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IMPACT OF PLANNING AND CONTROL SOPHISTICATION IN SMALL BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

Significant research has been conducted using numerical measures to establish criteria and determine the relationship between planning sophistication and business success. This research takes a different approach by using a one-on-one interview with closed ended questions to evaluate management perceptions of planning sophistication and its relationship to perceptions of company performance. Our study addresses sophistication in terms of: planning knowledge, time period the plan covers, external/internal considerations, and internal metrics used to measure success. It addresses measurement and control in terms of: goals and objectives, and monitoring frequency. Management's perceptions of how increased knowledge of the strategic planning discipline might impact future company performance are also evaluated. Findings indicate that managers' perceptions of greater sophistication in their planning efforts are slightly positively related to perceptions of better company performance. Overwhelming evidence is submitted indicating increased knowledge will moderately to significantly impact future company performance.

INTRODUCTION

Business schools stress the relationship between strategic planning and company results; however, only approximately twenty percent of all college graduates obtain their degrees in business (2004) U.S Department of Education. Since many small business leaders never graduate from college or obtain their degrees in non-business areas, it follows that many have limited knowledge of the strategic planning discipline. Robinson & Pearce (1984) report while most understand that planning is necessary and engage in some level of "strategic thinking," many small companies do not feel that they have the time or resources necessary to formalize a strategic plan. Many are familiar with strategic planning concepts at a general level but lack knowledge of the detailed considerations and steps that should be taken to orchestrate, monitor and, control a dynamic plan (p. 129).

Furthermore, small business managers are not sure whether strategic planning will improve company performance. The literature even suggests mixed results regarding the impact of planning on company performance. Boyd (1991) provides an overview of twenty-one research efforts from 1970 to 1988 which yielded mixed results. In his meta-analytic review of these publications, he reported that "while the average effect size is small, many firms do report significant, quantifiable benefits from participating in the strategic planning process" (p. 369). Miller and Cardinal (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of twenty-six previously published research studies and found similar results to those Boyd reported.

While a great deal of the research indicates planning formality moderately impacts performance, there is not a generally accepted definition of what constitutes planning sophistication and performance compared with plan measurement. Many studies, including Bracker & Pearson (1986); Perry (2001); Rhyne (1986); Ramanujam, Venkatraman, & Camillus (1986a, 1986b); Robinson & Pearce (1983); Rue & Ibrahim (1998); Thune & House (1970); Tossi, & Gomez-Mejia (1994); and Wijewardena, De Zoysa, Fonseka, & Perera (2004); have used various techniques to define sophistication and measurement. Miller and Cardinal (1994) believe that "methodological differences across studies have been largely responsible for inconsistent findings reported in the literature and largely responsible for the debate concerning the value of strategic planning" (p. 1662). Some authors attribute the inconsistency to "plan content" rather than "plan sophistication" (Hofer, 1976). Some attribute "bad management" as the major contributor to poor business performance (Allen, 1995; Argenti, 1976). And others have a more cynical view and contend that it is the process itself which creates ineffective planning efforts. Mintzberg (1994) argued that the strategic planning process has been confused with the mechanical articulation of plans that already exist rather than development of visions of the future.

There is research supporting the importance and effectiveness of strategic planning at early stages of a company's developmental life cycle. Lumpkin and Dess (1995) indicate that the use of a "simplistic strategy-making process was found to be positively associated with performance during the early stages of organizational development but detrimental to performance as organizations grow and mature" (p. 1386). Sarason and Tegarden (2003) reported similar findings, and Chrisman and McMullan (2004) indicated that startup ventures who use qualified outside counseling have "survival rates in excess of those in the general population" (p. 229).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper builds on the methodology and results of three recent studies addressing small to medium-sized businesses: Perry, 2001; Rue & Ibrahim, 1998; Wijewardena, De Zoysa, Fonseka, & Perera, 2004. Each of these studies used quantitative metrics for performance and found a moderately positive impact between strategic planning sophistication and company performance.

Rue and Ibrahim (1998) conducted a survey designed to address the relationship between planning sophistication and organizational performance in small firms. They included several factors: written plans, quantifiable objectives, external/internal environmental considerations, budgeting, and monitoring procedures. Sophistication was ranked using three categories which ranged from companies with no written plans to companies who developed written plans with: "quantified objectives, some specific plans and budgets, identification of some factors in the external environment, and procedures for anticipating or detecting differences between the plan and actual performance" (p. 27). Performance was evaluated using a quantitative comparison to industry averages, growth rate of sales, and return on investment. One of the key findings of their study was that higher rates of sales growth were achieved by those companies with more sophisticated planning processes. However, there was no significant relationship to return on investment.

Perry (2001) conducted a survey in which he used five simple yes/no questions to identify the formality of a company's planning process. A *yes* response was recorded only if written plans and forecasts existed for sales, staffing, cash, capital expenditures, and measurable goals three or more years into the future. The planning score response variable was the sum of the yes answers. He used a matching criteria of age, industry, SIC code, size, and location to compare similar companies who had declared bankruptcy with companies who had not failed. His results showed that the majority of those surveyed (61% for failed firms and 64% for non-failed firms) did not do any planning at all. In addition he found a weak but statistically significant relationship in the mean difference planning score between failed firms and non-failed firms, and noted that there were "strong indications ... that planning does make a difference and can reduce the probability of failure" (p. 204). He concluded with the following challenge "if your small business employs five or more people, you should consider engaging in the planning activities implied by the five questions used in this survey to measure the extent of planning, because doing so may enhance your chances of survival and success" (p. 206).

Wijewardena, De Zoysa, Fonseka, and Perera (2004) took a slightly different approach by identifying control as a key component of the planning process. Rue and Ibrahim (1998) addressed control in terms of monitoring, but Wijewardena et al. extended the use of control by considering the impact of control on company performance (measured by sales growth). They characterize planning sophistication by the following three categories: no written plans or budgets; simple budgets; and detailed budgets for many different operational areas. They further characterized control for the firms falling into the second and third categories by three additional categories: those who did not calculate variance (budget versus actual) differences; those who viewed budget variances on selected items; and those who regularly viewed budget variances on a broad range of operating activities with emphasis on taking corrective action. Two metrics, percent increase/decrease in sales growth, and sales growth direction, were used to calculate the results. Confirming the aforementioned results Wijewardena et al. reported "greater planning sophistication has correlated significantly with higher performance in sales" (p. 212). In addition, they further report that "more sophisticated budgetary controls have achieved better performance in sales" (p. 213).

METHODOLOGY

Similar to the three efforts described above, we included written plans, quantifiable objectives, external/internal environment considerations, and formal budgets among our research variables. In addition, we addressed three components: knowledge base; monitoring in terms of whether plan objectives are used as a measure of personnel performance; and how increased knowledge will affect company performance. Rather than using quantitative measures as the previous articles had done, we took a different approach by using management's subjective perceptions to measure knowledge, sophistication, and success. While some believe that inconsistencies in research methodology account for the inconsistency in the value of strategic planning, we believe quantitative metrics such as industry average comparisons of sales growth and ROI do not take other organizational dynamics into account. More importantly, a few numerical measures do not consider the many other metrics company management may consider important measures of success. In this study, we examine other factors and ask for management's overall perception of how the company has performed across the broad range of determinants.

We used the small businesses in the Charleston, South Carolina metropolitan area as the sample for our exploratory study. The predominant industry in the Charleston metropolitan area is hospitality and tourism.

Many large corporations have plants or local offices; however, the low country is mostly characterized by small businesses with fewer than 100 employees. These businesses are engaged in both manufacturing and service oriented operations. Our research was focused on those businesses, excluding those in the hospitality and tourism sector.

We chose to use an oral, structured interview with closed-ended questions to gather the data for our study. Undergraduate students from two strategic management classes were engaged to gather the survey information. As a final course assignment, each student was asked to select 2 companies from the Charleston metro area to interview. After the selections were made, they were compared to identify and resolve any overlaps. Before making any contact with the selected companies, each student was required to receive a certificate of training by completing the College of Charleston Institutional Review Board (IRB) training program for protecting human subject's research. The students were then counseled on how to make appointments and were asked to arrange a meeting with the highest ranking official in the company that was available to meet with them. To minimize bias and ensure that all surveys were conducted in a similar manner, several days were spent instructing the students on the proper methodology for conducting the interview. Mock interviews were conducted and the students were told to solicit information without expression or comment and offer explanations only if asked. The students presented each participant with a copy of the survey and an introductory letter (from the authors herein) explaining the research. To ensure the interviews were conducted, students were asked to obtain business cards from each participant and write a brief 1 page review of their experience. The participant was told that a follow-up presentation explaining the results of the survey would be held in the very near future. As a result, 118 companies participated.

There were three primary objectives of the survey. The first objective was to understand management's perceptions regarding their strategic planning initiatives, to understand what their detailed efforts entailed (including measurement and control processes used to communicate and measure their performance); to determine what factors they used to measure success; and to determine what their perceptions of success were.. To evaluate our first objective, we investigated business managers' perceived knowledge of strategic planning by asking how well they understood: <u>why</u> strategic planning is necessary; <u>what</u> factors should be considered; <u>how</u> to orchestrate a successful plan; <u>who</u>, in terms of internal and external resources, could add value to the plan development; and <u>when</u> and how often the plan should be updated. Details of their actual planning efforts were investigated with questions regarding the time frames and written elements included in their plans. Measures of success were identified by using a check list which included: sales; profit; productivity; customer satisfaction; quality; market share; product development; return on investment; and other. Expectations, measurement, and control philosophy were investigated using the following scale: 1 - expectations are not clearly established; 2 - expectations are generally and verbally communicated; 3 - expectations are written and measurable with target dates; and 4 - expectations are written and measurable with target dates and are used to evaluate personnel performance. Monitoring frequency was measured using: 1 - never; 2 - annually; 3- quarterly; and 4. monthly. And, performance compared with plans was measured using: 1- failed completely; 2 - needs improvement; 3 - met expectations; 4 - exceeded expectations; and 5 - superior.

The second objective was to evaluate management's perceptions of the impact increased planning knowledge would have on future company performance. To evaluate our second objective, early in the survey, we established perceptions of process sophistication without providing an overview of the concepts and process involved in strategic planning. The remaining survey questions were designed to provide a check-list of "food for thought" items for the interviewee to consider. Our hypothesis was that many companies had a basic general knowledge but lacked education and training on the details of the process.

The third objective was to evaluate key relationships between planning variables, measurement and control variables, and perceived success to identify those which had the greatest impact on perceived performance.

The survey used an ordinal Likert scale for the majority of the questions, and the results were summarized in five categories: 1 - demographics; 2 - process (overall perceptions of process sophistication, degree of employee participation, and communication methods); 3 - knowledge (perceptions of knowledge, detailed planning efforts, planning horizon, and metrics the company used to evaluate success); 4 - measurement/control (frequency of monitoring efforts, how objectives are established, to what extent they are communicated, whether they are used for personnel evaluation, and perceptions of overall performance); and 5 - future (considerations and perceptions that more knowledge might have on future results).

RESULTS

Demographics

Forty-three percent of our surveys were completed by company owners with the remaining 57 percent completed by key management personnel. Seventy-three percent of the companies were less than ten million dollars in sales and 90 percent had fewer than 100 employees. Fourteen percent of the companies were start-up ventures.

Process

Eighty-one percent of the companies in our survey reported that their strategic planning initiatives were midrange or better. Ten percent of the companies did no strategic planning at all, and 26 percent reported sophisticated planning efforts. Sixty-three percent of the planning efforts took place at the office. Thirty-three percent of the plans were completed by CEOs and executive management, and only 20 percent used formal reports to communicate their plans to the organization.

Knowledge

Perceptions of knowledge were: why, 91 percent moderate or better; what, 92 percent moderate or better; how, 90 percent moderate or better; who, 93 percent moderate or better; and when, 87 percent moderate or better. Table 1 shows the results of the company's detailed planning efforts and Figure 1 shows a Pareto analysis of the items the companies identified as the ones they use to measure plan success. Sales, profits, and customer satisfaction ranked one, two, and three respectively.

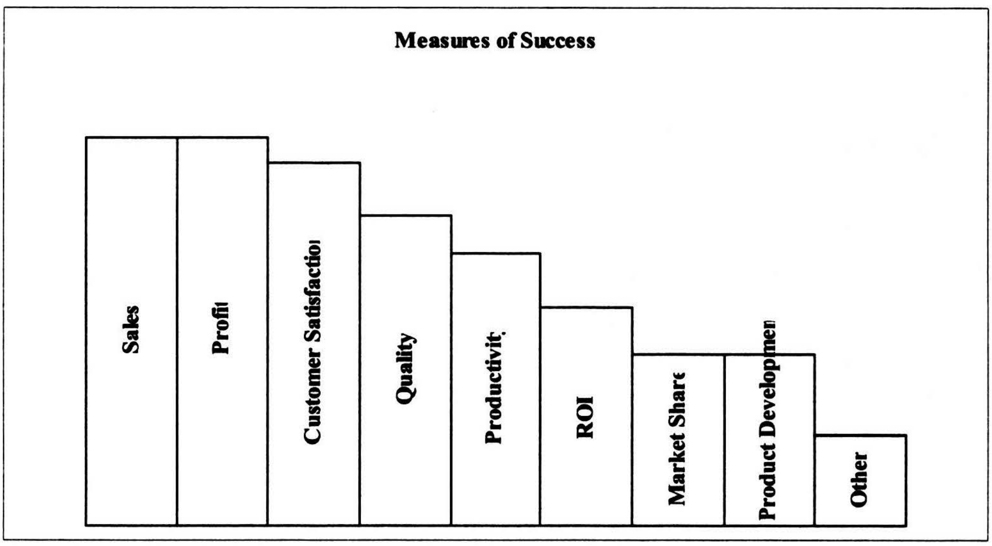
Measurement/Control

Communication of performance expectations and measurement of results were: expectations are not clearly established, 3 percent; expectations are generally and verbally communicated, 36 percent, expectations are written and measurable with target dates, 33 percent; and expectations are written and measurable with target dates and are used to evaluate personnel performance, 28 percent. Frequency of monitoring was: never, 3 percent; annually, 11 percent; quarterly, 24 percent; and monthly (with many indicating they monitor on a daily basis), 62 percent. The company's perceptions of performance against plan were: needs improvement, 26 percent; met expectations, 33 percent; exceeded

Table 1 – Detailed Planning Efforts

		Percent Responding		
Written	Don't Do It	< 1 Year	1 Year	> 2 Year
Sales Forecast	11	19	45	25
Staffing Forecast	28	26	33	13
Income Statement	8	25	44	23
Balance Sheet	11	27	42	20
Cash Flow	10	29	42	19
External Assessment	35	27	27	11
Internal Assessment	23	31	30	16

Figure 1 - Pareto Analysis of Success Measures



expectations, 34 percent; and superior, 28 percent. Frequency of monitoring was: never, 3 percent; annually, 11 percent;

Measurement/Control

Communication of performance expectations and measurement of results were: expectations are not clearly established, 3 percent; expectations are generally and verbally communicated, 36 percent, expectations are written and measurable with target dates, 33 percent; and expectations are written and measurable with target dates and are used to evaluate personnel performance, quarterly, 24 percent; and monthly (with many indicating they monitor on a daily basis), 62 percent. The company's perceptions of performance against plan were: needs improvement, 26 percent; met expectations, 33 percent; exceeded expectations, 34 percent; and superior, 7 percent. No one indicated that they had failed completely.

Figure 2 - Pareto Analysis of External Considerations

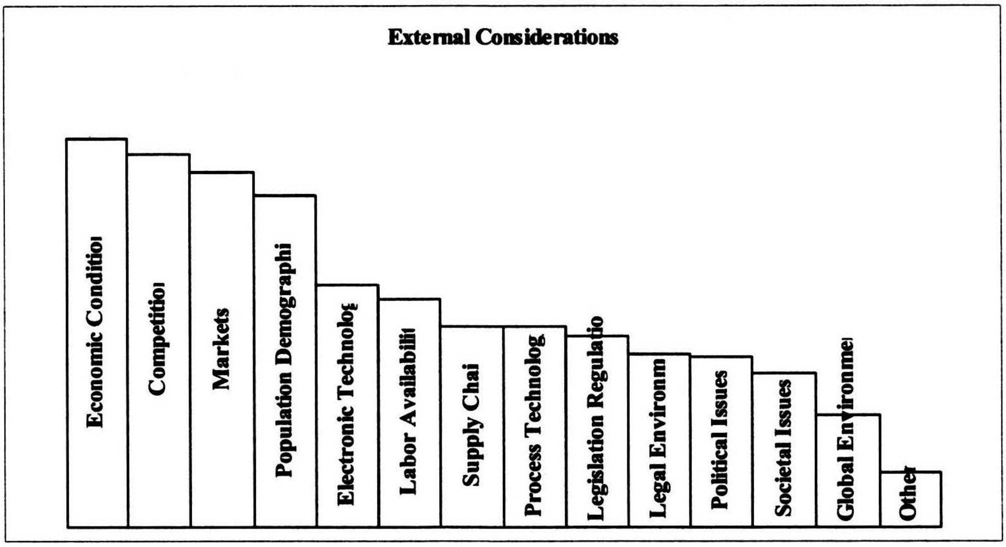
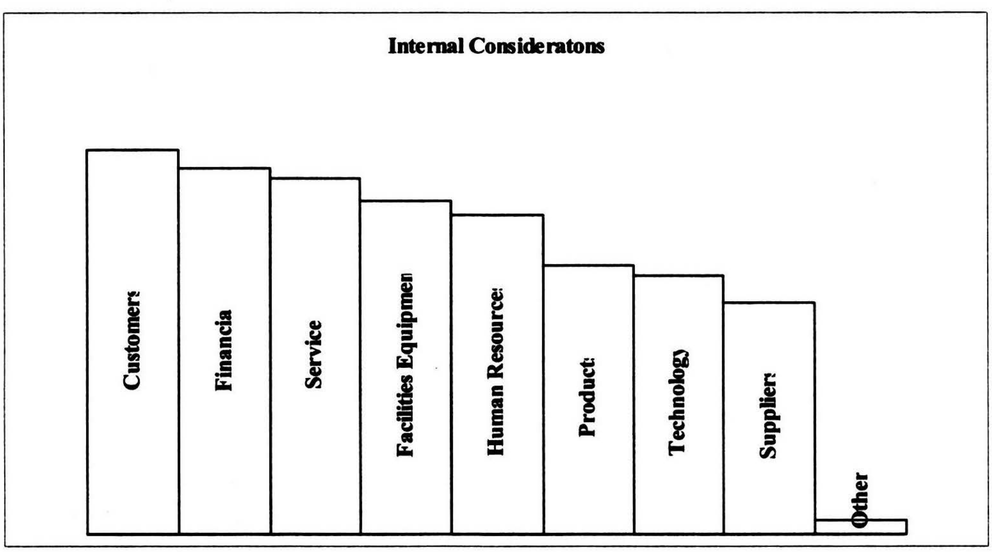


Figure 3 - Pareto Analysis of Internal Considerations



Future

Figure 2 shows a Pareto analysis of the company's external considerations. Their top five were listed as: Economic conditions, competition, markets, population demographics and electronic technology. Figure 3 shows a Pareto analysis of the company's internal considerations. Their top five were listed as: Customers, financial, service, facilities/equipment and human resources.

The effect of increased strategic planning knowledge on performance was reported as: 5 percent – no impact; 19 percent – improve slightly; 34 percent – improve moderately; and 42 percent – improve significantly. No one felt it would get worse. A cross tabular summary showing the percentage company's perceived performance improvement by current performance level is shown in Table

Table 2 - Cross Tabular Summary

	Perceived Performance			
Performance Increased with Knowledge	Needs Improvement	Met Expectations	Exceeded Expectations	Superior
Makes it worse	0	0	0	0
No Impact	0	6	3	0
Improved Slightly	11	26	19	0
Improved Moderately	30	40	41	43
Improved Significantly	59	29	38	57

2. The Kurskal-Wallis test confirmed (p-value = .0569) that the improvement perceptions were consistent across all levels of current performance.

Key Relationships

Table 3 shows the significant Spearman rank correlation (ρs) relationships between survey variables. The results show that there is a low (ρs from .2 to .39) to moderate (ρs. from .4 to .69 highlighted) relationship between some of the survey variables.

The significant relationships are summarized in the following four statements:

1. Companies that perceive they have a higher degree of sophistication in their planning process tend to: have more clearly defined measurable, performance objectives; monitor plans more frequently; and perform as well as or better than expectations.

2. Companies that perceive they have more strategic planning knowledge tend to: have more clearly defined measurable, performance objectives; monitor plans more frequently; and perform as well as or better than expectations.

3. Companies that used written forecasts for income statements, balance sheets, cash flows and internal situational assessment tend to perform as well as or better than expectations.

4. Companies with more clearly defined measurable, performance objectives tend to perform as well as or better than expectations.

DISCUSSION

It became clear during our interviews that many small business managers confused strategic management with operational management. This became quite evident when a surprisingly large number of responses to frequency of monitoring performance were "we monitor on a daily basis." Given that our survey was predicated on perceptions of strategic planning, we feel that much of our data collected came from their perceptions of operational management rather than their perceptions of strategic management. However, we do not feel this invalidates or minimizes our contribution to this area of research. It is difficult to ask someone about what they do not know; therefore, perceptions of what they think they know become very important to future research efforts. They are especially important to one of the major conclusions of this paper – Small business owners believe more knowledge of the strategic planning discipline will produce better company results.

Contrary to Perry's (2001) survey, which showed that very little planning is done in small businesses; our study found that perceived planning efforts are surprisingly

Table 3 - Significant Planning/Performance Relationships

		Clearly defined measurable performance objectives		Monitor plans more frequently		Perform as well as or better than expectations	
		ps	p-value	ps	p-value	ps	p-value
Perceived Sophistication		0.5865	0.0000	0.2011	0.0393	0.3436	0.0004
Knowledge	Why	0.2889	0.0031	0.2384	0.0146	0.2461	0.0017
	What	0.2826	0.0038	0.2998	0.0021	0.2544	0.0092
	How	0.3559	0.0003	0.3472	0.0004	0.4329	0.0000
	Who	0.4123	0.0000	0.2868	0.0033	0.4563	0.000
	When	0.3555	0.0003	0.2129	0.0291	0.3330	0.0006
Written Elements	Income Statement					0.2751	0.0048
	Balance Sheet					0.2317	0.0176
	Cash Flow					0.2016	0.0389
	Internal Assessment					0.2595	0.0078
Clearly defined measurable performance objectives						0.0345	0.0004

high with over 81 percent reporting mid-level to sophisticated planning efforts. However, while perceived planning knowledge is high, detailed questions revealed that when evaluated against theoretical planning tenants, many business owners do not know what they think they know and, many do not plan at the level many researchers believe to be sophisticated. Some of the planning shortcomings were evident in the facts that: 28 percent did not do a staffing plan; 35 percent did not do an external assessment; 23 percent did not do an internal strengths/weakness assessment; 39 percent of the companies goals and objectives were not clearly communicated or were general/verbal; and, only 28 percent actually used attainment of goals and objectives for personnel performance. While many companies reported that they completed written plans for sales, income, balance sheets and cash flows for up to 1 year, we believe these plans were developed as operating plans rather than strategic plans to support bank/lender requirements for financing.

This study has a major implication for researchers in the area of strategic planning as it relates to the question of what constitutes success. While many research efforts use quantitative methods and reached mixed results regarding the importance of planning and success, these efforts stop short of considering the many other factors small business owners use to evaluate performance. Return on investment (ROI), which Rue & Ibrahim (1998) used, ranked seventh on the list of success metrics in our survey. In an effort to explain this, we believe that most small business owners are not under the same pressures that many publicly-owned companies are. Small business owners may be more concerned with other issues such as maintaining a financially viable company that serves their customers; the ability to run their "own show"; and the ability to provide employment for themselves and their employees. These issues could provide insight to other measures of success to which we had given limited previous thought. Perhaps, ROI is a better measure for larger companies with many stockholders/stakeholders. While sales and profit ranked number one and two in our Pareto analysis of measures of success, in hindsight, we could have learned more about what companies viewed as important by using an open-ended question. We feel the metrics used to evaluate planning success should be revisited and recommend that future studies investigate this area in more depth to find out exactly what small business owners consider important measures of success?

This research also has an implication for small business owners: If you want to be more successful, then obtain more knowledge of the strategic planning process. The opening sentence of this paper, "Business schools stress the relationship of strategic planning and company results" represents the theoretical view of the benefits of strategic planning. Prior surveys and research have been conducted from this perspective. This survey was designed assuming that many small business practitioners may not be theoretically literate in business disciplines. The survey began by identifying what managers and owners perceptions were and proceeded to ask provocative detailed questions designed to impart knowledge while obtaining information. Our respondents indicated a high level of knowledge; however, their answers to the detailed questions indicated that their knowledge was at a very general level. It was evident that their perceived overall knowledge strength was not present at the detailed level.

This research is the first to show what practitioners believe to be true based on their own perceptions. These may be closer to reality than we have heretofore understood. Consistent with the three studies that inspired this research, we found that there is a relationship between planning and performance. Furthermore, we identified several significant relationships between planning success and planning knowledge, sophistication, written efforts, and monitoring. Since our simplistic "what do you think" methodology produced the same results as more sophisticated methodologies, it advances the question related to small business company success: is detailed knowledge of business planning more important than general knowledge? We believe we have gained an insight to the answer, which should provide an impetus for small business owners to seek more knowledge of the planning discipline.

Small business managers overwhelmingly confirmed the author's hypothesis that more detailed knowledge of strategic planning will improve company performance. The evidence shown in Table 3 that performance would increase with more knowledge was dramatic. While companies felt their knowledge base was high, they obviously felt they had more to learn.

The question then becomes what do we do? There are two responses: one for company leadership and the other for those who provide services for small businesses. For small business leadership, we would revise the comment Perry used to close his article and say that small business performance can be affected by introducing all company members to the general and detailed concepts of strategic planning, because doing so may enhance their chances of survival and success.

For the small business educator or service provider our results present an opportunity to present small business management with non-theoretical evidence that their peer managers believe strategic planning education will improve performance.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

While this study looked at small businesses in a mid-sized community in the Southeastern region of the U.S., we believe the results are transferable to small businesses in other regions of the country. We did not make an attempt to classify business types and the data are drawn from various small businesses in a variety of industries. Further research might find that the results obtained by this study are more applicable to some industries than to others.

This study intentionally looked at managers' and owners' perceptions of how their companies were performing in several categories related to strategic planning. Therefore, the data are based on perceptions of company success and on owner-based, self-reports of their planning activities. Nothing was done to verify or objectify individuals' reported perceptions of their planning knowledge, sophistication, or their companies' success. While we found that perceived level of sophistication is related to perceived level of success, this may be nothing more than finding that perception equals perception. An independent measure of planning activities and success measures would be useful in future studies to verify perceptions.

Finally, the data was obtained through interviews conducted by students. Business cards of interviewees were collected by students during the interviews as a way to confirm that the interviews were actually conducted; and all student interview documents were turned over to the authors for verification. The students were certified in human subjects research and well coached in how to ask questions, how to follow-up for clarity, and how to interpret various possible responses to questions. Nonetheless, there is a chance that interviewer ego or student naiveté may have contributed to a misrepresentation of the data. While, professionally trained interviewers may have produced different results, we feel our survey provides directional input to further research in this area.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to take a different approach to determine the answer to the question: does strategic planning improve performance? Previous research has not provided a conclusive answer. Miller and Cardinal (1994) suggest that methodological differences are a major contributor to the inconsistent findings. This study did not rely on elaborately constructed definitions of sophistication or numerical comparisons of sales growth, ROI, or industry averages. Rather, our methodology took a more simplistic approach: the companies were asked what they thought. This was done because of the inherent problems associated with defining sophistication and establishing measurement criteria. Each company regardless of industry is different. Each is composed of different personalities, leadership styles, cultures, philosophies, and definitions of success.

The three studies which inspired this research used different methods, definitions, and metrics from each other; however, each reached the same conclusion. This study's more simplistic approach also resulted in the same conclusion: planning improves performance. In addition, we found overwhelming evidence that small business owners and managers believe more knowledge of the strategic planning discipline will produce better company results.

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