

INNOVATION STRATEGIES AND
BUSINESS SURVIVAL IN A CHALLENGED ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The global economic downturn in the recent years coupled with the raging COVID-19 pandemic has spelt enormous challenges for business entities around the world. The fallout has been, among others, financial distress, bankruptcy and outright collapse of many companies. The fact that those business organisations that have survived are still facing challenged operational environment and uncertain future requires deploying appropriate innovative strategies with which to cope with the unfavourable operational scenario and ensure their continued existence. Hence, this study, based on contextual analysis, has been carried out to investigate the relevant innovation strategies that business entities have implemented towards ensuring their survival and continued operations. The outcome of the study revealed that innovative and coping strategies used by business entities in the face of the pandemic include: change of operational schemes; switching to internet media for operational facilities; adopting new sales strategies; minimizing overhead costs; introduction of new management practices; and disengaging employees who perform non-essential duties. The paper recommends, among others, that business entities should also introduce other survival measures such as: cutting bonuses of executives and placing embargo on luxury trips and paid holidays by top executives; outsourcing non-essential operations and renegotiating fixed expenses; and above all, engaging in business model innovation for developing new products and services to complement technology innovation for competitive advantage.

Keywords: Innovation, Strategies; Business, Survival; Challenged-environment.

INTRODUCTION

The environment of business has gone through turbulent phases in recent years. The recent inauspicious issue of COVID-19 has been particularly imperious with its grave consequences for the business entities. Such consequences which are easily discernible include: total stoppage of operations (by both manufacturing and service sectors of the business world, consequential loss, absence of patronage for the backlog of stocks, wastages & obsolescence of materials, and destruction of operational premises arising from riots (for instance, in Nigeria).

Business entities are established with predetermined goals of generating fortunes in terms of adequate returns, for the shareholders as well as the stakeholders. It is only when a business entity is profitable that its survival can be guaranteed, and by extension, continue to generate returns for the shareholders and

stakeholders alike. Business operational returns cannot be attained without appropriate strategies in place to withstand the environmental upheavals.

Business innovation simply refers to creating and applying novel methods with distinctive effectiveness, efficiency and enhanced returns on investment, in the operations of the firms. In other words, as observed by Vlados, and Katimertzopoulos (2019), business innovation can be termed as creating a new construction or a new method that can improve the performance of any operational mechanism of the firms. Therefore, a business innovation is capable of significantly improving the old ways or methods of business operations and by extension, boosting the performance of the firms.

Furthermore, business innovation is all embracing since it creates the predictor for effective and efficient industrial operation; affects products and processes. It serves as a panacea for inefficient operations, and therefore, it provides a competitive advantage for the firms (Porter, 1990; Porter & Heppelmann, 2015). Hence, it constitutes a strategic priority for business organisations. In related terms, some other writers such as Narayanan (2000) and Narayanan & O'Connor (2010) posit that innovation principally falls into the realm of production, given the fact that it pervades both process and output. This has developed from technological opportunities for improving consumer needs and desires.

Business strategies, according to Porter (1980) embraces decisions, which manifests in aggressive and defensive actions instituted by business entities for reaping competitive leverage towards realizing enhanced returns from operations. In related terms, Ibrahim (2015) observes that business strategy involves an outline of operational objectives, purposes, and goals to be pursued and achieved by the firm, which compel the managers to institute distinctive methods for achieving them. In essence, business strategies manifest in various ways such as competitive strategies, cost leadership strategies, survival and growth strategies, among others.

The business world is fraught with stiff competition. This is coupled with the dynamic nature of the external environment that is ever changing because of the vicissitudes associated with environmental influences. The intense COVID-19 pandemic has affected all the facets of our existence as well as the operations of the business world. Hence the study is an attempt to explore the relevant innovative strategies that business entities have put in place for survival and sustainability in the face of the current challenged environment largely occasioned by the ubiquitous COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization of Innovation

Conceptually, innovation involves the culture of creating new and valuable things such as new product or service, production process, structure or administrative system (Hult, Hurley & Knight, 2004; Tseng, 2015). Many authors (Colombelli and Von Tunzelmann, 2011; Ejermo and Xiao, 2014; Velu, 2015; Xia and Dimov, 2019) posit the exposition that innovation represents a significant predictor of firms' survival, and they believe that there exist a connection between innovation and survival of business entities in the dynamic nature of the corporate world.

Innovation can simply be regarded as the creation and application of novel ways or methods that are more effective, more efficient and profitable, in organisational operations towards generating enhanced returns on investment. Innovation can be said to involve a new construction or a new method that manages to improve the performance of any mechanism. Basically, an innovation must be able to significantly improve on the old ways or methods and ultimately boost the performance of a given mechanism (Vlados, & Katimertzopoulos, 2019).

In the opinion of some writers (Porter, 1990; Porter and Heppelmann, 2015), innovation constitutes the determining factor in defining industrial operation, which serves to generate competitive advantage and therefore, is a strategic priority of all business organisations. Furthermore, on the basis of entrepreneurship realm, innovation involves distinctions in technology for operations, marketing, after sales services and control of established structures (Deakins & Freel, 2007). Innovation can manifest in major four areas such as product innovation, process innovation, market innovation, and organisational innovation. All these forms of innovation depend on technology particularly through social networking, unrestricted access to information based on internet, and above all, machines or tools in the operations of business entities (Littunen, 2010).

Product innovation is regarded as relating to bringing out of a new product with enhanced performance or better-quality service in respect of its features, and the process innovation refers to creating substantially improved production process or distribution process (Cooper, 1986; Lager, 2002; Oslo manual, 2018). Empirical evidence provides that in order for a firm to survive and flourish in an undesirable environment, it must entrench product and process innovation in its operations. Such move will ensure enhanced productivity and growth of the firm's operations (Kim & Maubourgne, 2005; Slaper, Hart, Hall & Thompson, 2011; Ganotakis, 2012; Rueda, 2013), (See Table I below).

Technological innovation predominates in modern industrial operations permeating both production of goods and provision of services. Technological innovation, in essence, revolves around fusion of different technologies, sophisticated machines and equipment, technological gadgets, and tools (Rahmana, Yaacobb & Radzic, 2016). In other words, technological innovation refers to the process by which firms master and implements the design and production of products and services that are unique to the corporate world regardless of whether the products or the services are new to their competitors or their customers around the world (Mytelka & Farinelli, 2000). More so, according to Rahmana *et al.*, (2016), social networking, computerized records and online marketing can also be considered as elements of technological innovation because, as espoused by Diaconu (2011), they are entrenched in technology advancement.

Table I: Taxonomy of Innovation

S/N	TYPES OF INNOVATION	CHARACTERISTICS
1	Product Innovation	New products. Enhanced Performance. Better-Quality service.
2	Process Innovation	Substantially Improved process. Innovative Procedures. Lean Production.
3	Market Innovation	Create New Markets. Improved Delivery Mode. Create Demand for existing Products. Online Marketing
4	Organisational Innovation	Lean Organisation. Social Networking. Computerised Records.
5	Technological Innovation	Fusion of Different Technologies. Usage of Sophisticated Machines. Utilisation of Cutting-Edge Equipment. Introduction of Sophisticated technologies & Tools. Unique Design of Production Process.

Source: Data generated from literature review.

Basically, the term technology per se denotes machinery, tools and instruments that are useful in enhancing business operations (Radam, Abu & Abdullah, 2008; Saunila, Pekkola & Ukko, 2014). These days, there is no firm that can engage in profitable operations, grow and survive without the use of technology. The effect of technological development permeates all human endeavours; from the simplest tasks to the most complex ones; technology fundamentals are available with which to perform them effectively and efficiently. Technological innovations ensure effectiveness and efficiency since their deployment in business operations saves time, reduces costs of performing processes, and economises the utilisation of resources, and thereby generating adequate returns on investment.

Realm of Business Strategies

In a broad-based view on strategy, Pisano (2015) posits that a strategy involves commitment to a set of coherent, mutually reinforcing policies or behaviour aimed at achieving a specific competitive goal.” Pisano also observes that strategies elucidate organisational objectives and priorities, which support entity’s principal operational actions as inherently linked to them. Furthermore, the scholar opines that appropriate strategies enhance connection among varied stakeholders of a business entity, and that firms, more often than not, describe the grand operational stratagem (in terms of scope and alignment) while clarifying the means through operational functions (marketing, operations, finance, and R&D) designed to sustain the strategy.

Porter (1980) succinctly opines that business strategies encompass decisions regarding aggressive and defensive actions, taken by firm towards gaining competitive leverage, in order to realize a major return on investment. Ibrahim (cited 2015 in Pisano ,2015) emphasized the importance of a small business owner selecting the appropriate business strategy. Business strategy encompasses a pattern of objectives, purposes, and goals to be pursued and achieved by the firm, and managers create distinctive methods towards achieving them.

Predominant strategies that can be implemented by corporate entities towards ensuring competitive advantage, profitable operations, survival and growth are espoused below. (See Table II below).

i) Competitive strategies

Competitive strategies such as differentiation, cost leadership, and product or service customization, mainly depend innovation through which firms gain superior performance and a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Firms gain enhanced financial performance through competitive strategies (Bigliardi, 2013). Innovations are used to better address customer needs by differentiating their products from the competitors’ products. Firms have to decide on the types of such strategies to use so that they do not enter into problems, and competitive strategies calls for the assessment of available resources and the strategic goals of the business (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Generally, firms focus on strategies that are premeditated around value-based innovation towards gaining sustainable competitive leverage, and adopting multiple strategy approach is normally targeted towards sustaining growth in respect of declining markets (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014).

ii) Differentiation strategies

This involves producing commodities by a firm that are apparently distinct comparable to others with unique after sales services made possible through R&D; in such a way that the business may be difficult to emulate. However, Parnell (2015) observe that firms that laid emphasis on product distinctiveness as their competitive strategy often contend with issues such as product interference.

iii) Cost leadership strategies

Banker, Byzalov, Ciftci, and Mashruwala (2014) posit that strategy based on cost leadership is established towards achieving operational efficiencies. Firms can accomplish operational efficiencies through

economies of scale, process improvements using new technology, paying attention to effective utilization of available operational assets and employee productivity, and reducing dispensable overhead costs. Gehani (2013) opines that in order to pursue cost leadership strategy successfully, firms must change their operations into lean organisations. This involves ensuring that operations are carried out as usual but curtailing costs (such as reducing waste and outsourcing of some operations) towards gaining enhanced returns. According to Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014), cost leadership strategies can be positively correlated with firms' performance. These strategies (Parnell, Long, and Lester, 2015) are considered conservative and safe but could subject firms to vulnerability in the face of new entrants to the industry.

Table II: Classification of Business Strategies

S/N	STRATEGY MODE	CHARACTERISTICS	OBJECTIVES
1	Competitive Strategies	Differentiation, Cost Leadership & Product or Service Customization	Superior Performance Competitive Leverage, Enhanced Financial Performance & Growth
2	Differentiation Strategies	Superior Design, Product Distinctiveness, Excellent Customer Support (e.g., after sales service)	More Sustainable Financial Performance.
3	Cost leadership Strategies	Lean Organisations, Economies of Scale, Process Improvements (using new technology), Effective use of Assets, Remove Dispensable overhead.	Operational Efficiencies, Profitable Operations, Gaining Enhanced Returns
4	Growth Strategies	Gaining Access to New Markets, New Products Development, Market Development & Market Penetration Diversification	Growth in the Face of Challenged, Unpredictable Market Conditions
5	Strategic Alliance	Horizontal Networking, Cooperative arrangement between operators of enterprises.	Improving Competitive Positions & Performances, Effective Competing in Challenged Markets & Enhanced operations
6	Cooperation and competition Networking	Cooperative operations amongst small firms and collectively competing with big enterprises.	Positive Synergy, Operational Opportunities, Efficiencies for Common Benefits for all Participants in the Market.

Source: Data generated from literature review.

iv) Growth Strategies

Firms survive and grow by the willingness to adjust their strategies to match the prevailing market conditions. The prognosticators for business growth include: finding and gaining access to new markets, new products development, market development, market penetration, and diversification (Nnamseh & Akpan, 2015). In general terms, there are two different growth modes for business organisations such as organic growth and growth by acquisitions. Firms have to be of medium to large size in order to adopt growth through acquisitions. Growth through organic mode can be achieved by both small and medium sized firms. Growth strategy, more often than not, must be connected to the firm's resources, capabilities, and the dictates of the external environment (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). Empirical evidence provides that firms need to bring their employees into alignment with the goals for the business inherently preparing the organisation for growth. Furthermore, goal alignment can also be used to sustain

appropriate modicum of control during organisational change (Turner & Endres, 2017). Firms can achieve growth in the face of challenged and unpredictable market conditions provided they develop business-specific strategies to contest such situation (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014).

v) Strategic Alliance

Strategic alliance as a strategy involves a cooperative arrangement between small business owners to work together towards improving their competitive positions and performances (Zhao, 2014); involving horizontal networking. This strategic arrangement calls for small business owners at the similar level in the value chain collectively pooling their resources to participate for large scale orders (Villa & Bruno, 2013). Small business owners that cherish entrepreneurial and innovative posture employ strategic alliances to effectively compete in challenged markets through improvement of the internal operations, mitigating risks, and going into new market segments (Zhao, 2014). More so, the limited resources, restricted scope of operations, and inadequate negotiating power of small businesses make it necessary for them to engage in competitive approach with which to achieve maximum improvement in business performance (Dunne, Aaron, McDowell, Urban & Geho, 2016). Managers or owners of small firms normally assess the tradeoffs of business alliances through estimation of the operational resources required compared with the likely gains (O'Donnell, 2014).

vi) Coopetition Networking

Coopetition in networking arises when small businesses work simultaneously to compete and cooperate with their rivals (Akdogan, Dogan & Cingoz, 2015; Zhao, 2014); to create efficiencies for common benefits for all the participants in the market (Czakoń, Mucha-Kus & Soltysik, 2016). Small businesses use the coopetition strategy realizing that complementing each other's business activities results in creating positive synergy compared to what can be achieved by their individual business strategies (Czakoń *et al.*, 2016). In general terms, coopetition differs from collusion (negative strategy) in respective of objectives, time, and scope (Czakoń *et al.*, 2016) and successful coopetition (Thomason, Simendinger & Kiernan, 2013) requires trust, commitment, and mutual benefit for it to work. It is not uncommon for small enterprises to leverage on coopetition in establishing collaboration and sustainable relationship with big, influential firms in the same industry or market for operational opportunities. The coopetition firms, though at different scales of operations, are the types that utilize comparable resources, and they aim at challenging with firms in different industries (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2014).

Theoretical Review

This study is based on *Prospect Theory* because the economic situation nay business environment, arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, is dicey per se. Aladejebi (2020) has used the theory in a similar study. The Prospect Theory developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), is entrenched in making decision involving choices characterized by risk, probability, and uncertainty. Under this theory, the decision maker's perception in terms of the choice made depends on his characterization of the problem that confronts the organisation, and the perceived consequences of the decision. Furthermore, the decision on the choice of the decision maker involves the alternative that results in perceived greater gain, enhancing the position of the organisation, considering the uncertainty nature of the situation. This is the choice that presents much potential gains. Craighead, Ketchen & Darby (2020) observes that it is better to designate a scenario in optimism instead of skepticism. Such posture of the decision maker ensures that objectionable actions in terms of choices to be implemented are avoided.

Empirical Review

Some related studies are reviewed in this work. The review is pertinent as part of the literature. Buddelmeyer, Jensen and Webster (2010) examined the probability that firms have for survival in using innovative activities. The study was based on secondary data with appropriate quantitative model. The result of the study revealed that the extent of survival of firms depend on approaches used for differentiation strategies.

Tohidi and Jabbari (2012) investigated innovation and its necessity in growth, survival and success of organisations based on review of relevant literature. The paper revealed that every company should have innovation process from creation to playing, when a product enters growth step, the company must play a change in product for supplying to market because some other companies have already started using and reached the technology for production.

Rahmana, *et al.*, (2016) explored the theoretical review of technological innovation on SME survival based on review of available literature. The study used Malaysia SMEs as case for analysis. Findings from the review revealed some facts that: social networking based on internet technology is very effective in reaching different places in Malaysia; and innovation is crucial in maintaining strong growth, and surviving in the digital age as ICT driven, and that businesses should embrace digital technology.

Ortiz-Villajosa and Sotocab (2018) explored the impact of differentiation on survivability of big companies in UK based on data from selected manufacturing and service entities. The results of the study revealed that notable differentiation in novel manufacturing companies raised their survivability not the service ones. Furthermore, scope of operations of the companies, foreign subsidiary, and experience of the top management tremendously affect the chances of operational survivability of the enterprises. However, this scenario varies between manufacturing and service companies.

Aladejebi (2020) examined the survival strategies for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria during the ongoing COVID-19 crises. The study adopted a quantitative research technique. Questionnaire was distributed to 360 SME owners in Lagos; 60 each in six commercial areas, namely Asplada/Alaba, Surulere, Lagos Island, Ikeja, Ikoyi/Victoria Island and Yaba. 342 of the 360 questionnaires were viable. The respondents said that the COVID-19 Pandemic's impact includes a reduction in revenue, reduced staff salaries, and government not doing enough to curtail the spread of the Pandemic. Significant problems faced by SMEs are the inability to repay loans, rent, and salaries. The respondents suggested that the government should lower interest rates, relax loan, and tax repayments. Results also showed that many businesses were not paying their staff full salaries during the lockdown.

Fabeil, Pazim and Langgat (2020) explored the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on micro-entrepreneurs and their decisions for continuity and survival of their businesses in Malaysia based on both secondary and primary data like the use of unstructured phone interviews with open-ended questions conducted during the lockdown period. The study revealed that, in Malaysia, micro- entrepreneurs experienced loss of daily income due to disruptive supply chain resulting from the closure of supporting sectors, lack of workers for operations and declining in cash reserves. In response to the crisis, many entrepreneurs began to shift to alternative approaches to continue their business operation such as: selling and promoting their products via social media and mobile applications like Facebook and WhatsApp; hiring part-time transporter/runner to deliver their products to the customers; and adopted cash on delivery transaction, and government agency in Sabah area provided assistance to SME entrepreneurs and those in agri-based and food-based sector. More so, continuity strategies used include: shortening the supply chain through centralised synchronous distributors; producing emerging products to meet current customers' needs (e.g., essential foods, and cleaning and sanitary products); use of digitalised marketing through mobile applications and social media like Facebook and WhatsApp; employing cash on delivery mode for sales; receiving payment via bank transfer or e-wallet; adopting synchronous distribution approach parallel to omni-marketing channel approach which suggests the use of several channels in distributing goods to the customer.

The study of Shafi, Liu and Ren (2020) in relation to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on micro, small and medium size enterprises operating in Pakistan, revealed that the enterprises opted for: different variety of strategies to curb impact of the crisis such as shutting down completely, and partial closure of

their operations, whereas some planned to apply for a loan. Furthermore, some SMEs decided to change their business lines while others struggled to work remotely to minimize workers' exposure to the virus; limiting business traveling; laying off employees and reduction in staff salary due to cash-flow shortage. Oyewale, Adebayo and Kehinde (2020) estimated the effect of COVID-19 related cases and lockdown measures on the issues related to MEs in Nigeria. Using an electronic data collection approach, the study analyzed the data using the linear probability model to estimate the effect of the pandemic on the entrepreneurs and model the factors influencing coping strategies using a multivariate probit model. The study found that majority of the entrepreneurs were affected (both severely and slightly) by the COVID-19 pandemics through the partial and total lockdown and movement restrictions, and the pandemic's effect differs by sector of the economy (agriculture versus non-agriculture). For instance, partial lockdown measures had an increasing likelihood effect on low sales among the enterprises especially for the non-agricultural sector but there is a contrary result in the context of the food and agriculture sector. In addition, partial lockdown increases the likelihood of switching approaches of business (coping strategies) whereas total lockdown has a negative influence on the coping strategies. The study concluded that there is the need to address social protection approaches (such as palliative measures) which can help to cushion the effect of the pandemic on the SMEs in Nigeria.

Oche (2021) examined the consequences of the corona virus pandemic (COVID-19) on entrepreneurship in the UK with specific focus on the challenges posed to small scale businesses as well as the opportunities they can harness, leverage on or tap into in order to continually be in business. based on results of previous studies. The result indicated that SMEs battled with challenges in relation to receiving payments, postponing or cancelling orders and work, and funding from investors, inadequate cash flows, significant fall in business turnover, serious staffing problem, difficulty in retaining staff, and paying full salaries and wages, which placed the continuous survival of their business under serious threat. Available opportunities include: loans and grants from the government for partial payment of their workers' wage; deferral of tax payments; self-employed income support scheme; review of existing operational practices; leveraging on digital/internet facilities in operations; remote performance of tasks; cost reduction strategy; working from home; and creating new products and services to meet unexpected demands such as introduction of sanitization products; among others.

Hamdan, Kassim and Lai (2021) explored the impact of the outbreak during movement control order to micro-entrepreneurs under Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) program and the current approach used to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on their business. This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, an in-depth interview using a semi-structured interview format with six women micro-entrepreneurs. The selection of respondents through the non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) via the e-commerce platform of AIM is known as Bazar Sahabat. The paper provided two main themes for the impact on micro-entrepreneurs, namely financial issues and operational disruptions. The paper revealed that some micro-entrepreneurs, as a result of financial distress, had to close down their physical shop arising from the unexpected increase in production cost due to operational disruptions. In relation to mitigation approaches, the consensus pattern among respondents in respect of adopting new norms, including changing business operation locations from the physical shop to home-based and online platforms.

Adam and Alarifi (2021) investigated innovation practices for survival of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the COVID-19 times. Online questionnaire was used to collect the data from 259 randomly selected SME managers in Saudi Arabia, and the data was analyzed using the SmartPLS3 software. The study revealed that the SME sector has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this crisis, SMEs faced difficulties in performing their operational activities and severe financial risks. Managers of these enterprises developed new coping practices during the crisis period such as new

management practices implemented in their operations that resulted in improved performance and increased chances of survival for these enterprises. Such practices include SME managers' intensive communication with others to obtain business information and assistance, using social media to market their products, spending reductions through workplace sharing and performing tasks online, worker participation in thinking about the business's future, and active involvement in SME social networks, which may positively reflect on the business's financial performance. The structural equation modeling results showed that the innovation practices adopted by SMEs to face the repercussions of COVID-19 had a positive impact on the performance and likelihood of business survival. PLS-SEM bootstrap results indicated that external support aids strengthen the positive impact of SMEs' innovation practices on business survival rather than its performance.

THE STUDY METHOD

The study is predicated on content analysis, that is, systematic literature review of the available results of past studies in respect of coping strategies that were implemented for the survival of business entities in the face of the raging COVID-19 pandemic in particular. In essence, the data used for this study have been generated from available evidence in respect of past studies and various other publications in academic journals, among others.

Findings and Discussion

There are salient actions and innovative strategies, as discovered from the study that were adopted and instituted towards ensuring the survival of business entities in the face of the challenged environment such as the present COVID-19 pandemic period. These strategies for business survival, as discovered from the study are discussed below.

Change of operational strategies

The business entities, as discovered from the study, changed their operational strategies such as working from home and personal delivery of products to the doorsteps of consumers while some changed like SMEs changed their business lines, for the purpose of continued existence and future survival. Furthermore, some entrepreneurs of SMEs decided to close down their operational premises in order to meet the unexpected increase in production cost occasioned by operational disruptions as some other ones in relation to financial distress, decided to engage in altering their business operational locations such as changing physical shop locations to home-based and online platforms (Adam & Alarifi, 2021; Hamdan, *et al.*, 2021).

Switching to Internet Media for Operational Facilities

Some business entities decided to switch to the use of advanced or internet technology such as point of sales (POS) machines, which are portable and already connected to the banking operational terminals. Hence, the commercial banks were not left out in the fray as the use of POS afforded them the opportunity to deploy more of them through appointed banking agents. Furthermore, the social media ruled the operational terrain of businesses during the lockdown period due to its availability and reaching large magnitude of audience for the patronage of their products and services without using social media. (Fabeil, *et al.*, 2020; Adam & Alarifi, 2021;)

Adopting New Sales Strategies

The challenged situation made some entrepreneurs to shift from old marketing practices to innovative ones like: selling and promoting their products through internet based platforms such as social media (Facebook and WhatsApp); using part-time transporter/runner for delivery of their products to the users; and engaging in collecting moneys during delivery mode; receiving payment using internet transmissions. More so, some businesses also engaged in restriction the chain of getting goods across to the consumers

via agents or merchants; changing production line to evolving goods in order to cater for consumer demands, particularly indispensable food items as well as hygienic goods (Fabeil, *et al.*, 2020).

Minimizing Overhead Costs

The study reveals that some enterprises decided to change their business lines while others struggled to work remotely to minimize workers' exposure to the corona virus and to minimize their overhead costs of operations. They took other measures towards limiting business traveling. Some decided inevitably, to engage in load shedding by laying off some of their workers or employees while taking steps towards the reduction in staff salary arising from shortfall in cash inflows. Some SMEs operators stopped the payment of their staff salaries because sales operations were disrupted and by extension cash flows was not available for stoppage of operations (Aladejebi, 2020; Adam & Alarifi, 2021).

Introduction of New Management Practices

Some business entities, as discovered from the study, introduced new management practices for continued existence and survival. For instance, managers of some SME engaged in concerted collaboration with others towards generating business information and assistance for operations in marketing their products. There are other new management practices that were adopted such as: reducing time of operations through workplace sharing, performance of tasks online, allowing worker participation in thinking about the future position of their operations and survival of the business, and active involvement in SME social networks. These strategies were aid to have influenced positively on the business survival and financial performance (Adam & Alarifi, 2021).

Disengaging Employees Who Perform Non- Essential Duties

Some business entities decided to reduce their staff strength by disengaging workers who could be dispensed with as far as the operations of the enterprises are concerned as the fortunes of the business plummeted coupled with fact that there was drastic shortfall in cash inflows. This approach as a survival strategy was innovative and makes sense because there was lockdown in almost all parts of the world and sales was in jeopardy because of restrictions of movement (Shafi, Liu & Ren, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The advent of COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in destabilizing the operations of business entities. In the course of this study, it was discovered that business entities adopted a combination of some innovative measures (or strategies) for coping with the unfavourable operating environment. Such surviving measures were discovered to be mainly short term in nature. Hence, there is the need for both SMEs and large corporations to introduce other measures particularly for long-term survival since the pandemic is still raging.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are proffered for rejuvenating operations of firms in the face of the raging COVID _19 pandemics and the lull in their operations:

Firms should adopt various strategies that are appropriate to their individual operations with a view to coping with the challenged business environment and uncertain future in order to survive and generate desirable returns on investment.

All business entities (small, medium and large enterprises – should give forecasting appropriate pride of place in terms of preparing for untoward external environmental situation such as natural disasters. Since such environmental dictates cannot be averted, forecasting on their occurrence will place firms and other

business in favourable position to formulate relevant strategies in advance to mitigate them whenever they occur.

There are other short-term innovative ways of coping with the challenged environment, which business entities particularly large corporations can adopt for operations and survival. such short term strategies are cutting bonuses of executives and placing embargo on luxury trips and paid holidays by top executives (the fat cats in large corporations).

Both SMEs and large business entities can use some other strategies for survival in the short- term period, and these include outsourcing non-essential operations and renegotiating fixed expenses; Long-term survival measures, which business entities should adopt, in the face of the raging pandemic include: installing modern and efficient technology for cutting edge operations, and instituting innovation team for the cooperation of the workers (drastic change requires trust of the employees to succeed). Other such measures are developing employees in design thinking for their involvement in organisational problem solving, and engaging in business model innovation as a push towards effective performance, which should be used to complement technology innovation for competitive advantage.

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