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The Efficacy of Innovation Practices on Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe

By

[1]Dr Kajongwe, Collen,[2]Chinyena, Earlmeth
[1,] Midlands State University, Bag 9055, Gweru,Zimbabwe
Email: codzakajongwe@gmail.com/kajongwe@staff.msu.ac.zw
Phone number: +263 77 4198 231

[2]University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20, Harfield, 0028, Republic of South Africa

Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of innovation on SMEs performance in Zimbabwe. The literature survey reveals that the studies on innovation and its effect on performance are observed to have concentrated to Western, Middle and Far East countries and very little empirical evidence is noticeable in Africa. The issue of innovation and how it relates to firm`s performance and especially SMEs is therefore yet to be exhaustively explored. Three hundred (300) respondents in Zimbabwean Mashonaland West Province were used as research subjects. The study adopted a mixed method approach rooted in the pragmatist paradigm. A cross sectional survey research design was used and the sample was randomly selected from the population. Interviews and questionnaires were data collection instruments used in this study. Data was analysed using non parametric Chi-square test of independence through SPSS. The study found that SMEs were somewhat innovative but the cost of implementing innovation is the major constrain. The performance of SMEs was found to increase over the period SMEs were innovating. Innovation was found to positively predict the performance of Misprocess innovation increased sales volume, product innovation increased productivity and service delivery, market innovation increased customer satisfaction and service innovation increased market share and growth in SMEs. The influence of innovation on SMEs performance varied from industry to industry. The research has implications for managers and future researchers. The findings of the study revealed that innovation positively predicts the performance of SMEs. These results also imply that the influence of innovation on firm performance differs from SMEs. Since there is limited research on the influence of innovation on SMEs performance especially in developing countries, the present study provides vital evidence. As such the findings of this research have implications for managers and future researchers. It is recommended that SMEs must be financially supported by the Ministry of SMEs to innovate for sustainable development.

Keywords: Innovation Practices, Business Performance, Small and Medium Enterprises, Mashonaland West, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Innovation has been regarded as one of the key factors in affecting organizational performance globally. Innovation remains the major strategy and driving force for firms' growth and survival in any competitive business environment (OECD, 2015). Maletic, Dahlgaard and Gomiscek (2014) noted that the growth and development of developing nations lies in the innovative ability of its citizens. According to Haneda, Motheb and Thic (2014) the ultimate goal of innovation is to improve business performance. Many studies have analysed the relationship between innovation and Small and Medium Enterprises performance in developed nations and very few have focused in developing countries (Lendel, Varmus, 2013; Dastgerdi, 2012; Gunday, Ulusoy, Kilic & Alpkan, 2011). Understanding innovations and their relation with SMEs performance becomes more important in recent past years, rationale is to encourage SMEs to do innovation that will lead to a better performance (Becker & Egger, 2013).

Accordingly, the values shown by innovations become an eye-opener for potential circumstances that uncovered new ways of doing things, new products and processes that adds value to the economy. OECD (2015) avers that SMEs companies have proved to be important globally in employment creation and contributing more than 60 percent to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). SMES are non-subsidiary independent firms which employ not more than two hundred and fifty employees while some countries set the limit of employees to five hundred (OECD, 2015). In this regard the Oslo Guide (2005: 51) affirmed that there are three types of innovation, product, service and process. Thus, innovation is the utilization of new ideas, a process of furnishing and improving on product and services to appeal to customers taste and demand which expand on workers aptitudes (Brettel, Mauer, Engelen & Küpper, 2012**)**.

According to Haneda, Motheb and Thic (2014) Product innovation refers to the new or improved product that is successful on the market while a process innovation entails the implementation of a new or enhanced manufacturing or distribution process. Consequently, these innovations affect performance and vary in scale from sales, market shares and profitability (Lendel, Varmus, 2013). In an emerging market SMEs becomes very competitive when they provide importance to innovative activities that build their reputation in the market environment. A firm performance is related to the ability of the firm to gain profit and growth to achieve desirable objectives.

Statement of the Problem

SMEs industry is not sustainable and productive as hoped by Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) especially SDG 1 (end of poverty), SDG 8 (promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work) and SDG 9 (improve sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation) all of which are not easily realized. Sixty percent (60%) of SMEs fail in the first year of establishment while 25% fail within the first 3 years and the remaining 15% are likely to survive (SEDCO, 2014). Despite the importance of SMEs stimulating economic growth, there is death of literature on the impact of innovation practices on SMEs performance in Zimbabwe. A competitive and comparative advantage of SMES in Zimbabwe can be influenced by innovation practices. Innovation remains the major strategy and driving force for firms' growth and survival in

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any competitive business environment (OECD, 2015). Innovation has been regarded as one of the key factors in affecting organizational performance globally. Accordingly, the values shown by innovations become an eye-opener for potential circumstances that uncovered new ways of doing things, new products and processes that adds value to the economy. Hence the need to establish if innovation can enhance the competitiveness of SMEs in the context of Zimbabwe.

Literature Review

The ability to develop new ideas and innovation has become a priority for many organizations (Gunday, Ulusoy, Kilic & Alpkan, 2011). Studies have shown that SMEs engages in innovation activities has enhanced performances (Freel, 2000; Westerberg, 2008; Gracia, 2014). Brettel, Mauer, Engelen and Küpper (2012) opined that there is a link between innovation and SMEs performance. Thus, for firm's survival and growth, innovation has become a necessity for SMEs (Kaplan & Waren, 2007). The Oslo guide (2005) has given a large extent place to types of innovation and among them are organizational innovation and market innovation.

Organizational innovation is the implementation of a new organizational method in the firm's business practices, workplace organization or external relations while market innovation deals with the market mix and market selection to meet a customer's buying preference (Gunday*et al*, 2011). Hin, Kidir and Bohari (2013) argue that there are four types of innovation conducted in SMEs which are incremental, radical, modular and architectural innovation. Hin, Kidir and Bohari (2013) postulated that radical innovations were viewed as comparatively rare while modular innovations do involve new significantly components. According to Kidir and Bohari (2013), they stated that with architectural innovation, the components and associated design concepts remain unchanged but the configuration of the system changes as new linkages are instituted.

The findings of Saunila and Ukko (2012) revealed that distinctive competencies, organizational capability outcomes can be attained with certain innovation types. The literature reviewed the following factors; firm characteristics, managers' characteristics, size and age, technological factors, organizational factors and environmental factors as factors influencing innovation in SMEs. Saunila (2014) confirmed the influence of firm characteristics on innovativeness and found that heavy competition in SMEs is negatively associated with innovation and showed that this was more in the case for process innovations than product and marketing innovation.

Rubera and Kirka (2012) found the role of managers central in deciding to adopt innovation. In support of the above Yasin, Nawab, Bhatti and Nazir (2014) posit that size, age and flatter hierarchies were found to have effects on SMEs innovativeness. Yasin *et al* (2014) further state that larger size has a key contribution to innovation due to availability of resources. In support of the above Ul Hassan, Shaukat, Nawaz & Naz (2013) asserted that despite being heavily dependent on innovation SMEs were less capable of making use only of external inputs than larger organizations. McMillan (2010) postulated that the flexibility of SMEs, their simple organizational structure, low risk and receptivity were the essential features facilitating them to be innovative.

Mei and Dai (2013) argue that innovations that were simple for potential users to understand would be adopted more rapidly than those which required the adopter to develop new skills and knowledge. Chen and Fan (2013) asserted that several technological characteristics of an innovation would affect its adoption. Innovation in SMEs is also hampered by lack of financial resources, scant opportunities to recruit specialized workers and small innovation portfolios so that risks associated with innovation cannot be spread (Yasin et al, 2014).

In addition, Boucken and Kraus (2013) stated that technology with high complexity contained tacit knowledge that required laborious efforts to learn and diffuse in SMEs to innovate.

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Maletic, Dahlgaard and Gomiscek (2014) noted that SMEs though essential to the nation's economy, are faced with numerous challenges such as inadequate and non-functional infrastructural facilities, bureaucratic bottlenecks and inefficiency in the administration of incentives and support facilities, lack of easy access to funds or credits, uneven competition arising from import tariffs, lack of access to appropriate technology, high dependence on imported raw materials, lack of scientific and technological knowledge and know-how, lack of appropriate managerial and entrepreneurial skills and lack of suitable training and development, government policies; political consideration among others.

One essential element to overcoming most of the challenges faced by SMEs is innovation. As opined by Ota, Hazama and Samson (2013), a firm is likely to build a competitive edge given its ability to design, develop and market products or services that are novel and of better quality to that of its competitors. The relationship between corporate innovation and performance capability implies that innovation becomes a competitive advantage when it is based on a deep understanding of customer needs, competitor action, and technological development. Due to ever-changing competitive environment, companies that fail to implement innovation find it difficult to survive on a par with competitors (Salim & Sulaiman, 2011). Kim & Park (2010) argue that qualified human resources were helpful to adopt innovations because of their competent learning and innovative capabilities.

In addition, Zhu, Zhang & Zhang (2012) found close analysis of competitors, supervisory and reward system support to be most relevant to successful innovation. Adaptability through nearness to markets and close working relationships with customers were found to be associated with innovation (Chen & Fan, 2013). Brettel, Mauer, Engelen and Küpper (2012) opined that there is a link between innovation and SMEs performance and found a tendency for performance enhancing innovations to occur together, thereby creating high performance work systems.Thus for firms survival and growth, innovation has become a necessity for SMEs (Kaplan &Waren, 2007).

The relationship between innovation and firm performance has been confirmed in both empirical and theoretical studies. Calantone *et al* (2002) examined the relationship between learning orientation, firm innovation and firm performance in American firms. Carol and Marvis (2007) examined the relationship between innovation and organizational performance of Taiwanese SMEs in the manufacturing and service sectors. They measured performance in terms of firm sales. Van Auken *et al* (2008) assessed the relationship between the degree of innovation and performance among a sample of 1,901 Spanish manufacturing SMEs and their study reveal evidence of a positive relationship between three types of innovation (product, process and managerial or systems) and performance. Similarly, Garrido and Camarero (2010) investigated the relationship between learning orientation, innovativeness and performance and finding of the study reveals that learning orientation significantly influences both innovativeness and performance.

Also, Terziovski (2010) studied the innovation practice and its effects on performance of Australian SMEs. Their study revealed that innovation strategy is a key driver to performance of SMEs. Maletic, Dahlgaard and Gomiscek (2014) avers that innovation increases product quality improvement, improves safety and health aspects and compliance with legal regulations and standards.In this study the effects of innovative practices are measured by the following variables: market share increase, increase in production capacities, increase in customer satisfaction, reduction of material costs per Zimbabwean Economic Survey 2015 unit of product, improvement in the environmental impact, improvement in health or safety aspects and compliance with legal regulations and standards. However, this study explores innovation practices and business performance of SMEs in the Zimbabwe context.

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Objectives

3.1 To analyse the impact of innovation practices on SMEs performance in Zimbabwe

Methodology

Pragmatism guided this study. Mixed method research approach was also used in this study with survey research design. The population used in this study was 3000 registered SMEs in Hurungwe District taken from the Ministry of SMEs and Cooperative Development database. This study adopted the cross-sectional survey research design as it attempted to seek innovation practices and SMEs performance in the context of Zimbabwe. In this study, respondents were selected from owners or managers of 300 SMEs located in Hurungwe District in the following sectors; manufacturing, transport and service provision and the sample size was calculated from the 10 percent of the population as supported by empirical evidence. This location was chosen as it consists of urban and suburban to ensure all SMEs were located in different places. For the purpose of this study, stratified random sampling method was employed to provide context for generalizing data. The type of survey used in this study was self-administrated questionnaire. The researcher uploaded data on Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 for statistical analysis and test were done using non parametric chi-square test of independence, Friedman Rank test and cross tabulation for testing the association of categorical variable relationships. Data was presented in form of tables and graphs.

Findings

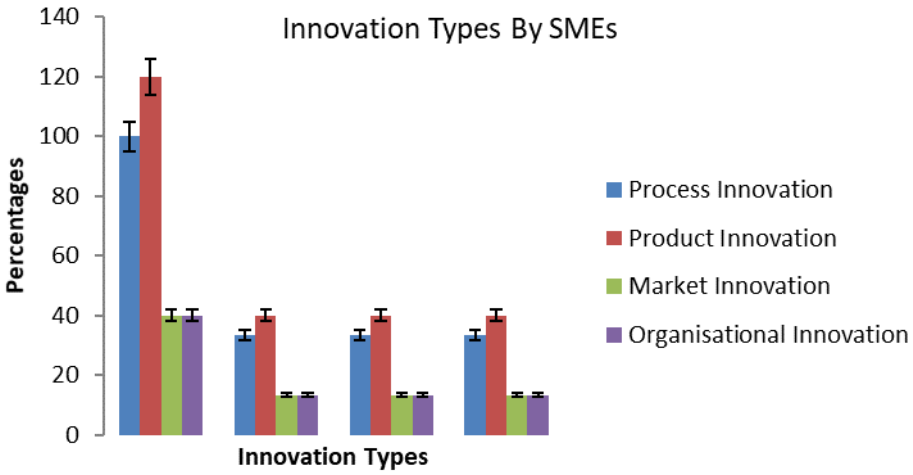

Figure 1 Innovation Practices by SMEs
Source Field Survey, 2020

The study results in Figure 1 show that SMEs practising process innovation were 33.3 %, product innovation 40%, market innovation 13.3% and organisational innovation 13.3%.

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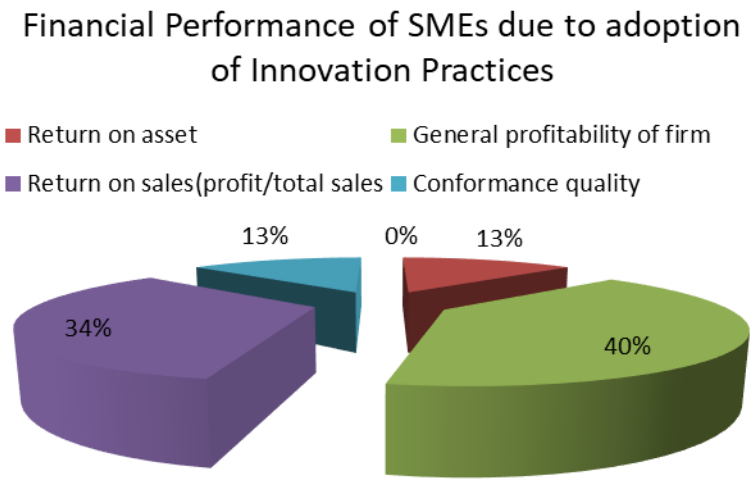

Figure 2 Financial Performance by SMEs
Source Field Survey, 2020

The results and levels of financial performance are shown in Figure 2 where 40% respondents pointed to the general profitability of the firm, 33% indicated to return on sales, 13% to conformance on quality and 13% on return on asset.

Table showing Correlations of innovation practices on SMEs Performance
Table 1: Correlations of innovation practices on SMEs Performance

Product innovation increases performance	Product innovation increased productivity and service delivery	0.702(**)	0.000
Process innovation reduces absenteeism and increase motivation	Process innovation increases sales volume	0.679(**)	0.000
Marketing innovation increases job security of employees	Marketing innovation increases customer satisfaction	0.656(**)	0.000
Organisational innovation	Customer innovation increases profitability	0.183(**)	0.000

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
Source: Field Survey 2019

The correlation statistics in Table 1 shows that a significant positive relationship exist between product innovation which correspond with productivity and service delivery (r=0.702, p=0.000). This confirms arguments by (Umer, 2012) that innovation is a key determinant of productivity and long-term growth. Ota, Hazama & Samson (2013) opined that supporting innovation in established SMEs can foster inclusive growth by increasing productivity gaps and wage gaps between SMEs and large companies. Olughor (2015) argue that investment in product innovation should be treated

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as positive inputs into the efficiency of SMEs rather than as cost figures that exhaust the firm. In addition, Becker & Egger (2013) avers that product innovation needs to be related to the production costs to reflect the true utilization of the firms' resources. Similar results are shown that process innovation increases sales volume leading to firm performance (r=0.679, p=0.000). SMEs are assumed to invest in process innovation to reduce their marginal cost for the existing product output decided by the demand to increase price cost margin significantly leading to performance measured by high profit returns (Mensah &Acquah, 2015).

Hajar (2015) asserted that process innovations strive to reduce unit cost of manufacturing or delivery, to increase value and worth, or to manufacture or deliver new or more improved products. Process innovation can play a very important strategic role as it enables to manufacture something that others cannot, or to formulate in a way better than other competitor firms (OECD, 2015). By process innovation SMEs can create a very helpful competitive advantage where employees are motivated for a new shift in production (Baloch, 2012). Rosli (2013) examine the relationship between innovation and performance in SMEs in Malaysia.

The findings confirmed that product innovation and process innovation influenced firm performance significantly. The results show that there is a strong influence of innovation in the level of performance of Small and Medium-Size Enterprises. More so the correlation statistics in Table 3 show that marketing innovation increases customer satisfaction (r=0.656,p=0.000).This confirms the argument by Haneda, Motheb & Thic (2014) that marketing innovations had a multidimensional impact on SMEs by boosting the sales of existing products through new marketing strategies. Hajipour, Ghanavati (2012) concurred that marketing innovation increases innovations of SMEs ability to extract consumer surplus which makes it more valuable to target consumers effectively. Findings from the study further show that organisational innovation is correlated to performance by building new markets (r=0.183, p=0.000) (refer to table 1). Table 2 show Chi-Square test of independence and hypothesis testing of relationship between innovation practices and SMEs performance.

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Table 2: Chi-Square test of independence and hypothesis testing of relationship between innovation practices and SMEs Performance

Variable 1	Variable 2	Chi-square (x^2) Value	DF	P-Value
Product innovation increases performance	Product innovation increased productivity and service delivery	39.685	3	0.000**
Process innovation reduces absenteeism and increase motivation	Process innovation increases sales volume	5.559	3	0.119**
Marketing innovation increases job security of employees	Marketing innovation increases customer satisfaction	10.642	3	0.014**
Service innovation increases decision making and innovation	Service innovation increases performance by building new markets	9.569	3	0.023**
Service innovation	Service innovation increase market share and growth	24.401	3	0.000**
Customer innovation	Customer innovation increases profitability	2.574	3	0.033**
Public innovation	Public innovation generates employment	10.503	4	0.033**
Open innovation	Open innovation generates employment	9.462	3	0.021*

*Significant at 0.05 level
**Highly significant at 0.01 level
DF=Degrees of Freedom
Source: Field Survey, 2020

Chi-square tests revealed that there is a relationship between product innovation increased productivity and service delivery ($X^{2=}$39.685, DF=3, p=0.000) at 95% confidence level as shown in Table 2. It may be argued that if SMEs adopt product innovation service delivery will increase and performance will be realised. The results indicate that there is evidence to suggest that process innovation increases sales volume of SMEs ($X^{2=}$5.559, DF=3, p=0.119) at 95% confidence level as

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shown in Table 2. This confirms the study byHafeez, Shariff, Lazim (2012) that innovation activities primarily aim to improve SMEs performance and lead to an increase in profit. The impact on the profit increase was measured by the market share increase, which leads to a rise in revenue, and by the reduction of material costs, which has a positive impact on total profit. It is assumed that SMEs that have the resources to improve innovation ability can significantly increase production and market performance, so SMEs need to further enhance innovation activities. The study also examined to see if there is evidence to suggest on whether marketing innovation increases customer satisfaction of employees in SMEs. Using Chi-Square statistic, the relationship between marketing innovation and customer satisfaction in SMEs was found significant (X^2 = 10.642, DF=3; p= 0.014) at 95% confidence level as indicated in Table 2. This confirms the assertion by Mensah &Acquah (2015) that innovation is a key determinant of productivity and long-term growth and supporting innovation in established SMEs can foster inclusive growth by reducing productivity gaps and wage gaps between SMEs and large companies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to the impact of innovation practices on SMEs performance in Zimbabwe. In terms of financial performance, operational performance, and innovation performance the study shows that there is a strong positive relationship among the variables. It is clear from the findings in this study that SMEs are innovative to achieve their objectives and goals. The relationship between SMEs innovation and performance capability implies that innovation becomes a competitive advantage when it is based on a deep understanding of customer needs, competitor action, and technological development. Effective innovation results in sustainable competitive advantage.

Small companies are perfect for developing innovations that do not require large amounts of capital. Innovation is considered an important element in business growth and an important factor of corporate excellence. Companies that have the resources to improve innovation ability can significantly increase production and market performance, so SMEs need to further enhance innovation activities. The results show that there is a strong link between innovation and SMEs operation sustainability. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this study show that organizational and marketing innovation can also contribute to firms' direct economic performance in terms of sales growth and increases in productivity. Therefore, manufacturing SMEs in Zimbabwe should engage more in process innovation and organizational innovation in order to boost their performances. Accordingly, we can conclude that firms with a strong market orientation also have much better effects of innovation activities.

Recommendations

This study presents a useful framework that shows how different types of innovations such as; product innovation, process innovation and organizational innovation impact the performances of the organization which is useful for the decision makers of SMEs in Zimbabwe. Results will help those decision makers who will practice innovation in their firms and now have the basic information about how innovation affects organization performance in SMEs which will prove positively to the organization. This study contributes to the literature and provides a valuable framework for the researchers as well to study the innovation, organizational culture and their relationship with organizational performance. The study presents direct implications for SMEs aiming at improving their innovation effectiveness. It is recommended that firms consider the environment in which they operate and should coordinate future innovations plans by considering synergistic process among the product, market and process innovations to arrive at a combination

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that will yield optimal levels of performance. This study offers an insight to explain why some SMEs are more successful at starting and developing innovation than others. Further studies must conduct research on innovation, environmental performance and business performance of SMEs in Developing Economies.

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