

MANAGERIAL CHALLENGES WITHIN SMEs: THE CASE OF A DEVELOPING REGION

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Abstract: SMEs form the backbone of many developed and developing economies. However, many of these businesses, especially smaller ones are faced with several challenges that may affect their day to day productivity. In light of this, the main purpose of this study was to analyse the perceptions of a group of SME business owners/managers regarding the managerial challenges they faced within a developing region. The study followed a quantitative research approach with a descriptive cross sectional research design. Two non-probability sampling techniques (convenience and snowball) were used to collect the data from the identified sample. A total of 198 usable questionnaires were returned. The study made use of a descriptive analysis, cross tabulations and chi-square statistics and a multivariate linear regression. Results indicated that participants perceived most of the identified aspects (lack of networks, operational experience, market knowledge, skills, labour and training) as omnipresent in their environments. Amongst these however, participants showed significantly strong perceptions regarding the impact of a shortage of skilled labour, insufficient business training as well as the lack of networking opportunities. The implications of these findings point to the importance of the provision and ease of access to quality practical entrepreneurship training. Based on the findings, it is recommended that both private and public sector support be prioritized towards the development of SME sectors given their value.

Key Words: SMEs, Managerial Challenges, Developing region, South Africa.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship and small business development has been pointed out as a key driver of economic growth and development (Meyer and Meyer, 2016; Tripopsakul, 2018). For some individuals starting a new business may seem challenging, however, many small and medium businesses are established by entrepreneurs almost on a daily basis. Unfortunately, almost half of these newly established businesses will not last longer than five years. McIntyre (2018) mention that around 20 percent of small businesses fail in their first year of operation, 30 percent in the second year and almost 50 percent after five years. Herron and Robinson (1993) point out that running a successful business requires skill and owners should be resourceful, open-minded and have a passion for what they do. In

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addition to these entrepreneurial characteristics needed to establish and manage a successful business, the business owner should be aware of the various managerial challenges that might have a negative impact on the productivity and performance of the venture. In light of this, the main purpose of this study was to analyse the perceptions of a group of SME business owners/managers regarding the managerial challenges they face within a developing region.

Literature

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), South Africa has one of the lowest turnover rates with regard to inherent entrepreneurial activities in the economy (Herrington et al., 2010). In addition, the South African National Planning Commission stresses that unemployment is one of the most daunting socio-economic issues (The Presidency, 2011). Therefore, much emphasis has been placed on small business and entrepreneurial development not only in South Africa but globally. According to Maas and Herrington (2006) the development of SMEs is a two-stage process. The first stage involves the start-up phase where entrepreneurs try to identify products and services that the business will be trading in and the second phase represents the initiation and continuation of business operations. This involves the business starting to compete with other existing companies. This is also generally the phase where businesses start experiencing managerial challenges (Olawale and Garwe, 2010). Kramer and Porter (2011) opine that economies with high levels of entrepreneurship show increased productivity and efficiency that results in higher economic growth. Furthermore, as there is a positive correlation between entrepreneurship and economic growth, entrepreneurial activity has been recognised as a key contributing factor towards a country's wealth (Meyer and Meyer, 2017). Therefore, understanding the barriers that restricts business growth or even leads to failure could be regarded as important.

During the various phases or cycles of a business, several barriers may restrict it from growing or even surviving (Gill and Biger, 2012). These barriers can be due to internal or external factors. External driven barriers would include aspects such as economic conditions, access to markets, corruption and strict laws and regulations. Internal barriers typically include aspects linking to finance, location, innovation and managerial skills (Molefe, 2018). For any business to thrive, the right management skills and experience are needed for day-to-day operations to function properly (Rauch and Hulsink, 2015). Olawale and Garwe (2010) identifies some managerial challenges as lack of identifying networks, operational experience, skills, market knowledge, shortage of skilled labour and insufficient training.

Pena (2002) postulates that the best asset for any business to thrive is human capital. Being a competent manager means that the entrepreneur must have a precise set of skills, knowledge and attitude that will contribute to personal effectiveness and growth of the business (Hellriegel et al., 2008). The lack of such

skills is one of the reasons why newly established SMEs struggle to stay in business. More specifically, these failures relate to a lack of education and training, which mostly occurs in developing nations. Research has indicated that small business owners are less likely to receive training in management skills than larger firms in any given economy whether developing or developed (Mthabela, 2015). Another managerial barrier links to having a sufficient and stable business network. Networking plays a vital role towards the growth of an SMME. Both new and established SMEs can benefit from networking, as it enables them to access finance, identify new markets and opportunities (Olawale and Garwe, 2010). With the right networking skills, entrepreneurs are able to access resources from the external environment therefore networking promotes a link between internal and external factors (Miller et al., 2007). In addition, evidence was found that amongst other factors, previous work experience of the owner is a positive determinant of business success (Lerner et al., 1997). Fairlie and Robb, (2008) had similar results and noted that these were consistent with previous findings. Their results indicated that previous work experience, especially if it was in a similar industry to the one being started, may have a significant impact on business performance. This experience may have a positive effect on market knowledge which can effectively increase business sales leading to business survival and growth.

Research Methodology

The main purpose of the study was to analyse the perceptions of a group of SME business owners/managers regarding the managerial challenges they faced within a developing region. In doing so, the study followed a quantitative research approach with a descriptive cross sectional research design. This specific design was chosen as it lends insight on the specific characteristics of groups and their beliefs (Kumar, 2014). Given the quantitative nature of the inquiry and presuppositions that real life events are best understood through observation and reason, the study was grounded in a positivist philosophical paradigm.

Study area

The research was undertaken in a local developing region in the Gauteng province in South Africa. It is encompassed within two local municipal areas namely Emfuleni and Midvaal which are situated approximately 50km south of Johannesburg. The Emfuleni area attributes the largest population amongst the two areas, higher levels of urbanization whilst its strategic location next to the Vaal River provides an area of potential for tourism development (Local Government Handbook, 2018). In contrast, the Midvaal municipal area is relatively smaller yet attributes higher levels of GDP per capita, infrastructure development together with a more diversified economic structure. Despite these unique characteristics, as a developing region, both areas attribute various socio-economic concerns including severe unemployment and poverty rates, as well as high criminal activity. Henceforth, given the underlining socio-economic nature of the region, it was

selected in order to better comprehend the managerial challenges small business owners faced in these specific environments.

Sampling strategy, research instrument and procedure method

The sample for the study was selected by means of a non-probability convenience and snowball sampling technique and included both male and female business owners/managers, residing in the Emfuleni and Midvaal local municipal areas. These particular techniques were chosen in light of the fact that businesses within the area, were within a geographically disbursed location which made it difficult to identify possible participants prior to the distribution process. By making use of a historical referencing technique in which similar studies were consulted (Okreglicka et al., 2015; sample size: 157) a final sample size of 200 was deemed sufficient. The primary data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire that was developed based on extensive literature and empirical reviews. The measuring instrument included two sections of which the first aimed to acquire the demographic and business specific information of the participants (Section A). Section B focused on acquiring the perceptions of the participants regarding the managerial challenges their businesses faced. This section included Olawale and Garwe's (2010) tested and validated business challenge scale. The scale includes various items which focus on both internal and external challenges SMEs face on a daily basis. For the purpose of this study, only those items pertaining to specific managerial challenges were considered. Responses were captured using a four point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

In order to ensure the face and content validity, the measuring instrument was subject to peer review as well as a pre-test by experienced researchers in the fields of entrepreneurship and economic development. This was supplemented by a pilot study in which 48 local business owners (not included in the final sample) completed the questionnaire. After the validation process, the questionnaires were distributed in areas with relatively high business activity that included central business districts (CBDs) as well as various industrial spaces within the study region. More businesses were identified by these business owners and also asked to participate in the study. Finally, after all questionnaires were distributed and returned, a total of 198 were deemed usable, affording the study a final response rate of 99 percent. Throughout the research process ethical norms and values were strictly adhered to. This involved obtaining ethical clearance on the use of the questionnaire from a university's ethics committee and providing reassurance that participation was completely voluntary and confidential.

Data analysis

The analysis was undertaken through the use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 and comprised three levels. The first provided a descriptive overview on the perceived managerial challenges of the participants while the second, focused on the various aspects that influenced the participants' views on these aspects. This involved the use of cross tabulations and chi-square

statistics to determine whether these challenges were viewed differently across various socio-economic aspects. Subsequently, a multivariate linear regression was used in order to determine the impact of these aspects on the perceived level of managerial challenges. For this purpose, a perceived managerial challenge index (PMCI) was constructed that served as the dependent variable in the model. The index comprised of six different managerial related challenges all weighted equally and measured on a four point Likert scale. As such, index scores ranged from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 24. The employed model is presented as follows:

$$PMCI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AGE_i + \beta_2 GEN_i + \beta_3 ED_i + \beta_4 SE_i + \beta_5 EXP_i + \beta_6 TRNG_i + \beta_7 EDES_i + u_i \quad (1)$$

Where $PMCI_i$ refers to the participants perceived managerial challenge index score, β_0 representing the intercept and $\beta_1 \beta_2 \dots \beta_7$ representing the coefficients, whilst u_i represented the error term. Independent regressors comprised of both continuous and categorical variables. In case of the latter, dummy variables were created where necessary as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent variables description

Variables	Description	Coding
AGE_i	Age	Dummy variable created where 1 = younger than 30 and 0 = Otherwise.
GEN_i	Gender	Categorical variable where 1 = Female and 0 = Male.
ED_i	Level of education	Dummy variables created where 1 = Tertiary qualification, 0 = Otherwise.
SE_i	Duration of self-employment	Dummy variable created where 1 = more than three years. 0 = otherwise.
EXP_i	Prior business exposure	Categorical variable where 1 = No and 0 = Yes.
$TRNG$	Business training received	Categorical variable where 1 = No and 0 = Yes.
$EDES_i$	Local development levels	Continuous variable ranging from 12 to 48. Higher scores indicate higher perceived economic development levels in the region.

Results and Discussion

The first level of analysis reported on the demographic and business specific characteristics of the selected sample. From the responses, more than half of the sample (52.8%) were between the ages of 30 and 50 years, while only 17.3 percent were younger than 30 years. More males than females were included in the sample, where the latter comprised approximately a third (29.9%) of the selected participants. Based on their education qualifications, the majority of the sample completed their secondary schooling with 44 percent obtaining a tertiary diploma or certificate. One of the questions asked during the survey, was based on the

duration of years of self-employment. Recorded responses show that almost three quarters of the sample had some level of experience in this regard with 74.2 percent indicating that they were self-employed for longer than three years. Almost a fifth indicated that they were not registered for taxation purposes, suggesting a noticeable informal nature of these businesses. With respect to size, a large majority were regarded as very small. A total of 63.6 percent of the businesses attributed five employees or less whilst only 21.8 percent reported labour force sizes with at least 11 employees.

Table 2 shows the descriptive results pertaining the managerial challenges faced by the participants. Notably from these results, all mean scores apart from a lack of market knowledge (2.98) were above three. This infers that participants perceived most of the identified aspects as omnipresent in their environments. Amongst these however, participants showed significantly strong perceptions regarding the impact of a shortage of skilled labour (3.54), insufficient business training (3.53) as well as the lack of networking opportunities (3.29). Leboea (2017) likewise reports these challenges as significant in the South African SME environment. One of the underlining economic challenges in the country is the lack of adequate labour resources which do not attribute the required skills (World Bank, 2018). In this regard, not attracting or acquiring the needed technical knowledge can induce ineffective production practices as well as severely limit the level of innovation needed to grow (Czarniewski, 2016). Likewise, for these types of enterprises, insufficient training can point to a lack of adequate entrepreneurship education especially in secondary school structures that do not sufficiently prepare owners for the current dynamic and complex business environment (De Jongh and Meyer, 2017).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on the Perceived Managerial Challenges

Managerial challenges	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean* (\bar{x})	Std. dev.
Lack of networks	5.2	9.0	42.9	42.9	3.29	0.411
Lack of operational experience	2.1	23.2	33.8	40.9	3.15	0.522
Lack of market knowledge	2.5	26.8	40.4	30.3	2.98	0.382
Do not have the required skills	2.0	29.8	28.3	39.9	3.06	0.658
Shortage of skilled labour	3.2	9.0	21.1	66.7	3.54	0.218
Insufficient training received	4.1	5.0	29.3	61.6	3.53	0.354

* Mean values range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 4

After completing the descriptive analysis, one of the objectives of the study was to determine whether there were any noticeable differences in the participants perceived challenges based on various socio-economic characteristics. For this purpose, the participants' PMCI scores were grouped as Low (scores between 6

and 12), Moderate (scores between 13 and 18) or High (scores between 19 and 24). Table 3 presents the results for the cross tabulations that were carried out. From the results, no noticeable differences regarding the level of perceived challenges were identified amongst the different age groups (*sig.* = 0.535), the participants gender (*sig.* = 0.563) nor if owners had any previous exposure to business (*sig.* = 0.181).

Table 3. Cross Tabulation Results (%) on the PMCI

Aspects	Low PMCI	Mod. PMCI	High PMCI	χ^2 Sig.	Cramer's ν
< 30 years	1.7	30.5	67.8	0.535	0.089
30 – 50 years	2.9	42.3	54.8		
> 50 years	2.9	44.1	52.9		
Male	2.1	36.9	61.0	0.563	0.087
Female	4.0	38.0	58.0		
Primary qualification	0.0	20.8	79.2	0.034*	0.289
Secondary qualification	1.8	30.4	67.9		
Diploma / Certificate	2.4	48.8	48.8		
Tertiary degree	7.4	48.1	44.4		
Less than a year	2.0	35.4	62.6	0.041*	0.125
Between 1 and 3 years	2.7	43.2	54.1		
More than 3 years	7.7	61.5	30.8		
No business exposure	1.4	31.4	67.1	0.181	0.131
Previous exposure	3.1	43.0	53.9		
No prior business training	2.7	42.9	54.4	0.025*	0.318
Prior business training	2.0	70.0	28.0		

* denotes rejection of the null hypothesis at a 5% level of significance

Whilst none of the aforementioned aspects attributed dissimilarities, results shown in Table 3 regarding the level of education infer that higher levels of qualifications were associated with lower perceived levels of managerial challenges. The chi-square value of 0.034 in fact suggests that the null hypothesis that these challenges were experienced similarly could be rejected at a 5 percent level of significance. This was further supported by a Cramer's V value of 0.289 indicating a medium effect size. These findings resonate with those presented by Kalane (2015) which suggests that better qualifications offer entrepreneurs an enhanced ability in risk assessment, hence reducing the likelihood of various stumbling blocks. Likewise, differences amongst the duration of self-employment were also deemed significant (*sig.* = 0.041) however these attributed only a small effect size (Cramer's V = 0.125). From these results it can therefore be inferred that individuals with longer self-employment durations were more inclined to report only moderate PMCI scores when compared to those with less years of experience. Similar findings were also reported by Petković et al. (2016). Finally, participants who indicated that they acquired business training prior to starting their business, showed higher levels of moderate challenges (70.0%) and lower levels of high PMCI scores (28.0%) as to those without any previous training. The p-value of 0.025 suggests that these

differences are statistically significant while the Cramer’s V statistic (0.318) shows a medium effect size in these dissimilarities.

For the final step in the analysis, a multivariate linear regression was utilized by making use of the PMCI as dependent variable. Results from Table 4 show a negative coefficient regarding age (1 = Older than 50 years; 0 = otherwise). This suggests that being older attributed lower PMCI scores than those younger than 50 years. Nevertheless, the low t-statistic (-0.023) and high p-value indicate that age was not a significant factor affecting the participants’ degree of managerial challenges. Similar results were also reported regarding the participants’ gender (*sig.* = 0.587) and their prior exposure to business (*sig.* = 0.213). This suggests that being either male or female or whether being exposed to any prior business operations did not have a significant impact on the participants PMCI in the model.

Table 4. Multivariate Linear Regression Estimations

	Unstd. Coeff.		Std. Coeff.	t-stat	Sig.	Coll. Statistics	
	β	Std. Error	β			Tol.	VIF
<i>Constant</i>	21.146	1.061		19.931	0.000		
<i>EDES</i>	-0.068	0.032	-0.161	-2.104	0.037*	0.893	1.120
<i>AGE</i>	-0.015	0.653	-0.002	-0.023	0.982	0.863	1.159
<i>GEN</i>	-0.305	0.560	-0.040	-0.544	0.587	0.952	1.051
<i>ED</i>	-1.379	0.729	-0.144	-1.891	0.060**	0.895	1.117
<i>SE</i>	-1.924	0.984	-0.153	-2.056	0.042*	0.849	1.178
<i>EXP</i>	0.642	0.513	0.092	1.251	0.213	0.960	1.042
<i>TRNG</i>	1.094	0.567	0.147	2.030	0.047*	0.901	1.110

Note: ANOVA Sig. = 0.006. F-statistic = 2.964. Adjusted R-Square = 0.144. ANOVA = Analysis of Variance. Tol. = Tolerance values. VIF = Variance inflator factor. * and ** denotes significance at 5% and 10% level of significance respectively.

Contrasting the aforementioned results, the coefficient for Training (1 = no training received; 0 = training received) had a positive and statistically significant sign. This infers that those without training prior to starting their business would likely have an index score that is 1.094 units higher than those that did receive some sort of entrepreneurship training. These results support those presented in the cross-tabulation analysis. The coefficient regarding the level of education (1 = tertiary degree; 0 = otherwise) however was negative. Both the t-statistic (-1.891) and p-value (0.060) suggest the impact to be statistically significant at a 10% level. Therefore, attributing a tertiary qualification decreases participants’ perceived level of managerial challenges compared to those attributing lower qualifications. The implication of this finding might point to the positive impact the exposure to entrepreneurship education at tertiary level has on these individuals. Nevertheless, Nchu (2015) explains that there still exists a significant absence of entrepreneurship education in especially secondary schools in the country, which then fails to instil key entrepreneurial abilities needed for those who do not progress to tertiary level.

Finally, in an effort to determine the impact of higher local economic development levels on the prevalence of the managerial obstacles the business owners faced, the study used Meyer and Keyser's (2017) enabling developmental environment scale (EDES). From the results reported in Table 4, increases in the EDES index scores show a statically significant (*sig.* value = 0.037) inverse relationship with the PMCI score. This suggests that the creation of a more favourable enabling environment contributes to a lower prevalence of managerial challenges in these areas. The fact that an improvement in external factors contribute to improved internal managerial environments highlights the importance of these processes for SME owners, especially in developing regions. Enhanced infrastructure, social well-being and economic prosperity of the area can all contribute to an enhanced retention of quality labour as well as improved networking opportunities (Sanda and Ntsiful, 2013). Ensuring that the results presented are reliable, various diagnostic statistics are also reported. For the model used the ANOVA *sig.* = 0.000 suggests that the included variables explained a significant amount of the variance in the dependent variable. Moreover, all tolerance values and variance inflator factors (VIF) were above the 0.1 and below the 5 thresholds respectively, showing no serious indication of multicollinearity amongst the included regressors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study had the primary objective of analysing the perceptions of SME owners regarding the managerial challenges they faced in a developing region. The findings of the study revealed the most challenging aspects for these businesses which included acquiring skilled labour resources and lacking the needed business training to effectively operate in more modern and dynamic business environments. Moreover, these individuals struggled to obtain adequate network opportunities partly due to a lack of the needed infrastructure and developmental support in the area. The implications of these findings point to the importance of the provision and ease of access to quality practical entrepreneurship training. Not only do these programs provide owners with the key critical skills to efficiently manage their enterprises but affords them the ability to drive innovative processes necessary for businesses growth. Further results reiterated the significance regarding the provision of enabling external environments towards the improvement in the businesses internal operations. For developing regions in particular, attributing progressive economic and social structures in local communities can greatly assist towards the acquisition and retention of quality production resources as well as the provision of conducive environments that facilitates good partnership formation. Based on the findings, it is recommended that both private and public sector support be prioritized towards the development of SME sectors given their value. Additionally, the absence of adequate entrepreneurship education should seriously be addressed at secondary school levels. This should entail an invigorated focus on instilling foundational personal skills, various technical attributes such as decision making and management as well as practical exposure that is linked to work

integrated learning practices. Lastly, regulatory and operational environments in these developing regions should be constructed with the aim of maximizing the sector's potential. This must include ease of access to finance, responsive service delivery and the removal of ineffective bureaucratic requirements. Limitations of the study pertained the cross sectional nature of the inquiry as well as the use of non-probability sampling techniques. Whilst seen as shortcomings, these limitations offer methodological and empirical possibilities for future research. Forthcoming studies can include the use of longitudinal designs, addition of managerial considerations in the analyses as well as adding comparative views pertaining both developed and developing regions' SME development.

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WYZWANIA MENADŻERSKIE W MŚP: PRZYPADEK ROZWIJAJĄCEGO SIĘ REGIONU

Streszczenie: MŚP stanowią trzon wielu rozwiniętych i rozwijających się gospodarek. Jednak wiele z tych firm, zwłaszcza tych mniejszych, stoi w obliczu wielu wyzwań, które mogą wpływać na ich codzienną produktywność. W świetle tego, głównym celem tego

badania była analiza postrzegania grupy właścicieli / menedżerów MŚP w zakresie wyzwań menedżerskich, z jakimi borykali się w rozwijającym się regionie. W badaniu zastosowano metodę badań ilościowych z opisowym projektem badań przekrojowych. Do zebrania danych z zidentyfikowanej próbki zastosowano dwie nieprobabilistyczne techniki próbkowania (metoda kuli śnieżnej i próbkowanie wygodne). Łącznie zwrócono 198 użytecznych kwestionariuszy. W badaniu wykorzystano analizę opisową, tabulacje krzyżowe i statystyki chi-kwadrat oraz wielowymiarową regresję liniową. Wyniki wskazywały, że uczestnicy postrzegali większość zidentyfikowanych aspektów (brak sieci, doświadczenie operacyjne, znajomość rynku, umiejętności, siłę roboczą i szkolenie) jako wszechobecne w swoich środowiskach. Jednak wśród tych osób wykazano znaczne silne spostrzeżenia dotyczące wpływu niedoboru wykwalifikowanej siły roboczej, niewystarczających szkoleń biznesowych oraz braku możliwości nawiązywania kontaktów. Konsekwencje tych ustaleń wskazują na znaczenie zapewnienia i łatwego dostępu do wysokiej jakości praktycznych szkoleń z zakresu przedsiębiorczości. Opierając się na ustaleniach, zaleca się, aby zarówno sektor prywatny, jak i sektor publiczny były priorytetowo traktowane pod względem rozwoju sektorów MŚP ze względu na ich wartość.

Słowa kluczowe: MŚP, wyzwania menedżerskie, region rozwijający się, Republika Południowej Afryki.

中小企业面临的经理挑战:发展中地区的案例

摘要: 中小企业是许多发达经济体和发展中经济体的支柱。然而, 许多这些企业, 尤其是小企业, 面临着可能影响其日常生产力的若干挑战。如果是这样, 本研究的主要目的是分析一组中小企业主/经理对发展中地区面临的管理挑战的看法。该研究采用定量研究方法, 采用描述性横断面研究设计。使用两种非概率抽样技术(便利和雪球)从所识别的样本中收集数据。共返回198份可用问卷。该研究利用描述性分析, 交叉表和卡方统计以及多元线性回归。结果表明, 参与者认为大多数已确定的方面(缺乏网络, 运营经验, 市场知识, 技能, 劳动力和培训)在其环境中无处不在。然而, 在这些方面, 参与者对熟练劳动力短缺, 业务培训不足以及缺乏交流机会的影响表现出强烈的认识。这些调查结果的含义表明了提供高质量实用创业培训的便利性和重要性。根据调查结果, 建议私人 and 公共部门的支持优先考虑其价值, 以促进中小企业部门的发展。

关键词: 中小企业, 管理挑战, 发展区域, 南非。