

Full Length Research Paper

Managerial practices for small construction companies in Masvingo City: Lessons for entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe's higher education sector

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This qualitative case study explored the managerial practices of small construction companies in Masvingo city with a view to relating findings to the newly introduced education 5.0 in Tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe. The study was motivated by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development's thrust to introduce innovation and industrialisation hubs in universities in the country culminating in the setting up of production units at these institutions. The study was conducted at small construction enterprises in Masvingo city because production units were at their infancy stage in the country at the time. Hence it was felt that universities could draw lessons from the private sector after the study. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used to generate data on the views of building inspectors, workers and owners of the small construction enterprises as well as residents of Masvingo city, towards the small enterprises' managerial practices. Participants felt that the financial management practices were sound but no formal marketing strategies or quality control systems were said to be in place in the enterprises. The study recommended small construction enterprises in Masvingo city to market as well as improve on their quality management skills for their enterprises to remain viable. In that vein, production units at universities should work towards improving their management styles in areas such as financial management, marketing strategies as well as quality control systems.

Key words: Managerial practices, production units, marketing strategies, quality control systems, industrialisation, innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

The Higher Education sector in Zimbabwe went through

several changes during the colonial and post-colonial periods (Mapara, 2009). The post-colonial era has seen the sector changing from Education 3.0 to Education 5.0

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(Muzira and Bondai, 2020). Muzira and Bondai (2020) further elaborate that 3.0 tertiary education phase had three pillars which are university teaching, research and community service, while the Education 5.0 has five pillars namely, university teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation. The thrust for Education 5.0 is the incorporation of innovation and industrialisation into the university education system resulting in the production of goods and services at these institutions. It is against this background that the current study looks at the managerial practices of small construction companies in Masvingo city so that lessons can be drawn from the findings and relate them to the management of the newly formed production units in universities in the country. At the time of conducting the study, many universities in the country had not established the industrial units. Hence, the study was conducted on small to medium enterprises (SMEs) whose operations are similar to those of the innovation and industrial hubs, so that university authorities can draw lessons from the findings of the study.

Several countries have different definitions of the term 'small to medium enterprises'; for, example, in Malawi these enterprises are defined as those with limited capital outlay, hence may require managerial and financial assistance to successfully run these business entities (Tengan et al., 2014; Kulemeka et al., 2015). In Zimbabwe, SMEs are defined as any business enterprises with less than 100 employees (Zimbabwe Framework cited in Nyamwanza, 2014). What is clear from this definition is that these enterprises often require managerial and financial aid from other quarters. This aptly sums up the need for proper management of these entities if they are to survive the different shocks experienced in their trade. Nyoni and Bonga (2017) note that Zimbabwean SMEs are facing problems in financing projects which are at their disposal due to the economic crisis in the country.

Innovation and industrial hubs at universities are responsible for the production of goods and services which are similar to those in SMEs and their existence in institutions of higher learning will expose students to business management systems thereby ensuring the hubs continued existence. The then Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology Development once said the real education should lead to industrialisation and modernisation through production of goods and services (Murwira, 2019). He said human basic needs such as shelter, food, water and novelty should be met. It is in the light of this thinking that this study looks at the managerial practices of the small construction projects to satisfy one of the human needs of shelter provision.

Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are an important sector for the economic and social growth of both developed and developing countries through job creation and provision of goods and services (Dumbu and Chadamoyo, 2012; Kotane, 2017; Diabate et al., 2019).

The contribution of SMEs to world economic growth is substantial; for example their contribution to Growth Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016 in France was 58%, Germany 53%, Italy 68%, China 58.5%, the Netherlands 63%, Egypt 80%, Indonesia 57% and Turkey with 53.9% (Herrington and Kew, 2017 in Meyer and Meyer, 2017). These figures are testimony to the importance of SMEs in enhancing the growth of economies globally. However, although SMEs in Zimbabwe accounted for 94% of the business population in the country in 2016, they only contributed a paltry 15% to the nation's economy due to the high failure rate especially in the first five years of their inception (Bukaliya and Aleck, 2012 cited in Sibanda, 2016).

For purposes of this study, small construction enterprises as SMEs were studied in Masvingo city so as to relate findings of the study to the survival of the construction section's production units likely to be set up in order to meet the demands of the Education 5.0 at universities in the country. The construction industry is as old as mankind. Its recorded existence dates back to the Stone Age era where people used stone piles such as the Zimbabwe Monuments of Zimbabwe, the pyramids of Egypt and the European Castles (Afedzie, 2016; Ngomi, 2017). The long history of the construction industry shows its importance to the human race, hence if properly managed can contribute to the growth of the national economy through improved building infrastructure, employment creation and contribution to the GDPs (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017). Many business start-ups end up being the economic hubs of nations, thereby contributing several percentage points towards their growth domestic product.

Notwithstanding the importance of small construction enterprises in the economic development of countries (Nyapfumbi, 2016), many such enterprises are struggling to survive under different management environments (Dumbu and Chadamoyo, 2012; Nyoni and Bonga, 2017). In Turkey, for example a survey of 40 construction companies was conducted on *Critical Factors to Success in the Construction Industry* (Arslan and Kivrak 2008). Findings of the study showed that *business management, financial conditions and owner/manager characteristics* were the main factors determining construction companies' success. Researches made on the management of small construction projects in African countries such as Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Swaziland have shown a plethora of challenges in the sector (Ahadzie and Amoa-Mensah, 2010; Kulemeka et al., 2015; Olusegun et al., 2018) with the exception of Ghana whose construction companies have been doing well since the discovery of oil in that country in 2007 (Tengan et al., 2014). However, Emond and Miles (1984) in Ahadzie and Amoa-Mensah (2010) also posited that literature is awash with management inefficiencies which in many cases have led to both time and cost over-runs of more than double the initial cost of

the project. These cost changes have huge implications on the survival of the construction enterprises in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Haron et al. (2017) also conducted a mixed method study on *Project management practice and its effects on project success in Malaysian construction industry*, where data were generated from 232 respondents in the construction industry. The major findings of their study was that issues to do with competencies of the construction team, performance by subcontractors as well as customer satisfaction were predictors of project success in the construction industry. Thus studies done on construction management showed a number of dimensions such as business management, manager characteristics (Arslan and Kivrak 2008) competencies of the construction workers and customer satisfaction (Haron, et al, 2017). This study looks at the effect of managerial practice with respect to exploring the marketing strategies, financial management and quality control systems used.

Statement of the problem

The purpose of this study was to explore the managerial practices of small construction enterprises in Masvingo city in Zimbabwe so as to draw lessons for university authorities manning the newly formed production units on the best managerial practices to run them. The production units are similar to those in SMEs in scope and focus. Research has shown that SMEs are not likely to survive the first five years of their introduction (Sibanda, 2016) due to a number of challenges faced, chief of which are associated with management styles (Nyapfumbi, 2016). It is against this background that the study was conducted with a view to drawing lessons for the newly implemented industrialisation and innovation hubs, thereby filling the gap on this new and lowly researched area.

Research Questions of the Study

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the prevailing marketing strategies used by the small construction enterprises in Masvingo city?
2. What financial management practices are implemented by these entities?
3. How do these enterprises employ quality control systems in their companies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing Strategies

SMEs need robust marketing strategies for their products to survive the stiff competition from other players in the industry (Musavengana, 2015). Competition is a healthy

factor for SMEs' development and without it, companies have limited incentives to invest and innovate (Tian, 2005 cited in Nyapfumbi, 2016). Competition also brings about the much needed innovation that makes organisation tick. However, the construction industry in Zimbabwe is faced with problems of unethical practices such as nepotism and corruption (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017; Nyapfumbi, 2016) so as to shrug off this stiff competition. Nyapfumbi (2016) also showed that corruption negatively affects the growth potential of firms because connected companies can pay bribes to potential customers hence unfairly awarded jobs. The current President of Zimbabwe was quoted as saying corruption is a cancer which has affected the various sectors of the Zimbabwean economy thereby affecting companies' competitive potential and growth (The Contractor: Construction Federation of Zimbabwe, (CIFOZ), February 2018).

Financial Management

The construction industry can be an ineffective and inefficient sector in some countries (Beatham et al., 2004 cited in Dziekonski et al., 2018). The reasons for failure are mainly due to poor tender estimates, corruption and lack of financial managerial skills (Ngomi, 2017; Olusegun et al., 2018). Although the construction industry contributes significantly to employment creation and economic growth, a slump in the survival rate of this sector has been noticed (Sibanda, 2016). In the 1990s, the construction industry in Zimbabwe employed about 100 000 workers but in 2016 the number had plummeted to around 30 000 (Nyapfumbi, 2016). Nyapfumbi went on to say that the year 2000-2008 saw the Zimbabwean GDP declining to a massive 50% on the backdrop of the economic crisis. As a result, many formal companies closed shop resulting in high unemployment. The informal sector is acting as a safety net for the unemployed people to eke out a living after losing their jobs in the formal industries. The construction industry was one such sector that came in as an answer to this high level of unemployment (Nyapfumbi, 2016). Unemployment is still high in Zimbabwe to the extent that the survival of these enterprises provides a window of hope to the unemployed Zimbabwean youths.

Financial management is the epicentre of any organisation whether huge or small (Diabate et al., 2019). Most SMEs fail to survive due to poor financial management (Dumbu and Chadamoyo, 2012; Temtime and Panziri 2006 in Nyamwanza, 2014). For example, in a study on factors affecting project performance among local contractors in Zambia, it was found that most local construction companies diverted funds towards buying cars and constructing their own houses once they got their first payment resulting in failure to complete their projects (Ngomi, 2017). This failure by contractors to use funds for the specific purposes for which they were intended, coupled with the general lack of marketing,

management of innovation and commitment to quality (Nyapfumbi, 2016) led to the demise of enterprises. Construction companies like any other entrepreneurs should have a strong financial discipline to take them to high levels of investment.

Quality performance

Quality construction is an important element of value to the construction sector (Tougwa, 2015; Tengan et al., 2014). Quality is concerned with how well a product or service achieves its purpose (Smith, 1995). Construction and Engineering law in Zimbabwe (2020) posit that quality of work in the construction industry is concerned with sticking to contract specifications and conditions as stipulated in the contract documents in totality in the implementation of the project. Dlungwana et al. (2002) as cited by Tougwa (2015) say that poor quality of work is common in the building industry as a result of poor contractor performance. Smallwood (2000) carried out a survey in South Africa to investigate the clients' perceptions about contractor performance and findings showed that poor quality and poor productivity were causes for poor contractor performance. Smallwood (2000) also found that customers professed poor skills level by artisans as one of the other causes of poor performance by contractors.

Quality control measures enhance company growth through reputation and out-competing other players in the industry. In Malaysia for example, construction companies had a positive growth rate due to customer orientation, quality factors and sound management practices (Bakar and Tabassi, 2012). So, quality should not be overlooked by organisations if they have ambitions of success. In Ghana, the situation was different because a 'greater percentage of projects are executed by small scale contractors [and have] largely been met with poor quality', (Tengan et al., 2014, p.18). Thus, small construction companies are lagging behind in their management system, hence they do not often last the first five years of their inception.

Researchers agree that employing trained personnel ensures quality of product in the construction industry (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017; Tougwa, 2015). In a study by Nyoni and Bonga (2017) on delays in completing construction projects, it was found that lack of experienced workers contributed to delays in the finishing of construction projects. The same view is held by Tougwa (2015, p.2) who says that "...construction companies today prefer people who combine industrial work experience with a higher degree in Construction Management to handle a management position." Hence, experience is very important in quality control system in the construction industry. However, it should be noted that in trying to maintain that standard of quality, there are costs that go with it (Woodward, 1997). Cole (1997) corroborates that quality control can be costly because it

represents an overhead cost in production. It would seem that doing away with quality will reduce the cost of production, but alas, in real terms, it will be more expensive to compromise the standard of quality due to repercussions of that move. Woodward (1997) pointed out that, poor quality control of construction projects can result in heavy losses experienced due to demolitions and rebuilding of the structure because costs incurred due to poor workmanship are at the expense of the contractor. Poor quality of work affects the completion time of projects due to re-working and hence pushing the contractor's budget beyond its initial levels (Tengan et al., 2014). Hence, the small construction enterprises in Masvingo city could save a lot by sticking to the prescribed quality control measures.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative approach using a case study design to give the investigators a chance to visit participants in their natural settings to generate data on small construction enterprises based on their experiences. Participants were selected based on their experience and understanding of the small construction enterprises which is the subject under study. Face to face in-depth interviews and semi-structured open ended questionnaires were used to collect data in the study.

Participants and setting

Participants of the study consisted of 10 small construction company owners, 10 artisans working in the small construction industry, 10 house owners whose houses were constructed by these enterprises in the city and two Masvingo city Council building inspectors. Purposive sampling was used (Cohen et al., 2011) whereby all the participants were selected based on their involvement in the small construction industry, supervision or being beneficiaries of the construction enterprises in Masvingo city. Workers in the construction enterprises were chosen based on the strength of their positions and knowledge in the small construction enterprises while building inspectors and house owners were chosen based on their involvement in the construction industry.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview and questionnaire guides were constructed by researchers soliciting for qualitative responses. The two research instruments yielded participants' views on managerial practices of small construction enterprises in Masvingo city.

The face-to-face interview enabled the researchers to interact with participants, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying motives (Oltmann, 2016).

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to company owners, building inspectors and artisans at their various work places in the city. Face-to-face interviews with house owners were also done at their places of residence. The interview was administered to house owners because it was felt that their level of education was not

known. The face-to-face interviews were audio-taped, with the permission of the participants. Data from both instruments were coded and organized into themes in line with the research questions.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the researchers focused on attaining credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability (Guba, 1981) through reliability of instruments. Reliability was achieved and guaranteed through triangulation where data were generated, using more than one tool (Gray, 2009). Triangulation is an approach used to validate findings through the use of multiple methods of data generation techniques in search of convergence of results in research studies (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). Data were generated using interviews and questionnaires in order to find out participants' responses to questions from research tools used in the study.

Ethical considerations

Researchers informed participants about their right to freely and voluntarily take part in the study and that they could withdraw their participation at any point in time should they feel that they wanted to do so. Their identity was protected through the use of pseudo names in the study and this was made known to the participants. It was also made clear to the participants that information gathered was treated in utmost confidence and would be used for the current study only.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the managerial practices of small construction enterprises in Masvingo city. The research responses were read several times and the following key dimensions emerged from the coded themes and transcribed narratively as follows: the state of the prevailing marketing strategies used, the financial management systems in place and the quality control mechanisms adopted by these enterprises. Interviews were audio recorded and this was made known to participants. Information was gathered based on the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires administered to participants.

Which are the prevailing marketing strategies used by the small construction enterprises in Masvingo City?

The majority of the participants felt that small construction companies could not market their products because the prevailing economic situation was bad at the time to an extent that companies could not afford to market their products. The following verbatim reports show this:

We used to market ourselves through [the] use of newspapers such as Masvingo Provincial Star or Masvingo Mirror even national papers such as The Herald but we can't do it often these days due to high

operating cost as a result of the economic turmoil the country is going through. I am aware of the need to market our construction company but resources don't allow for now. (Company Owner 3 – Questionnaire)

Yaa some small construction companies used to market their work through such platforms as Agricultural shows, but recently I haven't seen any such companies doing that these days. May be its due to the economic situation the country is going through. However, small construction companies market their products through their pricing structure which is competitive. Most of these enterprises have good charges which are highly negotiable. So it is the clients who find them not the other way round. (House owner 10 - Interview)

I think our construction company does market its products such as civil construction and draughtsmanship. The marketing should be done through placing adverts in the newspapers. (Artisan 4 - Questionnaire)

The majority of the participants showed that small construction companies in Masvingo city did not market their products as shown in the above excerpts, although only one participant had other views.

What financial management practices are implemented by these entities?

Participants felt that small construction companies employed proper financial management systems in their enterprises. That view, which was expressed by many of the participants, is represented by the following responses:

Umm Small Construction companies do have some proper financial management systems although they don't involve auditors in the running of their enterprises. They provide a balance sheet for the purposes of Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) returns annually. The good financial management ensures that they keep going under the circumstances. (Company Owner 1 - Questionnaire)

Financial management systems in these enterprises are done although they do not employ accounts clerks on site. The books of accounts are done by the company owner or relative as a cost cutting measure. These companies do everything within the book to reduce the cost of doing business, to the extent that they employ semi-skilled workers so as to cut costs (Building Inspector 2 - Questionnaire)

The accounting system of our company is done by the company owner's daughter. The company does not have permanent employees with the exception of a few relatives of the company owner. Yes the company has

some financial management practices. (Artisan 7 - Questionnaire)

Participants felt that small construction companies had some proper financial accounting systems and this was necessitated by the fact that ZIMRA required tax returns to be prepared and submitted annually.

How do these enterprises employ quality control systems?

Participants expressed different opinions on quality control systems by these enterprises. Some felt that the companies had good quality control systems while others had different views. The views of those participants who felt that companies had good quality control systems are represented below:

The small construction companies do have the controls because you can't tell the difference on the work done by large or small construction enterprises. In any case these are the only companies that do business in this city at the moment. (House owner 8 - Interview)

Our quality of work is good. We are one of the best companies in town. We don't have problems with quality. Even the inspectors know that. (Artisan 5 - Questionnaire)

Views of those participants who felt that companies had bad quality control systems are also represented below:

Small construction companies are not worried about the quality of their product as evidenced by employing semi-skilled workers in order to cut cost at the expense of skilled artisans who are champions of product quality (Inspector 1- Questionnaire)

Quality controls such as checking concrete consistence using the slump test is often ideal but not feasible based on the cost against the size of projects we undertake. The costs are prohibitively high to engage in some of these activities on small construction sites because profit margins are also low in tandem with the project size. (Company owner 2 - Questionnaire)

Although different participants had different views on the quality control systems in the enterprises, it seems there is lack of quality control mechanisms in them due to the unstable economic situation obtaining in the country. There is a tendency by company owners to sacrifice quality at the expense of cost.

DISCUSSION

The study sought to explore the managerial practices of small construction projects in Masvingo city. Although

results have shown that participants had different views on the enterprises' marketing strategies, financial management and quality control systems, generally it was felt that companies did not do well in marketing as well as quality control system in their entities. Most participants who took part in the study felt that these enterprises did not employ any marketing strategies in their organisations. Some participants said it was expensive to advertise the entities' products and services in newspapers and other platforms such as the Agricultural Show. Although marketing comes with a cost, reviewed literature has shown that companies which do without it do not last the distance (Tougwa, 2015). Similar findings emerged in a study conducted in Zambia in which contractors were not doing well due to poor marketing strategies (Ngomi, 2017; Olusegun et al., 2018). Companies which advertise reap the benefits of that exercise. Marketing strategy is concerned with finding sustainable ways for organisations to compete in a continuously changing world (Arseculeratne and Yazdanifard, 2014) regardless of the economic environment. Organisations should compete if they are to survive the test of time (Diabate et al., 2019). If the enterprises are not prepared to compete, they can be tempted to use corruption and bribes. Literature also shows that some companies are indulging in corruption in Zimbabwe (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017; Nyapfumbi, 2016) and this phenomenon destroys the competitive edge of the companies leading to imminent failure.

Some participants were of the view that the pricing structure of the small construction enterprises in Masvingo city was favourable. Literature contends that price is a potent element of the marketing mix because it impacts directly on the company's competitive edge (Lancaster and Reynolds, 2002). It has also been established that pricing is used as a yardstick that consumers use in reaching a purchase decision (Cole, 1997). If the prices are too high then some customers do not buy and if they are too low then it will be difficult for that company to be viable because of the losses incurred.

Many participants felt that the majority of these enterprises had proper books of accounts in their enterprises and these books were meant to fulfil Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) returns done annually. Financial accounting is the heartbeat of the organisation because failure to properly manage this area will mean failure to service debts or procure materials.

Most small construction companies fail to survive because of lack of access to loans and poor financial management (Ngomi, 2017).

Quality control systems in organisations are very important and the construction industry is not an exception. Although it was pointed out that small construction companies in Masvingo city were serious with quality, the real situation on the ground proved otherwise. There was no evidence of tests being carried out on site. Quality control entails that tests should be

carried out on materials on site such as concrete, bricks and aggregates (Nash, 1978).

Literature shows that successful companies prosper because of their emphasis on quality (Griffith, 1992; Cole, 1997). Bakar and Tabass (2012) made a survey on why small construction companies were successful in Malaysia and it was found that one of the reasons for companies' positive growth was due to the fact that they had good quality control systems. One way to control quality systems is through employing skilled personnel in the company (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017). Some enterprises engaged semi-skilled labour to reduce the cost of running their businesses but literature says that training is important because it ensures that organisations accomplish their objectives (Appleby, 1994; Cowling and Mailer, 1998). Training ensures that companies achieve their target in terms of quality control.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to explore the managerial practices of small construction enterprises in Masvingo city. It can be deduced that the small construction companies used to employ some marketing strategies before the advent of the harsh economic environment around the 1990s but most of them could no longer employ these strategies. The construction enterprises in Masvingo city had proper books of accounts but quality control was an area that lagged behind in these companies. No tests were carried on site to establish the strength of materials. Semi-skilled workers were employed as a way of saving on the cost of paying for qualified workers but this had a negative impact on the quality of the product. It is against this background that the production units in universities are advised to properly market their products, employ good financial management systems as well as instituting sound quality control systems. In the short term, it will appear expensive to undertake these actions but in the long term they will bear the fruits of this good management practice.

IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of findings raised in this study, researchers recommend the following in order to enhance the efficient managerial practices of the production units at state universities in the country:

1. Quality control should be the flagship and motto of any organisation that envisages success. Quality products last and provide value for money to the clients. Quality is a brand most consumers and clients would want to be associated with. When acquiring materials for construction, it is prudent to buy from known suppliers and materials such as bricks should be tested before use.

In the construction industry, the correct mixes of mortar or concrete should be adhered to. Tests such as the cube test in concrete should be done according to the book and workmanship on joints for brick or block work should be as per client's expectation.

2. Sound financial management should be adopted so that the industrial hubs do survive the economic hardships often encountered by developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Although the production units can depend on the university's coffers for their survival, proper books of accounts bring about accountability and sustainability of projects.

3. Proper marketing strategies should be employed for the production units at these universities. Marketing is done to sensitise the community about the products being produced by a given firm. It follows that production units should advertise their products so as to outcompete their competitors particularly through exhibitions at public fora such as Agricultural Shows.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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