' stories (Yin, 2014). Narrative was not appropriate for this study because I did not explore participants' life stories to determine sustainability strategies. The case study design was appropriate for this study because I studied successful small business owners who achieved sustainability beyond 5 years and researched information to identify and explore strategies the participants' implemented.

### **Research Question and Interview Questions**

My research question that guided my study is the following:

What innovative strategies do small business owners in the construction industry use for sustainability beyond 5 years?

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

1. What innovative strategies have you implemented to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
2. How do you implement new innovative strategies within your organization?
3. How do you assess your business strategies to determine if they are successful?
4. What, if any, were the key barriers to innovative strategy implementation?
5. How did you address any key barriers to implementing your innovative strategies discussed?
6. What additional information would you like to share about successful innovative strategies that you developed and implemented to successfully maintain operations during your organizations first 5 years of operation to achieve sustainability?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Von Bertalanffy (1972) (as cited by Caws, 2015) introduced general systems theory to explain general interactions and applications between complex systems. Von Bertalanffy found general systems theory to be a multiple disciplinary theory that encompasses many areas but examines these general systems in a similar way.

Furthermore, von Bertalanffy developed systems theory to be a broad theory to encompass multiple disciplines, but researchers continue to expand systems theory to develop principles that are used to explain systems in general (Caws, 2015). Small businesses have many different pieces that affect the entire business. Each part is critical for the entire sustainability of the small business.

The primary purpose of general systems is to explain wholeness and connectivity of multiple unique parts (von Bertalanffy, 1972; as cited in Caws, 2015). The wholeness necessary to explain the sustainability of small business makes general systems theory appropriate for this study. Understanding the relationships and connectivity of strategies to the sustainability of small businesses was a critical component of my study.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Business failure:* A business failure is the discontinuance of ownership, cease of operation, and loss of identity of a business (Sheng & Lan, 2018).

*Small business:* Small businesses classifications occur based on size standards in millions of dollars or number of employees (Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 2018). The construction industry ranges from 100–500 employees or \$32.5 million to \$36.5 million, depending on the specific industry in question (Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 2018). Firms with fewer than 100 employees account for the majority of all small business employment (Small Business Association, 2016).

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

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are parts of all studies. The researcher cannot prove everything in a study because every study has limits. The researcher needs



to state all assumptions and limits of the study, as well as state the reasons for narrowing the focus of the study.

### **Assumptions**

When the researcher assumes parts of the study are true with no proof, an assumption has occurred (Abrams, 2010). This study included three assumptions. The first assumption was participant honesty. I assumed participants would be unbiased, truthful, and provide in-depth responses to interview questions that did not include bias. The second assumption was that the qualitative method methodology was the most appropriate method for this study. I assumed that quantitative and mixed methods would not produce the best results for this study. The third assumption was that the case study design was most appropriate for gaining the most relevant information. I assumed conducting face-to-face interviews with multiple construction company representatives in Georgia was the best way to discover strategies from lived experiences.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are uncontrollable influences that may affect the results and lead to shortcomings of a study (Castillo, Berenguer, Sanchez, & Alvarez, 2017). I interviewed small businesses in Georgia in the construction industry. I relied on participants to disclose all information and organizational documents through the face-to-face interview process. Participants may not have recalled information accurately or may have failed to discuss all information pertaining to the success of their business.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations are guidelines or boundaries imposed by the researcher to narrow the focus of the study (Almutairi, Gardner, & McCarthy, 2014). This study consisted of small businesses in the construction industry that have been in business for more than 5 years. I selected small businesses based on the definition of fewer than 100 employees as outlined by the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations. I selected the size of the business and the length of operation because changing these factors may change the outcome of the study. I selected the location because strategies may change depending on location. I chose 5 years because this is an important milestone for small businesses to reach; only half of small businesses survive beyond 5 years.

## **Significance of the Study**

The qualitative study is significant because small business sustainability affects jobs throughout the United States. The headings below describe potential contributions to business practice and implications for positive social change. Business practice and positive social change implications are important to the study because they can increase the relevance of the study.

## **Contributions to Business Practice**

Small business leaders typically operate a business without the financial resources and stability that larger organizations may have. Therefore, small business leaders must discover ways to create sustainability to prolong the life of the organization and to maximize profitability. This study is significant to business practice because a researcher may use it to provide strategies for small businesses to increase sustainability and

lengthen organizations' lifespans. Through greater sustainability in the first 5 years of operation, small business owners may be able to increase their likelihood of future sustainability and success.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The implications for positive social change include the potential to provide knowledge of sustainability strategies for small businesses, which can increase the life of the small business and positively affect communities through greater job offerings. Small businesses employ over 59% of the U.S. population (Small Business Administration, 2017a). Small businesses leaders can increase jobs in America to aid in developing a stronger workforce and building strong communities, which could improve local economies.

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

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners implement to increase sustainability beyond 5 years. Small businesses are susceptible to higher rates of failure in the first 5 years (Small Business Administration, 2016a), so these years are critical to the potential future of an organization. The purpose of this literature review is to document literature and determine what strategies small businesses are implementing to increase sustainability. I accessed research databases through the Walden University library, including EBSCO, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Business Info Source; I used them in conjunction with government websites to determine the effects of sustainability strategies on small businesses.

The use of multiple sources will increase the validity and reliability of a study (Yin, 2014). Validity and reliability are critical to a doctoral study. I chose multiple peer-reviewed relevant sources to aid in data triangulation, and I can show multiple perspectives of the study.

Table 1

*Literature Review Sources*

Sources	5 years or older	2015 or newer	Total
Peer-reviewed articles	12	74	86
Non-peer reviewed articles	0	0	0
Government websites	1	8	9
Seminal works	1	1	2
Dissertations	0	0	0
Total	14	83	97
Percentage of peer-reviewed articles	14.43%	85.57%	100%

### **Sustainability**

Sustainability has many definitions throughout literature, and what is included or excluded from a definition can vary. Sustainability is meeting needs today without compromising the ability to meet needs in the future (Hashmi, Damanhour, & Rana, 2015). Sustainability is having the ability to successfully maintain, grow, and survive (Warren & Szustek, 2017). Additionally, sustainability is defined as using resources in a manner to preserve them for the future and maintaining the ecosystem (Bird & Davis-Nozemack, 2018; Tuntivivat, Jafar, Seelhammer, & Carlson, 2018). Researchers use the definition of sustainability in a variety of ways, and most researchers have different views on including and excluding organizations' environmental impact. For this study, I will

focus on sustainability as increasing the life of an organization and planning for the future of the organization; I excluded the environmental impact of these strategies.

### **Small Business Criteria**

The Small Business Act of 1953 is used to protect small businesses because of the important role they play in the economy (Small Business Act of 1953). Through the Small Business Act of 1953, Congress protects small businesses to stabilize the balance of power because small businesses are an integral part of the free enterprise economy (Dilger, 2017a). Additionally, the Small Business Act established criteria for small businesses. Small businesses are the backbone of competition. Their protection eliminates the monopolistic power of larger firms and enhances small business competition internationally. Because small businesses receive congressional support, it is important to have specific criteria defining a small business; otherwise, large firms could attempt to receive the benefits afforded to small businesses.

Small businesses have a variety of definitions across literature. The Small Business Administration even has two different ways to calculate eligibility; it outlines criteria based on either the number of employees and dollar value of total receipts. The criteria to be a small business depend on industry as well. The number of employee criteria set by the small business association range from below 100 employees to below 1500 dependent on the industry (Small Business Administration, 2017a). In the United States, 98.1% of employer firms have fewer than 100 employees (Dilger, 2017a).

There is not a uniform definition of small business but rather a set of criteria (Dilger, 2017b). Therefore, there are multiple ways to categorize small businesses. Total

receipts is one way to categorize small businesses. Total receipts means the annual income of a business (Small Business Act of 1953). The government calculates total receipts by using income tax returns or any other means available if income tax returns are not available (Small Business Administration, 2015). The criteria are specific and industry-dependent to ensure small businesses have appropriate protection under the law.

### **Small Business Success and Failure**

Small business sustainability is critical to the U.S. economy. Small businesses comprise 99.9% of all firms in the United States, and 99.7% of all firms with employees according to Small Business Administration (2016a). Only about 50% of small businesses survive past 5 years, and small businesses employ over half of all private-sector employees (Small Business Administration, 2016a). Small businesses contribute more to job creation than larger organizations (Spremo & Marjanović, 2017). Small businesses in the construction industry typically have the lowest survival rates of any industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Increasing sustainability of small businesses can decrease unemployment, strengthen the labor market, and increase job creation.

Sustainability is important for small businesses. Small businesses employ half the workforce and are a majority of businesses in the United States. The failure rates begin to diminish as the age of a business increases (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a). Increasing the sustainability of small businesses can positively affect the economic sustainability of a region (Sarra & Breman, 2017). Small business owners must develop strategies to become sustainable beyond 5 years.

Sustainability strategies are an important part of social change because small businesses are the backbone of the U.S. economy. They are an important lifeline and create 66% of new jobs (Small Business Administration, 2016a). Small businesses are the most important source of employment because of the large percentage of employees distributed among so many small businesses (Susu & Birsan, 2015). New jobs are emerging due to the small business growth. If small businesses fail, then jobs are lost and the economy suffers. Small businesses need sustainability strategies to aid in their survival, and the business owner can implement these strategies. Sustainability strategies can reduce the number of businesses failing and increase net job creation.

Small businesses fail for a variety of reasons. Lack of capital, lack of a business plan, lack of innovation, and poor staffing are known reasons for small business failure (Hyder & Lussier, 2016; Kostovski, Nanevski, & Gjurcevski, 2016). Capital is critical to small business success. Lack of financial capital at critical times can negatively affect a small business and lead to its failure (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). Lack of planning can be another reason for small business failure. Lack of planning can occur due to a variety of factors, including lack of education or lack of understanding of the need for a business plan (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). Staffing is critical to the sustainability of small businesses. Small businesses have fewer resources and employees are critical to an organization's success. Small businesses tend to have higher turnover rates due to increased responsibilities and demands of employees (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). The lack of a stable workforce increases the volatility of small businesses' successes and is another reason they fail.

### **Small Business Economic Impact**

Small businesses are the foundation of many countries, and they drive economic development (Eijdenberg, Paas, & Masurel, 2015). Small business growth and job creation aided in the recovery of the U.S. economy at the conclusion of the recession. Small businesses account for over a third of all exports leaving the United States (Small Business Administration, 2016a). U.S. lawmakers saw the importance of small businesses and realized the great economic impact; therefore, they developed the Small Business Act of 1953. The Small Business Administration is a government agency that monitors small businesses in the United States. Small businesses are an important part of creating a sustainable gross domestic product (GDP) because of the reduced dependence on foreign markets, and they provide diversification of resources because of the number of independent small businesses (Baidoun, Lussier, Burbar, & Awashra, 2017). The sustainability of small businesses is critical due to the number of jobs they create, the financial impact in relation to GDP, and the diversification of resources.

Researchers measure economic growth by the changes in real GDP (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017b). GDP is the sum of all consumption, investment, government purchases, and net exports, and it is the most widely known measure of aggregate output according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017d). The Small Business Act ensures that small businesses can compete as global exporters (Small Business Act of 1953). Small businesses provide jobs and income to individuals who spend this income, which affects GDP. Additionally, these small businesses purchase equipment as a business investment. Business sector spending accounts for approximately 69% of the value of GDP (Bureau



of Labor Statistics, 2017c). Small business sustainability is critical to the economic stability of the United States, especially during tough economic times. Increasing any part of GDP, excluding imports, impacts the U.S. economy positively. Small businesses are a critical component of the U.S. economy not because of one individual businesses size but rather because of the impact of a large number of small businesses.

The recession affected the United States in a major way, but small businesses continued to maintain their value through these difficult times. Small businesses continued to be the largest contributor to the number of jobs and number of businesses (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). Small businesses account for a majority of jobs, job creation, and innovation in the United States; therefore, the sustainability of these organizations is critical to the stability of the U.S. economy (Eijdenberg et al, 2015; Hyder & Lussier, 2016; Small Business Administration, 2016a). As small businesses begin to increase their sustainability, along with continued growth in small business startups, the job market will continue to expand and offer greater opportunities for employment. To positively impact the economy, small business owners must do their part to increase sustainability through a variety of strategies.

### **Small Business Owner Strategies**

Small business owners use a variety of strategies to increase the life of their organization. Different views on the types of strategies necessary to increase the sustainability exist in the literature; some of which overlap and contain similar strategies. Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright (2013) emphasized the need for a business plan for the future of the organization, whereas Smith and Barrett (2016) and Kuhn, Galloway, and

Collins-Williams (2016) emphasized the importance of owner growth, training, and development. Lofsten (2016) found entrepreneurial behavior and competition to be important.

A variety of themes has emerged from the literature about the importance of leadership strategies. Holloway and Schaefer (2014) found three common themes of successful business owners that include collaboration, mentoring, and people skills. Blackburn et al. (2013) found a reoccurring theme of planning. Successful businesses must have specific things in common and use a variety of strategies for success.

### **Planning**

Planning gives an organization direction. The business owner establishes a plan that includes where the organization is currently, the future goals of the organization, and how to get there. Blackburn et al. (2013) studied business growth and profitability and determined profitable businesses tend to have similar attributes that plan to grow at a steady rate over a long time. Profitable organizations have long-term goals and plans, which lead to long-term profitability. Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn, and Gilmore (2015) discovered small businesses sacrifice strategic planning for day-to-day operational focus. The lack of strategic planning of small business owners aids in lack of understanding of direction and allows for a misunderstanding of direction between the business owner and the employees.

Mitchell et al. (2015) determined that business owners may sacrifice strategic planning to survive the day. Creativity is an important feature missing from strategic thinking. Business owners need to plan strategically to create or protect their brand

(Mitchell et al, 2015). Small businesses that use a strategic plan are using strategic thinking, but to compete against larger firms, small businesses must find a way to gain a competitive advantage. Creativity is an important aspect to incorporate into strategic thinking, which should flow into the strategic plan.

**Business model.** Schaltegger, Ludeke-Freund, and Hansen (2016) examined small businesses that use business models to increase sustainability. The business model is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Schaltegger et al. (2016) found substantial research contributing to the importance of the business model but small business owners lacked knowledge of innovation and adaptation of the business model to their businesses. Additionally, new business models are developed as time passes to take advantage of new regulations, but organizations incorporating a new business model must plan for the unexpected in the future (Medved, Lakic, Zupancic & Gubina, 2017). Businesses develop a business model to increase the potential sustainability of the organization and plan for the direction of the organization.

Business plans change in the infancy of the organization due to customer acquisition and the continued necessity to evolve to meet consumer needs (Turner & Endres, 2017). Sustainability of new business models falls on the owners of the business (Medved et al, 2017). The need for adapting and changing is important for small business survival, and small business owners can adapt the business models to be able to sustain themselves. Small businesses can determine how they are finding a niche and filling it. Initially, small businesses tend to have a plan of action, but as the business opens and

matures, the plan must adapt. The business plan changes due to increased knowledge about the business and consumer needs.

**Marketing.** Marketing can create brand recognition and give businesses an advantage. Small businesses owners who capitalize on marketing can gain a competitive advantage over other firms (Mitchell et al. 2015). Small business owners must find ways to compete at a high level with fewer resources (Gholston, Kuofie, & Hakim, 2016). Small businesses may lack resources and knowledge compared to larger organizations. Small businesses must create a brand identity on a fewer number of primary brand associations (Mitchell et al. 2015). Even with fewer resources, marketing strategies are a key ingredient to future sustainability because they aid in the future direction of the organization.

Social media marketing is growing at a rapid pace due to increased acceptance and accessibility (Gholston et al. 2016). Organizations use social media marketing to build a relationship directly with the customer (Venciute, 2018). This makes social media a desirable medium for small business advertising. Small businesses tend to lack financial resources to begin a sustainable marketing campaign, but a properly executed social media campaign can target consumers and increase sales at a lower cost. Small businesses can fail due to a lack in exposure, but social media use can increase exposure and help small businesses compete with larger firms for market share.

Social media can aid in the growth of small businesses in a variety of ways. Social media can aid in growing brand awareness, building relationships, and increase sales (Jones, Borgman, & Ulusoy, 2015). Over time, brand awareness can become brand

loyalty. High brand loyalty means consumers will continue to buy the same brand over time compared to other brands (Ferreira & Coelho, 2015). Small business owners' relationships with customers can grow an organization's brand. These relationships grow the organization and increase the potential for future sustainability. Additionally, sales have a direct relationship with brand loyalty and customer relationships (Jones et al, 2015). Increasing sales and sustainable growth are important parts of long-term sustainability.

### **Owner Capabilities**

The owner of a small business is an important part of small businesses. Kuhn et al (2016), Lofsten (2016), and Smith and Barrett (2016) discovered small business owners lack many skills to be sustainable on their own. Anderson and Ullah (2014) found some small business owners make decisions that inhibit growth for fear of leaving a comfort zone. The lack of size and resources of small business owners is a contributing factor to their lack of sustainability during the early years of their existence. Due to the continuous changing markets, small business owners need to be able to adapt and change with the markets.

**Training.** Training is one way small business owners can grow their own capabilities and increase human capital. Smith and Barrett (2016) researched the growth of small business owner success due to continued training and development. Online training is an important feature Smith and Barrett (2016) emphasized due to the accessibility and adaptability of training materials. Additionally, online resources are emerging training tools that many small businesses are able to take advantage of today

due to the increased accessibility of technology. Online training is a tool that is growing in availability, but there is a variety of inexpensive training methods available to small business owners. Kuhn et al. (2016) determined the importance of learning from other firms through networking. Small business owners can use networking to strengthen their business.

**Networking.** Small business owners can use networking as a way to learn and grow without spending much money. Omri, Frikha, and Bouraoui (2015) concluded networking size and small business profitability have a positive correlation. Kuhn et al. (2016) found the need of small business owners to learn through peer advice. The business owner obtains the peer advice many different ways. In the past, peer advice was more difficult to obtain, whereas Kuhn et al. (2016) discovered tools for receiving and sharing peer advice through social media. Lofsten (2016) determined networking with other small businesses of a close proximity to be beneficial. Internal networking allows ideas to flow through the organization and does not follow the traditional organizational chart. Networking and building relationships with other small business owners can increase sustainability through the sharing of ideas and resources that may not be available to the small business owner.

Successful small business owners can learn from other small business owners. Small business owners need other small business owners to increase profitability and sustainability (Turner & Endres, 2017). Turner and Endres (2017) studied successful small businesses and determined a common thread of active membership with the Chamber of Commerce, attendance and participation in small business owner meetings,

and the owners took part in small business mentor programs as network avenues to increase sustainability. Successful small business owners can look outwardly for support rather than attempting to learn every intricate business operation themselves. Small businesses lack the resources of larger organizations, but through a partnership, the small business owners can create a competitive advantage with one another and learn from one another.

Another key attribute of small business networking is the opportunity to share resources. Small businesses tend to lack the resources necessary to compete with larger firms. Networking and cooperation among small businesses can reduce investment costs and increase the competitive advantage (Nikayin & Reuver, 2015). Small business can take networking to the next step and begin cooperating with one another to increase efficiency while also reducing costs. Small business owners can form a cooperative to collaborate with other small businesses that share similar problems (Benito-Hernandez, Platero-Jaime, & Esteban-Sanchez 2016). Larger organizations benefit from cooperatives, and small businesses need to take advantage of their flexibility while benefiting from the use of shared resources (Benito-Hernandez et al. 2016). Business owners use cooperatives to benefit one another.

**Mentoring.** Similar to networking is mentoring. For mentoring to be successful there must be a relationship. Relationships grow through common ground and similarities between the mentor and the mentee (Humberd & Rouse, 2016). Small businesses that use mentoring can learn from an experienced business owner, and reap the benefits of their expertise. Both parties of mentorship can benefit as the mentor can learn from the mentee

as the relationship grows. Several factors are important to the mentor and mentee relationship for the mentee to gain the greatest benefit. Knowledge and expertise, experience and age, approachability, mutual respect, communication, trust and honesty, passion and patience, willingness to learn, expectation alignment, and cultural issues are common themes in determining how effective the mentorship was to the mentee (Mataboee, Venter, & Rootman 2016). These factors are important to the growth and development of the relationship because they are important for the mentee to be able to grow the most, and this allows for greater respect of the mentor. When one of these factors is missing or misaligned, it can hinder the relationship between the mentor and mentee and decrease the chances of success. Educators use mentoring in education to develop on the job skills, additionally with the lack of resources available to small businesses; mentoring is a viable option to have the greatest gains (Woodley, Burgess, Paguio, & Bingley, 2015). Mentoring is how young small business owners can receive on the job training from successful experienced small business owners.

**Entrepreneurial business behavior and competition.** An entrepreneur's behavior can affect the future sustainability of small businesses. Lofsten (2016) identified three critical behaviors that increase sustainability for small businesses: risk-taking, frequently innovating, and pioneering nature. Adaptability is another key feature of small businesses, and the ability to adapt and change is a key indicator of the sustainability of the organization (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). The entrepreneur uses these components to set the foundation of the organization and to determine if organizations are moving towards goals or remaining constant.



Risk taking is important because the entrepreneur must take strategic action when faced with adversity according to Lofsten (2016). These risky actions are important because they small business owners use them to make investment decisions and planning. The strategic plan sets the organization up for the future direction of the organization. An organization with direction and a plan for profitability has a greater potential for survival beyond 5 years according to Blackburn et al (2013). Successful business owners develop plans to give themselves an advantage for success. Small business owners develop these plans to ensure the organization understands the future of the organization and allows for strategy implementation in preparation for the future.

Small businesses must change and adapt to meet consumer wants and demands and innovation of the small business is a strategy for sustainability. The frequency at which an organization innovates its products is another important business strategy (Loftsen, 2016). Product innovation allows the small business to position themselves as leaders in the market (Lofsten, 2016). Positioning in the market allows small business to take advantage and grow a strong customer base. Product innovation is not the only innovation necessary for small business success. Innovation is an improvement in any part of the organization, and small businesses must continuously improve to increase the chance of sustainability (Taneja et al. 2016). The innovation of business practices is being a pioneer in a specific area of business. Small businesses can try new things, adapt, and change to meet the needs of the customer. Small businesses owners can use flexibility and creativity to their advantage where larger corporations may not be able.

The pioneering nature is the driving force behind the entrepreneur and is why the small business owners compete aggressively. Lofsten (2016) concluded the pioneering nature to compete is an important role of the small business owner's behavior. Omri et al (2015) found increasing network size also increases innovation in an organization that leads to greater profitability. Innovation can be increased in a variety of ways and is important to consider when planning and implementing strategies for sustainability.

**Owner perceptions.** The small business owner's view and direction of the organization can be a determinant of growth. Small businesses have fewer regulations than larger businesses and fewer restrictions. Greater flexibility in operations is an important influencing factor of why small businesses make the decision to stay small and inhibit growth (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Small business owners have greater control of the organization with fewer regulations. Braidford, Drummond, and Stone (2017) determined small business owner's perception of growth determined the amount of resistance to growth. Business owners who perceive growth as an opportunity will tend to grow more than owners become defensive towards growth. These perceptions of the owner aid in the direction of the organization.

A strength of small businesses is greater flexibility and opportunities for growth. The culture of the organization can affect the ability to capitalize on growth opportunities and the ability to be flexible due to the size of the organization can aid in the innovation and direction of the organization (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Ghanavati (2014) found culture did not directly affect the financial performance of small businesses. Indirectly there are some connections (Ghanavati, 2014), and the lack of a direct effect can be

because the industry studied or potential geographic location. Company culture is an important driver of creativity (Chiaradonna, 2015). The culture of an organization studied may affect the results of the relationship between culture and financial performance.

### **Education and Expertise**

Knowledge and understanding are important to small business owners. Insufficient owner expertise and education is one key indicator of small business failures (Karadag, 2017). Small businesses owners who own a business that have survived beyond 5 years acquire knowledge and expertise over the life of the business. The expertise and education gained over time are why older businesses perform better than younger businesses (Karadag, 2017). Entrepreneurship skills are believed to be something which can be acquired so many colleges and institutions offer classes and training to develop small business owners' skills (Hodges et al. 2015). Small business owners must continue to learn and grow with the business in order to maximize the benefits of growing with the organization. Small business owners can gather expertise from a variety of sources such as formal education, owner experience, or networking but the most important feature is not one over the other but rather a combination of sources for the small business owner to grow from.

### **Leadership Strategies**

Small business owners need strategies for success. These strategies are designed to strengthen the organization. The strategy developed is dependent on the desired outcome. Dunne (2016) found a correlation between leadership strategies and the sustainability of small businesses through new product innovation. Whereas, Holloway

and Schaefer (2014) focused on reoccurring themes of successful business owners and determined leadership strategies focused on people to ensure success. Some owners emphasize continued learning where others emphasize developing a direction for the organization. Literature offers very little insight into specific correlations of leadership styles and sustainability, but there are some correlations of successful leadership traits, principles, and leadership strategies. These strategies are important to the success of the organization and small business owners can use them to enhance the effectiveness of the owner's capabilities. Focus and direction are important parts of successful businesses, and the type of leadership strategy must match the need of the organization

**Transformational learning.** Learning is important for small businesses to adapt to change. Transformational learning is the process of being open to change and receptive to new beliefs and opinions according to Mason (2018). Leaders must be able to adapt to the changing workforce in which they govern. Additionally, transformational learning is dependent on mentor relationships (DeCapua, Marshall, & Frydland 2018). The mentor and mentee relationship must be strong and both parties must be a part of the process (DeCapua et al. 2018). Transformational learning allows the small business owner to develop new strategies and adapt to the ever-changing market. Additionally, small business owners are able to increase flexibility because the openness to change and new beliefs when implementing transformational leadership strategies.

**Sustainable leadership.** A task of the leader is the sustainability of the organization. Leaders use sustainable leadership as a strategy to balance individual parts of the business for increasing the overall sustainability of the organization (Gerard,

McMilan, & D'Annunzio-Green, 2017; Suriyankietkaew, 2016). The leaders of an organization have major influences on the potential sustainability of the organization (Gerard, et al. 2017). Gerard et al, (2017) found organizational leaders to be critical in building stakeholder relationships, developing human capital (leader and employee), and manage the external impact on the organization. Suriyankietkaew (2016) determined sustainable leadership incorporates people, profits, and plans to enhance the future longevity of the organization. Small business owners must focus on the entire organization. Every part of the organization is important because of the various interdependent systems. Sustainable leadership strategies focus on growing the leaders in the organization and creating balance for long-term sustainability.

There is a variety of positive outcomes when incorporating sustainable leadership strategies. Employee satisfaction is an important output of sustainable leadership strategies (Moon & Jung, 2018). Additionally, sustainable leadership positively affects customer satisfaction (Suriyankietkaew, 2016). People skills are critical to the sustainability of small businesses, and the emphasis on people in the organization affects how employees interact with customers (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014). These two outputs are important for small businesses to reduce employee turnover, and create customer loyalty that are both important for small business sustainability.

Each part of a business has a large effect on a small business. Variety and balance are important features of sustainable leadership (Gerard et al. 2017; Suriyahkietkaew, 2016). One reason small businesses fail is due to the owners focusing on a specific area of a small business instead of strategically planning for the entire organization.

Addressing past issues, embracing past successes, and strategizing to meet future customer demands will increase the future potential sustainability of the organization.

**Innovation.** Small businesses that gain a competitive advantage over larger firms have a good chance of competing and staying in business. Consumers need to have a reason to go to the smaller business, and the small business must efficiently serve its customers. Innovation for small businesses can happen in variety of ways that include products and strategies (Taneja et al, 2016). Small business leaders who focus on seeking opportunities rather than small improvements tend to have greater success with innovations (Cooper, Peake, & Watson, 2016). Small businesses can use innovative strategies to enhance the sustainability of the organization because of the ability to respond to the need for change in a timely manner (Taneja et al., 2016).

Innovation can be an important way that small businesses create an efficient and effective comparative advantage. Small business owners use innovation to discover new opportunities, meet the needs of a changing environment, and continue to gain a competitive advantage (Li, Wang, van Jaarsveld, Lee, & Ma, 2018). Research shows the definition innovation varies. Innovation is a unique or new product or process that enhances the potential of resources (Almquist, 2016). Almquist (2016) discovered innovation rarely comes from established enterprises. The role of innovation is to grow and evolve products and processes to increase efficiency through the maximization of resources.

Innovation is one way to increase profit. Businesses want to increase revenues while reducing costs. Innovation is both market-driven and technology-driven. The

market can determine the direction of the organization while technology can increase the efficiency of the organization. Small businesses can use innovation to compete against other firms. Not all innovation affects businesses in a positive way. Disruptive innovation is a way small firms can use innovation to their advantage. Ojo (2017) defined disruptive innovation as a smaller firm effectively challenging a larger established competitor. Most firms sustain innovation where they have incremental increases where firms use disruptive innovation to change the entire landscape of the market. Small business owners can create new value through disruptive innovation (Karanja, Njeru, & Muhoho 2016). Disruptive innovation can play an important role in small business survival. Small businesses are able to gain large amounts of market share or control the entire market against larger competitors that can set them up for long-term success.

Small businesses owners can innovate in their business model. Through the rapid growth of innovation, technology, and the ever-changing markets businesses and the business model must adapt and change with the markets (Almquist, 2016). Some older business models can be out of date now. Businesses have the opportunity to use new emerging methods to reach customers such as social media or cellular ad campaigns. The consumers are spending more time on their phones and this is a chance to adapt and change with the markets with new apps, services, and platforms (Zott & Amit, 2017). Additionally, technology is changing at such fast paces that businesses must be less rigid and able to adapt to the changing needs of the workforce. Consumers and employees are changing and businesses must adapt to meet these needs.

Innovation, as with many strategies implemented by small businesses, is not a stand-alone strategy. Small business owners must combine innovation with other strategies such as marketing to be effective. Innovation and marketing when combined can create a differentiated process (Hsu, 2015). Changing and adapting a business model to target consumers while creating value and a new business model is business model innovation (Ritter & Lettl, 2018). One strategy does not determine the entire success or failure of an organization, but rather the combined strategies effectiveness is essential to the sustainability of the organization.

**Business Model Innovation.** Business model innovation is the creation of a new business model due to changes in the parts of the business model (Verhoeven & Johnson, 2017). Small business owners need to adapt the business model to fit their needs because there are so many new ways to conduct business (Zott & Amit, 2017). The change must create a new business model to be business model innovation. General systems theory is the study of how changes in one part of a system affect the whole system. This is critical to business model innovation because changes in parts of the business model will affect the entire business.

Innovative strategies for small businesses can create a need for a changing business model. Business model innovation is a way business can gain a competitive advantage over their competitors (Purkayastha & Sharma, 2016; Zott & Amit, 2017). Businesses that focus on business model innovation are able to capture revenue and create value in the organization (Purkayastha & Sharma, 2016; Zott & Amit, 2017). The value generated strengthens the organization because they are able to capitalize on new



revenues. Additionally, small businesses owners distinguish their business through new revenue generated by the business. Small business owners gain a competitive edge over the competition through the new revenue.

Small business owners use four business model value drivers to drive business model innovation. These include novelty, lock-in, complementarities, and efficiency (Amit & Zott, 2012; Zott & Amit, 2017). Each part is critical and determines what drives business model innovation. Each driver is an important part of business model innovation and is important to determine how much change is taking place. Novelty is the degree of change in the system (Zott & Amit, 2017). Which is how revolutionary and different the innovation is. Large amounts of novelty require large amounts of change, and may not resemble the old business model. Lock-in is the ability to create consumer loyalty for the product, brand, and company (Zott & Amit, 2017). Complementarities is the creation of complement goods that interact with one another. Lastly, efficiency is the cost savings generated by business model innovation.

Business model innovation is more than just product innovation. The business must be set up to foster creativity and innovation as well as implement the innovations. Business owners use business model innovation to change one or more parts of its business model and creates a business model that is new to this world (Zott & Amit, 2017). This does not happen by chance. Business model innovation is much more complex than product innovation (Bashir & Verma, 2017). The complexity is so much more because the entire business model changes. A failed innovation leaves a product or service without a future, but failing at business model innovation can ruin an entire

organization. This complexity is what allows firms that specialize in business model innovation to really excel and gain the competitive advantage in the fields in which they compete. Businesses must add new activities, link activities differently, or change pieces of the business model. The new business model must be different from any other business model to be business model innovation. The business must be doing things differently than other businesses.

**Quality management.** Organizations use quality management strategies to focus on the reduction of waste and provide the consumers with the best product and service possible. Properly implemented quality management strategies save the organization money while adding new revenue to the small business (Murphy & Leonard, 2016). Murphy and Leonard (2016) explained the importance of small businesses using quality management strategies, and Assarlind and Gremyr (2016) added the critical steps of proper implementation of quality management strategies. Both articles explained the importance of quality management strategies. Assarlind and Gremyr (2016) went further to explain the importance of each step to ensure the successful implementation of quality management strategies.

Small businesses use management strategies to increase profitability. Small business owners implement quality management in their business (Murphy & Leonard, 2016). A lack of resources compared to larger corporations is why many small businesses do not implement quality management strategies (Assarlind & Gremyr, 2016). Small businesses compete against larger corporations with more resources and the small business owners implement strategies to compete. A competitive advantage is critical to

competing against larger firms (Bashir & Verma 2017). Small firms have the ability to change and adapt to meet the needs of consumers faster than larger firms do. The ability to change quickly is a strength of small businesses and the ability to adapt to a quality management strategy is important for future sustainability.

Quality management is a growing trend and field. Additionally, the understanding of quality management has grown tremendously over the past 100 years (Weckemann, Akkasoglu, & Werner 2015). Originally, businesses only used quality management for finished products but quality management has evolved to include the workforce, goods, and services of an organization (Weckemann, Akkasoglu, & Werner 2015). Small businesses can implement a variety of strategies to ensure quality management. The customers determine quality management and the quality needed to meet their needs (Daneshjoo, Majernik, Danishjoo, & Krivosudska 2017). The important part of quality management strategies is to ensure the proper focus of the organization and ensure the appropriate implementation strategies are in place.

### **Resistance to Change**

Small businesses must implement many different strategies to survive beyond 5 years. Resistance to change can have large effects on small organizations where larger organizations may absorb the negative effects (Bourdon & Jaouen, 2016). Small business owners need change to affect sustainability to gain a comparative advantage over their competition. Resistance to change is a common issue in organizations, and strategy implementation must account for this resistance to change. There are a variety of types of resistance to change, and resistance can be found while actors simultaneously supporting

the change (Anderson, 2015). Members of the organization know that they need change, accept change, but resist parts of the change.

To accept change there must be an anchor to meaning for the members of the organization (Dickens, 2015). Resistance to change is almost inevitable, but with the right purpose and meaning change can be implemented in a way that meets the least amount of resistance. Small businesses must change and adapt to differentiate themselves from the competition. Griffin (2015) determined employee relationships were a critical component of industry diversification. Employees of the organization must understand the change and have a positive relationship with the owners and managers of the organization to reduce the amount of resistance to change. Emotionally tied employees will exhibit the least amount of resistance to change, and be the greatest proponents of implementation of the change (Dickens, 2015).

### **General Systems Theory**

Many researchers use general systems theory to analyze small business sustainability strategies. Von Bertalanffy introduced general systems theory to explain general system interactions and applications (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Caws (2015) explained general systems theory as a multiple discipline theory, whereas Colangelo (2016) found researchers use general systems theory as an evolutionary theory to explain a variety of different complex systems. General systems theory is broad and encompasses many areas that researchers use to study the effects on the sustainability of the small business. The growth and adapting of general systems theory are important to the future of the theory and for future studies.

## **Evolution of General Systems Theory**

Von Bertalanffy introduced systems theory to explain cybernetics but has recently evolved to include a variety of disciplines that include business (Colangelo, 2016). The evolution of the theory is critical to the continued growth and survival of the theory. General systems theory has evolved to explain various change related processes across many different systems (Simola, 2018). Researchers examine relationships in many different areas, and these relationships affect larger systems. Researchers use systems theory in a variety of different aspects that strengthens the theory and increases the credibility of the theory. Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced general systems theory to aid in the explanation of when multiple variables affect a larger system (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Systems can be complex and there was a need for a theory to aid in explaining how parts of a system affect the whole system. Von Bertalanffy developed general systems theory to be broad and reach multiple disciplines. Prior to general systems theory, there was a lack of theory used to study relationships in systems (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Since its conception, researchers use general systems theory in a variety of different studies and in a variety of different disciplines.

Researchers adapted general systems theory to include more than originally theorized. Researchers now use general systems theory in studies beyond the original sciences. This growth over time is important to the credibility and future longevity of systems theory. Systems theory places an emphasis on structure and roles in the system (Mania-Singer, 2017). The study of relationships described by von Bertalanffy (1972) is still the foundation but the expansion of the theory is more inclusive of a variety of

complex systems (Mania-Singer, 2017). This is why researchers of general systems theory are able to adapt and grow the theory. General systems theory is a very versatile theory in which can be used to explain any system that affects a larger organization.

### **Application**

Researchers use general systems theory to state the relationships of input variables of a system (Micó, Caselles, Soler, & Romero, 2016). The relationship and interaction of these variables are important to determine the effects on the system as a whole. Additionally, researchers use systems theory to explain roles and responsibilities in a system (Mania-Singer, 2017). This is why general systems theory is the study of wholeness.

Researchers use general systems theory to determine the external effects of internal operations (Malecic, 2017). Additionally, researchers apply general systems theory to complex systems to aid in explaining the interactions of these systems (Mania-Singer, 2017). Small business owners can use general systems theory to determine sustainability strategies. The internal strategies and procedures of the small business affect the external small business as a whole. Each system has a role and responsibility and affects the organization differently. Even though the effects are different, each part of the system is important to the sustainability of the entire organization. The small business is the organization with each input variable being the different components that aid in the success or failure of small businesses. Strategies for success are critical for small businesses because small business owners use these strategies to manipulate input variables to increase the sustainability of the organization.

## **Rival Theories**

**Grey systems theory.** Researchers use grey systems theory as a tool to analyze and observe small sample sizes that lack information to make long-term predictions according Liu, Yang, Xie, and Forrest (2016). Researchers use grey systems theory to fill the void where information is missing and predict future outcomes (Meng, Liu, Liu, & Wang, 2017). Researchers use grey systems theory in a variety of ways to predict or estimate the outcome of a system such as small business strategies for sustainability. Deng (1989) determined researchers use grey systems theory to aid in the development of innovational techniques and concepts, as well as, replacing processes to find real techniques rather than a statistical model when there was not enough data. Researchers use these techniques and concepts for decision-making and future predictions.

Small business sustainability research is very broad. Sustainability is having the ability to successfully maintain, grow, and survive (Warren & Szustek, 2017). Different researchers define sustainability as preventing negative effects to the ecosystem (Bird & Davis-Nozemack, 2018; Tuntivivat, Jafar, Seelhammer, & Carlson, 2018). Sustainability of businesses is a continuously evolving study, and there are contrasting views. Some reasons these contrasting views are prevalent is due to the nature of small businesses using different strategies for success depending on the type of business or even the location, and the different definitions of sustainability. It is important to view a small business in a variety of different capacities to determine if there are strategies implemented by small businesses that are cross-disciplinary. Additionally, grey systems theory is difficult to view as a lens for qualitative research. Much of the research uses

grey theory as a quantitative theory to predict numerical results when there is a lack of information.

**Evolution of grey systems theory.** Von Bertalanffy introduced grey systems theory for researchers to fill the void when information, operational mechanism, documentation, or structural message was missing or was not substantial enough (Deng, 1989). Lack of information can lead to results that are unclear, and grey systems theory is has grown to be able to predict results even with small sample sizes. Liu et al, (2016) determined researchers use grey systems theory to predict short and long-term results. Researchers are able to use these results to further research that had become stagnant due to lack of information or sample size. This evolution has aided in the growth and development of grey systems theory from a quantitative theory into an inclusive theory that includes quantitative and qualitative attributes.

**Application of grey theory.** Researchers can apply grey systems to a variety of areas that lack information to develop concrete information. Researchers use grey theory to solve uncertain problems that lack information (Liu et al. 2016; Stanujkic, Zavadkas, Ghorabae, & Turskis, 2017). When von Bertalanffy introduced grey systems, researchers only applied as a quantitative lens to view a problem. As the study has begun to evolve, researchers introduced qualitative applications to aid in the explanation in areas where there is a lack of information or areas where misinformation are prevalent.

### **Diffusion of Innovation Theory**

Innovation is a major influencing factor for small business sustainability. Diffusion of innovation theory is a critical theory when determining how innovation



affects organizations. E.M. Rogers introduced diffusion of innovation theory in 1962 to develop a process to communicate innovation (Chang, 2010). Diffusion of innovation theory is important to innovation because researchers study the dissemination of information. Additionally, researchers use diffusion of innovation theory to determine how perceived attributes of innovation affect organization adoption of innovation (Jamshidi & Hussin, 2016; Smaldino, Janssen, Hillis, & Bednar, 2017). This is constantly evolving and changing and researchers use diffusion of innovation theory to forecast innovation in multiple fields for the future (Chang, 2010).

Researchers use diffusion of innovation theory to determine communication of the adoption of innovation through an organization (Smaldino, Janssen, Hillis, & Bednar, 2017; Harvey, 2016). Additionally, researchers use this theory to determine how organizations accept innovation is accepted (Harvey, 2016). These are critical components of innovation theory because the process of communication and retention of innovation are essential to the successful implementation of innovation.

### **Problems with the Rival Theories**

Researchers use grey systems theory to fill in gaps where there is a lack of information and/or lack of sample size (Liu et al. 2016). When using grey systems theory, it is best implemented with a quantitative study as an accurate predictor when the sample size is not large enough (Deng, 1989). Through enough research, the sample size for small businesses sustainability can be very large, and there is a tremendous amount of information, although differing, about small business sustainability. Grey systems theory would best suit a similar study in a specific geographic location that only has a limited

number of small businesses in which had been successful. The limitations of the study would enhance the use of grey systems theory, but without these limitations, there are other theories that better fit small business sustainability.

Diffusion of innovation theory is relevant to innovation that is relevant to this study. The main problem with using diffusion of innovation theory is that it is not inclusive of the study but rather exclusive. Diffusion of innovation focuses only on how organizations use innovation (Chang, 2010). Diffusion of innovation theory only focuses on innovation (Blumberg, 2016). Small business sustainability is very diverse and can be more substantial than just innovation. Since this theory only encompasses a part rather than the whole study, it is not relevant to this study.

### **Transition**

The purpose of Section 1 was to explain the background of the problem, and develop the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, significance of the study, and the literature review. I explained and developed each one of these to validate there is a problem which needs further research. I will further expand on this research to develop strategies small business owners in the construction industry use to increase sustainability beyond 5 years.

In Section 2, I will explain the role of the researcher, participants research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis,

reliability, and validity of the study. I need to explain these in detail to determine which research method and design is most appropriate. Additionally, I will explain how I will use ethical research practices during the study to ensure protection of all participants.

In Section 3, I will present the findings from data collection and analysis. After presenting the findings, I will apply the findings to professional practice and determine the implications for social change. Lastly, I will make recommendations for both action and future research.

## Section 2: The Project

I conducted a qualitative multiple case study to explore sustainability strategies in the construction industry. I was the primary data collection tool because I conducted face-to-face interviews, analyzed organizational documentation, and triangulated these data with academic literature. I interviewed participants until I met data saturation, with a minimum of five small business owners. After I completed the interviews, I used member checking as a way to reduce researcher bias. I used data saturation, triangulation, and member checking to increase the reliability and validity of the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners in the construction industry used for sustainability beyond 5 years. The target population was owners of five successful construction businesses with fewer than 100 employees located in Georgia, who implemented successful sustainability strategies to increase their survival rate beyond 5 years. Small business owners can use this study to increase positive social change in the construction industry by aiding in small business sustainability beyond 5 years. Small business sustainability affects the job market due to the large number of people small businesses employ. A stronger job market could lead to a stronger economy, which may have a positive effect on society.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary data collection instrument because I conducted semistructured interviews with each of the small business owners who participated in this study. The researcher controls the interview and the data collection (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2014).

Qualitative case study researchers seek to explore a phenomenon through in-depth study and can use a variety of tools, such as interviews, focus groups, or observations (Bristowe, Selman, & Murtagh, 2015). I have been a small business owner in a variety of capacities since 2010, and I work hand-in-hand with small business owners daily. I have experienced both successes and failures as a small business owner, and I wanted to discover strategies to help small business owners increase the probability of survival beyond 5 years.

Research participants must be treated with respect, and the researcher must ensure that each participant is treated ethically (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Each participant volunteered to participate. I gathered prior consent from each participant and used member checking to ensure each participant's information was accurate and to ensure I treated each participant with respect. Additionally, I informed participants of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. A researcher must ensure confidentiality of information and protection from harm, and the researcher must treat each participant in an ethical manner (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I am the only person with access to the names of the organizations and the small business owners' names. I followed the policies and procedures outlined in the Belmont Report to build the trust and relationships with the small business owners who participated in the study.

Reducing bias in a study is an important role of the researcher. Understanding bias is important to reduce as much bias as possible from a study (Malone, Nicholl, &

Tracey, 2014). Unbiased research is important, and if any biases exist, they must be stated (Simundic, 2013). One way to reduce bias is to record memos throughout data collection (Tufford & Newman, 2012). As a small business owner, I have personal biases toward strategies that have worked and that have not worked for me. To reduce this bias, I took notes throughout data collection and analysis process to be able to reflect on and to discover any additional biases that arose. I did not want to lead the small business owners to answers, so I asked open-ended questions. I allowed each participant to elaborate and give detail during the interview process. Through member checking, I allowed the small business owners to add or take away any information to ensure I protected them and to ensure I did not include any biases of my own. I connected themes that emerged from interviews and analysis of literature to discover strategies and attempt to reduce bias.

Interviews were an appropriate method of data collection because the interviewees were able to give unobstructed answers. The researcher can identify experts to interview and obtain relevant information specific to the research topic (van de Wiel, 2017). Instead of conducting a study using surveys, I used face-to-face interviews. This process made it possible for me to ask the participants to elaborate on answers, so I could obtain more information. I recorded the interviews using a handheld recording device, and I transcribed each interview. I used member checking to ensure the accuracy of my interview transcription. Researchers use member checking to solicit feedback from interviewees and to discuss any inconsistencies with data collection (Andraski, Chandler, Powell, Humes, & Wakefield, 2014). To member check, I contacted the small business

owners interviewed and allowed them to read my interpretation of the interview to ensure I did not include any personal bias.

### **Participants**

I selected small businesses owners who own a business that has been in operation for more than 5 years. I only used small business owners in the construction industry in Georgia who have been in business for at least 5 years and have 100 employees or less. I used a purposive sample of small businesses owners who met the selection criteria. Purposive sampling is the selection of participants who meet specific criteria (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Gambari & Yusuf, 2016; Zerehsaz, 2017). Purposive sampling can increase relevant information from each participant due to the alignment of participants to the study. According to Robinson (2014), researchers use judgment criteria to select purposive sampling participants. I continued to interview participants until I reached data saturation but used a minimum of five small business owners who met the selection criteria. The selection criteria were a business's number of employees and years of operation.

Participant access is an important part of this study. I have a commonality with small businesses owners in the construction industry through an advisory council. I used our commonality in the advisory council to approach small business owners in the construction industry. Directly approaching participants can increase the participation rate (Taylor, Fern, Aslam, & Whelan, 2016). I personally invited each participant and explained the study to them. I sent a corresponding email with the informed consent form to the participants who elected to participate. We discussed a mutually agreed on location

for the interview. Continuous negotiations throughout the doctoral study are important to continue to gain deeper access to participants (Hoyland, Hollund, & Olsen, 2015). It is important for the researcher to continuously build relationships with potential participants and continuously negotiate to gain the most access. I had the informed consent form signed prior to beginning the interview.

### **Research Method**

I used the qualitative methodology to determine strategies that small business owners implemented to increase sustainability beyond 5 years. Qualitative researchers use collection methods, such as interviews, document analysis, or focus groups, to find new areas of understanding (van den Berg & Struwig 2017). Researchers use qualitative research to create a link between the research question, methodology, and research method (Kahlke, 2014). A quantitative researcher explains what is happening using numerical data and examining relationships by testing multiple hypotheses (Barnham, 2015), and a researcher using the mixed method combines quantitative and qualitative information and data (Mabila, 2017). The quantitative method was not appropriate because I did not analyze numerical correlations between small business sustainability strategies and I did not test multiple hypotheses. The mixed-method approach was not appropriate because I did not analyze numerical correlations and make connections between qualitative analysis. The qualitative method was appropriate for this study because the purpose of the study was to determine the strategies that successful business owners implemented to increase sustainability beyond 5 years, and the research question,



methodology, and research method share a common thread of small business sustainability strategies.

### **Research Design**

I used a case study for this research. The qualitative researcher uses a variety of designs that include phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, and case study (Yin, 2014). A phenomenological researcher looks at a phenomenon or situation that is unique to the environment (Yin, 2014). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because I studied strategies small businesses are implementing rather than phenomena. Ethnographic researchers examine cultural aspects such as beliefs and behaviors (Yin, 2014). I did not study the cultural aspect of business sustainability; therefore, the ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study. Researchers using the narrative approach examine experiences associated with the study (Yin, 2014). Narrative was not appropriate for this study because I did not examine life stories to determine sustainability strategies. Researchers use the case study approach to examine real-life situations to develop strategies (Cinneide, 2015). Case study researchers are able to delve deeper into specific scenarios that have been studied and identify strategies implemented rather than theoretical implications (Cronin, 2014). The case study design was appropriate for this study because many successful small business owners have achieved sustainability beyond 5 years and research was available to study what strategies they implemented.

When using a case study, data saturation is important to increase the rigor of the study. Data saturation is an important piece of case study research because researchers

use it to increase the validity and reliability of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Morse (2015) described data saturation as obtaining good and rich data from an adequate sample size. Data collection and analysis are critical for credible, reliable, and dependable research (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Researchers use data saturation to ensure the data is rich and to increase the validity and reliability of the study. I ensured data saturation by continuing to interview small business owners until no new data was obtained with a minimum sample size of five small business owners. Additionally, I asked open-ended questions and allowed the small business owners to elaborate and give as much detail as possible in the attempt to gather thorough data that had the most relevance.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population for this case study was small business owners who have fewer than 100 employees, who have been in operation beyond 5 years, and who are located in Georgia. Additionally, these small business owners own a business in the construction industry. I started by selecting five small business owners who met the participant criteria. There are hundreds of small business owners in the construction industry in Georgia. I used purposive sampling to select appropriate participants for this study, and I ensured data saturation by interviewing participants until I received no new information with a minimum of five participants. I used purposive sampling to gain the most relevant information. Researchers use purposive sampling to obtain relevant and rich information from a specific group (Robinson, 2014; Benoot, Bilsen, & Hannes, 2016; Patton, 2015). The target population must be specific to obtain an accurate purposive sample (Bungay, Oliffe, & Atchison, 2016).

I selected five small business owners who met the selection criteria because this helped me obtain rich data. I asked the same questions of the five participants. Researchers achieve data saturation when they obtain no new information pertaining to the study, there are no new themes, and the study is replicable (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The number of researchers analyzing the data, the complexity of the data, and the experience of the investigator can affect data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson 2006). Data saturation is about obtaining rich meaningful information that is comprehensive (Morse, 2015). Researchers use data saturation to determine sample size (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I ensured data saturation by planning an in-depth semistructured interview, and I continued to interview new participants until I received no new information or themes, and the study was replicable. Walden University's approval number for this study is 02-13-19-0669018.

I made every effort to protect the participants in this study. The researcher cannot violate participants' rights (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2014). I wanted to ensure that each participant's participation was strictly voluntary and confidential. To do this, I did not provide any incentives for participating, and I gave participants multiple opportunities to remove themselves from the study. Prior to obtaining an informed consent form, I met with each potential participant. During this meeting, I explained the doctoral study and emphasized that the participant could withdraw from the study at any time. The informed consent form also contains a statement explaining that the participant can withdraw from the study at any time by calling or emailing me. Additionally, during member checking, I

asked the participants if they would like to withdraw at that time to ensure participation was voluntary. To protect the participants' confidentiality, I coded each participant in the study, and all interview material is stored in a fireproof safe that I alone have access to. After 5 years, I will destroy all participant information.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Researchers who use the qualitative method are the primary data collection instruments (Yin, 2014). I was the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative case study. A researcher using case study design must use multiple sources of evidence to triangulate data, which may include field observations, interviews, documents, and participant observations (Yin, 2014). I used face-to-face interviews and organizational documentation as sources of evidence from the participants.

Ginting (2016) used semistructured interviews to support sustainability Strategies. Likewise, Noke and Chesney (2014) used semistructured interviews to explore small business strategies and found this strategy to be beneficial in acquiring the information needed to perform the study. I used face-to-face, semistructured interviews, a review of academic literature, and organizational documents to examine strategies small business owners use to increase sustainability. The organizational documents included profit and loss statements, cash flow statements, and a written business plan. A semistructured interview is a conversation on a specific topic between the researcher and the participant with a clear purpose, structure, and a lack of the researcher's opinions (Adams, 2010). After the semistructured interview, I provided a summary of the interview for participant feedback. This enhances the reliability and validity of the interview.

Member checking is a process that allows the research participant to review the interview themes and the participant provides feedback and guidance to the researcher (Andraski et al, 2014; Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Harvey (2015) described member checking as a process of validation of the interview through returning to the research participants for their confirmation of the interview transcription. After data collection and during data analysis I triangulated the data collected from the semistructured interviews, the review of academic literature, and organizational documentation.

Researchers triangulate data between multiple sources to converge the evidence and multiple sources of evidence to support the data (Yin, 2014). Researchers connect themes from different sources through triangulation to aid in increasing validity. (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Foley, Boyle, Jennings, and Smithson (2017) found researchers use triangulation of data to increase the validity of their study. A researcher can use multiple sources together to enhance the validity of a study because multiple sources are stronger than a single standalone source. I triangulated multiple sources of data to increase the validity of this study. To triangulate the data, I created themes from the interview and connected these themes to academic literature. I increased the validity and reliability of the study by connecting multiple sources and triangulated the data.

### **Data Collection Technique**

The data collection technique for this study was interviews. Semistructured interviews are appropriate for qualitative studies because researchers use them to provide reliable and comparable data (Baines, Dulku, Jindal, & Papalois, 2018). A semistructured interview has structure but the researcher is allowed the flexibility to ask follow-up

questions to obtain rich data (Kopp, Crump, & Weis, 2017; Mori, Sugawara, Obuchi, Shimmei, & Takahashi, 2018). The semistructured interview is informal enough to dig deep into the questioning as the interview progresses (Harvey, 2015). Researchers use the semistructured interview method because they have the flexibility to ask questions and the participant is able to elaborate on a response and to obtain rich data.

I conducted face-to-face interviews as a way to gain as much information during the interview as possible. The advantage of using interviews as a data collection technique is the ability to view social cues such as body language (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez). I had the ability to gain instant insight and a deeper understanding of small business strategies in the construction industry due to using a face-to-face interview. Qualitative interviewing is about human interaction and is more than just gathering information (Cairney & Denny, 2015). I gained owner perspective as well as which strategies were implemented which may not be evident in observation. Researchers use face-to-face interviews to ensure understanding from the participants and to dig deeper into the interview as needed (Magliano et al. 2018). Additionally, I may not have been able to obtain specific enough information through surveys because of the lack of follow up questioning. Researchers use face-to-face interviews to probe deeper into specific questions to ensure answer clarity.

The disadvantages of using interviews was time constraints of participants, smaller sample size, and time constraints of member checking. Other methods of data collection such as text message data collection produce similar data in a shorter amount of time depending on the type of survey (van Velthoven et al. 2018). I was only be able to

secure a limited amount of time with small business owners due to their busy schedules. This could have led to the small business owner rushing through the interview. Secondly, researcher use fewer participants during face-to-face interviews compared to surveys due to the amount of time needed to obtain interview participants, complete the interview, and transcribe the interview. Lastly, the step of member checking required more time from the participant to ensure data and their portrayal is accurate.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Researchers need to explain the categorization and organization of concepts to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Elo et al. 2014). All data must be securely stored, protected and measures in place to ensure the security of the data (Achinewhu-Nworgu, Nworgu, Azaiki, & Dikeh, 2015). The researcher's responsibility is to collect, store and analyze data (Chen, Mao, & Liu, 2014). I digitally recorded and kept a journal of each interview with notes. Additionally, I transcribed the interviews with personal information labeled for member checking purposes, to connect themes between interviews, and to protect personal information. I stored and locked in a fireproof safe all raw data that includes but not limited to digital recording, interview notes, and interview transcript in my home and I will keep for 5 years and destroy after that.

### **Data Analysis**

I used methodological triangulation as a data analysis tool. Researchers use methodological triangulation to combine two or more types of data sources to make connections (Joslin & Müller, 2016; Kotus & Rzeszewski, 2015). Researchers use multiple methods to increase the validity of the study (Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, &

Gonzalez, 2017). I used a review of academic literature, semistructured interviews, and organizational documentation as data for analysis and developed reoccurring themes between the three forms of data. I then examined themes between the three data sources to determine innovative strategies small business owners in the construction industry have used to increase sustainability beyond 5 years. To triangulate data, I used the qualitative analysis method to organize and analyze data. Researchers use the qualitative analysis method to organize data in a way that can be easily coded and triangulated (Blanc, 2017; Davidson, Thompson, & Harris, 2017; Freitas et al. 2017). I categorized and coded all themes from the interviews, documentation, and literature review on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I correlated key themes with recent studies, the conceptual framework, and the raw data obtained through the interviews. I connected the themes that emerged from the study, as well as the conceptual framework, and any new or related articles to the client leader for review and approval for publication at the conclusion of this study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Researchers use reliability and validity to strengthen a study. Reliability is the consistency of the study where validity is the accuracy of the study (Wladis & Samuels, 2016). Validity is being factually accurate (Ogilvie & McCrudden, 2017). Qualitative studies must be dependable, credible, transferable, and confirmable. A qualitative study must meet all these criteria to be relevant and trustworthy. The researcher must go through stringent processes to ensure they meet all criteria.



**Reliability**

Dependability is the consistency and reliability of the study (Chowdhury, 2015; Moon et al. 2016). Additionally, dependability is continuous performance over time (Costa & Furtado, 2015). I used member checking and methodological triangulation to increase the reliability and validity of the study. Researchers use member checking as a quality control process to validate the observations and conclusions to improve the validity and reliability of the study (Santos, Magalhaes, & da Silva, 2017). Researchers use methodological triangulation to connect and integrate themes between multiple data sources (Drouin, Stewart, & Van Gorder, 2015). The process of member checking is the sharing of data transcripts to elicit feedback from the participants (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017). After I interviewed participants, I provided them with transcripts of the interview for them to provide feedback. I did this to ensure I have not introduced my personal bias and to ensure I transcribed the interview properly. After I had the approved transcriptions of all interviews, I coded themes from the interviews and analyzed the three data sources to connect the themes and triangulated the data.

**Validity**

Researchers use member checking to increase the credibility of the research because participants are part of the study along with the researcher (Iivari, 2018; Madill & Sullivan, 2017). Researchers using the qualitative methodology must use a variety of sources and triangulate them to increase credibility (Varpio et al, 2017). Researchers use triangulation and data saturation to establish credibility (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). I

used semistructured interviews, organizational documentation, and a review of academic literature as the sources of data for the study and connected the reoccurring themes as a way to triangulate the data to increase the credibility of the study. I reviewed organizational documentation as well as the interviews to increase the validity of the study.

Transferability is the degree of use for research findings in future research (Moon et al. 2016). A high level of member checking engagement is important to qualitative studies because it helps ensure transferability (Birt et al. 2016). Researchers use triangulation to increase the transferability of qualitative research because researchers use multiple sources to view outcomes (Mikacic, 2015). I ensured transferability by using triangulation between multiple sources of data.

Confirmability is the ability of other researchers to replicate the study (Alonso-Diaz & Yuste-Tosina, 2015; Moon et al. 2016). Researchers use confirmability and triangulation to reduce bias and to ensure the study is replicable (Abdalla et al. 2017). It is important for researchers to be able to replicate the study to reduce bias and have confirmability. I used data triangulation between three data sources to increase confirmability of the study.

Credibility, transferability, and confirmability are all elements of quality qualitative research (Moon et al. 2016). When the researcher finds no new information or themes, data saturation has been met (Fusch & Ness, 2015). When the researcher has met data saturation and the study is credible, transferable, and confirmable they have met the criteria for a valid study. I continued to interview participants, with a minimum of five,

until no new data or themes emerge. Then I used member checking to ensure I transcribed the participants accurately. Lastly, I triangulated the data between the review of academic literature, organizational documentation (profit and loss statements, cashflow statements, and business plan), and interviews to ensure the study is reliable and valid.

### **Transition and Summary**

The purpose of Section 2 was to explain the role of the researcher, participants research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity of the study. I explained these in detail to validate the need for using a qualitative multi case study. I used the qualitative research method to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry used to increase sustainability beyond 5 years.

In Section 3, I presented the findings from data collection and analysis. After presenting the findings, I applied the findings to professional practice and determined the implications for social change. Lastly, I made recommendations for both action and future research.

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

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business owners in the construction industry use for sustainability beyond 5 years. I collected data from five semistructured interviews of successful small business owners in the construction industry, I reviewed cash flow statements, and I reviewed their formal business plans. I used methodological triangulation among the sources to develop themes from the interviews and business documents. Von Bertalanffy's (1972) general systems theory aligned with the strategies small business owners expressed in the interviews. I found recurring themes that all participants use to sustain their organizations, which includes building relationships in the organization, building the brand, specialization, and planning.

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

The overarching research question for this study was: What innovative strategies do small business owners in the construction industry use for sustainability beyond 5 years? I interviewed five small business owners who own a business with fewer than 100 employees. Each participant answered six open-ended questions about strategies and strategy implementation. I used their financial documentation and business plans to gather additional information and determine the effectiveness of the strategies discussed in the interview.

I followed the triangulation and data organization process established by Yin (2014). The four principles of data collection are (a) use multiple sources of evidence, (b)

create a case study database, (c) maintain a chain of evidence, and (d) exercise care when using data from electronic sources (Yin, 2014). I used multiple sources of data—interviews, financial documentation, and formal business plans—and created a case study database, which included coded themes. I used the database to maintain the chain of evidence between themes and different participants. Additionally, I used a limited amount of data from electronic sources, which was important in my review of academic literature but not needed for the convergence of evidence between study participants.

### **Theme 1: Internal Relationships**

Strengthening internal relationships was a sustainability strategy used by all participants. Many of the business owners expressed the need to grow their organization closer like a family and the need to grow with one another to grow the organization. Gerard et al. (2017) found organizational leaders to be critical in building stakeholder relationships, developing human capital (leader and employee), and managing the external impact on the organization. Sustainable leadership positively affects customer satisfaction (Suriyankietkaew, 2016). The growth of internal relationships and its positive effect on sustainability is consistent with von Bertalanffy's (1972) general systems theory, in which he proposed that parts of the system affect the wholeness of the system. Having employee buy-in and working as a cohesive unit will positively affect customers' experiences with an organization and affect the entire business positively.

Another important factor potentially influenced by building stronger internal relationships is employee turnover. Small businesses tend to have higher turnover rates due to the higher responsibilities and demands of employees of small businesses (Hyder

& Lussier, 2016). Positive internal relationships can reduce turnover. The five small business owners interviewed had relatively low turnover rates for their most critical employees, but they did experience higher turnover rates of entry-level employees. This was evident in organizational charts and organizational documentation provided by the small business owners.

All participants expressed the importance of internal relationships with their employees. Participant 1 stated:

Every day employees are the face of the organization. They are what makes this place successful. They are on the front lines working hard, building relationships, and getting the job done, which keeps this company going in the right direction.

Participant 5 stated:

My name is on the trucks of every employee that interacts with customers. I need employees that are part of my family. Every Friday we have a breakfast where we can all get together, talk, and grow. I hire people that fit our culture and want to grow as a family. We can train the skills, but the relationships must be cultivated through the culture we try to develop.

Small businesses in the construction industry rely on internal relationships among their employees. All small business owner participants stated the importance of having smart, hardworking, and family-oriented employees. The participants explained how these characteristics of employees were the foundation for a successful small business.

All five participants expressed the importance of internal relationships, but three participants explained ways they intentionally try to help their employees be successful

and to show how much they care for their employees. Participant 1 described special lunches where the entire company gets together and bonds. All families are invited and they usually attend. Participant 4 explained how they contribute to the benefits packages of the employees, but also work with them to show them how to invest. Participant 4 stated:

Offering a retirement plan is not enough if [the employees] do not understand it. I want my employees to grow, so I talk with them about their retirement and explain to them how to maximize their investment. Someone sat down with me one day and explained to me how this process works, and I want to be there for my guys. I want the best for my employees because they are what helps put food on my table. I want them to be as successful as possible and not have to struggle when the time comes for them to retire.

The three small business participants who expressed their intentionality to grow the internal relationships in the organization have all been successful at reducing turnover and creating an atmosphere of trust, which was evident in their organizational documentation.

## **Theme 2: Building the Brand**

Small business owners in the construction industry expressed the need to build the brand. The type of business they operate seemed to determine how small business owners built the brand. Customers are the driving force to build the brand in the construction industry. The participants' expertise ranged from commercial to residential, and some

customers were other construction companies and other participants' customers were the final consumer of a product or service.

Four of the participants discussed building direct relationships with customers. Small business owners should build strong relationships with their customers. These strong relationships need to be where both parties depend on one another and help each other. Participant 3 stated:

If we don't take care of our customers someone else will. We offer great customer service to our customers because we need each other. Most of my customers become more than a person that enters the door. They become friends with me and my staff because we keep them going and try to keep them profitable.

Participant 2 stated:

I want to become a part of my customers' business. My goal is to help them grow. When my customers grow, we grow. I do not want to be a visitor with my customer but rather work for my customer so we can align our organizations and where we can work seamlessly together.

Participant 5 stated:

I want my customers to be a part of my family. We need to know them and their background. They are what puts food on my table and every one of my employees' tables. We need to take care of our customers. Advertising gets them [customers] in the door, but relationships keep them coming back.

The closer the external relationships of the small business to its customers, the better service the business seemed to offer. Further research could be conducted on how



profits of one construction company affect the organizations it deals with, but this study does not prove this. Participant 2 stated:

I try to build close relationships of trust with my customers, one in which I can learn from them, as well as, they learn from me. We need each other to grow, and it is important to grow our relationship and really learn from each other to grow our businesses. As we build these close relationships it becomes less of a customer and salesman relationship and more of a friendship where we are trying to help each other.

Four of the five participants expressed the importance and reliance of other organizations. The participants expressed that personal relationships with their customers led to organizational growth and profitability. This was evident in the review of their organizational documentation.

I found many articles that included relationships as key factors to sustainability. Humberd and Rouse (2016), Kuhn et al. (2016), Loftsen (2016), Nikayin and Reuver (2015), and Omri et al. (2015) all expressed the importance of networking and working with others to grow organizations. This is especially significant for small to mid-sized organizations due to the lack of resources available to them. Mataboee et al. (2016), Turner and Endres (2017), and Woodley et al. (2015) also expressed the importance of external relationships and learning from other organizations through these relationships. Many researchers call external relationships by different names, which include *building the brand*, *customer relationships*, *networking*, and *mentor and mentee relationships*. All of these can be brand-building or external relationships, and many researchers have found

positive correlations between these relationships and the success of organizations. Four of the five participants expressed the importance of learning and growing through the development of external relationships, and all five participants placed external relationships as a priority to the organization's success.

Three participants have spent a great deal on advertising to reach their consumers. They have built brands by advertising and customers remember their name. Participant 4 stated: "We advertise heavily to build the brand. We budget it in and commit to continued advertisement." Participant 4 explained the key barrier to advertisement is the cost when business is slow but added, "it is a necessary expense to continuing to grow the business." Participant 3 and Participant 5 explained that advertising gets the business in the door, and it is their job to keep the customers coming back.

The brand is important to build and continue to grow. Small business owners need to know their customers and build the types of relationships that encourage continued growth with them. Additionally, building a brand means growing in that brand to reach more customers. All the participant response findings align with the theory that parts of the organization affect the whole organization (von Bertalanffy, 1972)

### **Theme 3: Specialization**

All participants expressed the need to know what they are good at and let that be the organization's focus. Participant 4 stated:

We know what we are good at and we know how to make money. We do not deviate too far from our expertise. Our employees are experts at what they do, and we try to give them the best chance to succeed because when they go to a job site

and have done something similar, we are able to get the job done faster and be more profitable.

Small businesses have fewer resources and less experience than larger businesses do (Small Business Association, 2016). The small business owners interviewed were experts in their particular fields in construction. The sizes of their organization were potentially beneficial because it helped them be the best at what they do.

Even organization specialization, there can be growth in the specialized area. Omri et al. (2015) found increasing network size also increases innovation in an organization, which leads to greater profitability. Finding areas of growth can lead to areas of profitability in the future. Participant 5 explained how they continue to grow in their specialty by educating others:

We wanted to grow in the construction field, so I first researched why we were not growing in particular areas. From there, I met with the local tech schools to see how we could work together. I met with one of the heads of our co-op to develop a curriculum to teach in tech schools, and now we are implementing this across the state, as well as getting in the high schools. Our next goal is to develop an apprenticeship program through high schools and tech schools to grow the industry.

Innovation for small businesses can happen in variety of ways that include products and strategies (Taneja et al, 2016). Small business leaders who focus on seeking opportunities rather than small improvements tend to have greater success with innovations (Cooper, Peake, & Watson, 2016). All five participants interviewed

expressed the need to grow, specialize, and innovate. Based on organizational documentation and the interviews, they all seemed to do this differently, but the idea was the same. All the participants are focused on opportunities for growth but still focus on the specialty of the business. This allows the business to grow but also protects the business from overexpansion.

The need to grow is important to survival. Innovation is an improvement in any part of the organization, and small businesses must continuously improve to increase the chance of sustainability (Taneja et al, 2016). All five participants seemed to grow differently, but all found a route to grow from their specialization. The different growth areas of the participants were advertising, education, training, relationships, and growing their customers. Growth and specialization are specific parts of an organization's plans and align with von Bertalanffy's general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Researchers use systems theory to explain roles and responsibilities in a system (Mania-Singer, 2017). Small business owners use innovation in a small business to increase the opportunity for growth. This is the role and responsibility of innovation, and another way general systems theory is applicable as a lens to view this study.

#### **Theme 4: Planning**

Two participants expressed the importance of planning. Both participants determined it was important to determine the future direction of the organization.

Participant 4 stated:

We sit down yearly and plan out our next year. We look at what has happened this past year and what we anticipate this next year to be like. This is where we set our advertising budget and really look at growth areas.

There were differences in the way these two participants planned and evaluated their business, but their businesses were different as well. Even with the differences, both were successful. Additionally, planning is important, but how you plan needs to be intentional to meet the needs of your organization. Participant 5 stated:

We are constantly evaluating, planning, and developing areas where we can grow. Through this planning process, we have found growth opportunities through developing curriculum for educating our future employees and our future customers. This will not only help us but help our industry. We are planning for our future by educating and growing our industry.

Researchers have found successful business planning can increase the sustainability of small businesses. Blackburn et al. (2013) found a correlation between planning and profitability of the successful businesses studied. Additionally, the inverse has been found to be true in that Mitchell et al. (2015) discovered small businesses that lack a strategic plan often do not know the direction of the organization, which can lead to failure. Small businesses need to know their direction and plan for the future to increase their chances of sustainability.

Both Participant 4 and Participant 5 showed growth in their organization due to their planning processes. Both had written plans they were currently attempting to execute, and both plans were evaluated on the future direction and profits of the

organization. The plans are strategies, which both participants attributed to their long-term success. This is evident through general systems theory that the wholeness is affected by parts of the system (von Bertalanffy, 1972).

An important piece of Participant 5's success in what comes from the planning process. Through the planning process, Participant 5 determined the need to constantly train his employees. The company goes through extensive yearly training and development. Weekly, employees meet to discuss specific needs and how to grow; yearly, the organization's employees attend continued education. The training is specific to the needs of the individual and the organization. The planning process of Participant 5 is used to determine what training the employees of the business need, and the training is aligned to the specific goals of the organization.

Only two participants explained planning as an important part of their sustainability, all five participants had a written business plan. Schaltegger et al. (2016) found a correlation between small businesses use of a business plan and sustainability. Mitchell et al. (2015) discovered small businesses sacrifice strategic planning for day-to-day operational focus. The sacrificing of the strategic plan may be a reason for small business failures being so high. All five small business participants are in the construction industry, but all of the business models were different. Sustainability of new business models falls on the owners of the business (Medved et al, 2017). The differences and intricacies of the business model were dependent on the specific needs of the organization, and the areas for growth.

Planning is an important piece of each of the small business participants. Each business planned differently, but literature is filled with the importance of small businesses planning and the correlation to sustainability. Planning is applicable to general systems theory because it is one piece of the puzzle that is used to increase the sustainability of the entire organization.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

Based on the study findings, the most significant contribution to professional practice may be the development of relationships. All participants identified building and growing relationships, whether internal or external, as key contributing factors to the success of their organizations. Jones et al. (2015) expressed the importance of growing relationships and brand awareness through social media. Additionally, Jones et al. (2015) discovered customer relationships with the organization have a direct relationship to sales. Humberd and Rouse (2016) explained the importance of a strong mentorship relationship built on common ground. Participant 2 explained the importance of growing, teaching, and learning from your customers. Participant 5 said, “Advertising gets me in the door, but relationships get them [customers] to call me back.” It is important for both parties to benefit and see value in one another.

Small business owners can benefit from this study by seeing the importance of internal and external relationships and implementing strategies to strengthen these relationships. Internally, stronger relationships were proven by the participants’ organizational documentation to reduce turnover of key employees, and positive external relationships have a direct link to sales and return service. The use of direct intentional

strategies to build stronger relationships with all stakeholders can increase the likelihood of sustainability beyond 5 years.

Additionally, small business owners can benefit from specialization in their field. All five participants expressed the importance of growth in their specialty and not straying far from what has made them successful. This is not to indicate that all the participants do not venture out to find new revenue sources. Participant 1 stated, “When business is slow, we will do a couple of extra jobs that are not multifamily to keep the revenue stream continuous, but when business is fast we stick to what we know.” Participant 2 expressed the importance of accurately calculating costs as compared to revenues to determine if a new strategy is successful. Some organizations focus too much on the revenues without truly digging into all the costs associated with a strategy. Participant 5 expressed the importance of growing the industry but still focusing on what breeds success.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Small businesses employ over 59% of the U.S. population, but only 50% survive beyond the first 5 years (Small Business Administration, 2017a). Through the implementation of successful relationship and specialization strategies, small business owners in the construction industry may sustain their organizations. As construction companies build stronger relationships internally and externally, other small business owners may learn these strategies through the examples set by other successful organizations.



By using strategies from the findings of this study, small business owners in the construction industry may contribute additional strategies by improving the knowledge of entrepreneurs in the field. As the number of small business owners in the industry begin to sustain their organizations over longer periods of time, these organizations will be able to hire more employees and keep them employed over longer periods of time.

Starting in 2005, in the United States, the recession affected many small businesses in the construction industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). During the recession, small business start-ups decreased, job creation declined, and the survival rate of small businesses decreased (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). After the recession, new small business owners need to be able to develop strategies to sustain their organization beyond the 5-year threshold to give themselves the best chance at long-term survival. Additionally, these strategies may aid in the development of stronger small businesses. Stronger businesses can be used to create a stronger workforce and potentially a stronger economy in case of another recession.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Based on the four themes identified through methodological triangulation of semistructured interviews, analysis of literature, and document review, I recommend the small business owners in the construction industry use training on the development of internal and external relationships. Internal relationships can aid in the development of stronger organizations, and external relationships can build the brand, grow the leaders, or strengthen customer relationships to the organization. Additionally, the training should include growth opportunities and how to grow in each business's specialization. This

training can be used to develop stronger businesses and build stronger communities around these organizations.

Many construction fields require education and training called continued education. This continued education is very specific to the license or specific field in which the owner operates. Continued education on the specific needs in the field as well as growing the industry, could be added to the continued education depending on the role of the individual. Training can be very specific to the needs of the field and industry with a captive audience who works directly in this field. This ensures the strategies can be developed specifically for the needs of the particular construction field.

Small business owners can benefit directly from this training. The training can satisfy a partial requirement for their continued education and aiding in the strengthening of organizations through strategy development. Additionally, small business owners may be able to learn from one another in the development of strategies that work in different areas.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

I chose a qualitative multiple case study to explore strategies that five small business owners in the construction field implemented in Georgia to sustain their operations for more than 5 years. The participants' strategies implemented in their organizations matched the literature review and conceptual framework, but researchers can delve deeper into a variety of areas such as specific industries in the construction industry, or a quantitative study can be conducted on the correlation between relationships to profits.

Researchers could explore strategies in the construction industry. There were many similarities and constants through the themes that emerged during the interviews. The most significant differences in the themes were between participants in the residential and commercial fields. Further research could be conducted including either residential or commercial construction companies to further elaborate on this study.

Multiple participants expressed the importance of relationships to their organization, but a quantitative study on how much these relationships affect profits could be valuable to the industry. Additionally, a researcher could study the effects of internal relationships in a company and the effects on the turnover rate of employees.

This study was conducted in Georgia, and many of the participants were from rural areas. This was a limitation to this study. A larger sample size, a different geographic location, and the inclusion of samples from urban areas are areas for future growth of this study.

### **Reflections**

Completing the Doctor of Business Administration program through Walden University was a rewarding yet challenging experience. I do not work in the field of business, but I do work with many businesses. I have a passion for small businesses because I believe it is an avenue to the American dream. I have learned more through the Doctor of Business Administration process at Walden than any other academic venture I have undertaken because I took ownership in my education and learned through the process.

Going into the doctoral process, I thought I knew the conclusions of the study before I began. Originally, I had many biases about my potential study. As I learned more about the process in the required residencies, I was able to look to literature and let literature be my guide to my study. It was a rewarding experience to leave what I thought I knew and to grow from what others have researched.

After completing the study, I learned that many industries have similarities. I am in education, and relationships are critical to the success of my school. The relationships of all stakeholders are necessary to the success of students. Through this study, I learned that relationships of all stakeholders are important for small businesses as well. The internal relationships keep the direction of the small business going, and the external relationships aid in the long-term survival and profitability.

### **Conclusion**

Strategies to develop relationships whether internal or external influence the sustainability of small businesses. Some small business owners lack strategies to sustain their businesses for beyond 5 years. The primary purpose of general systems is to explain the wholeness and connectivity of multiple unique parts (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Internal and external relationships tie organizations together. Each theme, which emerged from the interviews, was important to the success of each participant's organization. Based on the interviews, the long-term success of the organization was dependent on these strategies. The review of organizational documentation and the review of academic literature validated participants' responses. Applying general systems theory, the purpose of this study was to explore strategies small business owners were implementing to

sustain their organization beyond 5 years. The knowledge gained from the findings of this study may help other small businesses in the construction industry to survive longer and employ more individuals.

Five small businesses owners located in Georgia participated in the interviews and shared organizational documentation to explore strategies being implemented for sustainability. After data analysis, which included methodological triangulation and theme development through organization on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, four themes emerged: (a) internal relationships, (b) building the brand, (c) specialization, and (d) planning. Through triangulation of evidence, the results of the study align to current academic literature for sustainability of small businesses. Using the findings from this study, I attest to small businesses in the construction industry using strategies to develop internal relationships, building their brand, specializing, and planning. These strategies have been proven to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

1. Introduced myself
2. Provided participants copy of consent form
  - a. Ensured the participant understood the consent form
  - b. Discussed any questions
  - c. Both me and the participant signed the consent form
3. Explained the interview process
  - a. Discussed content
  - b. Answered questions
  - c. Discussed any concerns
4. Asked permission to turn on audio recording device
5. Turned on the audio device
6. Took notes during interview
7. Asked each participant the same interview questions
8. Followed up with probing questions
9. Collected organizational documentation
  - a. Profit and loss statements
  - b. Cash flow statements
  - c. Written business plan
10. Discussed member checking
  - a. Question discussion

b. Response discussion

11. Provided my contact information for follow-up questions, concerns, or to withdraw.
12. Thanked the participant
13. Ended interview protocol