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Exploring Key Success Factors for SME Strategy Implementation: A Review of Empirical Evidence in Kabwe District, Zambia

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Abstract

This study explores the key success factors (KSFs) that influence strategy implementation in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Kabwe District, Zambia. Using the Resource-Based Theory (RBT) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) as theoretical foundations, the research examines the availability of resources, leadership, innovation, and communication within SMEs and their impact on strategy execution. Data collected from 202 SME owners/managers via questionnaires and interviews reveal a significant relationship between KSFs and effective strategy implementation, highlighting areas for improvement in resource allocation and strategic flexibility. The findings emphasize the need for SMEs to foster a culture of innovation and cross-functional collaboration to enhance performance.

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1. Introduction

It is envisaged that, Strategy implementation is defined as the communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans. Hence, in the conventional approach to strategic planning, formulation and implementation are treated in a sequence. First, the strategy is formulated, and then it is implemented. However, this approach overlooks the fact that different stages of the planning process are not separate in practice, and organizations sometimes need to improvise emergent strategies in the face of uncertainty (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014) ^[1]. Alasady *et al.*, (2022:50) ^[6] posited that, “the main aim of conducting a research that investigates success factors is to explain why implementation projects fail or succeed. These factors explain failure or success of implementation using a number of factors that are referred to as critical success factors (CSFs).” Since the emergence of research on critical success factors in the 1960s, there have been continuous investigations focusing on the identification of the critical factors, (Ibid). Consequently, research on CSFs has continued to advance in a wide variety of application domains regardless of how it is criticized, (Alasady *et al.*, 2022:50; Alias *et al.*, 2014) ^[6, 5]. “Great consideration is given to CSFs in different application domains given the critical role they play in the success or failure of implementation projects,” (Alasady *et al.*, 2022:50) ^[6].

Mutambo *et al.* (2023) ^[32] envisaged that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a pivotal role in economic growth and employment generation, yet their vulnerability to failure is astronomical making their operational and financial uncertainties, thus requiring critical evaluation of factors that may trigger positive performance. In view of the foregoing, Key success factors (KSF) are variables regarded as inputs in an operation or program, (Sandada, 2015; Mbaka and Mwange, 2022) ^[28, 45] and some literature they are called Critical Success Factors (CSF), (Neilson, 2008; Dairu and Muhammad, 2015) ^[38, 20]. Critical Success Factors (CSFs) can be defined as those small number of areas in which satisfactory results will assure successful competitive advantage for the individual, department or organization, (Okoli *et al.*, 2020) ^[41].

The success of strategy implementation in SMEs hinges on a delicate interplay of key success factors, each contributing significantly to overall performance, (Guruwo *et al.* 2017, Adewumi & Afolabi, 2023; Alsaleh & Alhaj, 2023; Shah & Khan, 2022) ^[23, 15, 16, 47]. While these factors are interconnected, understanding their individual roles and how they synergistically drive performance is crucial.

KSFs are critical elements that determine the success of strategy implementation, (Mbaka and Mwange, 2022) ^[28]. They represent specific areas that, when addressed effectively, enable organizations to achieve their strategic goals, (Nyoni & Bonga, 2018) ^[40]. These factors can encompass various aspects of an organization, including leadership, internal capabilities, resource management, innovation, and external environment, (Nyoni & Bonga, 2018; Alsaleh & Alhaj, 2023) ^[40, 16]. In business, a key success factor is an input that is critical to achieving success (Alsaleh & Alhaj, 2023) ^[16]. They are ingredients necessary for a system to function and succeed, (Nyoni & Bonga, 2018) ^[40]. They are inputs of resources, ideas, and policies necessary to succeed in an organization. These may include human capital, educational levels, type or kind of products, nature of the business, technology, leadership styles, capital, infrastructure etc, (Nyoni & Bonga, 2018) ^[40]. Apart from the people working in a firm, researchers itemize human capital to include skills, experiences, competencies, schooling investment, and on-the-job training, (Nyoni & Bonga, 2018) ^[40]. Adequate human capital drives the digitization of an SME, which will spur increased performance and sustainable success (Njeru, 2015) ^[39]. Therefore, human capital is key to the success of SMEs, (Mbaka and Mwange, 2022) ^[28].

Underpinned by the Resource Based Theory (RBT) which stresses the vitality of resources both tangible and intangible in the running of organizations, (Hillman *et al.*, 2009; Abosede, 2016; Banda and Mwange, 2023) ^[25, 14, 17], and the Dynamics Capabilities Theory (DCT) which invigorates the cardinality of the external environment in the functionality of the businesses, (Teece, 2016; Teece, 2018; Samsudin & Ismail, 2019) ^[51, 50, 44], herewith conceptualized as SMEs, this paper investigated the critical role Key Success Factors (KSF) in Strategy Implementation and SME Performance with lessons from Kabwe District, Zambia. The study was premised against the backdrop that Zambian SMEs, especially those in Kabwe district, continue to face devastating ramifications in operations and progression, (Mwaanga *et al.* 2021; Ministry of Commerce Trade and Industry, 2020; Mukosa *et al.* 2020; Mwewa, 2018; Mwika *et al.* 2018) ^[35, 29, 30, 36, 37].

2. Objectives

1. To investigate the availability of objectives, vision, mission and objectives in SMEs in Kabwe District.
2. To explore the SMEs availability of financial, human and technological resources.
3. To assess the extent of innovation, leadership, collaboration and level of communication in SMEs in Kabwe District.

3. Literature Review

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in economies worldwide, contributing significantly to job creation, innovation, and economic growth. However, their success hinges on effectively implementing strategic management practices that align their resources and actions

with their goals. This critical comparative literature review examines key studies focused on identifying and analyzing the key success factors (KSFs) in strategy implementation and their impact on SME performance.

3.1. Key Success Factors: A Framework for Strategic Implementation

Examining KSFs in a Nigerian Context: Okoli *et al.* (2020) ^[41]. This study investigates the relationship between key success factors (top management support, entrepreneurial orientation, and customer focus) and SME performance in Anambra State, Nigeria. A quantitative survey research design was employed, collecting data through questionnaires from business owners and senior managers using purposive sampling. The study finds a positive and significant relationship between KSFs and SME performance, highlighting the importance of these factors in achieving success. The study adopts a quantitative approach, potentially limiting the depth of analysis and exploration of nuanced experiences. Additionally, its focus on Anambra State may limit generalizability to other regions.

Strategic Management Implementation in Iranian SMEs: Pournasir (2013) ^[42]. The study explores the key success factors of strategic management implementation in Iranian SMEs, focusing on the role of human resources. A mixed methods approach was employed, using both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with industrial managers and entrepreneurs. The study identifies financial resources, environmental factors, monitoring and control, staff (human resources), and employee motivation as KSFs. It emphasizes the importance of employee involvement and training in strategic management implementation. The study's focus on Iranian SMEs may limit generalizability. Additionally, while employing a mixed methods approach, it still primarily relies on quantitative data, potentially neglecting qualitative insights into the complexities of strategic management implementation.

Key Success Factors in Croatian SMEs: Škerlavaj and Čater (2020) ^[48]. This study examines the impact of KSFs in strategy implementation on SME performance in Croatia, employing the Resource-based View theory. A survey research design was adopted using questionnaires to collect data from 150 SMEs. Data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling. The study identifies five key success factors: top management commitment, employee involvement, communication, resource allocation, and performance measurement. The study's quantitative approach might not fully capture the nuanced experiences of SMEs. Additionally, the limited sample size (150 SMEs) may limit the generalizability of findings to all Croatian SMEs.

Strategic Decision-Making in Hong Kong Hotels: This study explores how hotel managers describe strategy and identify key success factors for its formulation and implementation, analyzing qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with top managers in Hong Kong. The study utilizes qualitative data from semi-structured interviews to understand the perspectives of industry practitioners. The study reveals that managers prioritize competition analysis and macro-environmental factors in strategy formulation, while placing greater emphasis on internal considerations like employee involvement and strategic consensus during implementation. While providing valuable qualitative insights, the study's focus on Hong Kong hotels limits generalizability to other sectors and regions.

Leadership and Strategic Implementation: O'Reilly *et al.* (2010) ^[3]; The study examines the influence of leadership effectiveness across hierarchical levels on strategic implementation. The study employs quantitative data analysis to test the consistency of leadership effectiveness across multiple levels. The study finds that consistent leadership effectiveness across hierarchical levels is critical for successful strategic implementation. The study focuses on leadership effectiveness, neglecting other potentially critical factors influencing strategic implementation.

Knowledge Management and SME Performance: Onofre and Teixeira (2021) ^[7]; This study investigates the implementation of a Knowledge Management (KM) strategy in a multinational company, exploring the critical factors for its success. The study employs a case study approach, analyzing qualitative data to understand the implementation process and identify critical factors. The study highlights the importance of the "people-processes-technology" trio in KM implementation, emphasizing the role of organizational culture, top management support, leadership, KM strategy, and performance measurement. The study's focus on a single case study limits its generalizability to other organizations.

ERP/CRM Implementation in Polish SMEs: Cieciora *et al.* (2020) ^[8]; This study explores the critical success factors of ERP/CRM implementation in Polish SMEs. The study uses quantitative data from Google Form surveys, employing Spearman's rank order correlation for analysis. The study identifies key success factors, including thorough pre-implementation analysis, adequate financial resources, effective communication, vendor skills and experience, and comprehensive preparation. The study's focus on ERP/CRM implementation in Polish SMEs limits its generalizability to other sectors or regions.

Supply Chain Management in Indian SMEs: This study investigates the critical success factors for the successful implementation of supply chain management in auto-components manufacturing SMEs in Coimbatore district, India. The study employs descriptive analysis using structured questionnaires collected from 60 respondents. The study identifies ten KSFs, including top management involvement, collaboration with supply chain partners, information sharing, sophisticated technologies, and product differentiation. The study's focus on auto-components manufacturing SMEs in a specific region limits its generalizability to other sectors or regions.

Sustainable Marketing in Omani SMEs: Shukri1 and Ismail (2023) ^[10]; This study explores the critical success factors for sustainable marketing in Omani SMEs, developing a framework for marketing strategic planning. The study utilizes a quantitative approach, employing a questionnaire survey of 364 Omani-owned SMEs in the sales sector. The study identifies current marketing strategies, including marketing mix strategy, social media marketing strategies, and online digital marketing. It also highlights challenges faced in implementing sustainable marketing practices, including lack of marketing activities, branding issues, market fluctuation, and financial obstacles. The study's focus on sustainable marketing in Omani SMEs limits its generalizability to other regions or sectors.

ERP Implementation in Developing Countries: Aarabi *et al.* (2012) ^[13]; This study examines the differences between the critical success factors of ERP system implementation in large firms and SMEs in developing countries. The study

analyzes data from various studies evaluating CSFs of ERP in SMEs and large firms, comparing findings and identifying similarities and diversities. The study reveals significant differences in CSFs between SMEs and large firms, highlighting the need for tailored approaches to ERP implementation based on company size. The study's focus on ERP implementation in developing countries limits its generalizability to other regions or economic contexts.

3.2. Synthesis and Comparative Analysis: Common Themes Across Studies

3.2.1. Leadership and Commitment

Several studies highlight the crucial role of top management commitment, strong leadership, and consistent leadership effectiveness across all levels of the organization. Effective leadership provides direction, motivates employees, and ensures alignment between strategic goals and implementation efforts. (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2010; Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020) ^[3, 48].

3.2.2. Employee Involvement

Several studies emphasize the importance of employee involvement in strategic planning and implementation. Engaged employees are more likely to understand and support strategic goals, contributing to successful implementation. (Pournasir, 2013; Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020) ^[42, 48].

3.2.3. Communication

Effective communication is essential for aligning stakeholders, building consensus, and ensuring that everyone understands and supports strategic goals. Clear and consistent communication is critical for successful implementation. (Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020; Cieciora *et al.*, 2020) ^[48, 8].

3.2.4. Resource Management

Adequate financial resources, efficient allocation of resources, and effective management of supply chains are vital for supporting strategic initiatives. (Pournasir, 2013; Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020) ^[42, 48].

3.2.5. Innovation

Innovation is increasingly recognized as a key success factor for SME performance. It allows businesses to differentiate themselves, adapt to changing market conditions, and achieve sustainable growth.

3.3. Diverse Perspectives: The Role of Context

3.3.1. Industry Specific Factors

While some KSFs are generally applicable to SMEs, certain industry-specific factors come into play. For example, the competitive landscape, market trends, and regulatory environment can significantly impact strategic planning and implementation in specific sectors. (Shukri1 and Ismail, 2023) ^[10].

Regional Context

The regional context can influence the success of strategy implementation. Factors such as access to resources, infrastructure, availability of skilled labor, and the presence of innovation ecosystems can vary significantly across regions.

3.3.2. Developing vs. Developed Economies

The challenges and opportunities faced by SMEs in developing economies differ from those in developed economies. The availability of resources, infrastructure, and support systems can influence the effectiveness of strategic implementation. (Aarabi *et al.*, 2012) ^[13].

In conclusion, this critical comparative literature review has shed light on the diverse perspectives, common themes, and methodological approaches in understanding the role of key success factors in strategic implementation and SME performance. The reviewed studies underscore the importance of considering factors such as leadership, employee involvement, communication, resource management, innovation, industry-specific contexts, and regional influences. Future research should strive to integrate different methodologies, broaden the scope of study populations, and focus on developing practical frameworks for SMEs to leverage KSFs for enhanced performance and sustainable growth. By recognizing and addressing these critical factors, SMEs can maximize their chances of success, contribute significantly to economic growth, and thrive in increasingly dynamic and competitive environments.

4. Methodology

Using the Epistemological thought which is the nature, sources of knowledge or facts, (Saunders, 2019) ^[46], the study was invigorated in the realm of the pragmatic philosophy herewith the consequences of actions, (Dudovskiy, 2018; Dawadi *et al.*, 2021; Muzata, 2017) ^[22, 21, 33]. Additionally, Deductive (Testing), (Murphy *et al.*, 2014; Muzata, 2017) ^[31, 33], and Inductive (Theory), Muzata (2017) ^[33] were applied. Compounded by concurrently presentation, (Muzata, 2017, Creswell, 2014a) ^[33, 19], the researcher applied both Explanatory-Relationships and Effect, (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011) ^[19], and Exploratory-In-depth Investigation, (Creswell, 2014) ^[19] generated within the domain of descriptive case study.

The sample size was calculated using the Slivin formulation which produced; $n = N / (1 + Ne^2) = 500 / (1 + 500(0.05^2)) = 220$; n thus, approximated sample was 220 SMEs though 202 was determined as the final sample size through response rate.

Furthermore, data was obtained via Likert Scale Questionnaire, and Semi-Structured Interview Guide and analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in IBM. SPSS version 27 and IBM SPSS AMOS version 23, (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kenny, 2020; Saunders *et al.* 2019; Rosner, 2016; Hair *et al.* 2006) ^[26, 27, 46, 43, 24] for quantitative data and Directed Content Analysis (DCA) for qualitative data.

5 Results

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

This section presents findings from a survey investigating the perception of key success factors (KSFs) in strategy implementation and their impact on SME performance in Kabwe. KSF1 showed a substantial majority (82.2%) agreed on the significance of clear objectives for strategy implementation, with only a small minority (0.5%) undecided. This highlights a strong understanding of the need for clear direction and goals in driving organizational performance. KSF2, an overwhelming majority (88.1%) agreed that employee engagement is crucial for strategy implementation success, with only 1% disagreeing. This signifies recognition of the crucial role of motivated and

engaged employees in achieving organizational goals. On KSF3, while a relatively large proportion (42.6%) remained undecided about the importance of efficient resource allocation, a significant majority (55.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests a mixed perception, possibly reflecting the challenges SMEs face in effectively allocating resources. On KSF4, an overwhelming majority (88.6%) agreed on the importance of effective communication for strategy implementation, demonstrating a strong understanding of its role in aligning efforts, fostering collaboration, and ensuring transparency. With regards to KSF5, a clear majority (79.7%) agreed on the crucial role of innovation in achieving strategic goals, with only a small minority (2.5%) undecided. This indicates recognition of the need to embrace new ideas and technologies for sustained growth.

Furthermore, KSF6 showed a majority (63.9%) agreeing on the importance of flexible strategies, while a smaller proportion (4.5%) remained undecided. This suggests that while SMEs understand the need for adaptability, more clarity is needed regarding how to implement flexible strategies effectively. In the context of KSF7, a majority (70.3%) agreed on the importance of strong leadership for driving strategy implementation, with only 4% undecided. This underscores the understanding of leadership's role in setting a vision, guiding teams, and motivating action. KSF8, the survey showed a high level of awareness regarding customer satisfaction, with 72.3% agreeing and a substantial 27.7% strongly agreeing on its relevance for achieving strategic goals. This indicates a strong focus on customer needs and recognition of their role in driving long-term business success. Last but not the least, on KSF9, a majority (54.0%) agreed on the importance of technological resources for strategy implementation, with only 0.5% disagreeing. This suggests a growing awareness of the role technology plays in modern business operations and a willingness to embrace technological advancements for achieving strategic objectives.

5.2. Structural Equation Modelling

This report presents a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the findings from the survey of SMEs in Kabwe. The CFA aimed to test a hypothesized model of underlying factors influencing SME performance, based on the seven measured indicators (KSF_SI5, KSF_SI5, KSF_S7, KSF_SI8) provided. The results showed that Factor Loadings were between 0.06 and 0.07 depicting a good correlation of between key success factors in strategy and the performance of SMEs as espoused by Hair *et al.* (2006) ^[24], Hu *et al.* (1999), suggesting a strong relationship between key success factors in strategy implementation and the indicators in the study. Additionally, the model fit saw indices with acceptable fit to excellent across generally indicated by CMIN/Df χ^2 (X^2) $p < 3$ (1.689); RMSEA, $p < 1$, (0.059); Pclose, $p > 0.05$, 0.030; CFI, $p \geq 0.09$, 0.914; TLI, $p \geq 0.09$, 0.901; IFI, $p \geq 0.09$, 0.916; PCFI, $p \geq 0.50$, 0.791; PNFI, $p \geq 0.50$, 0.706; AGFI, $p \geq 0.50$, 0.784; SRMR, $p < 0.08$, 0.063. Generally, the CFA provide valuable insights into validity and reliability of research findings underlying factors influencing SME performance in Kabwe.

5.3. Qualitative findings

This section documents the interactions with participants on KSFs_SI. The study asked four (4) questions which included

KSFs_SI1, KSFs_SI2, KSFs_SI3, and KSFs_SI4. The findings are presented hereunder.

5.2.1. Activities Employees are engaged in Strategy Implementation in SMEs

The activities that employees were involved in the SMEs reveals a crucial insight the study. Employee engagement is not merely a desirable practice but a necessity for successful strategic implementation. This section identified employee roles in SMEs such as selling, marketing, advertising, market research, and giving feedback. This critical analysis illuminates the inherent interconnectedness between employee activities and SME performance within the dynamic environment of SMEs. Strategic implementation requires more than just well-structured plans; it hinges on the effective execution of those strategies by employees. Within SMEs, characterized by their size, agility, and often limited resources, employee roles become particularly significant. These roles are not confined to operational tasks but are intrinsically linked to overall strategic success, influencing factors such as resource allocation, market competitiveness, customer satisfaction, and innovation.

5.2.1.1. Selling of Goods and Services

Selling of the company goods and services remain the cornerstone of strategy implementation as it translates in the end product. By design, Sales persons who understand and are invested in the company's strategic goals will be more effective at closing deals and fostering customer relationships. Their contributions are no longer seen as mere transactional, but as core to achieving strategic objectives, enhancing their feeling of ownership. According to the RBT, highly skilled sales team, trained to leverage company-specific knowledge and selling practices, becomes a valuable resource for building sustainable competitive advantage. Their ability to effectively market unique product features and build strong customer relationships differentiates the company in the market. The study establishes that employees were generally involved in selling of the products and services in the SMEs. In that vein, participant 12 revealed that employees were at the helm of selling the services and products in the SME, thus radiated that,

"They are at the centre of sales. Therefore, I can say, they implement our work plan of the business, (Participant 12)

Participant 15 went on to espouse that, *"Workers are the main drivers of the sales department....."* Additionally, participant 31 affirmed that the employees implemented the vision of the SME and cited that,

"....They are the ones who excites the vision of selling and reaching out to a larger customer base..... (Participant 15)

The above was also true with participant 60 who asserted that the employees were directly involved in the sales of the products in the SME and contended that, *".....They are directly involved in.....sale of our products and services.* Participants 70 and 88 also said that employees were directly involved in sales thus participant 88 illuminated that, *"In collaboration with the CEO, they are directly involved in sales,..... while participant 70 contended that, ".....They sale the brand....."*

5.2.1.2. Market research

The findings showed that the employees were at helm of understanding the market environmental through market

research. Empowering employees to contribute to market research provides them with a deeper understanding of customer needs and competitor dynamics. This ownership over market insights leads to more informed decision-making and ultimately, a stronger connection to the strategic direction of the company. Employees skilled in data analysis, market segmentation, and competitive intelligence contribute to developing valuable insights and strategic recommendations. This resource contributes to informed decision-making and helps create a sustainable competitive advantage. Employees with expertise in digital marketing, social media strategies, or creative branding contribute to building a unique brand identity and generating valuable customer insights. These capabilities distinguish the SME from competitors and strengthen its position in the market. These findings are confirmed by participants 17, 53, 78 tabulated below.

..... also involved in identifying market oriented brands in clothing, (Participant 17).

.....analysing the market trends to increase the chances of maximizing and meeting goals, (Participant 53).

They are data collectors and also analyzers of the market trends..... (Participant 78)

5.2.1.3. Giving feedback

The findings further showed that employees provided critical information to the businesses through giving feedback on the progress made in the SME. When employees feel their feedback is valued and incorporated into decision-making, they feel more connected to the strategic direction of the company. This sense of ownership over the company's future inspires them to contribute more proactively. A culture of open communication and feedback within the SME allows employees to identify and share crucial market data, customer insights, and operational improvements. This collective intelligence becomes a valuable resource for continuous improvement and adaptability in the dynamic market. The findings from participants 40, 64, 77 provides an illustration of the foregoing.

They are the heart of strategy implementation. They give feedback and analyse performance indicators..... (Participant 40).

Reporting on progress on how far we are giving with the business, (Participant 64)

They monitor the progress and performance indicators to dictate the extent of effectiveness of our strategies, (Participant 77).

5.2.2. Kind of resources employed in the implementation of strategies in SMEs

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in driving economic growth and innovation. However, the success of SMEs is often contingent upon effective strategy implementation. In a study investigating key success factors in strategy implementation among SMEs, owners and managers identified several resources essential for achieving strategic objectives. This section outlines human resources, technology, market research, and contemporary infrastructure as a reciprocal of the findings from the SMEs in Kabwe district.

5.2.2.1. Human Resources

Overwhelmingly, the study found that in most of the SMEs,

they heavily relied on employees in strategy implementation. Conceptually, human resources represent a critical component of organizational success, particularly in the context of strategy implementation. The effective utilization and development of human capital can significantly influence an organization's ability to achieve its strategic goals. Strategic human resource management (SHRM) theories emphasize the alignment of HR practices with organizational objectives to enhance performance and competitiveness. According to RBV, human resources can be a source of competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. SMEs can leverage their human capital by investing in training, development, and talent management to create a sustainable competitive advantage. According to dynamic Capabilities Theory. This theory posits that organizations must continuously adapt and renew their capabilities to respond to changing market conditions. Human resources play a crucial role in developing dynamic capabilities, such as innovation, agility, and learning, to support strategy implementation in SMEs. The following excerpts provides a vivid example of the informants responses (P1,P15,P95).

Experienced room attendants, chefs, guards and general workers, (Participant 1)

Human resources are the main driver of our goal. They help drive the sales department in our SME, (Participant 15)

Skilled labour, also top notch management skills that are able to deliver and coach effectively, (Participant 95)

5.2.2.2. Technology and Infrastructure

Technology serves as a catalyst for innovation, productivity, and efficiency in modern businesses. In the context of SMEs, strategic utilization of technology can enable process optimization, market expansion, and competitive differentiation. The adoption of digital tools, software applications, and automation systems can enhance operational performance and support strategic objectives. The Resource-Based View emphasizes the importance of leveraging technology as a strategic resource to create a sustainable competitive advantage. SMEs can harness technology for product development, customer engagement, and operational excellence to drive strategic success. The findings elucidated that SMEs invested heavily in new infrastructure in their SMEs to support effective implementation of their strategies. In view of the foregoing, contemporary infrastructure refers to the physical and digital assets, facilities, and systems that support business operations and strategic initiatives. In the context of SMEs, investing in modern infrastructure, such as state-of-the-art facilities, cloud computing, and data analytics platforms, can enhance operational efficiency, scalability, and innovation capabilities. Contemporary infrastructure enables SMEs to adapt to evolving market dynamics, customer preferences, and technological advancements. According to the Resource Dependence Theory, organizations rely on external resources, including infrastructure, to support their strategic objectives. Contemporary infrastructure offers SMEs access to critical resources, networks, and capabilities that can enhance their competitive positioning and market reach. In support of this findings, participants 16,80, 85, espoused the following;

We have engaged advanced and technological methods of cleaning and drying the cars, (Participant 16)

We have bought infrastructure that increases our capacity to produce quality bread, bans and related products, (Participant 80)

We employ technology. We have online marketing, sales. We use Facebook and WhatsApp, (Participant 85)

5.2.2.3. Market Research

SMEs revealed that at the centre of strategy implementation was information that spoke about the business environment. By design, Market research plays a crucial role in informing strategic decision-making, market positioning, and customer engagement for SMEs. By gathering and analyzing market data, SMEs can identify trends, opportunities, and threats, enabling them to formulate informed strategies and allocate resources effectively. Market research helps SMEs understand customer needs, competitor actions, and industry dynamics to drive sustainable growth. This was evidenced by participants 7, 12 herewith cited below;

We have invested in research of the market to understand how best we enter new opportunities, (Participant 7)

Market research is key to us. We have opened new outlets because we have embraced the power of knowing the market trend. This helps us to measure success, (Participant 12)

5.2.3. Support for Innovation and Creativity in Strategy Implementation in SMEs

The study in Kabwe District underscores the critical role of management support in nurturing innovation and creativity within SMEs. This support manifests through offering employees a sense of ownership and independence, facilitating capacity building through continuous professional development, providing access to technology, and encouraging collaboration and diverse perspectives.

5.2.3.1. Sense of Ownership and Independence

SMEs revealed that provided a nurturing environment free of creativity and diversity in thoughts with less influence from the management. In view of the foregoing, there was a leeway for the employees to contribute effectively in the operationalization of the SMEs. As such, granting employees a sense of ownership and independence empowers them to take initiative, experiment, and pursue innovative ideas. It fosters a culture where employees feel valued, trusted, and responsible for their work. This autonomy cultivates a sense of pride and ownership over their contributions, leading to increased motivation and creativity. This concept aligns directly with ownership theory, which emphasizes the role of individual motivation and commitment in driving organizational performance. When employees feel a sense of ownership over their work, they are intrinsically motivated to perform at their best, leading to increased innovation and creativity. By empowering employees, SMEs unlock a valuable resource—the creative potential of their workforce. This fosters the development of unique knowledge, skills, and experiences that contribute to the firm's competitive advantage. Exempts from participants 39, 14, below exemplifies the foregoing;

We have tapped into the knowledge of our employees. These are willing and ready at all times to bring new ideas and expand the business, (Participant 39)

Independent thinking, we are liberal in management where our employees can just inform us on the best practices for the

business, (participant 14)

5.2.3.2. Capacity Building through Continuous Professional Development

Continuously investing in employee development through training, workshops, seminars, and other learning opportunities equips them with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to innovate and adapt to evolving business environments. This investment fosters a culture of continuous learning, enabling employees to stay ahead of industry trends and develop innovative solutions. Continuous professional development adds value to the workforce, enhancing their skills and capabilities. This investment in human capital translates into a valuable resource, empowering employees to contribute to strategic initiatives and create competitive advantage. Investing in employee training and development directly strengthens organizational capabilities. Employees equipped with specialized knowledge and advanced skills can contribute to the development of new products, processes, and strategies, enhancing the firm's ability to innovate and remain competitive. In view of the foregoing, the preceding excerpts provides the narratives of the respondents (P19,P21, P42;

We do capacity building of the employees to see to it that they understand and are abreast with new trends in the market (Participant 19)

We encourage our human resources to capacitate their efficient and endow themselves with the industry (Participant 21)

We encourage capacity building and continuous professional development (Participant 42)

5.2.3.3. Providing Technological Gadgets and Equipment

Providing employees with access to modern technology, including computers, software, and communication tools, enables them to access information, collaborate effectively, and explore new ideas in a more efficient manner. This investment enhances productivity, facilitates creative problem-solving, and fosters a dynamic and technologically driven environment. Technological resources, when combined with skilled employees, create a unique resource base that sets the SME apart from competitors. This combination of technology and human capital enables innovation, efficiency, and a competitive edge. Access to cutting-edge technology strengthens core organizational capabilities. Employees can leverage these tools to develop new product design, implement advanced marketing strategies, and optimize operational processes, thereby enhancing the SME's ability to innovate and adapt. The narratives from participants 31, 60, 88 affirms the foregoing;

We use technological devices to allow our youthful workforce to use their expertise in marketing and sales, (Participant 31)

We encourage the use of ICT gadgets such as phones (Instagram, tiktok, Facebook) to advise and reach out to a large scope of audience, (Participant 60)

By use of online commerce, we are able to see the employees suggest and develop strategic goals that are very vital to our business, (Participant 88)

5.2.3.4. Collaboration and Diverse Thoughts

Fostering a culture of collaboration and encouraging diverse perspectives encourages open communication, cross-

functional idea sharing, and the exploration of innovative solutions. This creates a dynamic environment where employees can leverage their unique strengths and learn from each other, leading to more creative solutions and strategic breakthroughs. Collaboration and diversity introduce diverse knowledge bases and perspectives, adding value to the organizational resource pool. This collective intelligence fosters innovation and strengthens the SME's overall capability for creative problem-solving. Collaborative environments foster the development of collective capabilities, where teams can work effectively to solve complex problems, develop new products, and implement innovative strategies. This shared intelligence strengthens the organization's ability to adapt and remain competitive. The foregoing was in line with participants 23, 49, 64, responses;

We encourage diverse thoughts where as an SME we can effectively advice each other and give strategic direction to the business collaboratively, (Participant 23)

We encourage the collaborative efforts of the employees and also understanding of the market and what services our clients' needs, (Participant 49)

We encourage our employees to think outside the box and study the environment (Participant 64)

5.2.4. How SMEs motivate employees to achieve success in Strategy Implementation

The study highlights how SMEs management effectively motivates employees to contribute to successful strategy implementation. These efforts involve using incentives, fostering a sense of belonging and freedom of thought, encouraging collaboration and ownership of decisions, promoting technological use, and engaging in capacity building. This analysis explores each of these motivational strategies and connects them to prominent strategic management.

5.2.4.1. Incentives, Sense of Belonging, and Freedom of Thought

Providing incentives acknowledges and rewards employees' contributions, fostering a sense of value and motivation. Feeling a sense of belonging encourages employees to identify with the organization's goals and invest their creativity in achieving them. Freedom of thought allows for diverse perspectives and encourages employees to bring innovative ideas to the Table, leading to a broader range of solutions and a more adaptable organizational culture. Incentives directly impact employee motivation. When employees feel their contributions are valued and rewarded, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over their work and strive for success. By fostering a sense of belonging, SMEs create a valuable intangible resource, employee engagement. This engagement translates into increased productivity, innovation, and knowledge sharing, contributing to the organization's competitive advantage. Freedom of thought strengthens organizational capabilities by cultivating a culture of open communication, exploration, and idea generation. This allows SMEs to adapt to changing market conditions and develop innovative solutions. These findings were confirmed by participants 2, 11, 26 below.

We give incentives, days off and allow our employees to see the fruits of their labour. Sometimes in times of making surplus, we reward them with money, (Participant 2)

Independence to us is key. We strive to have our employees make independent business decisions based on the market trend, (Participant 11)

We give rewards, we encourage independence in the execution of our goals and objectives, (Participant 26)

5.2.4.2. Collaboration and Sense of Ownership in Decisions

Encouraging collaboration and involving employees in decision-making empowers them to take ownership of strategic initiatives. This fosters a sense of responsibility and increases the likelihood of employees contributing their creativity and insights towards achieving shared goals. Collaboration taps into the collective knowledge and experience of employees, transforming them into a valuable resource. This shared intelligence fuels innovation and problem-solving, contributing to the organization's unique capabilities. By involving employees in decision-making, SMEs develop collective capabilities, promoting collaboration and a shared understanding of strategic goals. This leads to more effective strategy implementation and greater adaptability. Giving employees a voice in decision-making increases their ownership over the process. This ownership cultivates greater responsibility and commitment, leading to greater engagement in strategy implementation. The findings are consistent with participants 23, 29, 30, 56 as narrated below;

We work collaboratively where we are able to give each other the same kind of treatment and take each other as an advisor and a great contributor to the sustenance of the business, (Participant 23)

Collaboration and also rewards for performing employees helps us to reach effective success in strategy implementation, (29)

Sense of belonging allows the workers to feel free in the execution of the strategies, (Participant 30)

We provide required business environment where we are all collaborative, (Participant 56)

5.2.4.3. Technological Use

Adopting and integrating technology empowers employees to work more efficiently, access information, and explore innovative solutions. It creates a dynamic environment that encourages creativity and fosters adaptability in fast-paced business environments. Technological adoption adds to the organization's resource base, allowing employees to access and leverage powerful tools for innovation and problem-solving. This creates a competitive advantage, particularly in industries where technology plays a crucial role. Technology empowers employees to develop new capabilities. Access to software, data analytics, and digital platforms enables them to design new products, implement innovative marketing strategies, and optimize operations, enhancing the organization's competitiveness. Participants 17, 31, 89 were on record to have promulgated that;

We use technologies that makes their work easier and more efficient. Support is the main motivator, (Participant 17)

We have exposed to technology, we have engaged experienced marketing team that is able to use these gadgets, (Participant 31)

We provide digital tools that helps in the effective and efficient way of doing business. Independence is this way is

key (Participant 89)

5.2.4.4. Capacity Building

Investing in employee training and development equips them with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to contribute effectively to strategy implementation. This continuous learning process fosters adaptability, encourages creative problem-solving, and enables employees to stay ahead of industry trends. Capacity building adds value to the workforce, enhancing their skills and knowledge. This investment in human capital transforms employees into valuable assets that contribute to the organization's competitive advantage. Investing in capacity building directly strengthens organizational capabilities. Employees equipped with specialized knowledge and advanced skills can contribute to the development of new products, processes, and strategies, further enhancing the SME's ability to innovate and adapt. In view of the foregoing, participants 42, 84, 59, 94 narrated that:

We support continuous professional development, (Participant 42)

Capacity building, we believe in team work, competence, hard work,..... (Participant 84)

Capacity building and also studying to increase on competence, (Participant 59)

We do capacity building to see to it that our employees have Modern skills in drilling and effectively attend to very complex tasks, (Participant 94)

6. Discussion

The quantitative aspect of the study revealed several dominant themes regarding the perception of KSFs in strategy implementation. A breakdown of the KSFs illustrates their perceived importance within the SME landscape in Kabwe district which is in congruent with several studies which highlight the crucial role of top management commitment, strong leadership, and consistent leadership effectiveness across all levels of the organization. Effective leadership provides direction, motivates employees, and ensures alignment between strategic goals and implementation efforts. (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2010; Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020) [3, 48]. In the same vein, other studies acknowledge the importance of employee involvement in strategic planning and implementation by envisaging that engaged employees are more likely to understand and support strategic goals, contributing to successful implementation. (Pournasir, 2013; Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020) [42, 48]. More, effective communication is essential for aligning stakeholders, building consensus, and ensuring that everyone understands and supports strategic goals. Clear and consistent communication is critical for successful implementation. (Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020; Cieciora *et al.*, 2020) [48, 8]. Likewise, innovation is increasingly recognized as a key success factor for SME performance. It allows businesses to differentiate themselves, adapt to changing market conditions, and achieve sustainable growth.

Furthermore, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings elucidates a broader understanding of the dynamics at play in SMEs in Kabwe. However, the findings necessitate a nuanced analysis, especially around efficient resource allocation and flexibility of strategies. The finding regarding resource allocation reflects the tension within SMEs between aspiration and reality. While the preponderance of agreement

on effective resource use underscores a shared understanding of its importance which is consisted with literature that asserts that adequate financial resources, efficient allocation of resources, for supporting strategic initiatives, (Pournasir, 2013; Škerlavaj and Čater, 2020) ^[42, 48], are cardinal, the substantial undecided responses suggest a lack of clarity or practical implementation strategies, implying that resources are a challenge. This discrepancy might indicate the need for tailored frameworks or augmented support systems to assist SMEs in resource optimization aligning with strategic objectives.

Additionally, flexibility of strategy yields a similar conundrum. Despite a majority recognizing its importance, the findings on how to implement flexible strategies effectively point to operational complexities within SMEs. Applying Dynamic Capabilities Theory is particularly insightful here, as it advocates for organizations to cultivate abilities that allow them to adapt to environmental changes, (Abosedo *et al.*, 2016) ^[14]. Thus, a gap exists between recognizing the need for flexibility and actualizing it in business processes.

This analysis offers valuable insights into the perception of key success factors in strategy implementation on the business performance of SMEs in Kabwe District. Harnessing these findings and addressing the identified areas for improvement can significantly contribute to the success of SMEs in Kabwe District, ultimately contributing to the broader economic development of the region. Significantly, the majority of respondents (over 50%) agreed or strongly agreed on the importance of 8 out of the 9 KSFs to SME performance. The survey revealed a consistently positive perception regarding the importance of these factors for SME success in Kabwe District, a finding that is supported by scholars that factors such as access to resources, infrastructure, availability of skilled labor, and the presence of innovation ecosystems are vital for strategic implementation in SMEs.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of key success factors (KSFs) in the successful strategy implementation of SMEs in Kabwe District, Zambia. It is evident that factors such as resource availability, leadership, innovation, and effective communication significantly impact the ability of SMEs to execute their strategies effectively. However, there are gaps in aligning strategic goals with resource allocation and operational execution, which limits performance improvement. Overall, fostering a robust environment that prioritizes innovation and strong leadership could enhance strategy implementation outcomes.

8. Recommendations

1. Training programs should be established for SME owners/managers to improve their strategic planning and execution skills.
2. SME policies should focus on enhancing resource availability and facilitating access to financial support for innovation.
3. Encourage collaboration and cross-functional communication within SMEs to improve strategy execution and organizational performance.
4. Government and business associations should promote leadership development programs to strengthen SME management.

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