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Federal Contracting Strategies for Service-Disabled, Veteran-Owned Businesses

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Ryan Letts

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Federal Contracting Strategies for Service-Disabled, Veteran-Owned Businesses

by

Ryan Letts

MS, American Intercontinental University, 2009

BS, American Intercontinental University, 2007

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

June 2018

Abstract

Access to federal contracts is often a challenge for service-disabled, veteran-owned business (SDVOB) leaders because of business size and competition in the environment. The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the strategies that 5 SDVOB leaders from 5 different businesses in the Northeastern United States used to win federal contracts. Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage was the conceptual framework for the study. Five company leaders who won \$1 million or more in federal contracts were contacted from the Vendor Information Pages database of the Department of Veterans Affairs to participate in the study. Data were collected via semistructured interviews and archival documents. Data analysis consisted of compiling the data, coding for emergent and a priori codes, disassembling the data into common codes, reassembling the data into themes, interpreting the meaning, and reporting the themes (strategies). Eight themes regarding winning federal contracts emerged. The eight themes were process improvement/optimization, understanding requirements, preventing trial and error, personalizing services, understanding the client, access to external capital/resources, understanding the procurement process, and forward-planning. SDVOB leaders may use the results of this study to secure larger contracts in less time by adopting successful strategies that have won federal contracts. Positive social change implications include the potential for further empowerment, success, and profitability of SDVOBs, as well as other minority-owned firms. Further success of SDVOBs may provide long-term employment and increased tax revenue for communities.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to some special people in my life. First, I want to dedicate this to my children Zariya and Iman, whom I love with all my heart. It is my sincere hope that one day you will be inspired to do the remarkable things which I know that you are capable of and remember that I will always be your biggest cheerleader. I also want to dedicate this study to the brave servicemembers of the U.S. Military who defend us every day and make our way of life possible. I would also like to thank my wonderful, and supportive family. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to make a special dedication to my grandfather James Letts, my adopted parents Cleon and Mavis Brooks, who are no longer with us, but played an instrumental role in molding me to be the person that I am. I love and miss you and thank you for everything that you have done for me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small business leaders contract with larger entities to grow their firms. The security of working with an established client or customer is appealing for several reasons, such as (a) growth in profile, (b) larger transactions over longer periods, and (c) the opportunity to do business with other large firms (U.S. Small Business Administration [U.S. SBA], 2016a). One such large entity is the U.S. Federal Government. Selling goods and services to the federal government is a competitive process, and small firms are at a disadvantage when competing against larger established businesses (Manuel, 2014). The categories of small companies designated by administrators at the SBA are minority, veteran, service-disabled, veteran-owned businesses (SDVOBs), and women-owned businesses based on annual receipts or number of employees. Because of their small business status, these types of organizations are at a greater disadvantage when competing to do business with the federal government against large entities. Small business owners often lack resources such as strategies, capital, personnel, expertise, and management structures to compete with large firms (Elston & MacCarthaigh, 2016). The strategies that some small business owners use is not effective to win federal contracts. The Internal Revenue Service and SBA determine a small business by the low amount of capital at the owner's disposal (U.S. SBA, 2016a). Often, the expertise of personnel does not match their titles in small firms. The management structure in small firms is often flat, and growth depends on the vision of the founder.

Background of the Problem

The U.S. SBA (2016a) is responsible for certifying economically disadvantaged firms into the 8(a)-minority business development program. Congress designed the 8(a)-minority business development program to develop minority-owned businesses for a total of 9 years from initial entry as a growth mechanism for small firms (U.S. SBA, 2016b). The administrators of the program encourage small firm growth and increase profitability (U.S. SBA, 2016c; U.S. SBA, 2016g). Federal agency administrators have an opportunity to meet their minority contracting goals mandated by Congress, and the small business owner gets a chance to grow.

When disadvantaged firms participate in the federal contracting process, it is easier for them to get small business loans because they can use the contracts as collateral as opposed to doing so in the private sector. However, one of the inherent problems that the Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO, 2017) analysts found was that veteran-owned firms involved in the SBA Express Loan program defaulted at a higher rate. By successfully executing contracts, small business leaders can repay loans at a favorable interest rate and increase their likelihood of securing larger contracts, thereby increasing profits. Even though the intent of the program administrators is to give equal access to small business concerns (U.S. SBA, 2016b), minority firms are unsuccessful in executing contracts for a variety of reasons and do not get equal access to federal contracts (Dilger & Lowry, 2014). The intention of the 8(a) program is to help contractors who are unfamiliar with the process of government contracting (Gooden, 2017). When small business owners have access to public contracts for a large

organization such as the federal government they grow and get the opportunity to sell to other large entities.

Problem Statement

The U.S. Federal Government awards over \$500 billion in contracts annually (U.S. SBA, 2016a). In 2015, although there were \$43.9 billion available in contracts for socially and economically disadvantaged business owners, disadvantaged business enterprises (DBEs) received \$29 billion whereas SDVOBs secured only 4% of total set-aside contracts (U.S. SBA, 2016j). The general business problem is that some SDVOBs are not as successful in securing contracts as other minority business owners; therefore, they lose profitable opportunities. The specific business problem is that some SDVOB leaders lack the strategies to win federal contracts and improve profitability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts and improve profitability. The population included leaders from three SDVOBs in the Northeastern United States who have successfully won two or more contracts that total \$1M or more. The results of this study could lead to positive social change because identifying strategies that lead to winning federal contracts could empower SDVOBs that are new to federal contracting. The successful award of a contract may lead to improved profitability and may provide long-term employment and increased tax revenue for communities.

Nature of the Study

I chose a qualitative methodology for my study. Researchers use a qualitative methodology to learn about the meaning that participants hold about a problem or issue by identifying patterns or themes (Lewis, 2015). The nature of the research question requires an inductive data analysis; therefore, I used a qualitative methodology for this study. McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) stated that researchers use the quantitative methodology to classify features, count them, and construct statistical models to explain observed events. The results of the research question for this study were not quantifiable; therefore, the quantitative methodology was not appropriate. Mixed-methods research is a combination of both the qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Maxwell, 2013). Because the mixed-method approach involved a quantitative approach, it was not appropriate for this study.

The design of the study should be in alignment with the methodology and the research question. Moustakas (1994) asserted that reality consists of objects and events perceived in the human consciousness. Perception and the interpretation of a lived experience is the central underpinning of phenomenology (Sorsa, Kiiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). Ascertaining how SDVOB leaders perceive their reality would not answer the research question. Grounded theory is an inductive design in which theory generation is intuitive (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Generating a theory is not relevant to exploring strategies that were used to win federal contracts. Studying the ways that humans interpret the world is the premise of narrative inquiry research (Connelly & Clandinin,

1990). The narrative inquiry design would not apply because I want to determine the strategies that leaders used and the results, not their experience while using them.

A case study design involves analyzing either single or multiple cases bounded by time and activity (Yin, 2014). According to Stake (2013), a researcher uses a multiple case study to explore something with lots of cases, parts, or members. To determine what strategies SDVOB leaders used to win federal contracts, an exploration of multiple businesses is required. A multiple case study research design would be sufficient to identify successful strategies; therefore, I used a multiple case study design for this study.

Research Question

What strategies do SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts and improve profitability?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to win federal contracts to improve profitability?
2. What hurdles did you experience in developing and implementing the strategies for winning your first contract?
3. How do you revise the strategies for maximum effectiveness based on changing conditions?
4. If your previous strategy was successful and profitable, why did you change it?
5. What internal resources did you use to compete for federal contracts?

6. What did you do to produce a good or service that is cheaper than your competitors?
7. What did you do to create a distinction between your product or service than your competitors?
8. What was your reason for focusing on the price of your product or service?
9. What was the reason you chose your market segment to highlight the difference in your product or service?
10. What additional information can you share with me regarding strategies that you used to win federal contracts and increase profitability?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study came from Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Porter identified four areas a company can use to pursue an economic lead in its chosen market. The four strategies for competitive advantage are cost leadership, differentiation, cost focus, and differentiation focus. One or more of these strategies can give a company a significant advantage when properly used (Wicker, Soebbing, Feiler, & Breuer, 2015). Cost leadership strategy is the ability to produce a good or service cheaper than competitors (Majumdar, 2015). Creating the perception that a good or service is different or better than the competition is a differentiation strategy (Porter, 1985). A cost focus strategy is when the price of the product or service is the main selling point. Isolating a segment and highlighting the aspect of their good or service that is different is a differentiation focus. Researchers who

explored the topic of government contracting focused on policies and contract amounts (Gooden, 2015); however, there are many unexplored subjects on procurement (Gooden, 2017; Maher, Deller, Stallmann, & Park, 2016). Navigating the procurement process requires a strategy to win contracts. I relied on Porter's generic strategies as the framework for this study.

The concept of generic strategies for competitive advantage (Porter, 1985) served as the lens through which I view the problem for this study. Identifying strategies that win contracts and improve profitability was my primary focus. In this multiple case study, the concept of generic strategies for competitive advantage (Porter, 1985) is the framework I used to explore the study findings.

Operational Definitions

The following are definitions of operational terms used in this study.

8(a) business development program: The 8(a)-business development program is an assistance program for small businesses that are owned and controlled (at least 51%) by economically disadvantaged individuals (U.S. SBA, 2016a). The purpose of the program is to lessen competitive barriers to help small businesses to contract with the federal government (U.S. SBA, 2016a).

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR): The CFR a set of rules and regulations that all the federal agencies are required to adhere to for procurement and other department functions (CFR, 2016). The purpose of the code is to provide a cohesive set of guidelines that agency professionals use to make contracting decisions (CFR, 2016).

Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR): The FAR are the rules and policies of acquisition for all executive agencies of the federal government (FAR, 2016). The purpose of the FAR is similar to that of the CFR; the key difference is that the regulations are legally binding (FAR, 2016).

Government Accountability Office (GAO): The U.S. GAO (2016b) is an independent, nonpartisan agency that works for the U.S. Congress and investigates the use of tax dollars at the federal agencies.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are essential to a study; they reflect anticipated occurrences that may have a significant impact on a researcher's ability to gather unfiltered and unbiased data (Kalhke, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). This study has three assumptions. I assumed that participants are versed in their respective roles in the organization and have an adequate understanding of the federal contracting process. I expected that the study participants understood and answered the interview questions honestly. Internal or external forces influence participants' answers (Yin, 2014). I assumed that internal or external forces influenced the participants.

Limitations

Limitations are potentially uncontrollable events that may have a significant impact on data collection, interviewee participation, or unforeseen circumstances from not having unlimited time or resources (Kalhke, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Each type of data collection method has limitations (Fusch & Ness, 2015). There were limits to the

scope of this study concerning resources available, time, and budget. One limitation was that the geographical area of firms interviewed is limited to the Northeastern United States. The participants were limited to SDVOBs who received a contract at the federal level. My plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews; however, some interviews may be over the phone; I may not be aware of the physical characteristics of the participants or know the extent of their disabilities, and the participants may restrict the information they divulged. Interviews served as a method to elicit information that is not readily available in documented format (Merriam, 2015) the participants may be missing or have incomplete documentation to verify claims. Time-based restrictions due to unanticipated influences or prolonged study completion could be limiting factors (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Because this is an unfunded study, there are limitations on monetary resources.

Delimitations

The bounds and scope of the study are the delimitations. Researchers set the delimitations of their study, which limit the scope and define the boundaries of a study (Kalhke, 2014). My objective in this study was to ascertain the strategies that SDVOBs used to win federal contracts. The geographical location of this study was limited to SDVOB firms located in the Northeastern United States that obtained contracts with methods that fit into Porter's (1985) generic strategies. The prescribed number of cases and participants that are required to obtain sufficient primary data for a multiple case study is three firms with at least three to six participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I expected to interview at least one to two participants at each of three firms for a total of three to six participants.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this study may be of value to disadvantaged business enterprises which include SDVOBs leaders who need to understand how to successfully get federal contracts to grow their businesses. By exploring the strategies that were successful in the past (Myers, 2013), there is a possibility that SDVOBs could secure more contracts, thereby increasing their profitability and participation in federal procurement. Scholars researching the topic of federal procurement have focused on issues with the process of contracting (Warren, 2014; Witko, 2016). This study may contribute to effective business practice that SDVOBs can deploy to successfully win federal contracts by having a strategic system to ensure consistent results.

Implications for Social Change

Some minority firms are more vulnerable than others and do not have adequate political representation. SDVOBs are an underserved subset in the 8(a) program (U.S. SBA, 2015). Identifying strategies that SDVOBs used to secure federal contracts could encourage more participation in the procurement process. Greater involvement in the federal acquisition process could benefit local communities. With federal contracts, leaders would likely have the ability to hire more employees, which could reduce unemployment, increase local tax bases, and improve the image of the local community (U.S. GAO, 2015b). The reinvestment of tax dollars into local economies is another benefit of winning federal contracts.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Exploring relevant literature about the strategies that SDVOBs used to win federal contracts and improve profitability was essential to address the research question. Yin (2014) recommended that researchers scrutinize their chosen data to ensure that they obtain reliable, relevant, and factual information. Based on Yin's recommendation, I explored the available literature to ascertain the issues that both small businesses and federal agencies have with the procurement process, found a relevant theory to explore the research question, and generated strategic solutions for SDVOBs to win federal contracts.

My process for finding relevant literature on federal procurement included searches in databases such as Elsevier, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. I used keywords in various combinations: *federal procurement, federal contracting, government contracting, minority certification, federal contracting strategies, strategies to win federal contracts, and generic strategies*. In this literature review, I found a total of 188 sources related to the topic. Within the literature review, 87% of the sources are from scholarly or governmental sources within 5 years of my graduation date of June 2018. There is a total of 163 peer-reviewed articles in the literature review section.

The subjects' central to this literature review are the procurement process from both the federal government and contractors' perspectives and common issues that both sides face when engaging and executing contracts. I explored the four areas of Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage cost leadership, differentiation, cost focus,

and differentiation focus, and how leaders of SDVOBs used them to win federal contracts. The first topic covered in this literature review is the history of the SBA and its role in federal procurement. I also addressed internal agency issues, budgets, fraud, contracting officer workload (Warren, 2014), and outsourcing (Gooden, 2017) on different aspects of procurement. Some of the topics included execution of contracts, which is central to public procurement. Primary information on federal contracting came from government websites, library databases, and industry journals. While reviewing the literature, I found that most of the content focused on issues with the procurement process.

Porter's Generic Strategies Framework

Exploring Porter's generic strategies. Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage provided the conceptual framework for this study. Porter's framework includes four areas: cost leadership, differentiation, cost focus, and differentiation focus. The cost leadership strategy is the ability to produce a comparable good or service cheaper than competitors (Majumdar, 2015). With a differentiation strategy, customers perceive a good or service to be different or better than the competition. Owners or managers of a firm seeking a cost advantage in a segment of the market are following Porter's cost focus strategy. A differentiation focus strategy is the isolation of a market segment and highlighting the aspect of a good or service that is different (Porter, 1985). Using one or more of these strategies may or may not be deliberate; market conditions are usually the driver that dictates which strategy is chosen.

In some cases, small business leaders find it necessary to use more than one strategy for marketing their products or services. Miller and Friesen (1986) reviewed Porter's generic strategies, but only focused on cost leadership and differentiation. Miller and Friesen applied generic strategies to the product, ingredient, and manufacturer system (PIMS) database to test if cost leadership and differentiation occurred with any degree of regularity. Miller and Friesen found that leaders of firms with distinctive competencies in the areas of differentiation cost leadership outperformed all the others. Moon, Hur, Yin, and Helm (2014) later expanded Porter's (1985) framework to eight strategies. At the time that Miller and Friesen conducted their review, the strategies that Moon et al. discussed were not available. If the researchers were privy to such information, their findings might have differed because they could now determine what to sell to whom.

Selecting the right strategy can be a challenge; however, once a framework is identified, it can bring clarity to the management process. Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage is an ideal framework to address the research question because owners who are seeking a superior business position use one or a combination of them. Gould and Power (2015) applied Porter's generic strategies to course design and delivery at a university and demonstrated that Porter's generic strategies had a universal application, which administrators had initially thought of as separate issues. Merging the two issues into a single framework helped to identify the common areas that were problematic to find simpler solutions (Gould & Power, 2015). By identifying the target of each course while overlaying Porter's generic strategies, the

researchers were to be able to assign the appropriate delivery method based on the design of the degree programs.

In some instances, an initial assessment of Porter's (1985) framework may not seem applicable to a study; however, minor adjustments like combining more than one strategy can be useful for researchers. Gould and Desjardins (2015) explored the competitive strategy-related consequences of offering user interface complexity for Internet users and asserted that Porter's generic strategies were not adaptable to companies created in the Internet age. However, Gould and Desjardins modified Porter's generic strategies framework for their study. The modified version of Porter's generic strategies worked, which lends credence to the utilitarian nature of the framework. The modifications that Gould and Desjardins made were like the methods that Tansey, Spillane, and Meng (2014) used in their study of construction firms, which are traditionally location-based businesses that are not engaged in electronic commerce. Porter's generic strategies were developed in the 1980s before Internet-based businesses were commonplace. Yet, Internet-based businesses also need strategies to be competitive, so Porter's framework is relevant. Virtual industries have similar needs to their brick and mortar counterparts.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concern for leaders of medium and larger firms. Ibrahim (1993) investigated 220 small firms for profitability using the framework of Porter's generic strategies and found that the strategy type(s) that managers used had a significant impact on their profitability. Ibrahim found that small firms that chose the appropriate strategy based on their size and capabilities had greater profitability

than their counterparts without any discernable approach. A strategy that differentiates a company from the competition is CSR. Panwar, Nybakk, Pinkse, and Hansen (2015) showed how effective generic strategies are at identifying trends for small business leaders. Small business leaders who focused on the competitive advantage they gained by practicing good CSR benefited from using a differentiation strategy (Panwar et al., 2015). Companies could leverage CSR, regardless of what strategies they used, to gain a competitive advantage when adhering to Porter's generic strategies.

Researchers debate the usefulness of some strategy tools competitiveness. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) critiqued strategy tools to determine if they were helpful or potentially dangerous for organizations and compared them to Porter's generic strategies. Porter's generic strategies varied in degrees of effectiveness, so researchers using a sociological approach to examine how strategy makers mobilize strategic tools need to be critical in their assessments (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Using generic strategies to analyze strategy makers is novel as the typical use is to measure outcomes. Benos, Kalogeras, Verhees, Sergaki, and Pennings (2016) demonstrated an example of using generic strategies to measure outcomes when they conducted multiple studies on strategic tools and found different results when examining the food sector in Greece. Benos et al. showed that only two of Porter's generic strategies were applicable. The perspective and priorities of the users served as the basis the strategies which could account for the varied effectiveness. In some instances, the users of the tools may not understand how to implement them.

Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage shares some similarities with systems theory. Researchers use systems theory because it is based on multiple disciplines (Lai & Huili Lin, 2017). Similarly, generic strategies are based on multiple factors that require different disciplines to execute (Porter, 1985). Lai and Huili Lin (2017) examined communication science and public relations in management consulting firms using systems theory to address the small degree of scientific examinations in consulting practices. Even though Lai and Huili Lin could have examined the strategies on their individual merit using Porter's framework, systems theory was the better option to answer the research question. In small firms, business leaders play multiple roles; however, each role has responsibilities and, using either generic strategies or systems theory could reveal how effective the leaders are in each role.

Some theories, models, and frameworks can be substituted for one another depending on the context. In the 3C model, Ohmae (1982) looked at three components the corporation, the customer, and the competition. Ohmae's framework could be a substitute for Porter's (1985) generic strategies. Researchers have revised Ohmae's and Porter's frameworks to make them more robust to suit their studies (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). Due to technological shifts, the context in which theories and frameworks were developed renders them less relevant; however, researchers have the flexibility to make modifications and adjustments when necessary.

The approach to developing a competitive marketing strategy depends on the perspective of leaders of the organization. The combination Porter's competitive framework along with Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) and

Political, Economic, Social, and Technological (PEST) analyses gave Pulaj, Kume, and Cipi (2015) a tool for exploring auditing firms in Brazil to get a holistic view of the market effects on firm performance. Pulaj et al. claimed that Porter's framework was from an outside-in market perspective. The market and the chosen strategy have a unique relationship. The frame of reference for developing a strategy is derived from the goals of management, which determines how and when to implement them (Pulaj et al., 2015). The frame of reference is also important because some researchers view entrepreneurship and competition as indistinguishable parts of a whole (Dhliwayo, 2014). Position in a market is a driver of strategy, and the resources determine how leaders view their chances of success when deciding on the implementation of the strategy.

In an environment that is changing, leaders find it necessary to use a competitive strategy that is aligned with the current market. Mathooko and Ogutu (2015) conducted a study to determine which of Porter's generic strategies were adopted to deal with the changing educational environment in public universities in Kenya. Mathooko and Ogutu considered forces such as stakeholders, changes in government policies, regulations, and reforms in higher education. By using Porter's framework, Mathooko and Ogutu determined that generic strategies influenced the choice of response adopted by the public universities. Pulaj et al. (2015) focused on the views of managers and the use of resources as the deciding factor when choosing a strategy. Time is a factor in the relevance of theories and frameworks, and researchers need to be cognizant of the period the theory was developed when choosing them to justify the results of their studies.

Small business leaders can use a combination or hybrid of Porter's generic strategies. Olson, Duray, Cooper, and Olson (2016) wanted to know what strategies, if any, were common among organization's leadership and found that football club managers tended to employ a hybrid of competitive strategies. Another industry where it may be difficult to determine if a strategy is used is education. Canziani, Welsh, and Tullar (2015) found that educators needed to develop a curriculum to better prepare students to be competitive when they graduated. In both studies, the competitive strategies were difficult to identify due to the nature of the businesses; however, by using Porter's generic strategies, the researchers could identify a single or a combination of strategies. In these cases, finding the underlying strategy enabled the researchers to assess if the application was correct and to generate alternative solutions to organization leadership.

The economic recession of 2008 affected the entire globe, and the external threats that impacted small businesses came from multiple areas. Delmas and Pekovic (2015) revealed that only 10% of managers changed strategy and 46% changed their strategy in a growing market as opposed to 9.87% in a down market. Being responsive to market conditions is a part of doing business. In their study on choosing the right strategy based on market conditions, Lee, Lim, and Tan (2015) demonstrated that strategic decisions affected the survival rate of companies. Both large- and small-scale forces can have a significant impact on a company's survival, and companies should use generic strategies to mitigate the adverse impact of external forces.

Some competitive strategies are more appropriate for some industries than others. In the examination of Porter's strategic positioning model and the resource-based view of strategy in different types of public organizations, the strategies were not appropriate because the settings were traditional (Rosenberg-Hansen & Ferlie, 2016). A part of Porter's strategic positioning model came from generic strategies, and it includes a way for managers to identify their model. The models are more appropriate for autonomous and market-like service delivery organizations (Rosenberg-Hansen & Ferlie, 2016). Rosenberg-Hansen and Ferlie, Delmas and Pekovic (2015) and Martynov (2015) found it necessary to choose a strategy that was aligned with the problem and industry. The alignment of the strategy to the industry enabled the researchers to conclude that resource efficiency should be more attractive in a down economy.

Internal strategies that increase competitiveness, such as accounting and the allocation of resources, still adhere to generic strategies for competitive advantage. Traditional management accounting does not change correspondingly to the shifting competitive and manufacturing environment (Lay & Jusoh, 2016). Lay and Jusoh (2016) discovered that leaders who adapted their management accounting for differentiation or a cost leadership strategy had a significant impact on performance. Kaufman (2015) examined Porter's generic strategies in contrast to resource-based view theory for human resource management (HRM). Although Lay and Jusoh concentrated on accounting and Kaufman focused on resource allocation, both strategies are a part of Porter's generic strategies. Increasing competitiveness by improving internal processes like accounting

and resource allocation is strategic and the reason that Porter's generic strategies were a good fit for the studies.

Some theories and frameworks designed for competitiveness do not adequately address a specific problem, and researchers should make the appropriate adjustments to fit their needs. In Pulaj et al.'s (2015) study, Porter's framework was not sufficient to address their research question; however, combining it with other theories helped them to get a suitable result. Treiloff and Buys combined Porter's generic strategies between 1980 and 1990 with a PEST analysis to conduct their study. Benos et al. (2016) used Porter's 1980 framework with factor analysis, one-way ANOVA, and multiple linear regression for their study. In both studies, the Benos et al. and Treiloff and Buys adjusted by combining generic strategies with other tools. The adjustments were necessary to analyze the data and reach a valid conclusion.

Researchers can use Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage in any methodology. In a quantitative examination of the relationship between business strategy and socially responsible supply chain management, business strategies significantly influenced socially responsible supply chain management (Yawar, & Seuring, 2017). Two of the strategies that Yawar and Seuring (2017) used in their study came from Porter's competitive advantage of the nation's framework (Porter, 1990). Wicker et al. (2015) also used a quantitative methodology for their study on European football clubs. Researchers can apply Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage to all three methodologies.

Researchers of any discipline can incorporate Porter's generic strategies. In an examination of the role of performance measurement in firms, competitive strategies positively and significantly enhanced performance when leaders used metrics to gauge effectiveness (Saunila, Pekkola, & Ukko, 2014). There are multiple ways to measure the effectiveness of competitive strategies, such as social impact and return on investment, depending on the requirements of the stakeholders (Roper & Hodari, 2015). Researchers used Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage in both quantitative and qualitative studies, which demonstrates the suitability of this theory for any methodology.

When choosing an appropriate strategy, a researcher should start with the leaders of an organization. The goals of leaders determine what strategy or combination they use (Pulaj et al., 2015). Brenes, Montoya, and Ciravegna (2014) used Porter's generic strategies to examine the factors that distinguished leaders who used a differentiation strategy and how they commanded higher than average prices. Brenes et al. found that innovation capabilities, marketing skills, and business scope were the three key dimensions that set apart an agribusiness firm that competed using a differentiation strategy (Vera, 2016). The leaders of the organization can choose the appropriate strategy and implement it based on their objectives.

Even though Porter's generic strategies has four core tenets, researchers often isolate and use each one individually. A differentiation strategy appeals more to some customers because it aligns with their base beliefs (Miller & Friesen, 1986). Brenes et al. (2014) demonstrated that researchers use each of Porter's generic strategies depending on their needs. Brenes et al. demonstrated how new businesses developed strategies.

Focusing on a single strategy is common among emerging agribusinesses from an outsider's market perspective (Pulaj et al., 2015). The isolation approach or single strategy can prove more relevant than using them all at once.

Due to the dynamic business environment, even the originators of theories and frameworks find it necessary to update or make changes to them after they have been widely adopted. Moon et al. (2014) stated that researchers and practitioners use Porter's generic strategies in the field of strategic management; however, many were critical when Porter expanded the generic strategies from three to eight. Moon et al. also introduced two new concepts they created called capturing the core and broadening without diluting. These new concepts were used to reconcile the pure or hybrid strategy debate. Majumdar (2015) found issues with Porter's cost leadership model and suggested that there could be improvement since the framework was originally developed. Porter changed the framework from three to eight, which is an example of updating after wide adoption. The context in which the theories and frameworks were developed changed, making them less relevant for researchers who apply them.

In some hyper-competitive industries, Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage has proven useful for business leaders seeking a competitive advantage. Benos et al. (2016) applied Porter's generic strategies to the food sector in Greece to examine differences in generic strategies and performance among food organizations and found that all the companies employed at least one of the four generic strategies. Benos et al. also found that food cooperatives could maintain a competitive advantage by remaining conservative with a preference for low costs. Benos et al. (2016) demonstrated

how useful Porter's generic strategies were in addressing the underlying problems that they identified in their studies. Because Porter's generic strategies are geared towards improving competitiveness, business leaders who adopt them excel in their markets.

If a researcher is attempting to identify a strategy, then Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage is a good starting point. Tansey et al. (2014) linked the response strategies adopted by construction firms during the 2007-2009 economic recession to Porter's generic strategies. The purpose of their case study was to find out what strategies construction companies adopted in response to the economic downturn. Tansey et al. found that construction companies adopted a cost leadership strategy. Tansey et al. used Porter's generic strategies not only because the framework was well known but also because it was the right fit for their study. Researchers studying strategy are not limited to Porter's framework, but it does have many applications for examination of competitiveness (Moon et al., 2014). Combining Porter's generic strategies with other frameworks is an option if the researcher desires to identify and generate strategic options.

The business landscape is competitive; to remain in operation, companies need to develop a distinct advantage. Foss and Saebi (2017) examined how companies used Porter's generic strategies to sustain long-term competitive advantage in their industries, and they demonstrated the successful implementation of business model innovation and the contributing elements. Foss and Saebi illustrated three value chain innovations and how a company could create value for the customer and increase profitability. Business leaders captured value by using Porter's differentiation strategy and incorporating other

advantages. Kharub and Sharma (2017) also examined innovative strategies as well as market drivers and found that organization members should consider technological drivers as competition because it enables them to outperform their rivals. Porter's generic strategies are a good framework to use if leaders are attempting to develop a strategic advantage.

Some researchers question the validity of Porter's generic strategies. Lee et al. (2015) examined the validity of Porter's generic strategies and their applicability to small businesses. Lee et al. claimed that companies that have 500 or fewer employees are not resource-challenged. The strategic implementation of resources on the part of smaller firms enables them to compete with larger resource rich companies (Lay & Jusoh, 2016). Smaller firms with just a few employees are resource-challenged; therefore, the strategies that they can employ are limited.

The speed that leaders of small businesses can react appropriately to changes in the market or adverse competition determines their longevity. Lee et al. (2015) identified competitive reaction as a limitation for small firm in niche markets. Large firms with an abundance of resources, including capital, can take on niche markets even if they fail to capture a large segment adequately. SMEs that operate in niche markets must allocate their limited resources in reaction to large firms impeding into their space; they often adopt strategies without knowing the full consequences of their actions (Lee et al., 2015). Lee et al. explained that small firms that are resource-challenged have difficulties implementing generic strategies. The resources at their disposal have a direct impact on the type of strategy that is chosen (Fox & Morris, 2015). Responding to changing market

conditions is sound business practice, and Porter's generic strategies can help leaders to make the necessary adjustments to compete in the new markets.

A recurring theme throughout the literature on Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage was the circumstances under which small business leaders choose and implement the strategy or strategies. Parnell, Long, and Lester (2015) explored organizational strategic capabilities and made correlations to the environment in which leaders implemented them. Resource-based and generic strategies can complement each other, and all the strategies have complementary applications depending on the environment. Brenes et al. (2014), on the other hand, examined differentiation strategies in emerging markets where the environment is constantly changing and found that the business owners' approach varied, which was consistent with Parnell et al.'s findings. It is still unclear whether the environment or leadership is the driver of strategy for competitiveness.

Researchers in Eastern countries embrace Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. Ling and Li (2016) discovered that both native and foreign firms adopted a differentiation strategy. Cost leadership and differentiation had a significant correlation, which was evident in supply chain management (Ling & Li, 2016). Unlike Foss and Saebi's (2017) study on business model innovation, the companies that Ling and Li examined adopted a differentiation strategy because it was the norm. As the business environment changes, the same companies may adopt a different strategy in response to the new market conditions.

At a global level, the business environment differs in each country, and companies adopt Porter's generic strategies accordingly. Franco and Lucas (2016) developed a taxonomy of small- and medium-sized family firms that internationalized based on Porter's generic strategies and found four groups of firms: domestic-focused traditionalists, global standardizers, multinational adapters, and transnational entrepreneurs. Franco and Lucas also found that the configurations were distinctive per their structure, orientations, and performance, but differed less in their strategies. Franco and Lucas suggested that a decentralized, entrepreneurial approach drove superior international (i.e., nondomestic) performance. Pulaj et al. (2015) also focused on family-run firms and how they implemented Porter's generic strategies. However, Pulaj et al. used a SWOT analysis to find out which firms had a superior advantage. Researchers in different countries adopt generic strategies because of the universal applications.

Based on the size, industry, environment, and resources of a firm, one or more generic strategies is not enough to gain an advantage. Köseoglu, Parnell, and Doyle (2015) examined the benefits of a differentiation strategy and customer-value focus for competitors of hotel properties and found that relationship management and organizational resource management were key drivers of sales growth. Therefore, managers should adopt a differentiation strategy instead of resorting to price cutting and other pricing and promotional tactics for growth. The difference between Köseoglu et al.'s study and Pulaj et al.'s (2015) study was that the latter focused on emerging markets, which have other challenges. Combining generic strategies with customer-value focus proved advantageous for business leaders in the hotel industry.

Challenging Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. Many researchers find deficiencies in Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. Seelhofer (2016) generated a conceptual process for business schools to adopt so that they could control the development of new strategies. Seelhofer described how to conduct a consistent situation analysis so that administrators could manage at all levels (normative, strategic, tactical, and operational). By using Porter's generic strategies to assess the approaches, Seelhofer revealed that researchers were limited in how they could apply Porter's generic strategies and suggested other strategies that the administrators could use. Tatoglu, Bayraktar, Sahadev, Demirbag, and Glaister (2014) examined voluntary environmental management practices (VEMP) of multinational enterprises in developing countries in the context of resource-based views and Porter's generic strategies and found that stakeholder pressures, perceived polluting potential, customer focus, and competitive intensity positively influenced VEMP. Tatoglu et al. did not find Porter's generic strategies relevant towards the internal factors that led to decisions to adopt positive VEMPs. Even though Seelhofer and Tatoglu et al. focused on different sectors, the researchers in both studies found limitations with generic strategies. In some instances, generic strategies do not have the focused scope that the researchers need, which causes them to either add other frameworks or choose a different approach.

Some researchers have preferences for other theories and frameworks than generic strategies for competitive advantage. Kitchen and Burgmann (2015) reviewed the emergence, growth, and status of integrated marketing communications (IMC) to derive ways that managers could move their organizations forward. Kitchen and

Burgmann found that although there were some inherent issues with the diffusion of IMC, it was a better option for managers than generic strategies. Lai and Huili Lin (2017) also used generic strategies for competitive advantage noting the limitations to examine communications but focused more on the value to contractors who were different from Kitchen and Burgmann. Due to the limitations of generic strategies, the researchers changed their approach when conducting their studies.

Supply chain management is challenging for any organization, due to the volatile nature of the business environment and shifting markets. Roloff, Aßländer, and Zamantili Nayir (2015) identified three commonly observed mistakes that managers made when managing suppliers and discovered factors that contributed to successful supply chain partnerships. Roloff et al. found that generic strategies for competitive advantage were not relevant to providing insights into how buyers and suppliers could foster better relationships. Yawar and Seuring (2017) examined CSR and found that strategy significantly influenced firm's participation in environmental responsibility. Generic strategies for competitive advantage are either not sufficient or limited in their ability to give the researchers a tool for conducting their studies.

When business leaders rely on a strategic tool, they trust that it will serve their needs. To understand the challenges a producer faces when attempting to ascend into the highest supplier league, Lindner and Senn (2015) examined 300 companies over the period of 6 years using Porter's generic strategies and discovered that leaders of companies who implemented a global account management program and did not use a cost focus strategy had a positive impact and protection in an economic downturn.

Lindner and Senn's study was an example of Delmas and Pekovic's (2015) resource efficiency. Generic strategies were not the robust tool that the researchers needed, and they had to find alternative means to conduct their studies.

The popularity of generic strategies for competitive advantage makes them a target for researchers who support and oppose them. Ismail (2016) examined the relationship between 24 personal values and strategic preferences of 137 participants in the context of Porter's generic strategies and found that personal values had an impact on the strategies that managers chose. Vera (2016) also used generic strategies to find out what values elicited customer loyalty. Leaders who need to know what internal or external factors are needed to improve market performance can use generic strategies either as a stand-alone or in conjunction with other strategies.

There are comparable theories and frameworks that can substitute or replace generic strategies for competitive advantage. Agnihotri (2015) compared Blue Ocean strategy (market creation) to generic strategies to determine which was better for profitability. Agnihotri asserted that practitioners could implement Blue Ocean in a variety of ways based on the need of the leaders and that generic strategies are not entirely different from Blue Ocean. Furthermore, Blue Ocean is better for profitability because of the new market created and the room for expansion. Blue Ocean is different from Porter's generic strategies in a few ways, mainly the lens from which the researcher developed them (Majumdar, 2015). Blue Ocean is a substitute for generic strategies, but it should be implemented based on the needs of small business leaders.

Researchers use generic strategies to explore areas beyond marketing. Martin (2014) stated that almost all business owners agreed that winning and keeping the trust of customers, investors, employees, and other stakeholders are critical to business success. Martin found that the model of trust is useful for analyzing a brand, company, or individual's present trust position to develop generic strategies. Martin's study is complementary to Ismail's (2016) examination of personal values. By working backward, Martin developed a set of generic strategies, which were different from Porter's generic strategies. Some of the differences were the rational and emotional investment that stakeholders had in a brand. The new strategies give researchers added dimensions and a more focused lens to conduct their studies.

There are multiple uses for generic strategies, and researchers have used them to examine leadership. Salicru and Chelliah (2014) examined the leadership psychological contract (LPC) in the socioeconomic environment of uncertainty to develop strategies for small business leaders. Leaders can develop strategies to be more effective in their roles using LPCs (Salicru & Chelliah, 2014). LPC is in line with personal values (Ismail, 2016) and winning trust (Martin, 2014). Ismail first examined LPC, then developed strategies; this is consistent with other researcher's use of generic strategies. The nature of the contracts that leaders develop with subordinates depends on the intended outcome, which is also the underpinning of generic strategies. Small business leaders can use generic strategies to determine what path to take in crafting an LPC with their employees.

Innovation happens in many ways, and the disruption that it causes requires leaders to have a strategy to compete. Like Foss and Saebi (2017) and Kharub and

Sharma (2017) examined market and technology strategies that drive innovation efforts and found Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage insufficient for their studies and proposed using other frameworks such as strategic positioning. Even though generic strategies do not directly address technology, overall competitiveness in a market still requires tactics that Porter's framework addresses.

In general, Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage are used by researchers to develop marketing strategies. Treacy, Spillane, and Tansey (2016) attempted to identify the critical factors that caused construction disputes in SMEs during the recession period from 2007 to 2009 and to develop strategies to combat future occurrences. Treacy et al. found seven factors that led to construction disputes: payments, work conditions, poor accounting/HR practices, changes to the scope of works, project overruns, defects, and requests to speed up projects. Treacy et al. concluded that it was essential to identify and document the factors of construction disputes and that generic strategies were not relevant. However, adhering to federal standards often causes disputes for contractors when dealing with agencies and subcontractors (Rueda-Benavides, & Gransberg, 2014). Generic strategies for competitive advantage can be used to address internal and intercompany issues; however, there are other theories or frameworks that could be substituted for generic strategies.

Applying generic strategies to new ventures can be challenging. Larrañeta, Zahra, and Galán González (2014) examined new ventures that were 8 years or younger and the choice of their leaders to achieve growth and found that new ventures gained success from pursuing strategic variety in highly dynamic industries. Although new ventures

gained from the strategic variety independently owned ventures achieved higher growth rates using the same strategy (Larrañeta et al., 2014). Achieving growth is the key to survival, and the strategy that is used towards that end is critical; that is why the relevancy or alignment with the goals of leadership is paramount (Parnell et al., 2015). In both studies, the researchers considered Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage but decided against using it. Strategies like Blue Ocean are better suited for new ventures, and generic strategies are more appropriate for established businesses.

Value creation is one of the most important functions of leadership. Like Berardo, Heikkila, and Gerlak (2014), Anker, Sparks, Moutinho, and Grönroos (2015) explored collaborative management. Anker et al.'s study was rooted in three generic offerings (configuration, solution, and network) to develop strategies for managers. Anker et al. found that managers who engaged in collaborative management had different motivations. Anker et al. also found that collaborators could deliver services that were beyond their capabilities. Because management and innovation are the primary roles of leadership, leaders can use generic strategies to help them gain insights on capitalizing in their chosen markets.

In higher education institutions, entrepreneurship is not applied internally. Dhliwayo (2014) examined how the business strategy could integrate with entrepreneurship to enhance higher education institution competitiveness and stated that typically practitioners in the fields of strategic management and entrepreneurship viewed them as separate entities. Dhliwayo presented a conceptual framework for integrating both fields in which managers could develop new strategies for emerging business trends.

However, Franco and Lucas (2016) suggested that decentralized, entrepreneurial approach drove superior international performance. In both studies, the researchers considered Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage but opted for other theories or frameworks. Although higher education institutions teach entrepreneurship, they do not practice it, which is unconventional.

Inconsistencies in Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. The debate over the inconsistency of generic strategies for competitive advantage includes single and hybrid strategies. Manev, Manolova, Harkins, and Gyoshev (2015) found evidence of performance flaws in hybrid strategies but not in single strategies. Manev et al. developed a hypothesis to test the inconsistency of hybrid generic strategies using profit as a metric. Like Hansen, Nybakk, and Panwar (2015), Manev et al. examined the impact on profitability. Manev et al. also discovered other inconsistencies with hybrid strategies, such as mass customization and multilocal strategies. The inconsistencies in Porter's generic strategies presented some challenges in determining their value to researchers.

Researchers classify generic strategies into two categories: single and hybrid. Hansen et al. (2015) explored Porter's generic strategies in the context of companies using singular versus hybrid strategies and found no clear advantage to either approach in the financial performance of 441 enterprises using either a singular or hybrid approaches. Hansen et al. did not identify whether the firms were pre- or post-Internet age as defined by Gould and Desjardins (2015). Salavou (2015) identified 15 studies that contained used manual and electronic methods since 2000 for competitive strategies and compared

them with firm performance and found that hybrid approaches were the most attractive choice for companies. Like Manev et al. (2015) and Hansen et al., Salavou's exploration of hybrid strategies proved versatile and furthered the area of research. Researchers focus on hybrid strategies because of the complex and multidimensional nature. However, researchers are challenged with capturing the realities of the business climate to which they are applied.

Researchers debate whether single or hybrid strategies are better. Manev et al. (2015) explored singular versus hybrid strategies using Porter's framework by investigating new firms in a transition economy. Manev et al. determined that although the singular strategy proved profitable, companies that used a hybrid model had superior performance when using cost leadership and differentiation strategies. In Hansen et al.'s (2015) exploration of hybrid strategies, the researchers found that buyers were inconsistent in their decisions to purchase based on their initial inclinations, which contributed to the strategies that company leadership chose. The inconsistencies of Porter's generic strategies complicate the debates that support or oppose them, which makes it more difficult to determine if single or hybrid strategies are better.

Even though Porter's generic strategies have been proven to be inconsistent, researchers still use them in their studies. Dwyer and Kotey (2015) explored key markers of high growth firms using Porter's generic strategies and found that personality, characteristics, and postgraduate education in management are not effective metrics. Porter's generic strategies had inconsistencies; however, they were sufficient to answer the research question (Dwyer & Kotey, 2015). Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2015) used

generic strategies in both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore cross-sector collaborations and found that there were many areas that needed improvement. Even though Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage had inconsistencies, it was sufficient for the researchers in both studies.

Small business leaders sometimes use a focus strategy to improve performance in a market. Hansen (2015) explored the inconsistencies of Porter's focus strategy. Business leaders use a focus strategy because they have a small market share. Leaders who used a focus strategy had limitations in resources or operated in an industry in which they did not have a dominant product (Hansen, 2015). Although it may be prudent to use a focus strategy, the market orientation is the determinant of whether it is appropriate (Köseoglu et al., 2015). Due to the limitations identified by Hansen and Köseoglu et al., small business leaders have had mixed results using the strategy. The inconsistencies of generic strategies have proved problematic for business leaders who implement them without doing an investigation for suitability.

Even with the inconsistencies of Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage, researchers still find them useful. Moatti, Ren, Anand, and Dussauge (2015) applied generic strategies to mergers and acquisitions (M&A) based on firm size and bargaining power with their suppliers, customers, and their operating efficiency. Moatti et al. concluded that the choice between M&A and organic growth involved a trade-off between increasing bargaining power and improving operating efficiency. Christensen, Dhaliwal, Boivie, and Graffin (2015) also explored bargaining; however, the researchers focused on how small firms reduced tax liabilities. In both studies, the researchers found

that due to the inconsistencies in generic strategies for competitive advantage, they were marginally acceptable. The inconsistencies in Porter's generic strategies were not significant enough for the researchers to change their approach to their study.

When researchers attempt to combine different components of generic strategies (hybrid), they find that there are inconsistencies in their hybrid form. Roper and Hodari (2015) explored the use of generic strategies in the tourism and hotel management industry and found that practitioners did not find generic strategies useful. Therefore, Roper and Hodari rejected them. Unlike Roper and Hodari, Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) examined the contextual factors that impacted generic strategies and how leaders used them. In both studies, the researchers found that due to the inconsistencies of generic strategies their results were inconclusive, but they could complete their studies.

Business leaders use Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage for addressing internal company issues. Souza, Guerreiro, and Oliveira (2015) conducted a study on information management in governmental agencies using generic strategies. Souza et al. and the General Services Administration (U.S. GSA, 2016a) agreed that there were multiple challenges that administrators in the federal government had, and adequately preparing for the future and accountability are primary concerns (Souza et al., 2015; U.S. GSA, 2017). The researchers could have used other theories or frameworks for their studies; however, they chose to use generic strategies even though there are noted inconsistencies because they thought it was appropriate for their subject.

Industry Literature

History of the SBA and federal contracting with SDVOBs. To understand the depth and breadth of federal contracting, it is necessary to examine how it came into being. During World War II, large industries increased production and contracting with the federal government to support wartime efforts, which left small business unable to compete (U.S. SBA, 2016a). In response to this lack of competitiveness for small business in federal contracting, Congress created the Smaller War Plants Corporation in 1942 but later dissolved it after the war concluded. Congress created other organizations to assist small business to be competitive in federal contracting such as Small Business Investment Companies. In 1953, Congress created the SBA to assist small businesses (U.S. SBA, 2016c).

The creation of the SBA brought to light other challenges because minorities still had difficulties competing for federal contracts. In 1964, administrators at the SBA focused on poverty through the Equal Opportunity Loan (EOL) Program (U.S. SBA, 2016c). The requirements of the EOL Program eased the credit and collateral requirements for applicants living below the poverty level to encourage new businesses that had been unable to attract financial backing (U.S. SBA, 2016c). Under the Small Business Act, PL 112-239 in the CFR, eligible participants for the 8(a) program were Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, and Subcontinent Asian Americans (U.S. SBA, 2016e). To prove to the Small Business Administration that they had a social disadvantage, minority owners needed to show that personal experiences impacted their ability to advance or grow their business (U.S. SBA,

2016e). A background check is necessary for each owner that participates in the 8(a) program, and it is done by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; U.S. SBA, 2016e).

At the federal level, there have been attempts to assist veteran business owners. Congress passed the veteran entrepreneurship and small business development act of 1999, PL 106-50 that required agencies to award 3% of contracts to SDVOBs (U.S. SBA, 2016c). The passing of PL 106-50 was the first time that SDVOBs participated in federal contracting. The introduction to federal contracting was facilitated by the 8(a) program under the SBA (U.S. SBA, 2016a).

The challenges that small business owners face in federal contracting is well documented. In 2010, administrators at federal agencies were aware of the challenges that small business owners had (U.S. SBA, 2016d). Minority business owners faced even greater challenges in federal contracting, which led to the creation of the 8(a)-Minority Business Development Program. The program derived its name from section 8(a) of the Small Business Act and gave the SBA authority to assist leaders of small companies that are owned and operated that are socially and economically disadvantaged (U.S. SBA, 2016c). Participants in the program benefit from gaining access to set-aside contracts that they otherwise would not have access.

The rules that govern federal contracting are in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). The CFR is the codification of the general and permanent rules published in the Federal Register by the departments and agencies of the Federal Government (CFR, 2016). The U.S. SBA (2016a) handles the administration and verification of 8(a) certifications; business owners who meet the requirements of the program may self-

certify that they are indeed disadvantaged to participate. Specially designated personnel in the SBA deal with certified firms. Even though federal contracting is interconnected and covers a wide array of processes, for this study, I limit the topics to doing business with the agencies in this literature review.

Outsourcing at the federal level. The government does not produce goods or certain services; therefore, procurement is necessary. Outsourcing services reduce the burden of training and costs associated with maintaining entire departments (Sako, 2014). Lai and Huili Lin (2017) explored the benefit that contractors brought to the procurement process. Lai and Huili Lin focused on the outsourcing of public relations and noted that even though the roles of contractors increased, the government does not understand the value that they add. Outsourcing is practical for many reasons but most of all it is cost effective (Sako, 2014). The decision to outsource is not solely based on price.

In 2013, the House of Representatives (U.S. HoR) (2016) examined strategic outsourcing. Strategic outsourcing by the federal government saves money and provides greater efficiency (U.S. GAO, 2015a). The House of Representatives wanted to address previous reports that found decentralized procurement in the federal government and that contracting officers were not fully leveraging their buying power. Furthermore, the federal government managed less than .05% of the \$500 billion spent on contracts annually, the Leadership Council agencies, a cohort of federal agencies responsible for Federal Strategic Sourcing Initiative (FSSI) governance (U.S. GAO, 2016b). The lack of direct involvement by the agencies speaks to the nature of the outsourcing decision.

There are factors besides money that influence agency administrators to outsource certain functions. Anguelov (2016) examined the factors that affect state agency administrators considered when making outsourcing decisions. Anguelov stated that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) created an overload for the state agencies that required them to outsource to keep pace. The workload surge due to ARRA increased the probability that an agency outsourced oversight by roughly 5 to 10% (Anguelov, 2016). It is common practice for agencies to outsource because it is practical, and if managed appropriately, saves taxpayers money (Sako, 2014). Anguelov found that outsourcing would not only help resolve workload issues but also diversity (Anguelov, 2016). Agency employees were outsourced because they could not manage the workload, which was a strategic decision.

To reduce costs, the VA (U.S. VA) leverages community resources in novel ways. VA administrators initiated many collaborative activities with outreach organizations to meet internal contracting goals (U.S. GAO, 2008; Hayward, 2016). In areas impacted by the economic recession, communities embraced the efforts of the VA because of the job creation that happened due to outsourcing (Gooden, 2017). The efforts of administrators at the VA was another example of how the federal government administrators were changing their procurement approach and implementing responsible spending.

Some services that are not governmental are better off outsourced. Sako (2014) and Kharub and Sharma (2017) reviewed technology strategy and management outsourcing by government agencies and focused on outsourcing of information technology (IT), defense, security, detention and prison services, healthcare, transport,

and shared service. Sako noted that global public-sector outsourcing totaled \$10.3 billion for IT and business processes compared to \$6.4 billion in the private sector. Outsourcing these services is an example of the government leveraging buying power.

Outsourcing is a strategy that improves efficiencies and is cost effective.

Researchers have examined the motivational factors that lead governments to outsource. Sako revealed that the United States, Great Britain, and Australia were the top three outsourcers in 2013. If this trend continues, legal and professional problems with outsourcing may continue, requiring new strategies to address them (Lai & Huili Lin, 2017; Sako, 2014). The problems of outsourcing are not felt until much further into the execution phase.

The decision to outsource is not simple. Like Sako (2014), Hefetz, Warner, and Vigoda-Gadot (2014) examined outsourcing in government agencies. Hefetz et al. studied how public administration scholars used transaction cost theory to explain the dichotomy between making or buying products and found that price was a factor in outsourcing decisions. It is important for contractors to understand this transaction cost theory because the generic strategy they choose directly correlates with the product or service they offer government agencies.

Effective communication is essential for every organization. Based on the transaction costs theory developed by Williamson in 1985, outsourcing by governments is pragmatic (Lai & Huili Lin, 2017). Managers and administrators find it essential to communicate effectively with the public, especially in government agencies, so outsourcing public relations is pragmatic. Lai and Huili Lin (2017) determined that

public relations agencies added value which the agencies could not. The value of specializing in certain areas is attractive to procurement officers.

Fraud and budgetary control in federal contracting. Fraud is prevalent everywhere; however, it is more damaging in the public space. Fraud is a concern for administrators of the 8(a) program because it undermines public confidence in the benefits of SBA programs, which support economic opportunity, small business growth, and job creation (U.S. SBA, 2016f). Loader and White (2015) explored the ethical aspects of prosecuting private security providers that commit fraud. Loader and White concluded that the biggest obstacle faced when prosecuting employees of private security providers for criminal actions was immunity. In response to the limited ability to prosecute, the Department of Justice expanded the responsibilities of the Special Maritime and Territorial Jurisdiction (U.S. SBA, 2016e). Although security clearance is mandatory for contractors who do business with the DoD, other agencies do not require a security clearance.

Public officials have made efforts to address the issue of fraud in federal contracting. In 2011, members of the House of Representatives attempted to learn how fraud affected legitimate small businesses in federal contracting (U.S. GAO, 2013a). The members sought solutions to deter fraud in the procurement process. Due to the prevalence of fraud, contracting officers are reluctant to use small businesses (U.S. GAO, 2013b). The U.S. GAO (2013b) pointed to a lack of oversight that allows fraud to go unchecked. Investigators at the U.S. GAO (2016) highlighted the importance of audits in federal procurement, which reduces the risk of fraud. The contracting cycle includes pre-

award, award, contract administration, and contract closeout. These stages have methods of control to prevent erroneous spending, invoice review, and incurred cost auditing (U.S. GAO, 2008). These measures have reduced the occurrence of fraud in federal contracting.

Tools that federal agencies have at their disposal for dealing with contractors that defraud the government or who have not fulfilled their contractual obligations are suspension, debarment, or both. Some agencies use suspension and debarment more effectively than others (U.S. GAO, 2016). Representatives in Congress attempted to uncover why some agencies were more efficient at identifying companies that tried to defraud the government than others (U.S. GAO, 2016). Representative Lankford of Oklahoma acknowledged that doing business with the federal government had challenges, such as paperwork and frustrations with the bureaucracy (U.S. GAO, 2008). Even though some contractors have been suspended or debarred, most fulfill their contractual obligations without any issues.

The federal government purchases vast amounts of goods and services from the private sector. The wide array of goods and services that the federal government purchases from small businesses place a strain on the system that oversees the process (U.S. GAO, 2013a). Investigators at the U.S. GAO (2013b) identified contract management weaknesses, such as challenges with control over contract payments and internal deficiencies throughout the contracting process. The GAO cited audit quality problems with the Defense Contract Auditing Agency offices nationwide. The U.S. GAO (2013b) also noted that auditors did not have autonomy, sufficient auditing skills,

or adequate supervision. The regulations that auditors are required to comply with makes it difficult for them to do their jobs sufficiently.

The federal government has many checks and balances in place to ensure that the needs of the public are being served. The U.S. GAO audits all federal agencies and reports their findings to Congress. In 2011, the U.S. GAO (2013b) explored defense contracting policies and tools that helped increase competition in the DOD's national security exception procurements to find ways to increase small business participation. The U.S. GAO (2013b) reported that the DOD is exempt from reporting procurement data for national security reasons, which presented a challenge for the auditors. The DOD has the largest budget of any federal agency, and many of its purchases fall under the exemption, so the U.S. GAO (2013a) cannot audit expenditures accurately. New rules will have to be enacted to address the challenges of auditing the DOD.

Public officials and administrators at the federal agencies try to find solutions to the problems with the procurement process. In 2011, the U.S. GAO (2015b) explored solutions that administrators at the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) took to address procurement deficiencies. The FBI addressed 21 of the 22 suggestions made for improving contracting. Implementing the recommendations led to significant improvements to contract administration, invoice processing, property accountability, and establishing or revising policies. Previously the U.S. GAO (2008) reported that a recurring issue was that agencies did not communicate or share information. The improvements experienced by the FBI had the potential for adoption by other agencies

(U.S. GAO, 2015b). If communications among the agencies improve, administrators may be able to reduce redundancies while streamlining the procurement process.

Federal agency administrators can improve internal processes through effective communication with local agencies. Berardo et al. (2014) examined collaboration between 14 federal, tribal, state, and local agencies. Interagency communication caused gaps in oversight and proliferated violations (Environment Protection Agency [U.S. EPA], 2016). Empowering small businesses to participate in environmental efforts could lead to a significant impact on the perception of the role of small businesses on climate issues.

Issues with conflicts of interests. Contractors who certify sometimes lose their privilege to participate in public contracting due to conflicts of interests. Internal issues, such as conflict of interest violations, can cause leaders to lose their contractor privileges (U.S. SBA, 2016e). The U.S. GPO (2014) noted that contractors were competing for less money while the federal government was increasing oversight, which meant that perceived or real conflicts of interest became a primary area of focus as a filtering mechanism. Conflicts of interest commonly occur in executive compensation, internal controls, business systems, purchasing, and document retention, which increases the chance of losing contractor privileges (U.S. GPO, 2014). Conflict of interest violations makes the public contracting process more complicated.

Conflicts of interest pose a challenge for administrators at federal agencies. The U.S. GPO (2014) acknowledged that conflict of interest violations could be embarrassing and costly; however, in federal contracting, such a violation can mean disaster for a

company. Federal suspension and debarment rules require that contractors disclose violations of federal criminal law to the agency they are doing business with (FAR, 2016). To avoid such pitfalls, contractors turn to online compliance systems (U.S. GPO, 2014). Even with the best of intentions and tools at business leader's disposal, there are still many ways that they can cross the line with conflicts of interests.

The issue of transparency in federal contracting. Minority and disadvantaged business owners who are new to public contracting may be confused by the role of contracting officers. Muñoz (2014) posited that even though contracting officers are central to every award decision, their role and authority are misunderstood, and the vast array of people, titles, responsibilities, and overlap in procurement functions confuses someone new to federal contracting. Contracting officers rarely interact with the public, and internal conditions justify the need for them to play multiple roles, which adds to the confusion (Muñoz, 2014). On the surface, it might seem obvious that a contracting officer has the authority to bind the government with contracts and modifications, but this is a gross misunderstanding of their role (Manuel & Maskell, 2013). Contracting officers can execute a contract, but they do not decide when funding is obligated (Muñoz, 2014). Muñoz stated that agencies use the term contracting officer ubiquitously, but it does not always have the same meaning or responsibilities. Also, they do not decide when or how much to modify or alter contract requirements.

There are common issues across the public contracting space that small business owners face. Industry professionals explained issues that small firms faced when doing business with the federal government (U.S. Government Printing Office [U.S. GPO],

2014). There was a general unawareness of the internal processes in the agencies and how to mitigate setbacks due to the lack of transparency (von den Eichen, Freiling, & Matzler, 2015). Small firms that did business with the federal government for the first time were encouraged to partner with a seasoned contractor or participate in a mentorship program so that they could become more knowledgeable (U.S. GPO, 2014). Mentoring could alleviate many of the issues that minority and disadvantaged business owners face when doing business with the federal government.

Congress and agency administrators monitor the way that small firms do business with the federal government. The U.S. GPO (2014) examined how contractors did business with the DOD because SMEs face unique challenges. The Armed Services Committee found long-standing issues of small businesses contracting with the federal government, specifically the DOD (U.S. GAO, 2008). Congress made efforts to address the issues, but the secretive nature of the DOD caused transparency challenges.

In some agencies, the contracting process is not clear. To make the contracting process more transparent, the GAO recommended that the DOD issue clear guidance on publicizing sensitive contracting data (U.S. GAO, 2015a). The U.S. GAO (2013a) reported that in most of the national security exception contracts that they reviewed, the DOD used a single argument known as class justification that applied to multiple contracts. Also, the U.S. GAO (2013a) recommended that the DOD monitor the impact of the class justification process and use tools that facilitate market research in a secure environment. Understanding of class justification and the impact that it has on minority-owned businesses could improve contractor participation.

The DOD's liberal use of national security exceptions resulted in a need to improve the contracting process, which required revamping some procedures. The DOD acquisition community was inherently risk-averse and needed to find ways to reduce the bureaucracy (U.S. GAO, 2015a). The acting associate administrator for government contracting and business development of the SBA outlined measures that the DOD and SBA took to increase contracting participation from small businesses (U.S. GAO, 2015a). Such measures included adding 19 contracting provisions to the Jobs Act of 2012 to redirect billions of dollars to small businesses and to make it harder to bundle contracts, which had historically proven to be challenging for small businesses (U.S. GAO, 2015a). Improving transparency for contractors relieved some of the challenges associated with contracting with the DOD.

Administrators of the Federal Supply Schedules (FSS) give veteran-owned small businesses priority when they compete for contracts. Manuel (2014) found that there was no clear evidence of statutory preferences for veteran-owned small businesses for orders issued under the FSS. Manuel and Maskell (2013) questioned the transparency of federal contracts awarded under the FSS and argued that the VA was the only federal agency that prioritized awarding contracts to veteran-owned small businesses and SDVOBs. However, under the FSS, there was no transparency and agencies awarded contracts to noncertified companies (Manuel & Maskell, 2013). Communication among agencies could result in similar practices of veteran preferences.

Contractors that perform poorly costs taxpayers billions of dollars annually. In 2012, members of the House of Representatives (U.S. GAO, 2015a; U.S. HoR, 2016)

challenged the assertion that there were multiple factors that contributed to poor performance. Reviews by contracting officers were out of the control of the contractor, and the officers did not evaluate the contractors on their individual merits and performance. The House of Representatives also found that contractors were not knowledgeable of the public contracting process and stated that ignorance was not an excuse for poor performance reviews (U.S. GAO, 2015a; U.S. HoR, 2016). The lack of knowledge by contractors was reflective of the transparency issues.

Workload and workforce issues in federal contracting. The federal workforce that supports the procurement process is essential. The U.S. GAO (2008) noted that there was an insufficiency of the acquisition workforce within the agencies. According to the U.S. GPO (2014), the Federal Aviation Administration adopted policies and plans that were inadequate to ensure an efficient acquisition workforce. The ramifications of an inadequate workforce were deficiencies in adherence to policies, a propensity to take shortcuts, and a lack of due diligence in screening contractors (Jeffrey-Waddoups & May, 2014). Gooden (2017) noted that contract management capacity affects the ability of procurement officers to do their jobs effectively. If procurement officers can be more effective, it could lead to cost savings and greater efficiencies.

Employee turnover has a significant impact on federal agencies. Warren (2014) examined turnover rates and the effect of additional workload on federal contracting officers concerning fixed-priced contracts, renegotiation, and costs. Warren provided evidence that the federal government experienced exceptional growth in acquisitions contracting for over a decade; yet, federal staffing did not grow proportionally. The

results of increased workload were decreases in reliance on competitive procurement procedures and reduced reliance on firm fixed-price contracts, which has resulted in higher costs and increased risk of renegotiation (Manuel & Maskell, 2011). There are solutions to employee turnover; however, the federal government has been slow to adopt them.

Workforce reduction and increased workload lead to cost overruns. The U.S. GAO (2015a) reported that some agencies accepted poor performance. In some cases, the staff did not complete follow-up paperwork that would have uncovered fraudulent activity, and lack of operational communication between agencies made them vulnerable. Other explanations not addressed by Congress but noted in scholarly studies are contracting officer workload and training level of staff (Liebman & Mahoney, 2017; Warren, 2014). The funding that the agencies receive also plays a role in the workload contracting officers have.

Decreases in the workforce usually signal that there are looming budget cuts or consolidation of departments. Manuel and Maskell (2011) stated that cost relief to agencies was workforce reduction, which included the acquisition workforce. An example was H.R. 4257, the Rebalance for an Effective Defense Uniform and Civilian Employees Act, in which Congress called for involuntary DoD civilian workforce separations (Manuel, 2014). Another example was that agencies traded services to reduce redundancy and costs (Manuel, 2014; Manuel & Maskell, 2013). The reductions identified by Manuel were mainly due to improvements in technology. The improvements in technology and reduced workforce resulted in savings to the agencies

and ultimately the taxpayers; however, it also meant a more efficient process for contractors to do business with the government.

Prime contractors who do business with the federal government are usually not knowledgeable in public procedures and often shift responsibilities to their subcontractors, which results in reduced participation in public contracting. The U.S. GAO (2013c) reported that the federal government started holding prime contractors accountable for their subcontracting plans and started strengthening the skills of the federal acquisition workforce, which included contracting training. There were also efforts to increase communication between all branches of the DoD, the Offices of Small Business, Disadvantaged Utilization, Small Business Procurement Advisory Council, SBA, and the small business community. These measures were efforts to increase small business participation in contracting with the DoD (U.S. GAO, 2015a). The measures ensured that prime contractors could no longer pass off the compliance and accountability to subcontractors.

Expiring agency budgets lead to irresponsible spending. The standard practice is to build up a rainy-day fund at the beginning of the year; if a need does not materialize, administrators then rush to spend the resources on low-quality projects before the fiscal the year finishes (Liebman & Mahoney, 2017). This practice leads to both cost overruns and fraud (U.S. GAO, 2008). Contractors who are aware of expiring budgets can position their companies to be the beneficiaries of the spending rush.

Some of the policies in place to maintain high standards for the federal government contribute to cost overruns. For example, making facilities greener and more

energy efficient by using environmentally sustainable materials and technology have been goals of federal administrators (U.S. GAO, 2008). The Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 and Executive Order 13514 set the statutes for green building practices slated for 2030 (U.S. GAO, 2016). The agencies, in turn, required contractors to implement green building measures during construction, which led to cost overruns (U.S. GAO, 2016). Traditionally, Congress has been slow to react to the advances in environmentally friendly materials, practices, and technology; the requirements increased sustainability practices.

After agencies enter into agreements with contractors, unexpected incidents can alter the price of completion, which leads to cost overruns. One of the tools that Congress and the DoD use to manage cost overruns is the Nunn-McCurdy law (U.S. GAO, 2016). According to the law, if cost overruns grow more than 15% of the agreed upon price, agencies are required to report it to Congress (U.S. GAO, 2016). In the event of a cost overrun of 25% or more, the result is immediate termination of the project unless the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) grants permission for continuation (U.S. GAO, 2016). One in three programs exceeded overruns of 25% or more (U.S. GAO, 2008). Administrators are still having a difficult time addressing the issue of cost overruns.

Long-term fixed price (standardized) vs. short-term cost reimbursement contracts. Curbing costs overruns is a concern for agency administrators. Warren (2014) explored fixed-priced contracts based on fatigue factors of contracting officers whereas Van Den Hurk and Verhoest (2016) examined the cost of such a practice. When

agencies implemented fixed-priced contracts at the onset of an award, there were significant savings to taxpayers, conversely costs increased with nonfixed agreements (Van Den Hurk & Verhoest, 2016; Warren, 2014). Overall, incomplete contracting led to delays, renegotiation of contracts, and higher costs to the federal government. An increase in contracting officers could alleviate some of the highlighted problems in federal procurement (Van Den Hurk & Verhoest, 2016; Warren, 2014). There is still a debate over the cost savings of fixed-price (standardized) and nonfixed price contracts.

It is common in some areas of government contracting for agencies to operate out of the norm. Kingdomware Technologies, an SDVOB, filed a suit with the GAO contesting an award that was sole sourced to a company that was already contracting with the VA but was not certified (U.S. GAO, 2016c). Dilger (2014) claimed that the perpetual awarding of contracts to the same company, as in the case of Kingdomware, were not uncommon. The U.S. GPO (2014) noted that trial and error on the part of agencies made it difficult for the contracting process to be more transparent without complications. All the agencies have different priorities and requirements, so the practice of standardizing contracts can be problematic because there is no flexibility to make changes that could reduce project costs.

The rationale for the keeping rainy-day funds is a reaction to the volatile nature of current events in which agencies operate. Historically, administrators did not find it prudent to foster a pattern of reduced budgets because unforeseen circumstances could render them ineffective, which could have irreparable consequences (U.S. GAO, 2008). The rush-to-spend culture leads to risky contract designs. Van Den Hurk and Verhoest

(2016) found that three agencies engaged in risky contract designs by converting short-term contracts into de facto long-term contracts, typically at the end of the fiscal year. Agencies can manage these risks by entering into short-term cost reimbursement contracts then move to fixed-price arrangements in later rounds of negotiations.

Standardized contracts save money in some instances and cost more in others. Van Den Hurk and Verhoest (2016) stated that there were calls for increased use of standard contracts in public–private partnerships for infrastructure development. Administrators expected that contracts would simplify and improve procurement by creating opportunities for learning, lower transaction costs, and better competition. Van Den Hurk and Verhoest found that standard contracts were a challenge because the benefits were not as straightforward as they looked at first sight. The researchers concluded that when considering the tension between the powerful, control-oriented role of contracting authorities, contingent, informal contracting is needed. Manuel (2014) also examined standardizing contracts, but at the subcontractor level. Subcontractors are typically overleveraged by primes because they do not have significant resources or capabilities.

Policies that have macro consequences. There are dozens of environmental regulations that apply to small businesses. The EPA and other agencies help small business owners to understand and comply with environmental regulations (U.S. EPA, 2016; U.S. SBA, 2016i) When small businesses are required to follow new policies; they sometimes have some unintended consequences. Halme and Korpela (2014) revealed that there is a common misconception that owner-managers of SMEs do not see

environmental issues as important because of their low levels of commitment to sustainable business practices. Halme and Korpela (2014) identified several factors that contributed to SMEs' lack of participation in sustainable business practices: (a) limited resources, (b) lack of eco-literacy, (c) low environmental visibility, (d) difficulties establishing a business case for sustainability for improving customer relations, and (e) a tendency for environmental sustainability tools and programs developed for large entities and is not customizable for SMEs. Small business leaders recognize the need to adopt environmentally sustainable practices; however, balancing the priorities of economic sustainability sometimes takes precedence over environmental goals.

Multiple factors contribute to the lack of participation in sustainability by small businesses. Halme and Korpela (2014) concluded that the impetus for environmental sustainability and practices vary in SMEs and that their participation is understated. Berardo et al. also identified four types of business owners based on their view of sustainability: practices-cost-burden, business-opportunity, bottom-line, and responsible owner-managers. Based on Berardo et al.'s (2014) findings, most of the data and literature available from the government to the public is on large enterprises. However, Berardo et al. and Halme and Korpela did not include relevant information from the EPA, which has resources and a wealth of information for small businesses (U.S. EPA, 2016b). Using the same performance metrics to assess large businesses and SMEs could produce misconceptions resulting in the underestimation of SMEs' performance or potential (Halme & Korpela, 2014). Factors such as sustainability practices, cost-burden,

business-opportunity, bottom-line, and responsible owner-managers can be addressed to increase small business participation in sustainability practices.

Challenges for small business in federal contracting. Small businesses are at a disadvantage when participating in federal contracting. The creation of the 8(a) program was a response to the challenges small businesses face competing against large firms for government contracts (U.S. SBA, 2015). The unfair advantage that large enterprises had such as capital, staff, and experience shut small businesses out of public procurement (U.S. SBA, 2016c). Small disadvantaged businesses have both internal and external challenges that required different solutions for addressing them.

Even though the 8(a) and similar programs are designed to give minority-owned business fair access to federal contracts, applying for the program poses a challenge. Small businesses struggle to obtain the contracts (Manuel & Maskell, 2011). Among the key issues for small businesses is contract bundling, which is the consolidation of smaller contracts (U.S. GAO, 2008). Often the bundled contracts are beyond the scope of what a small contractor can perform (Manuel & Maskell, 2011). If agencies can effectively address the issue of contract bundling, small business may increase their participation in federal contracting.

Internal federal agencies issues. The relationship between federal agencies and the firms they contract with establishes certain conditions, such as performance expectations. Leaders must demonstrate responsible internal policies (Schaltegger, Lüdeke-Freund, & Hansen, 2016). However, some drawbacks affect how much contractors bid on projects (Jeffrey-Waddoups & May, 2014). Leaders are sometimes at

risk of going out of business due to compliance issues (Ravenswood & Kaine, 2015). Compliance burdens operations and small business owners need to be mindful when factoring the costs into their budgets.

A balancing act happens on both sides of the contracting table. The bureaucracy and policies that govern federal contracting cause internal friction (Kennedy, 2014). Agencies such as the VA had a difficult time adhering to external policies while meeting internal goals (Panangala, Shedd, & Moulta-Ali, 2014; Ravenswood & Kaine, 2015). Congress required all federal agencies to meet the 23% small business contracting goal (U.S. SBA, 2015); however, the VA does 100% of their contracting with veteran-owned businesses unless required goods or services are not sold or produced by veteran-owned businesses. Adhering to mandated goals policies while managing contractors is a challenge that the VA must navigate consistently.

Complying with union contracts sometimes poses a challenge for business leaders. Hired firms face challenges not only with compliance but also with issues such as unions that represent their employees (Fox & Morris, 2015). The perception of a strained relationship between federal agencies and contracting firms of being at odds is misguided. Agencies demand compliance because they are accountable to Congress; they also encourage collaborations (Bryson et al., 2015; Quélin, Kivleniece, & Lazzarini, 2017). Agency administrators need to find better solutions to reduce the burden on the small businesses that they contract with.

Consulting is a part of public procurement. Like Lai and Huili Lin (2017), Howlett and Migone (2014) examined consulting in public procurement and found that a

lack of shared data and knowledge gained through the employment of external consultants was a major challenge, which existing financially based control systems failed to manage effectively. Even though the transaction costs that drove the outsourcing decisions were low, the tradeoff in quality of work and the reputational damage were high. Other challenges such as legal pitfalls have the potential to negate any initial cost savings.

A separate issue that federal agencies face in dealing with small businesses was enforcement of some contracts. Loader and White (2015) stated that there was no clear jurisdiction to prosecute private security providers. The difficulties identified by Loader and White extended beyond the Department of Justice. Other areas of procurement also have regulatory ambiguities such as fraud by company managers and excessive control over small or disadvantaged firms (U.S. SBA, 2016i). Loader and White also suggested disallowing the grant of immunity to private military contractors (Loader & White, 2015). In some instances, small firms are created solely for certifying as a DBE but have a significant ownership interest by other large firms, which is prohibited by the SBA because it constitutes fraud and excessive control.

The diversity issues. Some of the laws created by Congress to ensure diversity have unintended consequences and lead to discrimination because of vague language. Zisk (2014) asserted that even though writers of the Affirmative Action laws were well-intentioned, they created a constitutional anomaly. Large firms and other opponents of the 8(a) program and laws that support affirmative action stated that the basis for participation is economic disadvantage, not race. Zisk stated that race-based admissions

processes could withstand constitutional scrutiny. Many discrimination cases brought against various publicly funded higher learning institutions revolved around ambiguous language that starts at the federal level (U.S. SBA, 2016h; Zisk, 2014). Revising and using clear language could resolve many of the ambiguities in affirmative action laws.

Political representation is a necessity for minorities to get fair or equal treatment in public procurement. Representative bureaucracy occurs when an agency demographically mirrors the constituency it serves and is more likely to produce outputs that are favorable for the individuals in the community (Gooden, 2015). Gooden (2015) examined how proportionate awards were for small disadvantaged businesses and women-owned small business and found that agencies did not award small disadvantaged businesses and women-owned small business contracts proportionately. Weber and Geneste (2014) found that the perception of women being disadvantaged in public contracting puts them at greater risk of not having sufficient representation. Without adequate political representation, the enforcement of laws to ensure the inclusion of women in the procurement process will be difficult.

Diversity in federal contracting. The federal government is the benchmark for diversity in the workplace and the contracting process. Zisk (2014) explored affirmative action and found that decisions that were race-neutral on an individual level were a constitutionally permissible means of achieving the governmental interest in diversity. Panangala et al. (2014) stated that agencies presumed veteran-owned businesses disadvantaged without verifying with the VA. Panangala et al. argued that the U.S. Supreme Court does not view raced-based preferences in government contracting as

constitutionally defective. However, the authors of section 8(d) of the Small Business Administration Act, which prohibited future discrimination, did not encounter any past societal, individual, or industry-specific discrimination which was the basis for the legislation (Zisk, 2014). Administrators will have to adjust policies and enforcement to deal with discrimination as it arises.

Administrators at the federal agencies are seeking ways to meet their diversity goals. Like Agranoff (2014), Gooden (2017) examined diversity and public administration challenges in contracting and found that contract managers' capacity and internal bureaucracy caused goal displacement to procurement decisions. Gooden also argued that given deficiencies in contracting capacity, diversity governance was missing. Gooden reported that government agencies used minority-based preferences to reduce their workload by awarding based on convenience rather than redressing disadvantage and discrimination (Gooden, 2017). If the practice of convenience awarding continues, it will be more difficult to cure discrimination in federal contracting.

Congress has implemented programs to encourage female business owners in federal contracting. Weber and Geneste (2014) explored gender-related perceptions of SME success from 375 male and female-owned firms. Weber and Geneste found that the average female-owned business was significantly smaller than male-owned business, but they performed equally well in profitability and hours worked; female SME owners were more satisfied with both the success of their business and their lifestyle. Weber and Geneste's study was similar to (Gooden, 2015) because both teams of researchers examined the role of gender and equity in public contracting. Gender relations in public

contracting can be improved, especially in enforcement of diversity laws because of the lack of public representation and support for female-owned businesses.

The nature of public engagement differs at each level of government. Maher et al. (2016) examined human service contractors doing business with governments and noted the divergence in structure from the federal to local governments, which made the nature of contracting at each level unique. Maher et al. stated that in New York, for example, local government contracting was more pragmatic. Each level of government treats diversity differently, which is reflective of their demographic makeup and need (Maher et al., 2016). Witko (2016) took a global approach to examining not only the political aspect but also the financial process and found that the different financial obligations and priorities are the primary impetus for the engagements. Responses to international and domestic forces change the priorities of government at each level, and the resources that they acquire in reaction corresponds accordingly.

Converging forces both internally and externally make agency administrators assess the entire procurement process. Manuel and Maskell (2011) stated that trends in economics, technology, and public policy produced conditions brought about a change in federal procurement. Manuel and Maskell argued that the effects of e-commerce and supply chain, known as disintermediation, had a positive impact on federal contracting. The improved or streamlined processes led agencies to seek cost reductions in other areas (Manuel & Maskell, 2011). One of the main ideas that Manuel and Maskell explored was insourcing contractor functions, a process that could exacerbate the problem of

diversity in public contracting (Gooden, 2017). Some functions are better left inside of the agencies, which could lead to more uniformed practices and continuity.

Before the 8(a) program, there was little to no diversity in public contracting, and formerly incarcerated business owners could not participate. Agranoff (2014) examined challenges in government contracting and defined diversity as the context between management and governance. Zisk (2014) asserted that individuals should have fair representation in public procurement. However, the government does not do business with formerly incarcerated business owners. Agranoff stated that agency officers viewed former offenders as outcasts of society and marginalized them to the point that often their only recourse was to commit acts that returned them to incarceration. With a change of policies, the government could lead the charge in facilitating programs in the contracting system to aid former offenders to regain a foothold in society. The federal government could improve diversity in procurement by alleviating the cost to communities, public safety, and individual human need (Agranoff, 2014). The SBA is embracing the idea of accepting formerly incarcerated business owners.

Traditionally, affirmative action addresses equal opportunity employment. Gooden (2017) examined the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña* and the unfavorable result for SMEs that ensued. The decision was a setback for affirmative action initiatives (Gooden, 2017; Miller, 2017). Awards to minority-owned firms increased, but not for the reasons argued in the case; the rise in awards was due largely to federal agencies expediting the awarding process to decrease

workload (Gooden, 2017). Aligning internal agency operations with contracting goals could increase awards to minority-owned firms.

Changes in the procurement process. When there is a deadlock in Congress, and certain goods or services are vital, the U.S. President can authorize purchases without their permission. Howell and Magazinnik (2017) explained that the 1949 Federal Property and Services Act under Article II of the Constitution gave the president authority to make expedient purchases of goods and services in areas where Congress had not or would not act. The power that the bill gives the president can lead to significant cost savings; however, if used improperly, there is a possibility of irreparable damage (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). Procurement had a significant impact on the private sector, especially small businesses (U.S. GPO, 2014). In cases of indecision in Congress, market forces can have an adverse impact on small businesses. The U.S. president has the authority to expedite purchases to reduce negative consequences of stalled decision making.

Minority contracting goals are a priority of agency administrators. In 2013, the federal government awarded 23% of public contracts to small businesses (U.S. GPO, 2014). The 23% mark was significant because, before that, no agency had achieved that accomplishment. That year, three federal agencies received an A+ grade and 17 others an A (U.S. GAO, 2013a). This was the second time that the federal government met its target for contracting to SDVOBs with a total of \$12 billion in awards (U.S. GAO, 2013b). Meeting contracting goals is a positive signal to Congress that the agencies are being responsive to the needs of small firms (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). Essentially,

the president has the authority to directly manipulate the responsiveness of the federal government to small businesses.

Federal government doing business with small firms. Federal agencies routinely award contracts to small businesses. Fox and Morris (2015) outlined the ideal situation in which a government agency and contractor enter a long-term relationship. Fox and Morris stated that there should be a business relationship with an expectation of long-term commitment, working harmoniously, and leveraging each other's strengths. Communicating frequently and efficiently managing stakeholders should also be a synergistic goal of both parties. For subcontracting opportunities, small businesses should collaborate with a reputable contractor who has demonstrated excellent past performance (Fox & Morris, 2015). According to the U.S. GAO (2015b), there was a reduction in contract awards in 2014, which was due in part to contractors not fulfilling their obligations in previous years. The previously stated conditions infrequently occur, which is why many agencies do not meet the contracting goals.

The price of a good or service is a primary factor in the purchase decision of contracting officers. Töytäri, Rajala, and Alejandro (2015) examined business-to-business (B2B) marketing for firm profitability and long-term survival and found that commoditization of offerings in mature markets and pronounced buyer power drove price setters toward competition-based pricing or cost-based pricing, which led to below-target profitability. The federal government conducts business with small firms is to boost the economy (Hefetz et al., 2014). Agencies typically purchase goods or services priced at or close to market value (U.S. GSA, 2016b). Leaders who price their good or services to

beat other competitors are at risk of jeopardizing their long-term fiscal health for short-term gains.

There are many opportunities for small firms to do business with the federal government; however, few take advantage of them. In 2012, the United States House of Representatives explored problems and opportunities for small businesses on the GSA Schedule (U.S. GAO, 2016b). Members of the House wanted to ascertain how small businesses could take advantage of opportunities on the GSA schedule. According to a GAO report, the GSA schedules are complicated and posed challenges for small businesses (U.S. GAO, 2015b). The process for a small firm to get on the GSA schedule as a vendor is long and arduous (U.S. GAO, 2015b). Many politicians and advocacy groups have called for changes to the GSA scheduling process.

Even though the 8(a) program gives disadvantaged firms access to set-aside contracts, the process is still expensive. According to the U.S. GAO (2015a), of the \$500 billion dollars in total federal contracts, \$50 billion went to small businesses, which made up 80% of the 1,900 contractors on the GSA schedule. The U.S. GAO (2015b) also noted that many small businesses hired expensive outside proposal preparation services and purchased new record-keeping systems to compete for schedule contracts. Competing is an expensive proposition for small firms (U.S. GAO, 2008). Small business owners' better understanding of the public contracting process could help them to reduce the costs of competing.

Contracting officers make award decisions partly on qualification and partly on a contractor's past performance, which is an indicator of their future outcomes. The

Turner-Fairbank Highway Research Center (TFHRC, 2014) examined performance-based contractor prequalification as an alternative to performance bonds and revealed that in a low-bid environment, the acquisition of performance bonds had no impact on a contractor's ability to complete a project. Using past performance of contractors as a determinant of their ability to complete a contract limit qualified small businesses participation in public contracting (Fox & Morris, 2015). A major determinant in selecting a contractor in the highway industry is their ability to secure a performance bond. That criterion alone is not sufficient to determine if a contractor can complete a job on or under budget because contracting officers assess bonds based on company assets, not capability.

Contractors who perform certain functions are required to be bonded to business with the government agencies. The TFHRC (2014) also revealed that low contract values that require performance bonds are a contributing factor to project delays. The TFHRC suggested that there be a minimum contract value that requires increasing performance bonds from \$1 million to \$10 million (TFHRC, 2014). Administrators at the center also developed a three-tiered, performance-based prequalification system based on a company financial statement, which encourages improved performance (TFHRC, 2014). As Fox and Morris (2015) suggested, there should be other factors that administrators use to select contractors. The process to get a bond is rigorous and litigious, which deters capable contractors from participating in public contracting.

Influence of politics on contracting. Politics and public procurement are synonymous. Witko (2016) reported that governments often contract for services that

have high transactional costs, which significantly exposes them to risks. Government political influence usurped the ability of contracting officers to execute measures of efficiency (Witko, 2016). Minority firms, including SDVOBs, must adhere to policies to remain in compliance with the 8(a)-certification program (U.S. SBA, 2016a). The introduction of outside political influence presents an added challenge for minority firms that follow the rules (Howlett & Migone, 2014). Witko concluded that government contracting takes a long time to be profitable for small businesses and that the relationship with political officials has risks. The process of relationship building with politicians, coupled with the uncertainty of a contract award, has no guarantees; but, it is a better option than bidding with no follow-up actions.

Politicians can have both positive and negative impact on the procurement process. Maher et al. (2016) explored the degree of politics involved in government contracting decisions and found that pragmatism and politics were the dominant forces in procurement decisions. Contractors need to be aware of the link between politics and the contracting process so that they can avail themselves of resources that can give them an advantage (Witko, 2016). Small business owners should work with political representatives towards obtaining contract awards.

Bargaining can produce favorable results for minority and disadvantaged business owners. Christensen et al. (2015) studied the effect of political sensitivity and bargaining power on taxes and found that politically sensitive business leaders paid higher federal taxes but incurred fewer political costs. Christensen et al. found that small minority businesses do not have political influence. Witko (2016) and Maher et al. (2016)

examined how politics influences federal contracting and found that politicians have a direct impact on contract awards. Leaders without direct political resources have greater challenges in securing contracts (Christensen et al., 2015). Even though minority and disadvantaged business owners may not be politically savvy, they can still benefit from engaging with their representatives.

Small business owners who support political candidates during their campaigns may benefit if they win. In examining the relationship between campaign contributions and government contracts, Bromberg (2014) identified three trends that affected variation in contracting decisions: managerial, organizational and political. Bromberg asserted that vendor campaign contributions influenced award decisions. Knowing about their local public officials and the resources they provide should be the norm for minorities (Zisk, 2014). Although it may not be necessary for minority and disadvantaged business owners to contribute to political campaigns, they should still engage elected officials.

Business owners who contribute to political campaigns are treated more favorably than those that do not. Witko (2016) asserted that leaders with political connections were prone to special treatment and interference by politicians in the contracting process. Witko also argued that political interference influenced contracting officers because of the likely repercussions of their decisions. Witko found a positive correlation between campaign contributions and contracts. Establishing a relationship with political officials may result in securing more contracts (Maher et al., 2016). Supporting officials who share the same values through legal means such as campaign contributions could result in better representation.

Contractors impact the procurement process. Campaign contributions by contractors to capture political influence vary in degree; however, organizations with larger organized membership historically had more political influence than smaller ones (Bromberg, 2014). Small business leaders gain a competitive advantage by leveraging political influence (Witko, 2016). There is a clear advantage to leveraging political influence; therefore, it would be in the best interest of small business leaders acquaint themselves with the nuances early in the procurement process.

Common issues of small firms doing business with the federal government.

Many disadvantaged business owners who participate in public contracting are not ready to compete at a high level. Mark McKevitt, Flynn, and Davis (2014) found that leaders of small firms weighted the phases of procurement differently and determined that the readiness level of the firm affected the owners' and manager's approach to procurement. Per the U.S. SBA (2014), small firms can improve their chances of winning contract awards and successful completion by networking and communicating regularly with the agencies directly. If minority and disadvantaged business owners are mentored early in the process, they can make more informed decisions about participating in public contracting.

Employees with entrepreneurial education or backgrounds are an asset to small firms. Canziani et al. (2015) concluded that the level of entrepreneurship knowledge had a direct correlation to the likelihood of success. Furthermore, entrepreneurship education of leaders of firms, and the skills developed, are often beneficial for navigating turbulent environments (Canziani et al., 2015). Entrepreneurship is present at every level in new

and small firms so embracing uncertainty requires both leaders and employees to stay abreast of new developments in their respective fields (Canziani et al., 2015). Like Dhliwayo (2014), Canziani et al. revealed the link between the theoretical and practical aspects of entrepreneurial education. Entrepreneurial theories help to stimulate creative thinking while helping small business leaders to adopt the practices throughout the organization.

Factors outside of capabilities and past performance affect small businesses in federal contracting. Belogolovsky and Bamberger (2014) examined how incentives affected employee performance and linked it to federal contracting. In a similar study, Gupta, Goktan, and Gunay (2014) examined the perspective of industry professionals of female-owned businesses. Perceptions and incentives are two factors that were beyond the control of firms (Gupta et al., 2014). The incentives that employees are given are directly correlated to how they perform, which is an indicator of the firm's overall competitiveness. The perception of inferiority of female-owned businesses to their male-owned counterparts, even when there is no substantial proof, can lead to missed public contracting opportunities.

Strategies for doing business with the federal government. Before competing for federal contracts, many new businesses are unaware of the hidden costs; the lure of large award figures sometimes overrides rationale. Procurement is a competitive process and going through the certification processes provides no guarantee that a business will win a contract (Dilger, 2014). The U.S. GAO (2015a) revealed that the average cost to an architectural firm that competed for a federal project was \$260,000. If the company

wins the contract then the expenditure was recuperated; if not, it was a sunk cost (U.S. GAO, 2008). Even with better access to federal contracts, there are still risks in doing public procurement.

Minority and disadvantaged business owners certify so that they can get access to set-aside contracts. Certification is important to minority-owned firms because they compete with only other certified companies, and their disadvantage is no longer a factor (U.S. SBA, 2016a). According to the U.S. VA (2016), as of August 2017, there were 8,305 verified SDVOBs in the VA database, of which 2,574 were in the construction industry. There is an inconsistent distribution of SDVOBs in the United States. SDVOBs in the construction field in New York make up less than 1% of the entire population of minority-owned businesses in the 8(a) program; therefore, the opportunity for set-aside contracts is significantly increased (U.S. VA, 2016). Many disadvantaged business owners are not aware of the advantages of certification; therefore, they do not participate in public contracting.

Small firms certify to do business with the government because they get access to set-aside contracts. Although certification may prove advantageous to a qualified firm, it does not guarantee that contracts will be available (Dilger & Lowry, 2013). Furthermore, leaders must have the capability to execute a contract successfully and have a proven record of accomplishment. The combination of availability and capability requires knowledge of the federal contracting landscape (Dilger & Lowry, 2013). According to the U.S. GAO (2015b), there was a reduction in procurement awards in 2014, which

means that small firms are not getting access to federal contracts. Therefore, skillful navigation of federal contracting requires strategy to be successful.

Small business owners face challenges that threaten their longevity. Adhikari, Bliese, Davis, and Halawi (2014) identified seven external and internal forces that threatened minority-owned firms: (a) internal operations, (b) external enterprise operations, (c) overhead costs and operations, (d) government and market conditions, (e) profit and energy factors, (f) globalization, and (g) economic forces. Adhikari et al. stated that there were high failure rates of MBEs; however, the material that he obtained had contrary information. Additionally, there were higher success rates of MBEs in federal and state procurement (Gooden, 2017). Public contracting is a growth vehicle and MBEs, including SDVOBs, have proven that the capital infusion and rigorous accountability stimulates long-term development.

Even though small business owners do not have the same resources as large firms, they still have a propensity to succeed. Adhikari et al. (2014) suggested that minority firms are just as likely to succeed as their prime counterparts, but discrimination, access to capital, and bias are prevalent throughout many industries, which limits their potential. The threats Adhikari et al. identified were common for all firms regardless of size but had a significant impact on minority companies. Regarding government contracting, Adhikari et al. revealed that minority firms had the potential to perform with equal risk of failure and success. Small firms weighted the three phases of the procurement process differently; therefore, different strategies were required when competing for public

contracts (Adhikari et al., 2014; Gooden, 2017). Given the opportunity, small businesses can grow into large firms if they can overcome the challenges of public contracting.

Mentoring in public contracting has the potential to increase the number of small businesses that participate to complete their contracts. Mark McKeivitt et al. (2014) presented a case for mentoring in the early phases of the bidding process so that government and contractors could become familiar with each other. Leaders who are new to public contracting could benefit from such a relationship because the access to agency officers could lead to deeper relationships and less chance of misunderstandings (Roloff et al., 2015). If the mentoring process is nurtured properly, there could be greater successes by minority and disadvantaged business owners in federal contracting.

Minority representation in public contracting leads to increased awards. Gooden (2015) found evidence that increases in passive minority representation resulted in a larger proportion of contract dollars awarded to minority firms. One explanation for the increase was social psychology regarding the recognition of limited representation by some minority groups. A strategy that small firm owners can use is to tap into the influence of their elected officials (Zisk, 2014). Public representatives have incentives to advocate on behalf of minority disadvantaged business owners, so it is important to develop a working relationship.

The strategy of alliancing (partnering) in federal contracting. The purpose of the SBA is to administer and assist small businesses. The 8(a) Business Development Program, which is overseen by the SBA, is an assistance program for small disadvantaged businesses (U.S. SBA, 2016b). The 8(a) Program offers a broad scope of

assistance to firms that are owned and controlled at least 51% by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals (U.S. SBA, 2016b). Participants can receive sole-source contracts, up to a ceiling of \$4 million for goods and services and \$6.5 million for manufacturing (U.S. SBA, 2016b). A strategy that small business owners use in federal contracting is forming joint ventures then teaming (alliancing) to bid on contracts to complete larger projects and overcome the effects of contract bundling (U.S. SBA, 2016a). Administrators at the SBA encourage small business owners to use such strategies to grow.

Alliance participation is a strategy that leaders of small firms use to compete against larger ones; it is preferred because individually they do not have adequate resources. Firms that use resources strategically gain an advantage (Delmas & Pekovic, 2015). Most leaders of firms who participate in alliancing use a differentiation strategy. By using both Porter's generic strategies and the resource-based view of alliances as a framework, Martynov (2015) examined which firms benefitted more from alliance participation and found that small firms benefitted more from alliancing than their large counterparts. Leveraging the resources of complementary producers, which is the underpinning of alliancing, can lead to superior performance.

Alliancing is a strategy that small business owners use to compete for larger projects. Rueda-Benavides and Gransberg (2014) studied alliancing in federal contracting and examined how the FAR 6.101 applied to alliancing, originally intended for collaboration in the construction industry. Rueda-Benavides and Gransberg selected a commercially available standard form alliancing contract for analysis against the FAR.

Rueda-Benavides and Gransberg revealed that design-build would be the most reasonable method for an alliancing contract. The U.S. GAO (2015b) prefers to work with contractors who use partnering or alliancing. The benefits of alliancing outweigh the disadvantages; however, many small firms do not use this strategy.

Owners, managers, and employees of small businesses lacking knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in vital areas are limited when competing for government contracts. Congress and the U.S. SBA (2016a) designed the 8(a)-program framework for small business concerns entering federal contracting with limited resources and other challenges. Leveraging the program offsets some deficiencies that are common in nascent businesses (U.S. SBA, 2016c). Small businesses could collaborate with other firms to further offset their deficient KSAs when doing business with the government (U.S. SBA, 2016d). Small business owners who acknowledge their shortcomings, such as limited resources and skill sets, could help small business owners to see the viability of alliancing faster and avoiding common mistakes.

Contractors are required to prove their capacity to perform on a contract by providing a portfolio of past projects. Fox and Morris (2015) suggested that small firms collaborate on projects to leverage their strengths. Selecting an industry partner to maximize the probability of program success is a strategy that small firms employ (Martynov, 2015). Fox and Morris asserted that the federal government had not done a good job of predicting if a contractor can complete a job. Martynov provided an example of the DOD relying on contractors' proposals instead of reviewing their past

performance. By evaluating contractors using past performance, the DOD increased its risk of repeating past failures.

Transition

In a review of the professional and academic literature, I presented an in-depth exploration of the theories such as Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage, Ohmae's blue ocean strategy, and resource-based view. I provided a brief history of the SBA and their relationship to minority-owned businesses, a detailed account of relevant academic, and professional literature. In Section 2, I explain my role as the researcher, selection criteria and method for acquiring participants, research method, and design. I also address ethical concerns. I described in detail my data collection instruments, techniques, how I organize the data, and what my analysis entails. I also address reliability and validity. In Section 3, I present my findings, offer a conclusion and suggestions for future research.

Section 2: The Project

In this section, I describe my approach to conducting the study. I present my role as the researcher as a data collection instrument who uses tools at my disposal in a prescribed methodology to ascertain a meaningful outcome, as suggested by Merriam (2015). I outline the procedures for conducting interviews, interacting with participants, and adhering to ethical standards as prescribed. I describe my methodology for data collection, organization, and analysis.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts and improve profitability. The population included leaders from three SDVOBs in the Northeastern United States who have successfully won two or more contracts that total \$1M or more. The results of this study could lead to positive social change because identifying strategies that lead to winning federal contracts could empower SDVOBs that are new to federal contracting. The successful award of a contract may lead to improved profitability and may provide long-term employment and increased tax revenue for communities.

Role of the Researcher

During the process of conducting a study, a researcher has multiple roles. Merriam (2015), Stake (2013), and Yin (2014) agreed that the researcher is an interested observer, peripheral member, data collector, and primary research instrument. My duties were to initiate and nurture relationships with the participants. In my role as a researcher,

I served several functions, such as data collector, data analyzer, and member checker with participants.

The topic of SDVOBs in federal contracting is of personal interest to me because of my current occupation as a veteran business outreach coordinator for New York City and New Jersey at a nonprofit organization. I am also a service-disabled veteran, and I interact with veteran-owned businesses daily. As a business advisor, I counsel clients on how to contract with the federal government; my roles are to be a guide and facilitator for leaders who are seeking access to government contracting.

Human subjects, especially vulnerable populations, are more susceptible to the negative impact of an experiment. Researchers need to take precautions to protect their participants (National Institute of Health [NIH], 2016). According to the Belmont report, I adhered to the human subjects' guidelines because human participants are involved. Before recruiting participants and gathering data, I received approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board. Protecting the human subjects who participate in the study, as prescribed in the Belmont Report, by removing participant personal identifying information is my primary concern.

My main concern is to ensure the ethical treatment of all participants, especially the protected classes. Researchers conducting qualitative studies face challenges during the data gathering, interpretation, and analysis phases due to their proximity to the participants (Merriam, 2015). I respected participants privacy by anonymizing identifying information such as assigning codes, respecting their need for confidentiality, and requiring informed consent as outlined in the Belmont Report.

In qualitative studies, researchers gather data from different sources including interviews. Interviews can be structured, semistructured, or informal (Maxwell, 2013). For this study, I conducted semistructured interviews. To ensure that I asked all the relevant questions within the allotted time while allowing the participants the freedom to provide information that they deem necessary I used an interview protocol. The interview protocol is an instrument that researchers use to prepare for interviews and to ensure that all key questions are addressed (Merriam, 2015). The interview protocol served as a guide for me to maximize the time with the participants.

Bias is unavoidable; however, there are methods that researchers can use to avoid inserting their personal views into a study. Bracketing is a method that researchers use to suspend bias during the data collection and interview process to be objective in their analysis (Sorsa et al., 2015). Researchers must remain objective when conducting a study to maintain the integrity of the process and findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Bracketing is a method of inquiry that requires the putting aside of one's own beliefs about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject before and throughout the investigation (Sorsa et al., 2015). As recommended by Maxwell (2013), Merriam (2015), Stake (2013), and Yin (2014), I mitigated bias by using bracketing and focusing on the information provided by the participants instead interjecting what I already know throughout the process of this study. I asked open-ended questions and recorded the participants' responses as stated. For any answers that may be subject to interpretation, I asked follow-up questions for clarification.

Participants

The participants who were selected for the study were able to contribute relevant information to the researcher. Merriam (2015), Stake (2013), and Yin (2014) recommended that participants should meet the relevant criteria of the study. Therefore, I screened participants and excluded businesses that did not meet the eligibility criteria or could contribute to the overarching research question. Eligible participants for this study were leaders of SDVOBs who were owners and managers who had competed and won federal contracts that total \$1M or more. The U.S. VA (2016) has a public database of all veteran-owned businesses, which also includes SDVOBs. I contacted potential participants from the VA list in the Northeastern United States who have successfully won and executed federal contracts and invite them to participate in the study.

The data gathering portion of a study had no time limits or set amount of engagement with participants. To have continual access to participants, it is important for researchers to maintain a good working relationship (Yin, 2014). I maintained a good working relationship with participants by answering and following up with them to address any questions or concerns and progress of the study on a regular basis. According to Yin (2015), gaining access to the participants in the field is a process, not an event; there are multiple engagements and developing rapport is important. Based on my professional experience, I believe that my status as a service-disabled veteran helped to build rapport with participants. Having some commonality with the participants, such as my service-disabled status, may help to build trust that could not be established by other means. Continually engaging participants with updates help them to feel connected

to the process (Merriam, 2015). When participants are committed to the process, there is a higher likelihood of staying engaged throughout the data gathering phase.

Research Method and Design

The chosen method and design of the study are determined by the research question. The research question determines the method and design (Merriam, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). Based on the research question, a qualitative, multiple case study is appropriate for this study. The objective of this study was to identify successful strategies that SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts. Punch (2013) suggested that for researchers to situate themselves in the empirical world, they must have a strategy, conceptual framework, research question, and data collection tools. The conceptual framework, research question, and data collection tools help the researcher to remain objective throughout the research process.

Research Method

The chosen research method must align with the research question. Researchers use the qualitative method to explore individual experiences and describe a phenomenon (Cope, 2014). Because the answer to my research question is not quantifiable, a quantitative method would yield no tangible results. Punch (2013) believed that the nature of the data provides the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative methodology includes measurement procedures that require the concrete specification of the psychological phenomena of interest (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Westerman, 2014). The qualitative methodology is the more appropriate method in this study because I am seeking to identify strategies and am not quantifying them.

When using a qualitative methodology, there are processes that researchers must observe. Maxwell (2013) wrote a qualitative guide for researchers to follow if that is their chosen methodology. Maxwell explored an interactive approach to the qualitative research method and explained that the qualitative approach is best suited for studies that concern people, situations, events, and processes that the researcher wants to analyze to find out how circumstances influence outcomes. Maxwell explained the strength of a qualitative approach, which mainly derives from process orientation toward the world and the inductive approach. The qualitative methodology includes a focus on situations or people and the emphasis is on descriptions rather than numbers. Maxwell also explained that choosing a qualitative approach goes beyond a lack of fondness for numbers and is no less rigorous than a quantitative approach; it is a way of looking at the same problem from differing methodological perspectives.

The qualitative method is the best approach for this study based on the research question and nature of the problem. Merriam (2015) and Stake (2013) provided guidelines on how to conduct qualitative research. Merriam pointed out that qualitative research involves the everyday concerns of people's lives, which is what I am attempting to address with this research. Leaders of small and medium businesses turn to federal contracting because of the opportunity to win large dollar value contracts; however, a significant number of them fail (U.S. GAO, 2015b). Assessing their current operating revenues and ability is important to remain compliant before embarking on the federal contracting process, which could be costly.

A quantitative method was not appropriate for this study. Researchers use the quantitative methodology to classify features, count them, and construct statistical models to explain observed events (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Punch (2013) believed that the nature of the data provides the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative methodology includes measurement procedures that require the concrete specification of the psychological phenomena of interest (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Westerman, 2014).

A mixed-method approach is not appropriate for this study. Mixed-methods research is a combination of both the qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Maxwell, 2013). The quantitative portion of a mixed-methods study produces a numerical result which is not relevant to the research question (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Researchers exploring research questions to find out how circumstances influence outcomes would be best served to use a qualitative approach, a mixed-method approach would not yield the desired outcome (Palinkas et al., 2015). Because the mixed-method approach would not yield the desired outcome, I did not use this method.

Research Design

I used Myers' (2013) ideas to learn how to conduct a qualitative study on business. Myers outlined different qualitative designs that are appropriate for research on business: action, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory. Researchers conduct action research to solve practical problems while expanding scientific knowledge (Maxwell, 2013). Action research is primarily used in the health care field involving health care practitioners; therefore, it was not appropriate for this study topic.

Ethnographic research is the most in-depth and best suited for human, social, and organizational aspects of business organizations (Punch, 2013). I was not attempting to inquire about the social or organizational aspects of SDVOBs in public contracting; therefore, an ethnographic research design was not appropriate. The purpose of grounded theory research is to develop a concept grounded in data where there were no theories (Stake, 2013). In a grounded theory design, the researcher generates a theory; because Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage is the chosen framework, grounded theory is not appropriate for this study. Myers explained that for teaching and research, a case study is the tool of choice. A case study is an intensive analysis of a phenomenon or organization because the context is relevant (Lee et al., 2015). A multiple case study is more appropriate for this study because I am attempting to find out the strategies that different organization leaders use to bid and win federal contracts.

A multiple case study is the best design for answering the research question concerning the strategies that SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts to improve profitability. Stake (2013) provided insights into how, why, and when to conduct a multiple case study. The research question requires the study of multiple firms that participated in the procurement process to identify multiple strategies. Stake outlined examples to follow when undertaking multiple case studies. Stake stated that most multiple case studies are so complex that one person typically does them. Stake claimed that writing a good report requires that all the participants' experiences are interpreted by a single person for clarity. Finding out what strategies were used to win federal contracts

requires knowing how multiple companies approach the process of bidding, which requires a substantial amount of interviewing and documenting of participants' accounts.

I discovered that other designs, such as grounded theory, narrative inquiry, phenomenological, and ethnographic designs were inappropriate. Lopez-Dicastillo and Belintxon (2014) defined ethnographic research as the study of human behavior and the way people interpret their world. In this study, the goal is not to ascertain how business owners behave or how they make meaning of their world or lives. An ethnographic research design is not viable for the research question. Moustakas (1994) asserted that reality consists of objects and events perceived in the human consciousness. Perception and the interpretation thereof is the central underpinning of phenomenology.

Ascertaining how SDVOB owners perceive their reality would not answer the research question. Grounded theory is an inductive design in which theory generation is intuitive (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Porter's generic strategies are the theory that is germane to the research question, so there is no need to generate a new one. Studying the ways that humans interpret the world is the premise of narrative inquiry research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The narrative inquiry design could apply to this study because some aspects of strategies depend on the interpretation of a set of circumstances and navigating them to reach the desired outcome. With a narrative inquiry, the focus would be on the experiences of the participants, which would not address the research question of identifying successful strategies. Fundamentally, the desired result is not to determine any individual's interpretation, but to explore successful strategies that SDVOBs used to

win federal contracts. Eliminating these designs led me to choose a multiple case study design.

Based on the research question, a case study was an appropriate design for answering the research question. Case study research is an investigation of a single person, group, event, or community through various data collection methods (Yin, 2014). Answering the research question requires an investigation of multiple groups, SDVOBs, to identify strategies that leaders used to win federal contracts. The best design for answering a research question that asks what and has many parts is a multiple case study (Anderson, Potočnik, & Zhou, 2014). The multiple case study design is the logical choice for this research. Identifying strategies that lead to successful contracting awards requires studying multiple businesses that won federal contracts in the past. The design that is best suited to answer the research question is a multiple case study. Per Stake (2013), a multiple case study is an effort to explore a topic having lots of parts or members. Because SDVOBs vary in size, specialties, and levels of sophistication, there is no single classification that captures them, so a multiple case inquiry is appropriate for this study.

Data saturation is achieved differently in quantitative and qualitative methodologies. No set number of interviews constitutes data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Maxwell, 2013). Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that a researcher could reach data saturation with a sample size of three. To achieve a balance of both size and depth, a sample size of three companies would allow for both richness and depth to achieve data

saturation (Hazra & Gogtay, 2016). I interviewed five participants; I reached data saturation, and I concluded the interviews because I received no new information.

Population and Sampling

The population in this study was SDVOBs located in the Northeastern United States. SDVOBs leaders who won federal contracts of \$1 million or more was the primary focus of this study. A purposeful sampling technique is a nonrandom way of ensuring that certain categories of cases within a population get denoted in the final project (Anderson et al., 2014); therefore, I used purposeful sampling. When using the purposeful sampling technique, researchers chose participants based on a set of pre-qualifications (Palinkas et al., 2015). I chose participants who met the criteria for the study by selecting the best matches from the list on the Department of Veterans Affairs (U.S. VA) database and referrals. Time and resources are factors to consider when acquiring participants for a study (Myers, 2013). Purposeful sampling is useful for reducing the time it takes to recruit participants and saves on expenditures such as travel costs.

Participants could make referrals for the study. Chain referral sampling or snowballing yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of interest to the researcher (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Chain referral sampling is useful when researchers do not have unlimited time to conduct a study. Bagheri and Saadati (2015) suggested using snowballing (chain referral sampling) I also used the snowballing technique to solicit

participants. I called SDVOBs from the VA's web page where they are listed and use snowballing and purposeful sampling techniques to gain access to other participants.

A combination of purposeful sampling and snowballing can be helpful in yielding the desired sample for a study (Robinson, 2014). When conducting a study, it is important to have a sample size that is representative of the population being examined (Hazra, & Gogtay, 2016). Having a sufficient sample size enhances the credibility of a study. For small populations, a sample size of three is sufficient for balance and depth of inquiry (Fusch & Ness, 2015). My sample size was three cases consisting of three companies with at least six participants.

Interviews may take place at the principal place of business, over the telephone, or in a setting of their choosing (Merriam, 2015). Ensuring that I obtain accurate information from relevant participants ensured data saturation. I used the mirroring technique to verify accuracy, continually conduct interviews and collect data to ensure data saturation. The chosen data saturation and sampling techniques are appropriate for this study.

Ethical Research

After receiving IRB approval (IRB approval number: 10-19-17-0312119) to conduct the study, I solicited participants. The participants were required to sign a consent form that adheres to the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) standards before admittance into the study. Merriam (2015) recommended that researchers inform participants about research as it happens, the procedures they will experience, risks and

benefits, and the purpose of the research. I informed the participants about the research, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study before asking for consent to participate. The participants should be free to ask questions and have the option to withdraw from the study if they are uncomfortable or undergo undue stress (Maxwell, 2013). The participants were free to ask questions and had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. To withdraw from the study, the participants could either call or e-mail me with their request. I provided contact information for myself and Walden University, and they were given a copy of the consent form before engaging in the study. There were no consequences for withdrawing from the study. Participants received a copy of the published study for their efforts.

Ensuring ethical standards at all times during the study was paramount. The participants should be informed of their rights and reminded that they are volunteers (Merriam, 2015). Researchers are required to maintain data from the study securely for 5 years to protect the confidentiality of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). I will maintain the data collected from this study in a secure location for 5 years. Obscuring identifying information about participants and organizations by using initials or generic descriptions also protects the confidentiality of the participants and organizations (Cope, 2014). I obscured identifying information about participants and organizations. Codifying identifying information with initials like Business Owner (BO), or Participant 1 (P1) to ensure anonymity. Some participants may be part of a vulnerable population and require consent to participate in the study (Yin, 2014). Some participants such as managers need

a letter of cooperation from the owner. If participants are owners of SDVOBs a letter of cooperation is not required.

As a professional in the field of helping veterans to start and grow their business, I enter this study with some preconceived notions. The bias of researchers can affect the reliability and validity of the finding in a study (Sorsa et al., 2015). I identified my biases and suspended them using bracketing by using a research log. A research log helps researchers to identify their biases by documenting beforehand so that they can minimize them during the document collection and analysis phase of a study (Kalhke, 2014). In the research log, I noted my preconceived notions before document collection and analysis and updated periodically as I receive new relevant information. Some of my preconceived notions were that SDVOB business leaders could transfer military skills to business, they had adequate training to be business leaders, and that they did not have the right leadership team to scale their businesses. Researchers keep either a written log or use digital software to record their biases (Stake, 2013). I created a Microsoft Word document to record my biases.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument. The process of gathering data in a qualitative study includes interviews and document collection during the study (Anderson et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2013) for relevant information about federal contracting and SDVOBs. Collecting data from semistructured interviews (Yin, 2014) with leaders of SDVOBs and their archival records is a viable data source of information. I also researched company documentation and any public records available to gain relevant

information about the strategies, such as marketing materials, accounting records, tax filings, procurement events attended and contract award amounts.

The data collection instruments are an integral part of conducting a study. In qualitative studies, the researcher is usually the primary data collection instrument (Maxwell, 2013). For this study, I was the primary data collection instrument. The interview protocol is an instrument that researchers use to assist with asking interview questions and document collection (Merriam, 2015). I used the interview protocol as a guide for consistency in interview questions, document collection, and review. When reviewing company documents, public records, marketing materials, accounting records, tax filings, procurement events attended and contract award amounts, I matched them to the interview protocol. Researchers can use the interview protocol as an instrument to help suspend bias in field applications (Sorsa et al., 2015). Because I chose to do semistructured interviews the interview protocol was instrumental in helping me to keep participants on topic while allotting enough flexibility for unstructured interaction and subduing my biases.

Interviews may take place at a principal place of business, over the telephone, or in a setting of their choosing (Merriam, 2015). I conducted face-to-face semistructured interviews; if a participant preferred to conduct an interview over the telephone or in another setting of their choosing, then I made the necessary arrangements. A semistructured interview process is a conversational style dialog where the interview questions are not presented in a rigid format (Cope, 2014). I had a conversational style interview with participants. In a semistructured interview, participants should have the

opportunity to divulge information in an unscripted manner (Elo et al., 2014).

Participants had the opportunity to digress at times during the semistructured interviews.

For a copy of the interview protocol with interview questions, see Appendix A.

The document collection process is essential to provide supporting evidence for collected data, analyses and the conclusion of a study. Researchers should collect documents in a systematic way that is aligned with the research question (Lewis, 2015). I collected documents such as marketing materials, accounting records, tax filings, procurement events attended and contract award amounts as laid out in the interview protocol (Appendix A). Researchers should have a method in place to verify that the documents collected accurately reflect business activities (Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, & Casey, 2015). I reviewed documents with participants to verify accuracy. Researchers can use tools such as member checking and transcript reviews to enhance reliability and validity of their studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I used member checking to verify the accuracy of the collected data to enhance reliability and validity of the study.

In this study, I did member checking and used mirroring. Researchers can enhance reliability and validity, by doing member checking and mirroring techniques (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Member checking is the process of verifying with the participants that what they said was interpreted correctly (Maxwell, 2013). Mirroring is the process of repeating the participants' answers in the form of a question to verify that what they said was recorded correctly (Maxwell, 2013). During the member checking process, I reviewed the data with participants to verify accuracy.

Data Collection Technique

I served as the primary data collector for the study. During a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary data collector (Maxwell, 2013). Data can come from interviews (structured or semistructured), observations by the researcher, company archives, and other sources (Merriam, 2015). I collected data from semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, company documentation, and any public records available to gain relevant information about the strategies, such as marketing materials, accounting records, tax filings, procurement events attended, and contract award amounts. If the interviewee is not comfortable providing me with company archival documents, then I searched all public records, including websites, for information on the company.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to conducting semistructured interviews. One of the advantage to semistructured interviews is that the researcher has time to prepare questions, so there is less pressure on the researcher during the exchange (Westerman, 2014). During the interview, the participants could contribute information that I may have overlooked or omitted; I could also read social cues and body language. However, success in the interview process is dependent on the interviewer's skill of keeping the participants on the topic (Merriam, 2015). One of the disadvantage to semistructured interviews is that the researcher can influence the participant behavior which might interfere with the open exchange process (Punch, 2013). I was mindful of steering the participants.

In the document review process, there are also advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages of document review is that the researcher can get access to information that would otherwise be unavailable (Myers, 2013). Having access to documents such as financial statements is essential to answering the research question and obtaining them through the document review process demonstrates the advantage. There are also disadvantages to the document review process. The document review process is time-consuming, subjective, and can affect the validity of findings (Stake, 2013). While the disadvantages to document review are unavoidable, it is necessary. The document review process has both advantages and disadvantages; however, it is an integral part of conducting a study (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I reviewed all the documents collected to enhance the validity of the study.

Researchers strive to have credible, valid, and reliable study results. Member checking, mirroring, and methodological triangulation ensures the validity and reliability of the data (Maxwell, 2013). I used member checking to ensure accurate translation of the transcript by verifying the interview responses with the interview participants both at the beginning and end of the study. Participants had the opportunity to add or revise statements or give additional explanations to ensure the accuracy of statements and documents. Mirroring is a technique in which the researcher reflects the answers back to the participant in a question form; this ensures that the response was correct (Kalhke, 2014). Researchers can also achieve an accurate interpretation of the participant's responses by using the mirroring technique (Merriam, 2015). I asked open-ended questions and use the mirroring technique to clarify the participant's response.

Data Organization Technique

The data collection process is rarely linear or smooth. Researchers need to have a technique to organize all the collected data. Organizing the collected data during a study is paramount to maintaining the integrity of the project (Anderson et al., 2014). I created a digital master file with all the collected information sorted for relevance, such as type, date, and title for easy retrieval. Related articles, government documents, company documents, and interview recordings were also stored in a digital master file. Maxwell (2013) and Merriam (2015) recommended keeping a back-up of collected data in a secured location for 3 to 5 years. Yin (2014) recommended that researchers maintain a copy of the research data and documentation for at least 5 years. I will keep a copy of all documentation, including any research logs or reflective journals, in a secure location for 5 years.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the data analysis in this study is to identify the successful strategies that SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts. Merriam (2015) recommended using triangulation of data for a case study. The triangulation of data can be done with data collected from interview transcripts and government and company documents (Maxwell, 2013). To triangulate the data, I conducted semistructured interviews and cross-reference them with company documents, marketing materials, accounting records, tax filings, procurement events attended and contract award amounts to triangulate the data. Methodological triangulation is the process of using three of the qualitative methods to verify information (Merriam, 2015). To achieve methodological

triangulation cross-checking interview responses with company documents and at least one other source of collected data. The purpose of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of an organization, or in this case organizations, rather than a numerical analysis of a large sample size or data set (Merriam, 2015). I analyzed and interpreted data per clusters of concepts as they emerged. Before data were collected, I created two groups: strategies that fell within Porter's generic strategies and strategies that fell outside. The codes for data that falls within Porter's generic strategies were cost leadership (CL), differentiation (D), cost focus (CF), and differentiation focus (DF). The data that falls outside of Porter's generic strategies were coded and themed based on the frequency of occurrence and significance. The process of data analysis involves processing, recording, analyzing, reducing, pattern and theme identification, displaying, verifying, and drawing conclusions (Stake, 2013). I did not use a data software for analysis. I hand coded, processed and recorded the data, analyzed the data as I collected them, reduced the data for relevance, identified patterns or themes, displayed the data, verified and drew conclusions. I highlighted common nodes in different colors to create themes and weighted them based on the frequency of occurrence.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Qualitative researchers enhance reliability in their studies by adhering to procedures that are repeatable and dependable. Yin (2014) recommended that researchers code written interview data (notes) and cross-reference them with audio recordings to ensure reliability and reduce the likelihood of errors. I coded written

interview data and cross-referenced them with audio recordings. Because the interview questions were open-ended and were posed to multiple interviewees, the responses are unfiltered. Data triangulation is the process of cross-referencing information from one source with others (Anderson et al., 2014). I did data and methodological triangulation of the semistructured interviews with the research question, company, and government documents to enhance the reliability and dependability of the study. If there are any misunderstandings, I clarified by asking additional follow-up questions not listed in the interview questions. Elo et al. (2014) and Marshall and Rossman (2015) asserted that researchers need to account for the changing conditions for the chosen study and design caused by a refined understanding of the setting to achieve dependability by using member checking, transcript review, and pilot tests. To reduce the effects of personal bias and ensure the dependability of this study, I used member checking. I conducted member checking by asking participants to verify my interpretation of the semistructured interviews before I presented my findings. I presented my interpretations to the participants and asked if they were representative of what they stated or intended.

Validity

Validity in a qualitative study refers to how credible the process for obtaining research participants, gathering data, analyzing data, and reporting the findings. Researchers must adhere to the prescribed research method to achieve internal and external validity in a study (Merriam, 2015; Yin, 2014); therefore, I followed qualitative procedures for data collecting. Researchers who follow a prescribed data collection method, including member checking and transcript review, strengthen the credibility and

confirmability of a study (Yin, 2014). To further increase credibility and confirmability during the interview portion of the study, I verified that the participants understood the questions. A technique for ensuring that the participants understand the questions is to provide a written copy to them before the interview (Maxwell, 2013). The processes are prescribed to ensure that researchers achieve credibility and confirmability.

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the study. Cope (2014) asserted that credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant views or interpretation and representation of them by the researcher. Maxwell (2013) and Merriam (2015) agreed that researchers could enhance credibility by describing their experience and verifying the findings with participants. I ensured credibility by doing member checking of the data interpretation and methodology triangulation. To triangulate the method, I cross-referenced the research question with the research method and document collection to triangulate the method. I conducted member checking by asking participants to verify my interpretation of the semistructured interviews before I presented my findings. I presented my interpretations to the participants and ask if they are representative of what they stated or intended.

The ability to apply the findings from a study to other groups is transferability. Transferability refers to findings that apply to other settings or groups (Cope, 2014). Researchers strive for their findings to be meaningful to individuals or groups outside of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Researchers can achieve transferability by generalizing the context and assumptions of their studies (Merriam, 2015). I ensured transferability by adhering to the protocols and processes of interview data gathering, member checking,

triangulation, and generalizing the results so that future researchers can use them for different groups.

In qualitative research, confirmability refers to the ability of other researchers to confirm the results using the same processes. Confirmability is the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). Researchers can demonstrate confirmability by describing how they established conclusions and interpretations from the data (Houghton et al., 2015). Researchers can achieve confirmability by using the mirroring technique (Miller et al., 2015). I ensured confirmability by using the mirroring technique. Mirroring is when an interviewer repeats the participant's answer in the form of a question to ensure accurate interpretation of what was said (Maxwell, 2013). Using the mirroring technique is one way that researchers can achieve confirmability. Researchers reach data saturation when there is enough information to replicate the study, and there is no new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I reached data saturation when there was either enough information to replicate the study, or I obtained no new information through document collection and semistructured interviews.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I outlined in detail how I explored the research question: What strategies do SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts to improve profitability? For this qualitative multiple case study, I conducted semistructured interviews with SDVOB leaders in the Northeastern United States. I was the primary data collector, and my sources for document collection came from company documents, public records,

marketing materials, accounting records, tax filings, procurement events attended and contract award amounts. I used member checking to verify the accuracy of the collected documents to enhance reliability and validity of the study. I obscured identifying information about participants and organizations. I used the interview protocol as a guide for consistency in interview questions, document collection, and review. In Section 3, I present the findings of my study, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SDVOBs leaders used to win federal contracts. In Section 3, I present my findings, demonstrate the application to professional practice, and outline the implications for social change. The eight major themes were (a) process improvement/optimization to win federal contracts, (b) understanding requirements to win federal contracts, (c) preventing trial and error to win federal contracts, (d) personalizing services to win federal contracts, (e) understanding the client to win federal contracts, (f) access to external capital/resources to win federal contracts, (g) understanding the procurement process to win federal contracts, and (h) forward planning to win federal contracts.

Presentation of the Findings

In this section, I will discuss the major themes that emerged from the data. The major themes were (a) process improvement/optimization to win federal contracts, (b) understanding requirements to win federal contracts, (c) preventing trial and error to win federal contracts, (d) personalizing services to win federal contracts, (e) understanding the client to win federal contracts, (f) access to external capital/resources to win federal contracts, (g) understanding the procurement process to win federal contracts, and (h) forward planning to win federal contracts. I derived the major themes that emerged in this section from the semistructured interviews, collected and analyzed data, and archival documents that addressed the research question:

What strategies do SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts?

Theme 1: Process Improvement/Optimization to Win Federal Contracts

Leaders of SDVOBs are constantly improving and optimizing their processes to win federal contracts. Participant 2 stated that, “because I started my business, I knew and understood all the positions, so when it was time to scale I was able to improve processes or optimize which resulted in cost savings which I could pass on to our clients.” The participants stated that that hands-on knowledge was helpful for process improvement and optimization. Participant 4 stated that, “we constantly do internal refinements and optimization to save money, improve profitability, and be more attractive to the agencies.” The constant improvement of processes and optimizing is necessary to remain competitive.

Business leaders’ approach to process improvement and optimization to win federal contracts differs. Participant 3 stated that, “part of our optimization process was acquiring personnel with the appropriate skill sets to work in key positions.” Participant 3 highlighted the importance of contract matching. Participant 5, on the other hand, stated that, “we acquired a new telephone system and new computers to reduce the workload and improve output.” Although different methods were used to achieve process improvement or optimization, the goal remained the same, which was to be more competitive.

I reviewed the purchase orders of the company and cross-referenced them with the prices on their suppliers’ website to determine optimization to win federal contracts. I found that the cost of the purchased materials was lower than the listed prices. Price negotiation is part of the optimization process. Prices are negotiated and not listed on the

participants' websites, and cost estimation was done using the RS Means software. The phrases "low-cost and "competitive prices" were stated on the participants' marketing materials and websites, implying that they had the lowest prices. The archival documents were consistent with the theme of process improvement/optimization to win federal contracts.

The theme of process improvement/optimization to win federal contracts was in alignment with other researchers' findings. Small business leaders who improve internal processes and optimize output have a higher rate of survival than their counterparts who do not (Saidel, 2017). Refining methods and conducting process improvements are practical not only for profitability but also for economic longevity. Marion (2017) asserted that disadvantaged small businesses narrow the disparity gap by incorporating technology into their workflow. SDVOB leaders can incorporate innovative technologies to remain competitive.

The theme of process improvement/optimization to win federal contracts was not in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. The participants reported that using process improvement or optimization was essential for sustainability. Although the participants used process improvement or optimization, it was not correlated to Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. The participants provided no evidence that process improvement or optimization had any relation to generic strategies. The theme of process improvement/optimization to win federal contracts was in alignment with Anderson et al.'s (2014) innovation and creativity in organizations theory.

Theme 2: Understanding Requirements to Win Federal Contracts

It is important for SDVOBs to understand requirements to win a federal contract. In some instances, through no fault of either party, the wording of the contract can lead to misunderstandings; it is prudent for contractors to have a legal professional review the contract. Participant 1 stated that, “the first thing you have to do is make sure that you understand the contract because once it is signed, you are liable for everything in it.” Leaders of SDVOBs, and sometimes agency administrators who do not understand the contract terms, cause delays that leads to changed work orders and cost overruns. Participant 1 also stated that, “resolving misunderstandings early can lead to cost savings and less downtime.” An understanding of the contract could have revealed the potential issue before starting the project. Participants reported that sometimes change work orders are necessary and out of their control; however, the key is to maintain a good relationship with the client when misunderstandings happen.

The theme of understanding requirements to win federal contracts was in alignment with the literature. Small businesses that engage in federal contracting often fail to complete contracts on schedule due to a lack of qualified personnel, misunderstanding of (contract) requirements, and project management skills (Amol, Joshi, Inouye, & Robinson, 2017; Cabral, 2017). There are several reasons why contractors fail to perform on federal contracts. Jacob (2017) asserted that the federal government needs to adjust contract requirements to performance standards. Leaders of SDVOBs who demonstrate proficiency in understanding and executing federal contracts increase their chances of getting higher dollar value awards.

The theme of understanding requirements to win federal contracts was not in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Contractors who understand contract requirements were not demonstrating a clear distinction in their product or service. There was no mention of understanding contract requirements in generic strategies for competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). Knowledge of contract requirements is a way that SDVOB leaders can negotiate better prices with contracting officers. The theme of understanding requirements to win federal contracts was not related to generic strategies. The theme of understanding requirements to win federal contracts was in alignment with Anker et al.'s (2015) consumer dominant value creation framework (as outlined in the literature review).

Theme 3: Preventing Trial and Error to Win Federal Contracts

Leaders of SDVOBs who do not have a mentor win federal contracts through trial and error. Participant 4 stated that, "In the beginning, a lot of what we did was trial and error because we had to figure it out on our own." Leaders of SDVOBs are encouraged to seek out and build relationships with mentors. Participant 4 stated that, "If we had a mentor we would not have made as many mistakes." Leaders of SDVOBs should seek out mentorship to save time and, money, and to win federal contracts.

The theme of preventing trial and error to win federal contracts was in alignment with the literature. Small business leaders find that navigating the federal contracting process is not linear and that they must use their discretion (Daley, 2017; Laubacher, 2017). Many of the issues in federal contracting stem from a lack of understanding on the part of contractors of how the process works. Åstebro (2017) referred to new

contractors as nascent and novices because they are unfamiliar with public contracting and often make mistakes navigating the process. Leaders of SDVOBs who are new to the procurement process find navigating it problematic because they do not have clear guidance.

The theme of preventing trial and error to win federal contracts was not in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Demonstrating a clear distinction between product or service, unique processes, scarcity, or novelty are the tenets of differentiation and differentiation focus strategies (Porter, 1985). Because preventing trial and error to win federal contracts met none of the attributes of differentiation or differentiation focus, there was no alignment between the participants' responses and Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. The theme of preventing trial and error to win federal contracts was in alignment with Ohmae's (1982) Blue Ocean strategy. Ohmae defined Blue Ocean strategy as creating a market for a product or service so that essentially business leaders can capture large shares in an abbreviated time frame.

Theme 4: Personalizing Services to Win Federal Contracts

Leaders of SDVOBs personalize their services to set their companies apart from their competitors to win federal contracts. Participant 3 stated, "I would add my personal touch with the contracting officers and administrators so that we would stand out." The goods and services that SDVOBs produce are often indistinguishable from their competitors, which makes it difficult to stand out. Participant 2 argued that "the owner and their businesses are the same, so you can't help but be personal" so to connect

with clients the “sharing pictures of children and family creates a more personal relationship.” Personalizing services to win federal contracts can vary among business leaders, and there are no guidelines on how to personalize a service for a customer.

The theme of personalizing services to win federal contracts was not consistent with the literature. Small business leaders used various strategies to distinguish the products and services that they offered to the federal government (Leiser & Wolter, 2017). Many SDVOB leaders attempted to highlight the difference in their product or services from that of their competitors. Roberson (2017) asserted that tailoring products and services and giving them a personal touch to meet clients’ expectations are the characteristics of companies that retain repeat buyers. Leaders of SDVOBs who connect with contracting officers on a personal level may increase their chance of success in federal contracting.

I reviewed the archival documents of purchase orders, and I did not find any reference to the theme of personalizing services to win federal contracts. There was reference to meeting client’s needs and satisfying special requests on Participant 3’s website. There is no evidence in the archival documents that directly states personalizing; therefore, there is no support for the theme of personalizing services to win federal contracts.

The theme of personalizing services to win federal contracts was in alignment with Porter’s (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Personalization is related to differentiation and differentiation focus because the SDVOB leaders distinguished the service that they offered from their competitors. Business leaders who

used any of Porter's strategies together like differentiation and differentiation focus to personalize their offerings are using a hybrid strategy. A clear distinction in product or service, or unique processes, scarcity, or novelty are the tenets of differentiation and differentiation focus strategies (Porter, 1985). Personalizing services to win federal contracts is correlated to differentiation and differentiation focus, and it is consistent with the literature on the topic.

Theme 5: Understanding the Client to Win Federal Contracts

It is important for contractors to understand their clients and to develop good working relationships to win federal contracts. Participant 2 stated that, "to understand our client better, we did in-person visits." The visits were necessary to establish rapport, understand the nuances of the site, and priorities of the administrators. Participant 2 also stated that, "the agency administrators admitted that it was the first time that any contractor had done that, they were pleasantly surprised, and we built a great relationship." Leaders of SDVOBs benefited from in-person visits.

The theme of understanding the client to win federal contracts was in alignment with the literature. For business leaders to be successful in forging long-term relationships, it is imperative that they apply their knowledge about the agency and their procedures (O'Leary, 2017). One way that SDVOB leaders can understand the client better and forge a long-term relationship is by communicating regularly with the contracting officer and site administrators. Piotrowski (2017) stated that transparency in government procurement could reduce many inherent issues, such as agency-contractor

relationship, renegotiations, and cost overruns. If SDVOBs understand what their clients' needs are, there are likely to be fewer issues during the execution of contracts.

I reviewed the company's website, marketing materials, and purchase orders and I did not find any reference to understanding the client to win federal contracts. Because there was no evidence to support the theme of understanding the client to win federal contracts, there is no correlation. Therefore, there is no alignment between the archival documents and the theme of understanding the client to win federal contracts.

The theme of understanding the client to win federal contracts was in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. A differentiation focus strategy is advantageous when companies can be nimble in a rigid market (Porter, 1985). The process of site visits and understanding the client was documented in the literature and were consistent with generic strategies for competitive advantage.

Theme 6: Access to External Capital/Resources to Win Federal Contracts

Access to external capital and resources are vital for SDVOB leaders who engage in federal contracting. Participant 2 reported that "after we won the first contract, we needed capital to secure additional personnel and equipment." Federal labor regulations necessitated the need for capital. Participant 2 also stated that, "we were required to have enough personnel and pay them the prevailing wage including benefits when we were awarded the contract, even though we had not received our first payment." Participants 3 recalled having to "scramble to get capital after winning our first contract." The banks loaned them the capital so that they could purchase equipment and hire personnel. Participants 3 also reported that "we used the money to hire personnel, purchase or lease

equipment, and cover expenses.” Having access to external capital was critical to helping cover expenses until the company had sufficient income.

For construction contractors, having the equipment to complete a project was equally important as having the right personnel. Participant 2 explained that “the weather and time of year factors into the types of equipment we need for projects.” Experienced contractors plan for adverse conditions that may hinder contract performance and keep capital or resources in reserve. Participant 3 stated that, “in the winter, they may need snow removal equipment to access work sites.” Having access to external capital or resources are helpful in emergencies, or unforeseen situations like severe weather or accidents.

The theme of access to external capital and resources to win federal contracts was in alignment with the literature. Small business owners lack resources, such as strategies, personnel, expertise, and management structures to compete with large firms (Bellucci, Borisov, & Zazzaro, 2017; Finder, 2017). Leaders of SDVOBs who have access to external resources and capital have a greater chance of success in federal procurement. Capital in the form of loans or investments are an integral part of the growth process of small businesses; the cash injection shortens the time it takes to acquire equipment, personnel, and marketing (Tkachenko, Yakovlev, & Kuznetsova, 2017). Small businesses that lack resources are at a disadvantage when competing against established firms and are at greater risk of failure.

I reviewed the company’s website, marketing materials, and purchase orders, and I did not find any reference to the theme of access to external capital to win federal

contracts. Participant 2's purchase orders revealed that there were purchases of new equipment, however, there was no evidence to support the source of capital. The evidence does not support the theme of access to external capital/resources to win federal contracts.

The theme of access to external capital and resources to win federal contracts was in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Executing any of Porter's generic strategies requires capital and resources. Business leaders need capital and resources to exploit advantages using any of the generic strategies (Porter, 1985). Capital and resources are necessary for any business. SDVOB leaders who operate under the guidance of generic strategies will find it necessary to acquire one or both.

Theme 7: Understanding the Procurement Process to Win Federal Contracts

Understanding the procurement process was necessary to win federal contracts. Participants 1 stressed that "it is very important to understand the procurement process." Contractors who are knowledgeable about the federal procurement process find it easier to navigate, which causes fewer disruptions and leads to less strain on relationships between contractors and their partners. Participant 4 stated that, "contracting officers and agency officials were more inclined to give us additional projects because we demonstrated knowledge of the procurement process." The participants' understanding of the procurement process proved valuable both to their company and the federal agency.

I reviewed the participants' website for past projects and current workload to determine how they won federal contracts, and I found that the companies worked on several large projects at the same time with in-house staff and independent contractors. When contractors manage multiple projects simultaneously, they increase their risk of errors, accidents, and miscommunication. To reduce the occurrence of errors, accidents, and miscommunications, the SDVOBs leaders developed flexible schedules for their employees and independent contractors and were responsive if any adverse issues arose. The archival documents were consistent with the theme of understanding the procurement process to win federal contracts.

The theme of understanding the procurement process to win federal contracts was in alignment with the literature. Contractors bring value to the procurement process by advancing the goals of Congress and the federal agencies (Arena et al., 2018). Contractors are an integral part of the federal procurement process. All of the federal agencies provide information and resources to contractors who want to do business with the government (U.S. SBA, 2018). Contractors who understand the procurement process increase their chances of winning federal contracts.

The theme of understanding the procurement process to win federal contracts was in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. SDVOB leaders can become competitive by understanding the procurement process. A differentiation strategy is appropriate when the product or service is unique or leveraged in a saturated market (Porter, 1985). The participants' strategies were consistent with the literature on generic strategies for competitive advantage.

Theme 8: Forward-Planning to Win Federal Contracts

Forward-planning is essential to meet deadlines in federal contracting. Participant 3 stated that, “it was necessary to know the schedules and response times of the agencies so that we could plan accordingly” to be successful in federal contracting. Leaders of SDVOBs may miss opportunities and may be viewed as uninterested or unprofessional, or unready for federal contracting if they do not forward-plan. Participant 1 stated that, “we needed enough time to assess the public contracting space to develop a suitable marketing strategy that was competitive.” Leaders of SDVOBs need adequate lead time to assess the agency’s needs and their competitors’ offering and to develop a strategy.

Navigating the federal procurement space was challenging for new contractors. Contractors must have enough time to plan and execute each phase of the process. Participant 2 stated that, “we needed time to do the certification, find and review the contract, do our due diligence, and bid.” Finding a suitable mentor takes time, patience, and communication, which is why forward-planning is necessary. Participant 2 also stated that, “for our first federal contract we were assigned a mentor, but the relationship was not good, and we did not receive proper guidance, if we had more time we probably could have found a better one.” Allotting enough time to complete each phase of the process and having a strategy in place are the premise of forward-planning.

In reviewing the participants’ marketing materials and websites to determine how they used forward-planning to win federal contracts, I found that the contract amounts and scopes of work increased. Chronologically, the projects that the participants listed on their websites, which included both public and private sector work, revealed that there

was growth in both size and dollar figures. The project scope required the participants to hire additional personnel, which increased the company size and was an indicator of growth. The SDVOB leaders had to plan for growth in the business to accommodate more clientele. The archival documents were in alignment with the theme of forward-planning to win federal contracts.

The theme of forward-planning to win federal contracts was not in alignment with other researchers' findings. Business leaders who venture into new markets should do research and understand their customers' needs (Laubacher, 2017). First-time contractors should research the agency that they plan to do business with and formulate a plan for success. Companies that forward-plan and engage with mentors are more likely to be successful in federal contracting because they will have assistance to avoid common mistakes (U.S. SBA, 2018). The literature on the subject forward-planning is not consistent with the theme.

The theme of forward-planning to win federal contracts was not in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Business leaders who use forward-planning to be competitive were not consistent with either a differentiation, cost focus, or differentiation focus strategies (Porter, 1985). Forward-planning was not directly linked to differentiation and differentiation focus strategies. Although there was no correlation between generic strategies, forward-planning was important for SDVOBs.

Additional Findings Related to Federal Contracts

Preventing scope creep after winning federal contracts. The participants reported that site administrators made additional requests after winning a federal contract,

which is a phenomenon referred to as scope creep. Participant 1 stated that, “My first experience of scope creep, was when an agency administrator asked for additional work to be done that we did not discuss before starting the project.” The participants incurred more expenses and reduced profit margins due to the changes that the site administrator requested. Participant 1 also stated that, “we simply complied without formally submitting any change work order because didn’t want scope creep to cause delays.”

Additional requests or changes in the scope of work happen for a variety of reasons and is a normal part of federal contracting. Contractors who are flexible and prepared for such events will have a better experience in federal contracting. Participant 1 stated that, “the goodwill that we showed to the client by not submitting a change work order and delaying the project resulted in subsequent awards, and we recouped the initial loss many times over.” Scope creep is a regular occurrence in federal contracting, and SDVOB leaders should be prepared to make changes, remain flexible, and have creative solutions, to have a long-lasting relationship with an agency.

The theme of scope creep after winning a federal contract was in alignment with the literature. The processes of contract modification and change work orders require sufficient justification, renegotiating, and approvals that cause delays of projects and added expense to the taxpayers (Heberle, McReynolds, Sizemore, & Schilling, 2017; Kim, 2017). Scope creep, or contract modifications, are a part of doing business with the federal government. Leaders of small businesses who are prepared to circumvent common adverse conditions have a greater likelihood of securing more government

contracts (Kim & Brown, 2017). Although it may be prudent and more profitable to avoid the occurrences of scope creep or contract modifications, they occur frequently.

The theme of scope creep after winning a federal contract was not in alignment with Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Preventing scope creep after winning a federal contract does not directly correlate to any of Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage. The issue of scope creep is a problem for contractors. However, Porter did not mention scope creep in any of the generic strategies.

Adhering to payment schedules after winning federal contracts. Each federal agency had a different payment schedule, which can lead to delays in contractors getting paid. Participant 5 stated that, "Learning the payment schedule was a challenge for us at first." Contractors need to be prepared to operate for prolonged periods without income when engaging in federal contracting. Participant 2 stated that, "because we were new to federal contracting, we missed our first submission because we didn't know the (payment) schedule." Participant 5 reported that in their field, the initial investment was high in government contracting, so they had to make sure that they had sufficient capital to operate for an extended period. In federal contracting, construction contractors furnish all of the labor and materials needed for a project upfront, which is different from the private sector. Participant 1 stated that, "All of the expenses are on us for the project, so we made it a point to know when the agency was scheduled to pay us." The typical payment schedule for construction work is 45 days from the start of a project. Participant 2 stated that, "we had to pay employees on a biweekly basis without receiving the first

payment from the agency.” Delays that occur during the initial phases of a project can have a fiscal impact on a company.

The theme of adhering to payment schedules after winning federal contracts was in alignment with the literature. Small businesses that are susceptible to abnormal operational conditions, such as intermittent cashflows (untimely payments), are at risk of not completing their contracts (López-Hernández, Zafra-Gómez, Plata-Díaz, & de la Higuera-Molina, 2017). Leaders of SDVOBs who are knowledgeable of federal agencies’ payment schedules can be proactive and avoid some of the issues that come with lengthy payment cycles. Lewis (2017) asserted that contractors who do not know how the agency pays them would have a challenging time throughout the life of the contract. Positive cash flow is essential for every business; small businesses are sensitive to disruptions in cash flow.

The theme of adhering to payment schedules after winning federal contracts was not in alignment with Porter’s (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage. Leaders of SDVOBs who were knowledgeable about the payment schedule of the agency reported that they could anticipate payroll issues before they arose and avoided them. Porter never mentioned payment schedules in the generic strategies for competitive advantage. Therefore, it is not consistent with generic strategies for competitive advantage. The main priority for SDVOB leaders was to demonstrate that they were better than their competitors by saving the agencies money and delays with their knowledge.

Applications to Professional Practice

By understanding the strategies that existing SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts, other small business leaders can use the knowledge from this study to get comparable results. Federal administrators are concerned about 8(a) firms' participation in the procurement process (U.S. GAO, 2017). SDVOB leaders desire to gain greater access to federal contracts but lack the strategies to do so. SDVOB leaders have struggled to implement generic strategies for competitive advantage without doing an investigation for suitability (Köseoglu et al., 2015). SDVOB leaders implement generic strategies for competitive advantage in the federal marketplace. Unlike other markets, there are clear rules for soliciting and engaging federal agencies. Marketing strategies are limited in a closed system like the federal marketplace. Even in a transparent market, there remains a lot of uncertainty for SDVOB leaders, and the wrong strategy will be ineffective.

Congress has pressured agency administrators and contracting officers to increase the participation of minority-owned businesses, including SDVOBs. SDVOB leaders are challenged by the issues in federal contracting, and this is why 8(a) firms require strategies to overcome them (Arena et al., 2018; Lai & Huili Lin, 2017). SDVOB leaders who emulate strategies that were successful in securing federal awards will have a positive impact on new firms entering public procurement.

Federal agencies have identified many issues with the procurement process. Some of the issues in federal contracting were delays, renegotiation of contracts, fraud, and higher costs to the federal government (Van Den Hurk & Verhoest, 2016; Warren,

2014). Contractors who understand the contract requirements, their client's needs, procedures, the procurement process, payment schedules, scope creep, and fraud will eliminate most of the procurement issues. SDVOB leaders who attend training on the contracting process and become knowledgeable of the rules and ways to remediate issues may reduce the occurrences of change work orders or disputes.

By fostering regular interaction with contracting officers, attending training, and researching, contractors will better understand the procurement process. Leaders of SDVOBs can better understand their client by doing in-person site visits and building good relationships with them. SDVOB leaders who understand payment schedules reduce the risk of having cashflow issues. Contractors can reduce or avoid scope creep by communicating early and regularly with their clients if a change work order is needed which is better to do at the beginning of the project. SDVOB leaders used a hybrid of Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage because it was advantageous to them. Based upon the findings of the participant interviews and content analysis of the archival documents, I recommend that leaders use hybrid strategies for winning federal contracts.

Implications for Social Change

SDVOB leaders struggle to win federal contracts. Public officials and agency administrators seek solutions to the problems with the procurement process (Battaglio, French, & Goodman, 2017; U.S. GAO, 2015b). SDVOB leaders may increase their participation in federal contracting if some of the inherent issues, such as transparency

and fraud, are addressed. Leaders of SDVOBs who participate in federal contracting can grow to become large businesses and employ more people.

If an SDVOB becomes a large business from participating in federal contracting, there could be several positive effects on their local community. The 8(a)-minority business development program is designed as a 9-year a growth mechanism for small firms (U.S. SBA, 2016b). Leaders of SDVOBs who are successful in public contracting can mentor others so that the cycle can continue. Successful businesses reflect positively on the community. Employees relocate to be closer to work, which has a positive effect on the local economy. Minority-owned business and in this case SDVOBs are more likely to hire minorities and veterans.

SDVOB leaders who are entrepreneurs can find creative solutions and eliminate many of the issues that federal agencies have with the procurement process. Thriving businesses in local communities generate political interests that can call attention to social issues (Witko, 2016). Revenues from taxes get redistributed into local communities, which also has a positive impact on the local population. Successful SDVOB leaders reflect positively on their neighborhood, communities, and the military. Having more successful SDVOBs would encourage returning servicemembers to pursue entrepreneurship and reduce unemployment in the veteran population.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this study was to identify the strategies that SDVOB leaders used to win federal contracts and improve profitability. By identifying successful strategies, SDVOB leaders can use them to win federal contracts and grow their businesses

(Köseoglu et al., 2015). Leaders of SDVOBs should plan and familiarize themselves with the federal procurement process before attempting to bid on contracts. Leaders of SDVOBs should register with fedbizopps.gov to learn about the types of goods and services the federal agency that they want to do business with is looking for at the beginning. By using reputable websites that have either .gov or .edu extensions, SDVOB business leaders can steer away from businesses that may take advantage of them and get accurate information.

Based upon the findings of the participant interviews and content analysis of the archival documents, I recommend that SDVOB leaders network with other SDVOB and veteran-owned businesses to explore partnering or alliancing and use hybrid strategies so that their offerings can be more robust and appealing to contracting officers. The U.S. SBA and their local resource partners like SCOREs, SBDCs, WBCs, VBOCs, and PTACs have current information, opportunities, networking events, and hands-on assistance that SDVOB leaders can use (U.S. SBA, 2018). Even though SDVOBs are certified to do federal contracting as prime contractors, it is better to have some degree of success in the private sector and pursue subcontracting opportunities before bidding as a prime contractor. SDVOB leaders who have the experience and resources before competing for federal contracts as prime contractor reduce the risk of failure.

The results of this study are useful not only to SDVOB leaders but also to federal agency administrators, the Small Business Committees in the House of Congress and the Senate, other minority business owners, and stakeholders. SDVOB leaders can use the findings of this study to develop better strategies to compete and be more profitable.

Federal agency administrators can use this information to address areas of concern, like transparency and fraud. Members of the Houses of Congress and Senate can take measures to streamline the federal contracting process for SDVOBs and other minority-owned businesses. Stakeholders can better understand the inherent deficiencies in SDVOBs and develop better methods to work with and assist them.

I plan to distribute the findings of this study to SDVOB leaders, Veteran Business Organizations and Trade Groups, and with nonprofit organizations that serve the veteran population. The literature can be disseminated to the intended population through Veteran Business Organizations, trade groups, and nonprofits either physically or electronically. Also, by speaking at conferences or large gatherings with SDVOB leaders is another method of disseminating the information.

Based on the participant findings, analysis of the archival document, and the literature on federal contracting, I recommend that SDVOB leaders use the strategies outlined in this study to win federal contracts. SDVOB leaders can overcome issues such as bidding, risk management, and capacity (Arena et al., 2018; Eckerd & Girth, 2017; Marion, 2017). SDVOB leaders that overcome these challenges can have greater success in federal contracting.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies that SDVOB leaders use to win federal contracts. In this study, I did not address the ideal time in an SDVOB's growth to begin the public contracting process or the basic components and structure of a company that is suitable for federal contracting. During this study, the participants

identified strategies to address contract concerns like scope creep, process improvement and optimization, and accessing external capital that could be of interest to future researchers.

I also recommend that future researchers explore the mentor-mentee relationship in federal contracting. Participants have expressed disappointing results working with their mentors. Participants reported concerns about the "Pay to Play" culture in federal contracting that comes from various sources. Scholars should examine the types of fraud that takes place in federal contracting to reveal areas that are susceptible to exploitation.

Before analyzing the data, I expected to see a higher frequency of one or two strategies; I did not expect to find that a majority of SDVOB leaders were using hybrid strategies. Future researchers should explore why SDVOBs use hybrid strategies instead of single strategies. I also found from analyzing the data that SDVOBs did not use a cost leadership strategy; scholars should find out why SDVOB leaders do not use a cost leadership strategy. My last recommendation for a study on SDVOBs would be to find out how scalable they are to the management teams that they have.

Reflections

This journey started with sheer curiosity, and I never imagined it would take the course that it did. I am grateful for the experience and to have met all the wonderful people that I did along the way and the lessons that I have learned. When I first started working with veterans and hearing their stories of how they became entrepreneurs, I felt a bond not only because of our service, but also because of our desire to continue to do the best that we can. My connection with veterans was viewed through the prism of our

shared experience, so I did have some preconceived notions and biases. My first notion was that veterans could be good entrepreneurs because of the skills that they learned in the military. Second, I believed that they had adequate training to be successful business leaders. Third, I thought that they did not have the right leadership team to scale their businesses.

During the study and data collection process, I was able to connect with SDVOB leaders primarily due to our veteran connection. Upon initial contact, most were apprehensive about speaking to me, but once they learned that I was a veteran as well, they became more receptive. I learned that in doing data collection, some of the skills as a researcher were not adequate when interacting with people. I attribute my success in gaining participants with skills that I learned in my professional life, such as building rapport and overturning objections. The population that I was studying valued their time but felt it was their duty to help other veterans.

After completing this study, some of my initial notions were confirmed, and others changed. I was able to confirm that the skills that veterans learned while serving in the military could be used in business. I was also able to confirm that SDVOBs did not have the right leadership team to scale their companies into large businesses. I did not confirm that veterans had adequate training to be business leaders.

Conclusion

The participation of SDVOBs in federal contracting is essential for Congress and agency administrators to meet their goals. The federal government spends considerable amounts of money and resources to get SDVOBs to participate in public procurement.

However, the system needs improvement. The purpose of this study was to identify strategies that win federal contracts. If new SDVOB leaders can replicate the success of their predecessors, the results should be increased federal contracting participation and more awards in the 8(a) SDVOB category.

Leaders of SDVOBs used each of Porter's (1985) generic strategies for competitive advantage at different rates. I found that SDVOBs leaders used a hybrid of Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage more frequently than single or pure strategies. If SDVOB leaders use the same approach, they could get comparable results. There are many benefits to greater participation in federal contracting by SDVOBs, such as generating political interests that can call attention to social issues, redistribution of taxes into local communities, and reduced unemployment in the veteran population.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

| Interview Protocol | |
|--|---|
| What you will do | What you will say-script |
| <p>Introduce the interview and set the stage-often over a meal or coffee</p> | <p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study.</p> <p>The study is about Service Disabled Veteran Owned Businesses (SDVOBs) and the strategies they use to successfully win Federal contracts and improve profitability. The answers you provide will help to advance our level of knowledge of strategies that win Federal contracts.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch for nonverbal queues • Paraphrase as needed • Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What strategies do you use to win Federal contracts to improve profitability? 2. What hurdles did you experience in developing and implementing the strategies for winning your first contract? 3. How do you revise the strategies for maximum effectiveness based on changing conditions? 4. If your previous strategy was successful and profitable, why did you change it? 5. What internal resources did you use to compete for Federal contracts? 6. What did you do to produce a good or service that is cheaper than your competitors? 7. What did you do to create a distinction between your product or service than your competitors? |

| | |
|---|--|
| | 8. What was your reasoning for focusing on the price of your product or service? |
| | 9. What was the reason you chose your market segment to highlight the difference in your product or service? |
| | 10. What additional information can you share with me regarding strategies that you used to win federal contracts and increase profitability? |
| Wrap up interview thanking participant | Your participation was critical to help me get a better understanding of successful strategies that SDVOBs use to win Federal Contracts. Again, I want to thank you for your time and for agreeing to do this interview. |
| Schedule follow-up member checking | After I have transcribed your answers, I would like to follow up with you to verify that the content reflects what you said |

| | |
|---|--|
| interview | here today. May we schedule a convenient time to review your responses? |
| Follow-up Member Checking Interview | |
| Introduce follow-up interview and set the stage | Script XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX |
| Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question Bring in probing questions related to other information that you may have found-note the information must be related so that you are probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walk through each question, read the interpretation and ask: | Script XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX |
| | 1. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 2. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 3. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 4. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 5. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 6. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 7. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 8. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| | 9. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed |
| 10. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation- perhaps one paragraph or as needed | |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Did I miss anything? Or, what would you like to add?</p> | |
|---|--|

Appendix B: NIH Certificate

