

**AN EXPLORATION OF SMALL BUSINESS PROFIT STRATEGIES:
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A SMALL TRAINING BUSINESS IN THE UAE**

**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for
the degree of Doctor of Business Administration**

by

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Abstract

This research focused on a small training company located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The company reported a work-based problem related to a decline in its profitability, which challenged the ability of this company to remain operational. The problem of declining profitability of small businesses in the UAE was common, as many other small businesses struggled to remain operational. As a result, the research question of the study was: “What are the strategies that a small, UAE-based training company may follow to become profitable and remain in business?”.

This research aimed to adapt ideas from the practices of other small, training companies located in the UAE. A qualitative case study was chosen as the research design to address the research question. The participants were four business owners of other UAE-based small training businesses that are similar to the company’s size and training specializations. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and documents.

This study’s primary conceptual framework was Grant’s (1991) practical approach to resource-based strategy analysis. This approach was integrated with insights from the neo-institutional theory to capture the institutional context affecting strategy formulation in XYZ.

The study findings identified five themes related to the strategies that small training businesses in the UAE may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The first theme was that small training businesses might respond to external threats by developing a diversification strategy. The second theme was that companies may follow a cost-cutting strategy to respond to the increasing threats in the external environment. The third theme was that small training businesses

might develop customer-oriented strategies to define new opportunities in the market. The fourth theme was that small training companies might follow entrepreneurially oriented strategies to identify new opportunities. The fifth theme was that companies might pursue a customer-acquisition strategy to respond to external threats. The study also concluded that the defined strategic themes are not mutually exclusive, as the research participants followed more than one strategy simultaneously.

To derive actionable knowledge from the research findings, the study assessed the applicability of the five defined strategic themes to the context of the company. Specifically, the study evaluated the current resources and capabilities of the company and identified a hybrid strategy that the company can follow to become profitable and remain in business. An action plan was then developed to implement this derived strategy. A detailed list of the taken actions as an outcome of the findings was then presented.

The study findings contributed to the lack of research on what makes training companies in the UAE successful. It also contributed to the limited research about what makes training companies, regardless of their location, successful and profitable. The study may also have helped in addressing the problem of the fragmentation of research on what makes small companies successful. This was achieved by identifying the factors that were found to be significant to the success of small UAE-based training companies.

Keywords: Small companies, training companies, UAE, strategy, declining profitability

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

This research focuses on XYZ Training LLC., a small training company that specializes in providing vocational and technical training to oil and gas businesses that operate in the Middle East. The company is located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and provides in-house, tailor-made programs that meet the specific needs of clients. XYZ is a small company that is managed by its owners. XYZ is owned by three people. I am one of the three owners.

By the fourth quarter of 2015, the company started to experience a decrease in sales, which affected its profitability. The decrease may have been caused by the budget cuts that most XYZ clients implemented. We responded to the decrease in sales and profitability in 2016 by using a diversification strategy. We started by identifying key industries that were experiencing growth in the UAE. We then segmented the growing industries that the company is capable of servicing. Finally, we targeted niches within each segmented sector based on size and competition. Implementing this strategy yielded positive results immediately, and in 2016, the company succeeded in becoming one of the main providers of training for nurses in the UAE. However, this added business was still not sufficient to offset the decline in other areas of the company. Profit and sales figures continued to decline during 2017 and 2018, and the company urgently needed to define further strategies to remain operational and increase profitability.

XYZ was not the only small training company in the UAE to experience declining sales and profitability. The Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) sentiment survey data results illuminated an increase in the number of UAE-based SMEs that experienced a decline in sales

and growth during the fourth quarter of 2015 (Gulf Finance, 2015). This trend continued through 2016, as growth expectations for small businesses remained modest (Gulf Finance, 2016). Moreover, the Central Bank of the UAE reported slow growth during 2015 and 2016 (Central Bank, 2016). Small businesses in the UAE were hit hard by this slow growth, which led to many of them going bankrupt (Everington, 2016).

In addition to the struggles mentioned above for small businesses in the UAE, the demand for corporate training declined as clients were looking for opportunities to save costs (GDN Online, 2016). This decline was reported in many Middle Eastern countries, including the UAE, because of the economic slowdown caused by decreasing oil prices (GDN Online, 2016).

In summary, XYZ is struggling with a decline in sales and profit, which is making it difficult for the company to remain operational. Many other small businesses in the UAE reported the same problem of decreasing sales and profit (Gulf Finance, 2015). Moreover, the UAE's corporate training market has experienced a decline in demand due to budget cuts by clients (GDN Online, 2016). The owners of XYZ need to urgently identify new strategies to help them remain in business and become profitable. The background to the problem illustrates how XYZ started to experience a decrease in sales and profitability, where previous attempts to address declining sales and profitability were not successful.

1.2 Rationale of the study

This study has two rationales: one theoretical and one practical. As far as the theoretical rationale is concerned, the study will contribute to theory by addressing three interdependent research gaps. The first research gap is the lack of research on what makes UAE-based training

companies profitable. The literature concerned with the training industry in the UAE is mostly related to the functioning of vocational and educational institutions in the country. Sheshadri, Keralapura, and Shivalingaiah (2015) studied the development of the technical and vocational education systems in the UAE. Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin (2017) analyzed the growth and challenges that face vocational education. The same authors later assessed the contribution of the Abu Dhabi Vocational Education and Training Institute (ADVETI) in the growth of vocational education (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2018). Alshamsi (2020) investigated whether the vocational and technical education policy in the UAE can meet the country's vision. Another area that attracted the interest of a few researchers was the use of technology in training. Pillai (2017) investigated the use of technology in enhancing the skills of students at vocational institutes. Raji (2018) studied the importance of computer-assisted education in higher learning and vocational education. One study examined the effect of the cultural context on the delivery of a training programme in a major UAE bank (Jones, 2008). I was able to locate only one article that is concerned with the performance of a UAE-based training company. This article was authored by De Waal, Frijns, and Mroueh (2014), who measured the practices of a specific UAE-based training company against a framework of high-performance organization (HPO) characteristics. The lack of research on the profitability and performance of UAE-based training companies justifies the need for further studies to investigate what makes these companies successful.

The second research gap that this study will aim to address is the lack of research about what makes training companies, regardless of their location, successful and profitable. Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017) observed that there is extensive research related to the importance of training

in improving the performance of employees or the efficiency of the enterprise. Some studies explored the impact of training on improving employees' performance (Ibrahim, Boerhannoeddin, and Bakare, 2017; Mangkunegara and Waris, 2015; Iqbal, Ahmad, and Javaid, 2014). Other studies were concerned with the importance of training in improving the quality of the enterprise (Jabbour; 2015; Cromie et al., 2013). Other researchers were concerned with studying the impact of training on the profitability of the companies that are receiving the training (Amirzadeh, Jafarnejad, and Khubyari, 2016; Georgiadis, A and Pitelis, 2016). Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017) also noted that there is limited literature related to the companies that are delivering the training. Olaru et al. (2009) studied the ability of Romanian training providers to fulfil European quality assessments standards. Wawak, Batko, and Rogala (2017) examined the usefulness of quality management systems for learning providers. Rogala, Batko and Wawak (2017) studied the factors that affect the success of training companies. These three articles represent the sum of major work that is directly concerned with the performance of training providers, which justifies the need to conduct further research to reveal what makes training companies successful.

I have attempted to overcome the lack of research about what makes training companies successful by exploring the literature related to small business profitability, success, and growth. This is because XYZ is considered a small training company. The literature related to the factors that influence the success of small businesses is extensive. Researchers have identified various factors that could contribute to the profitability, growth, and sustainability of small businesses (Lussier, 1995; Blankson, Motwani, and Levenburg, 2006; Philip, 2011; Keen and Etemad, 2012; Steinerowska-Streb, 2012; Anggadwita and Mustafid, 2013; Blackburn, Hart, and

Wainwright, 2013; Bansal, 2015; Kemayel, 2015; Omri, Frikha, and Bouraoui, 2015; Attom, 2016; Bagur-Femeni, Perramona, and Amatb 2016; Kachlami and Yazdanfar, 2016; Pollack and Adler, 2016). Despite the extensive research that has addressed the factors that influence the profitability, success, and growth of small companies, we still do not have a clear picture of what makes small companies achieve superior performance (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014). Khan and Quaddus (2017) argued that the success factors of small business are largely subjective and fragmented. Moreover, there is a great discrepancy among opinions of what factors lead to the success or failure of small businesses (Marom and Lussier, 2014). Pervan, Curak, and Kramaric (2017) argued that understanding the performance of a firm is linked to the characteristics of the industry in which the firm operates. Moreover, Alawa and Quisenberry (2015) observed that recommendations about what small businesses should do to avoid failure are different from one country to another. Hence, the subjectivity, fragmentation, and discrepancy of findings in the small business success literature could be attributed to the fact that the findings of the studies are mainly relevant to the industry and the geographical location of each research. Hence, the third research gap that this study will aim to address is the fragmentation of research on what makes small companies successful. Figure 1-1 summarizes the research gaps that this thesis will address:

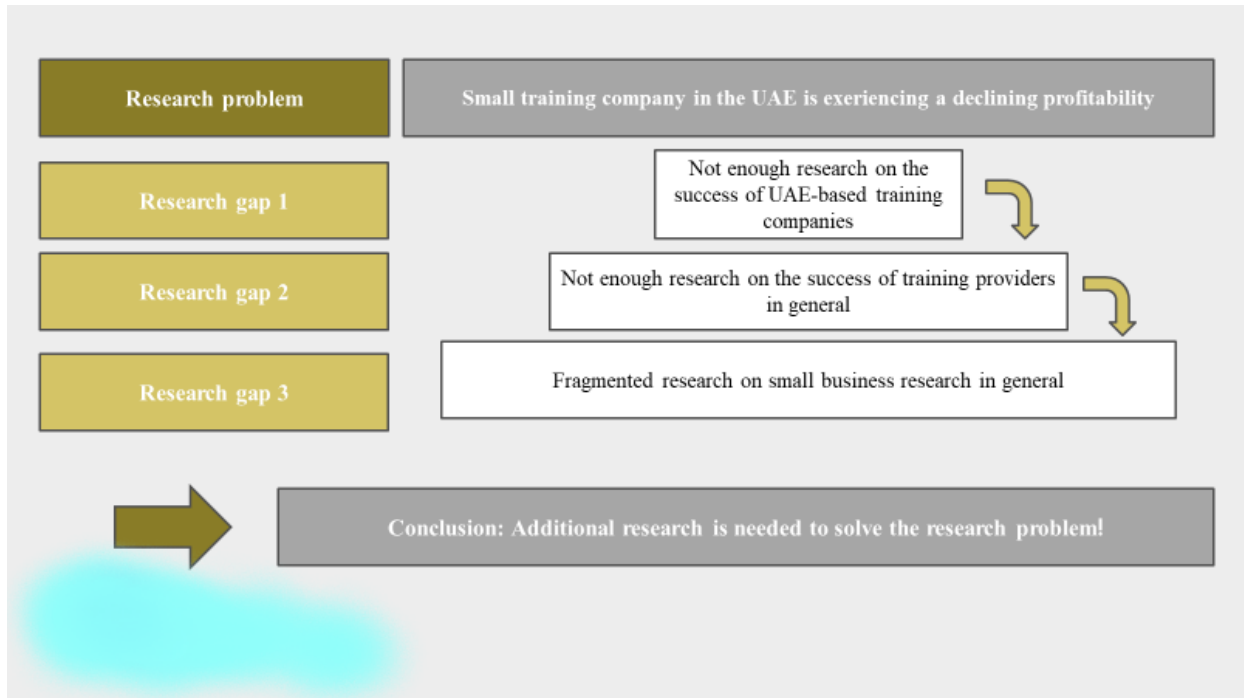


Figure 1-1: Research gaps addressed by this study

Moving on to consider the practical rationale, this study will aim to solve a specific business problem related to the declining profitability of XYZ. The study will aim to find solutions to this problem by identifying strategies that may help XYZ remain operational. Solving this work-based problem will help XYZ to remain operational, which will be beneficial to all its stakeholders, including me as one of the owners.

1.3 Problem statement

Many small businesses in the UAE are struggling to remain operational (Everington, 2016). Several small businesses in the UAE reported a decrease in growth and sales (Gulf Finance, 2015). The demand for training in the UAE declined as an outcome of the decrease in oil prices (GDN Online, 2016). The general business problem is that small businesses in the UAE are

experiencing declining growth and profitability and are challenged to stay in business. The specific business problem is that a small, UAE-based training company has experienced a decrease in profit, which may affect its ability to remain operational.

1.4 Research questions

In consideration of the previously mentioned problem statement, the following overarching research question was formulated to guide this study:

What strategies can XYZ implement in order to become profitable and remain in business?

This study will depart from Grant's (1991) definition of strategy analysis, which is, "The match an organization makes between its internal resources and skills and the opportunities and risks created by its external environment" (p. 114). Using this definition implies that exploring the resources, capabilities, opportunities, and threats is important for strategy development. Hence, the following four sub-questions were developed to address the overarching research question:

1. What are the resources that are important for the success of small training businesses in the UAE?
2. What are the capabilities that are important for the success of small training businesses in the UAE?
3. What are the threats that are limiting the ability of small training businesses in the UAE to become profitable?
4. What are the growth opportunities for small training businesses in the UAE?

1.5 Research objectives

The objective of this study is to identify a strategy and an action plan that can help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business. Achieving the objective of this study may directly affect the company's stakeholders. The owners might gain profit from XYZ and consequently consider pursuing further growth opportunities. The study may also have an impact on the company's employees and freelance trainers, who will be able to keep their jobs. It may also benefit the company's clients, who will continue to have access to the tailor-made services that XYZ provides. This study's findings may be quite valuable for similar businesses that are interested in learning about strategies that can increase their profitability.

1.6 Research approach

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore strategies that XYZ can implement in order to become profitable and remain in business. The population includes small, UAE-based training companies that have a similar training specialization. This research aims to adapt ideas from the practices of other small, training companies, which may be successful in business to date. This adaptation may only be applicable if the studied companies are similar to XYZ. I identified three parameters to determine the number of companies that are similar to XYZ. The first parameter is the location of the company. XYZ provides training in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Hence, only UAE-based companies that are registered in Dubai or Abu Dhabi were considered for this study. The second parameter is the training specialization. XYZ specializes in providing training to companies operating in the oil and gas, and healthcare sector. Hence, this study's population includes companies that specialize in at least one of these areas. The third parameter

is the number of employees. XYZ is a small company with eight employees. As a result, this study's population includes training businesses that have fewer than ten employees.

This study focuses on a real management issue that the organization is facing. I aimed to explore the possible solution for XYZ's decreasing profit. The participants of this study were the main source of defining the new actions. The participants were the owners of small UAE-based companies that are similar to XYZ in terms of size and scope. The participants and XYZ are both working within the same market conditions. Hence, the participants of this study are well informed about the challenges that small training companies are facing in the UAE market. The participants contributed to this research by helping me define XYZ's new actions to become profitable. The participants contributed during two phases of the research process. Data collection was the first phase. The data was collected from participants using semi-structured interviews. This data collection method allows researchers to learn about the participants' experiences in a specific context (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). The second phase was the data analysis phase. This was done by sharing the outcomes of the study with the participants and obtaining their feedback on the results. This study embedded action research interventions to help XYZ generate actions to remain in business. Documents served as the main data collection method during the action research phases of this study.

1.7 Contribution of the study

This study will make an original contribution to the field of management strategy. The resource-based view of the firm (RBV) is one of the strategic management theories (Raduan et al., 2009). The institutional theory has also emerged as an important concept in strategic management (Peng

et al., 2009). The conceptual framework of this study is Grant's (1991) practical approach to the resource-based strategy analysis with insights from the neo-institutional theory. This integration will be used to define the resources and capabilities that need to be filled, identify the threats and the opportunities that stem from the institutional and market environment, and define a strategy that matches the resources and capabilities with threats and opportunities. Hence, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge related to firms' competitiveness and profitability. This will be done based on the context of small training companies operating in the UAE.

1.8 The context of the study

The United Arab Emirates, known as the UAE, is a small federation of seven Emirates that was formed in 1971. In 2017, the population of the UAE was estimated to be around 9.4 Million (World Bank, 2019). Most of the population are expatriates, as UAE nationals are estimated to constitute about 11% of the population (Shayah and Sun, 2019). In 2018, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the UAE was estimated to be US\$ 414,179 Billion (World Bank, 2019). The UAE has vast reserves of oil and gas, as it is ranked 7th in the world in terms of oil and gas reserves (Gundala and Khawaja, 2014). In 2017, the activities related to the extraction of crude oil and natural gas contributed about 22.3% to the national GDP (UAE Ministry of Economy, 2018).

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in the economy of the UAE. SMEs constitute 94% of companies operating in the UAE and provide jobs for more than 86% of the private sector's workforce (UAE government portal, n.d.). The number of SMEs in the UAE is estimated to be 350,000 (Trade Arabia, 2017). Almost 45% of UAE SMEs are in Dubai, 32 %

are in Abu Dhabi, 16% are in Sharjah, while the remaining 7% are spread among the other Emirates (Duncan, 2014). Almost 73% of these SMEs are in the trade and retail sectors, 16% are in the services sector, and about 11% are in the industrial sector (Salman, 2018).

The definition of SME depends on where the business is based in the UAE. In Dubai, the definition of SME is linked to the sector that the company operates in. In the trading sector, a small business is any enterprise with less than or equal to 35 employees and a turnover of less than or equal to AED 50 million. In the service sector, a small business is any enterprise with less than or equal to 100 employees and a turnover of less than or equal to AED 25 million. In the manufacturing sector, a small business is any enterprise with less than or equal to 100 employees and a turnover of less than or equal to AED 100 million (Dubai SME, 2013).

The Abu Dhabi definition of an SME is determined by a decree issued by the Abu Dhabi Executive Council on 30 June 2013 (Duncan, 2014). This decree defines micro, small, and medium businesses by the number of employees (OECD, 2016). A micro business is one that has fewer than five employees. A small business is one with more than five employees and less than nineteen. A medium size-business has 20 employees and fewer than 49 (OECD, 2016). XYZ is registered in Abu Dhabi. Hence, this study will follow the definition stipulated in the Abu Dhabi decree that defines a small business as one that has more than five employees and less than nineteen.

1.9 The structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter is the introduction chapter, in which I introduce the work-based problem, the rationale of the study, the problem statement, the research

questions, the research objectives, the research approach, the contribution of the study, and the context of the study.

The second chapter is the literature review. The literature review will start by providing an overview of the conceptual framework of the study, which is the RBV theory integrated with insights from the neo-institutional theory. It will then review the literature that directly addresses the overarching research question and the sub-questions of the study. This will be done by providing a comprehensive synthesis of the external threats and opportunities. It will then be followed by providing an overview of the resources that are important for the success of small businesses or training businesses, the capabilities that are important for such businesses, and the strategies that have been used by other small businesses to become profitable. The summary of the findings of the literature review is presented at the end of this chapter.

The third chapter is the methodology chapter. This chapter will justify the selection of the research paradigm, approach, methodology, strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis processes that were used in this study. It will also illustrate how research quality and ethical issues were accounted for throughout all the stages of this research. The third chapter will provide insights into the challenges that are associated with the insider position of the researcher.

The fourth chapter will present the research findings. The findings are concluded after applying the research methodology and the data analysis process defined in the previous chapter. The chapter will include the feedback and reflections of some of the participants on the findings of the study.

The fifth chapter is the discussion and action. This chapter starts by comparing the results of the study with the findings of the literature review. It will then assess the applicability of the study's findings on XYZ to suggest a hybrid strategy that XYZ can implement to become profitable and remain in business. This section will also present the action plan and the evaluation of the actions that have been taken to put this strategy into operation.

Chapter six presents the conclusion of the study. It will also present its theoretical and practical contributions. The study limitations and directions for future studies are then presented. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the learnings that I obtained from this study at the professional and personal levels.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research is concerned with addressing a real work-based problem related to the declining profitability of a small training company operating in the UAE. The overarching research question that was developed to address this real work-based problem was: “What are the strategies that a small UAE-based training company needs to implement to become profitable and remain in business?”. Hence, the focus of the literature review was to find out what is already known about small business success, and whether any specific strategies were identified as effective for small business profitability.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section reviews the literature related to the conceptual framework of the study, which is the Resource-based View of the Firm theory (RBV) with insights from the neo-institutional theory. This section has been included for several reasons: it illustrates why the RBV was selected as a conceptual framework for this study; why it is beneficial for this study to integrate the RBV theory with the neo-institutional theory; it describes how Grant’s (1991) practical approach to RBV strategy analysis will be integrated with neo-institutional theory, and how this adaptation will be implemented in this research.

The study will then use the RBV as a guide to build an understanding of the reviewed literature. Specifically, the study will depart from Grant’s (1991) definition of strategy as “the match that an organization makes between its internal resources and skills and the opportunities and risks created by the external environment (p.114)” to address each of the research sub-questions and the overarching research question. Hence, the second section will review the literature related to

the growth opportunities that may be possible for small UAE-based training companies. The third section will provide an assessment of the external threats that were identified in the literature. The fourth section will introduce the fourteen factors that the reviewed literature identified as important for small business success. These fourteen success factors are categorized as resources, capabilities, and strategies. The findings related to each category are then discussed in three subsections. The first subsection will review the resources that could be important for the growth of small UAE-based training companies. The second subsection will discuss the capabilities that are important for the profitability of small UAE-based training companies. The third subsection will provide a review of the strategies that small UAE-based training companies may follow to become profitable and remain in business.

The fifth and final section is the conclusion of the literature review. It will present a map that indicates the external opportunities, external threats, internal resources, internal capabilities, and strategies that the literature of small business and training industry has identified as important for profitability and success. The following figure represents the plan of the literature review:

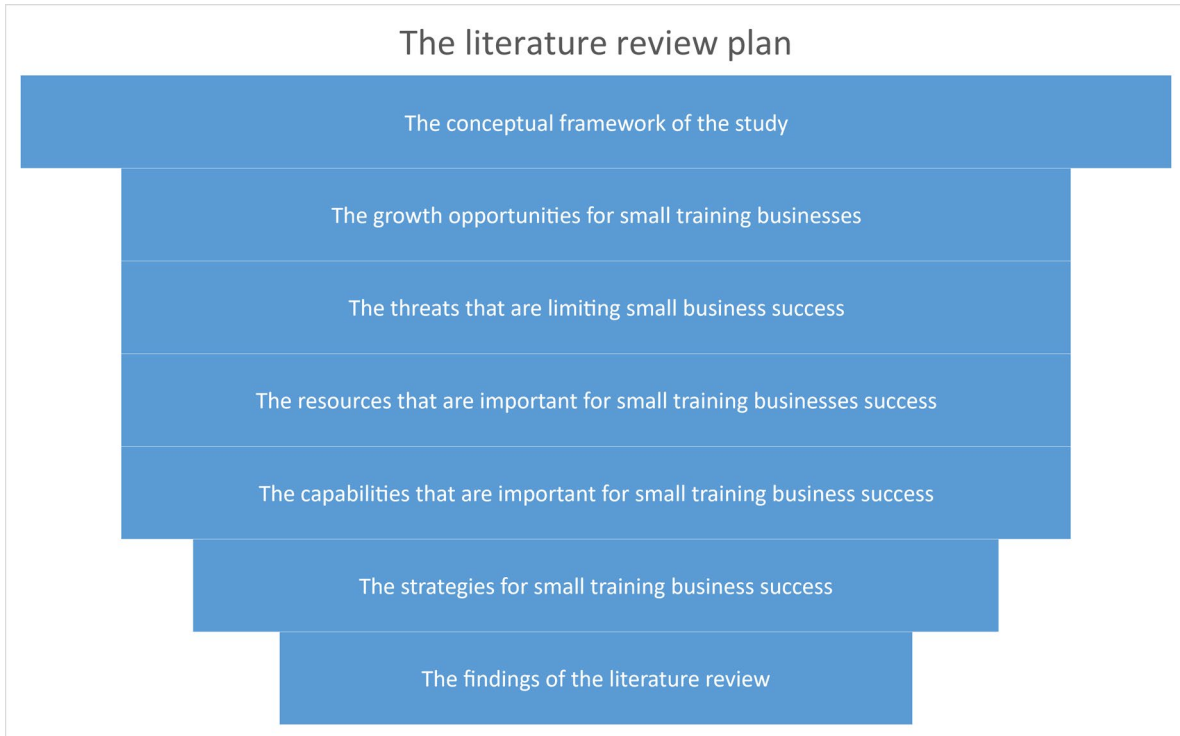


Figure 2-1: Literature review plan

Rowley and Slack (2004) argued that researchers could start the literature review by conducting a basic keyword search. The keywords used for this literature search were derived from the research question and the sub-questions of this study. The keywords used to identify the threats and opportunities are as follows: *the UAE training industry, vocational training in the UAE, corporate training in the UAE, small / SME business in the UAE, and the UAE economy*. The keywords used to search the internal resources, capabilities, and strategies are as follows: *training companies' success, training companies' strategies, training companies' profitability, small business / SMEs success, small business / SMEs growth, small business / SMEs strategies, Resource-based view of the firm, Resource-based view of the firm and small business, and Institutional Theory*. I used these pre-determined keywords to search scholarly research databases within the University of Liverpool online library (e.g., JSTOR, Taylor-Francis,

Emerald) and Google Scholar. I also conducted a backward and a forward search. This is based on the recommendation of Levy and Ellis (2006), who suggested complementing the keywords search with a backward and forward search.

2.2 The Conceptual framework of the study

This study's primary conceptual framework is Grant's (1991) practical approach to the resource-based strategy analysis. This approach is integrated with insights from the neo-institutional theory to capture the institutional context affecting strategy formulation in XYZ. This integration is based on Oliver's (1997) proposition about the importance of the institutional context in resource selection decisions. This section will provide an overview of the Resource-based view of the firm theory (RBV), its importance, the fit between the RBV theory and this study, and its limitations. It will then introduce the neo-institutional theory and justify why this study will benefit from integrating these two theories and how to implement this integration.

2.2.1 The Resource-based view of the Firm (RBV)

2.2.1.1 An overview of the RBV theory

Penrose (1959) provided the founding base of the RBV theory (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). Penrose argued that firms' resources are important for their success (Kozlenkova, Samaha, and Palmatier, 2013). She claimed that a unique firm character is derived from its heterogeneous collection of resources (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). Penrose adopted a wide definition of resources, which included managerial and entrepreneurial skills (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). The work of Wernerfelt (1984) is widely considered to be the first major contribution to

the RBV (Kozlenkova, Samaha, and Palmatier 2014). Wernerfelt argued that a firm's profitability is determined by internal organizational factors, which are its internal resources and capabilities (Wernerfelt, 1984). Wernerfelt (1984) defined a firm's resources as "the tangible and intangible assets which are tied semi-permanently to the firm" (Wernerfelt, 1984, p. 172). The importance of Wernerfelt's reasoning is that it posits that a firm can develop a competitive advantage based on the resources that it controls (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). This was an important shift in the strategic management literature, which was dominated by the work of Porter linking the competitiveness of a firm to external factors, such as industry structure and competitive positioning (Grant, 1991). Another scholar who contributed to the development of RBV is Rumelt (Wernerfelt, 1995). Rumelt (1984) considered the firm as a bundle of resources (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). He emphasized that the economic values of these resources depend on the context in which they are deployed (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). Rumelt (1984) further theorized that firms may start homogenous, but they tend to become different as time goes by and, hence, cannot perfectly imitate each other (Wernerfelt, 1995). Barney (1991) is considered the first scholar to present a comprehensive, empirically testable theoretical framework of the resource-based theory (Newbert, 2007).

Barney (1991) built the RBV on two main assumptions. The first assumption is that resources and capabilities are heterogeneous across organizations. The second assumption is that variation in the success rate of organizations is based on the organization's ability to acquire or control valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney, 1991). Hence, a company can gain a competitive advantage and become profitable when its strategic decisions are based on developing VRIN resources that can lead to competitive performance (López-

Cabarcos et al., 2015). As a response to criticism about the fact that the VRIN assumption does not indicate how resources should be deployed, Barney (1997) further evolved the VRIN framework to VRIO. The adjustment in the last letter of the acronym refers to “Organizational Capability”, which is the capability of the company to exploit its resources.

Grant (1991) is one of the scholars who contributed to the development of the RBV theory. Grant’s seminal work is one of the most highly cited and applied frameworks in strategic management (Rashidirad et al., 2015). Grant (1991) proposed an RBV-based practical framework for strategy analysis that consists of five steps. The first step is to identify and classify the firm's resources. This involves appraising the resources vis-à-vis competition. The first step also involves the identification of the optimal method for deploying these resources. The second step is to identify the firm's capabilities by defining what the firm can do more effectively than its rivals. The third step is to identify the resources and capabilities that can lead to sustainable competitive advantage. The fourth step is to select a strategy that best exploits the firm’s resources and capabilities. The fifth step is to define the resource gaps that need to be filled to be able to execute this strategy. Figure 2-2 outlines Grant’s practical approach to resource-based strategy analysis (Grant 1991, p. 115).

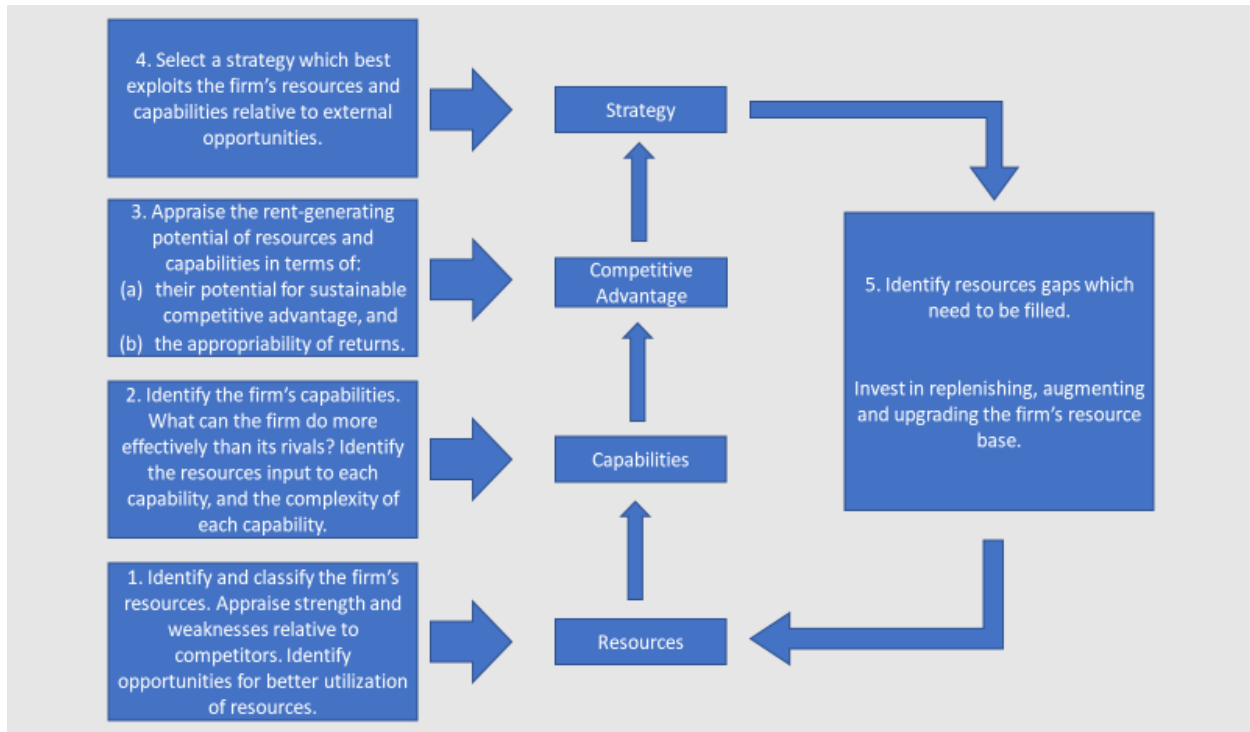


Figure 2-2: Grant's practical approach to the resource-based strategy analysis (Grant, 1991, p. 115)

This research adapted the approach of Grant's strategy analysis. The research questions of this study were structured to identify the resources, capabilities, strategies, opportunities, and threats that small training businesses have to consider to become profitable and remain in business. The literature review map, which will be presented in section 2.6, also identified the resources, capabilities, strategies, opportunities and threats that were mentioned in the reviewed literature. The findings of the study were also reported in themes that include all the strategic elements identified in Grant's approach. Finally, the action plan that was suggested for this study assessed the current resources and capabilities of XYZ to generate a strategy and a plan which is aligned with Grant's approach for strategy analysis.

Oliver (1997) argued that the RBV theory does not consider the institutional context that may influence the resource selection process that a firm may conduct. To overcome this limitation, I integrated Grant's (1991) approach with the neo-institutional theory by extending the resource appraisal and selection step and the evaluation of opportunities and threats step suggested by Grant (1991) to include institutional influences. The details related to how this integration is conducted are presented in section 2.2.3.

2.2.1.2 The importance of the RBV theory

RBV shifts the focus from the industry level to the firm level (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). During the 1980s, the strategic management literature was influenced by the work of Porter. Porter (1980) introduced the five forces framework to analyse competition. These five forces are the threat of new entrants, the threat of substitutes, the bargaining power of customers, the bargaining power of suppliers, and competitive rivalry. According to Porter (1980), the five forces framework helps companies to develop unique competitive strategies based on their detailed analysis of these five forces. Porter (1980) also identified two generic strategies that can help to achieve a competitive advantage: namely, cost leadership and differentiation. The central tenet of Porter's work was that industry factors determine the profitability of the firm (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). Barney (1991), however, criticized Porter for being more concerned with identifying the environmental conditions that favour competitive performance, and for assuming that all firms operating within the same industry possess the same strategic resources and pursue similar strategies (Barney, 1991). Barney (1991) also mentioned that Porter's approach to competitive strategy considers that heterogeneous resources are mobile and can easily be copied. Hence, any competitive advantage that is derived from them is not sustainable

(Barney, 1991). The RBV theory, on the other hand, can be used to explain what makes a firm competitive by establishing links between causes (resources and capabilities) on the one hand, and effects (competitive and superior performance over rivals) on the other (Hinterhuber, 2013). It focuses on defining what competitors cannot duplicate or imitate, for whatever reason, to eliminate the competitive advantage (Rouse and Daellenbach, 1999).

2.2.1.3 The fit between the RBV and this study

I chose the RBV theory as a conceptual framework for this study because I concluded that the RBV theory fits the context of small business research. Small businesses are vulnerable due to their limited resources and experience (McDowell, Harris, and Geho, 2016; Smallbone et al., 2012). This vulnerability makes small businesses more exposed to exogenous shocks as opposed to large businesses (Bartz and Winkler, 2016; Kitching et al., 2011). Small businesses should aim to build superior resources if they want to survive hostile conditions which they are likely to face as time goes by (Runyan, Huddleston, and Swinney, 2007). The RBV assumes businesses can become competitive by focusing on building valuable, rare, inimitable, and organizational resources (VRIO) (Barney, 1997).

Wernerfelt (1984) defined a firm's resources as the tangible and intangible assets which are tied semi-permanently to the firm. Hence, the RBV recognizes that intangible resources could be a source of competitive advantage. Roxas and Chadee (2011) argue that intangible resources are more likely to be classified as VRIO, since they are mostly related to the specifics of the firm. This is even more relevant to small businesses, since they have limited physical resources.

Hence, applying the RBV lens to small business research can help to focus attention more on the nontangible resources that are important to their success.

The RBV argues that the long-term survival of small companies depends on their uniqueness, through their capability-based offerings to the market (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). Grant (1991) defined capability as “the capacity for a team of resources to perform some task or activity” (p. 119). Therefore, applying the RBV framework to small business research emphasises the importance of developing unique capabilities to generate a competitive advantage. Figure 2-3 summarizes the fit that I concluded between the RBV theory and small business research, which justifies the selection of the RBV as a conceptual framework for this study:

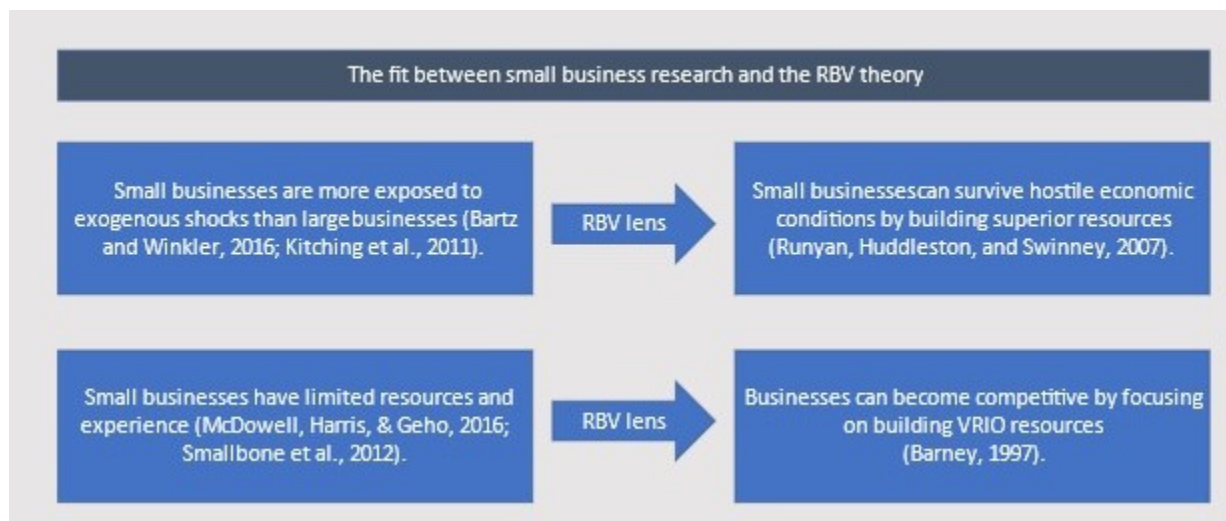


Figure 2-3: The fit between the RBV theory and small business research

2.2.1.4 Limitations of the RBV theory

Oliver (1997) argues that, while the RBV succeeds in explaining that selecting VRIN resources will lead to heterogeneity, which will lead to creating a competitive advantage, it does not

examine the social context that may influence the resource selection process such as firm traditions, network ties, and regulatory pressure. The RBV is also criticized for being a tautological or self-verifying theory, which makes it not empirically testable (Priem and Butler, 2001). This means that stating that valuable and rare resources are crucial for companies' success is true by definition. Moreover, it is not possible to measure resource value or resource rarity, which makes it difficult for this theory to be empirically tested (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). Another criticism of the RBV is that it assumes that the value of the resource is derived from the external environment. In other words, the value of a resource could change as the competitive environment changes. Hence, resource value may change unpredictably over time (Priem and Butler, 2001). A further criticism of RBV is that the same competitive advantage may be derived from a different configuration of resources (Priem and Butler, 2001). Moreover, RBV is accused of lacking managerial perception (Hinterhuber, 2013; Priem and Butler, 2001). This implies that simply advising managers that obtaining valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources does not provide any operational validity to practitioners (Priem and Butler, 2001).

Some scholars proposed solutions to overcome the above-mentioned limitations of the RBV. Oliver (1997), for example, integrated the RBV theory and neo-institutional theory to overcome the inability of the RBV to capture the possible influence of the institutional context on resource selection decisions. Brahma and Chakraborty (2011) argued that the shortcoming of the inability to measure the value of resources could be overcome by adopting qualitative methods, like ethnography and participant observation. They further argue that RBV is practical for managers, since it reminds them that the source of competitive advantage could lie within their organizations. Hence, the theory could be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the

company and help them to craft their strategies (Brahma and Chakraborty, 2011). Hinterhuber (2013) extended the RBV framework to address the criticism related to its lack of predictive power. The author suggested adding to the RBV framework demand-based variables of the customer needs and the size of the addressable market segment. This addition increases the predictive power of the RBV by enabling managers to decide on the future resources or capabilities that they need to invest in to achieve superior profitability.

Despite the criticisms mentioned above, the RBV is still considered to be among the most widely accepted theories of strategic management (Newbert, 2007). The RBV has made an impact on subject areas, including Human Resource Management, Economics, Entrepreneurship, Marketing, and International Business (Barney, Ketchen, and Wright, 2011). It is still considered a promising theory that analyses how resources can bring competitive advantage (Almarri and Gardiner, 2014).

2.2.2 The Institutional theory

The central tenet of the Institutional theory is that structures, processes, and forms of organization are influenced by changes in the institutional environments in which they are embedded (Stacey, 2011; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutions are defined as “The written and unwritten rules norms and constraints that humans devise to reduce uncertainty and control their environment” (Ménard and Shirley, 2008, P. 1). Institutions can be formal, such as constitutions, laws, contracts, and regulations. They can also be informal, such as habits, norms, beliefs, and conducts (Djelic, 2010, Ménard and Shirley, 2008).

Old institutionalism focuses on how individuals respond to pressure that stems from institutional rituals, formalities, and values (Stinchcombe, 1997). “Organizations thus adopt durable institutional forms that are compatible or resemble existing ones because actors interpret situations and adopt solutions from a menu of established, legitimate patterns of behaviours” (Jackson, 2010). New institutionalism, on the other hand, focuses more on legitimacy and isomorphism, instead of adaptation (Leaptrott, 2005). An organization that acts according to the commonly accepted values and rules will enhance its legitimacy (Zhao et al., 2017), which opens up new possibilities and increases its chances of survival (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutions create isomorphic pressure, which leads to organizational homogeneity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Neo-institutional theory explains organizational behaviour as responding to pressure created by institutions and not as a rational response to economic pressures (Suddaby, Seidl, and Le, 2013). Unlike neoclassical economics, New Institutional Economics (NIE) assumes that individuals have imperfect information and bounded rationality, which exposes them to uncertainty. This may lead individuals to incur transaction costs to acquire information and reduce risk (Ménard and Shirley, 2008). Humans create institutions to reduce risk and transaction costs. Unlike old institutional theory, however, NIE does not completely abandon neoclassical economic theory, as it still accepts important neoclassical assumptions such as scarcity and competition (Ménard and Shirley, 2008).

Ménard (2008) refers to transaction costs, contracts, and property rights as the golden triangle of New Institutional Economics “NIE” (p. 282). Transaction costs explain the presence of different types of organization, as well as tools for understanding the characteristics of arrangements among various economic units or organizations. The role of contracts in NIE is to ease the

limitations of bounded rationality, setting schemes of reference for future actions, and examining opportunistic behaviour. Property rights require the presence of institutions to allow for the trade-off of these rights. “Property rights thus affect contractual hazards and embed transactions into specific institutional environments” (Ménard, 2008, p. 282).

The field of strategy has been heavily dominated by the industry-based view and the resource-based view (Garrido et al., 2014). These two views of strategy have been criticized for lacking attention to certain macro-economic factors that could impact the competitiveness of the firm (Peng et al, 2009). As a result, the institution-based view of strategy has emerged as an alternative perspective by focusing on the role of institutions in understanding why firms differ in terms of competitive advantage (Garrido et al., 2014). One of the core propositions of the institutional-based view of the firm is that the strategic choices that managers and firms take rationally are constrained by the formal and informal institutional framework (Peng et al. 2009). The strategies and business capabilities of organizations are heavily influenced by the type of institutions that govern capital, labour, and the product market (Whitley, 2010). Institutional pressure may also create space for opportunities, which may offer companies a new strategic choice (Karatas-Ozkan, Yavus, and Howells, 2014). Institutions create economic opportunities because any economy requires the presence of economic infrastructure to function (Jackson, 2010). This is why scholars look at the “Institutional Comparative Advantage” that different countries may offer to firms (Jackson, 2010).

Hence, the focus of new institutionalism is to understand how organizations react to uncertainty through commonly used approaches, rather than novel, as a response to pressure from authorities. This opposes the RBV theory, which stresses the importance of companies becoming

heterogeneous to be able to gain a competitive advantage. This implies that human behaviour is not only motivated by economic optimization but is also influenced by social justification and social obligation (Oliver, 1997).

2.2.3 Integrating RBV and Neo-Institutional Theory

Barney et al. (2011) argued that the RBV has matured as a theory, which opens up new opportunities to expand it. One way to expand the RBV theory is to establish interlinkages between the RBV and other theoretical concepts, which will help to shed light on fundamental issues within the RBV theory and strategic management (Barney, et al. 2011). Barney et al. (2011) acknowledged the possibility of interlinking the RBV theory with the institutional theory by referring to the work of Oliver (1997). Oliver (1997) proposed a process model of firm heterogeneity that merges insights from the resource-based and neo-institutional theories. The central idea of Oliver's (1997) model is that resource selection decisions are influenced by the institutional context of the company's resources, and that both resource capital and institutional capital are essential for sustainable advantage. "A firm's institutional context includes its internal culture as well as broader influences from the state, society, and interfirm relations that define socially acceptable economic behavior" (Oliver, 1997, p. 679). Institutional capital is defined as "the context surrounding resources and resource strategies that enhances or inhibits the optimal use of valued resource capital" (Oliver, 1997, p. 709). Hence, companies need to possess institutional capital and resource capital in order to be able to create and sustain a competitive advantage (Oliver, 1997).

There are several studies that applied the RBV theory and the Institutional theory. Escobar and Vredenburg (2011) applied the two theories to examine how oil and gas multinationals adapted to sustainable development issues. Li (2016) developed a model that integrated the resource-based view (RBV) and Institutional theory to explain MNEs' foreign outward direct investment. Shibin et al. (2017) used the RBV theory and the Institutional theory to study the sustainability of supply chain management in Indian SMEs. The authors also argued that institutional theory can be the second theory to be chosen from all the available organizational theories because of its ability to define the social and environmental dimensions of the sustainability performance of supply chains.

Integrating the RBV theory with the Institutional theory will be beneficial for this study. The RBV does not investigate how the institutional context creates restrictions or opportunities which may influence the strategic decision-making of a company (Karatas-Ozkan, Yavus, and Howells, 2014). The RBV also does not explain how the institutional context influences the resource selection decisions of a company (Oliver, 1997). According to Grant (2013), external threats and opportunities are related to market forces such as competition, suppliers, and buyers. This definition of threats and opportunities does not take into consideration external threats and opportunities that stem from institutional conditions such as regulations, laws, or social norms. It also does not consider how the selection or replenishing of resources is influenced by the existence of such institutional conditions. As a result, this study will integrate the RBV theory and the institutional theory by considering both the external opportunities and threats that stem from the market conditions and how the institutional context influences the resource selection process of XYZ.

Figure 2-4 Illustrates how to integrate Grant's (1991) practical approach to resource-based strategy analysis with insights from the neo-institutional theory.

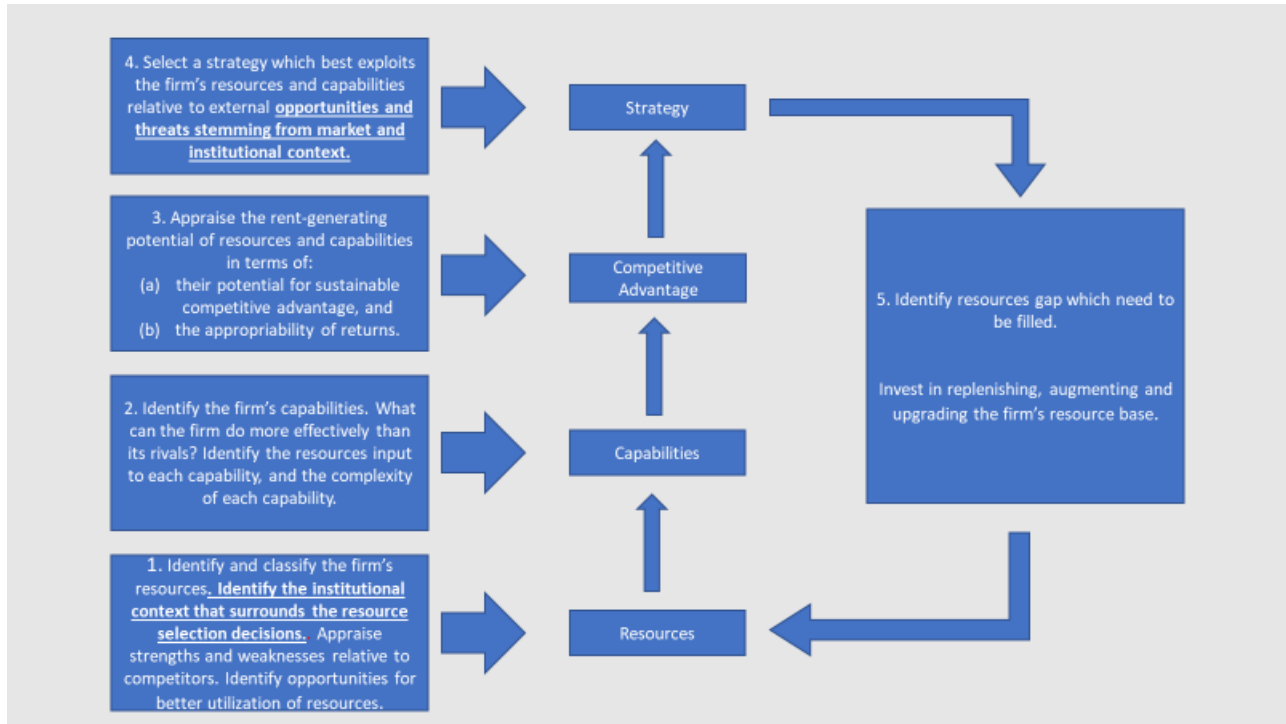


Figure 2-4 The adaptation of Grant's (1991) practical approach to the resource-based strategy analysis in the context of this study

2.3 Growth opportunities for small training businesses in the UAE

Identifying external opportunities is one of the steps that Grant (1991) suggested for resource-based strategy. This is because strategy development, according to Grant (1991), is not only about maximizing the use of internal resources. It is also concerned with making decisions related to the type of resources that the company may need to acquire in order to broaden its strategic opportunity. Hence, scanning the external environment for growth opportunities will help XYZ to make decisions about the type of resources and capabilities that XYZ may need to

develop to pursue growth opportunities. As mentioned in section 2.2.3, integrating the RBV theory with the neo-institutional theory will help this study to move beyond market opportunities, (i.e., buyer, supplier, competition) and to consider other opportunities that may be generated from the contextual environment (i.e., rules, regulations, norms). In the following section, I will provide an overview of the growth opportunities that were identified in the reviewed literature; namely, the UAE business environment, the UAE vocational education and Emiratization policy, and elearning.

Li (2019) identified governmental policies, infrastructure, and market openness as factors that could be used to measure the entrepreneurial institutional environment in a country. Hence, the opportunities related to the UAE business environment and vocational education and Emiratization could be considered as opportunities deriving from the institutional context that surrounds XYZ. Wawak, Batko, and Rogala (2017) identified elearning as an opportunity that training businesses may pursue to respond to the increasing competition in the market. Hence, the opportunity related to elearning could be considered as a market-related opportunity.

2.3.1 The UAE business environment

The UAE is among the most developed countries in West Asia (Gundala and Khawaja, 2014). In 2018, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the UAE was estimated to be US\$ 414,179 Billion (World Bank, 2019). The UAE authorities have shown a strong commitment to diversifying the economy and reducing its dependence on oil and gas (Shayah and Sun, 2019; Ahmed, 2015). Table 2-1 shows the UAE's ranking in some global economic indices (Al Hashimi, 2018, p. 13).

The advanced position of the UAE in these indices illustrates that the UAE provides a good business environment (Al Hashimi, 2018).

Index	Global ranking
Economic Openness	3 rd
Business environment, infrastructure, and Technological advancement	4 th
Global readiness index	5 th
Change readiness index	5 th
Global competitiveness index	15 th

Table 2-1: The UAE's ranking in some global indices (Al Hashimi, 2018, p. 13).

In 2010, the UAE government introduced Vision 2021. This vision is a long-term plan that aims at placing the UAE among the most developed countries in the world by 2021 (Alblooshi and May, 2018). The national strategic agenda derived from vision 2021 sets six strategic goals (Ahmed, 2015). One of these goals is to build a competitive economy that is driven by knowledge and innovation. One of the important areas that countries need to invest in to create a knowledge-based economy is education and training (Alblooshi and May, 2018). Moreover, the strategic agenda acknowledges that reaching this goal requires fostering an environment that promotes creativity and entrepreneurship. The agenda also stresses the importance of harnessing the full potential of the national human capital, providing Emiratis with the knowledge that they and their nation need to build a knowledge-based economy (UAE vision 2021 agenda, n.d.).

The reviewed literature in this section highlighted the growth opportunities that stem from the UAE business environment. The first opportunity is that the UAE provides a good business environment for companies. The second opportunity is related to the commitment of the UAE

government to build a knowledge-based economy and improve the skills of the Emiratis. This represents a direct opportunity for training businesses as it signals that the government may create demands for training to improve the skills of the national human capital.

Reflecting on the above, we can conclude that it may be possible for XYZ to develop new training programmes that are aligned with the government vision. This may include targeting topics such as innovation and entrepreneurship, which have been recognized as important in the national strategic agenda. Thus, it is important to ask the research participants about their perspectives on opportunities that may be foreseen in the UAE market to be able to confirm or further illustrate the conclusion of this review.

2.3.2 The importance of vocational education and Emiratization

The UAE government recognizes the importance of vocational education (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2017). This is because the UAE government believes that the development of a well-established technical and vocational education system helps in diversifying the economy (Sheshadri, Keralapura, and Shivalingaiah, 2015). Moreover, the UAE government believes that promoting vocational training and education will help in addressing the increasing demand for a highly skilled workforce in the UAE (Raji, 2018). More importantly, Emiratization is considered a top priority of the UAE government (Salama, 2015). Emiratization is a governmental initiative that aims at employing UAE citizens in both the public and private sectors (Raji, 2018). Vocational and technical training and education are considered to be efficient and flexible training systems that can help Emiratis to build the skills they need to enter the job market (Salama, 2015).

The UAE government has worked hard to develop a technical and vocational education system (Sheshadri, Keralapura, and Shivalingaiah, 2015). The UAE government has established several national institutes to provide vocational training, such as the Centre of Excellence for Applied Research and Training (CERT) (Al Hammadi, 2016; OECD, 2016). Several private companies have also stepped in to provide vocational training to various students across the UAE (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2018; Sheshadri, Keralapura, and Shivalingaiah, 2015). XYZ is one of the private companies that have done this.

The UAE has experienced growth when it comes to the demand for vocational education in the economy (Sheshadri, Keralapura, and Shivalingaiah, 2015). This is because of the increasing demand for technically trained graduates to accommodate the increasing diversification of the UAE economy (GFH, 2016). According to the Gulf Finance House report, the UAE experienced an increase in enrolments in technical institutes at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 25.1% in 2013-15, which was mainly due to the increasing demand by female students (GFH, 2016). Nonetheless, the rate of enrolment in vocational education is only 1–3%, which is considerably lower than the global average of 10% (Al Hammadi, 2016). This is because there is a lack of interest among high-school graduates in enrolling in technical and vocational education, probably because university graduates are offered higher salaries, which makes vocational education less appealing (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2017).

Other challenges that are facing the vocational education sector in the UAE include the lack of quality secondary education and inadequate teacher education (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2017). The government has recognized the need to improve the quality of vocational education by establishing a special entity to ensure that the vocational training offered is of high quality (Al

Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2018). Moreover, the government has introduced computer-assisted learning into technical and vocational education to increase the quality of the programmes (Raji, 2018).

In summary, the literature reviewed in this section demonstrated the importance of vocational training in the UAE, especially when it comes to serving the Emiratization agenda. The UAE government has conducted several initiatives to promote vocational training among Emiratis. Despite the various challenges, vocational training still constitutes an opportunity for training providers.

It is important to point out that XYZ focused in the past on Emiratization opportunities. Specifically, the company focused on providing vocational education programmes to young Emiratis that are interested in joining governmental oil companies. However, the demand for such courses declined as an outcome of the decrease in oil prices. Hence, XYZ may consider identifying new sectors other than oil and gas, that might also have Emiratization opportunities.

2.3.3 E-learning

There is a rising demand for corporate e-learning (Ellis and Kuznia, 2014). The Global Industry Analysts Inc. (2016) expects the global e-learning market to reach \$241 billion by 2022 (Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu, 2017). Moreover, the global e-learning market is expected to post a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.06 % from 2015-2019 (Ellacott, 2014). Specifically, corporate e-learning, which is considered to be one of the most impressive growth segments in the education industry, was expected to have a growth rate of 13% or more through 2017 (Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu 2017). In the Middle East, the size of the e-learning market

was estimated to be \$570 million in 2016 (Clowes, 2017). At that time, the e-learning market in the Middle East was expected to grow at a rate of 9% (Clowes, 2017). There are various explanations for the high growth of corporate e-learning. Belaya (2018) attributed this to the nature of the global business, which caused many corporations to rely on e-learning because of its ability to reach large groups of people in different areas or countries. Ellis and Kuznia (2014) argued that this rise is related to the creation of sophisticated technology and communications systems, which make the traditional model of training delivery less appealing. Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu (2017) stated that this increase is related to the rising use of HTML5-based browsers, cloud computing, smart mobile devices, and strong penetration of broadband Internet.

The high growth of corporate e-learning coincided with a steady decline in instructor-led training (ILT). As per data gathered by the Association for Talent Development (ATD), ILT experienced an unflinching decrease in recent years. It declined from being 59% of all corporate learning hours in 2010 to reach 49% in 2015 (Association for Talent Development, 2016). In the Middle East, ILT accounted for about 51% of the corporate training delivered in 2017 (BisReport, 2018). Despite the increasing popularity of corporate e-learning, the special characteristics of corporate training suggest that classroom types of training will continue to occupy a major share of the sector (BisReport, 2018; Prasad, 2016).

E-learning provides advantages to learning providers. It allows for the rapid production, distribution, and updating of learning content (Belaya, 2018). It reduces training expenses such as travel costs, rental costs for seminar rooms, and staff costs (Belaya, 2018; Mukherjee and Nath, 2016; Ellis and Kuznia, 2014). It allows for internationalization, as participants from different countries may come to enrol in e-learning. It gives the possibility of providing

interdisciplinary learning content (Belaya, 2018). E-learning can produce tailor-made training solutions for the employees (Ellis and Kuznia, 2014), provided in real-time to create just-in-time knowledge (Mukherjee and Nath, 2016). It gives the ability to keep detailed training records and to track employee performance (Ellis and Kuznia, 2014). Belaya (2018) suggested that e-learning could provide a great opportunity for vocational education training (VET) providers to improve the quality of the education they offered. Belaya (2018) also argued that introducing blended learning could help in overcoming the disadvantages of both methods of learning.

There are also disadvantages associated with corporate e-learning. The workplace should be suitable for e-learning (Belaya, 2018). Otherwise, the e-learning experience could be jeopardised by technical problems, such as bandwidth limitations, internet problems, and incompatible technology (Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu, 2017). Moreover, some trainees may lack the computer and technology skills that are needed for e-learning (Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu, 2017). There are also didactic and organizational challenges associated with the design and implementation of e-learning programs and learning opportunities (Belaya, 2018). These may include high maintenance cost, cultural resistance, and lack of trained staff to implement this type of training (Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu, 2017). There is a necessity to invest in the quality of the delivered content and to make it interactive, which embeds further costs (Belaya, 2018). Otherwise, the e-learning will suffer from the lack of sociability, lack of interactivity, and lack of feedback (Kimiloglu, Ozturan, and Kutlu, 2017). Finally, not all training topics are suitable for e-learning, such as soft skills training programmes (Belaya, 2018).

Hence, we can conclude that there is a rising demand for corporate e-learning in the Middle East.

This represents an opportunity that training companies could pursue to achieve growth and

profitability. However, there are challenges associated with implementing e-learning; moreover, classroom-type training is still expected to be more significant when it comes to corporate training.

The above studies would have been more relevant to the context of XYZ if they had inquired about the type of courses that could be delivered through e-learning. For example, most of the courses that are provided by XYZ are of short duration. Hence, one should question whether such short-term courses could benefit from e-learning solutions.

2.4 The threats that are limiting the profitability of small training businesses in the UAE

Grant (1991) identified strategy as “the match that an organization makes between its internal resources and skills and the opportunities and risks created by the external environment” (p.114). Hence, scanning the environment to identify external threats is an important activity that a company needs to undertake when developing its strategy. This scanning for external threats may allow the company to identify the resources and capabilities that the company needs to develop to be able to survive the external environment. The reviewed literature identified two main external threats. These threats are the dependence of the UAE economy on oil and gas and the declining demand for corporate training. Both threats are linked to governmental responses or actions, which affect the performance of small companies and training providers in the UAE. Hence, both threats could be classified as related to the institutional context that surrounds XYZ.

2.4.1 The UAE economy’s dependence on oil and gas.

The UAE economy is highly dependent on oil and gas (Soto and Haouas, 2016). Oil prices have a significant impact on macroeconomic development in oil-exporting countries in the Middle

East and North Africa (Hesse and Poghosyan, 2016). The decline in oil and gas prices decreases revenues and reduces government spending, which affects the growth of the non-oil and gas sector (Mahmah and Kandil, 2018). In 2015, the UAE government projected that oil prices were likely to remain low. As a result, the UAE government reduced expenditure to adjust to the decrease in oil revenue (Mahmah and Kandil, 2018). Moreover, the UAE government took further measures by increasing electricity and water prices. The government also issued new policies to lift the subsidy on gasoline and diesel to offset the declining revenue from oil (Mahmah and Kandil, 2018). The UAE is a member of the Oil Producing Exporting Countries Agreement (OPEC) (Shayah and Sun, 2019). The UAE had to cut its oil production in 2017 as part of its commitment to the OPEC agreement (Central Bank, 2017). This oil production cut affected the real oil and gas GDP, which shrank by 1.5% in 2017 (Central Bank, 2017). As a result, the UAE economy started to experience a decrease in growth. Figure 2-5 shows that non-oil GDP growth dropped from 4.6% in 2014 to 2.9% in 2017 (Central Bank of the UAE, 2017, p.20).

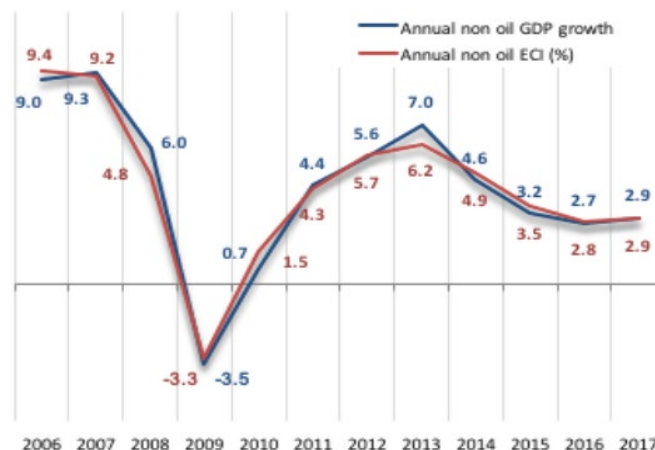


Figure 2-5: The non-oil GDP growth in the UAE (Central Bank of the UAE, p.20).

Small businesses were profoundly affected by this decrease in growth, which was triggered by the decrease in oil prices (Everington, 2016). During the 4th quarter of 2015, the SME sentiment survey reported an increase in the number of UAE-based SMEs that registered a decline in sales and growth (Gulf Finance, 2015). Despite some signs of slight improvements in the SME sentiment report in the second quarter of 2016, growth expectations stayed modest, due to the evident stress in the system (Gulf Finance, 2016).

In summary, the UAE economy experienced a decrease in growth triggered by the global decline of oil prices and the cut in oil production. The government also reduced its expenditure, which hit small businesses hard. Based on the above, the strategy that XYZ will need to develop should take into consideration the current economic conditions and the decrease in government expenditure to be able to increase the company's chances of survival.

2.4.2 The decline in corporate training demand

There are signs that many Middle Eastern countries, including the UAE, have experienced a decline in corporate training demand due to budget cuts implemented by the clients (GDN Online, 2016). As mentioned before, the UAE government reduced expenditure to adjust to the decrease in oil revenue (Mahmah and Kandil, 2018). “When financial crises strike governments, the first departments that usually witness sharp budgetary cuts are those in charge of training” (Al-Nuseirat and Biygautane, 2014, p.1). It can be concluded, therefore, that the demand for training by governmental entities has decreased as an outcome of the budget cuts implemented by the UAE government. Moreover, the data provided by BisReport (2018) shows that the

growth in training in the Middle East declined from 2016 through 2018. Figure 2-6 illustrates this decline (BisReport, 2018, p. 14).

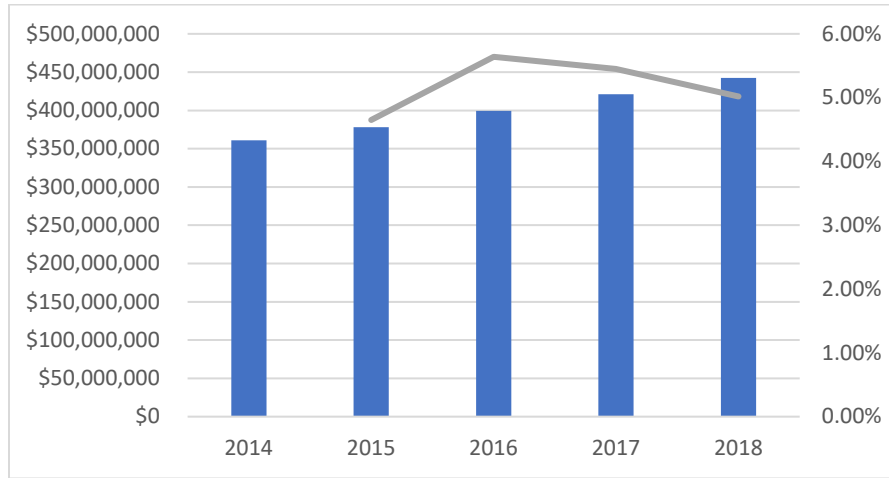


Figure 2-6: Growth of the corporate training market in the Middle East (BisReport, 2018, p. 14)

In summary, the corporate training market has experienced a decline in the UAE. The demand for training by governmental entities has also declined. XYZ is specialized in providing training to the healthcare and oil and gas sectors. Most of the clients of XYZ from these two sectors are governmental entities, so XYZ is directly exposed to this threat. XYZ owners have noticed the decline in the demand for training, especially in the oil and gas sector. Hence, XYZ needs to develop a strategy that takes into consideration this decline to increase its chances of survival.

2.5 Internal resources, capabilities, and strategies

As previously addressed in the section on the rationale of the study, the literature related to the factors that influence the success of small businesses is extensive. Small business researchers have identified various factors that could contribute to the profitability, growth, and sustainability of small businesses.

The reviewed articles identified fourteen factors that are important for small business success. A detailed overview of each of these factors will be provided in the following sections. The RBV framework was used to classify these factors into categories. Specifically, the definitions of Grant (1991) were used to classify these fourteen factors into resources, capabilities, and strategies. These definitions are:

- Resources: “Inputs into the production process” (Grant, 1991, p. 118).
- Capabilities: “The capacity for a team of resources to perform some task or activity” Grant, 1991, p. 119).
- Strategy: “The match an organization makes between its internal resources and skills and the opportunities and risks created by its external environment” (Grant, 1991, p. 114).

Figure 2-7 lists the factors that I identified in the literature and how I classified them based on Grant’s definition of resources, capabilities, and strategies.

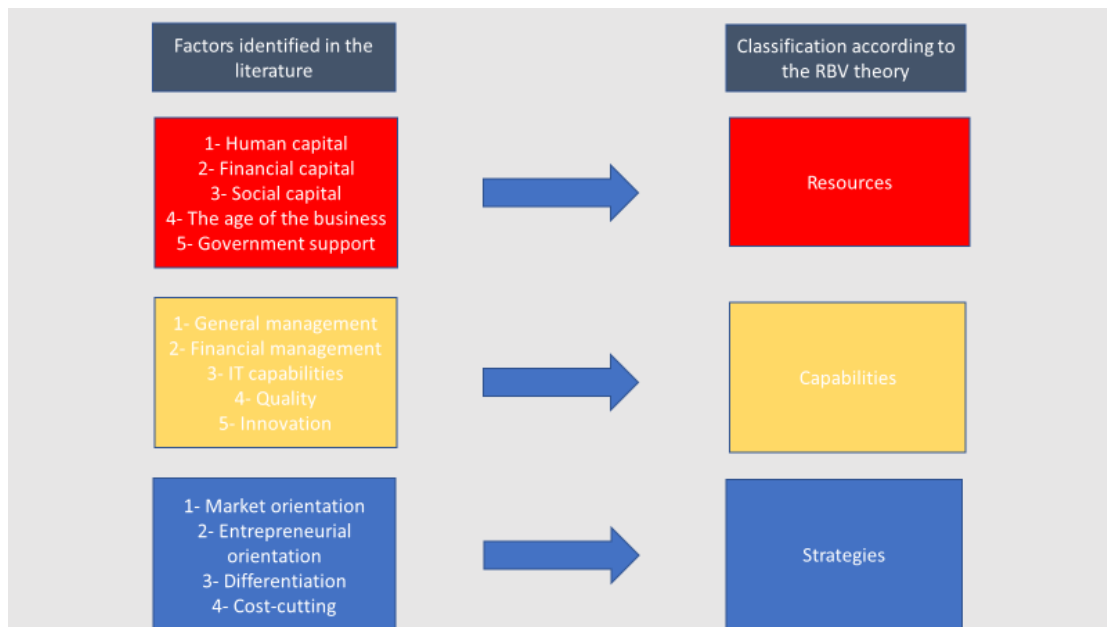


Figure 2-7: The classification of success factors into resources, capabilities, and strategies

2.5.1 The resources that are important for the success of small training businesses

Grant identified resources as inputs into the production process. Resources can be classified as physical, financial, human, technological, reputational, and organizational resources (Grant, 1991). They are the sources that create capabilities (Grant, 1991). The reviewed literature identified five main types of resources that were found to be important for small business success, profitability, and growth. These resources are human capital, financial capital, social capital, the age of the business, and government support.

2.5.1.1 Human capital

The literature discussing human capital as a success factor for small businesses can be divided into research emphasizing the quantitative dimension and research focusing on the qualitative dimension of human capital. While there is general agreement about the importance of employee competence for small business success (qualitative dimension), the influence of the number of employees (quantitative dimension) was challenged by some scholars.

Regarding the quantitative dimension of human capital, some studies concluded that the profitability of small firms is linked to the number of employees of the business (Bansal, 2015; De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes, 2013). Other studies concluded that the growth of a small business is influenced by its size (Kachlami and Yazdanfar, 2016; Yazdanfar and Öhman, 2015; Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright, 2013). This implies that the larger the SME, the more likely it will have resources to grow. Contrary to previous findings, however, Steinerowska-Streb (2012) found that firm size does not influence the profitability of SME during a period of reduced economic activity. Hence, it can be concluded that most of these studies supported the

conclusion that the number of employees is related to small business success and growth. Arend (2014) provided evidence that supports this conclusion from a dynamic capabilities' perspective. Dynamic capabilities are defined as "the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments" (Teece, Pisano and Schuen, 1997, p.516). Arend (2014) concluded that smaller firms are less capable of generating dynamic capabilities, which are important for small firms' success. However, the main weakness of this conclusion is that it does not take into consideration that small businesses have limited resources, which may restrict their ability to grow in terms of the number of employees. For example, a company might wish to hire more employees, but it might lack the capital or the physical space to conduct this expansion.

Turning now to the qualitative dimension of human capital, many studies found that the competence of human capital is important for small business success. "Human capital competence is defined as the ability to perform tasks that include workplace skills (skills) that are supported by knowledge (knowledge) and skills (abilities) in accordance with conditions imposed" (Anggadwita and Mustafid, 2013, p.417). The competences of the human capital were also found to be an important element for the success of small businesses (Nwachukwa, 2018; Anggadwita and Mustafid, 2014). Similarly, the literature related to training providers found that employing qualified trainers, which is a human capital component, was one of the factors behind training companies' success (Rogala, Batko, and Wawak, 2017).

Most of the studies that followed Lussier's model confirmed that the competences of the employees are important for small businesses' success. Lussier's model (1995) is a non-financial model that is commonly used to predict the failure or success of small businesses. This model is

considered suitable for small businesses because they may lack adequate financial data to analyse their performance (Marom and Lussier, 2014). The model is based on fifteen factors, one of which is staffing (Lussier, 1995). The staffing factor assumes that companies that cannot attract and preserve quality employees are more likely to fail than companies that can. This literature review included six studies that followed Lussier's model. Four of these studies found that staffing is a significant factor that can predict small business success (Hyder and Lussier, 2016; Lussier and Corman, 1996; Lussier, 1996; Lussier, 1995). Similarly, hiring employees that possess the right skills for the job was identified as important for small business success (Gandy, 2015). Also, attracting and retaining high-quality employees was found to be a good practice that small businesses need to follow to succeed (Akindoju, 2016).

In summary, while the focus of scholars might be on different dimensions of human capital, there is broad agreement on the general importance of employees for the success of small businesses. The dimension emphasizing the importance of the competence of human capital may be more relevant to the context of this study. This is because small businesses have limited resources (McDowell, Harris, and Geho, 2016; Smallbone et al., 2012). Hence, advising small companies to increase the number of their employees to become more profitable may not be feasible due to their resources' constraints. The limited literature related to training providers revealed that employing qualified trainers is important for their success (Rogala, Batko, and Wawak, 2017). Hence, this study needs to explore the exact trainers' competences that are crucial for small training businesses and inform whether the competences of other types of human capital are important for small training business success.

2.5.1.2 Financial capital

The relevance of financial capital as a success factor for small businesses is evident in a multitude of studies. However, there are different - and incompatible - schools of thought regarding the level of financial capital a small business should accumulate to maximize its competitiveness. The first school of thought advocates that small businesses should maximize their financial capital. The second school of thought argues that small businesses should define, and then reach, the optimal level of financial capital.

Concerning the maximization of financial capital, Bansal (2015) found a positive correlation between the profitability of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, (MSMEs), and their level of capital investment. Similarly, Chijioke (2016) concluded that one of the recommended strategies for small business success was securing additional funding sources. Moreover, De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes (2013) found that liquidity and long-term debt are essential for the profitability of SMEs. Lussier's model tested whether undercapitalized businesses have a greater chance of failure than firms that start with adequate capital. The capital was found to be a significant factor that could predict the success of small firms in four studies (Hyder and Lussier, 2016; Marom and Lussier, 2014; Halabi and Lussier, 2014; Coreman and Lussier, 1996). Fabregá and Nicolau (2016) investigated the financial characteristics of SMEs that survived the economic crisis in Barcelona. They found that companies that own financial resources were able to survive since they used these resources for refinancing or cancelling their debts.

A serious weakness with this conclusion is that it does not consider the difficulties that small businesses may have when it comes to increasing their financial capital. Small businesses have

limited financial capacities (Hausman, 2005). Moreover, borrowing from banks is highly challenging for SMEs operating in the UAE (Baby and Joseph, 2016). Therefore, a recommendation for small businesses to maximize their financial capital could be highly challenging due to their limited financial resources and the inability to borrow money from banks.

With regard to the importance of finding the optimal level of capital, Afrifa and Padachi (2016) reported that obtaining optimal working capital influences the profitability of small firms. This means that deviation above or below the optimal working capital will decrease profitability. This is because investing heavily in working capital will also be associated with increasing expenses, such as warehouse storage costs, insurance, lighting costs, and heating costs (Afrifa and Padachi, 2016). Pais and Gama (2015) provided evidence of the existence of an optimal working capital level for SMEs and found that more aggressive working capital management policies increase firms' profitability. Moreover, good working capital management is important for increasing the profitability of SMEs.

To sum-up, the literature identified two different schools of thought when it comes to examining the importance of financial capital for small business success. The first school of thought is concerned with maximizing financial capital. The second school of thought is concerned with defining the optimal level of financial capital. Nevertheless, there is general agreement in the literature about the importance of financial capital for small business success. XYZ has a serious limitation when it comes to financial capital. XYZ has limited financial resources. Some of the owners of XYZ are reluctant to increase the capital of the company, especially when considering the current declining economic conditions. XYZ was not able to borrow from banks, which

supports the conclusion of Baby and Joseph (2016) about the challenges that SMEs in UAE are facing when it comes to borrowing from banks. Hence, the strategy that XYZ needs to develop should take into consideration the limited financial capital of the company or suggest novel ways to raise capital.

2.5.1.3 Social capital

Social capital is defined as “the collective and personal knowledge that is embedded in the relationships among employees and between employees and external agents” (Donate, Peña, and Sanchez de Pablo, 2016, p. 929). Many studies found a direct relationship between social capital, or one of its elements, and small business profitability. Philip (2011) concluded that possessing a social network, which is an element of social capital, is important for SMEs’ success. Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) inquired into the competences that women entrepreneurs pursue to achieve growth, identifying four clusters of factors, which included human relations; a component of social capital. Runyan, Huddleston, and Swinney (2007) concluded that small business owners need to realize the importance of non-monetary resources, such as community brand and social capital, which could have a direct impact on the competitiveness of small companies. Similarly, Akindoju (2016) identified that having a strong network, which is a component of social capital, is a good strategy for small business success.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature in this section illustrates that social capital is important for small business success. Social capital has many elements, such as human relations, social networks, and community brand. Hence, it is important to investigate further the specific element

of social capital that is more relevant to the context of this study. It is also important for XYZ to assess its current social capital and to ensure that it is being used at an optimal level.

2.5.1.4 The age of the business

The age of the business is defined as the number of years of existence of the company (De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes, 2013). “The age effect means greater experience in choosing investments and in managing financial, material, and human resources, as well as a greater perception of business risk, contributing to increased profitability in this type of firm” (De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes, 2013, p.425). The reviewed literature on the effect of the age of the business, however, is not consistent. Some studies concluded that the age of the business influences the profitability of small businesses. In contrast, other studies did not find the age of the business to be a significant factor for small business profitability.

Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright (2012) found that the age of the business is important for SMEs’ growth in the UK. Similarly, Bansal (2015) concluded that the profitability of MSMEs is influenced by their business experience. The age of the SME was also found to be a determinant of SMEs’ profitability in Portugal (De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes, 2013). On the other hand, Kachlami and Yazdanfar (2016) concluded that the age of the firm does not necessarily influence the growth of small businesses. This means that older small firms do not necessarily grow at a faster rate than others.

The age of the business is not a resource that can be acquired. It is related to the experiences that the small firm accumulates over the years. However, some might argue that younger firms may compensate for the liability of their newness by having experienced managers or owners.

Kemayel (2015) found that the age of the manager has a positive effect on the performance of Lebanese SMEs. Lussier's model (1995) included the age of the owner among the factors that could predict the success or failure of small firms. Lussier (1995) assumed that younger people who start a business have a greater chance of failure than older people. However, four reviewed articles related to the Lussier model did not conclude that the age of the owner is a good predictor of the success or failure of a small business (Hyder and Lussier, 2016; Marom and Lussier, 2014; Lussier, 1996; Lussier, 1995). Moreover, Lussier and Coreman (1996) concluded that the age of the owner is not a significant predictor of success or failure. Similarly, only two studies related to Lussier's model found that the previous experience of the manager is a good predictor of the success of small businesses (Marom and Lussier, 2014; Lussier, 1996). One study concluded that management experience was not a significant predictor of small business success (Lussier and Coreman, 1996). Harris, Gibson, and McDowell (2014) also found that the prior business experience of the owners of a small business is not important for small business success.

To sum-up, there is no agreement in the literature about the effect of the age of the business on the success of small companies. Moreover, the literature seems to provide contrasting views when it comes to the relevance of the owner or manager's experience to small business success.

2.5.1.5 Government support

A small number of studies concluded that government support is an important resource for small business success and survival. Governments may support small businesses by providing financial support or subsidies (Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015; De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes,

2013). Governments may also provide non-financial support, such as training and consultations (Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015). Government support is more relevant to small businesses operating in developing countries (Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015; Philip, 2011). This is because markets and institutional infrastructure in developing countries are less advanced, which makes small businesses more vulnerable to changes in the surrounding environment (Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015). Having access to government support may enable these small businesses to survive the marketplace. Arasti, Zandi, and Bahmani (2014) also concluded that the main reason behind the failure of some entrepreneurs in Iran was the inappropriate policies and lack of governmental support offered to entrepreneurs.

2.5.2 The capabilities that are important for small training business success

Grant (1991) used the term ‘capability’ to refer to the capacity for a bundle of resources to perform some task or activity. Grant views the organization as a huge complex of routines. A capability is, therefore, a routine or several interacting routines (Grant, 1991). Many other scholars provided similar definitions to the one provided by Grant. Makadok (2001) defined capabilities as the organizations' systems that allow for enhancing the productivity of the acquired firm's resources. Similarly, Barney (2015) defined capabilities as the firm's attributes that allow for the exploitation of its own resources. Moreover, Hitt et al. (2003) argued that a set of resources might turn into a capability when they are combined or integrated into the performance of a task or activity (as cited in Beard and Sumner, 2004, p. 131). Taken together, these definitions tend to agree that a capability is what a firm can do with its resources.

2.5.2.1 General management capabilities

Adner and Helfat (2003) defined management capabilities as “the capabilities by which managers construct, integrate, and reconfigure the organization’s resources and competences” (Adner and Helfat, 2003, p.1020). Carmeli and Tishler (2004) argued that management capabilities empower the top management of the company to improve organizational performance, create, and maintain competitive advantages. This empowerment allows companies to face better environmental challenges (as cited in Ruiz-Jiménez and del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, 2016, p. 109). The reviewed literature indicated that management capabilities are important for small business profitability or success. Alawa and Quisenberry (2015) found that developing managerial capabilities is important to avoid small business failure. Philip (2011) found that management know-how is important for small business success. Thornhill and Amit (2003) identified several factors that resulted in small business failure. Among these factors was the lack of management capabilities. Ruiz-Jiménez and del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes (2016) found that management capabilities are vital for SMEs’ success because they influence the innovation performance of technology-based SMEs. Keen and Etemad (2012) also concluded that management capabilities are important for small enterprises. Arasti, Zandi, and Bahmani (2014) concluded that the lack of management skills was one of the reasons behind the failure of some entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, the evidence from the reviewed studies in this section showcased that management capabilities are important for small business success. These studies would have been more useful if they had focused on defining the exact management capabilities that small businesses or training businesses need to develop to become profitable and remain in business.

Adner and Helfat (2003) defined management capabilities as “the capabilities by which managers construct, integrate, and reconfigure the organization’s resources and competences” (Adner and Helfat, 2003, p.1020). I consider this definition as too generic, which could be the reason behind the lack of precision about the types of management capabilities that are related to small business success. Moreover, it could be the case that the required management capabilities are different from one industry to another. Hence, this study needs to explore whether there are specific management capabilities that small training companies need to develop to become profitable and remain in business.

2.5.2.2 Financial management capabilities

Generally, the reviewed studies agreed that financial management capabilities are important for small business success. Scholars have utilised two approaches to evaluate whether financial management capabilities are important for small business profitability. The first approach was by establishing a direct relationship between financial management capabilities and small business profitability. The second approach was by establishing direct links between specific elements of financial management practices and the profitability of small firms. These specific elements of financial management included cash flow management, working capital management (WCM), and record-keeping.

As far as the first approach is concerned, the lack of financial management capabilities was identified as one of the sources of the failure of small businesses (Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015; Thornhill and Amit, 2003). Similarly, Arasti, Zandi, and Bahmani (2014) found that managers of failed small firms did not pay enough attention to business financing. Shallow (2017) found that

the identification and implementation of effective financial management strategies may increase small business success, potentially resulting in their growth. Alrawi, Alrawi, and Alrawi (2015) found that managing finances is important for small business success.

Moving on to consider the second approach, Haron, Yahya, and Haron (2014) found a significant relationship between the use of cash flow information derived from cash flow statements and the profitability of small companies. In contrast, Wu'Adongo et al. (2015) found a relatively low degree of positive correlation between efficient cash management and the profitability of small enterprises. Attom (2016) concluded that the lack of working capital management practices was the major reason behind the liquidity challenges of small companies. Tran, Abbot, and Jin Yap (2017) found that WCM is a significant area of financial management; efficient WCM can significantly impact the profitability and liquidity of the business.

Record-keeping and financial control were among the factors that Lussier's model tested to predict the success of small businesses. Lussier assumed that small companies that do not keep updated and accurate records and do not use adequate financial controls have a greater likelihood of failure than firms that do (Lussier, 1995). Four studies that used Lussier's model found that record-keeping and financial control were significant factors in predicting the success of small firms (Marom and Lussier, 214; Halabi and Lussier, 2014; Coreman and Lussier, 1996; Lussier 1996).

2.5.2.3 IT capabilities

IT capability is defined as “the firm's ability to identify systems meeting business requirements, to implement these systems in a cost-effective manner, and to deliver long-term maintenance and

support for these systems” (Karimi, Somers, and Bhattacharjee, 2007, p. 224). The reviewed literature agreed that possessing IT capabilities is considered important for small business success. Pollack and Adler (2016) investigated the business skills that help SMEs to become profitable. The researchers found that IT skills have a significant influence on the likelihood of SMEs to report an increase in profitability. Kossaï and Piget (2014) found a significant statistical relationship between the level of ICT use and the profitability of SMEs. Nwachukwu (2018) found that IT updates are one of the successful strategies for small businesses.

To sum-up, there seems to be a general agreement about the importance of IT capabilities in small business success. This finding, however, needs to be carefully interpreted because it is coming from studies that were mostly concerned with small industrial businesses. Training business is not IT-intensive; hence, the relevance of this capability to the training industry needs to be examined with caution.

2.5.2.4 Quality management

Quality management is defined as “the set of interconnected and managed processes that function together to achieve the organization’s quality goals” (Hoyle, 2007, p. 197). The reviewed literature related to small business supports the importance of quality management to small business success and profitability. Similarly, the literature related to training companies also found that quality is important for the success of training companies. However, the smaller the company, the more challenging it is to implement quality systems.

Regarding the literature related to small businesses, Alawa and Quisenberry (2015) found that failed entrepreneurs reported that they did not implement quality systems because they thought

that they are costly and not valuable, which eventually prevented them from implementing the concept of continuous improvement. Similarly, Sainis et al. (2017) found that companies could sustain their financial performance and reduce their probability of bankruptcy during times of crisis by implementing quality measures. Bagur-Femenías, Perramon, and Amat (2015) found no direct relationship between the implementation of quality policies and financial performance. However, the authors were able to define an indirect relationship between quality and financial performance.

Quality was the most frequently recurring theme among articles concerned with the success of training companies. Wawak, Batko, and Rogala (2017) inquired whether implementing quality management standards that are specific to learning providers is essential for the success of training companies. They concluded that dedicated quality management systems are important for training companies' success. De Waal, Frijns, and Mroueh (2014) conducted a case study on a successful UAE-based training company. The purpose of the study was to explore whether this specific company can be considered a High Performing Organization (HPO). An HPO is defined as an organization that achieves financial and non-financial results that exceed its peers throughout five to ten years. The studied company, which was considered a successful company, scored higher than its peers in three of these factors. One of which was quality management.

Some scholars investigated whether implementing quality systems represents a challenge for training companies' providers. Wawak, Batko, and Rogala (2017) concluded that implementing quality systems does not represent a challenge to learning providers. Moreover, quality systems do not limit the entrepreneurial level of the company. Olaru et al. (2009) assessed the extent to which Romanian training providers fulfil the requirement of the Common Quality Assessment

Framework (CQAF), which is a major quality guideline in Europe for training and vocational training providers. The results showed that micro-companies were the least able to fulfil these requirements. Small companies were only capable to a small degree of achieving the requirements to perform assessment and monitoring. It also showed that those that were able to plan fulfilled the CQAF requirement in general. Hence, the smaller the learning provider, the more challenging it is for them to implement quality standards.

As far as ways to improve the quality of the provided training are concerned, Ab Rahman et al. (2016) concluded that interaction quality and environmental quality are the most crucial factors to provide quality training. Interaction refers to the level of interaction between students and training. The environmental factor refers to whether trainers provide friendly training, which, in return, yields an increase in trust and quality. Moreover, Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017) found that the most important factors to improve the functioning quality of training are hiring coaches with extensive knowledge in the field of training, hiring coaches capable of providing training in an interesting way, and hiring coaches with appropriate professional practice in the field of training.

To sum-up, the relevance of quality management as a success factor for small businesses or training businesses is evident in several studies. Most of these studies found that implementing quality standards or systems is vital for small business or training business success. One study suggested that the smaller the company, the more challenging it is to implement such quality standards.

XYZ implements two international quality standards. The first standard is ISO 9000:2015. This standard is based on many quality management principles, such as strong customer focus, the motivation and engagement of top management, the process approach and continual improvement (ISO, n.d.). Within the context of XYZ, the implementation of ISO 9001:2015 ensures that the content development, materials delivery, and recruitment of instructors follow consistent processes. The second standard is OHSAS 1800:2007. It is an Occupational Health and Safety Management standard that provides a framework to identify, control and decrease the risks associated with health and safety within the workplace (BSI, n.d.). Within the context of XYZ, the implementation of this standard assures our employees and clients that we take safety issues seriously. Hence, one should inquire whether there are other industry-specific standards that XYZ may need to consider to improve the quality of its offering further.

2.5.2.5 Innovation

Hogan et al. (2011) define innovation capability as “the firm’s ability, relative to its competitors, to apply the collective knowledge, skills, and resources to innovation activities related to new products, processes, services, management, marketing, or work organization systems, in order to create added value for the firm or its stakeholders” (Hogan et al., 2011, p. 1266). The literature expressed contrasting views when it comes to the importance of innovation capabilities for small business success and profitability.

Valdez-Juárez, García-Pérez-de-Lema, and Maldonado-Guzmán (2018) examined the effect of innovation on the performance of SMEs. Specifically, they explored the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Knowledge Management (KM) in increasing the

innovation of SMEs and, hence, increasing performance. The authors concluded that ICT significantly influences KM, innovation, and profitability. Similarly, Suhardiyah and Sulistyowati (2016) found that production technology and innovation are the most critical factors that increased the sales volumes of SMEs. Omri, Frikha, and Bouraoui (2015) concluded that innovation plays a mediating role between the human, social, and financial capital of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial success. This implies that innovation is an important capacity that small businesses need to marshal their human, social, and financial capital efficiently.

Contrary to the above, Saunila, Ukko, and Rantanen (2014) found that innovation capability has a minor effect on the profitability of small firms. Likewise, Anggadwita and Mustafid (2013) did not find a relation between innovativeness and sustainability with the enhanced performance of SMEs.

The reviewed literature does not agree on whether innovation capabilities are important for small business success. One should question whether the relevance of innovation capability is also linked to the industry. For example, innovation capabilities may be more relevant to the success of technology-based small businesses.

2.5.3 The strategies for small training business success

Grant (1991) defines strategy as “the match an organization makes between its internal resources and skill and the opportunities and risks created by its external environment” (Grant, 1991, p. 114). Having a strategy is important for small business growth (Keen and Etemad, 2012). Strategies for small businesses are also important to overcome their lack of resources, minimal environmental power, and owner-centred culture (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). They allow small

businesses to embed their valuable resources in their core business strategy, to ensure survival in the longer term (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). According to Armstrong (2013), small businesses that focus on their own competences when building their strategies can survive and grow at the same time, which is usually hard to pursue simultaneously. Many studies provided supporting evidence about the importance of strategies for small business success. Barbera and Hasso (2013) concluded that small family businesses that have proper strategies and processes are more likely to experience maximization of sales. However, these strategic processes are not important to obtain growth benefits. Arasti, Zandi, and Bahmani (2014) found that businesses that have inadequate strategies, such as inappropriate pricing or marketing strategies, are more likely to fail. Sandada (2014) concluded that the formality of strategic planning is a factor that has a strong impact on SME performance. Moreover, planning was one of the most frequently recurring factors that were proven to be significant for predicting small business success in studies that followed Lussier's model (Hyder and Lussier, 2016; Marom and Lussier, 2014; Lussier and Corman, 1996; Lussier, 1996; Lussier, 1995).

The reviewed literature defined four main strategies that small businesses could follow to become profitable: market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, differentiation, and cost-cutting strategies. A detailed review of each of these strategies is presented in the following sections.

2.5.3.1 Market orientation

Market Orientation (MO) is defined as “the organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs; dissemination of the intelligence across

departments; and organization-wide responsiveness to this market intelligence” (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993, p. 53). According to Mavondo (2010), MO consists of competitor orientation, customer orientation, inter-functional coordination, and long- term profit focus (as cited in Jones and Sisay, 2014, p. 6). Generally, the reviewed literature concluded that MO is important for small companies’ success. This conclusion was made by establishing direct or indirect relations between MO and small business success. The conclusion was also established by finding associations between components of MO, such as customer orientation or competitor orientation, and the success of small businesses. The literature related to training companies also supported this conclusion, as customer satisfaction was found to be a good predictor of training companies’ success.

In terms of the relationship between MO and the success of small companies, Pervan, Curak, and Kramaric (2017) concluded that small companies should develop processes that allow the recognition, collection, and analysis of data related to changes in the customers, markets, and supplies. They should be able to interpret this information to be able to understand the behaviour of the market and to sense new opportunities that may emerge out of the development of new technologies. The finding of this study is aligned with the definition of market orientation. Lonial and Carter (2015) studied the importance of entrepreneurial orientation (EO), learning orientation (LO), and market orientation (MO) to enhance the performance of small firms. The outcomes of their study concluded that MO, EO, and LO jointly provide a positive advantage, which in turn leads to positive performance. Laukkanen et al. (2016) concluded that market orientation could only improve firm performance when implemented through brand orientation.

This implies that small firms should invest in building their brands to be able to achieve improved performance through market orientation.

Customer satisfaction was also found to be important for small business success (Akaeze, 2016; Alrawi, Alrawi, and Alrawi, 2015). Customer satisfaction could be considered a component of MO. Similarly, Nwachukwu (2018) concluded that following a customer-centric strategy is important to maintain the profitability of the small business. Blankson, Motwani, and Levenburg (2006) found that a strong market emphasis on the customer yielded positive outcomes for small businesses. The training literature also emphasized the importance of satisfying customers. Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017) found that providing training that is unique and adjusted to customers' needs is important for training companies' success.

Marjanova et al. (2015) examined the role of competitor orientation in increasing the profitability of SMEs in developing economies. Competitor orientation is defined as the ability to understand the competitor's short-term strengths and weaknesses and its long-term capabilities and strategies, to generate a competitive advantage in the organization (Zhou et al. 2009, as cited in Marjanova et al., 2015, p. 665). The author concluded that competitor orientation directly affects the profitability of the firm. Similarly, O'Dwyer and Gilmore (2019) concluded that SMEs that want to improve their organisational performance should pay close attention to direct and indirect competitors in order to identify opportunities and build sustainable competitive, businesses.

To conclude this section, the literature identifies that MO is important for small businesses and training businesses profitability. MO consists of competitor orientation, customer orientation,

inter-functional coordination, and long-term profit focus (Mavondo 2010, as cited in Jones and Sisay, 2014). Hence, it is important to investigate further the specific element (or the combination of elements) of MO that is most relevant to the context of this study.

2.5.3.2 Entrepreneurial orientation

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) is “a strategic construct that captures a firm’s strategy-making practices, management philosophies, and firm-level behaviours that are entrepreneurial in nature” (Anderson, Covin, and Slevin, 2009, p.220). Applying EO in a small business context implies that the company should focus on entrepreneurial activities, such as opportunity seeking, acceptance of risk, proactively innovating new products, and looking for new markets (Jones and Sisay, 2014).

Many studies concluded that EO is important for small business profitability and growth. Anggadwita and Mustafid (2013) found that the most significant factor that influences the performance of SMEs is the entrepreneurial factor. Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) inquired into the competences that women entrepreneurs pursue to achieve growth. The author identified four clusters of competences, which included entrepreneurial competences. Andersén and Samuelsson (2016) examined whether EO and Management Accounting Practices (MAP) have a positive effect on the profitability of SMEs. The authors considered EO as a proxy for opportunity identification, and MAPs as a proxy for resources organizations. They concluded that both EO and MAPs have a positive effect on profitability in non-growing SMEs. Lonial and Carter (2015) studied the importance of EO, LO, and MO to enhance the performance of small firms. The outcomes of their study concluded that MO, EO, and LO jointly provide a positive

advantage, which in turn leads to positive performance. Similarly, Kaya (2015) found that corporate entrepreneurship positively influences the financial performance of SMEs. Ferreira, Azevedo, and Ortiz (2011) examined the impact of entrepreneurial orientation (EO) on the growth of small manufacturing companies in Portugal. Their findings highlight that small firms should develop superior EO and invest in better resources to consequently achieve superior capabilities to achieve high growth.

In summary, this review has shown that EO is important for small business success. However, small businesses may have to demonstrate other factors or orientations to be able to exploit this strategy (Andersén and Samuelsson, 2016; Lonial and Carter, 2015; Lumpkin et al., 2010). Hence, this study needs to look for a possible association between EO and other types of strategies or orientations.

2.5.3.3 Differentiation strategy

A differentiation strategy is defined as “one in which firms derive advantages by making the uniqueness of their products apparent to their consumers” (Lumpkin et al., 2010, p. 9). Some studies found that conducting a differentiation strategy helps small businesses to become successful. Lumpkin et al. (2010) suggested small businesses can obtain a competitive advantage by following a differentiation strategy. The authors argued that small businesses could conduct a differentiation strategy by implementing one of the following approaches: quality, customization, convenience, and unique style. Similarly, Kaya (2015) concluded that a differentiation strategy positively influences the financial performance of SMEs. Likewise, Njuguna, Ochieng, and

Odida (2015) concluded that SMEs were able to obtain a competitive advantage by following a differentiation strategy.

2.5.3.4 Cost-cutting strategy

The reviewed literature suggested that cost-cutting was a good strategy for small businesses that are operating in a declining market. Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) found that maintaining tight control on costs is one of the strategies that small businesses could follow to survive a declining market. Similarly, Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos (2014) found that a cost-cutting strategy is an important measure to implement in a declining economy in the short-term. However, this might have a negative long-term effect on growth. Hence, it is important to make a trade-off between the benefits and costs of similar short-term actions (Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos, 2014). Lumpkin et al. (2010) argued that microenterprises are good at bootstrapping since they can operate at low costs without incurring significant losses. Hence, it could be concluded that a cost-cutting strategy may help small businesses to become more profitable and remain in business. This conclusion is found to be especially relevant when the small business is operating in a declining economy. XYZ is operating in a declining economy. The company has already implemented many cost-cutting activities. This included reducing the number of employees to the minimum. Hence, one should investigate whether there are any other cost-cutting measures that XYZ could implement.

2.6 Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies that a small UAE-based training company may choose from to become profitable and remain in business. The conceptual framework of this

study was the RBV theory with insights from the neo-institutional theory. The planning of this literature review was centred around the research question and sub-questions of the study. The search of literature included literature related to the UAE economy, the training industry in the UAE, small businesses in the UAE, training business success factors, the RBV theory, the institutional theory, and small business profitability. The sources included peer-reviewed articles, theses, business news, and business reports. The review of literature related to small business success and training business success identified fourteen factors that are important for the success of a small business or a training business. Using the RBV theory, these factors were classified into resources, capabilities, and strategies. The findings of the literature review are presented in Figure 2-8:

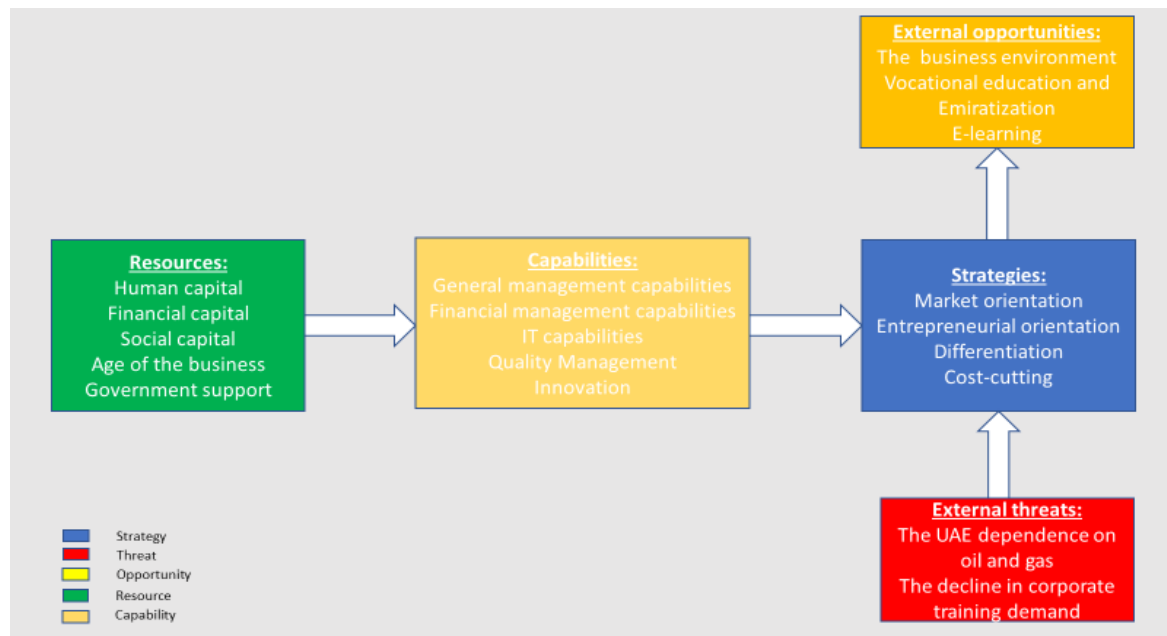


Figure 2-8: The findings of the literature review

The reviewed literature revealed that human capital, financial capital, social capital, and government support are important resources that small businesses should possess to become

profitable. These resources should be used to build capabilities that can help the company to build a competitive advantage. There was a disagreement in the reviewed literature over whether the age of the business is important for small business success. The most significant capabilities that the literature defined as important for small businesses are general management capabilities, financial management capabilities, IT capabilities, and quality management capability. The reviewed literature provided contrasting views when it comes to examining whether innovation capabilities are important to small business success. The strategies that small businesses use to become profitable are market orientation strategy, entrepreneurial orientation strategy, differentiation strategy, and cost-cutting strategies. The specific strategy to be developed should take into consideration the external threats that are derived from the institutional context in the UAE, which are the UAE economy's dependence on oil and gas and the decline in corporate training demand. The strategy should also consider the opportunities associated with contextual conditions in the UAE, which are the UAE business environment and the rising importance of vocational education and Emiratization. This is in addition to one opportunity stemming from the market conditions, which is e-learning.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the selection of the research paradigm, research approach, research methodology, research strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis processes that were used in this study. It will also detail how research quality and ethical issues were accounted for throughout all the stages of this research. The chapter will address the challenges that might arise as an outcome of the insider position of the researcher.

3.2 The research paradigm

3.2.1 Ontology

Morgan and Smircich (1980) argued that it is important for researchers to identify their ontological and epistemological assumptions before deciding on their choice of research methods. There is no agreed ontological and epistemological paradigm for management research (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998). Hence, it was important for me to review the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are accepted in social science, and to identify those assumptions that are aligned with the research questions and the objective of this study.

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2012) identified three ontological positions for social sciences which are nominalism, relativism, and internal realism. From a nominalist point of view, “Reality is simply a product of our minds, a projection of our consciousness, and cognition, with no independent status” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p. 78). Hence, nominalists believe that there is no truth and that facts are created by humans (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and

Jackson, 2012). Nominalism cannot be considered as an ontological assumption for this study because the research question is concerned with an entity (XYZ) and a phenomenon (declining profitability) that I assume to be true. Applying a nominalist ontology would reject the existence of XYZ and its declining profitability. Hence, nominalism was not selected as an ontological assumption for this study.

A relativist ontology would argue that there is no absolute truth (Johnson and Duberley, 2000) and that facts will depend on the perspectives from which they are observed (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). “Relativism asserts that there is no neutral, or independent, ahistorical criteria, for judging knowledge - or truth claims because we cannot stand outside our own social-historical milieu” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p. 75). If I assume that there are no criteria for identifying a profitable strategy, then this study may turn into a debate that presents the perspectives of the participants on the topic of this research. The absence of such criteria does not allow me to identify strategies that fit the context of XYZ. Hence, relativism was not selected as an ontological assumption for this study.

The essence of realism is that social and organizational reality exists independent of human cognition and consciousness (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Realism assumes that there is a single truth and that facts can be revealed (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). Accepting that a single truth exists is the common feature between realism and internal realism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). However, internal realism assumes that this single truth cannot be accessed directly and is to be discovered through indirect evidence (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). This study assumes that social entities are real. It aims at identifying a strategy that can help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business by

exploring what strategies other companies that are similar to XYZ are following. This strategy of exploration cannot be observed directly. However, it is possible to trace evidence of these strategies by collecting data from their owners by means of words. This is aligned with the internal realist assumption that facts can only be accessed indirectly. Hence, I concluded that internal realism is an acceptable ontological assumption for this study.

3.2.2 Epistemology

Social scientists debate two contrasting approaches to epistemology; positivism and social constructionism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). Popper (1968) defined positivism as “the pursuit of understanding of the principals governing the behavior of a real world, based on forming theories (induction) and testing them against it (deduction) (as cited in Thorpe and Holt, 2008, p. 64)”. A positivist epistemology assumes that knowledge is derived from observing events regularities and establishing and testing hypotheses (Fleetwood, 2013). It is concerned with generalizability by selecting a random sample and making inferences to the whole population (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). This study does not involve developing a hypothesis because it is exploratory in nature. It does not aim to achieve generalizability because it is concerned with a specific work-based problem; it is concerned with learning from the experiences of companies that have similar characteristics to XYZ, and not from a random sample. Hence, I conclude that a positivist epistemology is not aligned with the purpose of this study.

Thorpe and Holt (2008) argued that “the main premise of social constructionism is that social realities, identities, and knowledge are created and maintained in interactions, and are culturally,

historically, and linguistically influenced” (p. 201). The researcher’s role is to depend on the participants’ perspectives on the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) and understand the different experiences that the participants may have (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). The researcher develops ideas by collecting rich data from a purposely selected small sample. This is aligned with the objective of this study of developing a strategy by learning from the perspectives and experiences of the owners of other small training companies operating in the UAE. Hence, a social constructionist epistemological position was selected for this study.

3.2.3 Meta-theory

Fleetwood (2004) categorized the meta-theories approved by scientific researchers into three mutually exclusive forms: positivism, postmodernism, and critical realism (CR). “The key idea of positivism is that the social world exists externally, and that its properties should be measured through objective methods, rather than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection or intuition” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012, p. 344). Positivists perceive social realities as a closed system wherein cause/effect relationships can be observed or experienced (Sousa, 2010). Positivism is associated with the empirical realist ontology (Fleetwood, 2013). The positivist epistemological position assumes that knowledge is derived from observing event regularities or testing hypotheses (Fleetwood, 2013). This study aims to generate actionable knowledge that is relevant to XYZ’s context. It aims at identifying the strategies that XYZ may follow by collecting the views and experiences of the research participants using words and not numbers. Hence, this study is not aligned with the positivist meta theory because the study does not aim to generalize theories nor to test a hypothesis or observe regularities in events.

Contrary to the positivist view, the postmodernist view believes that the world cannot be understood objectively and what is known is simply created by humankind as an outcome of the varied aims, actions and interactions, and conventions of humans (Sousa, 2010). Postmodernism is associated with relativist ontology (Thorpe and Holt, 2008). According to Susen (2015, p. 47), postmodernism has three major epistemological assumptions:

1. The only postmodern truth can be found in the plurality of diverging perspectives.
2. The only postmodern certainty is expressed in its firm belief in uncertainty.
3. The only postmodern universality can be traced in recognition of multiple particularities.

Postmodernism advocates endless deconstructive reflexivity, where there is no fixed truth or final outcomes (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). This study identified an outcome, which is exploring strategies that XYZ may follow to become profitable and remain in business. Hence, postmodernism was not selected for this study.

“Critical realist scholars assume the existence of an objective ('intransitive') world that has powers and properties that can be more accurately known as a consequence of scientific endeavour but recognise that knowledge is a subjective, discursively bound (i.e., transitive) and constantly changing social construction” (Vincent and O’Mahoney, 2018, p.1). Critical realism is a philosophical approach that combines the features of positivism and constructivism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). Like the positivist approach, critical realism assumes that reality exists, and it is independent from human knowledge (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Hence, both positivism and critical realism share the same objectivist ontological position (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). However, critical realism and positivism have different

perspectives on epistemology. Positivists believe in an objectivist epistemology that assumes that reality can be accessed and accurately measured. This is unlike the subjective epistemological position of critical realism, which assumes that reality is socially constructed (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The subjectivist epistemological position is a common feature between critical realism and postmodernism (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Critical realism is also different from judgmental relativism, associated with constructivism, which deprives us of any basis for evaluating science because it reduces science to a self-referential exercise (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Also, critical realism proposes that the world is an open system with emergent properties. This contradicts the positivist view, which argues that the world is a closed system. It also contradicts the constructivist perspective, which argues that the world is the meaning that we give to it (Thorpe and Holt, 2008).

Critical realism is usually linked to the work of Bhaskar (Maxwell, 2012; Pawson, 2006). The most recent version of Bhaskar's critical realism is referred to as dialectical critical realism (Scambler and Scambler, 2019; Maxwell, 2012, Pawson, 2006). Dialectical critical realism is concerned with eliminating oppression and opening up space for solidarity and human flourishing through transformation and emancipation. (Scambler and Scambler, 2019). Bhaskar's emancipatory perspective on critical realism was criticized by other critical realist scholars (Maxwell, 2012). Maxwell (2012) drew a critical realist position that was adopted by other social scientists, especially Donald Campbell. This is because Maxwell (2012) believed that the position of Donald Campbell (among other scholars) is more compatible with the key ideas of critical realism, which are retaining ontological realism and accepting epistemological constructivism and relativism. Pawson (2006) also aligned himself with Campbell's view of

critical realism, rather than the dialectical critical realism of Bhaskar (Maxwell, 2012). Pawson (2006) pointed out that “the critical element” is what makes the interpretation of critical realism different between Campbell and Bhaskar (p.20). Being critical, for Bhaskar, is about understanding the social conditions that are causing oppression (Pawson, 2006). For Campbell, criticism is about “competitive cross-validation” among a community of scientists to get closer to the truth (Pawson, 2006, p. 20). This research is concerned with addressing a real work-based problem and not with social change nor with oppression. Hence, it is not aligned with Bhaskar’s version of critical realism. Critical realism, within the context of this research, is more associated with Campbell’s critique of positivism for being focused on observing the regularities of events in a closed system to achieve empirical generalization (Pawson, 2006). The open system assumption implies that social systems are made up of components and forces (Pawson, 2006). Reality, in this sense, becomes about understanding the mechanisms and processes that cause things to happen (Maxwell, 2012). Hence, being critical is also about believing that causality is real because it provides us with an explanatory power to understand the intrinsic world (Maxwell, 2012).

This study aims at identifying a strategy that can help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business. The primary conceptual framework for this study is Grant’s (1991) resource-based approach to strategy analysis. This approach proposes a process to strategy formulation based on understanding the relationships of the firm’s internal factors (resources and capabilities) and the external environment (opportunities and threats). This is aligned with critical realism because it assumes that a company (social system) that is made up of components (resources and capabilities) is seeking to identify a strategy (process) to become profitable and remain in

business. Causality in this context becomes concerned with exploring the mechanisms between internal resources, external factors, and profitable strategies. Maxwell (2004) suggested several strategies to claim causality in social research, including narrative and connecting analysis. This causal explanation strategy is linked to the data analysis approach, which includes categorization and identifying connections in a specific context. The data analysis for this study categorized codes into RBV strategy components, i.e., resources, capabilities, opportunities, and threats (see Appendix E). It then used relationship coding to identify possible processes among the categorized codes (see Appendix G). Details about the data analysis process of this study is presented in section 3.5 Data Analysis.

Based on the above, I conclude that the context of this research is aligned with critical realism. As mentioned in the previous section, this research assumes a realist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology, which is aligned with the position of critical realism. Critical realism is concerned with explaining causality. This is also the case of the conceptual framework of this study, which is about exploring the causal relations between internal factors (resources and capabilities), external factors (threats and opportunities) and competitive strategies.

3.3 Research approach:

3.3.1 Logical reasoning: Systematic combining, abductive approach

There are three main forms of logical reasoning used in research: inductive, deductive, and abductive (Reichertz, 2014). Deductive reasoning is concerned with forming a priori theoretical structure and testing it through observation (Thorpe and Holt, 2008). It is a type of logical reasoning that is concerned with predicting facts (Reichertz, 2014). Deduction follows a top-

down research process (Wieland and Marcus Wallenburg, 2012). Cavaye (1996) identifies the following steps to the deductive approach (p. 235):

- Using theories to develop propositions, including developing predictions or conclusions that are drawn from theory.
- Collecting data relating to the developed propositions.
- Testing propositions by comparing the predicted outcomes with the observed outcomes.
- Confirm or disprove theory.

This study is concerned with identifying strategies and actions that are specific to the context of XYZ. It is not concerned with predicting and testing a hypothesis, nor with confirming or disproving a theory. Hence, I did not consider deductive reasoning for this study.

In contrast to the deductive approach, inductive reasoning systematically generates theory from data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). It is “a reasoning process through which theory is generated out of specific instances of observation and experience” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p. 16). Inductive reasoning is usually associated with collecting data from small samples (Thorpe and Holt, 2008). DeCarlo (2018) identifies three steps to the inductive approach (p. 6.3.1):

- Collecting empirical observations related to the specific level of focus.
- Analyzing data by seeking patterns in those observations.
- Developing theories from these patterns to the general level of focus.

Inductive reasoning is concerned with collecting the perspectives of actors (Thorpe and Holt, 2008). This is aligned with this study, as it is concerned with developing a strategy by learning from the experiences of owners of other similar companies. Induction aims at finding rules that are limited to a specific context (Reichert, 2014). This is relevant to this study, as it is concerned with exploring the phenomenon of decreasing profitability within a small training business context in the UAE. Inductive reasoning is concerned with letting theories emerge from data rather than imposing an a priori framework (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). This study is concerned with identifying a strategy that can help XYZ become profitable and remain in business. There are many strategic management theories that can help to explain organizational performance (Raduan et al., 2009). Hence, it was important for this research to review the various strategic management theories and to adopt an a priori conceptual framework that was aligned with the context of this study (See section 2.2.3 Integrating RBV and neo-institutional theory). Such conceptual frameworks help researchers to better understand the research problem, identify the direction of the study, and give guidance about how to explore the relationships among different variables of the study (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). Based on the above, I conclude that induction does not represent the optimal reasoning approach for this research because it does not impose an a priori framework, which I believe is needed to give structure to the inquiry and help in achieving its objective of identifying a strategy and an action plan for XYZ.

“Abduction is a type of reasoning that begins by examining data and, after scrutiny of these data, entertains all possible explanations of the observed data, and then forms hypotheses to confirm and disconfirm until the researcher arrives at the most plausible interpretation of the observed

data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 186). Thus, abduction does not start with theories that need to be tested. On the contrary, it starts from observing that something is significantly different from what is expected and with doubts of whether our previous ideas or beliefs are still valid (Reichertz, 2014). It is about searching for a meaningful rule to explain a new or surprising fact that we seek to understand (Reichertz, 2014).

Dubois and Gadde (2002) suggest a system-combining approach grounded in abduction logic. This systematic combining is “where theoretical framework, empirical framework, and case analysis evolve simultaneously” (p. 554). This process is suitable when researchers are interested in refining existing theories or exploring new relationships, rather than generating new theories (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The basic ingredients of systematic combining are framework, theory, the empirical world and the case (Dubois and Gaddes, 2002, p. 555). According to Dubois and Gaddes (2002), systematic combining departs from believing that studying the unique phenomenon in its own context provides an opportunity for theory development. For this development to happen, researchers should not follow a linear research process. Instead, they are required to go back and forth between empirical observation and theory, which will enable researchers to better understand both theory and the studied phenomenon. Frameworks play an important role in systematic combining. Rather than being static, as in a traditional research process, they are considered evolving as the empirical observation may expand or re-direct the theoretical model. Figure 3-1 represents the systematic combining model suggested by Dubois and Gadde (2002, p. 555).

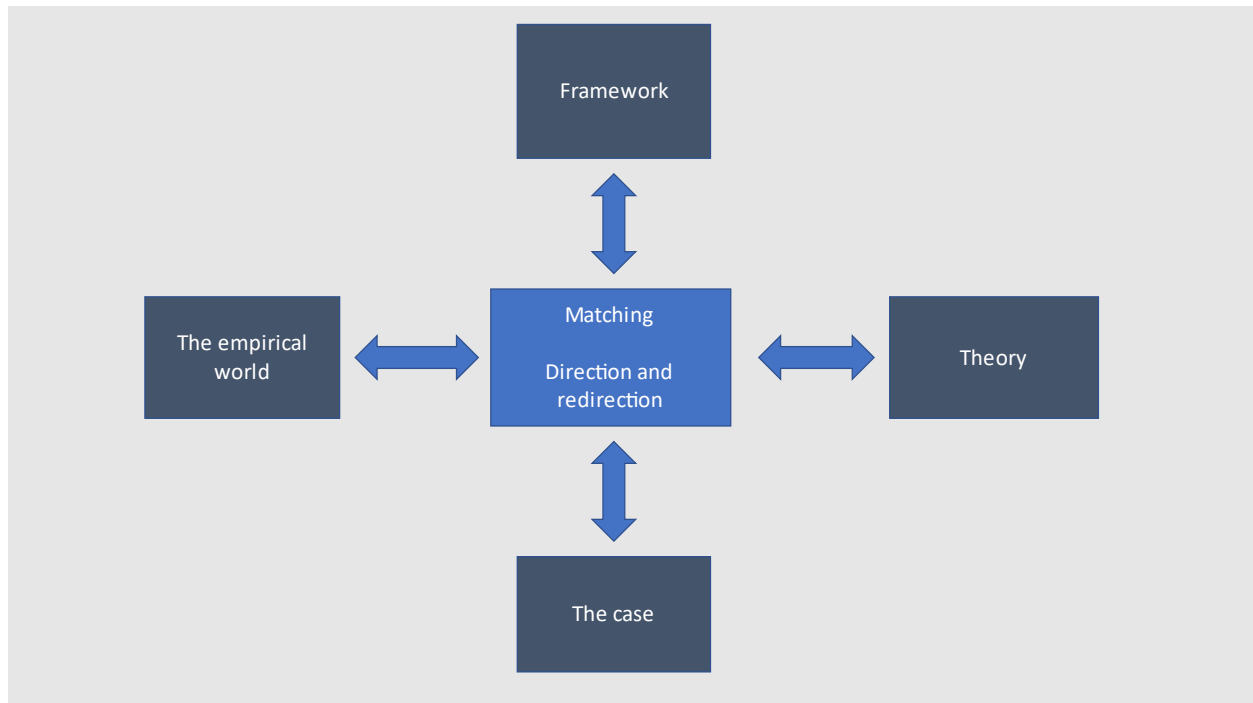


Figure 3-1: Systematic combining approach grounded in abductive logic (Dubois and Gaddes, 2002, p. 555).

The systematic combining approach suggested by Dubois and Gadde (2002) is aligned with this study. The research is concerned with a work-based problem related to the decreasing profitability (the phenomenon) of a small, UAE-based training company (the case). The study embedded an action research process (see section 3.3.3 Research Strategy) which allowed the researcher to go back and forth between the empirical observation and theory. The objective of this study is to identify a strategy that can help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business. Frameworks were an important element of this study (see section 2.2 the conceptual framework of the study). At the problematization phase, strategy was understood as a reaction to changes to the external environment. During the literature review phase, it evolved to adopt Grant's (1991) RBV approach to strategy analysis. After insights from the empirical findings, the

study modified Grant's (1991) RBV approach to strategy analysis by integrating it with elements from the neo-classical theory (See section: 2.2.3 Integrating RBV and neo-institutional theory). Hence, systematic combining grounded in abductive reasoning was selected as the research approach for this study.

3.3.2 Research methodology: Qualitative

I started the process of choosing a suitable research methodology for this study by re-visiting the research question. This is based on the recommendations of many scholars who argued that the type of research question is key for determining the appropriate research methodology (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010; Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). The research question of this study was to explore strategies that XYZ could implement to become profitable and remain in business. A qualitative methodology is appropriate for studies that are exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2013; Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). Hence, I concluded that the qualitative methodology is aligned with the exploratory nature of this study.

Sayer (1992) argued that the selection of a research methodology is influenced by the type of change involved in the study. This DBA thesis aims to create an intervention designed to create change in the studied organization as a reaction to an identified problem or opportunity (The University of Liverpool, 2017). I developed this research to initiate a change in XYZ to move from an unprofitable state to a profitable state. According to Buono and Kerber (2008), there are three approaches to change: directed change, planned change, and guided change. Directed change is when there are precisely defined goals. This is not the case of this inquiry because the research question does not set a defined level of profitability to be achieved throughout a specific

period. Planned change is when the leader possesses a clear road map to achieve the change. This type of change is not associated with the defined problem of XYZ since the leaders of this organization initiated this research because they do not possess a clear road map to achieve profitability. The third type of change is guided change. It is when the direction is loosely defined. Guided change is aligned with this research question since the owners of XYZ are not setting clear variables to achieve profitability. Qualitative research is appropriate when the research question does not set clear variables (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010). As a result, I concluded that the qualitative methodology is aligned with the type of change associated with this study.

Moreover, qualitative research is concerned with knowing how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a particular context (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010). This is the case of this study because it aims at developing strategies based on understanding what other business owners of small training companies in the UAE are currently doing to remain profitable.

Sayer (1992) claimed that some types of change could be quantified or reduced to the movement of qualitatively unchanging entities. These types of change fit the quantitative methodology because the described change can be mathematicised. However, this is not aligned with this study since the identified guided change associated with this study does not set clear goals or variables that can be measured. Moreover, this study is concerned with collecting the views and experiences of the participants in words. Qualitative studies can fit studies that are concerned with collecting words rather than numbers (Merriam and Grenier, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010). This is another alignment between qualitative methodology and this study.

In addition to the qualitative methodology, management researchers may also consider the quantitative methodology and mixed research methodology (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2013). The quantitative study design is not aligned with the scope of this study because the quantitative method seeks to predict a phenomenon by developing and rigorously testing the hypothesis (Anderson et al., 2015). It is a useful method for answering questions like who, where, how many, how much, and what is the relationship between specific variables (Alder 1996, as cited in Frels and Onwuegbuzie, 2013, p. 185). The quantitative method uses numerical values to interpret human subjects (Echambadi, Campbell, and Agarwal, 2006). This study is more about collecting data in the form of semi-structured questions that are posed to other small business leaders, but does not involve collecting numerical values. Hence, the quantitative method is not appropriate for this study. Furthermore, mixed methods combine elements from qualitative and quantitative data to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Bazeley, 2015). Mixed methods are inappropriate for this study since they still have a quantitative element to analyse, which is not the case of this study.

As a result, I concluded that the qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study. This is because this methodology is aligned with the exploratory nature of the research question of this study. The qualitative methodology is also aligned with the guided change that this study aims to initiate. The qualitative methodology focuses on participants' experiences and perspectives, which is what this study aims to achieve. It is also suitable for studies that aim to collect data in the form of words.

3.3.3 Research strategy: Qualitative case study

I chose a qualitative case study as the research strategy because this kind of study allows the exploration of the real-life workplace problem in my practice. Yin (2009) stated that a case study is an acceptable strategy for qualitative research and allows for an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. It is a research design that is concerned with experiencing the activity of the case as it happens in its context and its situation (Stake, 2006). The case study design focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings (Eisenhardt, 1989). This study provides a real-time setting for a qualitative case study since the research is concerned with the problem of decreasing profit (a contemporary phenomenon or an experience of an activity) that a specific company is facing (the real-life context). It is concerned with creating new dynamics that will help XYZ (the single setting) to become profitable and remain in business. Hence, this study is aligned with the statements of Yin (2009), Stake (2006), and Eisenhardt (1989). This justifies the qualitative case study design for this research.

According to Stake (2010), the methods of collecting data are influenced by the research question and the type of inquiry. This study involves collecting data in the form of semi-structured questions that are posed to other small business leaders. Case study research designs allow for the collection of data through such interviews (Yin, 2009; Stake, 2006; Eisenhardt, 1989), so this is another reason for using a case study design for this research.

The qualitative case study design is also aligned with critical realism. According to Sayer (2000), critical realism is relatively tolerant with respect to different research methods, especially if we

compare it to positivism and constructivism. Easton (2010) argued that critical realism provides a foundation that suits case research. According to Easton (2010), case research cannot be justified in terms of positivism, since case research is associated with small numbers. On the other hand, interpretivism is more relevant, but it is largely epistemological in its objectives (Easton, 2010). Critical realism, however, “provides not only a basis for justification but also guidelines as to how case research might be done and how theory can be fashioned” (Easton, 2010, p. 128).

Before selecting the approach for the case study, I considered other qualitative study designs: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. The narrative study explores an individual’s life (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is concerned with describing lived experiences and reflecting on them (Willis et al., 2016). The grounded theory requires extensive access to the workplace (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2013). Ethnography is about describing and interpreting a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory is impractical for this study because of the extent of access required to the sample of the study. The other research designs were not considered because they are not aligned with the research question of this study.

The qualitative case study research design has gained acceptance for developing models that are novel and grounded in the literature (Ponelis, 2015). Similarly, Eisenhardt (1989) provided examples of the wide range of outputs that case study research designs may generate such as novel process models and conceptual frameworks. Hence, using the qualitative case study research design was aligned with the objective of developing a strategy and an action plan that may help XYZ to develop a profitable strategy.

XYZ is a small training company with eight employees. Qualitative case studies have been widely used in small business research (Ponelis, 2015). These case studies suit research on small businesses because researchers have to "get close" to participants, penetrate their internal logic and interpret their subjective understanding of reality (Shaw, 1999); this is more achievable in a small business than in a large enterprise.

“Action research (AR) is defined as an informed investigation into a real management issue in an organization by a participant researcher, resulting in an actionable solution to the issue” (Thorpe and Holt, 2008, p. 17). Action research is related to this study because it is concerned with involving the members of XYZ to solve a real management problem. AR is an orientation to inquiry that has many theories, practices, and schools (Bradbury, 2013). Greenwood and Levin (2007) stated that there are two approaches to AR. The first approach argues that AR is a unique approach. The second approach considers AR “as a research strategy that uses many conventional social science techniques but that orchestrates the overall process in a distinctive way (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 89). This study applied the second approach to AR by following the mechanism of a qualitative case study while maintaining the participative and reflective stance of this inquiry. This was achieved by embedding Stringer’s (2013) basic action research routine into this study. In the following section, I will report how Stringer’s (2013) approach to AR was embedded in this study.

Stringer’s (2013) basic action research routine consists of three phases; look, think, and act.

Table 3-1 represents this routine:

<p>Look:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather relevant information (Gather data) • Describe the situation (Define and describe)
<p>Think:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore and analyse: What is happening here? (Analyse) • Interpret and explain: How or why are things as they are? (Theorize)
<p>Act:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan: Define a course of action based on analysis and interpretation. • Implement: Implement the plan. • Evaluate: Assess the effectiveness of actions taken.

Table 3-1: The basic action research routine (Stringer, 2013, p. 9)

Stringer (2013) mentioned that the above process should not be viewed as a linear process. On the contrary, it should be viewed as a constantly recycling set of activities. The participants in the action research process should continuously practice observation, reflection and action throughout the stages of the action research process.

The look phase involves two major activities: framing the research question and gathering the data (Stringer, 2013). The first cycle of investigation in an action research process is concerned with exploring and examining the interpretation by which a stakeholder group frames a problem. As far as this research is concerned, the owners of XYZ participated in framing the research question of the study. The owners of XYZ noticed a significant decrease in the sales and profitability of their company. As a result, several meetings were scheduled among the owners of the company to discuss this decrease. The meetings openly discussed the challenges that XYZ is facing. They addressed internal weaknesses, such as the lack of capital and the lack of diversity

in the company's offering. The meetings also addressed external threats, which mainly comprised the decreasing budgets of clients as an outcome of the fall in oil prices. The owners decided that the problem that needs to be addressed is the decrease in the profitability of XYZ, which is threatening the ability of the company to remain operational. I used documents to collect data during this phase of action research. I collected the minutes of meetings in which the owners of the company formulated the work-based problem. Details of the documents that were collected during this intervention are presented in section 3.4.2.2. The data analysis process that was followed to analyse these documents is presented in section 3.5.2.

The problem identification phase involved two main AR activities. The first was the participation of the owners of XYZ in formulating the problem statement, while the second was the practice of two types of reflection. The first type was a public reflection, which was practised among the owners of the company during their meetings. The second type of reflection was a personal reflection, which I practised by keeping journals of the meetings. Journals are a good tool for practising reflection because they help the researcher to reflect on experiences and anticipate future experiences before undertaking them (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

The second activity of the 'look' phase is gathering data. This activity is concerned with gathering relevant information to extend the perspective of the researcher and the concerned stakeholders about the research problem. Stringer (2013) listed ways the action researcher can gather data, which included literature review and interviews. AR was implemented during the literature review phase of this study by practising self-reflection. This self-reflection influenced my perception of the problem. Before the literature review phase, I imagined that the conclusion of the study would be based on reactions to the threats in the external environment. After

revising the theoretical and empirical research related to my research problem, I concluded that the desired strategy should be a match between the internal resources and capabilities and external threats and opportunities. I used a journal to indicate how my preunderstanding of the problem developed during the phases of the research, including the literature review phase.

I used interviews as one method of data collection for this study. Interviewing in action research is concerned with knowing what the interviewee wants to say, rather than confirming any hypothesis (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). Interviews in AR should be considered as a reflective process that helps the interviewee to reveal many features of their experiences that are related to the research problem (Stringer, 2013). This requirement of AR is met since the interview questions followed a semi-structured format, which allowed me to access participants' views, memories, and perspectives. My role as an interviewer was limited to helping the participants to reveal their perspectives. The details related to the interview process of this study will be presented in section 3.4.2.1.

The 'think' phase aims at examining the information that emerged from the look phase. This involves determining the features that may have a significant impact on the defined problem. These features can then be organized into frameworks of ideas or concepts, which can help the participants to improve their understanding of the defined problem. Stringer (2013) identified several activities that action researchers can conduct during the think phase, which includes identifying key features of experience, analysing epiphanies and illuminative experiences, categorizing and coding, enhancing analysis, constructing category systems, writing reports, and organising meetings. The think phase of this study used the gathered data to answer the research questions and sub-questions. These answers were organised into themes, which were put together

in a report that was shared with all the research participants. Some of the research participants participated in follow-up meetings and provided their reflections and feedback on the themes presented. This feedback was presented in section 4.8.

The ‘Act’ phase is concerned with working with the stakeholders to formulate actions that can help to solve the work-based problem (Stringer, 2013). After reviewing the findings of the study, I worked with the other owners of XYZ to formulate a new strategy, develop a plan of action, and evaluate some of the taken actions. I used documents to collect data during the Act phase. Details of the documents that were collected during this intervention are presented in section 3.4.2.2. The Act phase of AR is presented in section 5.3. Table 3-2 illustrates how the three phases of Stringer’s AR routine were embedded in this study:

Phase	Activity	Application in this study
Look	Framing the research question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The participation of XYZ owners in framing the research question. - Practising public and personal reflection.
	Gathering data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Literature review: practising self-reflection and questioning my pre-understanding of the problem. - Interviews: using the interviews to help participants to reflect on their experiences.
Think	Analyse the data Writing report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The data analysis identified themes that answered the research questions. The data analysis was put into a report that was shared with the research participants.
	Participants’ reflection and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some participants provided their feedback and reflection on the result of the study that was presented in the report. These comments and reflections were presented in section 4.8 of the study.
Act	Constructing, implementing, reviewing, and evaluating actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The owners of XYZ developed and implemented a strategy and an action plan after reflecting on the findings of this study. The actions are presented and evaluated in section 5.3.

Table 3-2: The application of Stringer (2013) action research routine on this study

3.4 Research methods

3.4.1 Population and sampling

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore strategies that XYZ can implement to become profitable and remain in business. This research aims to adopt ideas from the practices of other small, training companies, which may be successful in business to date. This adoption may only be applicable if the studied companies are similar to XYZ. I identified three parameters to determine the number of companies that are similar to XYZ. The first parameter is the location of the company. XYZ provides training in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Hence, only UAE-based companies that are registered in Dubai or Abu Dhabi were considered for this study. The second parameter is the training specialisation. XYZ specialises in providing training to companies operating in the oil and gas and healthcare sectors. Hence, this study's population included companies that specialise in at least one of these two areas. The third parameter is the number of employees. XYZ is a small company with eight employees. As a result, this study's population included training businesses that have fewer than ten employees.

There is no available public data that provides information on the combined parameters of training specialisation and the number of employees. I combined various sources of secondary data to identify companies that are similar to XYZ in terms of specialisation and number of employees. I started by searching the databases of two main regulatory authorities that license training institutes in the UAE to determine the number of training companies that have similar specialisations. The first database is related to The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). KHDA is the educational quality assurance and regulatory authority of the

Government of Dubai. It is also the authority that is responsible for licensing training companies in Dubai. The KHDA database lists all training businesses that are licensed in Dubai. The database allows searching for all licensed training companies in Dubai by location and activity. This helped to limit the search to companies that are specialised in oil and gas or healthcare training. The KHDA database provides complete contact details of the training companies, including phone, fax, address, and email. The second database is that of Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (ACTVET). ACTVET is the authority that is responsible for licensing training companies in Abu Dhabi. The ACTVET database lists all licensed training companies in Abu Dhabi. It provides complete contact details of training companies, including phone, fax, address, and email. The ACTVET database clearly states the line of specialisation of each licensed company, which enabled me to select companies that are specialised in oil and gas training or healthcare training. I filtered the companies that specialise in oil and gas training or healthcare training, which are XYZ's specialisations. I reviewed the courses that are offered by each of these companies. This revealed that not all companies that are listed as healthcare training providers in these databases could be considered similar to XYZ in terms of specialisation. XYZ is specialised in providing training to healthcare practitioners, such as nurses, doctors, and pharmacists. However, some of the listed companies are only specialised in providing general healthcare courses, such as healthcare awareness or nutrition. I eliminated such companies from the study's population. As a result, I identified thirty-six companies with a specialisation similar to XYZ.

I conducted an online search to determine the number of employees of each of the selected thirty-six companies. This search included visiting the companies' websites and business

intelligence databases. I was able to group the selected companies according to three categories. The first category comprised companies with over fifty employees, which included six companies. The second category was companies that had eleven to fifty employees, of which there were ten companies. The third category was companies that had two to ten employees, which includes fourteen companies. I was not able to determine the number of employees for the remaining six companies.

XYZ has eight employees. Hence, XYZ fits the category of companies that have two to ten employees, which includes a total number of fourteen companies located in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Therefore, I chose the category of two to ten employees to represent the population of companies that are similar to XYZ in terms of specialisation and employees. Hence, the population of this study was fourteen companies.

According to Yin (2009), identifying a sample size for a case study design depends on the number of literal case replications. This could be two or three cases for straightforward issues that do not require a high degree of certainty (Yin, 2009). Researchers may press for six or more cases when the issue is subtle and requires a high degree of certainty (Yin, 2009). Stake (2006) argued that researchers could achieve maximum benefit from a case study design by selecting four to ten cases. This is in line with Eisenhardt (1989), who argued that four to ten cases are suitable for most case studies. The recommendations of Yin (2009), Stake (2006) and Eisenhardt (1989) formed the basis of justifying this study's sample size of four small training companies located in Abu Dhabi or Dubai.

I aimed to identify profitable strategies by exploring what other small training companies are doing to remain profitable. Patton (2002) stated that purposeful sampling is a strategy that allows for the selection of cases that can provide an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon (as cited in Suri, 2011, p. 65). Following purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select cases that provide a good understanding of the study's research question (Creswell, 2013). It also allows the selection of cases that illustrate processes or features that the researcher is interested in exploring (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). Hence, this study followed a purposeful sampling strategy because it allowed me to select four small training companies and learn from their strategies and practices. Patton (1990) identified fifteen purposeful sampling strategies, which included criterion sampling. This strategy is useful when the researcher is interested in selecting cases that meet a certain predetermined criterion. The sampling selection process for this study included three predetermined criteria: the location of the company, the training specialization, and the size of the company. These criteria were important to ensure that the selected companies are operating in a context that is similar to XYZ. The sample included one profitable company, which allowed me to compare and contrast the strategies and practices of profitable and unprofitable companies. For this study, business success refers to a business that was profitable during the past three years.

3.4.2 Data collection methods

3.4.2.1 Interviews

Interviews are among the most common sources of data for case studies (Yin, 2009; Stake, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are used to explore subjective views regarding a situation or

phenomenon (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). They help interviewees to freely communicate their opinions using their own words (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017). Semi-structured interviews are well suited for case study research (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017). In this study, it was important to allow the participants to freely express their subjective views so we can understand their strategic actions and how they have stayed profitable. Hence, the interviews followed a semi-structured format and were conducted face-to-face with the business owners of each of four, small training companies.

Patton (2015) stated that an interview protocol is an instrument of inquiry, where questions are asked to collect specific information related to the study's aim (as cited in Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 813). The interview protocol for this study (see Appendix C) included ten questions that are directly related to the overarching research question and the sub-questions of this study. More specifically, the interview questions inquired about the internal resources and capabilities that the participants thought were important for their companies' profitability. They also inquired about the participants' assessments of the threats and opportunities that may impact the performance of their companies. The questions also inquired about the strategies and actions that business leaders are implementing in their small training companies to remain profitable.

I obtained the contact details of the potential participants of this study by searching two databases of training businesses in the UAE. I contacted potential participants by sending emails inviting them to participate in this study. The email provided an overview of the study and the interview questions. The email highlighted that the interview would be audio recorded, and it included the participant consent form. The participant consent form (see Appendix A) highlighted that participation in this study is voluntary and that no incentive would be offered to

the participants in exchange for their participation. The participation consent stated that the privacy and confidentiality of the participants would be protected. This was achieved by assigning numbers or aliases to the participants. The participation information form (see Appendix B) included a statement that there is no foreseeable risk or harm from participating in the study.

Each participant chose the time of the one-on-one interviews. Three of the interviews took place in a confined area at the premises of the interviewees. One interview took place at the premises of one of the interviewee's clients; this is because the interviewee was engaged in a long-term contract with his client. All the interviews started by reviewing the purpose of the study and the reason for selecting the participant to participate in it. The review also covered the consent form, as well as explaining that participants have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. All participants signed the consent form before the start of the interview. The interviews were voice recorded after obtaining the interviewees' consent. Each interviewee answered the ten questions stipulated in the interview protocol, and the interviews lasted for approximately sixty minutes.

Probing is a technique that can be used by the researcher during the interview. It allows the researcher to improve, clarify, and sharpen-up the interview responses (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012; Britten, 1995). I used the probing technique during the four interviews, which helped me to focus on obtaining specific information. I also used probing to clarify vague statements or incomplete responses.

3.4.2.2 Documents

Documents were the second source for data collection. They were used to collect data that emerged from the action research intervention embedded in this study. Documents are defined as “textual or visual devices that enable information to be shared and stories to be presented” (Coffey, 2014, p. 369). They may include agendas, minutes of meetings, background papers, books, brochures, and journals (Bowen, 2009). Documents are considered an acceptable method for collecting evidence in a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). They can provide action researchers with a significant amount of information about the organization under investigation (Stringer, 2013).

As mentioned in section 3.3.3 Research Strategy, this study embedded Stringer’s (2013) basic action research routines with qualitative case study design. This routine includes three phases: “Look, Think, and Act”. I collected and analysed the documents that were related to phases of this routine. These documents were the minutes of meetings between the three owners of XYZ. I had access to these minutes of meetings, being one of the owners of the company. Table 3-3 summarizes the collected documents and how they are linked to their relevant AR phase. The process that was followed in analyzing these documents is presented in section 3.5.2.

AR Phase	Area of investigation	Document	Summary
Look	Identify the work-based problem and framing the RQ	Minutes of meeting 1 Minutes of meeting 2 Minutes of meeting 3	Documented discussions about the most significant problems that the company is facing.
Think	Constructing the action plan	Minutes of meeting 4	Documented discussions and decisions about the actions that need to be taken to put the developed strategy into execution.
Act	Act: Taking and evaluating the actions	Minutes of meeting 5	Documented discussions about evaluating the actions that have been taken.

Table 3-3: Summary of documents data

3.5 Data analysis

3.5.1 Data analysis of interview data

Yin (2009) provided four general strategies researchers may use in their data analysis. These four strategies are the theoretical proposition strategy, the case description strategy, using qualitative and quantitative data strategy, and rival explanations strategy. This is because Yin believes that there are no fixed formulas in qualitative case study data analysis. The theoretical proposition strategy is considered as an acceptable approach to data analysis in qualitative studies in general (Graue, 2015). Yin (2009) considers the theoretical proposition strategy to be the most preferred data analysis strategy for case studies. This is because the original design of a case study was more likely to be based on such theoretical propositions, and then reflected on the research questions, literature reviews, new propositions, and data collection plan (Yin, 2009). Theoretical propositions allow the researcher to compare the outcomes of the data analysis with the outcomes of the developed propositions (Cavaye, 1996).

I concluded that it is possible to follow the theoretical proposition, which is Yin's (2009) preferred strategy, as a data analysis strategy in this study. The theoretical findings that emerged from the literature review (see Figure 2-8) served as the basis for developing the codes and the codebooks of this study. The primary conceptual framework of this study was based on the RBV. The use of the RBV theory helped me to categorize the codes into resources, capabilities, strategies, external threats, and opportunities, and those categorizations helped me to identify the emerging themes for each of the sub-questions of the study. The overarching research question of this study was to identify the strategy that small training companies may follow to become profitable and remain in business. By referring to Grant's (1991, p. 114) definition of strategy as the match that the organization makes between its internal resources and skills and external threats and opportunities, I was able to look into the relationships between resources, capabilities, threats, and opportunities to identify the possible strategic scenarios that small training companies could follow to become profitable and remain in business (see Appendix: F). These strategic scenarios were the strategic themes that emerged from the data analysis of this study, which are presented in chapter four. I have compared the findings that emerged from the data analysis with the literature review findings (Figure 2-8), which are presented in chapter 5.

Moreover, case studies are concerned with analytical generalization and not with statistical generalization (Easton, 2010). Having a defined theoretical proposition is important to achieve analytical generalization as the findings from the case study will become generalizable to the defined theoretical proposition rather than the entire universe (Baškarada, 2014). This is another reason for selecting the theoretical proposition as the data analysis strategy for this research. I

will illustrate how analytical generalization was achieved in this study when discussing the quality of research in section 3.6.2.

Before selecting the theoretical proposition strategy for data analysis, I considered the other strategies suggested by Yin (2009): the case description strategy, using qualitative and quantitative data strategy, and rival explanations strategy. Yin recommends only following the case description when it is not possible to implement the theoretical proposition strategy. It is not possible to follow the qualitative and quantitative data strategy because this study will not collect quantitative data. The Rival explanations strategy may be implemented in this study if the participants reveal contrasting perspectives to the research question of the study. Yin (2009) states that this strategy could be used in conjunction with the other three strategies.

Shaw (1999) observed that qualitative case studies that are concerned with small firm research rarely detail the exact procedures for data analysis. I consider this a serious limitation because keeping a detailed account of methods and procedures is important to build an audit trail for a case study. Building an audit trail for a case study is important to achieve conformity and quality in qualitative research (Connelly, 2016). I concluded, therefore, that it is necessary to develop a detailed process for data analysis to achieve quality in this study.

Creswell (2013) proposed a six-step data analysis process for qualitative case studies. The first step of this process is to organize the data by creating and organizing files. The second step is to read through texts, make margin notes, and form initial codes. The third step is to describe the data into codes and themes. The fourth step is to classify the data into codes and themes. This step also involves using categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns. The fifth step is

to interpret the data by developing naturalistic generalizations of what was learned. The final step is to visualize the data by presenting an in-depth picture of the case, using narrative tables and figures.

As a result, I developed the process outlined below for data analysis that combines the clear data analysis process of Creswell (2013) with the theoretical proposition strategy of Yin (2009). Table 3-4 describes this process:

	Step
1	Organise the data by creating and organising files.
2	Read through texts, make margin notes, and annotations.
3	Form initial codes by relying on the findings from the literature review.
4	Classify the data into codes.
5	Classify the codes into RBV based categories.
6	Identify the emerging strategic themes based on Grant's definition of strategy.
7	Presenting the research findings to the research participants

Table 3-4: The data analysis process of this study

In the following sections, I will provide a detailed overview of each of the steps that were described in the above table.

3.5.1.1 Organise the data by creating and organising files

I used NVIVO 12 to organize, manage, and analyse the data. NVivo is a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that can be used to store, organise, manage, and

analyse data (Creswell, 2013; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012). I uploaded the interview transcripts into NVivo 12.

3.5.1.2 Read through texts, make margin notes, and annotations

I started reading and re-reading the data that I uploaded into NVivo 12. The purpose of these readings was to get the overall feeling of the data and to observe any general patterns. This is recommended by Patton (1987), who argued that reading and re-reading the data helps the researchers to heighten their awareness of the patterns, categories, and themes (as cited in Shaw, 1999, p. 65). I created annotations in segments of the texts when I observed something worth noting. I also created a special memo in NVivo 12 to record my initial thoughts and reflections after reading each interview transcript. The annotations helped me at the coding stage, since they included segments that were considered important. The memos helped me to keep track of the assumptions that I was making while interpreting the data.

3.5.1.3 Form initial codes by relying on the findings from the literature review

Coding is considered a common feature among all approaches to qualitative research (Stake, 2010). “Codes are defined as tags or labels for assigning units of meanings to the descriptive or the influential information compiled during the study” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 56). It is the process of aggregating the gathered data into categories or themes that are important to the study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010).

The qualitative data analysis literature identified two main strategies for coding: emergent and a priori. Emergent coding does not establish any prior themes (Ponelis, 2015). This approach suggests that the researcher should not do any coding until data is collected (Miles and

Huberman, 1994). Themes emerge through the ongoing examination and comparison of data (Ponelis, 2015). Emergent coding is more associated with grounded theory research design (Creswell, 2013; Miles and Huberman, 1994). It is considered more open-minded and context-sensitive (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The second approach to coding is a priori coding. In a priori coding, codes could be developed based on the literature (Ponelis, 2015) or based on the conceptual framework or the research question of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The researcher then applies the a priori developed codes to the data.

I believe that a priori coding approach is aligned with the theoretical proposition strategy for data analysis suggested by Yin (2009). This is because the theoretical proposition strategy guided the coding development in this approach. This study has a well-defined research question and a conceptual framework that guided the research in all its phases. It also has a theoretical perspective that emerged from the literature review (see Figure 2-8). Hence, I chose a priori coding as the coding approach for this study.

“A codebook is a set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyse interview data” (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch, 2011, p. 138). It is a management tool that helps the researcher to keep records of the codes (Saldaña, 2016; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested creating a provisional start list of codes from the conceptual framework, research question, and/or key variables that the research brings into the study. As a result, I developed a codebook that is based on the findings of the literature review. The initial codebook included nineteen priori codes (see Appendix D).

3.5.1.4 Classify the data into codes

After developing the codebook, I started applying the codes to the data. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), codes could be applied to chunks varying in size. This could include paragraphs, sentences, or words. I focused on coding segments of the text that reflected the definition of the codes that I pre-defined in the codebook. This is regardless of the size of the segment. Creswell (2013) encourages researchers who use a priori coding to be open to new codes that could emerge from the data. Hence, I added new codes to segments that I thought were important to the research question, but not addressed by the initial codes that were a priori developed. In some instances, I applied simultaneous coding. Simultaneous coding is when the researcher applies more than one code to the same segment (Saldaña, 2016). The final codebook included twenty-nine priori and emergent codes (see Appendix D).

3.5.1.5 Classify the codes into RBV- based categories

Saldaña (2016) recommended reorganizing the full set of codes into a selected list of categories, before considering the study's central themes or concepts (Saldaña, 2016). Code categories could be pre-existing or emerging from the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This research used the RBV as a primary conceptual framework. Specifically, this study used Grant's (1991) resource-based approach to strategy analysis. Using Nvivo 12, I categorized the codes into the following RBV categories that are aligned with the research sub-questions of the study (see Appendix E):

- 1) The resources that are important for the success of small training businesses in the UAE.
- 2) The capabilities that are important for the success of small training businesses in the UAE.

3) The threats that are limiting small training businesses in the UAE from becoming profitable

4) The growth opportunities for small training businesses in the UAE.

I started to look for themes that emerged from the categorized codes to answer the four research sub-questions of the study. I present the emerging themes in chapter 4. For each theme, I present a table linking interview statements to codes, to RBV category, and to the emerging theme (See chapter 4).

3.5.1.6 Identify the emerging strategic themes

I then explored how the categorized codes relate to each other. Specifically, I analysed the cause/effect relationships that were identified between resources, capabilities, strategies, threats, and opportunities. To identify the cause/effect relationship, I used Nvivo 12 to trace relationship coding to capture evidence of relationships between two categorized codes (see Appendix F). I then used Lucidchart software to draw a chart that presents all the relationships among the codes and categories. The outcomes of this relationship coding are presented in Appendix G.

I used Grant's (1991, p. 114) definition of strategy as "the match that the organization makes between its internal resources and skills and external threats and opportunities" to identify the emerging strategic themes. Based on this definition of strategy, I considered a strategic theme as one that includes the following components:

- One strategy
- At least one resource or capability
- At least one threat or opportunity

I examined Appendix G for strategic scenarios that include the above components. As a result, I was able to identify five possible strategic themes that small training companies may follow to become profitable and remain in business. I present these strategic themes in chapter 4. For each theme, I present a table linking interview statements to codes or relationships codes, and to the emerging theme (See chapter 4).

3.5.1.7 Presenting the findings to the research participants

I summarised the thematic findings related to the question and sub-questions of the study in a report. I shared this report with the participants of this study. Some of the participants provided their feedback to the findings, which I present in section 4.8.

3.5.2 Data analysis of documents

This study embedded an AR intervention, which is based on Stinger's (2013) AR routine. This routine includes three phases: Look, Think, and Act. The document analysis was influenced by the area of investigation that is associated with the relevant AR phase. During the Think phase, the investigation area was to find out how the company owners identify their work-based problem. I uploaded the minutes of meetings associated with this phase (see table: 3-3) to NVIVO12. I highlighted excerpts from the text that identified a problem or a challenge at XYZ. I assigned codes to the highlighted excerpts to describe the type of problem that was asserted in each selected excerpt. I then started examining the codes and looking for themes that reflect the shared meaning that the owners of XYZ developed about their work-based problem. I presented these themes and the document analysis process that was conducted during the "Think" phase of action research in Appendix H.

The Act phase was concerned with developing the action plan. I uploaded the minutes of meeting in which the owners discussed the action plan (See Table: 3-3) to NVIVO 12. I highlighted texts from this document that indicated an action. I then grouped these actions into three categories: resources-based actions, opportunity-based actions, and capability-based action. The theme that emerged from this analysis was the action plan that was presented in Figure 5.2. The data analysis process that was followed in constructing the action phase is presented in Appendix I.

The Act phase was also concerned with evaluating the action. I read the minutes of meeting that concerned with evaluating the actions. This document included a table that summarizes the actions and the owners' evaluations. I present this table in Appendix J.

3.6 Quality in research

A quality study is one that can be trusted should others want to make use of the knowledge generated by it (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). Many perspectives exist when it comes to ensuring the quality of qualitative research. The perspective of Lincoln and Guba (1985) is among the most often cited perspectives of quality criteria in qualitative research (Treharne and Riggs, 2015). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) perspectives on quality include the examination of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformity. The following sections evaluate the quality of this study against the four perspectives introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

3.6.1 Credibility

Merriam and Grenier (2019) argued that "the understanding of reality in qualitative research is about the researcher's interpretation of participants' interpretation or understandings of the phenomenon of interest" (p.25). Establishing credibility in qualitative research entails that the

participants being researched feel that the findings represent their experiences (Treharne and Riggs, 2015). It also indicates that the findings of the study were based on evidence (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). This is important to ensure that the findings of the study are accurate and not being misinterpreted by the researcher.

Member checking is one of the strategies that could be used for ensuring credibility in qualitative research (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). Member checking is defined as asking a data source to confirm the researcher's reporting (Stake, 2010). This strategy was used to ensure the credibility of this study. I collected data from the participants by using face-to-face interviews. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed into a written document. I shared the transcript with the participants by email. All the participants confirmed that the shared transcript matched their inputs and opinions expressed in the interviews.

3.6.2 Transferability / Generalizability

Transferability or generalizability is about inquiring whether the findings of a particular study are applicable in other contexts (Treharne and Riggs, 2015). Generalizability is usually associated with positivist types of research as researchers can generalize statistically (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). This allows the researcher to argue that what applies to a random sample could also apply to the entire population (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). Merriam and Grenier (2019) argued that transferability in qualitative research cannot be generated statistically. This is because qualitative research mostly uses small, non-random samples, that are selected purposefully (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that transferability or generalizability in qualitative research is more concerned with naturalistic

generalization as opposed to statistical generalization. “Naturalistic generalization occurs when the findings are in harmony with the experiences of the individual evaluating the research, and thus appear transferable in the eyes of the reader” (as cited by Terhane and Riggs, 2015, p. 58). Thus, transferability or generalizability in qualitative research can be achieved when the researcher provides a rich and thick description of the study to allow readers to make decisions regarding transferability (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As far as this study is concerned, I have provided a thick and rich description of this case study, which can help the reader to identify whether the findings of this study could relate to their context. This thick and rich description is presented in the following:

- Description of the background of this study (see section 1.1).
- Description of the context of this study (see section 1.8).
- Description of the population and the sample of this study (see section 3.4.1).
- Description of the data collection methods of this study (see section 3.4.2).

Case studies are sometimes attacked for their lack of generalizability (Easton, 2010). Yin (2009) responded to this criticism by arguing that case studies rely on analytical generalizability as opposed to other forms of generalizability. “Analytical generalization is the process of generalizing from some data to an extant theory rather than generalizing from some data to the population, as is attempted in statistical generalization” (Terhane and Riggs, 2015, p. 63). In this sense, case studies are useful in supporting or expanding existing theories (Amerson, 2011). The analytical generalizability in this case study was achieved by concluding that Grant’s (1991) practical approach to the resource-based strategy analysis could be integrated with insights from the neo-institutional theory to be applied to the context of small UAE-based companies.

3.6.3 Dependability

Dependability inquires whether similar findings would be produced if someone else also undertook the research (Treharne and Riggs, 2015). In qualitative research, dependability is concerned with checking whether the results are consistent with the collected data (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). An audit trail is one of the strategies that researchers can use to ensure dependability (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). An audit trail is “a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study” (Merriam and Grenier, 2019, p. 31). This study used an audit trail to ensure conformity. To create this trail:

- The data collection methods were detailed in this study (see section: 3.4.2).
- The data analysis process was detailed in this study (see section: 3.5).

3.6.4 Conformity

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that conformity is about ensuring that the findings of the study are the product of participant responses and not the researchers’ biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives. One of the strategies that could be used to ensure conformity in qualitative research is the use of an audit trail (Connelly, 2016). The use of an audit trail in this study was presented in Section 3.6.3 Dependability.

3.7 Ethical considerations

I followed the ethical principles suggested by Bell and Bryman (2007) to ensure that acceptable conduct of management research was followed during this study:

- **Ensuring that no harm comes to participants:** This study did not involve any physical harm to the participants because it was conducted in an office setting.
- **Respecting the dignity of the participants:** The University of Liverpool stresses the importance of safeguarding the dignity of the research participants (The University of Liverpool, 2017). I respected the dignity of the participants by:
 - Asking them to determine the time of the meeting.
 - Informing them that they have the right to refuse to answer any question.
 - Informing them that they can withdraw from the study at any time.
 - Avoiding asking any questions that the participants could deem inappropriate.
- **Ensuring a fully confirmed participant consent form of research participants:**

A participant consent form was prepared for this study (see Appendix A). The participant consent form was part of the ethical application, which was approved by the ethical committee on the 16th of January 2019. The participant consent form was emailed to the participants before the interview. I also started all the interviews by explaining the participant consent form to the interviewees. All participants signed the consent form before the interviews.
- **Protecting the privacy of research subjects:** Privacy in qualitative research is concerned with avoiding invasions of the privacy of the research participants (Bell and Bryman, 2007) and avoiding raising questions or possibilities that the interviewee did not consider before (Stake, 2010). I protected the privacy of the participants by not asking any questions that could invade their privacy.

- **Ensuring the confidentiality of data:** Data was collected using interviews and documents. Interviews took place in confined areas with only the interviewee and myself present. The interviews were audiotaped. I was the only person who had access to the audiotape recordings, which were stored in a password protected electronic folder on the hard drive of my personal laptop. I deleted the audiotaped files upon transferring the interview proceedings into a written transcript and completing the member checking process. The second source of data collection is documents. I am the only person who has access to these documents, which are filed in a locked cabinet drawer in my home. I was the sole researcher for this project. No other person was involved in this study. All physical data will be shredded after five years from completing this study. Electronic data were saved in an electronic folder on the hard drive of my personal laptop. This electronic folder is password protected. My personal laptop is password protected. Physical data are locked in a cabinet drawer in my home. All data, whether electronic or physical, was not and will not be shared with another organization or person.
- **Protecting the anonymity of individuals or organizations:** Aliases were assigned to the participants to protect their anonymity.
- **Avoiding deception about the nature or aims of the research:** The participation information sheet (see Appendix B) clearly stated the aim of the study, which is to help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business.
- **Declaration of affiliations, funding sources, and conflicts of interests:** This study did not have any funding sources. “Ethical conflict occurs when an individual perceives that his/her duties and responsibilities toward one group are inconsistent with his/her duties

and responsibilities toward some other group (including one's self)” (Hunt, Chonko, and Wilcox, 1984, p. 310). As far as this study is concerned, an ethical conflict could occur if I use the collected data to obtain a competitive advantage for my company. This is considered a personal gain that a researcher should not pursue (Hunt, Chonko, and Wilcox, 1984). Marketing research is one of the research disciplines that is highly exposed to this type of ethical conflict (Hunt, Chonko, and Wilcox, 1984). Marketing researchers might collect sensitive data from one party, such as prices or product characteristics that could be considered valuable by other parties. Hunt, Chonko, and Wilcox (1984) argued that marketing researchers can overcome this conflict by balancing the interests of their outside client against the interests of various other parties, including company, self, society, competitors, and other clients. As far as this research is concerned, I adopted some of the ethical principles of marketing researchers, as stipulated by Hunt, Chonko, and Wilcox (1984), to be able to overcome this ethical conflict. The first principle was not deceiving the participants about the purpose of this study. The participant information sheet clearly stated the purpose of the study, which is to explore strategies that can help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business. The second principle is not to take a competitive advantage from the generated data. I shared the outcomes of the study with the participants, which gave them the opportunity to benefit from this research.

- **Honesty and transparency in communicating about the research:** The participant information sheet clearly explained the purpose and the nature of the research. The participant information sheet was emailed to all the participants before the interviews. I

also started the interview process by reviewing this form with the interviewees to ensure that all the information was clearly explained. All the terms and definitions that are mentioned in this study are clearly defined.

- **Avoidance of any misleading or false reporting of research findings:** I avoided misleading, misunderstanding, misrepresenting, or false reporting of research findings by conducting member checking. This ensured that the transcript of the interviews was checked and approved by the interviewees. I have also shared the outcomes of the study with the participants. This allowed me to share the data analysis with them and to check if the presented analysis could be differently interpreted by the research participants.

3.8 Role of the researcher

I have a dual role in this research. My first role is as one of the managing owners of XYZ. My second role is as the sole researcher of this study. Coghlan (2001) argued that there are three challenges that researchers as managers need to address. These challenges are preunderstanding, role duality, and managing organization politics. In the following section, I will explain how I have dealt with these three challenges while conducting this research.

Gummerson (2000) defined the term ‘preunderstanding’ as people’s knowledge, insights, and experiences before engaging in the research programme (as cited in Coghlan and Brannick, 2010, p. 114). As far as this study is concerned, my preunderstanding could be considered as a valuable source of knowledge because of the rich information that I have about the research problem, the researched organization, the training industry, the small business dynamics in the UAE, and the state of the economy in the UAE. However, this rich preunderstanding could be a

source of bias in this study. My personal bias may also block any opportunities for alternative reframing while collecting the data. For example, my personal biases might affect the data analysis phase of this research because I may interpret the data based on my pre-understandings and assumptions of the problem. To minimize the bias associated with my preunderstanding of the problem, I wrote down my pre-assumptions in a reflective journal. I visited this reflective journal throughout the research process to remind myself of my pre-assumptions and to self-check whether my biases influenced the research process. I have also commented on how my assumptions are changing while progressing in the study. In addition to this, I used the member-checking technique to verify the accuracy of my interpretations of the data collected during the interviews. I also shared the results with the participants to check if they may have different interpretations of the analysed data.

My dual role as a researcher and as an owner of XYZ might have created a political issue with the research participants because the participants in this study are the owners of companies that are operating in the same industry as XYZ. Kakabadse (1991) presents six guidelines for dealing with political issues (as cited in Coghlan and Brannick, 2010, p. 131). One of these guidelines is to work on the comfort zones, which implies working on ideas that participants can accept and tolerate. I created these comfort zones by focusing on two ideas.

The first idea is that XYZ does not pose a competitive threat to the participants since XYZ's offering is highly specialised. The second idea is that this research is addressing a problem that is common among small training companies in the UAE. Hence, participants benefited from this study since they were able to review its outcomes.

Managing managerial politics within the organization is a challenge that researchers as managers need to consider. This is because an insider action research inquiry stresses listening, emphasizes questioning, fosters courage, and encourage democratic participation (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). All these characteristics may threaten the existing norms in the organization. Managing managerial politics was not a significant problem because this research did not involve research participants from my organization. Moreover, XYZ is a small company that is managed by the owners. The owners and employees of XYZ supported this research because the final objective of this study, which is to define a profitable strategy, is beneficial to them all. This is because achieving a profitable strategy will ensure the sustainability of the operations of XYZ.

3.9 Summary

I started the problem-solving process by selecting the research philosophy of this study. This is because the research philosophy purposefully guides the researcher to establish criteria to find a solution to the defined problem (Kuhn 1970, as cited in Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p. 68). I then justified the selection of critical realism as the meta-theory for this study. I then explained why a system-combining approach grounded in abduction logic was chosen as the logical reasoning for this study. I then presented the features of quantitative and qualitative research. I illustrated how the nature of this inquiry is more associated with the qualitative methodology because the latter is about understanding the experiences of the participants that cannot be quantified, which is the scope of this study.

I presented the five research designs associated with the qualitative methodology. I explained that the case study is the most appropriate research design for this study because it helps to

explore a real-life problem through interviews. I presented the action research intervention that was implemented in this study. I provided information about the data collection and data analysis processes. I addressed the procedures and actions that were taken to ensure quality and ethics in this research. The challenges arising from the insider position of the researcher were also stated.

Chapter 4: Research findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the interviews. This study followed Yin's (2009) theoretical proposition as a data analysis strategy. As illustrated in section 3.5.1 Data analysis of interview data, I concluded that this research could follow the theoretical proposition strategy, which Yin (2009) considers as the most favourable strategy for data analysis in a case study. I used the findings that emerged from the literature review (see Figure 2-8) to develop the codes of this study. I used the RBV theory to categorize the codes into resources, capabilities, strategies, external threats and opportunities (see Appendix E), which helped me to identify the emerging themes for each of the sub-questions of the study. I used Grant's (1991) RBV framework for strategy analysis to look into the relationships between resources, capabilities, threats and opportunities to identify the possible strategic themes that small training companies could follow to become profitable and remain in business, which answers the overarching research question of this study (see Appendices F and G).

In the following sections, I will present the findings that emerged for the four sub-questions of the study and the overarching research question. I will then illustrate how the participants followed a multiple approach to strategy as opposed to a single strategy. Finally, I will present the reflection and feedback that some of the participants provided on the findings of the study.

4.2 Sub-question 1: What are the resources that are important for the success of small training businesses in the UAE?

The data analysis identified six resource-related themes that are critical to the success of small training companies. These themes are the competences of the trainers and the owners, the number of employees, financial capital, social capital, licenses, and the office. No evidence was found related to the age of the business and government support, which are resources that the literature review findings identified as important for small business success. The findings related to each of these themes are presented in the following sections.

4.2.1 The competences of the trainers and the owners as the most significant human capital competences for small business success

The collected data showed that participants B, C, and D considered the competence of the trainers to be crucial to the success of their companies (Table 4-1). Participants B and D believed that the certification of the trainer that entitles him/her to deliver mandatory training is the most critical competence for the success of their companies (Table 4-1, statements 2 and 3). Mandatory training is the training that clients are required to provide to their staff following statutory requirements imposed by regulating authorities.

In addition to the qualification of the trainer, Participant D believed that the trainer's reputation is an important resource for his company's success (Table 4-1, statement 4). He considered the reputation of the trainer more important than the reputation of the company. This is because the client places more importance on assessing the trainer rather than the company, when evaluating proposals.

Participant C also believed that the competences of the trainers are important to the success of his company (Table 4-1, statement 5). He also referred to the competences of the business owner (the entrepreneur) as being important for the success of his business (Table 4-1, statement 6). No findings emerged from the data about the competences of any other category of employees, such as administration or business development personnel.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The competences of the trainers and the owners as the most significant human capital competences for small business success	Human capital competences (RBV category: Resource)	1	B	“The main resources that we have are the licenses and the certified trainers ”.
		2	B	“There is also scarcity in the market when it comes to certified trainers . Hence, the company that has certified trainers and accreditations is only missing the ability to convince the customers about its offering”.
		3	D	“Having certified and experienced trainers in the oil and gas sector is our main resource”.
		4	D	“ The reputation of the trainers is also an important resource. The reputation of the centre is still developing. Our trainers are approved by major oil and gas companies. This is an important resource”.
		5	C	“Our main resource is the team ,..... by the team, I am referring to the trainers and consultants ”.
		6	C	“I see that the entrepreneur is the most critical element in the success of our type of firms”.

Table 4-1: Selected interview data regarding the importance of the competences of trainers and owners theme

4.2.2 The impact of the number of employees on the profitability of small training companies

The four companies have a small number of employees because the sample of the study was limited to companies that have two to ten employees. Two participants mentioned in the interviews how the number of employees may influence their companies' profitability (Table 4-2). Participant B informed me that companies that have a larger number of employees are in a better profitability position than smaller companies. The participant believed that having more employees enables companies to follow a diversification strategy, which may help them to survive (Table 4-2, statement 1). Despite this, Participants B and D minimized their number of employees as an attempt to reduce their expenses and consequently survive the declining conditions in the market (Table 4-2, statements 2 and 3). Hence, it could be concluded that the decision of whether to increase or decrease the number of employees is dependent on the strategy that the company wants to pursue.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The impact of the number of employees on the profitability of small training companies	Number of employees (Priori code)	1	B	“Profitability is not the same among competitors. Bigger competitors can generate more profits...They are huge. When you have more employees and more marketing and more trainers, you will be able to make more business” .
		2	D	“Our main aim during the current market conditions is to survive and preserve the status quo...Our number of employees is not high” .
	3	B	“When the sales volumes started to decrease, we started to downsize and to cut on our expenses” .	

Table 4-2: Selected interview data regarding the impact of the number of employees on the profitability of small training companies theme

4.2.3 Financial capital and the profitability of small training businesses

The impact of financial capital on the profitability of small training businesses emerged in three interviews (Table 4-3). The participants provided different perspectives on the importance of financial capital to their companies' success. Participant B thought that financial capital was important for the growth and profitability of his company, and stated that the limited financial capital of his company prevented him from bidding for big projects because executing such projects requires a high level of financial capital (Table 4-3, statement 1). Hence, the lack of financial capital prevented Participant B from pursuing opportunities to deliver training to big clients. Participant B did not believe that small, service-oriented companies, such as training companies, do not require a high level of capital. He believed that having substantial financial capital would help the company to navigate through non-payments and the risks of delays in payments (Table 4-3, statement 2).

Participant D provided a different perspective on the importance of financial capital for small training companies' profitability. Participant D stated that financial capital is important for companies that would like to follow a diversification strategy. This is because following a diversification strategy requires paying for new training licenses, hiring qualified trainers, and increasing the space of the training centre. This participant also stated that financial capital is important for following a client acquisition strategy, because acquiring new clients involves hiring employees for business development and marketing, which needs capital (Table 4-3, statement 3). In contrast, Participant C did not believe that small, service-oriented companies require a high level of capital. He believed that the company needs to have a minimum level of working capital to support its ongoing activities. (Table 4-3, statement 4).

The above results showed two different understandings of the importance of financial capital for the success of small training companies. Two participants thought that strong financial capital is important for small training companies' profitability. One participant thought that companies only need the minimum level of capital to sustain their operations.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
Financial capital and the profitability of small training businesses	Financial capital (Priori code) (RBV category: Resource)	1	B	“We have received inquiries to deliver some courses that we rejected . This is because these courses required higher financial capital, which we did not have . Your client is a big company. The client expects you to deliver the course, and then wait for about four to six months to get paid . At the same time, I am supposed to pay all our expenses in advance. I cannot make these advanced payments ”.
		2	B	“ I disagree (that small training companies do not require high capital). I have some clients that have not paid us for one year . We had to file a lawsuit to get our money., we ended up paying on fuel and follow-up to get our money more than we had as a profit”.
		3	D	“ The capital is needed for business development . For example, access to cash can allow you to have more training rooms and to bring new trainers . Moreover, it helps in bringing marketing team. The capital is therefore linked to your business strategy..... then capital is for sure needed to expand ”.
		4	C	“Companies need to have a minimum level of cash to operate . This cash is needed to pay rent, salaries, and office expenses”.

Table 4-3: Selected interview data regarding financial capital and the profitability of small training companies theme

4.2.4 The importance of the network and reputation to the profitability of small training companies

The data emerging from the interviews referred to the importance of two social capital elements to the success of small training companies, which are: network and reputation (Table 4-4). Two participants stated that networks are important to the success of their companies. Participant A, who owns a profitable company, talked extensively about the diversified network of speakers and trainers that he built over the past thirty years and how it is critical to the success of his company (Table 4-4, statement 1). Hence, it can be concluded that Participant A is mainly referring to a network that gives him access to various types of speakers and trainers.

Participant C referred to a different type of network. He was concerned with “The network of international friends” that helps him to come-up with new training ideas. Hence, Participant C believed that his network allows him to learn new ideas from the international market, and to localize them to the context of the UAE (Table 4-4, statement 2).

Turning now to consider the reputation element of social capital, Participant C thought that the reputation of his company was important to its success (Table 4-4, statement 3). This contrasts with the opinion of Participant D, who believed that the reputation of the trainer is more important than the reputation of the company (Table 4-4, statement 4).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The importance of the network and reputation on the profitability of small training companies.	Social capital (Priori code) (RBV category: Resource)	1	A	"I do have access to any know-how that exists in the world. I have access to previous government officials. I have access to experts and scientists, I can access any Arabic, Asian, European or American expertise".
		2	C	"We take advantage of the international network of friends to understand the latest trends at the global level. This allows us to borrow ideas and to customize them in accordance with the local and current needs".
		3	C	" Our reputation is well-known in the training market I am mainly referring to the company reputation ".
		4	D	" The reputation of the trainers is also an important resource. The reputation of the centre is still developing.

Table 4-4: Selected interview data related to the importance of network and reputation to the profitability of small training companies theme

4.2.5 Licenses as an important resource for small training companies' profitability

The heading 'Licenses' refers to the official permits issued by UAE government entities to allow a training company to conduct training. Three participants referred to the importance of these licenses for their companies' operations (Table 4-5). Participants B and D stated that licenses are an important resource of for their companies. This is because providing mandatory training in oil and gas requires specific licenses, which his company possesses (Table 4-5, statement 1 and 2). Moreover, Participant D believed that the costs associated with obtaining the licenses are the only costs that companies cannot reduce (Table 4-5, statement 3). Similarly, Participant C stated

that having the appropriate licenses allowed him to diversify his offering into the consultancy business (Table 4-5, statement 4).

Based on the above, it was concluded that having the appropriate licenses is mandatory for companies to become training providers in the UAE. The licensing requirements depend on the type of training that the company wants to provide.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
Licenses as an important resource for small training companies' profitability	Licenses (Emerging)	1	B	" Our main capability is that we are qualified and certified to deliver the mandatory training that is related to oil and gas, safety, and first aid ".
		2	D	"Our main capability is the licenses and the approvals to conduct specialized oil and gas training".
	(RBV category: Resource)	3	D	" The main cost that we cannot reduce is the licenses and accreditations costs. These are costs that are essential for our operation".
		4	C	"our current license allows us to conduct both training and consultancies ".

Table 4-5: Selected interview data related to the importance of licenses to small business success theme

4.2.6 Office as an important resource for small training companies' profitability

Having an office space is one of the obligatory requirements that is imposed by the regulators on training companies. Participants B and D thought that the office rent is a significant expense that they had considered minimizing when their sales started to decrease (Table 4-6, statements 1 and 2). Participant D provided training in their premises (Table 4-6, statement 3). Participant C relied more on providing training in hotels or at the clients' premises (Table 4-6, statement 4).

Based on the above, it was concluded that having an office is an obligatory resource that a company should have to be able to conduct training in the UAE. The size of the office depends on whether the company relies on conducting training at the client’s premises or in its office. Some participants moved to less expensive offices to reduce costs.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
Office as an important resource for small training companies’ profitability	Office (Emerging)	1	B	“We have also considered changing the location of our office by looking for less expensive premises . This is because the current office is considered to be expensive compared to the current income”.
		2	D	“ Our rent is not that high . It fits the current need of our clients”.
	(RBV category: Resource)	3	D	“ Having a training centre is very important because on-site training opportunities are limited nowadays”.
		4	C	“We are mainly B2B that is mainly conducted in-house or in five stars hotel ”.

Table 4-6: Selected interview data regarding the importance of office for small training companies’ profitability theme

4.3 Sub-question 2: What are the capabilities that are important for the success of small training businesses in the UAE?

The data analysis identified two capabilities that are important to the success of small training companies. These themes are related to management capabilities and quality management. The findings related to each of these themes are presented in the following sections.

4.3.1 General management capabilities that are important for small training companies' success

The data identified the specific general management capabilities that the owners of small training organizations need to develop to ensure the success of their companies. These two management capabilities are matchmaking capabilities and understanding the client's business processes (Table 4-7).

Participants A and D identified matchmaking capabilities as a critical management capability that small training businesses need to develop to be successful (Table 4-7, statements 1, 2 and 3). By matchmaking capabilities, the participants were referring to the ability to match each client with the right trainer. Participant D focused on conducting mandatory training. He has, therefore, referred to the matchmaking capability by his ability to access qualified trainers to match the demand for providing mandatory training (Table 4-7, statement 3).

Understanding the clients' business processes was identified as an important managerial capability by Participant A, who belongs to the profitable company. This participant stated that knowing these processes allows him to deploy his network and matchmaking capabilities in a way that helps to convince the decision-makers with his offering (Table 4-7, statement 4).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
General management capabilities that are important for small business success	Management capabilities (Priori)	1	A	“I always say that we are in a huge ocean. Ocean fish come in various sizes. The skill is how to capture the right fish that fits the need of the client ”.
		2	A	“I can say that what makes me different is the network, the ability to target different market niches, and the matchmaking ability ”.
	(RBV category: Capabilities)	3	D	“Our other capability is having access to certified trainers to conduct these types of training. We have certified trainers that are qualified and capable to deliver the diversified trainings ”.
		4	A	“You should be able to understand the processes and to find the right tools that can make the development happens”.

Table 4-7: Selected interview data regarding the management capabilities that are important for small training companies' success theme

To conclude, the data suggest that matchmaking capabilities and understanding the business processes of the client are important managerial capabilities within the training business context. These capabilities require access to a network of trainers, which is a social capital component.

4.3.2 The importance of quality management for small training business success

The data confirmed that quality management is important to the success of small training businesses. Three participants indicated during the interviews that providing quality training is important for the success of their companies (Table 4-8). Participant A stated that he always follows and monitors the execution phase of the training projects to ensure the high quality of the delivered training (Table 4-8, statement 1). This helps Participant A to stay ahead of the competition (Table 4-8, statement 2). Participant B also stated that he is providing quality

training at a good price to remain in the market (Table 4-8, statement 3). Participant C stated that customers in the UAE are always expecting to receive quality products or services because they operate according to international standards (Table 4-8, statement 4).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The importance of quality management capability for small training business success	Quality Management (Priori)	1	A	“After this, we come to the execution phase , and here you should do your job in a perfect way . This is vital for success ”.
		2	A	“We have managed the competition by focusing on quality ”.
	(RBV category: Capabilities)	3	B	“We are providing high-quality training at a lower price . I believe that all other training companies are doing the same to be able to survive. Training companies that are not accepting this are having problems”.
		4	C	“The UAE is well exposed to other international experiences. Hence, they are always demanding the highest standard ”.

Table 4-8: Selected interview data related to the importance of quality management for small training business success theme

4.4 Sub-question 3: What are the threats that are limiting small training businesses in the UAE to become profitable?

The data analysis identified five themes related to the threats that are affecting the performance of small training companies. These threats are budget cuts and decrease in demand, competition, lack of awareness, payment risks, and economy-related threats. The findings related to each theme are illustrated in the following sections.

4.4.1 The impact of the budget cuts and decrease in sales on the profitability of small training companies

The four participants stated that their clients had decreased their training budgets (Table 4-9). These budget cuts were the primary factor that led to a decrease in sales in the three companies. Participant B stated that clients nowadays are only requesting mandatory training, which is the training that the client is obliged to conduct to meet legal or regulatory requirements. As a result, Participant B experienced a decrease in sales (Table 4-9, statement 1). Similarly, Participant D reported that there was a decrease in demand because his clients cancelled their yearly big training projects. This resulted in increasing competition as the market size shrank as an outcome of the budget cuts (Table 4-9, statement 2). Participant C also reported that he had experienced a decrease in demand as an outcome of the budget cuts. As a result, he decided to introduce new training ideas to compensate for the market that was lost as an outcome of the budget cuts (Table 4-9, statement 3). Finally, Participant A acknowledged that many companies and governmental authorities are cutting their training budgets, although these budget cuts did not affect the sales of his company. However, the budget cuts were considered by Participant A as the most important factor that is limiting the growth of his company (Table 4-9, statement 4).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The impact of the budget cuts and the decrease in sales	Budget cut and decrease in sales (Priori) (RBV category: threat)	1	B	“Companies are not requesting training anymore. Before, companies used to ask for training to enhance the capabilities of their human resources and according to their training plans. Right now, potential clients are only requesting mandatory training that is required by the regulators to be able to carry their operations”.
		2	D	“Many training companies were relying on big projects. These big projects have been reduced. Hence, everyone is now competing on the remaining slice of the pie”.
		3	C	“We concluded that the most effective way to overcome the current cuts in training budgets is by introducing new products to the market”.
		4	A	“The first barrier (to growth) is the budget cuts ”.

Table 4-9: Selected interview data related to the impact of the budget cut and decrease in sales theme

4.4.2 The impact of increasing competition on the profitability of small training companies

The four participants asserted that competition in the training industry in the UAE is high (Table 4-10). Participant A confirmed that his business was profitable during the past three years. Despite the positive performance of his company, Participant A believed that competition is becoming fiercer every year. Participant A managed to survive the competition by focusing on quality and by following a diversification strategy (Table 4-10, statement 1).

Two participants stated that the increasing competition in the market resulted in a decrease in prices for training. Participant C reported that the increasing competition in the market had

forced the prices to go down. He also observed that many training companies had been forced to shut down, since they were not able to survive the increasing competition (Table 4-10, statement 2). Participant D also indicated that the increase in competition resulted in a decrease in prices (Table 4-10, statement 3).

Participants C and B reported that the rising competition led to the increasing bargaining power of customers. They both stated that customers are now asking for high-quality training at the lowest price (Table 4-10, statements 4 and 5). Participant B also confirmed that the competition was fierce in the recent past. He also observed that many training companies had been forced to shut down. However, he started to feel that the competition has recently decreased because of the closure of some competitors.

To sum up, competition led to a decrease in the prices of the offered training and increased the bargaining power of customers. Two participants confirmed that some of their competitors had closed their operations because they were not able to survive the increasing competition. One participant thought that the fact that many companies had exited the market means that the competition has recently become less fierce.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The impact of increasing competition on the profitability of small training companies	Competition and decrease in prices (Priori)	1	A	“The past three years have been good to us. Having said that, it is important to point out that the competition is becoming fiercer . We have managed the competition by focusing on quality and diversification”.
		2	C	“I see strong competition in the market. Prices are going down . This might have forced some of our competitors, especially those that were not successful in diversifying their offering, to shut-down”.
	3	D	“ The prices of some of our courses have dropped by 70% . Some courses used to be sold at AED 400 but are now being offered at AED 80. Some courses were offered at AED 1,500 but are now being sold at AED 600. This is because of the increasing competition ”.	
	4	C	“Customers want top quality at a low price . This is an equation that is hard to fulfil”.	
	5	B	“Big companies that have volume are asking for discounts . This is something that we have accepted to do. We are providing high-quality training at a lower price ”.	

Table 4-10: Selected interview data related to the impact of increasing competition theme

4.4.3 The impact of the lack of awareness on the profitability of small training companies

Two participants identified the lack of awareness as an external threat to their organizations’ success (Table 4-11). By lack of awareness, the participants were referring to the inability of the customer to recognize the importance of training or its impact on their employees. Participant C stated that the lack of awareness may prevent the company from introducing new training ideas

as a follow-up to previously delivered training (Table 4-11, statement 1). Participant A also reported that there is a general lack of awareness among clients about the importance of training and its positive impact on the performance of organizations (Table 4-11, statement 2). Participant A suggested that companies may overcome this threat by helping the customers to measure the outcomes of the provided training. This helps to illustrate to the customers the benefit of the training and allows pitching of new training ideas (Table 4-11, statement 3).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The impact of the lack of awareness on the profitability of small training companies	Lack of awareness (Emerging) (RBV category: threat)	1	C	"It sometimes happens that your counterparty does not possess the knowledge or the know-how to assess your performance . We might execute a great project and come up with great outcomes. However, the person in charge of assessing our work is not capable of measuring and assessing what we have done. This implies that we had the chance to generate more from this business. However, this chance was missed because of the existence of "Blocker People" .
		2	A	"The second barrier to growth is the lack of awareness about the importance of training and development".
		3	A	"Moreover, training companies should be able to measure the progress that has been achieved by the conducted training to make the client realize the value of the provided training ".

Table 4-11: Selected interview data related to the impact of the lack of awareness theme

4.4.4 The impact of the non-payment risk on the profitability of small training companies

Non-payment risk is a threat that was solely indicated by Participant B (Table 4-12). This participant reported during the interview that he had been exposed on a few occasions to non-payment risks. Moreover, some of his clients did not pay within the agreed time. This delay in payment has severely damaged the cash flow of his company. As a result, Participant B rejected some business opportunities because he was not sure whether the client would be able to pay him on time (Table 4-12, statement 1). This led to a decrease in this participant's client base.

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The impact of the non-payment on the profitability of small training companies	Non-payment risk (Emerging) (RBV category: threat)	1	B	“We became selective in our approach by offering training to companies that are capable of guaranteeing their payments . Clients will have to pay in cash or provide cheque guarantees. Otherwise, we will not accept to conduct business. As a result, our client base decreased ”.

Table 4-12: Selected interview statement regarding the impact of non-payment risk theme

4.4.5 Economy-related threats

Two Participants were concerned with the risks associated with the current state of the UAE economy. Participant B believed that the UAE economy is currently in crisis (Table 4-13, statement 1). From the perspective of this participant, crisis refers to the economic conditions that led to budget cuts (Table 4-13, statement 2). Participant C used the term ‘recession’ to refer to the current status of the economy and believed that the recession in the economy triggered the

cuts in training budgets, though he considered that companies should expect a recession once in a while (Table 4-13, statement 3).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The impact of economy-related threats on the profitability of small training companies	Economy-related threats (Emerging) (RBV category: threat)	1	B	“Our company started to feel the crisis about a year ago... By the beginning of 2017, we started to experience the decline. By 2018, things went even worse”.
		2	B	“It means (crisis) that companies are not having budgets (for training) anymore”.
		3	C	“In the global economy, we tend to expect to feel a recession once every ten years. We have experienced a recession before in 2009 and 2010. Hence, we were expecting a recession in 2018. Our company felt the recession in 2018 ”.

Table 4-13: Selected interview statements regarding the economy-related threats theme

4.5 Sub-question 4: What are the growth opportunities for small training businesses in the UAE?

Three themes related to external opportunities emerged from the interviews. These themes are e-learning, mandatory training, and the UAE economy. The findings that emerged from each of these themes are explained in the following sections.

4.5.1 The non-relevance of e-learning as an opportunity in the context of small training companies

Three participants stated that they do not see opportunities in e-learning (Table 4-14). Participant A believed that the Arab region is not yet ready for e-learning; he believed that instructor-led training would remain the most requested type of training (Table 4-14, statement 1). Participant B considered e-learning to be luxury training that cannot be introduced when the market is price sensitive (Table 4-14, statement 2). Participant D did not find any fit between e-learning and mandatory training that leads to certification (Table 4-14, statement 3). Participants B and D suggested that e-learning could be more relevant to self-development courses, which is a type of training that is not offered by the four participants (Table 4-14, statements 4 and 5).

Participant C acknowledged that some of his clients might have resorted to e-learning solutions, which may have affected his market share. However, he still believed that face-to-face communication is key to the type of training that he is offering. Hence, he is not considering offering e-learning solutions to his clients (Table 4-14, statement 6).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
The non-relevance of elearning as an opportunity in the context of small training companies	elearning (Emerging) (RBV category: opportunity)	1	A	“The problem in the Arab World and this is something that I always say when people ask me about the online solutions ; I say that we, as Arabs, are not ready for this yet. There is a limited number of trainees that need online training. The rest of the trainees require conventional training because they are not ready for online. I would say no more than 10% of the needs of training are requiring online training.....The ideal training in this part of the world

				is instructor-led learning”.
		2	B	“The market is price sensitive. So, there is no luxury to introduce online training”.
		3	D	“The ability to conduct online training is associated with the acceptance of the client to receive the course online. Right now, the client is requesting to have 1) pre-exam 2) post-exam 3) attendance sheets to be able to be certified. This cannot be conducted online”.
		4	B	“I am not sure the extent at which people are convinced in online training . I believe it is not practical . I thought about it, but perhaps you know better than me I think online training is only important when you are targeting students that are looking to improve their knowledge . In our case, students are only looking for accreditation. Hence, online training is not important”.
		5	D	“All these training cannot be conducted online . These are all mandatory training. Trainees are attending because they must obtain the certification to keep their jobs. Very few attends because they are interested in the training itself”.
		6	C	“I believe that some of our clients left us and went to online training because online training is less expensive. I still believe that face to face and personal communication is important in training . However, I cannot deny that online training has reduced our size. I am not thinking to introduce online training as a product offered by my company soon”.

Table 4-14: Selected interview data related to the non-relevance of e-learning as an opportunity in the context of small training companies theme

4.5.2 Mandatory training as an opportunity for small training companies

Mandatory training is the type of training that is imposed by regulators in certain professions. Participant B identified mandatory training as an opportunity that helped his company to remain operational (Table 4-15, statement 1). This is because mandatory training is the least affected by budget cuts (Table 4-15, statement 2), as companies will still be required by law to enrol their employees periodically in such types of training.

Participant B forecasted that new oil and gas projects are going to be awarded to new companies. Hence, the companies that will be awarded these projects will be required according to the regulations to provide mandatory training to their employees (Table 4-15, statement 3).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
Mandatory training as an opportunity for small training companies	Mandatory training (Emerging) (RBV category: Opportunity)	1	B	“All our team now is focusing on these mandatory courses, and I believe that we have managed to create a good customer base for this”.
		2	B	“For the time being, no one is asking for training unless it is mandatory”.
		3	B	“We are a bit optimistic that there might be new oil and gas projects. If this happens, this means that new mandatory training will be required and as a result, you will have a chance to improve your market share”.

Table 4-15: Selected interview data related to mandatory training as an opportunity for small training business success theme

4.5.3 Opportunities stemming from the UAE business environment

Four participants identified external opportunities that are associated with the UAE economy. Participant A believed that the UAE is a modern country that has lots of potential for development. Moreover, the UAE government has shown a lot of interest in developing the skills of the citizens (Table 4-16, statement 1). Participant C stated that the UAE always looks to implement the best practices in the world, and there is currently a lot of emphasis on government excellence and innovation (Table 4-16, statement 2) Hence, companies could take advantage of this unique mindset to come up with innovative training programs that address the interests of the country.

Participant B believed that oil and gas prices are forecasted to increase within this year. This will enable oil and gas companies to increase their training budgets and to announce big training projects (Table 4-16, statement 3). Companies that can survive the current market conditions will be able to benefit when such opportunities emerge. Participant D believed that new oil and gas projects would be awarded in 2019. This may increase the demand for training in the oil and gas sector (Table 4-16, statement 4).

Emerging theme	Code	Statement number	Participant	Illustrative statement
Opportunities stemming from the UAE business environment	Opportunities in the UAE economy and training industry (Priori)	1	A	“ The UAE market still has a potential for development. The UAE is a country that is moving forward. It is a modern country that is about fifty years old. There is an opportunity for development , and there is an interest in the performance development of locals ”.
		2	C	“The UAE is very advanced, especially if ... compared to other GCC countries. For example, governmental excellence is considered to be a hot topic in the UAE right now. Innovation is also an important topic in the UAE. The UAE is ranked as number one in innovation among the Arab countries ”.
	3	B	“I think that oil prices will improve within this year and that we will start seeing again budgets for big projects ”.	
	4	D	“We believe that new projects will be awarded to oil and gas companies within this year.”.	

Table 4-16: Selected interview data related to opportunities stemming from the UAE business environment theme

4.6 The overarching research question: What strategies can XYZ implement to become profitable and remain in business?

I started the process of identifying the themes related to the overarching research question by exploring how the categorized codes related to each other. I analysed the cause/effect relationships that were identified between resources, capabilities, strategies, threats and opportunities. I used Nvivo 12 to capture evidence of relationships between two categorized

codes (see Appendix F). I then used Lucidchart software to draw a chart that presents all the relationships among the codes and categories (see Appendix G).

As can be seen from Appendix G, the relationships between the different categorized codes are complex and interrelated. This represented a challenge for data analysis. Hence, I uploaded this appendix on “kumu.io”. Kumu is a data visualization platform that helps organize complex information into interactive relationship maps. I used this platform to help to identify themes.

The research question of this study was, “What are the strategies that a small UAE-based training company may follow to become profitable and remain in business?”. Hence, the themes that I aimed to identify were themes that are related to strategy identification. Grant (1991) defines strategy as the match that an organization makes between its internal resources and skills and the opportunities and risks created by its external environment. Hence, I started using the zooming-in feature in the Kumu platform to identify strategic themes from Appendix G that are aligned with Grant’s definition of strategy. Specifically, I looked for themes that have one strategy, a minimum of one resource or capability, and a minimum of one threat or opportunity.

As a result, I was able to identify five strategic themes that fit the above criteria. These themes represent the strategic options that small training companies in the UAE may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The emergent themes are presented in table 4-17:

Emerging themes
Theme 1: Diversification strategy as a response to the external threats
Theme 2: Cost-cutting strategy as a response to the budget cuts and decrease in sales
Theme 3: Customer orientation strategy as a response to the opportunities in the market
Theme 4: Entrepreneurial orientation strategy as a response to the industry threats
Theme 5: Customer acquisition strategy as a response to the external threats

Table 4-17: Emerging Strategy themes

The above themes will be discussed in the following sections. The figures that will be presented in the following paragraphs were generated from Appendix G by using the zooming-in feature in the Kumu platform.

4.6.1 Diversification as a response to the external threats

Diversification is a strategy that companies follow when they want to introduce new products or services to the market. The four participants reported during the interviews that they have followed a diversification strategy (Table 4-18). The participants stated that they followed a diversification strategy as a response to external threats, such as budget cuts, decrease in sales, and increasing competition (Table 4-18, statements 1, 2, 3,4).

Participants B and D decided to diversify within the training industry by introducing new training specializations to their offerings (Table 4-18, statements 5 and 6). To diversify within the training industry, the company needs to have licenses (Table 4-18, statement 7). Licenses refer to the official permits issued by UAE government entities to allow the training company to

conduct training. Companies may be required to apply for an additional license for each training specialization that they wish to deliver. Another important resource that companies need to have to implement a diversification strategy within the training industry is human capital. Companies need to assess the competences of their human capital to make sure that they can deliver the newly defined training (Table 4-18, statement 11). Participant C decided to diversify into the consultancy business because his company has the licenses (Table 4-18, statement 8) and the human capital competences (Table 4-18, statement 10) that allowed this type of diversification to happen.

The diversification strategy may require the companies to increase their financial capital resources to be able to cover the costs associated with diversification. These costs are the cost of licenses (Table 4-18, statement 12), increasing the number of trainers and the office space (Table 4-18, statement 9). Companies need to make sure that the income from the new diversification outweighs its associated costs (Table 4-18, statement 7).

Participant A, who owns a profitable company, has a strong network of trainers and clients. This may provide him with an advantage when implementing a diversification strategy. The strong network is a resource that allows the company to access a wide pool of trainers with a diversified set of skills. This network also allows the company to reach out to various clients to introduce the new offered training or service (Table 4-18, statement 13). Participant A possessed the matchmaking capabilities that allowed him to utilize his network to select the trainer that fits the need of the client (Table 4-18, statement 14).

Relationship among the categorized codes	Statement	Participant	Illustrative statements
Relationship between diversification (category: strategy) and external threats category	1	A	“We have managed the competition by focusing on quality and diversification ”.
	2	B	“For the time being, the survival game is related to diversification . This implies that companies should have more than one specialization to offer. Companies need to get small bits from every market”.
	3	C	“Hence, our strategy during the current challenging times is diversification ”.
	4	D	“Our main aim during the current market conditions is to survive and preserve the status quo.....We are aiming at introducing new mandatory training programs in oil and gas”.
	5	B	“Companies should have more than one (training) specialization to offer. Companies need to get small bits from every market”.
	6	D	“We have a diversified training offering , which allows us to be in different markets”.
Relationship between licenses (category resource) and diversification (category: strategy)	7	B	“Hence, when you diversify , you're offering the probability will increase. Hence, we plan to increase our licenses . This will increase our costs too”.
	8	C	“As a result, we have decided to enter the consultancy marketour current license allows us to conduct both training and consultancies ”.
Relationship between number of employees (category: resource) and diversification (category: Strategy)	9	B	“Bigger competitors can generate more profits. This is because they have more specializations as well as a high number of trainers . Hence, they can generate more revenues and consequently make higher profits”.
Relationship	10	C	“Having a strong base of clients as well as a strong

between human capital competences (category: resources) and diversification (category: strategy).			team with diversified sets of experiences, was an important factor to decide to diversify to the consultancy business ".
	11	D	"We have certified trainers that are qualified and capable to deliver the diversified trainings ".
Relationship between financial capital (category: resource) and diversification (category: strategy)	12	B	"The main plan for us is to try to bring new accreditations for mandatory training. Hence, we plan to increase our licenses . This will increase our costs too . However, we do believe that the newly generated income will compensate the costs".
Relationship between network (category: resource) and diversification (category: strategy)	13	A	"The intangible resource is the diversified network that I built over thirty years. I do have access to any know-how that exists in the world. I have access to officials. I have access to presidents and ex-presidents, prime ministers, ministers, and ambassadors".
Relationship between matchmaking capability (category: capability) and diversification (category: strategy)	14	A	"I can say that what makes me different is, the ability to be in different market using my matchmaking ability ".

Table 4-18: Selected interview data related to the diversification as a response to external threats theme

As can be seen from figure 4-1, this strategy is resource-intensive. Six resources are connected to this theme: financial capital, licenses, human capital competences, number of employees, office, and network. One capability was connected to this theme, which is the matchmaking capability.

The figure did not indicate an opportunity that this strategy may address. The strategy was

followed by the companies to respond to threats that are coming from the industry and the economy.

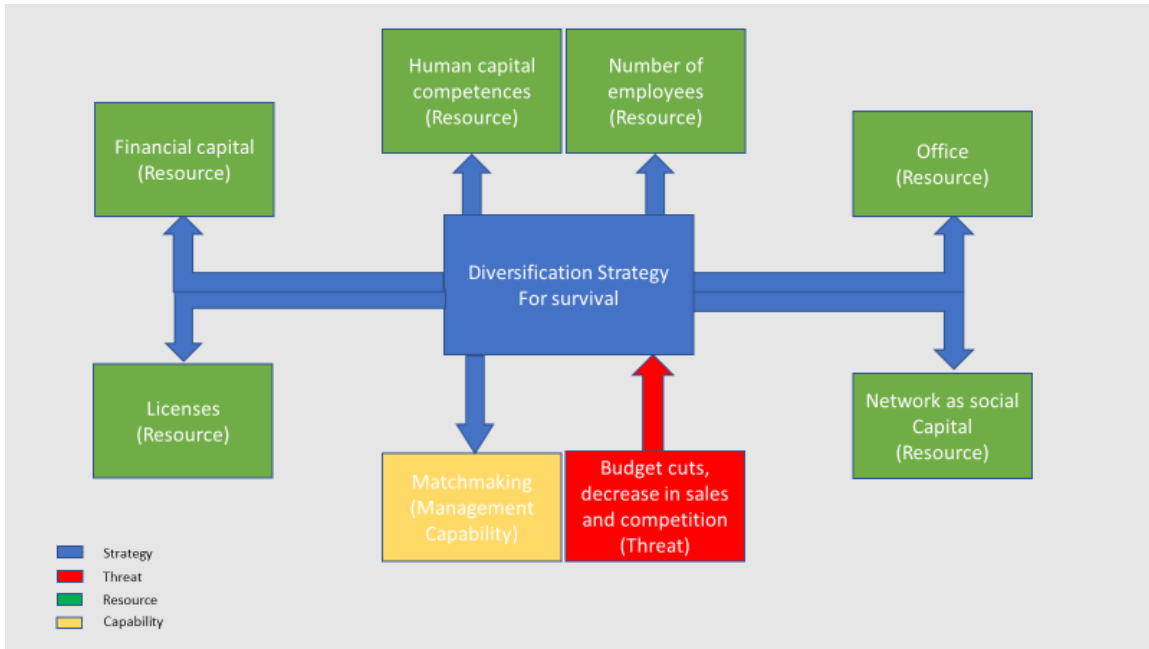


Figure 4-1: Theme 1, Diversification strategy as a response to the external threats

4.6.2 Cost-cutting strategy as a response to the budget cuts and decrease in sales

Two participants reported that they had started to implement cost-cutting strategies as a response to the budget cuts and decrease in sales (Table 4-19, statements 1 and 2). Participants B and D thought that the office rent was a major expense that companies could reduce by moving to less expensive premises or renegotiating the lease terms (Table 4-19, statements 3 and 4). The other major expense that companies may reduce is the cost of employees. As stated before, participant B reported that they started reducing the number of employees when the company experienced a decrease in sales (Table 4-19, statement 5). Similarly, Participant D reported that their current

number of employees is at the minimum, which allows his company to minimize costs (Table 4-19, statement 6).

Relationship among the categorized codes	Statement	Participant	Illustrative statements
Relationship between cost cutting (category: strategy) and budget cuts and decrease in sales (category: threat)	1	D	“The competition is fierce right now and our sales are decreasing . Hence, we are trying to cut on every possible expense to remain in the market”.
	2	B	“We started to downsize and cut our expenses when the sales volume started to decrease”.
Relationship between the office (category: resource) and cost-cutting (category: strategy)	3	B	“We have also considered to change the location of our office by looking for less expensive premises ”.
	4	D	“I am aware of training centres that were forced to shut-down because of their high costs . We have reasonable costs if to be compared to other competitors . Our rent is not that high ”.
Relationship between the number of employees (category: resource) and cost-cutting (category: strategy)	5	B	“We started to downsize and cut our expenses when the sales volume started to decrease ”.
	6	D	“I am aware of training centres that were forced to shut-down because of their high costs. We have reasonable costs if to be compared to other competitors.....Our number of employees is not high”.

Table 4-19: Selected interview data related to cost-cutting strategy as a response to budget cuts and decrease in sales theme

It can be seen from Figure 4-2 that the cost-cutting strategy is only concerned with minimizing resources to respond to external threats. Two resources are connected to this theme: employees and office. The data did not indicate a specific capability that is important for executing this

strategy. The figure also shows that this strategy does not recognize possible opportunities in the market.

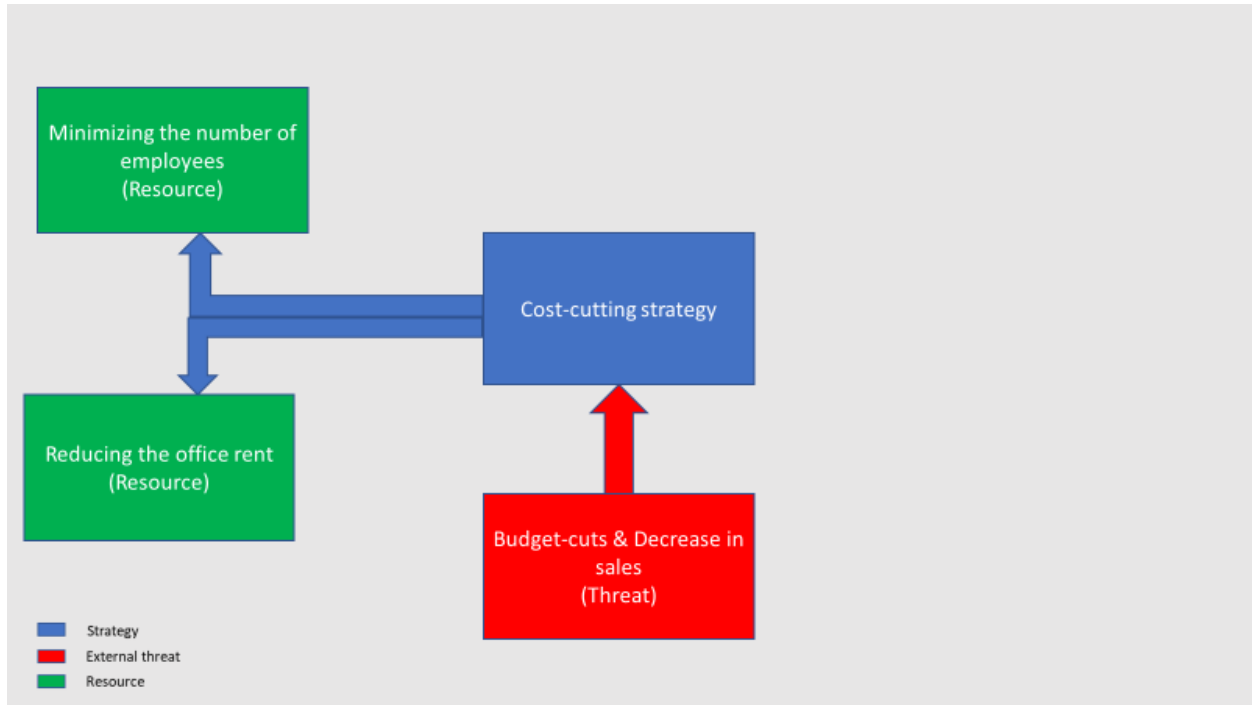


Figure 4-2: Theme 2, Cost-cutting strategy as a response to the budget cuts and decrease in sales

4.6.3 Customer orientation as a response to opportunities in the market

Customer orientation is defined as the continuous and proactive disposition towards identifying the needs of the target customers and sufficiently providing value that satisfies these needs (Han, Kim, and Srivastava, 1998). Customer orientation is a strategy that was followed by participants A, B, and C. These three participants reported during the interviews that understanding the new trends in customers' requirements is important for their success (Table 4-20, statements 1, 2, and 3). The three companies followed the customer orientation strategy as a response to the threat posed by budget cuts and decrease in sales. To compensate for the loss triggered by budget-cuts

and decrease in sales, they looked for new training opportunities that stem from the current clients' needs (Table 4-20, statements 4, 5, and 6).

To implement this strategy, companies need to have the capability of understanding the business processes of their clients. They need to scan the requirements of the clients, map them, and then decide on the training sector that they are capable of targeting. Participant C understood the processes of conducting business with the governmental sector. He focused on scanning the needs of the governmental sector because of its significant budget (Table 4-20, statement 7).

Similarly, Participant B followed a customer-oriented strategy by focusing on mandatory training. Mandatory training is the type of training that is imposed by regulators in certain professions. Participant B knew the processes that the client followed when requesting mandatory training. He decided to focus on mandatory training because it is the least affected by the budget cuts and decrease in sales. As a result, he scanned the market to identify the types of mandatory training that are required by the regulators (Table 4-20, statement 8).

For companies to be able to follow a customer-orientation strategy, they need to make sure that they have the appropriate resources to pursue the newly identified markets. The most frequent resources that the participants referred to are licenses and the certified trainers. Participants B and C reported that they possess the licenses and the qualified trainers to execute the newly defined opportunities (Table 4-20, statements 9,10, 11, and 12).

Code	Statement	Participant	Illustrative statements
Customer orientation (Priori code) (RBV category: Strategy)	1	A	“You must always be adaptable and be prepared to follow the new trends in the market ”.
	2	B	“The most important factor that we look at when forming our strategy is to explore what the market needs ”.
	3	C	“If we manage to understand the priorities of the client , then we will always be a couple of steps ahead of the competition”.
Relationship between budget cuts and decrease in sales code (category: external threat) and customer orientation strategy (category: strategy).	4	A	“You must have tools that allow you to be ready to meet the market need . The market will never stay the same. It will always evolve”.
	5	B	“ Before, companies used to ask for training to enhance the capabilities of their human resources and in accordance with their training plans. Right now, potential clients are only requesting mandatory training that are required by the regulators to be able to carry their operations.....Therefore, we started to look at what types of mandatory training are being asked by the regulators”
	6	C	“ Customization is also key to survive the current conditions. ”
Relationship between knowing the client processes as a management capability (category: capability) and customer orientation strategy (category: strategy).	7	C	“Understanding ... the government goals will help you to develop training that is aligned with what the government requires ”.
	8	B	“We started to look at what types of mandatory training are being asked by the regulatorsWe have spent more marketing efforts on these types of mandatory training”.
Relationship between certified trainers as a human capital competence (category: resources) and customer orientation strategy (category: strategy).	9	B	“The new strategy of focusing on mandatory training was put in place about ten months ago. The main resources that we have are the licenses and the accredited trainers ”.
	10	C	They (the government) are interested in government excellence ... We are now focusing on consultancies related to Governmental Excellence Our team experience includes HR,

strategy).			governance, government communication, strategy, excellence, and execution.....”.
Relationship between licenses (category: resources) and customer orientation strategy (category: strategy).	11	B	“We are qualified and certified to deliver the mandatory training that are related to oil and gas aid ”.
	12	C	“our current license allows us to conduct both training and consultancies ”.

Table 4-20: Selected interview statements related to the customer orientation strategy as a response to opportunities in the market theme

To sum up, customer orientation strategy was reported by three participants as important for small training companies’ success. The participant that did not report this strategy was the owner of a loss-making company. The participants followed the customer orientation strategy as a response to budget cuts and decrease in sales. Following the customer orientation strategy allowed the three participants to identify new opportunities. Companies need to have the appropriate licenses and trainers to be able to execute this strategy. They also need to be capable of understanding the business processes of their clients to be able to identify new training opportunities that stem from the clients’ needs. Figure 4-3 summarizes this strategic theme:

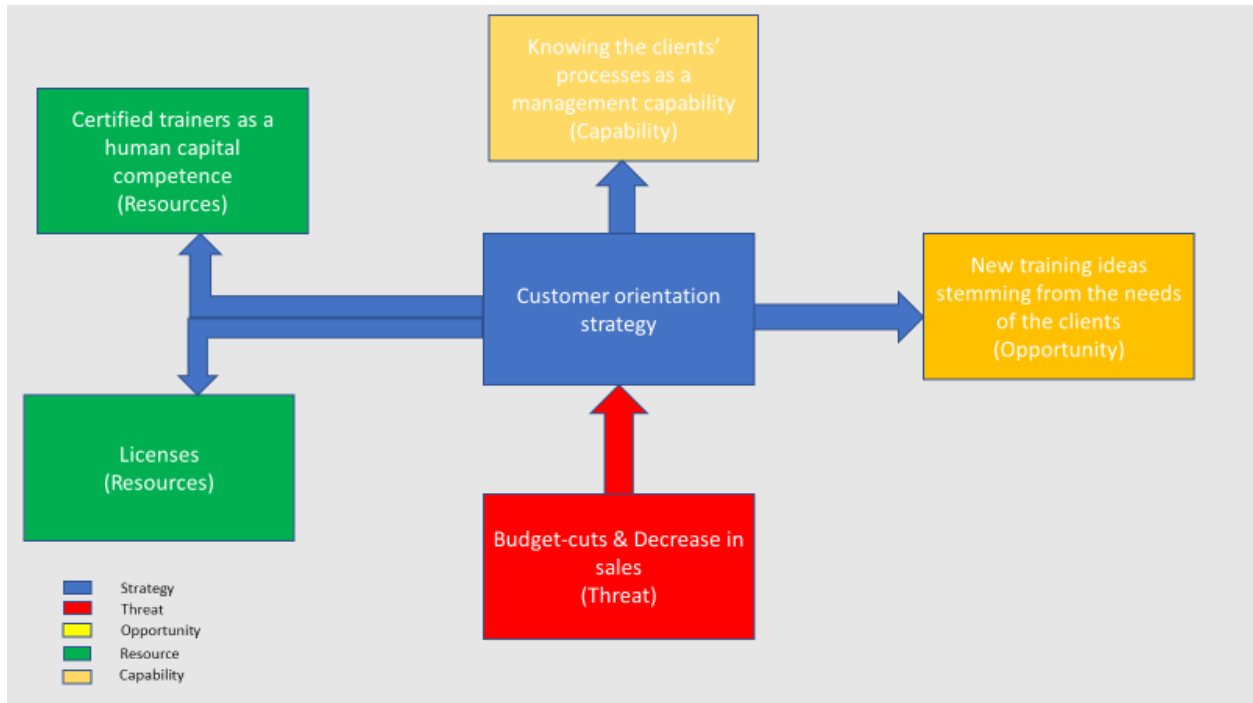


Figure 4-3: Theme 3, Customer orientation as a response to external opportunities.

As can be seen from the figure above, this strategy includes all the strategic components suggested by Grant (1991). The strategy aims at identifying new opportunities to offset the challenges stemming from the industry threats. Two resources are connected to this theme: licenses and certified trainers. One capability is connected to this theme, which is knowing the client's processes.

4.6.4 Entrepreneurial orientation as a response to the external threats

Entrepreneurial orientation in a small business context implies that the company should focus on entrepreneurial activities, such as opportunity seeking, acceptance of risk, proactively innovating new products, and looking for new markets (Jones and Sisay, 2014).

Participants A and C followed entrepreneurially oriented strategies by focusing on introducing new training ideas to the market. Both participants stated that they followed entrepreneurially oriented strategies as a response to budget cuts, decrease in sales, and lack of awareness (4-21, statements 1 and 2).

Small training companies need to focus on the opportunities that stem from this environment to come up with new training ideas that are aligned with the vision of the country. For example, Participant C thought that government excellence and innovation are considered as a hot topic in the UAE right now because they are directly aligned with the country's vision (Table 4-21, statement 3). Participant A believed that the UAE is a country that is always moving forward. Hence, there are many opportunities for development, especially when it comes to raising the skill levels and knowledge of the Emiratis (Table 4-21, statement 4).

The implementation of this strategy is dependent on the entrepreneurial skills of the business owners, which is a human capital competence (Table 4-21, statement 5). It requires a strong network of experts to allow for developing new training services (Table 4-21, statement 6). Implementing the EO strategy also requires a strong network among decision-makers to be able to pitch for these new ideas (Table 4-21, statement 7).

Code	Statement	Participant	Illustrative statements
Relationship between budget cuts and decrease in sales (Category: threat) and Entrepreneurial orientation (category: strategy)	1	C	“We concluded that the most effective way to overcome the current cuts in training budgets is to focus on introducing new products to the market ”.
	2	A	“ With the current declining conditions , you always must have new ideas and new suggestions . You must look for the new budgets ”.
Relationship between opportunities in the UAE economy (category: external opportunities) and entrepreneurial orientation strategy (category: strategy)	3	C	“This is because the UAE is very advanced, especially if being compared to other GCC countries. For example, governmental excellence is considered to be a hot topic in the UAE right now. Innovation is also an important topic in the UAE . The UAE is ranked as number one in innovation among the Arab countries”.
	4	A	“ The UAE market still has a potential for development . The UAE is a country that is moving forward. It is a modern country that is about fifty years old. There is an opportunity for development, and there is an interest in the performance development of locals ”.
Relationship between human capital competences (category: resources) and entrepreneurial orientation (category: strategy).	5	C	“ The competences of the entrepreneur as well as the entrepreneur's network are the capital that brings success”.
Relationship between network (category: resources) and entrepreneurial orientation (category: strategy).	6	C	“The competences of the entrepreneur as well as the entrepreneur's network are the capital that brings success”.
	7	A	“What is important is to be able to reach out to the decision-maker who is responsible for the defined opportunity ”.

Table 4-21: Selected interview statements related to the entrepreneurial orientation strategy as a response to external threat theme

To sum up, entrepreneurial orientation is a strategy that was followed by two participants. One of these participants was the owner of the profitable company. The second participant was the owner of a breaking-even company. This strategy allowed the two companies to compensate for the market that was lost with the budget cuts by identifying new markets. Companies that wish to execute this strategy should have a strong network that can help them to define new opportunities. Figure 4-4 summarizes this strategic theme:

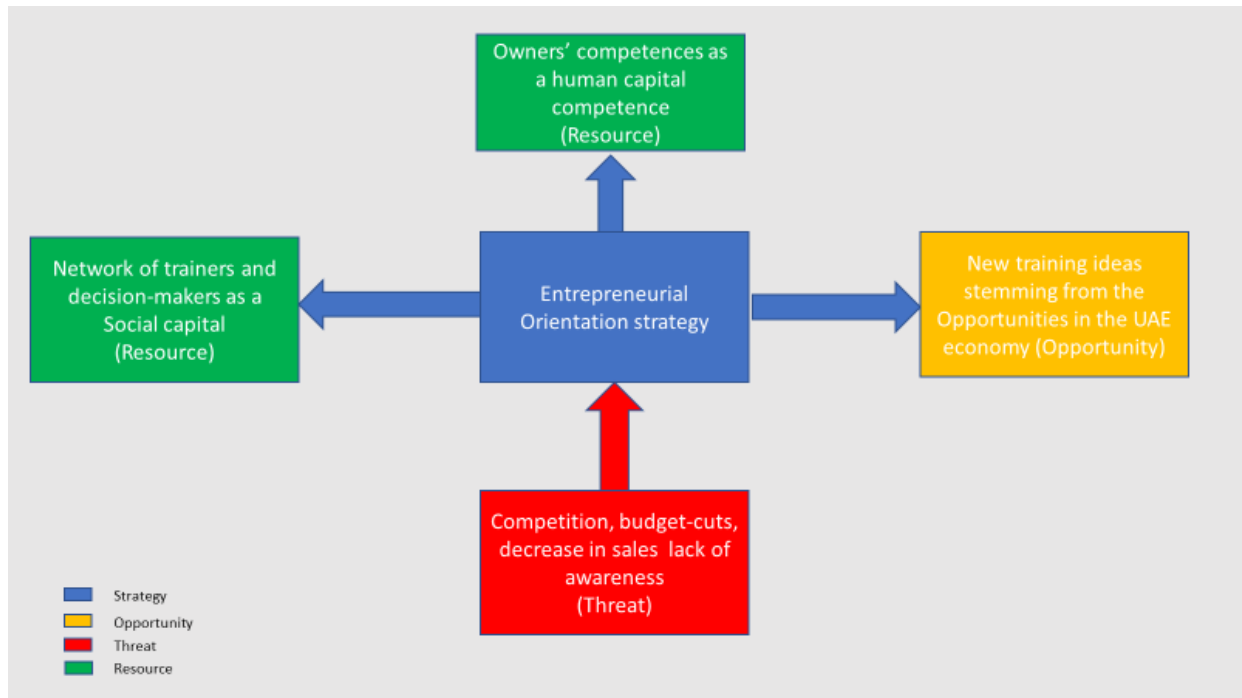


Figure 4-4: Theme 4, Entrepreneurial orientation strategy as a response to external threats.

4.6.5 Customer acquisition strategy as a response to external threats

The customer acquisition strategy is when the company focuses on bringing new customers or clients to the business. This strategy was only followed by Participant D, who owns a loss-

making company. The customer acquisition strategy may allow this company to respond to the current decrease in sales and drop in prices (Table 4-22, statement 1).

To be able to follow this strategy, the company needs to invest in a business development team to conduct sales and marketing activities. The company needs to make sure that they have enough financial capital and office space to support executing this strategy. Hence, the company should be careful to assess whether the return from this strategy will outweigh the associated cost, especially when we consider threats from the industry and the market (Table 4-22, statement 2).

Code	Statement	Participant	Illustrative statements
Relationship between competition (category: threat) and customer acquisition (category: strategy)	1	B	“We are doing our best to bring new clients to the centre..... We are hoping that bringing new clients will compensate for the decrease in sales . We need to widen our client base to be able to compensate for the decrease in the prices ”.
Relationship between human capital and financial capital (category: resources) and customer acquisition strategy (category: strategy).	2	D	“We are reluctant to invest in marketing and business development . This includes hiring a marketing team and placing ads in newspapers. This is because we are not sure whether this investment will pay off, especially when considering the current market conditions”.

Table 4-22: Selected interview data related to customer acquisition strategy as a response to external threats theme

It can be seen from the figure below that this strategy requires an increase in the resources of the company. The resources that are connected to this theme are the number of employees and

financial capital. The data did not identify a capability that is needed to execute this strategy. The strategy can be followed as a response to industry threats.

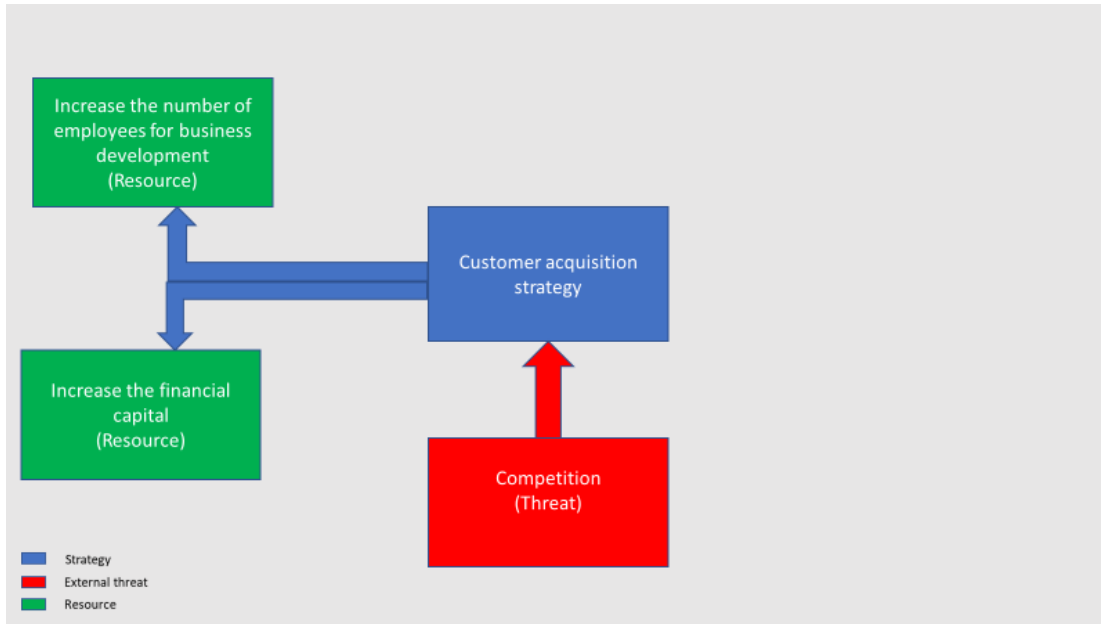


Figure 4-5: Theme 5, Customer acquisition strategy as a response to external threats theme

4.7 Multiple-strategy approach

The research findings identified that the emerging strategic themes are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, each participant pursued more than one strategic choice simultaneously. Table 4-23 indicates the strategic themes that were identified by each participant:

	Profitable company	Breaking-even Companies		Money-losing company
Themes	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
Diversification strategy as a response to the external threats	X	X	X	X
Cost-cutting strategy as a response to the budget cuts		X		X
Customer orientation as a response to opportunities in the market	X	X	X	
Entrepreneurial orientation strategy as a response to external threats	X		X	
Customer acquisition strategy as a response to external threats				X

Table 4-23: Participants' classification according to the strategic themes

The table above shows that all the participants identified the diversification strategy. On the other hand, customers' acquisition strategy was only identified by the loss-making company. No strategic themes were exclusively mentioned by Participant A, who owns a profitable company. Each participant followed three strategic themes. Participants A and C identified the same strategic themes.

4.8 Action research intervention: Presenting the findings to the research participants

This qualitative case study embedded an action research intervention that followed the basic action research routine suggested by Stringer (2013) (see table 3-2). This action research routine

consists of three phases; think, act, and reflect. Stringer (2013) listed several activities that the researcher could implement during the “think” phase. These activities include analysing the data, writing a report, and obtaining participants’ feedback and reflections. These action research activities were implemented in the data analysis phase of this study. I prepared a report that summarized the thematic findings that were presented in this chapter. I sent this report to the four participants of the study by email. I requested to meet again with the participants to present the findings and obtain their feedback and reflections. Two participants agreed to meet again. The remaining two participants did not agree to meet again as they thought that the sent report presented all the inputs they could think of for this study. Each of these two follow-up meetings lasted for about forty-five minutes. The new ideas that emerged from these two sessions are presented in the table below:

Finding	Reflection
<p>The competences of the trainers and the owners are important for small training business success. No data emerged about the competences of other types of employees, such as business development.</p>	<p>Participant B stated that the trainers of his company do sometimes conduct business development activities. This is usually conducted by following up with clients and suggesting new training ideas. Hence, Participant B thought that the competence of the trainers is not only related to the training delivery or the certification of the trainer. It is also related to building good relations with customers, which in turn may bring new business.</p>
<p>The age of the business was not found to be important for small business success.</p>	<p>Participant C did not see the age of business as important if it is to be considered as a proxy for management experience. However, he thought that</p>

	the age of the business is a good proxy for reputation, which is a social capital element.
IT capability was not found to be important for small business success.	Participants B and C thought that this is a logical conclusion because the training business is not IT-intensive.
External threats	Participant B stated that the pressure on his company from the budget cuts and the decline in demand had increased since conducting the initial interview.

Table 4-24: Participants' reflection on the findings of the study

4.9 Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify strategies that a small UAE-based training company may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The conceptual framework of this study was the RBV theory integrated with insights from the neo-classical theory. The sample of the study was four small UAE-based training companies that are similar to XYZ in terms of size and specialization. This chapter presented the findings that emerged from analysing the data from the interviews. The data analysis strategy that was used for this study was the theoretical proposition strategy (Yin, 2009). I used this strategy to group the findings of this study into themes. Specifically, I used the RBV theory and Grant's (1991) approach to RBV strategy development to identify themes that address the sub-questions and the overarching research question of this study.

I illustrated that the strategic themes that the participants identified are not mutually exclusive. Participants simultaneously followed more than one strategic theme at the same time. I did not find a strategic theme that was exclusively mentioned by the profitable company. I presented the identified strategic themes of each participant in table 4-23. I shared the research findings with the four participants of the study. Two participants provided feedback and reflections on the findings of the study. I presented the new findings that emerged from the feedback sessions in table 4-24.

Chapter 5: Discussion and action

5.1 Introduction

This study is concerned with conducting an action research change intervention to solve a real workplace-based problem of the decreasing profitability of a small training company in the UAE. The study aimed at learning from the actions that similar companies to XYZ are following to remain profitable and operational. As a result, this study followed a qualitative case study design by collecting data from the owners of four training companies that are similar to XYZ in terms of size and training specialisations. This study also implemented the action research routine suggested by Stringer (2013). The action research cycle that was implemented in this study is presented in table 3-2.

This chapter consists of two parts. The first part is the discussion, which is concerned with comparing the results of the study with the findings of the literature review. The second part is the action, which is concerned with assessing the current resources and capabilities of XYZ, suggesting a strategy and an action plan, and evaluating the taken actions.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 Sub-question 1: What are the resources that are important to the success of small training companies?

5.2.1.1 The human capital competences that matter for small training business success

As mentioned in the literature review, many studies have found that the competence of human capital is important for small business success (Nwachukwa, 2018; Hyder and Lussier, 2016; Anggadwita and Mustafid, 2014; Lussier and Corman, 1996; Lussier, 1996; Lussier, 1995). The literature related to the training industry also concluded that employing qualified trainers is vital for training companies' success (Rogala, Batko, and Wawak, 2017). This study confirmed that human capital competence is important for the success of small training businesses. This study also identified two types of staff that their competences matter for small business success; namely, the trainers and the owners. The research participants identified the competences that trainers should have; the certification of the trainer and the reputation of the trainer. The study also informed that the competences of the owner are essential for small business success. In the case of the profitable company, the academic designation, certification, reputation, and personal image of the owner were found to be important for the success of his company. As a practitioner, I did not expect that no data would emerge about the competences of other types of employees, especially the business development personnel. A possible explanation for this, which emerged from the follow-up session with one participant, is that trainers could be assigned to conduct business development activities. Trainers tend to spend a long-time with their clients during the training sessions. This allows them to build good relations with the client or suggest follow-up

sessions that could bring new business. In a future investigation, it might be possible to explore whether business development is a competence that the owners of training companies should look for when recruiting new trainers.

5.2.1.2 The link between the number of employees and the strategic decision of the company

In reviewing the literature, most of the studies supported the conclusion that the number of employees is related to small business success (Kachlami and Yazdanfar, 2016; Yazdanfar and Öhman, 2015, Bansal, 2015; Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright, 2013; De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes, 2013). This study offered a different perspective on the effect of the number of employees on small business success by linking the number of employees to the strategy pursued. Specifically, the study concluded that companies that want to follow a diversification strategy need to consider increasing the number of employees. This is because companies that want to diversify to another type of training need to consider hiring trainers that can deliver the new offering. However, some companies decided to follow a cost-cutting strategy, especially when considering the current declining conditions in the economy. Such companies minimized the number of employees to reduce their costs to remain operational. A possible explanation for this might be that the study participants were concerned that they are operating in a declining economy. Hence, one should question whether the impact of the number of employees is linked to the state of the economy.

5.2.1.3 Financial capital as an important resource to eliminate threats and pursue opportunities

As mentioned in the literature review, many studies stated that financial capital is important for small business success. These studies identified two different schools of thought about the level

of financial capital that companies need to have to become successful. The first school of thought advocates that small businesses should maximize their financial capital (Chijioko, 2016; Fabregá and Nicolau, 2016; Bansal, 2015). The second school of thought argues that small businesses should define, and then reach, the optimal level of financial capital (Afrifa and Padachi, 2016; Pais and Gama, 2015). The current study supports the general conclusion of the literature review that financial capital is important for small business success. The study identified that having adequate financial capital is important to overcome external threats, such as the lack of payment. This is aligned with the finding of Fabregá and Nicolau (2016), who found that companies with financial resources were able to survive the economic crisis in Barcelona. Moreover, the research participants indicated that having robust financial capital permits the company to pursue new opportunities. No evidence emerged from the data about the importance of identifying the optimal working capital for maximizing the profitability of small training companies. One should investigate whether the owners of such small companies possess the financial management capability to determine what constitutes an optimal level of working capital.

An important issue for further research is to identify how small businesses can maximize their financial capital. This is an important question, especially when we consider that borrowing from banks is highly challenging for SMEs operating in the UAE (Baby and Joseph, 2016).

5.2.1.4 The social capital elements that are important for small training businesses

The reviewed literature identified social capital as an important resource for small business success. The literature also revealed that social capital has many elements, such as human relations, social network, and community brand. The data analysis identified two elements of

social capital that were considered important for small training business success: network and reputation. Two types of networks were identified as important for small business success. The first is related to the network of trainers, which allows companies to follow a diversification strategy. The second is an international network of friends that allows the company to come up with new training ideas. The reputation of the company and the trainers were also found to be an important aspect of social capital for small business success.

The literature review identified the age of the business as an important resource for small business success. Within the context of the reviewed literature, the age of the business was a proxy for management experience. The data that emerged from the interviews did not identify the age of the business as an important resource for small training business success. In the follow-up sessions, however, one participant stated that he considers the age of the business as a proxy of the company's reputation, which is an element of social capital. The participant highlighted that some big companies, especially in the oil and gas field, only permits companies that are more than three years old to bid for their projects. Hence, the age of the business could be considered as an important element of social capital for small training business success.

5.2.1.5 Offices and licenses as important resources within the UAE training industry context

The data analysis identified licenses and offices as valuable resources for small training business success. These resources were not mentioned in the reviewed literature. A possible explanation for this might be that these resources are more relevant in the context of the UAE than elsewhere. Training activities are not allowed to be conducted in the UAE without a valid license issued by the training authority of the Emirate. For example, no training activity can be conducted in Abu

Dhabi without a valid license issued by the Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training “ACTVET” (ACTVET, n.d.). To obtain a training license, the company should meet several requirements, including having an office with adequate training rooms (ACTVET, n.d.). ACTVET conducts yearly inspections to its licensed companies to ensure that the office centre is maintained and is following the requirements (ACTVET, n.d.). Hence, even companies that rely on offering training at the client’s premises are obliged to maintain adequate office space. Based on this, it could be concluded that licenses and office space are resources that are required by the institutional environment that regulates the training businesses in the UAE. This is aligned with the view of Oliver (1997), who argues that the regulatory environment may require companies to possess certain types of resources.

5.2.2 Sub-question 2: What are the capabilities that are important for small training business success?

5.2.2.1 The managerial capabilities that are needed to martial the social capital of the company

The literature review identified the managers’ capabilities as important for small business success. (Ruiz-Jiménez and del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, 2016; Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015; Arasti, Zandi, and Bahmani, 2014, Keen and Etemad, 2012; Philip, 2011; Thornhill and Amit, 2003). Despite this affirmation, the literature did not provide specific insights into the types of capabilities that the managers should develop to improve the performance of their companies. The findings that emerged from the current study succeeded in identifying two managerial capabilities that are specific to UAE-based small training business context. The first such capability is the matchmaking capability. Matchmaking capabilities are concerned with the

efficient use of the networks of the trainers (as a resource), as it is essential to find a suitable trainer to match the need of the client. The second capability was understanding the clients' business processes. This capability allows the owner to deploy social capital resources and matchmaking capabilities to identify and realize new business opportunities. Hence, it is important to point out that the two management capabilities that this study identified are directly linked to the use of social capital.

5.2.2.2 Surviving external threats by focusing on quality

The reviewed literature illustrated that quality is important for small companies (Sainis et al., 2017; Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015) and training providers (Wawak, Batko, and Rogala, 2017; Rogala, Batko, and Wawak, 2017; De Waal, Frijns, and Mroueh, 2014). The findings of this study concluded that all the participants stressed the importance of quality management for their companies' success. Moreover, the study concluded that quality management helped the participants to survive external threats such as decrease in sales and increase in competition. The quality certificates the participants obtained were similar to those of XYZ.

5.2.2.3 Other capabilities identified in this study

The study findings did not confirm the literature review proposition related to the importance of IT capabilities to small training business success. An explanation of this that emerged from the follow-up session was that the training industry is not IT-intensive.

The study findings did not reveal any evidence related to the relevance of innovation capabilities to small business success. However, the study identified entrepreneurial orientation as a strategy that small businesses may follow to become profitable. Entrepreneurial orientation is concerned

with many entrepreneurial activities, which include innovating new products (John and Sisay, 2014). Hence, perhaps the innovation capability within the context of small training business is more associated with the entrepreneurial orientation of the owner, rather than other resources or capabilities such as information technology or knowledge management.

The study findings did not reveal any evidence related to the relevance of financial management capabilities to small training business success. A possible explanation for this is that the financial management operations that are associated with this type of business are not complex in nature.

5.2.3 Sub-question 3: What are the growth opportunities for small training businesses in the UAE?

The literature review found that the business environment in the UAE offers opportunities for business growth (Al Hashimi, 2018). The UAE government is planning to invest in education and training to build a knowledge-based economy (Alblooshi and May, 2018). Harnessing the full potential of the Emiratis is key to creating a knowledge-based economy (UAE vision 2021 agenda, n.d.). The literature review identified this growth opportunity as associated with the institutional context of the UAE. The findings of the study showed that there are opportunities associated with the UAE business environment. The study found that there is a rising demand for training courses that are aligned with the UAE government's vision. One participant suggested two hot topics that are currently in demand by the government: government excellence and innovation. The findings of the study also confirmed that Emiratization is an opportunity for small business growth.

The literature review suggested that the UAE government recognizes the importance of vocational training (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2017). The government considers vocational and technical training as a flexible training system that helps in employing Emiratis (Salama, 2015). This growth opportunity was also considered to be related to the institutional context that surrounds XYZ. The study participants are active in providing vocational training in the UAE. The findings of the study referred to one type of vocational training that is currently in demand, which is mandatory training in oil and gas.

The literature suggested that there is a rising demand for corporate e-learning in the Middle East, which may represent an opportunity that training companies could pursue to achieve growth and profitability. The findings of this study doubted the relevance of e-learning to small training business. The study showed that most of the training provided by small training companies is short-term training that requires attendance, certification, and post-exam. The study participants thought that this could only be achieved by Instructor-Led Training (ILT). I tend to disagree with the research participants that e-learning cannot accommodate the attendance, certification, and post-exam requirement. During 2017 and 2018, I attempted to introduce e-learning as part of the training that is offered by XYZ and was able to subscribe to a platform that enabled us to host online training. The platform keeps an audit trail of the participants' attendance during the whole duration of the training. I suggested to the clients that they could hold a post-exam in their computer labs, to be completed by all the participants under the supervision of the clients. However, clients still preferred Instructor-led training. Hence, I agree with the conclusion of the study that e-learning may not be an opportunity for small training businesses locally for the time

being. However, I may offer a different interpretation of these findings, which may be related to the client's reluctance to change and the difficulty of the instructors implementing the change.

5.2.4 Sub-question 4: What are the threats that are limiting small training businesses in the UAE to become profitable?

The literature showed that the global decrease in oil and gas prices led to a decrease in government expenditure in the UAE (Mahmah and Kandil, 2018). Governmental training budgets tend to decline when government expenditure is reduced (Al-Nuseirat and Biygautane, 2014). Both threats are associated with government responses or actions, which classify them as threats that stem from the institutional context. The findings of the current study confirmed that small training companies experienced a decline in demand as an outcome of the budget cuts implemented by the clients. The study findings also identified further threats related to the state of the economy; specifically, non-payment risks and increasing competition.

The study identified the lack of awareness as another threat that limits the profitability of small business success. Lack of awareness refers to the inability of the customer to recognize the importance of training or its impact on their employees. This threat prevents the company from pursuing new opportunities such as introducing new training ideas as a follow-up to previously delivered training.

5.2.5 The overarching research question: What strategies can XYZ implement to become profitable and remain in business?

5.2.5.1 Diversification strategies as a response to external threats

The first strategic theme that emerged from this study was that diversification is a strategy that small training businesses may follow to respond to external threats. This finding broadly supports other studies linking the successful performance of small businesses to diversification strategies. For example, De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes (2013) concluded that SMEs could pursue growth opportunities by using diversification activities, which may increase their profitability. Detarsio, North, and Ormaetxea (2016) noted that diversification was one of the strategies that Argentinian SMEs followed to survive the financial crisis. Alawa and Quisenberry (2015) suggested that following diversification strategies may help small companies to avoid the decline in their product life cycle. Two of these studies concluded that diversification strategies could help small companies to react to crisis conditions (Detarsio, North, and Ormaetxea, 2016; Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015). This is another alignment with the finding of this study that small training companies may use diversification strategies to respond to external threats.

One study argued that diversification is not possible within a small business context (Garagorri, 2016). This is because small companies suffer from the liability of smallness and scarcity of resources. Hence, small companies do not have excess resources that can help them to diversify (Garagorri, 2016). However, another study concluded that the efficient use of intangible resources allows small companies to overcome the lack of resources and implement diversification strategies (De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes, 2013). This study identified six

resources that are important to follow a diversification strategy. Three of these resources could be classified as tangible resources, which are the office, the financial capital, and the employees. The other three could be classified as intangible resources, which are licenses, human capital competences and networks. Hence, the findings of this study tend to give equal weight to both tangible and intangible resources.

I tend to believe that the ability of a company to conduct a diversification strategy by solely relying on intangible resources could be related to the type of diversification that the company seeks to implement. Within the context of XYZ, it may be possible for the company to diversify within the training industry by relying on its existing intangible resources. The company might be able to identify new training programmes and seek new clients by exploiting its current intangible resources. However, XYZ may not be able to diversify into other industries by solely relying on its current intangible resources. The company will have to acquire new licenses and recruit new employees to be able to service a new industry. Hence, I tend to conclude that the scarcity of tangible resources may constrain the ability of the company to diversify into other businesses.

5.2.5.2 Responding to external threats by reducing the need for resources

The second finding of this study was that cost-cutting strategies are important for small training business success when responding to budget cuts and a decrease in sales. This finding confirmed the conclusion drawn from the literature review, which stated that maintaining tight control on costs is one of the strategies that small businesses could follow to survive a declining market (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014; Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos, 2014). This finding is also

aligned with the conclusion of Lumpkin et al. (2010), who argued that microenterprises are good at bootstrapping, since they can operate at low costs without incurring significant losses.

This study concluded that small training businesses might follow a cost-cutting strategy by decreasing the number of employees and office rent. The previously mentioned studies stated some costs that were important to reduce for their studied samples. Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos (2014) mentioned that the commercial enterprises that were included in the sample of their study reduced packaging costs and suppliers' costs. Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) studied SMEs in various sectors and concluded that companies focused on maintaining low production costs. However, these costs do not apply to a training company. Hence, I was not able to find any insights from the literature to elaborate on the findings of this study related to the resources that small companies may reduce to follow cost-cutting strategies. This may be due to the different characteristics between the training industry and those of the previously reviewed studies.

It is important to point out that XYZ has already implemented cost-cutting strategies by minimizing the number of employees and renting a reasonably priced office. Hence, the cost-cutting practices that XYZ may further implement might be minimal.

5.2.5.3 Customer orientation strategy as a response to external threats

This study concluded that a customer orientation strategy is vital for small training business success, especially when responding to external threats. This finding supports evidence from previous research that concluded that small businesses should focus on their customers to enhance their profitability when the market is unstable (Nwachukwu 2018; Akaeze, 2016). This

finding also broadly supports evidence from other studies that linked customer orientation and customer satisfaction to small business success (Lonial and Carter, 2017; Alrawi, Alrawi, and Alrawi, 2013).

This study concluded that small training companies might follow a customer-oriented strategy by developing training programmes that fit the exact needs of the customers. This matches the finding of Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017), who concluded that providing training that is unique and adjusted to customers' needs is essential to a training company's success. Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017) also concluded that hiring qualified trainers is important for training companies' success. This study also identified qualified trainers as an important resource that can help small training companies to implement several strategies, including a customer-oriented strategy.

This study found that it is crucial to identify new training ideas that stem from the client's need. This is aligned with one of the findings of Lonial and Carter (2017), who reported that some small companies monitored the changes in the regulatory environment and evaluated how they may influence the trends and development in the market. Similarly, Pervan, Curak, and Kramaric (2017) concluded that small companies should develop the capability to recognize, collect and analyse data related to changes in the customers, markets, and supplies.

5.2.5.4 Entrepreneurial orientation and small business success

This study found that entrepreneurial orientation is a strategy that small training businesses may follow to respond to industry threats. This finding broadly supports the conclusions of other studies in this area linking successful or enhanced small firms' performance with entrepreneurial

orientation (Andersén and Samuelsson, 2016; Lonial and Carter, 2015). This finding supports previous conclusions by Anggadwita and Mustafid (2013), who found entrepreneurial aspects to be important for SMEs' success in a competitive environment.

The study concluded that having a network of trainers and decision-makers is an important resource that is needed to execute an entrepreneurially oriented strategy. Philip (2011) also concluded that a social network is important for an SME's success. The author reported that a social network "helps entrepreneurs to reduce risks and transaction costs, improve access to business ideas, knowledge, and capital" (Philip, 2011, p. 131). Hence, it could be concluded that this study supports the finding of Philip (2011) about the importance of networks for the success of SMEs. It is important to point out that Philip (2011) stated different types of support that the network could offer, as opposed to those identified in this study. Hence, it might be suggested that the type of support that the network offers to small businesses may depend on the context of the company.

This study found that small training companies may develop new training programmes by focusing on opportunities that stem from the country's vision and plan. This could be interpreted as meaning that small training companies in the UAE can develop new training offerings based on information that is collected from market scanning. This is aligned with the findings from the literature review that stated that entrepreneurs must monitor the environment of the business and modify strategies in case of changes in this environment (Pervan, Curak, and Kramaric, 2017; Alawa and Quisenberry, 2015).

The literature review informed that small companies might have to demonstrate other factors or orientations to be able to exploit EO as a strategy (Andersén and Samuelsson, 2016; Lonial and Carter, 2015; Lumpkin et al., 2010). The findings of the study concluded that participants followed more than one strategy simultaneously. Participants who reported that they implemented EO as a strategy also followed diversification and customer orientation strategies.

5.2.5.5 The relevance of the customer acquisition strategy

This study found that companies may follow a customer acquisition strategy when responding to external threats. This finding was reported by one participant only, who belonged to a loss-making company. The reviewed literature did not provide enough evidence about the relevance of a customer-acquisition strategy for small business profitability or survival. Only one study referred to the importance of customer acquisition as a part of a holistic, customer-centric strategy (Nwachukwu, 2018). Hence, I tend to believe that there is little evidence from the findings of the study and theory about the relevance of this strategy to small business success. Moreover, the findings of this study illustrated that implementing this strategy requires an increase in financial capital and hiring more employees. Hence, applying this strategy could be challenging, as companies need to make sure that the benefits of implementing this strategy outweigh the associated costs. This could be more challenging when considering the external threats stemming from the economy and the industry.

5.2.5.6 Multiple approach to strategy

This study found that the emerging strategic themes are not mutually exclusive. This is because all the small training companies that participated in this study adopted several strategies

simultaneously. This finding supports the conclusions of other studies in the area of small business strategy. For example, Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) noted that SMEs followed a multiple-strategy approach when operating in adverse economic conditions. The authors also noted that multidimensional or hybrid strategies outperformed single strategies when operating in adverse economic conditions. Mosakowski (1993) also concluded that entrepreneurial companies might follow focus and differentiation strategies simultaneously to improve their economic performance, which is aligned with the conclusion that companies can follow a multiple approach to strategy. In broad terms, the finding of this study related to the multiple strategy approach may be considered to be consistent with the shift of emphasis in the management literature from strategic purity to strategy hybridization (Salavou, 2015). This implies that small business owners need to be aware of the possibility of combining various strategies. This may be related to the ability of the owners to reconfigure their existing capabilities and resources to be able to implement such multidimensional strategies.

5.3 The action

This study followed Stringer's (2013) basic action research routine. This action research routine is composed of three phases; look, think, and act. The look phase is concerned with gathering relevant information and describing the situation. This study implemented the look phase by involving the owners of XYZ in framing the research question and practising reflection. The think phase involves exploring and analysing what is happening and interpreting and explaining why things are as they are. The study implemented the think phase by analysing the data and obtaining reflection and feedback from the research participants on the findings of the study. The third phase is the act phase. According to Stringer (2013), this phase involves three activities;

planning the action, implementing the action, and evaluating the action. The action research intervention that was implemented in this study is presented in table 3-2. The three activities of the act phase will be presented in the following sections.

5.3.1 Planning the action

This study aimed to explore strategies that a small UAE-based training company may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The findings of the study identified five possible strategic themes that small UAE-based training companies may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The study also concluded that the five strategic themes that emerged are not mutually exclusive. Having discussed the findings of the study, it is now important to assess the extent to which each of the identified strategic themes fits the context of XYZ. It is also important to examine how XYZ can combine some of the identified strategic themes to develop a hybrid strategy for XYZ. To be able to review the applicability of the findings of the study to the context of XYZ, I will adopt the RBV-based practical framework for strategy proposed by Grant (1991) (see Figure 2-2) by suggesting a strategy that optimizes the use of resources and capabilities to exploit external opportunities and limit the effect of external threats.

In the next sections, I will assess the current resources and capabilities of XYZ vis-à-vis the resources and capabilities that were defined as important by each strategic theme. This will help me to identify the strategic themes that XYZ can execute based on its current resources and capabilities. I will then propose a hybrid approach to strategy. This hybrid strategy will illustrate how the resources and capabilities may be configured to perform the suggested strategy. I will identify the resources or capabilities that XYZ may need to develop or acquire to be able to

execute the selected strategy. I will present the action plan that needs to be implemented to execute the defined strategy. Finally, I will provide an evaluation of the actions that have been taken.

5.3.1.1 Assessment of the current resources of XYZ

The findings of the study identified five strategic themes that small UAE-based training companies may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The findings also identified the resources that are important for the execution of each strategy. Most of these resources were important for executing more than one strategic theme. Table 5-1 identifies these resources and assesses them based on the current resources of XYZ:

Resource	Diversification	Cost-cutting	Customer orientation	Ent orientation	Customer acquisition	XYZ assessment
Financial capital	X				X	Limited financial capital
Licenses	X		X			Oil and gas, healthcare
Human capital competences	X		X			Qualified trainers in oil and gas and healthcare
Office	X	X				Small office space
Network	X			X		An extensive network of trainers and clients
Number of Employees	X	X			X	Eight employees

Table 5-1: The assessment of the current resources of XYZ

The table above shows that financial capital is needed to execute the customer acquisition strategy. This financial capital is needed to hire business development employees and to increase the current office space. XYZ owners have limited financial capital. They are also reluctant to make further investments, given the current declining demand in the market. Hence, XYZ

owners are not willing to follow this strategy. It is also important to point out that the loss-making company followed this strategy. This supports the current reluctance of the owners of XYZ to follow this strategy, as there is no evidence that this strategy can increase profitability.

The table also shows that financial capital is needed to follow a diversification strategy. In this strategy, financial capital is needed to hire new trainers and to obtain new licenses. Diversification can be done either within the training industry or in other industries, such as consultancies and events. The limited financial resources of XYZ may suggest that the company is also not capable of following a diversification strategy. This is aligned with previous research, which suggests that small companies cannot diversify because they do not have enough resources (Garagorri, 2016; Jones and Sisay, 2014). De Carvalho, Serrasqueiro, and Nunes (2013) concluded that SMEs could diversify by using their intangible assets efficiently. Similarly, Chatterjee and Wernerfelt (1988) concluded that the presence of intangible assets would enable companies to follow a related diversification. I believe that XYZ can diversify within the training industry by exploiting two of its current intangible resources, which are licenses and networks. XYZ can increase its offering within its current training specializations. This type of diversification does not require the acquisition of further licenses. XYZ can also hire trainers on an assignment basis to deliver the newly diversified training, rather than hiring trainers permanently. XYZ can reach out to such trainers because it possesses a strong and diversified network.

As mentioned in the previous section, licenses were found to be an important resource for small training business success. Table 5-1 also shows that licenses are important for following a customer-orientation strategy. Hence, XYZ can follow a customer-oriented strategy because it

has the required licenses to service the training needs of its clients in the oil and gas and healthcare sector.

Human capital competences were defined as important for executing diversification and customer orientation strategies. XYZ has competent and qualified trainers. Hence, XYZ can follow a diversification and / or customer-oriented strategy.

Increasing the office space was found to be important for executing a diversification strategy. XYZ has a small office space, which may be considered a constraint for following a diversification strategy. However, I concluded in a previous paragraph that XYZ could diversify by exploiting its existing intangible assets. This implies that XYZ is capable of diversifying without the need to increase the size of its current office space. Decreasing the office rent was found to be important for following a cost-cutting strategy. XYZ has already decreased its current space to the maximum as an outcome of the finding of this study.

Having a strong network was identified as an important resource for executing a diversification strategy and an entrepreneurially oriented strategy. XYZ possesses a strong network of trainers and clients. Hence, XYZ can execute a diversification strategy and / or an entrepreneurially oriented strategy.

Increasing the number of employees was found to be important to follow a diversification strategy. As stated before, XYZ does not possess the needed financial capital to hire new employees. However, XYZ is capable of diversifying by focusing on exploiting its existing intangible resources. Hence, XYZ may be able to diversify without the need to increase the number of employees. Increasing the number of employees was found to be important to follow

a customer-acquisition strategy. I have illustrated in a previous paragraph that XYZ cannot follow this strategy because it does not possess the needed financial resources to do so. Decreasing the number of employees was found to be important to follow a cost-cutting strategy. XYZ already has a small number of employees, which makes it difficult for the company to decrease the number of employees further.

In conclusion, the assessment of the current resources of XYZ revealed that the company possesses the needed resources to execute three strategies. These strategies are diversification within the training industry, entrepreneurial orientation strategy, and customer-orientation strategy. XYZ does not possess the resources to diversify into other industries or to follow a customer acquisition strategy. XYZ is already bootstrapping. It has a limited number of employees. It has already decreased its office rent as an outcome of the findings of this study. Hence, it can be concluded that XYZ is already following a cost-cutting strategy.

5.3.1.2 Assessment of the current capabilities of XYZ

The findings of the study identified two types of management capabilities that are important for executing two strategic themes. The first management capability was the matchmaking capability, which is the ability to pick the trainer who can best address the training needs of the client. The matchmaking capability was defined as important for following a diversification strategy. XYZ possesses this capability, which allows the company to follow a diversification strategy. The second management capability was knowing the processes the clients follow for conducting business. Knowing the processes was defined as important for following a customer-

oriented strategy. XYZ possesses this capability, which allows the company to follow a customer-oriented strategy.

5.3.1.3 XYZ's hybrid strategy

The previous sections have assessed the current resources and capabilities of XYZ vis-à-vis the requirements of the five identified strategic themes. I concluded in these sections that the current resources and capabilities allow XYZ to follow three strategies. These strategies are diversification, customer orientation, and entrepreneurial orientation. I also concluded that the lack of financial capital and the reluctance of the owners of XYZ to make further investment makes it not possible for XYZ to follow a customer acquisition strategy. I also illustrated that XYZ is operating at a minimum level of costs, which implies that it is already following a cost-cutting strategy. In the following paragraphs, I will evaluate whether it is possible to combine the three strategic themes into one hybrid strategy that fits the context of XYZ.

Having re-visited the three identified strategic themes, I concluded that they all seek to identify new markets to serve. The diversification theme was concerned with introducing new products or services to the market to respond to external threats. The customer-orientation theme aimed at introducing new training ideas stemming from the continuous assessment of the clients' needs. The entrepreneurial orientation theme aimed at introducing new training ideas to the market based on the opportunities in the UAE economy. I also concluded that the three strategic themes were triggered by an external threat. Based on the above, I concluded that XYZ may be able to diversify through customer orientation. This will imply that XYZ can seek to diversify its current training offerings by introducing new training ideas that stem from the assessment of the needs

of the existing customers. Also, XYZ can diversify through entrepreneurial orientation. This implies that XYZ will diversify within the training industry by introducing new training ideas based on the evaluation of the opportunities in the UAE economy. Figure 5-1 presents the hybrid strategic framework that could be implemented in XYZ, drawing on the findings of this study and the previous discussion of the applicability of these findings on the context of XYZ:

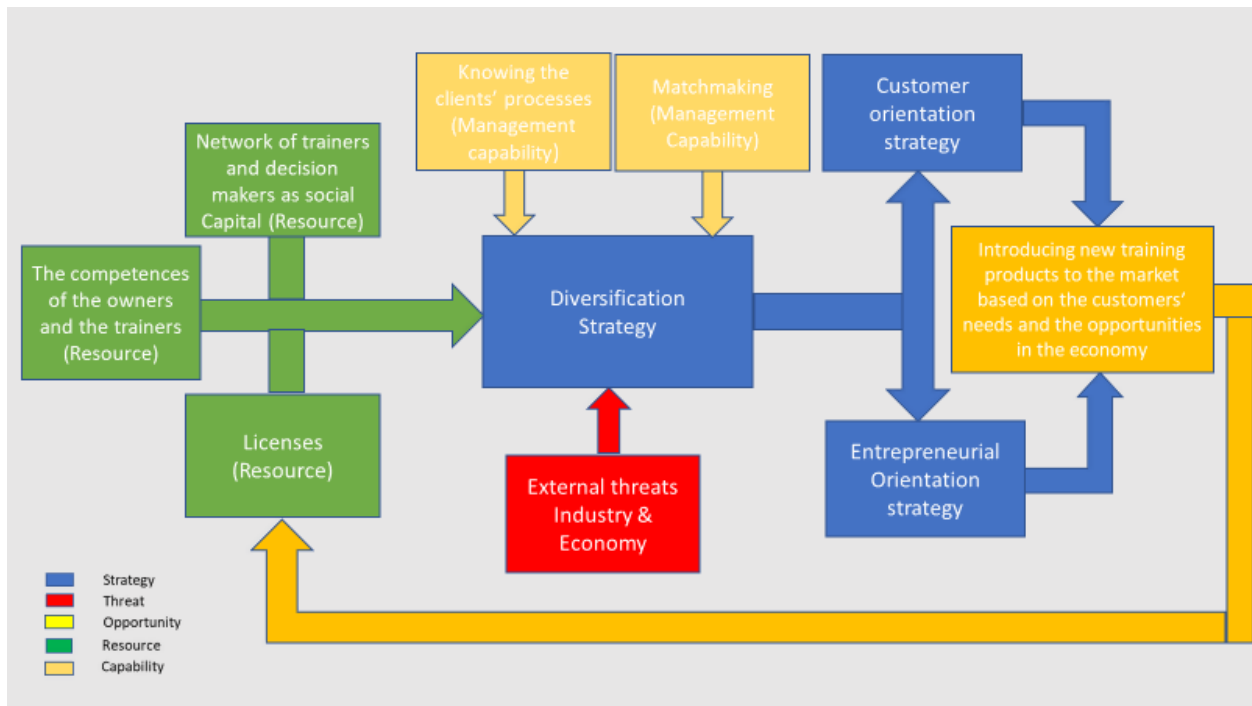


Figure 5-1: The suggested hybrid strategy for XYZ

The above figure illustrates that XYZ has intangible resources; namely, the licenses, the competences of the owners and trainers, and the network of trainers and decision-makers. XYZ also possesses matchmaking capabilities and the capability of knowing the processes followed by the clients. These resources and capabilities enable XYZ to follow a diversification strategy. The diversification strategy that XYZ can follow is by introducing new training services to the

customers. XYZ can introduce new training topics by following a customer-oriented strategy. A customer-oriented strategy allows the company to introduce new training ideas by assessing the needs of the customers. XYZ can follow an entrepreneurially oriented strategy by identifying new training topics that are stemming from the opportunities that exist in the UAE market. This approach may require XYZ's owners to invest in acquiring new licenses. This hybrid strategy may help XYZ to address the current work-based problem of the decrease in profitability, which this study found to be an outcome of the industry and economy threats.

Some studies have demonstrated evidence of a relationship between diversification, customer orientation, and entrepreneurial orientation. Singh et al. (2013) concluded that entrepreneurial characteristics and customer orientation were significant factors, among others, that contributed to the decision of small companies to diversify. This provides evidence about the interrelations that may exist among these three strategies. Lonial and Cartier (2015) concluded that market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, and learning orientation jointly provide a positive advantage to small firms. Customer orientation is considered as a component of market orientation (Mavondo, 2010). The conclusion of Lonial and Cartier (2015) may provide evidence about the possibility of combining customer orientation and entrepreneurial orientation to enhance the profitability of small businesses. Hence, it can be concluded that there is evidence in the literature about the relationship between the three strategies. This evidence may broadly support the hybrid strategy that is suggested for this study.

5.3.1.4 The action plan

This research aimed to solve a real workplace-based problem of declining profitability by helping the owners of XYZ to identify and implement strategies that can help them to move from an unprofitable state to a profitable state. Thus far, this research achieved one of its objectives by exploring the strategies that XYZ can follow and suggesting a hybrid strategy that fits the context of XYZ. However, the ultimate value of this research is to create actionable knowledge that can bring organizational change. To achieve this change, a meeting was conducted with the other owners of XYZ to discuss the hybrid strategy and suggest actions for implementation. Figure 5-2 presents the action plan that emerged as an outcome of the data analysis of this minute of meeting. Evidence of the data analysis process that led to the generation of this action plan is presented in Appendix I.

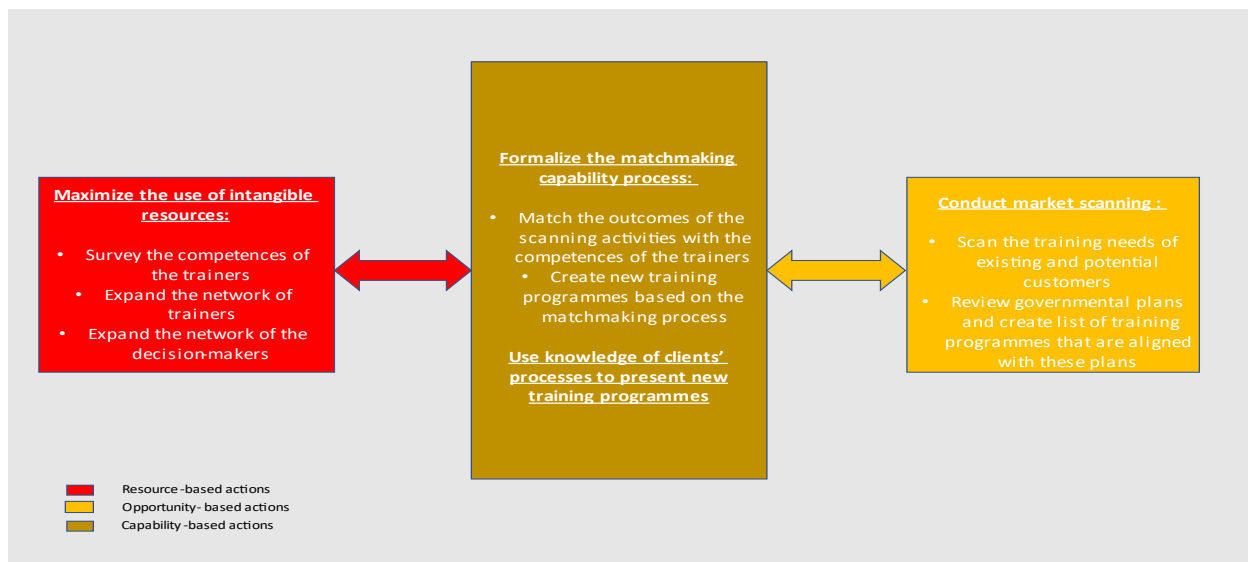


Figure 5-2: The action plan

As represented in Figure 5-2, the suggested actions are grouped into three categories: resource-based actions, opportunity-based actions, and capability-based actions. The final outcome of the

action plan is the identification of new training programmes that the company could develop to diversify its offering. In the next sections, I will describe the actions that have been taken as an outcome of the above action plan. I will also present an evaluation of the taken actions.

5.3.2 Taking the action

The owners of the company assessed the competences of their trainers. They concluded that their trainers could deliver training in management and IT. Diversifying into IT training requires significant investment in IT infrastructure, but XYZ has limited financial resources. Hence, the owners agreed not to diversify into IT courses.

The trainers of XYZ also identified that they can deliver management and Project Management Professional training (PMP). The owners of the company scanned the market to assess the demand for management courses. The market assessment revealed that the competition in management training and PMP courses is high. Hence, the owners of XYZ were not able to matchmake these trainers' competences with an external opportunity. Consequently, the owners agreed not to diversify into management and PMP courses.

The owners of the company scanned the training needs of their existing and potential clients. The owners of the company observed that there is an increasing demand for security and cybersecurity training among oil and gas companies. The owners expanded their network and identified competent trainers who can cooperate with XYZ to deliver security and cybersecurity training. As a result, XYZ started promoting this new offering.

The scanning activities revealed that one of the healthcare clients is looking for professional development activities other than training. The owners of XYZ evaluated other methods of

professional development with their trainers. They suggested organising conferences and workshops that are aligned with the training needs of the client. The owners proposed this to the client. The proposal was approved. XYZ is now assisting the client in organizing a specialized conference and workshop.

The owners of XYZ reviewed the governmental plans. The owners concluded that innovation is a hot topic in many sectors in the UAE, including healthcare. The company expanded its network and identified trainers that can deliver such training. XYZ started promoting this new offering in healthcare innovation.

5.3.3 Evaluating the action

After five months from putting the action plan into execution, the owners of XYZ met to evaluate the taken actions. The minutes of meeting related to this phase of action research included a table that stated the actions taken, the outcomes, and the suggested follow-up actions.

I present this table in Appendix J. The key points that were presented in this table are:

- Helping one client to organise workshops and conferences could open up a new diversification opportunity for the company. The owners of the company may have to consider acquiring new resources if they want to diversify into this new domain.
- It is still early to evaluate the outcomes of introducing new training in innovation, security, and cybersecurity as clients are still assessing our proposals.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study departed from a real work-based problem of the decreasing profitability of a small UAE-based training company. The objective of this study was to identify a strategy and an action plan that can help XYZ to become profitable and remain in business. This study implemented a qualitative case study design that collected data through interviews and documents. This study followed a purposeful sampling strategy by selecting four UAE-based training companies that are similar to XYZ in terms of size and training specialisation. This sampling strategy allowed me to explore the actions and the strategies that other similar companies are following to become profitable and remain in business. The study findings identified the resources, capabilities, external threats, and external opportunities that small training businesses need to consider when formulating their strategies. The study also identified five strategies that small training businesses may implement, which are: diversification, customer orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, cost-cutting, and customer-acquisition. The study also showed that these five strategies are not mutually exclusive, which implies that companies may follow more than one of these strategies simultaneously. The study then integrated Grant's (1991) RBV practical approach to strategy analysis with insights from the neo-institutional theory and suggested a strategy and an action plan that fits the context of XYZ. The study highlighted the actions that have been taken and evaluated their outcomes. Hence, it can be concluded that this study achieved its objective of developing a strategy and an action plan that may help XYZ to become operational and remain in business. In the following sections, I will present the theoretical

contribution, the practical contribution, the study limitation, directions for future studies, and personal learning and reflections.

6.2 Theoretical contribution

This study addressed three research gaps. The first research gap is the lack of research on what makes training companies in the UAE successful. This study attempted to reduce this lack of research by focusing on how small UAE-based training companies should deploy their resources and capabilities to implement profitable strategies.

The second research gap that this study addressed is the lack of research about what makes training companies, regardless of their location, successful and profitable. For instance, Rogala, Batko, and Wawak (2017) observed that there is little research about the management and efficiency of training companies. This study contributed to reducing this gap by identifying the resources, capabilities, and strategies that small training providers need to consider to improve their profitability.

The third research gap is related to the fragmentation and subjectivity of the research on small business success. Researchers have identified various factors that could contribute to the profitability, growth, and sustainability of small businesses. Despite this extensive research, we still do not have a clear picture of what makes small companies achieve superior performance (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014). Pervan et al. (2017) argued that understanding the performance of a firm is linked to the characteristics of the industry. Hence, another research gap that this study attempted to address is the fragmentation of research on what makes small

companies successful. This was achieved by identifying the factors that were found to be significant to the success of small UAE-based training companies.

Grant's framework of the resource-based view of strategy is one of the most highly cited and applied frameworks in strategic management (Rashidirad et al., 2015). This study contributed to the field of management strategy by illustrating that this framework could be integrated with neo-institutional theory to be applied to a small business context. The study followed the steps identified by Grant for competitive strategy development. The study identified the resources and capabilities that are important to small training business success. It then identified strategies that best exploit the firms' resources and capabilities relative to external opportunities.

6.3 Practical contribution

This study identified five strategies that small UAE-based training companies may follow to become profitable and remain in business. As part of the ethical consideration of this study, I provided the study participants with a summary of the findings. Hence, the participants of this study may benefit from the five strategies suggested by implementing them in the context of their companies. This may help these companies to increase the sustainability of their operations and increase in profitability, especially when considering the severity of the external threats that were identified in the industry and the economy.

This study supported previous research that concluded that small businesses usually follow a hybrid approach to strategy (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014; Mosakowski, 1993). This finding could provide insights to owners of small training businesses about how to integrate more than one strategy to increase the competitiveness and profitability of their companies.

This study identified the resources and capabilities that are important for small training business success. It also concluded that the challenge of being a small business with limited resources can be overcome by focusing on the efficient use of intangible resources. The owners of small training companies may benefit from this finding by focusing on strengthening these identified resources and capabilities, which may help them to improve their performance and remain in business.

The study identified potential opportunities in the market. The owners of small training companies may benefit from this finding by marshalling their resources and capabilities to capture these identified opportunities.

6.4 Study limitation

This section will describe the limitations of this study that existed due to its context and research design. I grouped the limitations of this study into the following categories: the exploratory nature of the study; the limited generalizability of the findings of this study; and limitations related to the action research intervention.

6.4.1 The exploratory nature of the study

This study was designed to explore strategies that a small UAE-based training company may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The research integrated the RBV theory and the neo-institutional theory to identify how small UAE-based training companies should deploy their resources and capabilities to respond to opportunities and threats in the external environment. The study identified five strategic themes that illustrated the relationships between Grant's components of strategies, which are resources, capabilities, strategies, threats, and

opportunities. The relationships between these resources are not empirically tested, which is a key limitation of this study.

6.4.2 The limited generalizability of the findings of this study

The sample size of four small training companies limits the generalizability of this study beyond the population of this study. This is because the population of this study does not represent the entire small, training businesses population in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. It is limited to companies that have two to ten employees and to companies that are specialised in oil and gas or healthcare training. Hence, the findings of this study may not apply to small, training businesses that are different in size and scope or not located in Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

Moreover, this study is concerned with the profitability of a small training company. The small business population is not a homogenous group (North and Varvakis; 2016; Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright, 2013). Small businesses are started for different reasons, run by various types of owners, and have different organizational characteristics (Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright, 2013). Small business characteristics are dependent on the business sector, the market they serve, the product they produce, macroeconomic context, and support institution (North and Varvakis, 2016). The success factors of small businesses are largely subjective and fragmented (Khan and Quaddus, 2017). There is significant variation among factors that lead to the success or failure of small businesses (Marom and Lussier, 2014). This represents another challenge for the generalizability of the findings of the study, which are influenced by the location and the industry of this study.

On top of this, the definition of SME is problematic for researchers (Baporikar, 2015). This is because this definition usually involves various thresholds (such as assets, number of employees, and turnover), which vary from one country to another (Baporikar, 2015). Hence, the generalizability of this study's findings is also constrained by the definition of a small business that was chosen for this study.

6.4.3 Participants' feedback limitation

I shared the results of the study with the research participants. I asked the participants to give their feedback on the results of the investigation. Two participants accepted to review the study findings and provided feedback. The other two participants acknowledged the receipt of the results but did not offer any feedback on the results. This may indicate that the participants had a different level of commitment to this research, which may be considered as a limitation of this study.

6.5 Direction for future studies

The limitations of this research may suggest areas for future investigation. This study suggested five strategic themes that small training businesses may follow to become profitable and remain in business. The strategic themes identified several relationships among Grant's components of strategy, which are resources, capabilities, strategies, threats, and opportunities. Further research may use quantitative methods to empirically test the relationships among the strategic components of each identified strategic theme. This will help to understand the relationships' salience, which will help to determine the most dominant strategy components and relationships that small training companies need to focus on to improve their performance.

The results of this study could be improved by increasing the sample size. A larger sample may help in providing a more precise result that represents a full illustration of the entire population. The findings could be improved by expanding the profile of the research participants, which was limited to the owners of the companies. Expanding the profile of the participants by including the employees of the companies may complement or offer new insights to the findings of the study.

This study was limited to companies that are located in Abu Dhabi or Dubai. A further study could cover other geographical locations to examine whether the same themes would emerge. Similarly, future research may cover other industries, which will help in comparing the emerging themes in different industrial settings.

6.6 Personal Learning and reflections

This study helped me to learn more about my workplace. Reviewing various literature related to the strategies for success and growth of small and training businesses provided me with a lot of knowledge about the most common factors and actions that help small companies to become successful. Using the RBV as a conceptual framework made me visualize XYZ as a bundle of resources and capabilities. This enabled me to learn more about the internal strengths and capabilities of XYZ. It also provided me with ideas about how to improve the performance of the company, which was the hybrid strategy that I presented in the previous section. I learned a lot from the insights that were provided by the study's participants during the interviews. I was able to determine the common problems and actions that were taken by similar companies, which complemented my existing knowledge about the training industry in the UAE. Finally, reflection sessions with the other owners to discuss the outcomes of my study helped the owners of XYZ to

develop a shared vision about the actions that need to be implemented to improve the performance of the company.

This DBA programme helped me to develop a more rigorous approach to my professional practice. I am now applying some of the learned research practices and action learning ethos to solve new problems or explore new opportunities. For example, I have recently co-launched a new digital platform business. During the ideation phase, I created efficient means of communication with my partners, which helped us to cogenerated knowledge and reflect on our discussions and actions. I applied a relevant practical framework that I found in a scholarly article, which helped me to precisely define the value proposition that this new platform will deliver to each stakeholder. I conducted extensive research to evaluate the new business idea and assess the risks and opportunities. I conducted several focus groups with the identified stakeholders to review the prototype of the new platform. I used the qualitative research skills that I acquired from this programme to record and analyse the data that was generated from these focus groups.

Learning about the principal epistemological debates had a significant impact on my personal development. I was amazed to learn how each philosophical approach may lead to different conclusions. I find myself applying my novice understanding of these debates to explain why people may have different perceptions or narratives from the same experience.

I identify myself as an entrepreneur. I was involved in founding and managing various small businesses in different sectors. I was always involved in setting and implementing strategies in these businesses. This DBA project provided me with theoretical knowledge about small

business strategies. It also helped me to learn to develop actionable strategies that are grounded in theories. This complemented my practical experience in strategy formulation in a small business context. Hence, I am now able to present myself as a small business strategist, which may open new career opportunities for me.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participation Consent Form



Committee on Research Ethics

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project:

An exploration of small business profit strategies: A qualitative case study of a small training business in the UAE.

Researcher: Karim Tabah

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 7 October 2018 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.
4. I agree to take part in the above study.

5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained. The researcher will be assigning aliases or numbers when referring to me or to the organization that I represent. It will not be possible to identify me in any publications.
6. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the purpose of conducting this research.
7. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
8. I understand that this consent form preserves and does not waive any of my legal rights.

Participant Name

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Principal Investigator:

Karim Tabah

Jumeirah Lake Towers, Cluster: C. Dubai - UAE

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Version 1.2 – 07/11/2018

Appendix B: Participation Information Sheet



Committee on Research Ethics

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Study: “An exploration of small business profit strategies: A qualitative case study of a small training business in the UAE”.

Invitation:

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your business partners, friends and relatives if you wish. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for reading this.

Karim Tabah

DBA Student ID: H00031485

1. What is the purpose of the study?

This research focuses on XYZ Training LLC., a small, UAE-based, training company that specialises in providing training to companies operating in the oil and gas, and healthcare sector. XYZ is struggling with a decline in sales and profit, which is making it difficult for the company to remain operational. The owners of XYZ need to urgently identify new strategies to help them remain in business and become profitable. This study will aim to help XYZ to identify such new strategies by exploring the practices that other small training businesses in the UAE are following to remain profitable.

2. Why have I been chosen to take part?

Potential participants in this study are selected because they own businesses that are similar to XYZ in terms of size and specialisation. Hence, their thoughts and experiences could be beneficial to achieve the purpose of the study. All selected participants are:

- Owners of small training business in the UAE.
- Their companies are specialised in providing oil and gas and / or healthcare training
- Their companies have ten employees or fewer

3. Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.

4. What will happen if I take part?

This study uses qualitative case study as a research design to find an answer to the research question of this study. I will be conducting a face-to-face interview with each participant. All interviews will be audio recorded. Each interview is expected to last for sixty minutes. During the interview, participant will be asked the following ten questions:

- Please share how you selected your strategy for increasing profits.
- Please describe how your business capabilities influenced your strategy choice.
- Tell me about your business resources (tangible or intangible) and how they influenced your company's profitability during the past three years.
- Please explain how your business resources and capabilities differ from those of your competitors.
- Compared to your competitors, how profitable is your business? Please discuss what should be improved in your business to enhance profitability.
- Please tell us about the barriers that are limiting the growth and profitability of your company.
- Please provide your insights on new opportunities that you foresee in the market.
- How do you plan to respond to changes in customers' needs?
- Please discuss the current competition in the market. How do you plan to sustain a profitable performance amidst the competition?

- How can the use of new technology enhance the performance and profitability of your business?

5. Expenses and/or payments

There will be no compensation or reward in exchange for taking part in this study.

6. Are there any risks in taking part?

The physical risk is minimal because the study is conducted in an office setting. The psychological risk is minimal because the participants are only required to voluntarily answer ten non-personal questions. All participants will have the right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time if they feel uncomfortable to cooperate.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

The participants may benefit from the study because the findings of this study will be shared with them. The results may offer potential benefits to the participants because the results will present the threats and the opportunities that may exist in the participants' industry.

8. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting Karim Tabah on 050-926 29 37, and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then, you should contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide

details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

9. Will my participation be kept confidential?

Privacy will be ensured throughout the research process. Data will be collected using interviews. Interviews will take place at the premises of the interviewees in a confined place with the only presence of the interviewee and myself. The interview is going to be audio-taped. I will be the only person who will have access to the audiotape recordings, which will be stored in a password protected electronic folder on the hard drive of my personal laptop. I will delete the audiotaped files upon transferring the interview proceedings into a written transcript.

10. What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will lead to the development of the thesis, which will be submitted to the University of Liverpool. The thesis will be stored in the university archives. The results of the study will be shared with the participants. Participants may obtain a copy of the thesis if they wish to. The result of the study will be presented in a manner that does not allow for the identification of the participants from the results.

11. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

You can withdraw at any time, without explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for this to be done. Otherwise, you may request that they are destroyed and no further use is made of them. The results of the study will be anonymised. Hence, you may only be withdrawn prior to anonymisation.

12. Who can I contact if I have further questions?

For any further questions, please contact:

Karim Tabah

Email: karim.tabah@online.liverpool.ac.uk , Tel: 050 – 926 29 37

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Project: “An exploration of small business profit strategies: A qualitative case study of a small training business in the UAE”

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

Questions:

1. Please share how you selected your strategy for increasing profits.
2. Please describe how your business capabilities influenced your strategy choice.
3. Tell me about your business resources (tangible or intangible) and how they influenced your company’s profitability during the past three years.
4. Please explain how your business resources and capabilities differ from those of your competitors.
5. Compared to your competitors, how profitable is your business? Please discuss what should be improved in your business to enhance profitability.
6. Please tell us about the barriers that are limiting the growth and profitability of your company.
7. Please provide your insights on new opportunities that you foresee in the market.

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8. How do you plan to respond to changes in customers' needs?
9. Please discuss the current competition in the market. How do you plan to sustain a profitable performance amidst the competition?
10. How can the use of new technology enhance the performance and profitability of your business?

Appendix D: Codebook

	Name	Description	Type
1.	Age of the business	The number of years of existence of the company.	Priori
2.	Budget cuts and decrease in sales	The reduction in the training budget of clients and the decline in demand reflected in the decrease in the volume of the sold training.	Priori
3.	Competition and decrease in prices.	The descriptions that the participants provided about the level of the rivalry among the training companies in the UAE. The decrease in the price of the sold training.	Emergent
4.	Cost-cutting strategy	The actions or processes that leads to the reduction of costs.	Priori
5.	Customer acquisition and customer retention	Bringing new customers to the business and the ability of the company to retain its existing customers.	Emergent
6.	Differentiation	“One in which firms derive advantages by making the uniqueness of their products apparent to their consumers” (Lumpkin et al., 2010, p. 9).	Priori
7.	Diversification	Expanding into new products or services.	Emergent
8.	e-learning	The perception of the participants about the possibility of conducting online training for their offered programmes.	Priori
9.	Entrepreneurial orientation	“A strategic construct that captures a firm’s strategy-making practices, management philosophies, and firm-level behaviors that are entrepreneurial in nature” (Anderson, Covin, and Slevin, 2009, p. 220).	Priori
10.	External threats (UAE economy)	Threats that are stemming from the economic conditions in the UAE economy.	Priori
11.	Financial capital	The money and credit that is available to the company.	Priori
12.	Financial management capabilities	The ability to plan, organise, direct, and control the financial activities of the company.	Priori
13.	Government support	Any support that government provides to companies to become successful. This may include financial support and non-financial	Priori

		support.	
14.	Human capital competences	“The ability to perform tasks that include workplace skills (skills) that are supported by knowledge (knowledge) and skills (abilities) in accordance with conditions imposed” (Anggadwita and Mustafid, 2013, p.417).	Priori
15.	Number of employees	The number of permanent employees of the company.	Priori
16.	Innovation capability	“The firm’s ability, relative to its competitors, to apply the collective knowledge, skills, and resources to innovation activities related to new products, processes, services, management, marketing, or work organization systems, in order to create added value for the firm or its stakeholders” (Hogan et al., 2011, p. 1266).	Priori
17.	IT capabilities	“The firm’s ability to identify systems meeting business requirements, to implement these systems in a cost-effective manner, and to deliver long-term maintenance and support for these systems” (Karimi, Somers, and Bhattacharjee, 2007, p. 224).	Priori
18.	Lack of awareness	The inability to recognise the importance of training. The inability to assess the impact of training on the performance of the company.	Emergent
19.	Licenses	The official permission issued by UAE Governmental entities to allow the training company to conduct trainings.	Emergent
20.	Management capabilities	“The capabilities by which managers construct, integrate, and reconfigure the organization’s resources and competences” (Adner and Helfat, 2003, p.1020).	Priori
21.	Mandatory training	the type of training that is imposed by regulators in certain professions.	Emergent
22.	Market niches	The focus on specific target market (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014).	Emergent
23.	Market orientation	“The organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs; dissemination of the intelligence across departments; and organization-wide responsiveness to this market intelligence” (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993, p. 53). Market orientation consists of competitor orientation, customer orientation, inter-functional coordination, and long- term profit focus (Mavondo, 2010).	Priori
24.	Office or premises	The physical location of the company.	Emergent

25	Opportunities in the UAE Economy and training industry	The business opportunities that may stem from the conditions in the UAE economy (i.e., good business environment) and in the training industry (i.e., Emiratization).	Priori
26	Payment risk	The risk of the loss as an outcome of client's default.	Emergent
27	Measuring the performance of the training Strategy	Showing to the client the benefits of the training by illustrating the progress that the trainees achieved as an outcome of the training.	Emergent
28	Quality management	"The set of interconnected and managed processes that function together to achieve the organization's quality goals" (Hoyle, 2007, p. 197).	Priori
29	Social capital	"The collective and personal knowledge that is embedded in the relationships among employees and between employees and external agents" (Donate, Peña, and Sanchez de Pablo, 2016, p. 929).	Priori

Appendix E: Nvivo extract, Categorizing the codes

Name	Files	References
RBV category - capabilities		
Financial management capabilities	1	1
General management capabilities	2	6
Innovation	0	0
IT capabilities	0	0
Quality management	3	5
RBV category - external threats		
Budget cuts and decrease in sales	4	9
Competition and decrease in prices	4	18
Lack of awareness	2	2
Payments risk	1	2
The UAE economy	2	7
RBV category - resources		
Age of the business	0	0
Financial capital	3	7
Government support	0	0
Human capital competences	3	10
Licenses	3	9
Office	3	5
Social capital	3	9
The number of employees	2	3
RBV category - strategies		
Cost-cutting	2	7
Customer acquisition	1	4
Differentiation	1	3
Diversification	4	10
Entrepreneurial orientation	2	9
Market niche strategy	2	2
Market orientation customer orientation	3	5
Measuring the performance of the training	2	3
RBV category - external opportunities		
elearning	4	5
Mandatory training	1	8
The UAE economy and training industry	4	5

Appendix F: Nvivo extract, relationship coding

From Name	To Name
RBV category - external opportunities\The UAE economy	RBV category -strategies\Entrepreneurial orientation
RBV category - external opportunities\Mandatory training	RBV category - resources\Licenses
RBV category - external opportunities\elearning	RBV category - external opportunities\Mandatory training
RBV category -strategies\Market orientation customer orientation	RBV category - capabilities\General management cap
RBV category -strategies\Market orientation customer orientation	RBV category - resources\Licenses
RBV category -strategies\Market orientation customer orientation	RBV category - resources\Human capital competence
RBV category -strategies\Market orientation customer orientation	RBV category - external threats\Budget cuts and decrease in sales
RBV category -strategies\Market orientation customer orientation	RBV category - external opportunities\The UAE economy
RBV category -strategies\Market orientation customer orientation	RBV category - external opportunities\Mandatory training
RBV category -strategies\Diversification	RBV category - resources\Office
RBV category -strategies\Diversification	RBV category - external threats\Competition and dec
RBV category -strategies\Diversification	RBV category - resources\Financial capital
RBV category -strategies\Diversification	RBV category - resources\Licenses
RBV category -strategies\Customer acquisition	RBV category - resources\The number of employees
RBV category -strategies\Customer acquisition	RBV category - resources\Financial capital
RBV category -strategies\Cost-cutting	RBV category - resources\The number of employees
RBV category -strategies\Cost-cutting	RBV category - resources\Office
RBV category - resources\The number of employees	RBV category -strategies\Diversification
RBV category - resources\Social capital	RBV category -strategies\Diversification
RBV category - resources\Social capital	RBV category -strategies\Entrepreneurial orientation
RBV category - resources\Human capital competences	RBV category -strategies\Entrepreneurial orientation
RBV category - resources\Human capital competences	RBV category -strategies\Diversification
RBV category - resources\Human capital competences	RBV category - external opportunities\Mandatory training
RBV category - resources\Financial capital	RBV category - external threats\Payments risk

Appendix H: Document analysis for the action research intervention (Think phase)

Emerging themes	Code	Excerpt examples from the MOMS 1, 2, and 3
XYZ is experiencing a decline in demand, which is threatening the ability of the company to remain operational.	Decline in demand	<p>“There is a sharp decline in demand by oil and gas clients in Abu Dhabi and other international operators”</p> <p>“We have managed to make follow-up courses However, all budgets are on freeze mode right now”.</p>
	Loss	<p>“If things continue like they are this year, then we are likely to occur another loss.”</p> <p>“We may not be able to sustain continuous losses”.</p> <p>“Our company is losing money because of the changes in the external environment”.</p>
XYZ is operating in a challenging economic environment.	The economic environment	<p>“The current economic situation and the instability in the region are highly challenging”.</p> <p>“The current global economic and business environment is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, which is referred to as “VUCA”.</p> <p>“...the current challenges that it is facing after the decrease in oil prices”.</p>
XYZ is in urgent to develop a strategy and a plan to be able to remain operational.	Strategy	<p>“The challenge is not about bringing new employees. It is about having a strategy and a plan about what we need to tell these new business development people”.</p> <p>“We might need to make bold decisions of injecting cash to change the situation. But we also need to have a strategy and a plan....”</p> <p>“In the previous meeting, we started questioning how to diversify and how to decide what new sectors we need to be in?. To answer this question, we said we need to develop a strategy and a plan”.</p> <p>“One area of diversification could be in healthcare sector...we need to see if there are other categories of healthcare professionals that we can target such as doctors or pharmacists”.</p>

**Appendix I: Document analysis for the plan phase of the action research intervention (Act
phase: planning the action)**

The emerging theme	Code	Excerpt from the MOM 4
The action plan presented in figure 5-2	Resource-based	Partner one will contact the trainers and ask them to inform us about the courses that they think that they are capable of delivering.
	Opportunity-based	Partner two will talk to oil and gas clients to know what their training plans are for Q4 of 2019 as well as their plans for 2020.
	Opportunity-based	Partner three will contact healthcare clients asking about their future plans.
	Opportunity-based	Partner two will review again the UAE agenda for 2021. He will also talk to various contacts to learn from them about the new topics that they think are aligned with the vision.
	Resource-based	The admin team will update the database of trainers and to add to them tag words that helps us to define their specializations.
	Resource-based	All partners will work on finding new trainers and expanding the network of clients and decision makers
	Capability-based action	Partner three will follow up with the other partners to suggest any new training programs that could have emerged from the opportunity-based actions and to identify if any of our trainers are capable of delivering these new courses.

Appendix J: Excerpt from MOM 5 (Act phase: Taking and evaluating the action)

Action	Outcomes	Follow-up
Trainers' assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our trainers are capable of delivering IT training. This requires investment in procuring computer labs and network infrastructure. Decided not to pursue this opportunity because of need for investment. - They can also deliver Project management training and management courses. Competition in this sector is too high and the market is price sensitive. Decided not to pursue this opportunity because of high competition. 	
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two clients confirmed that innovation is a hot topic nowadays. Their advice was to look into specific types of innovations in our specializations. - We now have contacts with two trainers who are capable of delivering innovation training. The trainers are capable of delivering innovation in healthcare training. We have already agreed with the trainers to prepare a course outline to promote it to our clients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We have promoted this offering to our clients. We have submitted two proposals so far. We are waiting for the feedback of the clients
Scanning the needs of existing clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One client informed us about new regulations that are resulting in increasing demand for cybersecurity training that is specific to oil and gas operations. We already made contacts with two trainers who can design and deliver these courses. We submitted two bids so far. - One client informed us that there is no budget for training for the remaining part of the year. However, there is a budget for interactive types of training. We proposed to organize a conference and an interactive workshop which is in line with our last offered courses. A proposal outlining the conference and workshop program was submitted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bids are still under evaluation. - Offer is accepted. This could be a pilot case to introduce conferences and workshops into our offering.
Reviewing governmental plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The hot topic in almost every sector nowadays is innovation. This confirms what we have also heard from our clients in healthcare. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We have already started promoting innovation training to some government clients.

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