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Effective Strategies Processing Companies Use to Sustain Business Operations Beyond 5 Years

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Travis C. Souders

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Effective Strategies Processing Companies Use to Sustain
Business Operations Beyond 5 Years

by

Travis C. Souders

MBA, Westwood College, 2014

BS, Westwood College, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

June 2020

Abstract

Some small food processing businesses in the United States lack strategies to remain financially viable beyond 5 years of operation. Owners and managers of small food processing businesses could benefit from an improved understanding of the importance of effective strategies to improve small business sustainability. Grounded in systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies small food processing companies use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The participants were 1 small-business owner and 8 managers in Lexington, Kentucky, who used effective strategies to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. Data collected came from semi-structured interviews, company documents, and observations of participants during a morning staff huddle and a staff meeting. Thematic analysis and methodological triangulation were the means of analyzing the data. Three themes emerged from this study: customer service, strategic planning, and effective leadership. A key recommendation is for small business owners to identify customer expectations through active engagement and recognize the importance of customer retention. The implications for social change include the potential for food processing companies to contribute to the economic sustainability of a community, providing income to farmers, local jobs, and food to consumers.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small food processing business owners and managers could benefit from an improved understanding of the importance of systems theory and effective strategies to improve small business sustainability. Small businesses create wealth, economic growth, and development worldwide (Blankson, Cowan, & Darley, 2017). Small businesses comprise 99% of all employers and account for 64% of net new private-sector jobs in the United States (Dilger, 2017). In 2013, U.S. small businesses employed 56.8 million people, representing 48% of the private-sector workforce (U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2017). Firms with fewer than 100 staff members employed most of this population. Private-sector employment increased by 2.2% in 2016, which is lower than the previous year's increase of 2.5% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). Small businesses created 1.1 million net jobs in 2013, with the lowest gain among firms that employ five to nine employees, representing 84,020 net jobs (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017). The goal of this study was to identify the relevance of systems theory and the effective strategies that successful small business owners and managers use to remain sustainable beyond 5 years.

Background of the Problem

A small business is an independently owned, for-profit operation with fewer than 500 employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a). Small businesses account for almost half the workforce in the United States, with entrepreneurs founding more than half a million new businesses monthly; however, 50% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years of operation (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2017).

Previous researchers have explored how various sustainable strategies of small business owners impact their businesses' survival; however, few examined the potential application of systems theory to improve small business performance. Conclusions from this study could help small business owners by demonstrating how systems theory improves small business performance. The results of this study might explain how the application of systems theory would allow small business owners to improve business performance and sustain their operations beyond 5 years.

Problem Statement

Over 50% of U.S. small businesses fail within the first 5 years of operation, and only one third survives for 10 years (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017). Small business organizations employ over 50% of the working population; therefore, the rate of small business failure has a concerning impact on the economy (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a). The general business problem was that some small food processing business owners in the United States who do not develop systems for small business owners within rural areas and small towns could face closure within 5 years. The specific business problem was that some owners and managers of food processing companies within rural areas and small towns lack knowledge of the effective strategies needed to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the effective strategies used by owners of small food processing companies to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The participants were one small business owner and eight

managers of a food processing company in Lexington, Kentucky. In identifying ways food processing companies can remain in business, this study could contribute to positive social change by directly impacting local communities. Food processing companies contribute to the economic sustainability of the community by providing a source of income to farmers, local jobs, and food to consumers. Food processing plants typically offer employment in rural areas and small towns and directly affect farmers, ranchers, and fishermen as well as employees.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative methodology was appropriate for the current study because the focus was to explore the most effective strategies and sustainability initiatives of successful small business owners. Researchers use qualitative methodology to explore phenomena that are difficult to quantify mathematically. Qualitative research takes a holistic view of philosophies based on real-world experiences. Researchers seek to establish patterns and categories by organizing data inductively into multiple units of information (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The problem with quantitative data is that numbers and statistics do not allow researchers to fully comprehend significant themes and participants' strategies (Yin, 2016). Mixed methods approaches include both qualitative and quantitative strategies, which enable researchers to identify the relationships, differences, and meanings among variables (Yin, 2016). In this study, the qualitative method was appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of the influence of systems theory on small business sustainability.

Among the approaches to qualitative research design are phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, and case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A phenomenological design was not appropriate for the current study because of the intent to find common meaning from multiple individuals and lived experiences. According to Gibson (2016), an ethnographic design is suitable for researchers exploring individuals who share the same actions and processes; however, ethnography is most effective when the researcher becomes part of the group to record more comprehensive observations. A narrative scholar attempts to tell the life story of an individual. I did not select a narrative design for this research study because the purpose of the study was not to tell life stories. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), in a case study design, researchers use open-ended questions in semistructured interviews to elicit participants' feedback on an event and then identify patterns in the resulting data. Yin (2016) noted case studies are relevant when researchers seek to identify real-life issues aligned with a modern phenomenon. A case study was suitable for the current study because the focus was on real-life settings, exploring contemporary bounded systems using distinct types of information.

Research Question

What effective strategies do owners of food processing companies use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

I developed the following interview questions to explore how small business owners sustain a business for more than 5 years.

1. What strategies have helped you sustain your business to become profitable beyond 5 years?
2. How effective are the strategies in meeting your business objectives?
3. How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these strategies?
4. What strategies contribute to the sustainability of your small business?
5. What obstacles did you encounter in implementing these strategies?
6. How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these obstacles?
7. What other information concerning achieving the sustainability of your small business would you like to share?

Conceptual Framework

The systems theory is a logico-mathematical discipline that Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced in 1937 at the University of Chicago. Von Bertalanffy (1972) described this theory as a system of components within an interactive system, network, or population. Systems theory is useful for understanding how an organization interacts with its surrounding environment, as well as for exploring the relationships among various elements, objects, and events. In qualitative studies, systems theory allows researchers to examine relationships between parts of the system and to identify elements that contribute to the system's behavior (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Systems theory can also be useful in identifying the functionality of business strategies, such as training programs (Bridgen, 2017). Systems theory could enable small business owners to explore the factors and strategies required to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

In the current study, the goal was to explore the effective strategies successful small business owners have used to establish a sustainable small business (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Successful small business owners understand the interrelations of various departments of their organizations and establish effective interactions among them to address business needs (Bridgen, 2017). Systems theory is a complex interaction transpiring between the phenomenon and its groups (Li, Mitchell, & Boyle, 2016). Through exploratory investigation of successful small business owners and their activities, I attempted to uncover information useful for other aspiring business owners to create and sustain their small businesses beyond 5 years. The results of the study provide a lens through which scholars and practitioners could understand how some small business owners sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Operational Definitions

Effective leadership: Through effective leadership, small business owners and managers influence their followers to advance themselves and accomplish organizational success (Campbell & Park, 2017). Employee leadership enables small business owners and managers to support their employees, fulfilling workers' needs within the workplace (Gerrard & Lockett, 2018).

Organizational performance: Scholars and practitioners determine organizational performance based on leadership's desired conclusions, generally measured by financial and operational benefits (Foley & O'Connor, 2017). Organizational performance enables small business owners to expand projects and invest in new technology. Small business

owners use organizational performance to gain a competitive advantage while extending resources and knowledge by networking (Bridgen, 2017).

Small business: In the United States, small businesses maintain revenues, assets, or employees below a specific threshold (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). A small business is an independently owned organization operated for profit. In the service industry, small businesses are those with less than \$5 million in receipts. In the food processing industry, small businesses are organizations with 500 or fewer employees (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2017).

Sustainability: In the current study, sustainability is a business owner's ability to establish, grow, and maintain a business successfully (Kurucz, Colbert, Lüdeke-Freund, Upward, & Willard, 2017). Additionally, sustainability is the ability of an organization to respond to short-term financial requirements without compromising others' ability to meet future needs (Call-Cummings, 2016). Small business owners focus on sustainability to operate the small business beyond 5 years.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Researchers use assumptions to develop theories and research methods, and design and influence findings (Wolgemuth, Hicks, & Agosto, 2017). This study was based on four assumptions: (a) Participants were honest and thorough in their responses, (b) participants had enough time to provide detailed answers and enough knowledge to answer the interview questions, (c) the collected data would provide enough insight to

answer the research question, and (d) purposeful sampling would ensure that all participants had knowledge about the research problem.

Limitations

Limitations are the external elements that could constrain the scope or outcomes of a research study. Limitations include a study's environmental restrictions and potential weaknesses (Yin, 2017). Limitations are factors beyond the researcher's control and consist of weaknesses of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that participants' honesty and thoroughness would limit the results of the study. In addition, participants' availability to respond to the interview questions in enough detail could limit study results.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries researchers impose to limit the scope of a study (Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017; Yin, 2016). In this study, I focused on one small food processing company in Lexington, Kentucky, that has remained in business beyond 5 years and has 500 or fewer employees. Participants included the owner and eight managers who had at least 2 years' experience in management working at a small food processing company.

Significance of the Study

The results of the study can provide small food processing company owners and managers with knowledge of the effective strategies needed to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Findings could enhance small business owners' understanding of systems theory and of the effective strategies that can sustain small businesses beyond 5 years.

Subsequently, small business owners and managers could provide sufficient employee training and recognize the successful relationships between systems theory and effective strategies that sustain small businesses beyond 5 years (Huang & Knight, 2017).

Contribution to Business Practice

Successful small business owners and managers implement sustainable strategies to increase the probability of staying in operation beyond 5 years (Kurucz et al., 2017). Through the findings of the current study, small business owners could implement effective strategies on how to sustain their businesses (Joslin & Müller, 2016). Small business owners and managers might gain knowledge and skills needed to implement transformative business sustainability models that will improve revenue and market share. Small business owners can use the current study's findings to implement effective strategies that align with the businesses' internal culture and long-term goals. I also sought to identify the applications of systems theory to business practice, which could be relevant to scholar-practitioners.

Implications for Social Change

Small business owners are an essential component of their communities. Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016) noted that the community identity and involvement of a business could include communication with the chamber of commerce, participation in community charity events, and donations to local organizations. Small business owners contribute to positive social change by providing farmers with multiple sources of income and consumers with food throughout the local communities (Boon, Eckardt, Lepak, & Boselie, 2018). Additional positive social change is that small food processing companies

provide jobs and income for members of their communities, thereby enhancing local economic health (Call-Cummings, 2016). Many small food processing company owners seek to develop formal networks, relationships, and merchant associations to leverage members' expertise to achieve long-term sustainability. Food processing plants provide employment opportunities in rural areas and small towns, which has an impact on farmers, ranchers, and company employees. The environmental benefits of community involvement include increased productivity and innovation, improved labor competition, and more robust retail sales (Call-Cummings, 2016). Cypress (2017) noted small businesses create ample opportunities for workers to shop at other local small businesses, thereby strengthening commercial centers. My intent in the study was to explore the effective strategies that small business owners and managers use to improve business sustainability.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of conducting this qualitative single case study was to explore the effective strategies successful business owners and managers of food processing companies use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The central research question for this study was: What effective strategies do owners of food processing companies use to sustain their business beyond 5 years? Through a detailed exploration of the question, I provided additional insight for small business owners to sustain operations beyond 5 years.

I conducted a literature review to systematically explore and then synthesize the findings of previous researchers (Booth et al., 2016). I reviewed the existing knowledge

about small business sustainability to examine the phenomenon of strategies small business owners use to sustain operations beyond 5 years (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). To identify peer-reviewed articles, books, and gray literature, I searched ERIC, ProQuest, and Google Scholar using the following keywords: *systems theory, alternative theory, marketing, leadership, management, business environment and location, customer service, sustainability, small business, management, customer service, business strategy, and management*. Of the total article count of 239, I used 142 references, of which 140 (99.5%) were peer-reviewed and published within the last 5 years.

Systems Theory

Von Bertalanffy (1972) introduced systems theory in the 1930s to explore the challenges of small business owners. Researchers use systems theory as a guide to examine relationships between events, either internally or externally. Systems theory consists of opened and closed systems, the former a method for organizational owners to collect information from operating environments to influence the organization's systems; in contrast, closed systems provide no opportunity for interaction (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Mania-Singer (2017) identified the three key elements of systems theory as structures of organizations, open systems, and interrelated subsystems. Organizations consist of several subsystems alternately interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent. Open systems are those that influence larger environments; in turn, interrelated subsystems function within a continuous response loop comprised of inputs/outputs, feedback, and transformation. Sayin (2016) posited that systems theory guides small

business owners to identify a set of established principles for improving a process to enhance performance.

Small business owners could benefit from exploring entire business systems with the use of systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). This theory provides researchers and small business owners with information focused on the complexity of a system and interconnections with external elements of small business operations. Some small business owners use systems theory and systems thinking as guides to identify problems within their business operations (Forshey & Levitas, 2016). Systems thinking enables small business owners to conduct business analysis and decision-making. Abdelkafi and Täuscher (2016) noted the use of systems theory provides information allowing small business owners and managers to identify solutions for specific business problems. Sayin (2016) further noted that small business owners applying systems theory to daily operations could experience positive organizational change. Systems theory can, therefore, assist small business owners in considering issues that involve multiple parts.

Systems theory provides valuable information small business owners could use to ensure business orientation and sustainability (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Some small business owners use systems theory to gain an understanding of small business strategies (Fiore et al., 2018). Systems theory includes a systematic construct to explore and identify relationships in the empirical world (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Successful small business owners applying the constructs of systems theory aid practitioners and small business owners in centralizing those regulatory systems in need of attention (Fiore et al.,

2018). Business owners must develop systematic thinking to ensure the interconnections of internal and external factors in ensuring sustainability for small businesses.

Looking at systems in a holistic view illuminates strengths and weaknesses based on the goals and missions of small businesses (Bridgen, 2017). To improve the sustainability of a small business, owners could apply systems theory to address the complexity of the environment. Block, Colombo, Cumming, and Vismara (2018) noted the use of systems theory is inspiring for small business owners, enabling them to comprehend the influence of outside factors on business operations. The foundational elements of systems theory help small business owners develop effective management skills for the sustainability of their operations (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016). Small business owners could achieve sustainability by developing critical thinking abilities about business systems (Phelan, 2016). Owners of successful small businesses use more effective ways to introduce communication through an application of the theory, thereby sustaining their small business within a specific time frame.

Using the foundations of systems theory, researchers and small business owners gain an understanding of a business operating system aligned with the predictive ability to observe real-world systems. Small business owners must acquire knowledge of systems by exploring inputs, procedures, and processes that contribute to business success (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016). Small business owners could implement strategies that solve complex business problems to achieve sustainability (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016). The use of systems theory might be effective for small business owners to expand effective strategies within the operation.

The strategies of systems theory can help small business owners comprehend the *why?* and *how?* of sustainability in the context of their small business. Successful small business owners use systems theory to enhance processes (Fiore et al., 2018). Some small businesses fail because of an ineffective process within the organization; hence, owners could use systems theory as a guide to formalize all elements internally and externally (Hill & Alexander, 2017). Successful small business owners use systems theory to establish a clear communication channel to support small business processes, ensuring sustainability (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016). Hill and Alexander (2017) noted that small business owners use elements of systems theory to explore human behavior and gain trust from customers within the community. Effective processes allow small business owners to achieve quality sustainability within service operations.

Systems theory is appropriate for small business owners to better implement specific procedures within the organization, allowing effective management (Otley, 2016). The elements of systems theory could provide small business owners with the opportunity and understanding to establish leadership and behavioral principles, creating an effective business governance process (Desai, Lockett, & Paton, 2016). Small business owners who use the systems theory approach could recognize patterns from examining the relationships between two or more interrelated components that might not be visible if examined separately (Otley, 2016). Because of the importance of systems theory to small businesses, this theory served as the conceptual framework for the study. Organizational success is the effectiveness of interactions among individuals, the environment, and changing social capital (Desai et al., 2016).

In summary, not acting as a unit can be a cause of failure for business organizations. Applying the principles of systems theory could assist in the comprehension of how small business owners can gain valuable information to manage subordinates and employees effectively (Bush, 2016). Systems theory was appropriate to explore how successful small business owners implement multiple systems collectively to achieve small business success (Howell, 2017).

Survival and Economic Growth of Small Businesses

Small businesses significantly contribute to the development of local economies, accounting for two thirds of employment opportunities in most Western economies, thereby stimulating these economies and increasing their growth (Albuquerque, Filho, Nagano, & Phippsen, 2016; Amurao & Panlilio, 2016). Amurao and Panlilio (2016) considered small businesses the mainstay of every economy. In addition, Albuquerque et al. (2016) identified small businesses as a mix of organizations offering goods and services across various industries, making them difficult to classify. Amurao and Panlilio found small businesses and entrepreneurs to be the most influential drivers for economic growth. Therefore, achieving organizational goals must be a consideration for small business owners and managers.

Survival is a priority for any business, especially regarding the higher exposure to risk and impact of competition among small businesses when compared to larger firms. Bates and Tobb (2016) recognized that small business owners face various challenges restricting their growth and survival. Bates and Tobb considered managerial capability an important element of survival but noted that an insufficient number of small business

owners engage in formal training. Ehigie and Umoren (2018) identified financial constraints, management problems, corruption, lack of infrastructure, and lack of capital as factors hindering small business growth. The following subsections include discussions of survival, economic growth, and strategic planning for small businesses.

Survival and economic growth. Various researchers identified factors that support small business success and survival. Whereas Badwan, Al Shobaki, Naser, and Amuna (2017) cited economic measures and indices as determinants of young small businesses' survival, Foley and O'Connor (2017) identified personal relationships as a major contributor. New small business owners face challenges attempting to create and sustain their business ventures. New small business owners fail to have access to key resources because they have limited market presence and depend on a niche customer base (Ehigie & Umoren, 2018). For their part, Calme and Polge (2018) attributed the deterioration of many businesses to entrepreneurs' lack of managerial skills. Furthermore, Jakhu and Malik (2017) noted new small businesses are more volatile compared to their mature counterparts, having an increase in job rates aligned with destruction. Foley and O'Connor agreed with the claim that startups contributed toward jobs immediately; however, most of the startups failed within the first 2 years. Having access to key resources such as funding could help sustain small businesses beyond 5 years. Essential to small business survival is managing economic behavior or indicators, such as cash flow, debt performance, risk management, and interest rates. Calme and Polge (2018) found small businesses' economic performance and economic indicators difficult to track because such entities might not borrow from financial institutions.

In addition, small businesses' existence could depend on factors outside of the business. It is critical that new small business owners develop effective strategies at the start of the business venture to be sustainable beyond 5 years (Minner & Shi, 2017). Minner and Shi (2017) emphasized the importance of a small business owner selecting the correct business strategy. The business strategy establishes a pattern of objectives, purposes, and goals for the small business (Garba, 2017). Small businesses are vulnerable to troubled environments due to limited financial and human resources, making them more susceptible to local cyclical troubles (Jogaratnam, 2017). Furthermore, Jogaratnam (2017) observed that competition was the main obstacle of small businesses; however, resilience is a characteristic of small businesses, making their economic growth possible. Small business owners and managers who properly manage economic behavior could encourage small business sustainability beyond 5 years.

As a dominant component of economic growth, the resilience of small businesses following a crisis is essential for global markets' success. Minner and Shi (2017) identified crisis management as a response to the survival and success of strategic planning. In troubling environments, strategic planning could play a role in the rate of survival (Ortiz-Villajos & Sotoca, 2018). Leadership behavior is a strong contributing factor in effective crisis strategic planning (Rahman, Amran, Ahmad, & Taghizadeh, 2016). A leader's ability to adjust operational strategies is important for small businesses to remain competitive, accept new advances, and meet the needs of changing global markets (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017). Saleem (2017) claimed the sustainability of small businesses depended on owners' sound operational principles, especially when

managing risks. Developing solutions to help business owners achieve goals aligned with strategic change can assist these owners in delivering sustainable results (Almeida & Pessali, 2017). Furthermore, small business owners and managers obtain competitive advantage using effective strategies instrumental in enhancing economic development (Saleem, 2017).

Overall, small businesses survive because of different factors. Internal characteristics of the business, such as resilience and financial resources, are important in ensuring business success and sustainability (Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016). However, the essential factor is the leader's ability to develop new strategies directly related to the growth of the business, addressing potential issues that could impact the growth of small businesses (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016). The next section presents a discussion of strategic planning for small businesses.

Strategic planning. Strategic planning impacts the sustainability and success of small businesses. Originating with military planners, the concept of strategic planning is now applicable to a model of business planning in a single business cycle (Saleem, 2017). Strategic planning enables an organization to expedite direction for the future. Saleem (2017) related the importance of strategic planning to the midterm future of a business, positing that owners can achieve additional success by identifying their businesses' strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities (SWOT).

Strategic planning includes the formulation of strategy through analysis of the business, performance, and external environment (Hyz & Gikas, 2016). Strategic planning is analytical, organized, and purposeful. Dey and Lehner (2016) noted the

contribution of strategic planning depends on the organizational integration it creates. Strategic planning incorporates patience, teamwork, perseverance, and meaning to the mission and vision of a business, with a focus on results rather than outputs (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016).

Small business owners can consider methods to address business challenges. Various strategic planning initiatives are inherent within the SWOT analysis; however, SWOT is a widely recognized and respected strategic tool to facilitate the assessment of economic conditions and classify internal variables (Guth & Asner-Self, 2017). The internal factors of SWOT include strengths (internal strong points of business), weaknesses (factors the organization lacks), opportunities (factors presented by the environment), and threats (elements potentially dangerous to the business; Guth & Asner-Self, 2017). The owners of small businesses must be cognizant of the external environment (Moyo, 2017). Advantages exist for small business owners to consider SWOT, a beneficial tool to provide qualitative information in an organized manner.

The development of a strategic alliance is another option for small business owners. Some small businesses form strategic alliances to obtain resources. Fletcher, Harris, and Richey (2017) defined a strategic alliance as a long-term agreement enabling participating businesses to gain or sustain competitive advantage. Businesses could benefit from strategic alliances; however, Galpin and Whittington (2017) estimated a failure rate of business strategic alliances between 50% and 60%. Strategic alliances might produce cost savings in executing operations, sourcing quality products, and

recruiting inexpensive labor (Galpin & Whittington, 2017). The combination of owners' efforts could be beneficial to their businesses' growth and sustainability.

Business models provide owners with strategies and frameworks for starting a new business, as well as for transforming the current business model of an established company. According to Turner and Endres (2017), business models illustrate how business activities flow and how a business generates value. Because business models are dependent on the owner's needs and goals, the model varies across organizations. Gerrard and Lockett (2018) described a vigorous business model as one that ensures the efficacy of existing activities and the flexibility to adapt to environmental changes. The business model concept lends an innovative and holistic perspective to strategy practitioners, facilitating cooperative and effective strategy development.

Strategic planning by small business owners is an essential part of ensuring success. McDowell, Harris, and Geho (2016) identified a relationship between strategy and business performance, consequently implying that small business owners must implement effective strategic management. Most small business owners serve as owner-managers responsible for the majority of daily operations (Smith & Barrett, 2016). These owners are busy attending to the short-term challenges of running a business, thus limiting the resources available for long-term planning. Effective small business owners and managers use strategic planning to identify long-term goals and evaluate the ability to achieve these goals (Wynn & Jones, 2018). Therefore, small business owners and managers must find time to consider and weigh strategic options in all aspects of the business to conduct effective strategic planning (Smith & Barrett, 2016).

Small business owners and managers need to ensure short-term success while remaining mindful of long-term sustainability (Perrault & Keating, 2017). Hence, these business leaders must draw upon the concepts of strategic management and planning. This knowledge is essential to understanding the status of the firm, having a definite sense of the mission, and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the company (Bendickson & Chandler, 2019).

Strategic planning is an effective and essential tool to promote small business growth and sustainability. Small business owners must formulate strategies for the business, organizational performance, and external environment. Specifically, SWOT analysis is helpful to explore and assess the small business's external environment. Calopa (2017) noted the need for strategic planning when owners seek to maintain and expand their small businesses; however, not all owners or managers recognize the importance of strategic planning. The question about strategic planning is whether small businesses experience more difficulties executing the essentials for planning because of their size (Miller, Hoffer, & Wille, 2016). The following section is a discussion of factors related to the success of small businesses.

Success Factors of Small Business

Small business owners must perform specific functions to be successful in a competitive environment. One such function is implementing effective marketing strategies to sustain operations and compete with other small business owners (Williams & Aaron, 2018). Arsic (2017) noted the marketing strategies used by successful small business owners should incorporate established marketing concepts.

Marketing. Marketing activities include the promotion, production, and pricing of business goods and services (Westwood, 2016). Small business owners must adopt effective strategies to gain more customers (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017). Marketing involves goal orientation and the use of the systems approach (Kersten, Harms, Liket, & Maas, 2017). When small business owners focus on customer orientation, they must also maintain a vision of organizational goals (Kennickell, Kwast, & Pogach, 2017). Small business owners can seek to achieve profits by concentrating on business system elements and customer needs (Barrena, López, & Romero, 2018). Market research entails organized gathering, analyzing, and recording data relevant to the small business's services (Singh & Sahu, 2016).

The key to establishing a competitive advantage for small business owners is to comprehend both customer behavior and the customer market segment base (Herlina, Syarifudin, & Kartika, 2019). So, King, Sparks, and Wang (2016) noted an increased focus on customer engagement in academic literature and practitioner decision-making regarding predictions of brand loyalty. Market analysis is essential for business owners to identify and acquire customers (Miettinen & Stenbacka, 2018). The market analysis section of the marketing plan assists small business owners in recognizing and acquiring potential customers (Westwood, 2016). In turn, the sales forecast section should include various scenarios, such as best-case and worst-case situations (Anning-Dorson, 2017).

Planning plays an essential role in small business management (Westwood, 2016). Specifically, sales forecasting and planning contribute to the success of small business owners (Gupta, 2017). Through a sales forecast, an analyst estimates possible sales in a

specific market within a certain time frame (Anning-Dorson, 2017). A sales forecast assists a manager in determining the business's likelihood of sustaining in a given environment (Hatten, 2015). The sales forecast is the foundation of the income statement, upon which small business owners rely to determine variable costs and cost of goods sold (Trugman, 2016). It is difficult, however, for new small business owners to prepare a sales forecast. Once the small business has experienced prior periods of sales, there is a greater potential to forecast these sales to future periods (Sorheim, 2017).

Through competitor analysis, business owners focus on their major competitors and competitive advantage and determine how likely the relationship is to change. New small business owners tend to ignore the existence of competition because the industry does not include close substitutes (Honig & Hopp, 2016). When another small business owner's resources become vulnerable, the small business leader must identify competitors' weaknesses as well as methods to take away market shares (Aithal, 2016).

Overall, small businesses must gain a competitive advantage as part of their goals and objectives. Knowing effective marketing tools is necessary for small businesses to achieve competitive advantage (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016). Competition and entrepreneurship are important elements in understanding markets. Small business owners continue to strive for a competitive advantage through the innovation of new products and processes. An increased understanding of customer behaviors is necessary to assist businesses in gaining such a competitive advantage. However, aside from marketing, leadership and managers play key roles in ensuring the success and sustainability of small businesses (Bush, 2016).

Effective leadership. Effective small business owners can guide and influence employee performance. Organizational leadership involves different levels of interaction, depending on the stage of development and size of the organization (Tatikonda, Terjesen, Patel, & Parida, 2017). Small business owners and managers are effective when they surround themselves with a team of associates who want to achieve established goals collectively. New small business owners face significant challenges to exploring the unknown; therefore, one of the most critical leadership qualities is the ability to cope and respond when operations do not go as planned (Mazzei, Flynn, & Haynie, 2016). In a growing company, owners and managers must communicate an organizational vision to all members (Baxter, 2016). Employees expect business owners to be charismatic; however, scholars consider charisma ineffective and unrelated to the qualities of a leader (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2016).

Virtuous owners demonstrate the determination to do whatever necessary to help their organization succeed (Ward, 2016a). In small and individually owned businesses, owners normally work long hours and interact with most employees daily (Ward, 2016b). When owners and managers have an effective relationship with employees, employee productivity increases (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2016). In contrast, in a large business, the employee–employer relationship involves less bonding and might be less productive (Yeboah & Koffie, 2016).

Understanding the role of social capital is another important consideration for business owners. Rahman, Belas, Kliestik, and Tyll (2017) showed that social capital mediated the relationship of knowledge-sharing to leadership. Therefore, establishing

trust between owners and employees, having shared visions, and creating a collaborative environment contribute to organizational efficiency and success. Because of the limited workforce in small businesses, establishing relationships between owners and employees should not be complicated (Ruseva, Farmer, & Chancellor, 2016). With the small population of workers within these businesses, employees tend to play critical roles in their organization, thus highlighting the importance of owners and managers taking care of these workers (Ruseva et al., 2016). Small business owners and managers must take the initiative to promote positive influences through their leadership styles.

Wong, Holmes, and Schaper (2018) identified several leadership styles that have positive influences on organizational performance. Goleman (2017) categorized the six leadership styles as visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and commanding. Visionary-style leaders establish goals and allow their team members creativity in achieving such goals (Seelhofer & Valeri, 2017). These leaders tend to motivate employees and improve performance. In contrast, affiliative-style leaders focus on creating harmony within groups by increasing communication among team members (Atchan, Davis, & Foureur, 2016). Democratic-style leaders tend to use team members' knowledge and skills to guide the direction of the group (Kurucz et al., 2017). Finally, a pacesetter-style leader sets challenging standards and expects high performance and results (Atchan et al., 2016).

The two commonly known leadership styles are transactional and transformational (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017). Transactional leadership is a style wherein leaders focus on delegating tasks and objectives to their subordinates, coupled

with a monitoring approach for leaders to express dissatisfaction in the employee performance (Bottomley, Mostafa, Gould-Williams, & León-Cázares, 2016). In contrast, transformational owners focus on enhancing the values and beliefs of followers, using these values to motivate employees to move beyond their own interests and work for the common good (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2017) noted transformational leadership is one of the most effective styles for empowering employees and achieving positive organizational performance. Because transformational leadership centers on empowering employees, the impacts on organizational performance have been mostly positive (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Alternately, transactional leadership adversely impacts engagement because of the negative means of leading with this style (Brown & Danaher, 2019).

Management skills. Successful small business owners and managers use several management techniques to achieve business objectives and effectively use available resources (Hope, 2017). Evaluation of small business owners and managers is according to the effectiveness of their leadership management skills (Lisowsky, Minnis, & Sutherland, 2017). Management skills include leadership skills, conceptual skills, and technical expertise (Lee, 2018). Small business owners and managers must be able to make informed decisions regarding planning, staffing, and organizing (Hope, 2017).

Planning is the first function of management. Small business owners and managers are responsible for establishing long-term objectives and determining the strategies, resources, and individuals necessary to achieve organizational goals (Carraresi, Mamaqi, Albisu, & Banterle, 2016). Controlling, which is related to planning, refers to

the process of evaluating activity to sustain a business on the right track (Amorós, Basco, & Romani, 2016). Controlling involves measuring activities and comparing performance standards, as well as identifying variances in standard performances. The control process helps small business owners and managers solve internal and external problems in the organization. Without organizational structure, small business operations could become chaotic and ineffective (Makhmoor & Rajesh, 2017). Effective communication occurs when small business owners and managers enhance lines of communication and establish hierarchies of authority (Makhmoor & Rajesh, 2017). Small business owners and managers must determine which activities are necessary to implement these plans. In addition, they should periodically review business relationships and make necessary adjustments to ensure effective operations.

Staffing refers to the process of hiring employees who possess specific skills to perform certain job functions. After small business owners or managers determine the tasks needed, they must identify the skills employees need to perform those tasks (Sarah, 2016). Small business owners and managers must be able to motivate and train their employees to work and achieve organizational goals (Vecchiato, 2017). Another function of staffing is downsizing or eliminating employees when necessary to ensure the organization meets established expectations (Zamora, 2016). When managers and owners complete the staffing process, their focus is on directing the employees, providing motivation through daily interaction to achieve established goals (Andrzej, 2017). One way small business owners motivate their employees is by offering incentives such as bonuses (Brannan & Wiklund, 2016).

In summary, small business operations, including food processing companies, are complex despite the size of the organization. The unique nature of small business requires owners to use appropriate styles and techniques of leadership to achieve success (Miller et al., 2016). Miller et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of leadership action and decisions to the success of the organization. However, there is a lack of studies exploring the role of leadership styles and their impact on the sustainability of small businesses. Moreover, aside from the importance of leadership and management roles, heads and owners of small businesses often face challenges such as lack of control, great uncertainty, and high levels of competition. Therefore, the unique nature of the small business environment should be a consideration for the success of the organization.

Business environment and location. The location of a business has an impact on its value and could be a determining factor of whether the small business succeeds or fails (Xiaohong & Renyoung, 2017). One essential task for small business owners is to identify an ideal location to gain targeted customers and employees. Additionally, small business owners must consider local zoning, taxes, and laws. During the selection process, it is also important for entrepreneurs to consider the cost of operations in each location to prevent insolvency. Successful business owners place importance on the location preferred by their targeted customers and the possibility of expanding into new customer markets (Bridgen, 2017).

Customer accessibility is an essential factor when selecting a small business location. Customers tend to stay close to home, seldom repeatedly traveling long distances for a specific merchandiser. Small business owners should thus locate a space

that is close to their target customers. When small business owners fail to identify a potential location for targeted customers, their competitors benefit (Qi, Roth, & Wald, 2017).

Small business owners and managers must create a global presence through webpages, providing customers with information such as hours of operation, location, and available services and products (Hsu, Wiklund, & Cotton, 2017; Svatos, 2017). Johanson and Carey (2016) recommended small business owners use site selection software to identify the ideal small business location. Site selection allows users to access customer characteristics such as age, median income, and traffic flow patterns (Packard, 2017). The increased availability of demographic software and the decreased cost of personal computers allow small businesses to use the same tools as larger organizations (Philipson, 2016).

Business environment and location could potentially impact the performance of an organization, including small businesses. Therefore, exploring and understanding these factors is an essential responsibility of small business owners (Philipson, 2016). The external environment and location are not the only external factors meriting consideration for business success (Svatos, 2017). Small businesses should also consider customers, because remaining in operation is only possible when there are customers willing to transact with small businesses.

Customer service approach. Scholars have noted the need for customer engagement and aligning small business decision-making with brand loyalty predictions (So et al., 2016). Small business owners have the ability to gain new customers based on

quality and personal service rather than prices alone; however, sales prices are a vital component in gaining new customers. A segment of customers will patronize a small business based on loyalty and positive perceptions within the community (Pandya, Mathur, & Mathur, 2016). Consumers tend to purchase affordable convenience goods more frequently (Boo, 2017). The selling of these goods in high-traffic stores demands the consistent stocking of shelves and satisfying the needs of the target customers. In contrast, shopping goods tend to be more expensive, with consumers often comparing prices. Specialty goods include high-priced or name-brand goods that customers recognize. Businesses could target compulsive buyers who select merchandise without need, intending to alleviate stress and disappointment (Ramoglou & Tsang, 2016).

Customer service impacts small businesses' sustainability and survivability within a competitive environment. Organizations must address customer relationship management when developing a business plan to increase profits and revenues (Peppers & Rogers, 2016). Developing customer relationship management practices entails exploring customer behavior and building relationships. A customer relationship strategy makes the customers a priority, with the expectation of improving customer retention and loyalty, thereby increasing sales. When focusing on establishing a new customer base, however, small business owners might neglect to concentrate on sustaining their current customer base (Herrera, 2016).

Implementing a successful customer service plan is essential for small business sustainability. Smaller organizations have more opportunities to address customer complaints and achieve satisfaction when employees have the authority to act on behalf

of the organization's best interests (Heilbrun, Rabin, & Rozenes, 2017). Within larger companies, managers might have limited decision-making authority regarding customer satisfaction. In a small business, however, the owner can speak directly with customers to resolve any concerns. Customer service strategies should include quick responses and friendly interactions with the business owner (Peppers & Rogers, 2016).

In summary, both internal and external considerations are important for small business success. Moreover, small business program and strategy developers (usually the owners) must consider the environment and actual customers of the firm. The role of the business environment and customers to the success or failure of small businesses in the food processing industry has yet to receive scholarly inquiry. However, aside from the factors that promote small business success, it is also important to explore the literature on barriers or challenges that could impact success and sustainability (Peppers & Rogers, 2016).

Sustainability Challenges of Small Business

The sustainability of small businesses is a challenge for owners (Haider, Asad, Fatima, & Abidin, 2017). Improving the value and sustainability of small business practices requires changes within operational systems. Additionally, the specific challenges small business owners face could create obstacles to business sustainability. One of the ways small business owners can avoid failure is to understand the different challenges that have preceded past failures. More important, small business owners must study and learn from business failure. In the next section, I review several of these potential challenges.

Poor management abilities. New small business owners often underestimate the funding needed to sustain operations, instead starting a business with just enough funding to launch operations and keep the business open for a short period. Such mistakes stem from the owner's belief that the small business will quickly generate enough revenue to sustain operations (Kireyev, Kumar, & Ofek, 2017). Some small business owners have insightful ideas for marketing new products but lack the appreciation or application of management skills, such as planning and financing (Kellermanns, Walter, Crook, Kemmerer, & Narayanan, 2016).

Small business owners might lack the management skills needed to grow the business. Although business growth could be an advantage, failure to grow could turn into a disadvantage. For example, because of increased production demands, products might not arrive on time or meet quality standards. Small business owners who do not manage growth successfully could adversely impact the company's reputation (Subramanian, Gunasekaran, & Gao, 2016). It is, therefore, essential for small business owners to recognize the importance of managing growth (Chang, Khan, & Tsai, 2017).

Some small business owners start a new company without first preparing a business plan, which is a crucial element in strategic planning. The business plan is one of the most important supporting documents for small business owners (Amato, Baron, Barbieri, Belanger, & Pierro, 2017). These strategic plans should include operational and financial planning, as well as an explanation of the business purpose, including products and services. The business plan should incorporate an analysis of the target industry, including its strengths and weaknesses, promotions, and marketing policies (Clarke &

Braun, 2016). Also necessary is financial information concerning future profits and investments, which will help the small business owner remain focused on the projected goals of the organization. Business owners should use business plans as a tool for guidance and decision-making. Without proper management expertise and skills, small business owners could find lower profits than expected (Donate, Peña, & Sanchez de Pablo, 2016).

Overall, small business owners and managers must have the technical expertise to guide and train their employees. In today's small business environment, many operations are dependent on computers for daily tasks, making effective computer skills essential for performing job duties. Conceptual skills, such as creative and innovative thinking, are important for small business owners (Bremmer & Kesselring, 2016). Creative thinking enhances small business owners' ability to identify, prioritize, and correct issues. Small business owners should be willing to train their managers in areas requiring specific skills to enhance employees' performance (Bremmer & Kesselring, 2016). Moreover, business planning is a key component of small business sustainability; otherwise, the businesses will likely fail.

Poor business planning strategies. In creating a business plan, the small business owner must consider the business's background, mission, and objectives (Hogan, Huston, & Drnevich, 2017). The business plan should consist of marketing policies, prices, and promotions, as well as financial information relevant to future profits and investments. Strategic plans enhance small business owners' ability to focus on the specific goals of the organization and serve as a principal guide for decision-making.

Well-established business plans provide small business owners with a better opportunity for success (Laukkanen & Tornikoski, 2017). A formal business plan should enable small business owners to formalize the business's vision, purpose, goals, and strategies. The absence of a business plan could result in a lost focus on business goals. In contrast, a consistent focus on purpose enhances employees' ability to stay committed during times of change or chaos. Establishing effective strategies helps small business owners identify the resources needed to reach their intended goals, such as time and money (Kusumaningrum & Hidayat, 2016). A business plan should align with the contribution of small business owners (Finch, 2016).

An effective business plan is one that is not too complex (Simón-Moya & Revuelto-Taboada, 2016). The business plan should describe where and why the small business will reach its intended destination. The duties of the small business owner and manager are to ensure adherence to these steps, with the business trending in the right direction (Ward, 2016a). Each of the four components of a business plan merit daily consideration, with examination and revision, as needed (Ward, 2016a). Failure to implement a clear and concise business plan could create significant difficulties in understanding whether the small business is growing as intended. Small business owners and managers who fail to implement a clear and concise business plan could negatively impact the sustainability of the small business (Nelson, 2017).

Governance, risk, and internal control management. Some small business owners fail to devote attention to evaluating risk (Tchamyu, 2017). Small business risk is the possibility of suffering a loss in earnings, which could occur as a result of various

circumstances, such as fires and lawsuits. Risk management enables small business owners to recover their losses from financial and operating perspectives (Zwane & Nyide, 2016). Small business owners must focus on both pure risk and speculative risk, with the former defined as a loss resulting from an unexpected event (Goyal & Wang, 2017). A severe threat to small businesses is a loss of profits. Some small business losses result from research and development, and changes in the law are uninsurable losses. Various methods are available for small business owners to manage uninsurable risk, with risk avoidance being one such avenue (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

Loss prevention techniques could include implementing work safety rules and hiring security guards. Risk transfer entails shifting the consequences of risk to an external agency (Sadgrove, 2016). Risk assumption involves the small business offering self-insurance, meaning the organization sets aside funds to cover uncertain losses. Risk management occurs through implementing steps to preserve the business's assets and earnings, thus enabling owners to identify the most effective way to prevent loss. Small business owners must be aware of the various types of risk their organization could face. First, owners should take an efficient approach to identify pure risk; subsequently, they must identify risks critical or important; and finally, they will select a strategy to manage the risk (Cole & Sokolyk, 2016). Some of these risks are potential hazards that could destroy a small business or could be costly and time-consuming to repair (Bromiley & Rau, 2016). Small business threats include location, human, and technology risks. Location risks include storm damage and other natural disasters, human risks include employee alcohol and drug abuse, and technology risks include power outages and

electrical energy. Failure from small business owners and managers to implement preventive measures and alternate plans for operation could cause business closure.

The primary methods of assessing risk are risk refinancing and risk control (Sadgrove, 2016). Risk control involves minimizing loss by choosing not to participate in hazardous events. Risk financing requires small business owners to designate funds for potential losses (Sadgrove, 2016). Once small business owners decide on a specific technique to manage risk, they must follow through with actions such as purchasing insurance. Finally, the small business owner should evaluate and explore the risk management technique in use (Sadgrove, 2016). This review is essential because the previous risks will diminish over time, and new ones will arise.

Corporate governance has been a topic of conversation within various organizations for the past 2 decades (Jaroslaw, 2016). Multiple small business failures have resulted from poor corporate governance and internal controls. Corporate governance describes the system used by a small business to control daily business operations. When small business owners implement corporate governance strategies, they provide incentives for managers to achieve the identified objectives encourage by facilitating avenues for effective performance oversight (Frese, Hass, & Friedrich, 2016).

Internal controls established by management help to ensure that financial reports will be reliable (Gregson, Mann, & Harrison, 2017). Unfortunately, financial statements are susceptible to three types of errors. These are excluding expense transactions that result in inaccurate and overstatement of earnings; incorporating sales revenue earned in

different periods, which would be considered improper; and involving the revenues earned or expenses annotated for different amounts (Bromiley & Rau, 2016).

Established internal controls could prevent financial statement errors (Carbó Valverde, Rodríguez-Fernández, & Udell, 2016). Preventive controls assist in deterring adverse events (Buculesu, 2017). Detective controls assist in determining unwanted events and identifying mistakes made by the financial institution or bank. Another means of preventive control, separation of duties involves splitting the responsibilities of the person who authorizes and records transactions from the individual who receives the assets (Coppa & Siramesh, 2016). A lack of separation could allow one individual to make unapproved transactions without oversight.

U.S. federal and state laws and regulations impact small businesses in different ways. The Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), which includes a group of aligned statutes, provides oversight on transactions in all 50 U.S. states. The UCC codes have nine articles: sales, general provisions, commercial paper, bank collections and deposits, letters of credit, bulk transfers, secured transactions, documents of title, and investment of securities (Bates & Tobb, 2016). Small business owners can use multiple approaches to ensure adherence to government regulations (Greenwood, 2016).

Small business owners should be aware of the laws that impact their organization, challenging any that harm their business. Small business owners can relocate to a new municipality with different rules that align with their organization's business plan (Brimoh, 2017). Small business owners are more likely than those in larger firms to neglect to institute basic controls that could save them from costly losses.

Summary of the Literature Review

Exploring the different elements of success and failure of small businesses is important because most local economies include all types of businesses. Furthermore, the literature review indicated the importance of small businesses to the economy. Therefore, this review of relevant literature centered on the different aspects of small businesses, especially success and sustainability.

The conceptual framework chosen as the foundation of exploration for this study was systems thinking. Organizational success, especially that of small businesses, commonly depends on the effectiveness of the relationships, communications, and reactions between the business, the environment, and the customers (Au, Chiang, Birtch, & Kwan, 2016). Moreover, the players in a small business must act and perform as a unit to promote the success of the entire organization. In systems thinking, the view for leading any organization must be holistic due to the dynamic processes involved (Gong, 2017). Because of the complex nature of the market and vulnerability of small businesses, 50% of these companies fail within the first 5 years of operation. Therefore, I explored the critical success factors for small business owners. Marketing, leadership and management, business environment and location, and customer service approaches all contribute to the success of small businesses.

Small business owners and managers play significant roles in small business growth. Not only must small business owners focus on daily operations and strategic management, but they must also consider and make decisions. Poor management is a

challenge for achieving success and sustainability, something especially true for small businesses, which are more sensitive to internal and external changes.

Successful small business owners often emerge in times of crisis and shape the culture of their business (Linton & Kask, 2017). All small business owners and managers should strive to establish a positive attitude within their organization. Effective owners are those with strong communication skills, listening skills, and the ability to influence their followers. Leadership styles are often specific to situations, as small business owners take a variety of approaches based on different situations.

Strategic planning and management are additional factors that contribute to the successful development and implementation of strategies toward sustainability (Yu, Li, & Yang, 2017). However, strategic planning requires a long-term perspective, planning for which often remains unexplored in small businesses. Small business owners are responsible for looking into aspects of the business that will strengthen the organization, as well as taking advantage of opportunities and minimizing risks and threats (Daniel, Adegoke, & Jan, 2016). Small businesses in the food processing industry are some of the most common organizations vulnerable to failure because of the unique nature of food products. The gap in research exists in exploring the sustainability of small businesses in the food processing industry.

Summary and Transition

In Section 1, the review of information aligned with the background of the problem statement, the purpose statement, the nature of the study, and the conceptual framework. This section contained information regarding the research question,

operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. In this section, I identified the interview questions. I also provided a review of the literature exploring the strategies small business owners of food processing companies used to remain relevant beyond 5 years.

Section 2 presents a discussion about the method and design of the research study. Critical elements include the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, and participant criteria. In Section 3, I reveal data techniques used to gather and record participant responses, present the results of participants' responses, and evaluate the interview transcripts.

Section 2: The Project

I interviewed one small business owner and eight managers of a small food processing company who met the selection criteria to determine effective strategies used to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. Section 2 includes the following topics: research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection and data organization, data analysis process, methods used to ensure dependability, credibility, and transferability, and reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the effective strategies used by owners of small food processing companies to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The participants were one small business owner and eight managers of a food processing company in Lexington, Kentucky. In identifying ways food processing companies can remain in business, I sought to contribute to positive social change by directly impacting local communities. Food processing companies contribute to the economic sustainability of the community by providing a source of income to farmers, local jobs, and food to consumers. Food processing plants typically provide employment in rural areas and small towns and indirectly affect farmers, ranchers, and fishermen as well as employees.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers have specific roles in a case study, such as conducting interviews, witnessing, recording data, and examining material while remaining impartial (Burke, 2017). In qualitative research, researchers accept the role of the primary data collection

instrument (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Before recruiting participants for this qualitative case study and conducting open-ended interviews, I obtained Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (10-24-19-0583340). My prior experience in networking within the small business community gave me the ability to increase comprehension of the obstacles some small business owners and managers experience.

The role of the researcher is to comprehend and uphold the ethical guidelines of the Belmont Report, with the protection of participants of the utmost importance. Requirements of the Belmont Report provide the ethical protections of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in research involving human subjects (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Respect for persons means that participation is voluntary and participants can decline to participate at any time (Sims, 2018); beneficence refers to maximizing benefits and reducing harm to research subjects; justice includes the fair distribution of benefits and risks among participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As the researcher, I understood the need to protect participants from harm. Therefore, I obtained their informed consent, outlining the purpose of the study while maintaining confidentiality. I treated the participants as independent agents and avoided exploiting their vulnerability.

Researchers must ensure participants remain protected during interviews to attain bias-free data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers should interpret data correctly to eliminate bias and recognize any preconceptions that could create partiality (Davidson, Paulus, & Jackson, 2016). By using multiple data collection instruments in line with methodological triangulation, I minimized researcher bias in this study. I used the

interview protocol to ensure participants received and responded to the same questions. Researchers use interview protocols to collect data on a topic while maintaining the organization of information. I attended one staff meeting and one morning huddle and obtained archival documents at each gathering.

Participants

In this qualitative single case study, I ensured participants had extensive knowledge of the phenomenon under exploration to provide appropriate information (Young, 2016). The sample comprised one small business owner and eight managers of one small food processing company in Lexington, Kentucky, an important region because small businesses comprise over 95% of employers in the state (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2017). To take part in this study, participants were required to meet the criteria of being a successful small business owner or manager of a small food processing company for at least 5 years.

Researchers conducting a qualitative case study use criterion to identify participants for the exploration of a phenomenon (Cooper & McNair, 2017). I called the specific small business and sent a request through e-mail informing potential participants about the study. Once I obtained a signed letter of cooperation from the partner organization, I sent the signed letter of cooperation to the Walden University IRB for approval. Upon approval from the IRB, I scheduled interviews with each participant of the partner organization who met the research criteria.

Upon receiving confirmation from eligible candidates, I sent a request through e-mail informing potential participants about the study. At the time of interviews, each

participant signed a letter of consent before starting the discussion. To establish effective and cohesive relationships, I informed all participants of the intentions and expectations for this qualitative single case study before they signed the letter of consent.

Participant interviews took place in a secure conference room at the wholesale division of the partner organization. At the beginning of the interview, I reminded each individual that participation was voluntary. Throughout the interview, I remained tactful and professional. To ensure an ethical study, I adhered to the interview protocol, used effective interviewing and listening skills, and avoided coercion (Gibson, 2016). I informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Research Method and Design

This section provides the rationale for the selection of the research method and design. Researchers choose the most appropriate method to answer the research question (Padgett, 2016). In this study, I explored effective strategies small business owners use to achieve small business sustainability beyond 5 years. Although there is a need for leadership development among owners of small businesses, few researchers have focused on effective strategies and leadership practices (Cooper & McNair, 2017).

Research Method

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Frederiksen, Wennberg, & Balachandran, 2016). The research question explored in this study was: What effective strategies do small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years? Qualitative researchers gain insight into why participants make decisions (Molina-Azorin & Fetters, 2016). The exploration of sources of information

using the qualitative method helps the researcher identify and comprehend the phenomenon through the perspective of participants (Misund, 2017).

Understanding environments contributing to a phenomenon is important, as is interviewing participants who have experience (Kalemba & Campa-Planes, 2017). Qualitative research aligns with effective strategies in small business because participants will provide extensive knowledge about the phenomenon (Joslin & Müller, 2016). Researchers conduct qualitative studies to obtain and understand participants' responses. The qualitative approach enables researchers to use multiple data sources to triangulate data (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016).

I used a qualitative research method to provide descriptive details, enhancing the exploration of effective strategies used by small food processing companies. Researchers should select the method most effective in gathering meaningful data (Park, Chun, & Lee, 2016). Quantitative research might not be appropriate for interpreting outcomes or helping researchers explore specific themes, and this method allows conducting only limited investigations (Boddy, 2016). A limitation of qualitative research is the inability to display interpretations of small business sustainability through statistical results (Giorgi, 2017). A quantitative approach would have been appropriate if the intent was to analyze numerical data and explore relationships between variables, not to perform an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon using open-ended questions (Oxley, 2016). In experimental quantitative designs, researchers use surveys and structured protocols to collect limited, predetermined responses (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Quantitative studies allow researchers to examine the relationships between variables by testing theories,

which was not my intent (Rose & Flynn, 2018). The descriptive data participants could have provided regarding leadership would have been impossible to quantify (Friedel, Clegome, Kaufman, & Seibel, 2016).

Mixed methods are a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Nelson, 2017). Mixed methods are appropriate when a study requires one approach to explicate another and the researcher has enough time to do so (Isal, Pikarti, Hidayanto, & Putra, 2016). In this study, I focused on gaining an understanding of how effective strategies could enable a small business owner and managers to operate a small food processing company beyond 5 years (Caretta, 2016). A quantitative approach was not appropriate because it would have prevented the gathering of descriptive data on small business owners' experiences (Furlong, Crossan, Gandz, & Crossan, 2017). Through qualitative research methods, researchers can use numerical data to explore and comprehend decision-making and human behavior (Nelson, 2017).

Research Design

The single case study design was appropriate for this study because I aimed to explore and understand a small business owner's perspective on effective strategies. A researcher chooses between a single, multiple, or explanatory case study design (Madonsela, Mokwakungu, & Mbohwa, 2017). In a case study, researchers can review numerous sources of information to categorize new experiences of a phenomenon (Ulriksen & Dadalauri, 2016). The case study design allows researchers to explore the understanding and perspectives of participants in a real-life context. For this study, using

open-ended questions allowed me to gain an understanding of effective strategies that impact the sustainability of a small food processing company.

Qualitative designs not selected for this study included narrative, ethnography, and phenomenology. In narrative inquiry, researchers must interpret meanings expressed in narrative data; in comparison, case study researchers express the meanings of participants (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2016). Researchers use narrative design to identify stories, journals, and life experiences of individuals (Balestrery, 2016). The objective of this study was to explore effective strategies of individuals with knowledge of the leadership phenomenon within a small business setting (Emerson, 2016). Narrative design is most effective when exploring a process, which was not the intent of this research study.

Ethnographic researchers use archival research to form conclusions and recommendations constructed from participants' lived experiences. Researchers use a phenomenological design to concentrate on experiences using in-depth interviews (Caretta, 2016; Yin, 2017). A disadvantage of the phenomenological approach is that researcher bias could threaten study validity. Phenomenology could be appropriate when the researcher intends to explore and understand lived experiences; however, the approach was not suitable to explore effective strategies in natural environments (Daniel, 2016).

Participants' insights and experiences provided distinctive information to assist in defining this research study; however, corroborating the findings with other evidence gives strength to conclusions (Hadi & Closs, 2016). Researchers focus on evidence in a

qualitative case study and not solely on lived experiences. Open-ended questions enable participants to expand in detail on their feedback and responses. To confirm data saturation, I performed member checking, giving participants the chance to add information and confirm my understanding of their feedback. Performing member checking enables researchers to identify data saturation if no additional material emerges (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). In this study, I compared the participants' interview responses with observational data and archival documents. I obtained copies of supporting documents from attending a staff meeting and a morning huddle. Participants agreed with my interpretations and did not provide additional information. Member checking and triangulation of data sources are ways to enhance the reliability and validity of a research study. Researchers can achieve data saturation if no additional information is discovered (Morgan, Eliot, Lowe, & Gorman, 2016).

Population and Sampling

In this qualitative case study, I used purposeful sampling of participants. Researchers use a purposive sample to identify appropriate participants to provide effective and accurate data and to understand a phenomenon through data to provide diverse perspectives (Morgan et al., 2016). Participants who work in a successful small business could help identify solutions and address the central research question. A primary advantage of a small sample size is it allows researchers to use open-ended questions to obtain rich data (Gelhorn et al., 2016). For this study, I conducted semistructured interviews to explore what effective strategies sustain a small food processing company beyond 5 years (Malterud et al., 2016). A qualitative single case

study allows researchers to achieve data saturation with a small sample by gathering data from multiple sources within a single organization (Emerson, 2016).

Participants for this study were one small business owner and eight managers of a small food processing company. The chosen sample size was enough, as data saturation occurred through redundancy in participant responses. Data analysis entailed sorting interviewee responses into categories to determine themes.

To participate in this study, participants had to meet the criteria of being a company owner or manager of a small food processing company for at least 5 years. Using specific measures to select participants could help in obtaining the proper selection of participants (Breznik & Lahovnik, 2016). Researchers select participants with in-depth experience to effectively collect data (Fisher, Murphy, Jerolmack, Hoang, & Parrenas, 2016). The purpose of this single case study was to identify the effective strategies small food processing company owners and managers use to sustain operations beyond 5 years.

Each of the nine semistructured interviews incorporated open-ended questions and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. During the individual interviews, observing nonverbal communication and addressing the research question by allowing participants to expand on their responses helped the researcher explore feedback and identify patterns and themes. The interview location could impact data collection; therefore, sites should be convenient and comfortable (Fletcher, 2017; Oltmann, 2016). All interviews took place at the participants' place of business in a secure conference room. I informed each participant in advance that the conference room would be secure during the interviews, with the doors locked and signage on the door informing others not to disturb.

Conducting interviews enables the researcher to network, interact with participants, and observe their daily practices. Interviewing in a quiet room at the participants' location of choice could help them to feel comfortable enough to speak openly (Fletcher, 2017). I ensured the interview room location met research requirements, as interview processes are calmer in a quiet and comfortable environment because interviewees feel safe. To eliminate potential distractions, I ensured the interview location had no televisions, radios, or coworkers present. Using secured conference rooms with locked doors eliminates interruptions.

Ethical Research

A researcher must protect participants from harm and obtain their informed consent prior to the study, something essential to research ethics (Marrone, 2016). Participants should understand their role in a research study (Astroth & Chung, 2018). For this study, all documents provided to participants disclosed the intent of the qualitative research study and each participant's role. The letter of consent provided detailed instructions regarding the research process, ensuring the study was ethical (Marrone, 2016). Researchers must mitigate risks by providing informed consent, upholding participant privacy, and ensuring confidentiality (Morgan, 2019). Each participant must grant written permission verifying readiness to participate according to IRB requirements. In this study, I collected the consent form in person and identified that each participant was able and willing to engage.

Obtaining informed consent is a fundamental component of ethical research necessary before conducting interviews or gathering data (Cypress, 2017). The consent

form contained background and procedural information about the study and details about ethical considerations, such as the voluntary nature of the study and disclosure about payment for participation. It is the researcher's responsibility to protect participants and safeguard integrity (Belmont Report, 1979). Each participant was aware of the option to withdraw from this study, in which case I would have destroyed any data obtained from that individual; however, no participants withdrew. In this study, all initial participants participated in the interviews. Additionally, confidentiality is essential to ethical research, ensuring study validity and the protection of participant privacy. Coding data creates additional security measures for participant information to remain confidential (Vitak, Shilton, & Ashktorab, 2016). Data from this research study will remain in a safe and secure location for 5 years to protect the rights of each participant. Walden University protocol and guidance requires researchers to destroy data after this period for further participant privacy.

Data Collection Instruments

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016). Data collection began once participants agreed to take part. The data collection process started by conducting semistructured interviews with one successful small business owner and eight managers, followed by exploration and review of participant responses. For this case study, I constructed interview questions, conducted interviews, reviewed archival documents, performed data analysis, and reported conclusions. Smith and McGannon (2018) noted that making observations of each participant while taking notes and recording responses is an effective way to collect

data. Obtaining archival documents is a secondary measure to perform methodological triangulation (Nichols, 2016).

Interviews allow researchers to initiate dialogue with participants in exploring and gathering in-depth data (Oxley, 2016). For this research study, I selected participants, developed open-ended questions, conducted interviews, made detailed notes, and audio-recorded and transcribed responses to identify common themes (see Appendix A). The interview technique is effective for attempting to understand participants' experiences (Gross, 2016). Researchers conduct semistructured interviews to gain insight into each participant's understanding for potentially addressing the research question (Oesterreich & Teuteberg, 2016). In this study, I used an interview protocol to construct and administer seven original, open-ended questions, ensuring participants received and responded to the same preconstructed questions. The interview protocol assists researchers and interviewees in focusing on essential topics (see Appendix B). Each interview consisted of seven open-ended questions, followed up by additional questions to explore participants' experiences and understanding of the strategies small business owners use to sustain small businesses beyond 5 years. When researchers use open-ended questions, a participant can provide detailed information, which helps to increase the reliability of the case study (Gross, 2016). I asked potential participants prequalifying questions (see Appendix C). Once selected, participants agreed to provide feedback while I audio-recorded interviews, and later transcribed data using NVivo 11 software. This collection method ensured the validity and reliability of the data collected. Additionally, I used a journal to record feedback regarding important nonverbal communication and

obtained archival records from attending one staff meeting and one morning huddle. Obtaining archival records from participants in qualitative research provides researchers with secondary data to assist in triangulation (Yin, 2017).

To increase reliability, I performed member checking, allowing participants to review my understanding and confirm the interpreted meaning. Member checking is a quality control process a researcher uses when conducting qualitative studies (Kern, 2016). Providing participants a chance to evaluate the researcher's understanding of their responses enhances the validity and reliability of the study (Runfola, Perna, Baraldi, & Gregori, 2016; Yin, 2017). Further, by conducting member checking, interviewees can identify errors and clarify incorrect researcher perceptions (Gross, 2016). For this study, it was essential to recognize unique themes explaining meanings about the leadership phenomenon to gain new insight. Observing participants and exploring their feedback provided awareness of effective strategies successful small business owners and managers use daily (Kern, 2016). The data collection process was challenging; however, the process likely strengthened the results of this research study after outcome validation (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Archival and supporting documents provide additional recollection researchers cannot record during interviews. Researchers use archival documents in case studies to triangulate data (Rosenthal, 2016). The use of multiple sources allowed methodological triangulation and promoted the reliability of the findings.

Data Collection Technique

In a qualitative study, researchers explore a research question from various perspectives. The use of multiple data collection techniques enhances the ability to

understand leadership in small businesses (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019). The semistructured interview process includes developing questions, interviewing participants, and recording data. Exploring firsthand experiences of a small business owner and managers of a food processing company allowed me to identify effective strategies used to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. I used semistructured interviews to obtain descriptions of participants' lived experiences, enhancing the ability to explore and identify new conclusions from the feedback provided in responses to open-ended questions (Young, 2016).

During the semistructured interviews, I asked participants a set of seven open-ended questions and follow-up questions for clarification. As I was the primary data collection instrument, open-ended questions were effective in helping me gain insight and explore data not obtained from the closed-ended questions (Wadams & Park, 2018). Information gained from interviewees' feedback provided an in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon. When researchers develop interview questions that are in alignment with the phenomenon under study, interviewees can expand on their experiences.

Obtaining data from participants' experiences helped me to develop themes regarding strategies used to sustain small business operations beyond 5 years. For this research study, interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. During the semistructured interviews, I allowed participants to expand on their responses. In case studies, the length of time for interview sessions could change depending on responses from participants during each interview session (Amankwaa, 2016). The location of the interview can also affect data collection; therefore, the location for this study was convenient and

comfortable for each participant. Kern (2016) noted participants are more likely to provide in-depth feedback when they feel at ease. Participants in this study understood they could speak freely about their experiences in a safe environment. A researcher must inform participants of the option to withdraw from the study if they feel uncomfortable (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I obtained permission from each participant to audio-record interviews using a digital recorder, which allowed me to upload audio for transcription and ensure the correctness of content. Obtaining consent to record ensures participants are aware and approve of all data collection methods (Young, 2016).

I used a journal to take notes during interviews, further ensuring data accuracy. Researchers take notes to record participant reactions, minimize preconceptions, and eliminate interview bias. Semistructured interviews are effective for researchers when there is a single opportunity to interview participants. Face-to-face interviews provide the ability to observe nonverbal communication (Breznik & Lahovnik, 2016). During interviews, misunderstanding and research bias of data can distort the trustworthiness of a research study (Call-Cummings, 2016). To eliminate the potential for bias, I avoided leading interviewees while taking notes and recording. One drawback to the semistructured interview process is the collection of a large volume of information, which could be difficult to transcribe (Kern, 2016). Researchers often gather secondary evidence in a case study for methodological triangulation (Kern, 2016). I attended one staff meeting and one morning huddle and obtained archival and other supporting documents as secondary data. The combination of observations and document retrieval assisted in methodological triangulation.

I used a digital voice recorder, which allowed me to scan and annotate keywords aligned with identifying common phrases and themes within NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. I conducted a comparison between themes from the literature and themes from the interview transcripts. Morse (2015) noted that qualitative researchers use the comparison method to determine data saturation; access to archival records assisted me in identifying effective strategies in a small business. Researchers expand the data pool by using archival documents to provide information not retrieved during observations or interviews (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). The use of archival documents (secondary data; Arsel, 2017) allows researchers to cross-validate data collected with other instruments.

Observation can help a scholar to discover areas in which small business owners and employees interpret duties differently, as well as to triangulate the findings (cf. Archibald, 2016; Morse, 2015). The disadvantages of this technique include observations becoming deceptive or biased. Participants may alter their behavior because of being under observation (Morse, 2015); thus, researchers who observe participants must limit distractions.

I performed member checking to enhance the credibility of this research study, conducting semistructured interviews to provide a quality control mechanism that eliminated misinterpretation. Member checking involved sharing my interpretations with participants and allowing them to provide feedback on my perceived understanding of their responses. Member checking was a way to mitigate erroneous understandings, with the intent of recording correct results. Member checking enables researchers to verify the

accuracy of word choice and interpretation (Birt et al., 2016). Researchers achieve saturation when no new themes emerge (Emerson, 2016). If they are unable to achieve data saturation after the initial interviews, researchers solicit additional participants until saturation occurs.

Data Organization Technique

Another important function in data collection is data organization. As the researcher, I was responsible for the organization and storage of data throughout the collection process. Researchers must accurately organize data to access when needed (Doody & Noonan, 2016). By comparing data, I was able to collect information and achieve data saturation, minimizing the number of thematic categories. An interview protocol enhances the reliability of a case study by ensuring all participants reply to the same line of inquiry (Birt et al., 2016). I used the interview protocol to discuss key topics with the participants, allowing them to provide and expand upon feedback. With participants' permission, I used two recording devices—a digital recorder and a cell phone—during interview sessions, ensuring accurate data capture. The use of audio-recording devices during interviews allows researchers to listen to responses, clarify meanings, and prevent bias (Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2016).

I used NVivo 11 software to organize the data to code and develop themes. I created an alphanumeric system (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) to identify each participant. A researcher should develop an organized system of cataloging and labeling when storing and accessing data (Archibald, 2016). Obtaining participants' permission to use audio-recording devices ensures their comfort, making it more likely they will share

pertinent data. Researchers use interview transcripts to identify common themes among participant responses (Archibald, 2016). Listening to audio recordings prior to transcription enables researchers to decipher the interviewees' responses (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Transcripts of the recorded interviews will remain in a locked safe, as required by Walden University, until their destruction 5 years after study approval.

By assigning pseudonyms or identifiers, the researcher can ensure the confidentiality of each participant in the final publication (Yates & Leggett, 2016). After the interviews, I labeled the documents and stored them in a folder, along with notes taken during the interview sessions. I also used an Excel spreadsheet to record all responses, listing each question on a separate worksheet as an effective tool for storing and organizing data (Nelson, 2017).

After 5 years, I will delete all electronic files and shred all physical documents to maintain participant confidentiality. Confidentiality is essential for ethical research to ensure data validity and protect participants' privacy (Nelson, 2017). I have sole access to the data and no identifiable information from participants appears in the publication of this study.

Data Analysis

The four types of triangulation are method, investigator, theory, and data source (Nelson, 2017). Data analysis includes examining, categorizing, tabulating, and testing. A researcher can analyze case studies using techniques such as pattern matching, time-series analysis, and logic models (Guo & Guo, 2016). Data analysis occurs in five steps:

compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Compiling refers to collecting and organizing the data; disassembling and reassembling include separating the data into groups, identifying patterns or themes, and regrouping the data by themes; and interpreting involves associating the themes with existing research and the conceptual framework (Yin, 2017). Through interpretation, researchers draw conclusions about the information gathered in the study (Yin, 2017). I collected data from interviews and company documentation, as well as attended one staff meeting and one morning huddle. I used NVivo 11 software as the primary tool during the five stages of data analysis. My literature review and conceptual framework were two critical assets when I begin to interpret the data and draw conclusions.

During the examining stage, researchers begin to review interview transcriptions. Sorting data simplifies the identification of themes and allows researchers to listen to full interviews and make corrections if outputs are incorrect (Joslin & Müller, 2016). The audio-recording device allows researchers to decipher interviewees' responses to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). As themes emerge from documents, researchers compare the outcomes to those of the interview transcripts and determine similarities (Yates & Leggett, 2016). When redundancy occurs in responses, saturation has occurred and further investigation is unnecessary.

The next stage in data analysis is developing codes by organizing and grouping data, which makes coding more efficient for subsequent access (Yin, 2017). Coding allows researchers to derive themes and categories from data. In using coding,

researchers can align participant responses to underlying theories and themes (Piškur et al., 2017). I performed member checking, creating thematic analysis to associate data and align evidence. Through thematic awareness, researchers can identify patterns and compare data, which helps determine data saturation. Case study researchers use various sources of data to identify common themes and patterns. For this study, I was the primary data collection instrument, gathering information through interviews, observations, and archival documents.

Using these sources allowed me to compare common themes and align data to identify if a correlation existed between small businesses' effective strategies and operation beyond 5 years. I compared transcripts, archival documents, and observation notes to minimize and eliminate categories. Researchers use the comparison method to categorize similarities and variances in participants' responses (Yin, 2018).

Reliability and Validity

Future scholars could use the conclusions of this study as a foundation; therefore, I had to provide quality data. Scholars verify the quality of data through the validity and reliability of the research. To optimize quality, a need exists to maintain accurate records, interview relevant participants, and record the steps used to conduct the study. Oversight and openly sharing procedures completely and truthfully also promote reliability (Birt et al., 2016).

Reliability

Reliability refers to the repeatability of research procedures. In this study, I provided a detailed record of research collection methods and explained the research

design. Documented procedures bring reliability to the study, enabling researchers to maintain a research log to record procedures (Nichols, 2016). Research journals are appropriate for documenting procedures and enabling future scholars to replicate research conclusions (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). By properly explaining the steps of this research study, I ensured the results were trustworthy and valid.

Reliability also includes a researcher's responsibility to verify the accuracy of data. As the primary researcher for this study, I recorded interviews and reviewed recordings to ensure accuracy. Upon the conclusion of interviews, I transcribed interviewee responses using NVivo 11 software. When reviewing data, researchers must limit bias to ensure reliability and accuracy (Harrison et al., 2017). A participant with a background of the phenomenon under study improves the credibility of research conclusions; therefore, the selection of interviewees entailed using a purposeful sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016).

Member checking. Researchers can ensure data validity by allowing each participant to review the accuracy of the transcripts and researcher interpretations. After transcribing interviews, I met individually with the participants to evaluate copies of the coded transcripts and obtained feedback on my understanding of their responses. During member checking, participants review the data for clarification and provide further information, if necessary (Runfola et al., 2016). Misinterpreting the data could compromise the validity of the research; therefore, member checking is essential.

Validity

Qualitative researchers can verify accuracy and validity using certain procedures or tests, which are credibility, transformability, dependability, and conformability (Emerson, 2016). Researchers use credibility to ensure research outcomes are trustworthy and accurate based on participants' assessment. Activities helping to expand research credibility include close observation, triangulation, and checking raw data against the researcher's understanding (David, Hitchcock, Ragan, Brooks, & Starkey, 2016). To ensure credibility, some researchers have suggested using triangulation to demonstrate reliability across data collection techniques.

Methodological triangulation. In a qualitative study, researchers can validate data through triangulating interviews, archival documents, and observations (Nichols, 2016). One advantage of methodological triangulation is the ability to use various sources to align outcomes and reinforce a qualitative study (Turner et al., 2017). Previous researchers have used interviews, observation, and document review to comprehend the behaviors of small business owners and managers of food processing companies, which indicates the effectiveness of methodological triangulation in this field of study.

To ensure transferability, researchers provide detailed accounts of the research process, use open-ended interview questions, and discuss limitations. Open-ended questions allow the researcher to boost the transferability of the results across other populations (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). When researchers document their procedures and limitations, future scholars following the same procedures should reach similar conclusions.

Conformability is the true value researchers establish through bias-free research processes. In this study, I used a journal to help prevent bias by capturing observations and thoughts as they occurred. Researchers must ensure data accuracy and prevent falsifying information to avoid bias (Turner et al., 2017). I reviewed the data for accuracy and used member checking to ensure my interpretations were appropriate.

Data saturation is another element a qualitative researcher can use to enhance reliability through the demonstration of commonalities in data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Researchers use triangulation to achieve saturation from multiple sources (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). When repetition appears within interview data and document reviews, the researcher knows that data saturation has occurred. Data saturation is an indication of an adequate sample size; if unmet, this provides researcher guidance on contacting participants to ask follow-up questions, if needed. Researchers must understand the importance of data saturation because it indicates commonalities, thus helping strengthen the research outcome.

Summary and Transition

Section 2 included the purpose statement, role of the researcher, data collection, and validity of this study. Section 2 presented the methodology used in this study and a review of the purpose of this research. I used a qualitative research approach and a single case study design to explore small business sustainability beyond 5 years. Researchers can build on theory using a single case study design. In this section, I explained ensuring alignment with the central research question and purpose statement, as well as discussed criteria for collecting data, managing and storing data, and interviewing. Section 2

contained subsections on data collection instruments, data organizing techniques, and data analysis. The data collection process involved a self-developed interview protocol, archival document review, and observations during one staff meeting and one morning huddle. Also presented in this section were the requirements for participants, ethical research, and population sampling methods. The purposeful sample comprised the owner of a small food processing company and eight managers. Section 2 concluded with a discussion of reliability and validity, ensuring the doctoral study meets quality standards.

Section 3 includes a discussion and presentation of the application of the results and findings to professional practice and implications for social change. Section 3 also presents my recommendations for action-based results and future research studies in areas of sustainability and leadership in small business.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore effective strategies used by some small food processing companies to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The participants were one small business owner and eight managers in a small food processing company in Lexington, Kentucky, that had sustained operations beyond 5 years. Exploring effective strategies could help failing small food processing companies both within the United States and abroad. The primary themes that emerged from this study were customer service, strategic planning, and effective leadership.

Presentation of Findings

To answer the research question—What effective strategies do owners of food processing companies use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?—I conducted face-to-face interviews with one small business owner and eight managers in a food processing business with fewer than 50 employees. Each participant answered seven open-ended questions about effective strategies and strategy implementation. Each audio-recorded interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. I took notes while observing each participant; in addition, I collected secondary data from one staff meeting and one morning huddle and archival documents and supporting documents. I used methodological triangulation during the data analysis. The small business owner and eight managers were present at the meeting and the morning huddle. After data analysis, three main themes emerged: customer service, strategic planning and marketing, and effective leadership (see Table 1). The themes indicated effective strategies that successful small food processing

companies use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. In the subsections that follow, I discuss the themes and compare them to the literature and conceptual framework.

Table 1

Emergent Themes

Nodes/themes	Number of participants	Number of documents	Number of references
Customer service	9	4	41
Strategic planning	9	2	34
Effective leadership	9	6	28
Total	27	12	103

Theme 1: Customer Service

The first theme to emerge was the need to provide effective customer service. After hand coding, I entered the data into NVivo 11 to verify this theme and identified supporting references from the literature review. All interviewees noted that customer service was an essential element in establishing a sustainable company beyond 5 years of operation (see Table 2).

Table 2

Theme 1: Customer Service

Node/theme	Participants	Responses/documents
Customer service	9	41
Documentation	3	4
Total	12	45

The customer service *theme* aligns with general systems theory because effective customer service provides the ability to maintain a consistent customer base and potentially attract new customers. Small business owners use systems theory to examine how various components of the organization link together and impact the organization. The nine participants mentioned customer service a combined 41 times throughout the interviews; I posted 18 of these responses under Theme 1. Participant 1 stated, “An established small business allows business owners to interact with a customer base compared to that of a large business owner because of availability.” I noticed the facial expression of Participant 1 changed to one of happiness when asked what strategies contribute to the business objectives. Participant 5 proudly reported, “The partner organization has been in business for over 3 decades.” Additionally, Participant 8 stated, “Customer service is the primary component that has contributed toward the sustainability of our business and growth.”

Organizations that deliver outstanding customer service increase the likelihood of customer retention, an effective strategy toward the sustainability of operations (Campbell & Park, 2017). Providing the customer with a personal experience assists with marketing and potential exposure to newer clients, contributing to the growth of an organization over time (Saleem, 2017). Owners of large businesses have multiple layers of employees, managers, and supervisors between themselves and the customer base, making it much more difficult to establish a personal relationship with each customer (Saleem, 2017).

Participant feedback from Interview Questions 1 and 2 indicated that customer service was foundational to the growth of the business because the same customers would continue to return after the initial transaction. Along these lines, Participant 3 related, “The customer is always right, regardless if they are in the wrong or not.” Participant 1 confirmed the continuation strategy of customer service: “Regardless of error on either side, we want that customer to return for more business. As an organization, we need to realize this concept and satisfy the customer before they leave the business.” Participant 2 stated, “Customer satisfaction is of the utmost importance because [customers] are what keeps the machine running.”

The theme of *customer service* aligns with systems theory because the participants understood the importance of stakeholders’ inclusion within the various components of the organization that contribute to the success of the small business. Participant 5 stated, “The small business owner treats employees with respect and kindness and provides effective customer service to employees as if they are customers, as well.” Effective leadership allows small business owners and managers to influence followers to act in the same manner toward customers (Campbell & Park, 2017).

Successful small business owners realize employees and customers are stakeholders in the organization and are thus components of the entire system (Gerrard & Lockett, 2018). Participant 4 stated, “Successful small businesses recognize the importance of customer service and the tangibles that are created as a result.” One tangible result is increased sales from repeated customer bases. Intangible conclusions might include an established positive reputation within the local community. Participant 8

noted, “We have had customers supporting us for over 10 years.” Participant 6 related, “Being available to each customer allows for the customer to feel important and respected, which keeps the customer returning.”

Participant 9’s responses to Questions 1 and 2 indicated that customer service can be a competitive advantage and a method to retain customers. Participant 9 noted, “The small business owner has emphasized since the beginning to retain customers through healthy relationships, which will impact our business moving forward.” Participant 1 stated, “Effective customer service allows the organization to separate itself from fellow competitors.” The respondent’s statement indicated the small business owner uses customer service to gain competitive advantage in the marketplace. Building rapport with customers allows small business owners to personalize the consumer experience. Participant 3 commented, “Consistently reaching out to your customers and getting to know them by name and remembering faces with all interactions makes the consumer feel more valued.”

I attended one staff meeting and one morning huddle with each participant present; additionally, I obtained archival documents as secondary data. The customer service-oriented company documents I received were two brochures, one flyer, and a company card listing a website for consumers to provide feedback after engaging in transactions with the small business (see Table 2). Participant 4 explained, “We use the two brochures to communicate organizational strengths. The two brochures include product offerings for our consumers to buy a specific product and receive a 50% discount

on the next purchase of any item in our inventory.” Participant 1 described, “The other brochures indicate financial data and sharing the history of the company.”

Small business owners use advertising and marketing as a form of communication to the public. Brochures provide small businesses with high visibility among the targeted market (Chen, 2019). Participant 4 stated, “We use flyers to present technical capabilities and success [in] handling complex projects.” Similar to Participant 4, Participant 8 noted, “[Brochures are] a great way to share our office location, retail location, and wholesale location.”

Obtaining customer feedback helps small business owners learn about their performance and critical areas of improvement (Herrera, 2016). During the staff meeting, when participants discussed specific duties and tasks for each shift, Participant 5 offered, “Being present on every level is another element contributing toward effective customer service.” Furthermore, Participant 7 stated, “Customer service is all about being in the present.” A company taking several days or hours to respond to a customer or potential customer via telephone, e-mail, or social media might leave the consumer feeling neglected and dissatisfied with the service. Participant 1 observed, “Having a solid process in place through the entire customer lifecycle ensures all customers receive the same level of customer service.” Customers who return become stakeholders and assets to a small business. Customer service enables small business owners to differentiate products and exceed expectations, establishing a loyal customer base and creating the opportunity for consumers to return (Chen, 2019).

Participants also provided me with a copy of a significantly large order that reflected last-minute customer change requests. This document was an example of effective communication between the meat department and the retail store. Without clear communication between the two departments, the consumer's order would have been incorrect and the business would have failed at fulfilling the consumer's requests. Making last-minute adjustments to satisfy customer needs increases the potential for the same customer to share personal experiences with the organization (Herrera, 2016).

Theme 1 was in line with findings from Peppers and Rogers (2016) in that customer service is essential to the longevity of small businesses within a competitive environment. Small business owners and managers should focus on customer relations while developing a business plan to increase profits and revenues. Business owners need to implement a successful customer service initiative, thus creating more opportunities to respond to customer complaints and achieve customer satisfaction. (Reynoso & Cabrera, 2019). Ramoglou and Tsang (2016) noted implementing a customer service relationship strategy makes the consumer a priority, with the expectation to enhance customer retention and loyalty.

The findings in Theme 1 are also parallel to von Bertalanffy's (1972) systems theory, as the participants understood how the organization interacts with the surrounding environment. In the context of this study, the small business owner and managers consistently explored relationships among various elements and events within the business to ensure the implementation of customer-oriented policies. Systems theory

enables researchers to explore relationships between parts and identify components that contribute to the system's behavior (von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Theme 2: Strategic Planning

Strategic planning affects the success of small business sustainability and consumer retention. Saleem (2017) noted the concept of strategic planning began with military planners that various levels of businesses use as a model of business planning consistently. After hand coding, I entered the data into NVivo 11 software to verify this theme; I also identified references cited within the literature review that supported Theme 2.

Table 3

Theme 2: Strategic Planning

Node/theme	Participants	Responses/documents
Strategic planning	7	34
Documents	5	2
Total	12	36

Of the nine participants interviewed for this study, seven mentioned Theme 2 a combined 34 times; accordingly, 12 quotations from the interviews applied to Theme 2. Participant 1 stated, "Small businesses have limited resources, which doesn't make sense for my business to compete in broad market segments that are already dominated by larger companies." Strategic planning allows for small business owners to formulate a strategy through analyzing business performance and the external environment (Hyz & Gikas, 2016). Participant 5 shared,

In the small food processing market, a strategic plan's shelf life is usually dependent on the type of market. In the mature marketplace, a plan can last for roughly 15 years; however, in a dynamic market, the plan needs to be focused on more often.

The small business owner must be cognizant of the external environment and identify advantages for longevity (Galpin & Whittington, 2017). Participant 3 stated, "Strategic alliance helps with obtaining more resources to operate and grow. Proper planning clearly defines the mission of the small business while assessing the current environment of the marketplace." Strategic planning is a foundational element that assists owners in assessing the performance of the small business.

Most small business owners serve as managers who operate most daily operations within the organization (Smith & Barrett, 2016). Participant 7 related, "One essential element that is implemented in our strategic business plan is not putting all our ducks in one pot." Participant 7 continued, "We don't obligate no more [*sic*] than 10% of our business to one customer in relation to contracts. Having a diverse customer base allowed us to grow to \$32 million on sales last year." The small business owner diversified his customer base, ensuring consistent growth and support from multiple customers rather than depending on one primary client that might cease operation. Comprehending how strategic planning is a fundamental tool for small business owners is essential in the sustainability of small businesses beyond 5 years. The key to establishing a competitive advantage for small business owners is to understand both customer behavior and the customer market segment base (Singh & Sahu, 2016). Participant 2 said, "Marketing is a

key component to our strategic planning and knowing our customers' patterns and keeping up with the market trends are vital to our success." Successful small business owners implement goal orientation and the use of the systems approach (Arsic, 2017). Market research includes organized gathering and analyzing feedback from consumers that are relevant to the small business. Participant 4 shared, "We have a wholesale plant and a retail store, but we also have been seen on local television shows that I would consider positive exposure for our business."

Market analysis of a business plan helps the organization's leadership to explore and identify future customers (Westwood, 2016). Participant 8 noted, "Strategic planning and marketing are effective strategies that contribute toward our sales forecasts and estimate of sales within a specific marketplace. This allows us to adjust to specific market trends and determine sustainability into the future." Participant 3 stated, "Sales forecast is the foundation of the income statement." Small business owners rely on the sales forecast to determine variable costs and of goods sold (Trugman, 2016). Along these lines, Participant 1 shared, "Without proper marketing and exposure, we cannot forecast these sales to future periods."

I attended one staff meeting, where Participant 1 gave me copies of brochures, flyers, and a company card with a website address for consumers to provide feedback after making transactions with the small business (see Table 3). Additionally, after I attended the morning huddle, Participant 1 provided me with a card that summarized the talking points from all nine participants before Participant 5's interview with a local television station. I observed effective communication and interaction among all

participants who expressed the importance of visibility with potential consumers by participating with the media. Participant 1 stated, “The interview with the local television station will provide exposure to potential customers who watch the local television segment.” Participant 5 and Participant 6 gave me a company memorandum about an event to market the small business’s new product available for local consumers. Participant 8 stated, “Keeping an eye on the market and countering what competitors are doing is truly important to our success. We have to expose ourselves to the consumer and make ourselves visible in every possible way.”

Organizations must become visible to consumers if they are to gain a competitive advantage (Arsic, 2017). I obtained two brochures that had elicited a response from the participants who explored strategic planning. As Participant 1 observed, “We use brochures as a method of strategic planning to showcase our quality.” One brochure provided details of the small business’s product line and price points compared to those of other local competitors; the second brochure showed past achievements and the history of the small company. Participant 6 stated, “We are attempting to gain a competitive advantage by showing our past achievement, which enhances credibility of the products we provide.”

Strategic planning requires small businesses to include important information when describing skills, products, and resources to the potential consumer (Reynoso & Cabrera, 2019). Small business owners analyze targeted markets and implement strong advertising to appeal to a specific population in an attempt to gain new customers (Chen, 2019). Participant 4 stated, “A strong component of our strategic plan is to cater to our

audience and achieve maximum response.” Participant 9 added, “The flyers are an effective tool to take advantage of our call to action with our consumers.” Participant 7 explained, “We use call to action to obtain new leads and earn new customers. The brochures serve a pivotal role in our potential for future growth by gaining new customers.”

The findings in Theme 2 align with Gupta’s (2017) notion that the market analysis section of the marketing plan enables small business owners to identify and acquire new customers. Sales forecasting should include various scenarios, such as the worst and best case resulting from the organizational leadership decision-making (Trugman, 2016). Through competitive analysis, small business owners focus on market advantage and what separates their business from competitors within specific marketplaces. Successful small business owners and managers use strategic planning to create long-term goals and conduct an evaluation to obtain established goals (Wynn & Jones, 2018).

The findings from Theme 2 align with von Bertalanffy’s (1972) systems theory. Small business owners who consider strategic planning and marketing as one component of an overarching system can adapt to various trends of the external environment. Systems theory allows adaptable small business owners to thrive when various methods such as marketing, technology, and customer satisfaction are necessary within certain marketplaces. Small business owners who identify specific marketplaces and trends where competitive advantage separates their organization from others become sustainable (Bridgen, 2017).

Theme 3: Effective Leadership

Effective leadership from small business owners impacts employee performance due to the various levels of interaction and the developmental stage of the organization (Bush, 2016). After hand coding, I entered the data into NVivo 11 software to verify this theme and identified prior research that supported Theme 3.

Table 4

Theme 3: Effective Leadership

Node/theme	Participants	Responses/documents
Effective leadership	5	28
Documentation	6	6
Total	11	34

During the semistructured interviews, five of the nine participants mentioned Theme 3 a combined 28 times, with nine quotes contributing to these findings.

Participant 1 related, “The owner is very effective because he surrounds himself with like-minded individuals who support the vision of the organization.” Participant 4 shared, “The small business owner and other managers are effective because of the ability to respond to operations that did not occur as planned.”

Owners and managers must communicate an organizational vision to all members of the small business (Baxter, 2016). Accordingly, Participant 6 noted, “Each department within our company understands that customer service is the highest priority and communication is the most important element to ensure customer orders are fulfilled correctly and above standard.” Participant 2 shared, “We have morning huddles every

day at 0800am hours with each department manager and the owner to discuss current issues and the upcoming tasks for the day.” The morning huddle was a 21-minute meeting of the nine participants who represented the various departments of the small business at which they discussed ongoing issues and tasks for the upcoming shift. The huddle also served as a channel for participants to follow up on the previous day’s issues and tasks that required attention. I observed effective communication among all participants regarding an upcoming interview with a local television station. Participants shared with me a card of talking points they felt were important for Participant 5 to discuss during the interview. Additionally, I observed and transcribed communication from Participant 2, which was an example of the participants using the morning huddle to discuss issues and future tasks each department needed to address. The small business owner attended each morning huddle to address any questions and concerns brought to light.

I was able to attend a morning huddle before the first shift of the day. The morning huddles also serve as opportunities for the organizational leaders to ensure subordinate coverage of each workstation by employees certified to perform the necessary duties. In small businesses, successful owners demonstrate the determination to complete the tasks necessary for the company to succeed (Ward, 2016a). Participant 2 stated, “The owner often times comes out of the office and cuts meat with the lower-level employees to boost morale and show employees that he once also used to work at that level.”

Leaders tend to motivate employees and improve performance when they interact with subordinates and allow employees to observe superiors performing the same work (Goleman, 2017). Participant 5 noted, “The small business owner establishes realistic goals and allows us managers to be creative when implementing avenues to achieve goals.” Small business owners and managers must make informed decisions regarding planning, staffing, and organization (Seelhofer & Valeri, 2017). To this end, Participant 4 stated,

The small business owner allows us to use our own initiative to make informed decisions that impact daily business transactions. This, to me, is effective leadership that boosts morale because it makes me feel like I am truly part of something bigger.

I obtained e-mails from the small business owner and two managers providing guidance to department staff about tasks to complete prior to an upcoming shipment. I observed Participant 1 asking other staff members, “What can I do to help make the process go smoother for your guys?” Because one of Participant 5’s employees had to leave early, the participant asked, “Could we ensure shipping is covered for this afternoon?” Participant 1 affirmed, “I can remove someone from the meat department to fill in the absence of the driver this afternoon.” This exchange evidenced that leaders within the small business organization were following up on issues and providing further support to meet deadlines.

Proactive leaders who help management, staff, and employees are those who invest in themselves and the performance of the organization (Mania-Singer, 2017). The

communication and networking I observed during the staff meeting and morning huddle confirmed that effective leadership contributes to small business sustainability. Effective leadership enables organizational leaders to make decisions, aligning the small business with targeted goals (Mania-Singer, 2017). Participant 7 stated, “The staff meetings and morning huddles we conduct allows us to discuss and execute business strategies crafted toward our organizational goals and aspirations.” All participants discussed talking points for the upcoming television interview, which were lower prices, quality products, number of years in business, and points of contact. About the interview, Participant 6 shared, “This allows us to feel confident in what message we want communicated and marketed toward the public.” Continuing the discussion about the television interview, Participant 1 stated, “When the consumer feels that an organization is genuine, they will trust the product and remain loyal.” Participant 3 opined, “Visibility is the most important element to obtain growth.” Providing methods of exposure and marketing materials such as brochures and flyers enabled exposure to the consumer. Participant 4 stressed the importance of openness, saying, “Transparency by allowing customers to provide feedback on customer care cards is vital in letting us know how we are performing.”

Participants’ statements during the morning huddle and staff meeting were in line with their feedback in the semistructured interviews. During the staff meeting, Participant 1 noted, “It’s essential to identify what customers’ needs and expectations are so we can accommodate.” Participant 9 stated, “Using customer care cards to identify performance measures enables the small business to assess consumer expectations.” The brochures and flyers provide visibility to targeted markets to attract potential consumers.

Effective leadership is inspiring followers through action (Chen, 2019). Effective leaders identify potential problems and discuss with managers how to solve issues before negative discourse can develop. One component of effective leadership is that small business owners analyze, plan, and adapt to changes using strategic planning to satisfy the customer. Participant 1 observed, “Sharing the vision is essential to good leadership. Sharing your vision helps growth, and it helps management grow through execution.”

Owners and managers must communicate with and establish an organizational vision for all stakeholders (Baxter, 2016). Small business owners should consider employees as stakeholders because workers contribute to the success of the small business (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016). Effective leaders, starting with the small business owner, recognize the importance of guiding and influencing managers and lower-tiered subordinates. The small business owner and managers of the small business organization in this study also emphasized effective communication.

The findings from Theme 3 are in line with von Bertalanffy’s (1972) systems theory. By attending one morning huddle and one staff meeting, I was able to observe the small business owner and managers practicing effective communication. Every manager represented a different department within the organization. The small business owner ensured each department was fully staffed and ready to fulfill the orders for the upcoming shift. The small business owner and managers also discussed issues and actions to fix them most efficiently. I obtained copies of archival documents and supporting documents from each department during the morning huddle listing various issues and obstacles each department needed to address for the upcoming shift. Mania-Singer (2017) identified

three key elements of systems theory as structures of interrelated subsystems. The morning huddles and staff meetings were a specific way the small business in this study was able to use systems theory to implement effective communication and showcase effective leadership.

Applications to Professional Practice

Small business owners and managers strive to identify effective strategies to sustain operations for long periods. The themes identified through the interviews and company documents provide small business owners and managers with effective strategies to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The three emergent themes of this study serve as recommendations and suggestions for professional practice for other small food processing companies to include practical solutions to sustain business operations successfully. Small business customer service, strategic planning, and effective leadership contribute to small business sustainability (Turner & Endres, 2017).

Small business owners who use customer service as an effective strategy are best positioned to build rapport with customers (Bush, 2016). Small businesses that consistently contact and interact with customers provide a personalized experience that ensures customers feel valued, which could enhance customer retention (Park et al., 2016). Efficient response times in communication, whether by e-mail, telephone, or social media, prevent customers from feeling neglected (Reynoso & Cabrera, 2019). Small business owners and managers who respond to customers' concerns quickly will ensure the customer feels valued (Foley & O'Connor, 2017).

Findings from this study indicated strategic planning to be an important strategy for small business owners and managers to sustain operations beyond 5 years. Also identified was that strategic planning helps small business owners and managers eliminate distractions and establish the planning process. Strategic planning allows owners to create an environment comprised of multiple points of view, which encourages open and free discussion (Chen, 2019). Chen (2019) further noted that strategic planning assists owners and managers in establishing a small business's mission, vision, and values.

Findings also showed that effective leadership helps small business owners and managers establish and achieve long- and short-term goals. Small business owners who identify strategic objectives, such as launching new products and services, could acquire new customers and develop more effective visibility. Applications to professional practice could include influencing the owners and managers of new and failing small businesses to adopt these effective strategies, which could improve the management of the various sectors within a small food processing company.

Owners of new and established small businesses could use the findings from this study to maintain operations and develop effective strategies, which can lead to sustainability. The organization in this study has been in business for over 5 years and contributed notably to the local economy. Owners of new or established small businesses might find the information provided by this study's participants useful in sustaining their own businesses. The findings are relevant, with the strategies having proved successful for the organization and participants in this study.

Implications for Social Change

Positive social change deriving from the study could lead to more sustainable business practices for small food processing owners and managers that can contribute to the local economy and community. Small businesses that remain in communities offer employment and stability to residents. The small food processing sector includes farmers, ranchers, hired workers, and residents in local communities, with responsibilities including planting, caring for livestock, and harvesting raw food items. Small businesses improve competition within local communities otherwise flatlined in growth and innovation, creating additional employment opportunities for citizens. Small businesses that remain productive contribute to the local tax base, in turn sustaining roads, libraries, parks, police, and other community services (Kristanti, 2019).

Small businesses in rural areas that adopt online tools and digital services across the United States could generate 360,000 jobs within 3 years (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017), helping people to acquire assets and create wealth. Technology has the most significant impact on small businesses within rural areas (Kristanti, 2019), with nearly 20% of such organizations generating at least 80% of their annual revenue by selling products and services online. Small business owners who combine technology with strategic planning could experience significant growth in revenue (Chen, 2019). Small food processing companies and managers can use these findings to implement effective strategies identified in the study to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

Recommendations for Action

Some small food processing company owners face challenges in sustaining operations beyond 5 years. Small food processing company leaders should implement applications to develop effective strategies that lead to sustainable operations beyond 5 years. Based on the three themes identified through methodological triangulation of data from semistructured interviews, exploration of literature, and document review, I recommend that owners and managers of small food processing businesses enhance their customer service strategy to be much more effective than their competitors within the same marketplace. Establishing an effective customer service program allows small business owners to save in acquisition costs. Gaining a new customer costs five times more than retaining an existing one (Kankam-Kwarteng, Donkor, & Acheampong, 2019). Customer service retention enables small business owners to sell to existing customers over 60% of the time, compared to a 20% probability of selling to new customers (Li, Chan, & Kim, 2019). Accordingly, small business owners who want to sustain operations beyond 5 years need to establish a consistent and loyal customer base.

Small business owners and managers should also implement effective strategic planning and marketing tactics that are more successful than competitors within the same marketplace. Small business owners who intend to sustain operations beyond 5 years must develop a strategy defining a plan that articulates growth. Furthermore, high visibility and exposing one's business to the public could help a small business acquire new customers and create potential growth. Strategic planning allows small business owners to prioritize, build consensus, make decisions, and assess progress toward

intended growth (Williams, Manley, Aaron, & Daniel, 2018). Small food processing company owners should explore strategic planning strategies that separate their companies from others in the same industry, thus creating a competitive advantage.

Small business owners and managers should implement a strategic plan that clearly outlines purpose and vision, serving as a foundation to align teams and create systems (Mezhouda, 2019). The strategic plan provides an organizational vision and baseline to guide daily operations. Furthermore, strategic planning enables owners to implement short-term, specific actions designed to create purpose. Small business owners who are effective leaders communicate vision and goals to employees and stakeholders of their organizations (Mezhouda, 2019). Establishing a clear vision is the first step; the small business owner must then communicate the vision to the entire organization through various channels (Bogers, Chesbrough, Heaton, & Teece, 2019). Small business owners using proper communication channels such as an intranet, memoranda, and e-mail to distribute the message to lower-level employees is key to workers accomplishing tasks correctly. Small business owners can benefit directly from applying the three themes identified within this study. Additionally, small business owners and managers could learn from one another while implementing effective strategies that work within various areas of the organization.

Small business owners and managers should adopt effective leadership strategies to sustain business operations. Leaders who provide vision inspire employees throughout the organization (Mezhouda, 2019). Establishing effective communication channels allows small business owners and managers to communicate the company vision to all

employees in the organization. Small business owners and managers who effectively present ideas gain support and interest from employees. Additionally, including employees in decision-making on operational workflows will enhance productivity and quality, potentially leading to a sustainable small business operating beyond 5 years.

Recommendations for Further Research

I chose a qualitative single case study to explore effective strategies that small food processing business owners in Lexington, Kentucky, use to sustain their operations beyond 5 years. The strategies participants applied within their organization aligned with the literature review and conceptual framework. However, researchers can explore further in a variety of areas, such as other industries or regions. Researchers could attempt to identify effective strategies small business owners use within urban areas because of the different environments and cultures. The effective strategies could vary between similar organizations in other demographics because of different lived experiences and how systems can run differently because of those variables.

After conducting semistructured interviews and exploring responses from each participant, I discovered similarities and constants from the three themes that emerged during the interviews. Future researchers should explore the difference in effective strategies from one department to another. Additionally, researchers could attempt to identify which strategies are more effective across areas.

This study took place in Lexington, Kentucky, where many of the participants were from rural regions; this population restriction posed a limitation on this study. A larger sample size, different geographical locations, or the inclusion of samples from

urban areas are considerations for future study. Conducting a quantitative study by examining relationships between strategic planning and profitability might help researchers discover whether effective strategies in a specific demographic could help small businesses sustain operations beyond 5 years in different locations.

Reflections

Completing the Doctor of Business Administration program through Walden University was the most challenging endeavor I have ever attempted. Walden University as an organization was a consistent, reliable presence throughout my studies. The various departments, such as the IRB and Writing Center, have been helpful during this journey. I have a strong desire to investigate effective applications that make a small business sustain operations for extended periods. The DBA program allowed me to explore and identify themes from this study. Furthermore, this experience has inspired me to conduct future research within the realm of small business in rural areas.

In going through the doctoral process, I incorrectly assumed the outcome of the study before I began data collection. As I concluded this research, I realized it was the literature and Walden DBA rubric that guided my research. After completing my study, I became aware of the importance of effective leadership within any organization, regardless of size. Employees are assets and stakeholders of the organizations, as well. The effective strategies—and the right kinds of strategies—determine the outcome and sustainability of small businesses.

Conclusion

Strategies such as excellent customer service, strategic planning, and effective leadership influence the sustainability of small businesses. Some small food processing business owners lack strategies to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The primary intention of general system theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972) is to explain the connectivity of multiple parts to a system. The three themes identified in the study were essential to the success of the organization. The review of archival and supporting documents from meeting attendance aligned with the academic literature and validated responses from the small business owner and managers. The application of general systems theory, and the purpose of this study, was to explore effective strategies a small food processing business owner could implement to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The knowledge obtained from the findings could help other small businesses in the food processing industry sustain operations over a longer period and on a consistent basis. The small business owner and managers of one small food processing company in Lexington, Kentucky, participated in interviews and shared supporting documents, allowing my exploration of effective strategies applied for sustainability.

After data analysis, which included methodological triangulation and theme development through organizing data in NVivo 11 qualitative software, three themes emerged: customer service, strategic planning, and effective leadership. Drawn from the methodological triangulation of evidence, the results of the study aligned with current academic literature regarding the sustainability of small food processing companies. Exploring and using the findings from the study, I can attest to finding small food

processing companies using effective customer service, strategic planning, and effective leadership, strategies proven to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What strategies have helped you sustain your business to become profitable beyond 5 years?
2. How effective are the strategies in meeting your business objectives?
3. How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these strategies?
4. What strategies contribute to the sustainability of your small business?
5. What obstacles did you encounter in implementing these strategies?
6. How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these obstacles?
7. What other information concerning achieving the sustainability of your small business would you like to share?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

- I. Introduce self to participant(s).
- II. Present consent form, go over content, and answer questions and concerns of participant(s).
- III. Give participant copy of consent form.
- IV. Turn on recording device.
- V. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification and note the date and time.
- VI. Begin interview with Question 1; follow through to final question.
- VII. Follow up with additional questions.
- VIII. End interview sequence; discuss transcript review and member checking with participant(s).
- IX. Thank the participant(s) for his/her part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for scheduling follow-up member checking interview, questions, and concerns from participants.
- X. End protocol.

Appendix C: Prequalifying Interview Questions

1. Are you a current owner, manager, or supervisor at the chosen small business food processing company?
2. Have you employed strategies to improve and sustain positive leader–employee relationships to increase productivity? If so, what strategies and how did you measure increased productivity?
3. Have you employed specific systems to make operations more effective? How did you measure increased effectiveness, if any?
4. If you are selected to participate in this doctoral study, are you willing to be audio-recorded?
5. What is your current title/position?

Appendix D: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about effective strategies small food processing companies use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The research study is focused on effective strategies one small business owner and eight midlevel managers use to sustain operations. The researcher is inviting one small business owner and eight midlevel managers who are employed by a small food processing company for more than 2 years to be in this study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Travis C. Souders, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore effective strategies one small business owner and eight midlevel managers use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an audio-recorded interview that will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.
- Upon conclusion of the interview, I will follow up with you as the participant, ensuring I understand the feedback and responses you provided during the interview. This is also included within the 60- to 90-minute timeframe for interviews with each participant, but separate from the interview. This follow-up will last 15 minutes.

Here are some sample questions:

- How effective are the strategies in meeting your business objectives?
- How did you assess the effectiveness of addressing these strategies?
- What strategies contribute to the sustainability of your small business?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or well-being. As a participant, you can remove yourself from participating at any time.

This research study could help identify effective strategies small business owners and midlevel managers of small food processing plants could use to stay in business beyond 5 years from starting up.

Payment:

Each participant will receive a \$5 gift card for participation in the research study.

Privacy:

Reports coming out of this study will not share the identities of individual participants. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also will not be shared. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by scanning, recording, and taking notes while interviewing each participant. A locked file cabinet will hold written notes, an external hard drive, interview transcripts, confidentiality documents, and my research journal. After 5 years, I will delete all electronic files, shred all documents, and delete all recordings to ensure participant confidentiality.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now, or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via phone and e-mail. The researcher's telephone number is 502-642-9544 and the researcher's e-mail address is travis.souders@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **10-24-19-0583340** and it expires on **October 23, 2020**. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study well enough to decide about it, please indicate your consent by signing below.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of Consent _____

Participant's Signature _____

Researcher's Signature _____