

**التأثير المعتدل للمهارات والتفكير لبيئة عمل ريادة
الأعمال على التدريب من أجل أداء الشركات الصغيرة
في العراق**

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The Moderating Effect of Work Environment on
Entrepreneurial Training, Skills and Mindset
Towards Small Enterprise Performance in Iraq

التأثير المعتدل للمهارات والتفكير لبيئة عمل ريادة الأعمال على التدريب
من أجل أداء الشركات الصغيرة في العراق

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المستخلص:

الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو فحص الدور المعتدل لبيئة الأعمال في العلاقة بين مهارات ريادة الأعمال (ES) وأداء الأعمال التجارية الصغيرة (SB) في العراق، بغداد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى حل التناقضات الموجودة في الأدبيات المعاصرة فيما يتعلق بالعلاقة بين مهارات ريادة الأعمال وأداء الأعمال. وتم اعتماد استبيان باستخدام مقياس ليكرت المكون من 5 نقاط من أعمال الباحث السابقة للتأكد من استجابات أفراد العينة. تم اعتماد تصميم البحث المسحي، وتم استخدام الاستبيانات ذاتية الإدارة لجمع البيانات من أصحاب الأعمال الصغيرة في 9 مناطق في بغداد عاصمة العراق. تم إجراء التحليل باستخدام الإصدار 23 من برنامج SPSS. وقد تم استخدام العلاقة المباشرة بين النتائج الرئيسية وتحليل الانحدار الهرمي لفحص الفرضية ذات التأثير المعتدل لبيئة الأعمال على العلاقة بين مهارات ريادة الأعمال وأداء الأعمال الصغيرة، وبين الجدول أدناه أن بيئة الأعمال تعدل العلاقة بين مهارات ريادة الأعمال وأداء الأعمال الصغيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بيئة الأعمال، مهارات ريادة الأعمال، الأعمال الصغيرة. أداء الأعمال

Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the moderating impact of the business environment on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills (ES) and the business performance of small businesses (SB) located in Baghdad, Iraq. This research seeks to address the inconsistencies observed in contemporary literature regarding the connection between ES and business performance. A questionnaire, employing a 5-point Likert scale, was adapted from previous scholarly work to gather responses from respondents. A survey research design was implemented, and self-administered questionnaires were distributed to small business owners across nine districts in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 23. To examine the hypothesis with respect to the moderating influence of the business environment on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and small business performance, both direct relationship analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were employed. The

results, as presented in the table below, demonstrate that the business environment indeed moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and small business performance, thereby providing support for our research hypothesis.

Keywords: Business Environment, Entrepreneurial Skills, small business. Business Performance

1. Introduction

In accordance with Iraq's private sector development strategy spanning the period from 2013 to 2030, it is articulated that the private sector will be predominantly characterized by the presence of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as very small businesses primarily engaged in retail, trade, construction, and transportation. Notably, the majority of these businesses are owned by sole proprietors and family enterprises. It is worth acknowledging that a considerable portion of the workforce in these small businesses lacks formal entrepreneurial training and is comprised of unskilled and short-term laborers, as outlined in the Private Sector Development Strategy of Iraq (PSDSI, 2013).

Despite the recognized significance of SMEs in driving economic development, they simultaneously encounter a range of challenges, a fact well-documented in prior research literature on the subject (Harash, Al-timimi, & Alsaadi, 2014). Some of the key challenges for SMEs, identified by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009), encompass various internal and external factors, including a dearth of management expertise, limited access to financing options, governmental inefficiencies, and inadequate infrastructure.

Figure 1 illustrates the pivotal challenges faced by small businesses throughout their evolutionary stages, from inception and development to maturity (Enterprises, 2013).

The performance of small businesses in Iraq typically contends with numerous adverse effects, particularly during periods of economic recession, downturn, and political instability (Lohrke, Franklin & Kothari, 2015). Such economic downturns create an unfavorable environment that constrains the productivity, profitability, and expansion of small businesses, consequently exerting a negative impact on the broader economy (Berisha-Namani, 2009). Small businesses are often the hardest hit sector during economic recessions, experiencing declines in sales and profits as consumer demand diminishes. Consequently, this economic struggle leads to reduced employment rates, contributing to higher levels of unemployment and crime rates. Such conditions hinder the desired growth and development of the small business sector, which is crucial for overall economic well-being.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the critical success factors that can facilitate an improved economic environment for small businesses to not only survive but also thrive during economic recessions and downturns.

2. Prior Studies and Hypothesis Development

The examination of various factors contributing to the success of businesses or projects within any given environment holds significant importance, as evidenced by the work of scholars like Ram and Wu (2013) and Daniel, Cieslewicz, and Pourjalali (2012). This importance stems from the far-reaching influence that businesses exert on virtually all

aspects of society. Particularly noteworthy is the substantial impact that small businesses have, not only on individuals but also on the broader economy. Therefore, it becomes imperative to delve into the factors essential for the growth and development of the small business sector.

The objective of this study is to explore the moderating effect of the business environment on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and the performance of small businesses in Iraq. This inquiry is particularly relevant given the challenges faced by the country, as highlighted by Al-Ansari, Ali, and Knutsson (2014). Iraq contends with issues such as economic imbalances, as discussed by Hanna, Hammoud, and Russo-Converso (2014), as well as civil unrest, as noted by Abbass and Jassam (2015). These contextual challenges underscore the need to investigate how the business environment interacts with entrepreneurial skills to influence the performance of small businesses in Iraq.

2.1 Entrepreneurial Skills

Entrepreneurial skills can be defined as the capacity of an entrepreneur to make a transformative impact by creating something novel that holds inherent value. This endeavor requires a dedicated commitment of time, effort, and various resources, including financial, psychological, and social capital. In return, the entrepreneur seeks to attain both monetary rewards and personal satisfaction, ultimately striving for independence (Hisrich & Peters, 2002).

The acquisition of these entrepreneurial skills is pivotal in achieving substantial success. A study conducted by Gomezelj and Antoncic (2008), which analyzed 168 firms in Slovenia, sought to identify the critical dimensions of entrepreneurial knowledge that significantly influence the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The model they established hypothesized a positive relationship between entrepreneurial knowledge and SME performance, a relationship that was predominantly substantiated by their findings. The study recommended the need for generalizability in order to assess the applicability of the model in different contexts.

Within the context of global competitiveness, the knowledge dimension, which encompasses entrepreneurial skills, emerges as a crucial factor for the success and performance of small businesses. Paradoxically, many entrepreneurs tend to undervalue the importance of knowledge (Gomezelj & Antoncic, 2008). While entrepreneurs are often well-educated, there are gaps in their market-related knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the belief in their capacity to address and overcome challenges can sometimes hinder their path to success (Rowley, 2000).

Identifying the specific skills and knowledge deficits that hinder business performance can be a complex task for entrepreneurs (Tajnikar, 2000). Therefore, it is imperative for entrepreneurs to proactively determine the necessary skills and knowledge required for continuous improvement. The realm of entrepreneurial knowledge is boundless, and previous research has shown that entrepreneurs in the early stages of their entrepreneurial journey may lack certain specific skills and knowledge. Nevertheless, they can still achieve success. Many entrepreneurs acquire their entrepreneurial skills not through formal education but rather through hands-on experience. They develop practical skills related to comprehending the business environment, problem-solving, market understanding, and vision development. This adaptability and commitment to acquiring essential knowledge contribute to their business success (Lassen, 2007).

2.2 Moderating environment and Small Business Performance

The business environment holds a pivotal role in shaping the growth and economic development of nations, serving as a catalyst for individuals to engage in various business ventures aimed at enhancing their quality of life (Ohanemu, 2006). This environment, as noted by Adidu and Olanye (2006), is not limited to physical surroundings but encompasses the totality of forces and factors exerting influence on business performance within a given context. Thus, small business proprietors must actively engage with these influencing factors to ensure the success and viability of their enterprises (Ukaegbu, 2004).

In recognition of the dynamic nature of business environments, Kuye (2004) emphasized the imperative of studying these contexts. Operating within a dynamic business environment, small businesses face numerous challenges, and their survival and performance are contingent upon adapting to these conditions. This study underscores the significance of investigating factors that can bolster the performance of small businesses during economic recessions, downturns, and crises. Such endeavors are vital to fostering a conducive economic milieu for the growth of small businesses, particularly in regions marked by instability, such as Iraq (Dockel & Ligthelm, 2015). For instance, Iraq's financial sector has experienced a severe recession due to unrest and interstate conflicts (Mahmoud, Ahmed & Al-Sammarraie, 2014), leading to the closure of many financial institutions and economic disruptions, which have cascading effects on small businesses dependent on the financial sector for their operations.

Numerous studies have addressed these concerns. Jabeen (2014), for instance, explored the impact of total quality management (TQM), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), market orientation (MO), and the external environment (EE) on the performance of SMEs in Pakistan. The study aimed to shed light on factors contributing to improved SME performance. Findings revealed the pivotal roles of TQM and MO in enhancing SME performance, while the external environment acted as a moderator between entrepreneurial orientation and performance, as well as market orientation and performance. In contrast, entrepreneurial orientation showed no significant association with performance, and EE did not moderate the relationship between TQM and performance.

Similarly, Yeow (2014) delved into the scarcity of entrepreneurial competencies, capabilities, and skills among SME owners in the Malaysian business environment. The study concluded that SME owners in Malaysia must actively engage in strategic entrepreneurship activities and skill development to sustain competitive advantages and bolster their performance in the global market. Additionally, Husien (2012) investigated the role of strategic human resources management (SHRM) in the performance of SMEs in Iraq, highlighting the significance of factors such as line management, compensation, alignment, employee participation, and performance appraisal in predicting the success of Iraqi SMEs.

Consequently, this study aims to examine the moderating role of the business environment on entrepreneurial factors and the performance of small businesses in Iraq. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that small business performance in countries grappling with poverty, war, natural disasters, and civil unrest can be highly unpredictable (Jenning and Beaver, 1997). Such conditions have far-reaching consequences on economic growth, affecting not only large corporations but also the backbone of the economy—small businesses. These consequences range from the diversion of foreign direct investment (FDI) to disruptions in trade, loss of human capital, and resource reallocation to less productive activities (Lowry & Chapman, 2015).

Iraq serves as an illustrative case, contending with poverty, war, natural disasters, civil unrest, and an adverse business environment that significantly impacts small business operations. For instance, Iraq's GDP fell to 4.21 percent in 2015 (Trade Economic, 2014), and it ranked 156th out of 188 countries in terms of ease of starting a small business (World

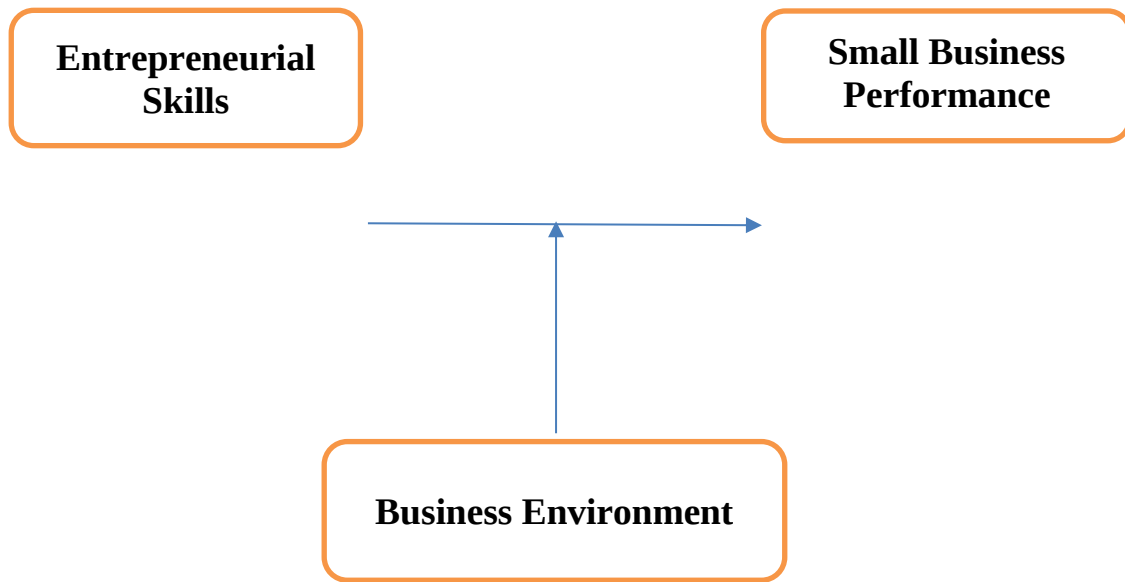
Bank, 2014). The instability has disrupted international commerce and trade, damaged oil installations, and led to the relocation of businesses to safer neighboring countries (Lowe, 2003).

Furthermore, Iraq's business environment is characterized by a lack of transparency and efficiency (Embassy, 2014; Cordesman & Khazai, 2014; Looney, 2008; Suder, 2004). The labor market faces governmental interference and control, and this interference has been exacerbated by ongoing conflicts (Looney, 2008). The government's use of oil revenues as subsidies for essential goods and services, along with tight price controls on food and medicine, discourages foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign trade and investment (FTI) (Balke, Plante & Yucel, 2014; Ross, 2011). These factors obstruct international commerce and trade. Notably, previous studies have highlighted the positive influence of exports on the growth of small businesses in developing nations (Coad & Tamvanda, 2012).

Consequently, Iraq's small businesses face numerous challenges, including disruption to oil production, high startup costs, meager government subsidies, power and water shortages, security concerns, and high customs duties (Nasr & Rostom, 2013; White, 2012; Alsaaty, 2011). Such conditions have impeded the growth of the small business sector in Iraq (Nasr & Rostom, 2013).

Restoring Iraq's small business sector is paramount to revitalizing the economy and creating employment opportunities. While small businesses contributed 0.5 percent to GDP in 2011 (Kami & Chaudhr, 2011), this figure declined to 0.421 in 2015 due to unfavorable business conditions caused by crises (Trade Economic, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the moderating influence of the business environment on entrepreneurial behavior and the business performance of small enterprises in the post-war and economic recession period in Iraq.

The following figure provides an overview of the research framework, based on the reviewed literature: [Insert Research Framework Figure]



2.3 Business Environment as a Moderator

The study conducted by Naser, Mohammed, and Nuseibeh (2009) underscores the

critical importance of a conducive business environment and regulations, efficient essential framework services, access to both short and long-term financing at reasonable rates, proper valuation and funding mechanisms, consulting support, and knowledge about business opportunities for the flourishing of small businesses. Awe (2012) and Yusuf (1995) further contribute to this understanding by identifying key success factors for small business performance, which encompass consumer confidence, the economic condition of the country, environmental influences, government intervention, currency stability, and interest rates within the business environment.

In a related context, the research of Adidu and Olanye (2006) firmly establishes the intrinsic relationship between small businesses and their operating business environments, emphasizing that small businesses worldwide operate within specific business environments. Ukaegbu's findings (2004) further substantiate this perspective by highlighting the necessity for small business owners to engage proactively with the forces that shape their business environments to ensure the successful performance of their enterprises.

However, it is noteworthy that none of the previous studies examined in the literature have integrated market orientation, knowledge management, entrepreneurial orientation, and firm performance, considering the moderating and mediating influences of business environment and organizational culture within a unified model. Building upon these arguments, the present study aims to propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The business environment moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and small business performance in Iraq.

2.4 The Theoretical Underpinning

The research is grounded in theories that focus on how firms achieve profitability and enhance their performance by employing entrepreneurial behavior to drive business growth. There are multiple theoretical frameworks available for analyzing the role of resources in firm performance. In this context, the study incorporates three key theoretical perspectives: entrepreneurial cognitive theory, resource-based view theory, and contingency theory.

Entrepreneurial cognitive theory delves into how entrepreneurial behavior facilitates entrepreneurs in recognizing opportunities for establishing and expanding businesses. Resource-based view theory, on the other hand, elucidates the relationship between entrepreneurial factors as independent variables and firm performance as the dependent variable. Furthermore, contingency theory is also integrated into the research framework to complement the resource-based view and entrepreneurial cognitive theory. This inclusion is driven by the dynamic nature of the business environment in which small businesses operate and perform.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

Data collection for this study employed a self-administered questionnaire survey method, wherein small business owners were selected through simple random sampling from the sampling frame encompassing small business owners across the nine districts of Baghdad, Iraq. The sampling frame serves as a representation of all small businesses in the Baghdad district. Despite certain limitations associated with questionnaire-based research, the advantages such as cost efficiency, convenience, and reduced interview bias were deemed to outweigh these drawbacks. It's worth noting that

there is a potential risk of common method bias stemming from self-report data. Consequently, the study's findings should be interpreted as reflections of the perceptions of small business owners, offering a potentially accurate assessment of their businesses' conditions (Lyon et al., 2000).

Based on data from the Employment and Vocational Training Department in the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (2017), there were a total of 11,302 small businesses within the Baghdad district. To determine the sample size, the table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was employed. Consequently, a sample of 375 small business owners was drawn from the sampling frame, and a total of 300 valid responses were collected and returned, resulting in a response rate of 80 percent. This response rate was considered satisfactory and may be attributed to the researcher's ability to effectively engage and persuade the respondents to actively participate in the survey.

Furthermore, addressing the issue of non-response bias, which is relevant to survey-based data collection, is essential. Non-response bias arises when significant differences exist between the survey responses of those who responded early and those who did not respond at all. To mitigate this concern, the study followed the conventional approach of comparing the early wave respondents with those from the final wave (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). The early wave comprised 186 responses, while the final wave included 114 responses. A statistical analysis using independent sample t-tests was conducted to compare the responses of these two groups, focusing on demographic characteristics within the survey. The results of this analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no substantial non-response bias in this study, in line with the findings of previous research (Oppenheim, 1966; Lin & Schaeffer, 1995).

3.1 Operationalization and Measurement of Variables

Entrepreneurial factors encompass the elements that provide entrepreneurs with opportunities to establish and grow their businesses, ultimately contributing to their success and economic development. These factors play a crucial role in fostering business growth, spanning from local community-level impacts to broader urban areas. Within the scope of this study, the entrepreneurial factors comprise dimensions such as motivation, functional skills, training, mindset, and the aspiration to achieve high levels of success in entrepreneurial endeavors. The measurement of these conceptual dimensions draws from established literature sources, including works by Amabile, Hennessey, and Tighe (1994);

Krasniqi and Tullami (2013); Botha (2006); Jayawarna, Rouse, and Kitching (2013); Carland, Carland, and Carland (2015); and Davis, Halls, and Mayer (2015). The items employed for measuring the variable of entrepreneurial skills are adapted from these sources.

3.1.1 Entrepreneurial Skills Measures

- I maintain a strong focus on long-term goals and objectives (Future Focus).
- Ideas often spontaneously flow from me (Idea Generation).
- I have a track record of effectively translating ideas into practical outcomes (Execution).
- I exhibit sensitivity towards the feelings and perspectives of others (Interpersonal Sensitivity).
- I possess a high level of self-assurance and confidence (Self-Confidence).
- Even in challenging situations, I tend to maintain an optimistic outlook (Optimism).
- I demonstrate persistence and resilience, not easily giving up when faced with obstacles (Persistence).
- I am comfortable with taking calculated risks in my entrepreneurial endeavors (Risk Taking).
- I believe I have a strong sense of control over my circumstances (Locus of Control).
- I have faith in my problem-solving and creative abilities (Self-Esteem).

3.1.2 Business Environment

The business environment plays a pivotal and indispensable role in shaping the performance of small businesses. The immediate geographical context where business activities take place holds significant influence over the broader development of the Iraqi business environment and, consequently, the national economy. This influence stems from the fact that many regions in Iraq specialize in particular types of small businesses within their local spheres, thereby making a substantial contribution to the overall economic growth.

The variables used to gauge the Iraqi business environment encompass aspects such as post-war dynamics, economic recession, and the prevailing political instability in the country. These measurement items are adapted from prior studies conducted by researchers such as Ward, Duray, and Sum (1995); Olszak and Ziemba (2012); Peifer, Zhao, and Schibrowsky (2012); and Leonidou (2004). The following instruments are employed to assess this construct:

- Lack of access to financing negatively impacts small businesses.
- Government instability has adverse effects on the business environment and performance.
- Economic recession leads to unfavorable conditions within the business environment.
- Shortages of skilled labor impede small business performance.
- Rising material costs negatively affect business performance.
- Increases in utility expenses impact the business environment.
- Declining demand in the local market influences the business environment.
- Low profit margins hinder business performance.
- Declines in foreign markets affect the business environment.
- Lack of access to product advertisement resources impacts business performance within the business environment.

3.1.3 Small Business Performance

The performance of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Iraq holds paramount importance, especially in the aftermath of prolonged conflict, as the country endeavors to recover from the extensive damage inflicted upon it. Several critical success factors, including entrepreneurial elements such as motivation, skills, training, and mindset, play a pivotal role in the success of small businesses in Iraq. The measurement criteria for these factors draw from previous research studies conducted by Abdul-Maksoud, Asada, and Nakagawa (2008); Feldman (2014); and Rody and Stearns (2013). Performance is assessed based on key indicators, including small business cash flow, profitability, and income. The following constructs are utilized to measure this variable:

- Notable improvements in the profitability levels of small businesses.
- Substantial growth in the operating income of small businesses.
- Significant increases in sales profit growth within small businesses.
- A marked rise in the growth rate of cash flow.
- Tangible growth in annual sales figures.
- Noticeable expansions in the total assets of small businesses.

3.1.4 Small Business Performance

The performance of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Iraq holds paramount significance, particularly in the aftermath of protracted conflict, as the nation continues its efforts toward post-war recovery. Given the challenging context, certain critical success factors, notably entrepreneurial elements such as motivation, skills, training, and mindset, assume pivotal roles in supporting the resilience and growth of small businesses in Iraq. These measurement criteria draw from established research studies conducted by Abdul-Maksoud, Asada, and Nakagawa (2008); Feldman (2014); and Rody and Stearns (2013).

Performance within this context is assessed through key financial indicators, including small business cash flow, profitability, and income. The following constructs are utilized to gauge the performance variable:

- Remarkable enhancements in the profitability levels of small businesses.
- Substantial increases in the growth of operating income among small businesses.
- Noteworthy expansions in the growth of sales profits within small businesses.
- A substantial rise in the growth rate of cash flow.
- Significant annual sales growth.
- Tangible increases in the total assets of small businesses.

4. Testing of Hypothesis

To test the hypotheses developed, various statistical analyses were conducted, including correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. Furthermore, hierarchical regression analysis was employed to examine the hypothesis involving the moderating influence of the Business Environment on the relationship between Entrepreneurial Skills and Small Business Performance. The results presented in the table below indicate that the business environment indeed moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and small business performance, providing support for Hypothesis H1.

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis confirm the presence of a moderating effect of the business environment on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and small business performance.

Independent Variables	Std. Beta 1	Std. Beta 2	Std. Beta 3
Entrepreneurial Skills	.512	.230	.246
Interaction			
ES × Business environment			.138
R ²	.262	.349	.368
R ² change	.262	.087	.019
F-change	102.918	38.842	8.539
Significant level (P<)	*** .001	** .05	* 0.

5. Discussions and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine and substantiate the positively significant moderating relationship between the business environment and the impact of entrepreneurial skills on the performance of small businesses operating in Iraq. While there is a substantial body of research on entrepreneurial behavior, there is a noticeable dearth of studies focused on this topic within Arab countries. The implications of this discovery are profound, as it stands to empower small business owners by encouraging a deeper appreciation for the importance of their entrepreneurial motivation.

This heightened awareness has the potential to bolster their competitive position within the market and propel their businesses toward superior performance. Small business owners can leverage this understanding to enhance productivity and orient themselves strategically within the intensely competitive business environment. Furthermore, it underscores the imperative for small-business owners to possess a genuine passion for their products or services, a willingness to be personally invested in their ventures, a commitment to long-term engagement, a clear market definition, and a proactive attention to detail.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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