

A Framework of Entrepreneurial Competencies: A Case Study of Cameroon

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Abstract: Successful entrepreneurial venture heavily depends on exogenous and endogenous factors that cannot be ignored. However, a lack of knowledge and understanding of endogenous factors such as entrepreneurial competencies has led to the failure of many ventures. Thus, entrepreneurial competencies must be taken into consideration in planning a venture. By using the competency approach, this study identified the entrepreneurial competencies needed for a successful venture through interviews, observations, and documents. This case study utilized Merriam's data analysis process to identify the required entrepreneurial competencies for successful ventures. Fourteen successful entrepreneurs served as participants and were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. This study was conducted in Yaoundé and Douala, Cameroon. The findings revealed seven entrepreneurial competencies: opportunity-seeking competency, learning competency, relationship competency, managerial competency, market-competition competency, and technical competency, concluding that entrepreneurial competencies are vital for a successful venture.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship, small and medium enterprises, entrepreneurial competency, competency approach, entrepreneurs, case study, Yaoundé, Douala, Cameroon, Africa*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, governments have been paying more attention to small and

medium enterprises (SMEs) worldwide as they are perceived as the backbone of economic development and growth since they account

for 80% of the global economy growth (Burns, 2016).

The realization of the role of SMEs in the economic growth of all countries has led governments worldwide to put in place programs, reforms, and structures for promoting entrepreneurship and facilitating entrepreneurial works such as a reduction of taxes for enterprises or the creation of national exhibition for products, or financial support for enterprises, or an exemption of taxes for start-ups (Sambajee & Dhomun, 2015). Despite the governments' role in creating business support programs, providing SMEs finance, and creating laws and policies for SMEs, studies revealed that they still face numerous challenges worldwide in general and particularly in developing countries (Sambajee & Dhomun, 2015), resulting in a high rate of SMEs' failure (Muriithi, 2017). According to Benzazoua Bouazza, Ardjouman, and Abada (2015); Kamunge, Njeru, and Tirimba (2014); and Muriithi (2017), the emphasis on the external factors such as financing or easing access to credit rather than the internal ones that have to do with the competencies, skills, and knowledge necessary to perform may have led to the SMEs' failure.

Studies in entrepreneurship suggest that specific competencies in entrepreneurship are vital to the growth and success of any business, especially in developing countries (Solesvik, 2012), and acquiring, understanding, and mastering their nature and role can have a significant impact on practice (Solesvik, 2012). Man, Lau, and Snape (2008) point out that developing relevant competencies among entrepreneurs is crucial. It provides SMEs with a sustainable competitive advantage, mainly because entrepreneurial ventures depend on the entrepreneurs' abilities. Theories such as personality traits theory and

competency theory support the entrepreneurial competencies construct. There are also models and frameworks of entrepreneurial competencies that explain the entrepreneurial competencies needed by entrepreneurs for successful entrepreneurial ventures. These theories and models give a clear picture of the competencies needed by entrepreneurs, and their validation through quantitative studies has led researchers to conclude that the listed competencies were required for SMEs' success (Ahmad, 2007; Man, 2001; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013).

However, despite all the theories and models, the rate of failure of SMEs in Africa is still high, with five out of seven new SMEs failing in the 1st year (Muriithi, 2017). Cameroon is no exemption with only 40% of new SMEs surviving the first three years (Fouda & Pene Zongabiro, 2015), leading to economic and social problems such as an increase in the unemployment rate, an increase of the poverty level, a reduction of job creation and diversification of business operations, and a reduction of the GDP (Okpara, 2011; Tabora, 2014). According to Solesvik (2012), the lack of contextualization of entrepreneurial competencies entrepreneurs need in emerging or developing economies impedes entrepreneurial ventures' survival. However, all models have been developed in developed countries from a Western and Asian perspective and context, which may be considered the major limitation or concern of the said models. Therefore, this study investigated the key entrepreneurial competencies for a successful venture in the context of Cameroon, a developing country.

Literature Review

The competencies concept and how it is applied in entrepreneurship is relatively new and gained in popularity only after the acceptance of Boyatzis' model, "The Competent Manager: A Model for Effective manager," in the late 1980s. The competency approach posits that some characteristics, knowledge, skills, and capabilities are necessary for entrepreneurial venture performance. Its root lies in need for identification and definition of the characteristics of successful managers with the assumption that the characteristics can be taught and learned (Boyatzis, 1982). In entrepreneurship,

those characteristics, knowledge, skills, and capabilities are linked to SMEs' birth, survival, and growth (Man, 2001). If some authors have argued that some entrepreneurial competencies are innate (Cunningham and Lischeron, 1991; Saquan, Yusof, & Nor, 2009), others have argued otherwise, stating that entrepreneurial competencies can be acquired through training (Ahmad 2007; Boyatzis, 1982; Man 2001). This paper is based on the assumptions that competencies can be acquired through training, meaning they can be taught and learned.

Before advocating the competency approach, having a clear understanding of the competency' concept is vital. The wide range of competency definitions appearing in the literature has led to confusion on the true meaning of the concept, and the differentiation between competence and competency is the principal argument. Although some scholars see the two concepts as totally different, they are often used interchangeably. Königová & Hron (2012) defined competencies as a set of specific knowledge, abilities, skills, traits, motives, attitudes, and values essential for each person's personal development and successful participation in an organization (p.131). For Abraham, Karns, Shaw, & Mena (2001), competencies can be defined as a panoply of the characteristics, behaviors, and traits for successful job performance (p. 843). Parris, cited in Ahmad (2007), defines competencies as a cluster of related knowledge, attitudes, and skills that affect a significant part of one's job correlates with performance on the job and can be improved via training and development (p.20).

Those definitions have in common four important aspects of competency: (a) competencies comprise an individual's characteristics linked to the effective outcome of assigned work, (b) competencies are shown in the person's behavior. Therefore, measurable and observable, (c) competencies make objectives and goals accomplishment easy, and (d) competencies are organizational resources that can be developed and improved. Brophy and Kiely (2002) argued that given the descriptions above, understanding business success through the lens of competencies would give a more comprehensive and straightforward approach. A study on entrepreneurship courses' impact

on competencies revealed that developing or improving entrepreneurial competencies can be done through training programs on entrepreneurship.

Iandoli, Landström, and Raffa (2007) define entrepreneurial competencies as the competencies that give entrepreneurs the ability to face critical situations effectively. Entrepreneurial competency refers to the skills and knowledge available that allow a person in various situations to make the right decision, and it can be acquired through experiences, career, training, and education (Soejono, Mendari & Rinamurti, 2015). Mitchelmore and Rowley (2010) identified entrepreneurial competencies as a group of specific competencies vital to the successful entrepreneurship exercise and are carried out by people who start and develop their ventures (Zizile, & Tendai, 2018).

Many authors have studied entrepreneurial competencies models in the last few years. In their study on the entrepreneurial competencies managers need in their work, Penchev and Salopaju (2011) proposed a two-sided model of entrepreneurial competencies. If one side focuses on the entrepreneurial competencies needed by entrepreneurs from the beginning of the entrepreneurial venture, such as proactiveness, change, risk-taking, seeing opportunities, soft, networking decision-making creativity, and innovativeness; the other one is more on the competencies needed in order to run the established ventures such as leadership, communication, specialist, and problem-solving.

Arafeh (2016), in his study on an entrepreneurial key competencies model, proposed a soft computing-based entrepreneurial key competencies model (SKECM). It is a model that both individuals and firms can access an entrepreneur's key competencies. SKECM is a three-stage model based on three clusters of competencies: power, planning, and achievement, with ten entrepreneurial competencies attached to the three clusters. Power includes persuasion and networking competencies. Planning includes goal setting, information seeking, and systematic planning and monitoring. Achievement includes opportunity-seeking and initiatives, persistence, fulfilling a commitment, demand for quality, efficiency, and risk-taking.

In his cross-cultural study among SMEs in Malaysia and Australia on the impact of entrepreneurial competencies on entrepreneurial success in manufacturing and retail sectors, Ahmad (2007), using qualitative and quantitative methods, identified 12 entrepreneurial competencies out of the interviews of the twenty Australian and Malaysian entrepreneurs. The competencies were strategic, commitment, conceptual, opportunity, organizing, relationship, learning, personal, technical, ethical, social responsibility, and familism. Out of the 12 competencies, nine were already represented in the model of entrepreneurial competencies proposed by (Man 2001). The newfound competencies were social responsibility, familism, and ethics, revealing that although some competencies are universal and generalized, others are context-specific.

In the quantitative analysis using factor analysis and structural equation modeling, the researcher came up with two models of entrepreneurial competencies: the comprehensive model and the Parsimonious model. The comprehensive model confirmed that the 12 competency areas were required in Australia and Malaysia with a difference in the organizing and leading and familism competencies in both countries due to their different contexts. The Parsimonious model that was a generated model that fits both countries yielded two different sets of entrepreneurial competency models. In Australia, the parsimonious model included seven areas of competencies that are commitment, conceptual, opportunity, learning, personal, ethical, and social responsibility; while in Malaysia, the model comprised eight areas of competencies which are strategic, conceptual, opportunity, relationship, learning, personal, ethical, and familism (Ahmad, 2007).

Several studies have tested the founded entrepreneurial competencies and revealed their impact on entrepreneurial venture's birth and growth. Kabir, Ibrahim, Anuar, Shah, and Kunci (2017) examined the relationship between entrepreneurial competency and venture performance of female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Using a sample of 200 women entrepreneurs in Kaduna State, the findings indicated that they need to develop the necessary competencies

to run their ventures effectively and efficiently. The findings also revealed that opportunity, strategy, and organizing competencies have a positive and direct relationship with the venture's performance. Using 255 pharmacies retail in the United States, (McGee and Peterson, 2000) revealed that relationship, managerial, and personal competencies positively correlated with venture performance in terms of gross profit and net income. In their study on the sustainable performance of Thailand SMEs, (Thongpoon, Ahmad & Yahya, 2012) discovered that opportunity, relationship, and managerial competencies explained Thailand SMEs' economic performance.

Zizile and Tendai. (2018) studied the importance of entrepreneurial competencies on women entrepreneurs' performance in East London, Cape Town in South Africa. Using a quantitative method and a sample of 145 respondents, they found out that entrepreneurial competencies impact the women-owned SMEs' performance in East London. They also found that entrepreneurial competencies are vital for SMEs in East London to establish and survive. In their quantitative study in the investigation of the effect of entrepreneurial competencies on venture performance among early-stage entrepreneurs Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), Barazandeh, Parvizian, Alizadeh, and Khosravi (2015), using data gathered from the GEM census in 2010, including 125 cases from 59 member countries, found that entrepreneurial competencies have a positive effect on venture performance. Undoubtedly, entrepreneurial competencies impact entrepreneurial ventures' birth, growth, and survival. However, most studies have been conducted in Western and Asian settings, which cannot be generalized to the African setting. In this vein, the present study sought to investigate the entrepreneurial competencies needed by entrepreneurs in Cameroon through in-depth interviews, observations, and documents analysis.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key entrepreneurial competencies required in Cameroon to be successful in an entrepreneurial venture?
2. What framework of entrepreneurial competencies can be proposed to enhance entrepreneurship in Cameroon?

Methodology

This section describes the research design to include the methods of selecting research participants, data collection, analysis, and results. The design followed the qualitative research protocol where in-depth interviews, documents, and observation were used to collect data.

Research Design

A case study explains a phenomenon and enhances our understanding of various people, groups, communities, and organizations (Mukherjee, 2018). This case study is designed to emphasize an in-depth investigation of the entrepreneurial competencies of entrepreneurs in Cameroon. It is for discovering, understanding, and holistically describing throughout fieldwork and personal experiences the entrepreneurial competencies of successful entrepreneurs in the country of Cameroon. The choice for a case study is because it allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon or situation in-depth, providing rich descriptive and exploratory information about an issue or phenomenon studied (Thomas, 2011).

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Cameroon in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala. Officially, Cameroon is called the Republic of Cameroon. It has a triangular shape that covers an area of 475 650 km on the armpit of Africa's map and is located between West and Central Africa. It is bordered in the North-East by Chad, in the East by the Central African Republic, in the West by Nigeria, and in the South by three countries: Gabon, the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), and Equatorial Guinea. The country has a population

of 24,827,091 and is divided into ten regions, with 8 and 2 regions speaking French and English. Cameroon faces many economic and political problems such as poor technology advancement, corruption, high unemployment, and a poor standard of living (Akwaowo, 2012).

Sampling

This study used a purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling was the best fit for the study. The researcher used snowball and multiple variation sampling. Snowball, network, or chain sampling helped locate a few key successful entrepreneurs who met the established criteria for participating in the study. While interviewing the few key successful entrepreneurs, they referred the researcher to other successful entrepreneurs. Multiple variation sampling helped capture and describe the core themes of several successful entrepreneurs. The sample for this study was fourteen successful entrepreneurs from the cities of Yaoundé and Douala.

The participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- They started and have grown their ventures
- They have been running their ventures for more than three years because 60% of new SMEs do not survive for more than three years
- They live in Cameroon
- Their ventures are in Yaoundé and Douala because it is where most of the SMEs are mainly located
- They actively participate in the management of their ventures
- The ventures must have between 5 to 100 employees (SMEs have between 5 to 100 employees)
- The ventures should be financially healthy (increase in revenue, increase in the operating profit margin, ability to pay short-term obligations)
- The ventures should not be a franchise or a part of a bigger corporation but a stand-alone firm.

Data collection

The interviews were held at the times and places that were most convenient for the participants. For the interviews that were conducted in the participants' office, after the interview, the researcher was allowed by participants to remain in their offices just to observe them in their natural setting, to observe how they related with their employees and customers, just to have a feel on how they run their ventures. The participants agreed to let me stay and observe on two conditions: not be a hindrance and not video record their offices. Photocopy of financial performance documents such as revenue, profit, operations efficiency, and liquidity were asked too. This was done because the financial performance documents are among the indicators of successful organizations.

Data analysis

Discussions were recorded and transcribed before attempting any analysis. Analyzing data is "the process of making sense out of the data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). In qualitative analysis, data analysis starts at the beginning of the data collection (Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell (2007), in qualitative analysis, data analysis consists "of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion" (p. 148). In this study, the unit of analysis was the competencies of successful entrepreneurs, and the data analysis followed Merriam's data analysis process. Data were coded manually using open and axial coding. Open coding was used to write down notes (open codes) next to the relevant data in answering the study's research questions. Axial or analytical coding was used to group the open codes into categories. Richard (as cited in Merriam, 2009) posits that analytical coding "goes beyond descriptive coding; it is coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning" (p. 180). In this study, it also played a significant role in connecting core categories and emerging related categories. Thematic analysis was used to group the categories into themes deriving from both data and the researcher's prior understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were followed in this study. Along with the informed, all research participants received a clear explanation regarding the purpose of research, data collection procedures, and the purpose of the research findings. The participants understood where and how raw data would be stored to protect their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Their participation was voluntary, and pseudonym names (participant 1, 2, or 3) were used to protect their identity.

Researcher's Reflexivity

Doing this kind of research without being personally involved in it is impossible. Studies done by researchers are all tainted by their past experiences, culture, and personal beliefs. I believe that entrepreneurship can really help in developing my country if well structured. As a novice in entrepreneurship, I also have a deep interest in this study. One of the main reasons I decided to do this kind of study is my nationality. I am from Cameroon, a developing and struggling country that is going through an economic, political, and social crisis. For this reason, I believe that it is essential for Cameroonians to know and understand entrepreneurial competencies that are necessary for successful ventures in Cameroon to overcome the crisis.

Results and Discussion

The results presented focused on the entrepreneurial competencies needed in the context of Cameroon for a successful venture. The participants of this study consisted of 14 entrepreneurs coming from the city of Yaoundé and Douala. Among the 14 participants, three were female. All the entrepreneurial ventures were more than four years old. Among the participants, one is a Ph.D. holder, eleven are masters' degrees holders, and two are bachelor's degrees holders. Seven participants already had management experience before starting their ventures, while seven started without any managerial experience or prior management training. Eight participants started a venture related to what they studied in schools, while six started their ventures without technical expertise and no prior technical training

in their business field. All the ventures are start-ups and under sole proprietorship legal status. The number of employees varies from 15 to 40 employees. All the ventures are over four years old and represent different activities.

The participants were asked about the competencies entrepreneurs in Cameroon should possess to become successful in their entrepreneurial journey. Seven competencies' themes emerged from research question two. The themes are: (a) opportunity-seeking competency, (b) learning competency, (c) relationship competency, (d) managerial competency, (e) market competition competency, (f) technical competency, and (g) ethical competency.

Opportunity-seeking Competency

The participants argued that recognizing, creating, or responding to an opportunity is crucial for entrepreneurs. Three categories emerged from the opportunity competency: (a) seeking business opportunities, (b) responding to opportunities, and (c) spotting opportunities.

Seeking business opportunities. Successful entrepreneurs are those who know how to look for opportunities. They do not wait for opportunities to arise but go out to seek them. If, for some participants seeking business opportunities can be done by scanning, studying, or analyzing the environment for opportunities, for others, it can also be done by anticipating customers' trends and exploring new ideas. EP1 stated,

To fully understand the informal sector's enormous potential and know how to use it to my advantage, I spent months studying it. I think in entrepreneurship, it is vital to study your environment. Only by doing this will you be able to see and understand a problem and find the solutions. You need to understand the problem before solving it. (IDI EP1, p. 2)

Responding to opportunities. Some participants mentioned that most of the time, an opportunity lies where there is a problem that needs to be taken care of. They all shared the same idea that successful entrepreneurs are those who respond to problems by taking action. For EP6, any problem has its solution, as long as it is something a person can have control over, and reducing child malnutrition is something EP6 she

thought people could do.

Spotting quality opportunities. Spotting quality opportunities is another characteristic of successful entrepreneurs. Participants posit that it can be done by recognizing potential customers. They argued that sometimes people who share the same challenges as the entrepreneur could become their potential customers. EP4 said that his co-workers will always complain about the lack of a certain product in the market at his formal firm. He added that he would complain about the lack of the same product. According to the participant, they will always say things like, “*I wish someone will come with an idea that would solve this problem for us*” (IDI EP4, p. 2). So, one day he thought, why can't I be that person?

For Rita, Priyanto, Andadari, and Haryanto (2018), entrepreneurial opportunities are the favorable and positive conditions that lead and play an important role in entrepreneurial action. However, Alvarez and Barney (2007) argued that opportunities formation, which is opportunity recognition, can be explained through both creation and discovery processes leading to creating two theories of entrepreneurial opportunities. According to them, both theories try to explain the process of opportunity recognition. George et al. (2016) concluded that opportunity recognition through discovery or creation could only happen if individuals combine the six important factors: prior knowledge, cognition, social capital, entrepreneurial alertness, systematic research, and environmental conditions that are key to opportunity recognition and interrelated.

Learning Competency

All participants agreed upon learning competency as one competency any successful entrepreneur should possess, as they all perceived it to be vital. Two categories emerged from the learning competency: (a) learning from different sources and (b) self-learning.

Learning from different sources. A successful entrepreneur is one who always continuously engages in learning through various means. Participants said learning could be done through formal and informal training such as schools, training sessions, or seminars. Some participants mentioned that following a specific

educational curriculum or training sessions helps develop knowledge and skills related to a particular field. EP9 and EP5 indicated that starting and managing their ventures was easy because it was related to what they had studied in school for years. For EP6, a successful venture is accomplished by doing, falling, solving problems, making mistakes, but still learning from the failures and mistakes.

Self-learning. Some participants started a venture that was not related to their educational background and in which they had no prior management or experience. They learned the operations related to their ventures by educating themselves. The participants argued that self-learning is vital for a successful venture. According to them, successful entrepreneurs are people to whom learning is second nature. Some participants mentioned that they had learned the operations related to their ventures from YouTube or their books. EP6 stated,

My background is in sociology. From sociology to the cereal industry, there is a huge gap. I researched, I read books, and I studied on YouTube. I taught myself the venture's operations; I taught myself on the internet. It is only now that I am planning to go to England and study food technology. I taught myself. (IDI EP6, p. 5)

Lately, an increasing number of studies have been done on entrepreneurial learning reflecting on the importance of learning in a successful venture (Neck & Greene, 2011; Rae & Carswell, 2000). According to Leitch and Harrison (2005), “effective entrepreneurs are exceptional learners. They learn from everything. They learn from customers, suppliers, and especially competitors. They learn from employees and associates. They learn from other entrepreneurs. They learn from experiences. They learn by doing. They learn from what works, and more importantly, from what does not work” (p. 356). However, Nielsen, Høgh, and Kristiansen (2011) argued that the planned and normative approach to learning that is often used in higher education does not always allow entrepreneurial learning to happen.

Relationship Competency

All the participants revealed that relationship competency impacts any venture since it is crucial to building a successful venture. An entrepreneur's daily routine is to deal with many people, such as customers, suppliers, employees, and literally, any person he or she meets. Five categories emerged from the theme: (a) networking, (b) building customers' trust, (c) creating a positive work environment, and (d) dealing with other parties.

Networking. All participants shared that building networks are one important characteristic of successful entrepreneurs. For the participants, no man is an island. They argued that successful entrepreneurs are those who know how to develop contacts and network with different people from different fields, such as advisors, experts, or government agencies.

Building customer's trust. Successful entrepreneurs focus on providing good customer services and convincing them of their expertise because there is no business without customers. The participants stressed that entrepreneurs should know how to take care of their customers. According to EP12, one way of taking care of the customers is by always being alert to their needs and showing interest in their needs. EP2 commented,

Some customers will only trust and listen to your opinion. So, when they come to your office, and you are not around at that specific time, you rush when they call to take care of their need no matter where you are. (IDI, p. 7)

Creating a positive work environment. The success of any entrepreneurial venture depends on the climate within the firm. Participants reported that successful entrepreneurs should know how to create a positive work environment within their ventures as it will lead to a more productive and creative working environment. EP4 mentioned that one way of creating a positive work climate is by having clear communication, which is vital for a positive working relationship.

EP1 and EP3 highlighted that listening to the employees' ideas, views, or opinions creates a positive working environment.

Dealing with other parties. Developing and

maintaining good relations with employees and customers and other stakeholders such as suppliers or the community plays a role in the venture's life. Participants argued that entrepreneurs should not underestimate the impact those groups can have in their ventures. EP7 declared that as long as an entrepreneur depends on some other people to supply whatever is needed to produce his or her product, dealing with suppliers continuously will be inevitable.

Maritz (2010) refers to relationship as the existence of connections, ties, and social interactions. There is an increased perception of relationships as a vital element of entrepreneurship as they permit the utilization of ideas and information by network partners (Ahlin, Drnovsek, & Hisrich, 2014). For Moensted (2010), through social networks, SMEs can share ideas, knowledge, and information to impact their innovative capacities. Kamalian (2015) suggests that SMEs can network with the state organization, with other SMEs, with intermediary institutions (educational institutions, investment organizations, information technology intermediaries), with research organizations (colleges, universities, research centers, technical institutes), or with direct business partners (customers, suppliers, and competitors).

Managerial Competency

All the participants suggested that managing is the core of a venture. According to them, knowing how to manage the venture's resources is essential for entrepreneurs. Six categories emerged from the theme: (a) planning skills, (b) organizing skills, (c) leading skills, (d) controlling skills, and (e) hiring skills.

Planning skills. When it comes to planning for a venture, there are four notions entrepreneurs need to know. The first one is to decide beforehand what is to be done, the second one is when is it to be done, the third one is how it is to be done, and the last one is who is going to do it. Participants mentioned that it is crucial to know how to define the objectives and goals of a venture because they guide both the employer and employee in building the venture. They added that a venture without clear goals and objectives to be achieved does not have a purpose.

Organizing skills. Some participants highlighted that it is important for entrepreneurs to know how to organize their employees, resources, policies, and procedures. According to EP1, one way of organizing the resources of a venture is by delegating. The participant argues that as long as a venture is growing, the entrepreneur will have more responsibilities to carry. So, delegating some of the responsibilities to the employees will allow them to organize the new responsibilities better. For EP5, entrepreneurs should know how to assign tasks to their employees.

Leading skills. Learning how to lead employees in their ventures is a skill that entrepreneurs must learn. Participants shared that successful entrepreneurs are doers, meaning they lead by example. For EP11, EP2, and EP12, entrepreneurs should be able to handle the tasks their employees usually do since they are the first employees of their ventures. EP2 declared,

I just do not sit the whole day behind my desk. I work hard, and when your employees see you working that hard and are aware that you can actually do the jobs you hired them for, it makes them work harder to impress you. They will respect you more because they know your skills. (IDI EP2, p. 4)

Controlling. All the participants emphasized the function of controlling venture success. They said that as an entrepreneur, it is crucial always to control the employees' work, especially when it comes to production, which is vital. EP4 mentioned that control has nothing to do with not trusting the employees; it is only to ensure that tasks and plans have been carried the way they were supposed to.

Hiring skills. All the participants stressed the importance of identifying and recruiting the right people to survive any organization. They highlighted the importance of hiring people with the right attitude, motivation, and enthusiasm. They said that one of the impediments to being successful in the context of Cameroon is the people working for you. EP1 commented,

Because of our status as SMEs, some people usually really think they are doing us a favor by applying to our firms, so we should hire them. They just come with the wrong attitude, and if you are smart enough, you better not hire that kind of

person even if you are in need. (IDI, p. 7)

A study done by Gruber (2007) found out that managerial competency helps entrepreneurs systematically approach their goals and prevents them from focusing on other activities that sideline their efforts. Accordingly, Shane and Venkataraman (2010) found that managerial competencies help facilitate the corrections of deviated outcomes from stated goals by allowing quick identification of the source of the deviation and in the communication of goals, increasing the pace at which others can act on those goals. Delmar and Shane (2003) concluded that managerial competencies diminish the chances of new venture disbanding, facilitate the development of the product in new ventures, and facilitate the organization of the activities in new ventures.

Market Competition Competency

Some participants mentioned strategic competency among the competencies for a successful venture. Three categories emerged from the theme: (a) conducting research and (b) creating a competitive edge.

Conducting market research. Some participants said that conducting market research is primordial for a successful venture. According to them, conducting research will keep entrepreneurs from starting a project that might fail. They argued that research is the clearance entrepreneurs need before starting a project. For them, successful entrepreneurs are those who always do their homework, especially today, where the business is more dynamic and ever-changing than ever. EP4 stated,

Many ventures fail today not necessarily because of a lack of finances but also because of a lack of research on their projects. As a matter of fact, always study the market first, if you can hire a consulting firm to do it and work with them. If I had conducted my research before starting my venture the first time, it would have helped me save much time, energy, and money. (IDI EP4, p. 6, DA, OA)

Creating a competitive edge. For a venture to be successful, there is a need for a difference. According to the participants, if the product or

service an entrepreneur is going to introduce to the market is no different from what others have already introduced, the product or service is likely to fail. EP4 highlighted that there is nothing new under the sun, but for an entrepreneur, knowing how to differentiate their products or services from others is a must as it will give them competitive leverage.

Evidence shows that market competition leads to an increase in SMEs' financial performance (Wang, Walker, & Redmond, 2007). According to Ali Al-Shatanawi, Osman, and Suberi (2014), a lack of competitive edge in the business environment may put SMEs' survival at risk. The resource-based view posits that achieving and retaining a continuous competitive edge is vital for any organization to thrive in the business environment. According to the RBV, a continuous competitive edge is any organization's central capabilities and resources, which are the principal source of an organization's success (Hsu, Tan, Laosirihongthong, & Leong, 2011).

Technical Competency

The participants pointed out that possessing and applying technical competency or expertise related to the field of interest is crucial for any venture's success. (a) Technical expertise and (b) managerial expertise emerged from the theme.

Technical expertise. All the participants highlighted the importance of technical expertise in venture creation and growth. They said that whether it is the agriculture industry, health industry, fashion industry, or food transformation industry, there are specific techniques, tools, and procedures for each industry that the venture owners must master. They stressed that a certain level of expertise is expected from entrepreneurs. EP4 indicated that technical expertise plays a huge role in the production process. If entrepreneurs do not know what should be done, how would they know what their employees are doing works right?

Managerial expertise. All the participants also indicated that knowing how to run a venture is important, especially knowledge on financial management, staff management, and marketing. They explained that managerial expertise should not be neglected even though technical expertise

is a must. Entrepreneurs should know how to run a venture as it is vital for its growth. EP10 stated,

I am an engineer; I mastered the area I specialized in. But you know what is funny? When I decided to start my venture, I realized that being an excellent engineer was only half of the requirements. They did not teach me business courses at the national school of engineering; there are no business courses offered. So guessed what happened? I went through many challenges, and to overcome them, I taught myself basic finance, management, accounting, marketing, and so on. Knowing these are so important for growing a venture. (IDI EP10, p. 6)

Ahmad, Ramayah, Wilson & Kummerow (2010) suggested that technical and managerial expertise are important requirements for entrepreneurs to develop successful ventures. According to Papulová and Mokros (2007), technical expertise is required to ensure the satisfactory completion of business-related activities. Winterton (2002) added that it is vital for entrepreneurs to possess the technique (know-how), the knowledge (know that), and the skill related to the field. This is because technical-related skill is viewed as a vital source of expert power that helps execute the vision and plan of the entrepreneur (Urban, Van Vuuren, & Barreira, 2008). In their study, Ajay and Vijay (2011) concluded that possessing and mastering venture-specific skills will provide ventures with a sustainable competitive edge. Even if venture owners do not have to deal directly with the task involving the technical part of the business, mastering the technique and knowledge is still important as they will engage in the venture's functional role (Ahmad et al., 2010).

Ethical Competency

Some participants highlighted the importance of practicing business with an ethical mindset. (a) Being honest in dealing with business and (b) working with honest people emerged from the findings.

Being honest. Conducting business with integrity is primordial. According to the participants, in the field of entrepreneurship, a man's or woman's word is his or her key to success. Meaning entrepreneurs need to always

keep in mind that their words or actions can affect their ventures. EP6 indicated that when an entrepreneur gives his or her word, he or she has to keep that word, creating a bond of trust between him or her and the customers. She added that customers need people they can trust and count on. The moment that trust is broken, an entrepreneur will lose his or her customers.

Working with honest people. Some participants highlighted that if being honest in doing business is important, working with honest people is important too. By honesty here, the participants meant not only honesty but also loyalty. According to EP2, entrepreneurs need to learn how to surround themselves with loyal people. He explained that employees that are being loyal to their employer would never betray the value the employer believes in.

It is believed that good ethics is beneficial for ventures as it will help them grow (Tehseen & Ramayah, 2015). According to Mohamed, Omar, and Wei (2015), ethical actions in SMEs are also crucial as they could affect the interpersonal and emotional aspects of life and work relationships. However, Ahmad (2009a) suggests that since SMEs are small firms, self-managed and independent, the ethical practices would revolve around the personal beliefs and values of the owners rather than by a code of ethical guidelines as in larger companies.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to identify the key entrepreneurial competencies necessary for ventures' birth, growth, and survival. This study identified seven entrepreneurial competencies: opportunity-seeking, learning, relationship, managerial, market competition, technical, ethical, and personal competencies. Based on the findings, it is evident that entrepreneurial competencies are a key driver of successful ventures. As such, they should continue to be the central focus of future research in the field of entrepreneurship. Based on the implications, it is recommended that policymakers focus on developing and implementing an entrepreneurial curriculum in all educational fields, not only business studies. It is also recommended that policymakers develop an entrepreneurship curriculum for primary and secondary schools. Developing an entrepreneurial culture is vital for entrepreneurship, and it can only be done by introducing students early to the concept of entrepreneurship. Since this study focused on successful ventures, a similar study can be conducted of the SMEs that no longer exist to provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their failures. Likewise, a similar study can be conducted in other regions of the country. A quantitative study can also be done to test the current study's findings.

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