



**Building a sustainable future: Prospecting for success in South Africa's
energy sector**

by

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DECLARATION

I, Theodora Thando Mthembu, hereby confirm this research report is my original work. I have never submitted this research report for any degree or examination at another institution. All of the sources and information used in this research have been acknowledged. I have adhered to ethical standards in conducting this research and it is plagiarism-free. All of the sources have been cited correctly.

Signature: 

Date: 27 February 2025

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Thank you to Jehovah who gave with his only Begotten Son, Jesus, that carried through the challenges of this journey. In times of struggle, your light has given me the courage to endure.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the strategies and challenges impacting small businesses in the South African energy sector, focusing on effective prospecting, building strong client relationships, leveraging industry expertise and increasing project success. Interviews with industry experts were carried out to collect information using a qualitative methodology. The key findings showcase the importance of pipeline management and proactive sector-specific experience in the energy sector in achieving sustainability for small businesses. The research results provides insights to empower small businesses to be proactive as opposed to reactive in bidding and securing client contracts. The research offers insightful recommendations for small businesses to get past challenges in their quest to grow their business in the energy sector. The discussion surrounding the growth of SMEs in emerging markets is complemented by these findings.

Keywords: client relationships, effective prospecting, energy sector, small businesses, SME development

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BESS	Battery Energy Storage Systems
CESA	Consulting Engineers South Africa
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
ECSA	Engineering Council of South Africa
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
ITT	Invitation to Tender
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
RFP	Request for Proposal
SA	South Africa
SACNASP	South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of purpose

This research explores strategies which enable small businesses to grow and succeed in the energy sector, focusing on prospecting effectively and building sustainable client relationships.

1.2 Background of the study

Oxfam (2024) argues that South Africa's government aims to enhance energy security, economic growth and environmental sustainability through the expansion and diversification of the energy sector. This initiative encourages small businesses to concentrate on their activities in the energy sector. However, small businesses may encounter several issues, such as navigating regulatory frameworks and meeting technical requirements, if they do not practice effective prioritisation and prospecting (Burger, 2013). Building client relationships is also necessary to become a preferred consultant in the highly competitive industry. This positioning helps companies to successfully navigate the pre-qualification and tendering stages of the Invitation to Tender (ITT). Although becoming a preferred consultant is a general objective, small businesses can achieve this by means of micro-ambition goals.

Baccarini (1999) stresses the importance of small businesses effective management of the pre-qualification and ITT stages to increase their prospects of securing profitable contracts. This process includes the examination, recognition, assessment, selection and prioritisation of opportunities. This enables businesses to secure repeat business, maintain strong client relationships and build sustainable businesses. Active positioning enables companies to know about upcoming projects before they are publicly announced, allowing for better allocation of resources, maximising the client base and successful submission of tenders. This requires thorough market research, understanding the objectives and needs of clients, and actively building new and nurturing existing relationships.

The Bid Team (n.d.) stresses the importance of early positioning to win bids and to gain a competitive advantage. Effective communication with clients on the achievements of the business can inspire and inform them. Small businesses in the energy sector therefore need to establish themselves as credible and competitive in future projects. As suggested by Morris and Hough (1987), cited by Dalcher (2012, p. 646), the basic strategies are to build strong client

relationships, to form strategic partnerships with other firms, and to invest in the development of staff skills and capacity.

1.3 Problem statement

Small businesses in the South African energy sector face major challenges, including project delays, overbudgeting and tough competition (Hubstaff, n.d., Sibiya et al., 2015). These issues highlight a number of knowledge gaps which are being addressed by this research. First, according to Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014) not much is known about effective prospecting strategies in small business; therefore, it is not considered as good practice. Second, sometimes they do not have the best of relationships with clients, as they are prone to putting the needs of the business, as a profit-making business, before those of the clients. This can negatively impact a business, as it is crucial to consider client needs and demands in order to grow and succeed in the energy sector (Messner, 2024). Thirdly, many small businesses lack knowledge of how to use their sector-specific experience to secure priority projects (Mtambo et al., 2023). Finally, better strategies are needed to manage delays in projects, budget overruns and other problems. By addressing these knowledge gaps, this research fosters sustainable success for small businesses in South Africa's energy sector through effective prospecting, efficient market research, robust client relationship strategies and sector-specific experience.

1.4 Research purpose

This research identifies strategies that South African small businesses can adopt to improve their project success rates and growth within the energy sector. It investigates the potential benefits of effective prospecting for success, strategic client relationship building, and the development of sector-specific experience. In addition, the research examines strategies that empower small businesses to overcome the challenges and to position themselves for success in the sector. This research contributes towards a sustainable future for small energy sector businesses in South Africa through strategies for success and growth. Furthermore, it addresses existing strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement, as recommended by Mtambo et al. (2023) and Aren and Sibindi (2014).

This research provides detailed information for small businesses in the energy sector on how to improve their prospects and develop effective strategies for early positioning. As a result, these businesses have the power to secure priority projects, to rationalise their systems and to contribute to sustainable growth. In addition, this research adds to the existing data on strategic

positioning and project management in Southern Africa.

1.5 Research objectives

The research objectives are:

- 1) Objective 1: To examine how small energy sector businesses in South Africa step up their efforts in identifying and prioritising opportunities
- 2) Objective 2: To identify strategies small businesses employ to build strong and sustainable relationships with new and existing clients in the sector
- 3) Objective 3: To explore how small businesses can be sustainable in securing and delivering priority projects by capitalising on industry-specific experience
- 4) Objective 4: To identify which KPIs could be instilled to measure how effectively to secure and deliver projects in the energy sector?

1.6 Research questions

The research examines the effectiveness of successful prospecting strategies, the building of strategic client relationships and the sector-specific experience in securing and delivering projects for clients in small energy sector businesses in South Africa, addressing the following research questions:

- 1) Research question 1: How can small energy sector businesses in South Africa step up their efforts in identifying and prioritising opportunities?
- 2) Research question 2: What strategies can small businesses employ to build strong and sustainable relationships with new and existing clients in the sector?
- 3) Research question 3: How can small businesses be sustainable in securing and delivering priority projects by capitalising on industry-specific experience?
- 4) Research question 4: What key performance indicators (KPIs) can be used to measure how effectively to secure and deliver projects in the energy sector?

1.7 Rationale of the study

The energy sector is rapid expanding. It also offers opportunities for small businesses to support its development. However, problems such as delays in projects and the need to retain skilled workers can have an impact on their growth (Hubstaff, n.d., Sibiya et al., 2015). To help these

small businesses overcome these obstacles, this research explores how to combine successful, effective prospecting, building up existing client relationships and acquiring sector-specific experience to increase the likelihood of securing and completing these priority projects in a timely manner.

Furthermore, understanding the pre-qualification and ITT processes, as discussed by Baccarini (1999), is crucial for securing construction opportunities. This research adapts these findings to the small business context. Dalcher (2012, p. 646), citing Morris and Hough (1987), investigates early positioning strategies used by larger businesses. This research identifies the most effective approaches for small businesses to succeed and grow in the sector by adapting these strategies.

1.8 Delimitations of the study

This research does not examine larger or international businesses; rather, it investigates small businesses operating within the energy industry. It examines strategies which empower them to position themselves earlier for upcoming opportunities before they get publicised. These prospecting strategies focus primarily on growing the business and helping it succeed in the business sphere. This research does not cover other components considered in the business environment, such as financial management. It does not influence larger or multinational businesses, as they often focus on prospecting and early positioning for success and are more established in terms of clients and business growth.

1.9 Assumptions

The assumption of this research is that key factors impacting the growth and success of South African small businesses include sector-specific experience, strategic client relationship building and successful prospecting. It also presumes that these businesses have the capability and resources necessary to successfully carry out the proposed strategies. In addition, the research suggests that success and growth in this context have a fixed meaning. The research provides transparency to the reader by recognising its focus and possible limitations by indicating certain delimitations and assumptions. This helps readers better understand the findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores different research focusing on small energy sector businesses in South Africa. It highlights knowledge gaps, discusses theories to inform the research and develops the conceptual framework that guides this research.

2.2 Project management and client relationship

According to Mtambo et al. (2023), small businesses in South Africa have the opportunity to expand and achieve exceptional success in the energy industry. However, these businesses often encounter several challenges, such as budget overruns, project delays and a lack of skilled professionals (Hubstaff, n.d.; Sibiya et al., 2015). Wu et al. (2017) argues how efficient project management is, especially those focusing on construction heads. Similarly, Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014) argue that building strong client relationships is crucial for obtaining referrals and repeat business in the professional services industry.

2.3 Research gap analysis

While existing research provides information on small business growth, success in project management and client relationship building across various industries (Woo & Leelapanyalert, 2014; Wu et al., 2017), it does not adequately cover the focus area of this research.

2.3.1 Research knowledge gap 1

Burger (2013) provides detailed data on the growth and success prospects for small businesses. However, Aren and Sibindi (2014) emphasise that there is not sufficient research on the specific strategies that work best for small South African energy firms to succeed. This research explores this knowledge gap by investigating successful prospecting and early positioning strategies within this environment.

2.3.2 Research knowledge gap 2

Wu et al. (2017) emphasise the importance of effective project management for small businesses in the construction sector. Notwithstanding this, there has previously been limited research on project management strategies that South African small businesses in the energy sector can employ and embed in their everyday practices. This research fills this gap by

exploring management techniques. These techniques could help small energy businesses in South Africa. The purpose is to enhance their chances of securing contracts and be sustainable in South Africa.

2.3.3 *Research knowledge gap 3*

According to Messner (2024), small businesses often struggle with building and maintaining strong client relationships, which is crucial for enhancing project outcomes and client retention. This research explores strategic client relationship development, looking at specific strategies businesses in this sector might use to build strong relationships with both new and existing clients. Customer relationship management (CRM) is vital for maintaining market share and securing long-term success in the energy sector (Messner, 2024).

2.3.4 *Research knowledge gap 4*

According to Sulich and Soloduch-Pelc (2022), several small businesses lack the knowledge of how to leverage their sector-specific expertise to secure and deliver priority projects. This research investigates how small businesses can effectively utilise their industry-specific knowledge to enhance their competitiveness and project success. Therefore, leveraging sector-specific expertise is essential for securing and delivering priority projects in the energy sector (Sulich & Soloduch-Pelc, 2022).

2.4 *Constructs selected for the study*

The research focused on a number of constructs including strategic client relationship building and successful prospecting for success strategies. The success rate of small businesses securing and completing priority projects is another construct investigated.

2.5 *Theories used to inform the study*

Two primary theories serve as a basis for comprehending how small energy businesses in South Africa tackles both projects as well as challenges. The first theory is the resource dependence, followed by social network theory.

2.5.1 *Resource dependency theory*

According to Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) contend businesses are dependent on resource dependence theory to succeed externally. Furthermore, Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) emphasises that businesses are at an advantage if they cannot secure external resources. For small

businesses operating in this sector, the resource dependency theory emphasises the importance on focusing on securing priority projects. Another factor this theory stresses is building strong client relationships and cultivating existing ones for growth and success. In addition, the South African energy sector has many great prospects for small businesses to grow and succeed. However, these businesses are often faced with several challenges which hinder them from achieving their desired outcome (Mtambo et al., 2023; Sibiya et al., 2015). These challenges include fewer resources than larger businesses. These businesses rely solely on external factors, such as clients. This is why the resource dependency theory could help these businesses understand how they can use this research to navigate this environment to their advantage.

2.5.2 *Social network theory*

Granovetter (1973) highlighted that the social network theory showcases how pivotal networks are for information access. This is because it is possible to think of successful prospecting and success strategies as means of creating and utilising social networks within the South African energy industry. These networks may offer useful details about upcoming priority projects, the bidding process and client needs, all of which can offer small businesses an advantage over competitors.

2.5.3 *Integrating dependency theory and social network theory*

This research explores how small businesses could utilise social networks to access project information, build relationships and collaborate with clients. It also explores how these businesses can move away from resource dependence on larger ones by using social networks as a resource. This research enables them to acquire priority projects, be visible to clients, increase their chances of securing relevant projects and enhance their ability to deliver projects successfully within a specified timeframe.

2.6 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework illustrates how constructs selected for this research are related. This is shown by Figure 1 below. The framework highlights the sequential relationship between the levels. It also shows a strong relationship and project opportunities. Level 1 looks at establishing the foundation for the strategic client relationship building that is reflected in Level 2. Level 3 is similarly achieved through the success metrics attributed to Level 2's client satisfaction.

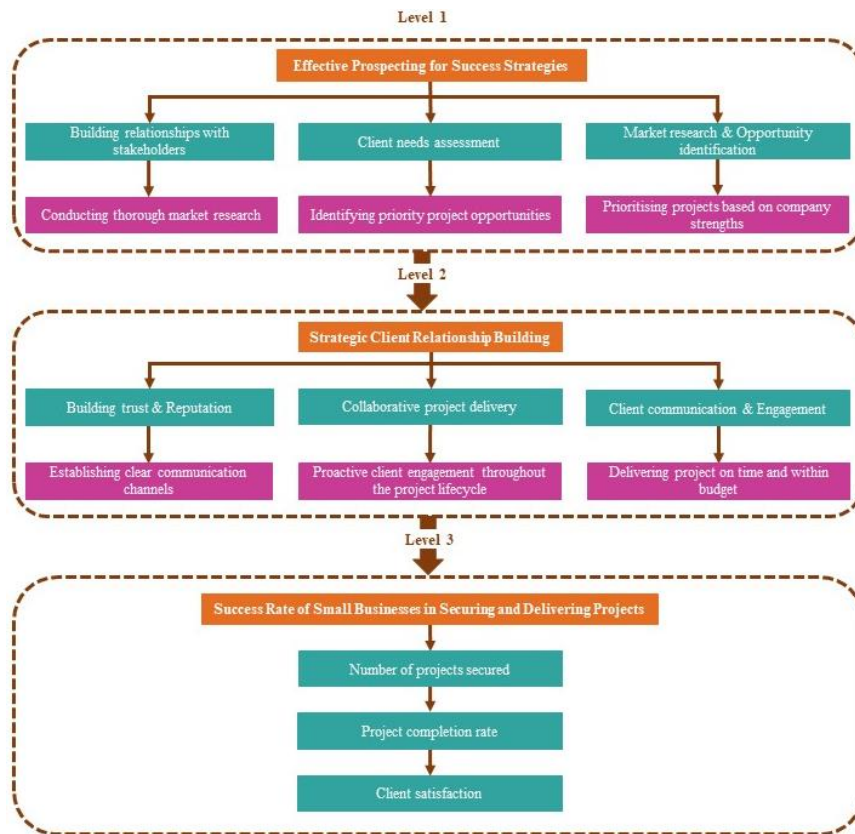


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: the relationships between constructs

The influence of strategic client relationship development and effective prospecting for success strategies on small businesses is an essential subject in this sector. Furthermore, the capacity to secure and deliver priority projects in the geography of this research is explored. Through a comprehensive analysis, the effect of these constructs on the success of securing and delivering a project success was conducted in this research.

The conceptual framework suggests that factors that do not affect the success rate of small businesses in securing and delivering priority projects are successful prospecting strategies and building client relationships. This suggests that adopting these strategies could increase the likelihood of success in the South African energy sector.

2.7 Research propositions

According to Zhao et al. (2022) prospecting, market trends and research for small businesses in the construction sector is important and should be embedded in all practices. Effective prospecting is pivotal for small businesses in the energy sector to prioritise projects that drive

growth and success while also helping them remain sustainable. Similarly, Vieira et al. (2019) highlight that these businesses should pursue profitable opportunities and focus on sustainability and longevity. According to Morris et al. (2011), businesses that strategically position themselves are more likely to thrive in their respective sectors. Based on the conceptual framework, the following propositions are proposed.

2.7.1 *Proposition 1*

Proposition 1 (P1): South African small businesses in the energy sector are more successful in obtaining new projects if they conduct thorough market research, identify priority project opportunities and focus on projects within their core areas of experience.

2.7.2 *Proposition 2*

Proposition 2 (P2): Establishing clear lines of communication, actively interacting and engaging clients with clients throughout the project as well as efficiently completing projects within budget and on schedule will ensure small energy businesses in South Africa complete priority projects and guarantee satisfaction.

2.7.3 *Proposition 3*

Proposition 3 (P3): South African small businesses in the energy sector that are using their sector-specific experience are more likely to secure priority projects and complete them in a timely manner.

2.7.4 *Proposition 4*

Proposition 4 (P4): South African small businesses in the energy sector that implement project management strategies early in the process are more likely to mitigate risks surrounding stakeholder engagement, early risk identification and regular performance monitoring. This prevents delays and encourages effective management of budgets, contributing to the KPIs.

2.8 Conclusion

To concentrate on projects as well as challenges connected to efficient prospecting, project management and client relationships, this chapter examined important literature on South African small businesses in the energy sector. Important research gaps were found, such as the absence of sector-specific experience in the small energy business in South Africa context. The Resource Dependency Theory and Social Network Theories were alluded as a cornerstone for

guiding businesses on obtaining and execution of priority projects. Lastly, the conceptual framework emphasise the connection between effective prospecting strategies, client relationship strategies and overall business success. These insights encourage exploration for boosting project acquisition, encouraging client involvement and offering long term viability for small energy sector businesses in South Africa.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the approach utilised by the researcher. This chapter further explains the research design and discuss how the researcher collected the data. The chapter also discuss the research instrument. The research population, sampling strategy, sample, data analysis strategies and methodological limitations are presented. Lastly, the research quality assurance and ethical concerns are discussed.

3.2 Research design

This research uses an interpretivism research paradigm with a qualitative research approach. Interviews are used to collect the data using an interview guide. The interview guide has semi-structured interview questions. Through a comprehensive analysis of personal experiences and points of view made by qualitative research, small businesses in the South African energy sector may get valuable insights along with detailed information about the strategies adopted (Creswell & Cresswell, 2019).

Participants shared their real life experiences while ensuring the research objectives were addressed, as emphasised by Denzin and Lincoln (2011). This speaks to the purpose of the qualitative research, which is conducted to allows researchers to gather rich, insightful and descriptive data that reveals complex human experiences in their geographic context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This was especially helpful to probe into the subtle issues and responses of small businesses in this sector.

3.3 Data collection methods

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with key individuals to collect the data. The researcher asked open-ended questions (see Appendix B for the interview guide), which provided insightful answers from the participants based on the themes. Section A enabled collection of information related to the effective search for success used by small businesses in the energy sector. Section B focused on strategies used by small businesses to build lasting and strong relationships with clients. Section C focused on the uses of sector-specific experience, while Section D explored project management strategies in addressing challenges faced by South African small energy businesses.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) recommends piloting an interview guide with a small sample to ensure clarity, comprehensiveness and smoothness. The researcher reached out to a few participants comprising of people in similar discipline during their available time to pilot the interview guide. The interview was piloted gave the participants with a chance to raise any concerns and any ask for explanations about anything unclear to them. Additionally, the pilot interviews were conducted to encourage open-mindedness in preparation for the actual interview phase. The researcher obtained written consent before the interviews began. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings.

3.4 Research instrument

To investigate the experiences of small businesses in the South Africa's energy sector, semi-structured interviews in an interview guide were utilised. Based on the theory to inform the study, conceptual framework, a literature review and research objectives, the interview guide was created. Interviews were conducted following an informed consent process, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, maintaining data anonymity. In addition, the researcher ensured that the interview guide was divided into four main sections. Preliminary demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview.

3.5 Population

The population for this research consisted of small businesses in South Africa operating in the energy sector. To ensure relevance to this research, the population was selected based on the experience of the small businesses in the energy sector..

3.6 Sample and sampling strategy

This research employed non-probability sampling. Prior to the conducting the interviews, a selection criterion was drafted. This criterion was prepared and embedded before data collection began. Additionally, purposive sampling was also used by the researcher. It identified and selected participants with relevant experience aligned to this research. According to Guest et al. (2006) and Creswell and Poth (2018) to get sufficient data saturation, the first six to twelve interviews are imperative in a qualitative approach.

The sample comprised of eight participants, consisting of subject matter experts, project managers and small business owners with a strong understanding of the energy sector and the challenges that small business owners are faced in the pursued to grow and succeed in the

sector. The participants consisted of two from battery energy storage systems (BESS), two from offshore wind, two from solar and two from hydrogen, for a total of eight. These eight interviews ensured there was sufficient thematic saturation while ensuring insightful and descriptive data was collected. This research considered participants with at least 4 years and above of experience in the energy sector. Participants with no direct contact or experience in the energy sector were not considered, as that would go against the purpose of this research.

3.7 Data analysis strategies and interpretation

The transcribed interviews were analysed. Furthermore, thematic analysis was utilised. Crosley (2023) defined thematic analysis as the methodical review of data to find, categorise and analyse recurrent patterns. This method is useful for identifying themes and interpretations that emphasise the participants viewpoint and experiences.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) six phase data analysis strategy, the researcher began with familiarising the data collected. This first phase focused on re-examining the transcripts to find details. The second phase focused on the development of preliminary models and their refinement on the basis of research questions and emerging topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the third stage, themes were identified by grouping the models into possible themes and by making adjustments where necessary. The fourth phase looked into assessing themes for relevance, uniqueness and consistency to the research objectives. Phase five involved embedding the themes in the data analysis phase together with existing literature. Finally, in phase six, the researcher collated a report that incorporated the themes into a coherent, useful and insightful analysis of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.8 Methodological limitations

This research comprised of several limitations. Utilising semi-structured interviews for the data collection stage, focused only on small businesses in South Africa's energy sector. Another methodological limitation included only a specific timeframe for data collection. These limitations emphasised the need for a more robust and potentially aggressive approach to unpacking small businesses' experiences. Moreover, determining if the findings could be applied in a broader context critical assessment of responses and search for explanations was essential to avoid unintentional gaps in information. Moreover, the findings could not be applied to small businesses in different sectors or geographical locations.

3.9 Quality assurance

Various approaches were taken to account to ensure quality and trustworthiness.

3.9.1 *Transferability*

The conceptual framework, literature review and research objectives were all taken into consideration when designing the interview guide. To ensure the interview went well, the researcher gave participants a chance to ask clarifying questions and be open-minded to concepts they and the researcher had not thought of; the researcher piloted the interview with a small sample. To ensure transferability, the interview guide was improved before the main data collection. The feedback from the pilot interviews was used as a guiding point. Tracy (2020) stresses the importance of doing this in order to resolve any problems before the main stage of data collection.

3.9.2 *Dependability*

The researcher ensured a trustworthy, transparent and bias-free environment during interviews, ensuring participants' confidentiality rights. The research objectives were clearly explained to participants to minimise potential bias. The researcher also researched how to actively listen and conduct unbiased interviews. Galdas et al. (2017) suggested that active listening as well as conducting unbiased interviews allows participants to answer questions openly.

3.9.3 *Credibility*

To ensure credibility, Stahl and King (2020) suggested that it was essential for the researcher to do thorough participant-checking. The researcher does this to ensure participants are the correct subset. Subsequently, to verify the accuracy of their insights, the researcher shared preliminary findings with them. As suggest by Morse et al. (2002) the researcher could explore data triangulation to verify that the data is substantiated with academic references. This was done by supplementing the interview data with company documents or industry reports to allow detailed interpretation of the research.

3.9.4 *Confirmability*

The methods and procedures utilised of the research design were clearly documented and outlined throughout the research. Flick (2022) verified the importance to assessing the quality and trustworthiness of the findings to potentially aid future research.

3.10 Ethical considerations

The research made sure to follow all ethical consideration during through the research. The researcher adhered to ethical considerations to protect participant privacy, ensure informed consent and to conduct the investigation with honesty and respect for all parties involved.

3.10.1 *Informed consent*

Participants were informed about how data would be obtained. Additionally, the research objectives were described. Participants were also educated on the uses of findings. The signed consent forms confirmed that participation was voluntary. The form highlighted those participants can withdraw from the research should they feel uncomfortable. It also emphasises that they would not suffer any prejudice. Participants were made aware of the research objectives. The usage of the data were also emphasised to the participants. Before te interviews, participants received about how the researcher protected their data. Communication about their names would not be exposed. Additionally, the potential risk and benefits of participation were explained. Anonymity for all participants involved was ensured. The researcher supplied participants with contact information for the researcher and any relevant ethics committee to whom to address questions or concerns. In addition, the participants were given a chance to ask questions and receive explanation before signing the consent form. After receiving written approval, the interviews commenced.

3.10.2 *Confidentiality*

Participant anonymity was enforced by the researcher. This was done by utilising pseudonyms in transcripts and securely storing interview recordings after transcription. Interview data was kept on a computer requiring a password, with backup copies on another secure password-protected computer. The researcher ensured that research reports, presentations and publications did not include material that could identify specific participants.

3.10.3 *WITS ethics application process*

The researcher adhered to the rules. The researcher received ethical clearance. The University of Witwatersrand Research Ethics Committee gave permission to begin data collection (see Appendix A for the ethics clearance certificate). The data from interviews was collected virtually. Additionally, no human contact was involved.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research methods used in this research. Data collection methods were clarified in detail. The research design and data analysis strategies were also discussed. The researched used semi-structured interviews. This method gathered in-depth insights from key individuals. The population and how the sample was selected was also confirmed in this chapter. This was done to ensure a targeted approach to participant selection. The limitations of the research were addressed and quality assurance measures. The chapter showed the findings were reliable and valid. Participant confidentiality and informed consent was adhered to as part of ethical consideration during the research. These methodological approaches formed a strong foundation for the subsequent data analysis as well as the discussion of findings.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Insight analysis from interviews aligned with literature gathered through this research will be discussed in this chapter. The key findings are interpreted in the South African context, with emphasise on strategies for small energy business growth and sustainability. The thematic analysis method is used to compare and contrast the findings from the data collection phase and unpack the findings thoroughly.

4.2 Overview of participants

To understand and unpack each participant's transcribed interview, it is essential to highlight the level of seniority amongst each of them to assess how the participants compare in their perceptions and to identify whether the differences are a result of the level of experience held amongst each professional within the communications and marketing industry. Table 1 below provides an overview of the participants for data analysis throughout this chapter, the participants' profiles and the levels of seniority to ensure anonymity as promised during the data collection phase.

Table 1. Overview of participants' levels of seniority

Key for analysis	Role	Years of experience
Participant 1 (P1)	Business Development Advisor	25 years
Participant 2 (P2)	Environmental Scientist	15 years
Participant 3 (P3)	Energy Engineer	12 years
Participant 4 (P4)	Knowledge Manager Renewable Energy	11 years
Participant 5 (P5)	Senior Electrical and Electronic Engineer	8 years
Participant 6 (P6)	Technical Advisor: Green Hydrogen South Africa Global Co-Lead: Women in Green Hydrogen (Africa)	7 years
Participant 7 (P7)	Senior Electrical Engineer	7 years
Participant 8 (P8)	Energy Engineer	4 years

Out of the eight participants, two had between 12–25 years' of experience, three had between 7–8 years' of experience and one participant with over 4 years of experience within the energy

industry. Of these participants, two were female and the remaining six were male. The participants represented four main renewable energy disciplines: BESS, onshore wind, solar energy and hydrogen. In addition, these varying roles and levels of seniority and experience in the industry enabled participants to be equally compared as subject matter experts, project managers and small business owners.

4.3 Thematic analysis process

Crosley (2023) describes thematic analysis as involving systematically examined data to identify, code and analyse recurrent patterns in research. Subsequently, the thematic analysis method enables accessibility and theoretical flexibility throughout the data analysis stage (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Derived from the research objectives and insights, themes associated with the key findings are depicted in Figure 2 below. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-step process, the themes can be the direction of travel for the findings.

The first phase involves familiarising the data collected, where transcripts are reviewed multiple times to obtain clear comprehension of the insights. The second phase focuses on generating preliminary codes and refining them aligning them to the emerging themes and research questions. Phase three looked at how themes are identified by grouping codes into potential themes and adjusting them, as necessary. The fourth phase entails reviewing the themes for consistency, uniqueness and relevance aligning them to the research objectives. The fifth stage involves distinguishing and refining the themes in accordance to the collected data and existing literature. Finally, in phase six, the researcher compiles a report that integrates the themes into a coherent and insightful analysis of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

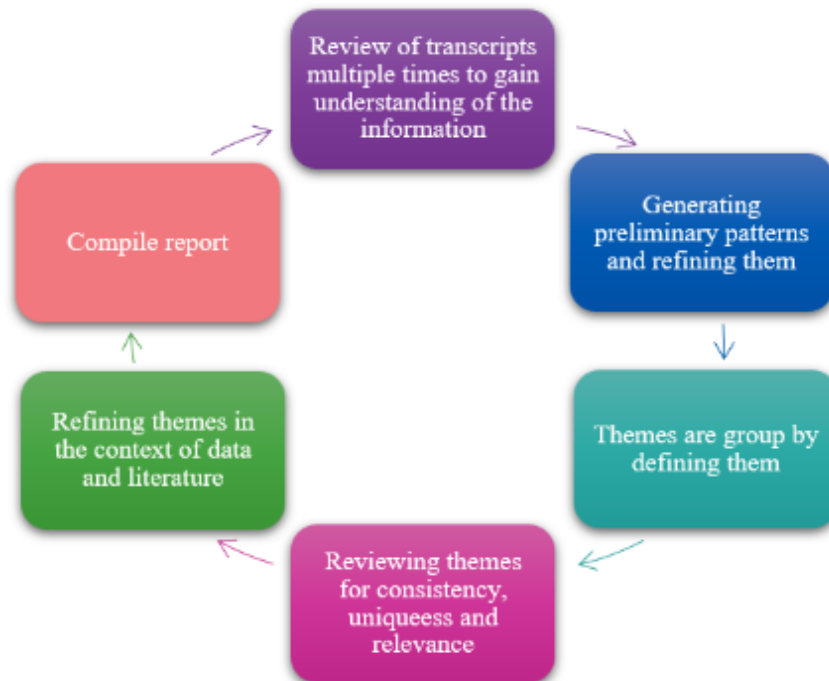


Figure 2. Thematic data method process using Braun and Clarke's 6-step process

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)

4.4 Presentation of results

4.4.1 To examine how small energy sector businesses in South Africa step up their efforts in identifying and prioritising opportunities

According to P3:

Small businesses should showcase a track record, a deep understanding of the market and propose innovative solutions.

This statement shows that all the participants in this research unanimously agreed that effective prospecting and strong client relationships significantly impact project success rates. Building trust and maintaining open communication were highlighted as crucial elements. This is emphasised by P7:

Good client relationships definitely impact how efficiently a project is run and how challenges are managed.

Effective prospecting and client relationships are vital for project success, fostering trust, efficient communication and repeat business.

The findings from this question are that effective prospecting fosters trust and efficient communication, improving project outcomes and increasing the likelihood of repeat business. Additionally, strong relationships also position businesses to anticipate and prepare for future projects. In addition, the insights gained from effective prospecting and client relationships emphasise that it is best practice for small businesses to embed both the project execution and pipeline of opportunities in their business. It contributes to the longevity of the business in several ways, such as providing project success and the sustainability of the business. This relationship highlights the apparent gap that exists by providing arguments on the essence of project success and sustainability of small energy sector businesses in South Africa, which was not previously explored by other researchers.

The participants stressed the significance of market research to adapt services to the demands of the clients as well as to anticipate future trends. The importance of this was underlined by the fact that market research helps to match your offers to the needs of your clients and thus makes your company more competitive. The key finding of this interview is that comprehensive market research is the cornerstone of successful marketing and enables businesses to adapt their offers and anticipate client requirements efficiently. P2 added:

Tailoring solutions to client needs fosters trust and improves prospecting success.

An approach fitting one client will never be the same for another client when coming to providing services to a client. Small businesses are encouraged to understand that what may work for one client may not work for another. This is because each client has different needs and expectations. It is crucial to continue cultivating client relationships for the benefit of both parties.

All the participants emphasised the importance of market research to align services with client requirements and anticipate future trends. According to P4:

Market research helps align your offerings with client needs, making your business more competitive.

In addition, P2 asserted that:

Tailoring solutions to client needs fosters trust and improves prospecting success.

There is vast market research which investigates and enables businesses to adapt their service offering to different clients while working on clearly understanding client demands. Moreover, they are able to identify key clients at an early stage and to draft client packs to manage their expectations.

4.4.2 To identify strategies small businesses employ to build strong and sustainable relationships with new and existing clients in the sector

All the participants emphasised the importance of market research to align services with client requirements and anticipate future trends. According to P4:

Market research helps align your offerings with client needs, making your business more competitive.

In addition, P2 asserted that:

Tailoring solutions to client needs fosters trust and improves prospecting success.

There is vast market research which investigates and enables businesses to adapt their service offering to different clients while working on clearly understanding client demands. Moreover, they are able to identify key clients at an early stage and to draft client packs to manage their expectations.

All the participants highlighted that sector-specific expertise and a strong track record are critical for winning projects. The need for partnering with larger consulting firms was also identified as a way to gain exposure and credibility. This is emphasised by P5:

Starting with smaller tasks to build a portfolio allows businesses to later secure larger contracts with big corporations.

In addition, P1 stated:

Fulfilling promises and contract agreements within the promised time is crucial for building credibility.

The findings from this question amplify how sector-specific experience enhances credibility and helps small businesses win contracts. Furthermore, building a portfolio and leveraging references from existing clients are key strategies for the success of a small business in the energy sector. In addition, the contribution to the existing knowledge stresses the importance

of building a strong record of accomplishment and partnering with bigger businesses with similar business interests for business growth.

All the participants agreed that proactive and transparent communication, coupled with networking was vital. Participants emphasised the role of industry events in establishing and maintaining relationships. According to P4:

Regular meetings, whether physical or online, create open communication and allow for proactive risk management.

This statement stresses the transparency in gathered from the findings, which emphasises the importance of client engagement and interaction assists with building trust. When a client is given personalised services, they feel like they are part of the family and are able to be loyal to the business and provide the business with repeat opportunities. In addition, networking events and regular check-ins provide opportunities to foster stronger relationships. P2 added:

Active listening and delivering according to client needs help foster long-term relationships.

According to P7:

Delivering high-quality work on time and within budget makes small businesses a preferred choice.

Echoing P7, the participants highlighted that timely delivery, adherence to quality standards and alignment with industry frameworks such as Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) were differentiators. P4 further asserted that:

Aligning work with ESG frameworks helps small businesses stand out during tenders.

On the basis of the above statements by the P7 and P4, small businesses can become preferred consultants by consistently delivering quality and respecting evolving industry standards. By working with the bigger consulting companies, they can build their network, and eventually, the client could prefer them to the bigger company.

4.4.3 To explore how small businesses can be sustainable in securing and delivering priority projects by capitalising on industry-specific experience

All the participants highlighted that sector-specific expertise and a strong track record are critical for winning projects. The need for partnering with larger consulting firms was also identified as a way to gain exposure and credibility. This is emphasised by P5:

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Timely delivery, compliance with quality standards and alignment with industry frameworks such as ESG were highlighted on several occasions as differentiating factors. This is apparent from the response of P7, which claims that:

Delivering high-quality work on time and within budget makes small businesses a preferred choice.

Additionally, P4 asserts:

Aligning work with ESG frameworks helps small businesses stand out during tenders.

These small businesses in the energy sector can become preferred partners by consistently delivering quality and adhering to evolving industry standards. Making it their duty to keep up to date with market trends, knowing which conferences to attend and who is who in the market can also be another differentiator for them.

P6 noted:

A lack of skilled professionals can be detrimental to project quality and timeliness.

All participants supported this statement and echoed the common problems of poor project management, lack of skills and financial constraints. In addition, P8 stated that:

Market saturation and resource limitations create significant hurdles for small businesses in the energy sector.

This means that regulatory compliance and market saturation exacerbate these issues. Reducing skill shortages and focusing on efficient resource allocation is crucial for overcoming project management challenges and maintaining competitive advantage. This helps the business better identify gaps and produce effective solutions to fill those gaps.

4.4.4 To identify which KPIs could be instilled to measure how effectively to secure and deliver projects in the energy sector?

The participants offered varied perspectives on defining success; however, they all emphasised community impact, employment creation and economic contribution. According to some participants, they believe and have seen in practice that the delivery of projects that meet client needs and those which contribute to national development objectives was also highlighted as an indicator of success. Participant P5 said:

Success is when a project contributes to community development and creates jobs in underserved areas.

Another participant, P8, noted:

For small businesses, success is about building a sustainable portfolio of high-quality work and making a measurable impact on the economy.

From the above statement from P8, it can be noted that participants argue that the success of small energy sector businesses in South Africa is defined not only by financial metrics but also by their wider impact on society and the economy. Some of the key indicators include job creation, sustainable operations and compliance with economic and social responsibility of the geography they are located in. These results findings also strengthen the business's reputation and credibility in securing future projects.

Participants noted that KPIs such as project completion rates, budget compliance and client satisfaction are critical and of key importance. They agreed that success is multi-dimensional and encompasses financial sustainability, the impact on the community and

operational effectiveness. For example, one participant stated, “Delivering quality work on time and within budget is a key KPI for small businesses.”

A study on CRM systems conducted by Nethanani et al. (2024) suggests that business impact on the performance of SMEs concluded that effective use of KPIs allows businesses to proactively monitor their performance and identify any areas for improvement. Nethanani et al. (2024) further asserted that alignment of KPIs with strategic objectives promotes sustainable business. Contrary to Nethanani et al., Ogujiuba et al. (2021) warned against over-reliance on financial KPIs, arguing that broader indicators like employee satisfaction and environmental impact should also be considered. Ogujiuba et al. (2021) argued that SMEs and sustainable entrepreneurship in South Africa should incorporate sustainability metrics. This is because these metrics provide a more broad view of business performance.

Participants stressed the importance of delivering quality work and reaching the project at the stipulated time and date; and within the communicated budgeted range. This is because the success of the business can also be attributed to the financial sustainability, client satisfaction and capacity to scale up.

I concur with the notion that a balanced framework of KPIs, including financial, operational and social indicators, is essential for every business. Additional metrics, such as the financial metrics are also imperative. However, the including broader strategies provide a comprehensive assessment of success, aligned with sustainable business practices.

4.5 Discussion of findings

Figure 3 below graphically represents the key themes and findings of this research.



Figure 3. Key findings and themes

4.5.1 *How can small businesses in South Africa’s energy sector step up their efforts in identifying and prioritising opportunities?*

The participants stressed the importance of maintaining a strong pipeline of projects through active engagement and monitoring of industry trends. They stressed the use of tools such as industry alerts, forums and government partnerships to identify upcoming projects. For instance, one participant noted, “Focus on local government initiatives and maintain connections with existing clients to uncover suitable projects.” According to Afidegnon (2019), the findings on factors for success for energy opportunities in Southern Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, strategic partnerships as well as understanding of local market dynamics in identifying viable projects is important.

While proactive engagement is beneficial, some researchers argue that small businesses may face challenges due to resource constraints, limiting their ability to effectively monitor and respond to industry trends. A South African study by Mabunda et al. (2023) assert load-shedding affects Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) highlighted that external factors could hinder small businesses to secure priority projects.

Effective prospecting as well as maintaining strong client relationships were highlighted as crucial. The participants stressed that proactive communication and consistent engagement are key to securing future projects and building trust. For instance, P3 highlighted the role of proactive communication in securing future projects, while P4 emphasised the value of face-to-face interactions.

My belief from my experience is that small businesses need to improve current strategies and actively embed them effectively in order to know how to respond to external challenges. This can take a while for the labour force to understand the need for these improved strategies; however, eventually they will understand that it is implemented as a best practice measure. Building new and maintaining existing networks and keeping them informed of new trends in the industry can further improve their ability to identify and prioritise opportunities at all times. Businesses are also empowered to keep their pipeline visible.

4.5.2 *What strategies can small businesses employ to build strong and sustainable relationships with new and existing clients in the sector?*

Trust, transparency and consistency in communication were identified by participants as the basis for strong client relations. Therefore, continuous engagement with clients is imperative. This can be provided in the form of regular mail check-ins, attending conferences or exhibitions where the client would normally be present, or can even take place as a coffee meeting to find out what is happening or going to happen in the future. One participant stated, “Proactive communication, consistent quality delivery and face-to-face interactions foster long-term client loyalty.” The study on CRM in the energy sector therefore supports this view and stresses that strategic CRM approaches, including transparent communication and personalised engagement (Pellegrini, 2021), are essential to maintain strong client loyalty. Other studies conducted by researchers such as Odonkor et al. (2024), emphasise that over-reliance on formal communication channels can lead to a lack of personal connection. This can result in professional falling apart. Furthermore, Odonkor et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of balancing formal and informal communication to foster trust to enhance resilience on small businesses through relationship formation with new and existing clients.

Effective communication strategies and networking have been alluded to. The participant contends that communication can serve as a tool to gauge when opportunities would be released by clients. This point was alluded to by P1, P2, P5, P6, P7 and P8, who maintained that networking shall always be an effective tool for collaboration with clients and maintaining a relationship with clients.

I concur with the argument that balanced approach, which combines formal communication with personalised interaction is pivotal. Tailoring communication strategies to clients preferences can strengthen relations and increase client loyalty.

4.5.3 How can small businesses be sustainable in securing and delivering priority projects by capitalising on industry-specific experience?

The participants emphasised that leveraging industry-specific experience builds credibility and enhances competitiveness. They suggested starting with smaller tasks to build portfolios and using these as references or foundations to win larger contracts. One participant noted, “Starting with smaller tasks to build a portfolio allows businesses to secure larger contracts with corporations.”

Research indicates that demonstrating niche expertise and a strong track record is critical for project success in emerging sectors. Geographical experience, coupled with sector-specific

experience and a proven portfolio, are important assets for energy project development in South Africa and other sub-Saharan African regions (Afidegnon, 2019). In addition, some researchers argue that small businesses often face difficulties in scaling up due to resource constraints, which limit their ability to take on priority projects (Mabunda et al., 2023). Another South African study highlighted negative effects of load-shedding on SMEs. These external factors could further hinder the capacity of small businesses to pursue larger projects.

The ability to leverage and utilise specialised expertise emerged as a critical success factor. Participants highlighted that showcasing a strong track record and demonstrating competence in niche areas help small businesses win priority projects. P5 argued the essence of starting with smaller tasks to build a portfolio, which can later be leveraged to secure larger contracts.

I agree with the notion are required to leverage sector-specific experience. I also believe that the creation of partnerships with larger businesses can help a small business mitigate several constraints and begin securing larger contracts.

4.5.4 *What are the KPIs that small businesses in this sector can use to measure success? E.g., project completion and client satisfaction?*

Participants noted that KPIs such as project completion rates, budget compliance and client satisfaction are critical and of key importance. They agreed that success is multi-dimensional and encompasses financial sustainability, the impact on the community and operational effectiveness. For example, one participant stated, “Delivering quality work on time and within budget is a key KPI for small businesses.”

A study on CRM systems conducted by Nethanani et al. (2024) suggests that business impact on the performance of SMEs concluded that effective use of KPIs allows businesses to proactively monitor their performance and identify any areas for improvement. Nethanani et al. (2024) further asserted that alignment of KPIs with strategic objectives promotes sustainable business. Contrary to Nethanani et al., Ogujiuba et al. (2021) warned against over-reliance on financial KPIs, arguing that broader indicators like employee satisfaction and environmental impact should also be considered. Ogujiuba et al. (2021) argued that SMEs and sustainable entrepreneurship in South Africa should incorporate sustainability metrics. This is because these metrics provide a more broad view of business performance.

Participants stressed the importance of delivering quality work and reaching the project at the stipulated time and date; and within the communicated budgeted range. This is because is the

success of the business can also be attributed to the financial sustainability, client satisfaction and capacity to scale up.

I concur with the notion that a balanced framework of KPIs, including financial, operational and social indicators, is essential for every business. Additional metrics, such as the financial metrics are also imperative. However, the including broader strategies provide a comprehensive assessment of success, aligned with sustainable business practices.

4.6 New insights into energy sector market challenges

According to the findings above, this research can ascertain that effective prospecting and effective client relationships are not only beneficial for larger businesses but also imperative for smaller businesses. Effective prospecting enables businesses to be forward-thinking and strategically position themselves for the work they desire. Small businesses are profit-making businesses; therefore, they also need to be strategic and not pursue all the opportunities they come across; however, they should carefully identify and select the ones relevant to them as a business. This is where effective prospecting comes in through the 12 steps of the bidding process that questions the viability of opportunities and then gives steps on how to bid and win those opportunities.

Secondly, the new insight into the energy sector market emphasises the essence for small businesses in this sector is them being able to gain credibility to get awarded larger contracts that are relevant to their business. It is imperative that businesses actively seek opportunities that are within their service offering, as that will provide the client with an understanding of where they are skilled. This is where marketing and business development material, such as capability statements that speak to the specific experience of the business, come in. This stresses the essence of maintaining a strong track record of experience and encourages partnerships with larger and international organisations to grow.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter focused on presenting findings and thematic data analysis. It further highlighted key themes gathered from this research, such as the importance of effective prospecting, leveraging sector-specific expertise, the use of effective communication strategies and the challenges faced by small businesses this sector. The insights provide a thorough overview of aspects having an influence on success, growth and sustainability of businesses. The

conclusions and recommendations to follow further emphasise what more could be done to grow and succeed in the energy sector and where to improve.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of findings

Research locally has shown that effective prospecting strategies have an impact on success and sustainability of small energy sector businesses. Effective prospecting involves maintaining a visible pipeline of projects. It also looks at actively engaging with market trends and clients through networking to identify new opportunities. The findings highlight that businesses that embed effective prospecting and engage in industry conversations are more likely to secure long-term contracts. The research stresses the importance of building sustainable client relationships. With trust, transparency and continued engagement being the key factors ensuring the success of the project. Businesses that maintain open communication with clients tend to experience increased projects from clients because they have built strong professional networks.

The findings emphasise that utilising sector-specific experience provides small businesses with a competitive edge. Demonstrating technical competence and establishing credibility through a record of accomplishment help businesses position themselves strategically in the competitive energy sector. This also enables them to those skills as their key differentiator. Research has also identified several challenges faced by small businesses encounter including but not limited to labour force constraints, project delays as well as market saturation. To ensure long-term sustainability of the business, it is imperative to mitigate these challenges through strategic planning, skills development and collaborations with external partners. The insights gathered from this research contributed to a wider understanding of effective prospecting and business growth strategies within the within the sector of interest in South Africa.

5.2 Conclusions

The research showed the significance of effective prospecting and strategic client relationships in boosting the success of small energy sector businesses in South Africa. Effective prospecting, characterised by a clear understanding of market trends and the maintenance of a strong pipeline of projects, enables businesses to identify and prioritise opportunities that are of interest to them. Strong client relationships, based on trust, transparency and a consistent commitment, are an essential element in ensuring repeat business and project success. Small businesses that make use of their sector-specific experience are better placed to compete in a highly saturated market such as the energy sector. Demonstrating technical excellence and

maintaining a strong track record are key factors in the award of priority projects. However, the research also revealed that small businesses face a number of challenges, including limited resources, skills shortages and financial constraints, such as bidding costs, which are the internal costs incurred by businesses in preparing for an RFP, which may hinder their growth and sustainability. For instance, bid costs have factors which could potentially cause businesses financial constraints, such as the client needs, which may be insurmountable, and the bigger and more complex the opportunity, the higher the bid cost will be. Therefore, strategically monitoring and controlling bid costs will be essential. Furthermore, carefully distinguishing between direct and indirect costs is essential to ensure bid costs are kept at a minimum while submitting a quality bid at the deadline stage. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of strategic planning, capacity building and networking.

5.3 Recommendations

The purpose of these recommendations is to propose considerations based on the findings and objectives highlighted by the researcher. Using the data collected from interviews and thematic analysis, these recommendations aim to equip South African small businesses in the energy sector with effective growth and sustainability measures. They focus on enhancing effective prospecting through processes such as the 12 steps of bidding process. They also foster new and existing client relationships while tackling skills shortages and utilising industry networks effectively. These recommendations aim to assist small businesses in steering the competitive landscape whilst achieving long-term success.

The recommendations emphasise the importance of developing strategies which enable specifically small businesses to address several shortcomings they are exposed to this sector. They are not only based on the researchers experience, however, but also embedded literature and collected through interviews with project managers, subject matter experts and owners. This ensures that the data gathered is obtained from real-world scenarios and insights. By focusing on the recommendations, small businesses are empowered to focus on strategies that are meaningful to the business and help them grow in the competitive market.

The recommendations fill the knowledge gap of this research through its specific and actionable strategies, which could be implemented for growth and sustainability in South Africa. The recommendations can be embedded in the strategies and offer a roadmap for growth, supported with real-world experiences and evidence from other researchers.

5.3.1 *Develop robust prospecting strategies*

Small businesses should invest in tools and processes that enhance their ability to identify upcoming opportunities, such as subscribing to industry publications and participating in professional forums. In addition, they should look into investing in their workforce, specifically work-winning professionals who can help them better position themselves for a bid. These professionals understand the complexities of bidding and use several frameworks, including the 12 steps of the bidding process. They can also look at employing professionals who are already Association of Proposal Management Professionals (APMP) accredited because these professionals understand the importance of effective prospecting and how to effectively position the company to win contracts.

5.3.1.1 *12 steps of the bidding process*

Figure 4 below graphically illustrates the 12 steps of the bidding process.



Figure 4. Better bidding: 12 steps to bidding framework

Source: Paul (2020)

Winning work should be an essential part of a business. This is why a business first came to life, because it has to make a profit. By adhering a structured and deliberate process, such as

the 12 steps of the bidding process, small businesses can significantly improve prospecting and overall bid win rates. Each step in the 12 steps of bidding process contributes uniquely to the emergence of proposals, whether small, medium or big. It also enables a business to match business objectives with client needs and promote strategic growth opportunities. By embedding these steps into their prospecting strategies, small businesses can adapt their offers to market demands, increase their efficiency and build stronger client relationships. This structured and deliberate process not only increases the businesses win rates but also has an impact on the sustainability of the business, which is primary focus of this research (Paul, 2020).

The first step in the 12 steps of bidding process is the client engagement phase. The step stresses the importance of building sustainable relationships with clients to understand their needs and decision-making process. This approach enables businesses to anticipate client demands and to better tailor their proposals to meet those demands, which increases their chances of being awarded a contract. By engaging clients early on in the process, small businesses position themselves as trusted consultants.

The initial win strategy helps small businesses assess opportunities and identify the likelihood of success. This step encourages the focus on win-win offers that match the strengths of the business and thus optimise resources. Through strategic selectivity, companies can avoid over-investing in low-return projects and instead focus on quality rather than quantity.

The bid/non-bid gate serves as a critical decision point where businesses assess the feasibility and viability of the project against their capabilities. Through the formalisation of this step, small businesses can ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the project(s) with a strong probability rate of winning. In this way the number of unsuccessful bids are reduced significantly.

The coordination and initiation of the tender process ensure that all team members understand the roles, time submission dates for clarifications and tender as well as the objectives. A clear plan minimises confusion and redundancies and promotes cooperation and efficiency. This step is essential to maintain focus and ensure that the submission meets the client's requirements.

The response planning and business approach is to develop responses that meet the needs of clients while being aligned with the business's pricing and resource strategy. This phase reduces the risk of erroneous pricing or the omission of key aspects of the tender.

Steps such as the development of content, price and offer and the interim and red-top reviews highlight the iterative improvement of the tender document. Regular revisions ensure compliance, consistency and quality and present a polished and professional proposal to clients.

Activities after submission and closure highlight the importance of maintaining momentum after submission. This includes client consultation, interviews, and feedback. These follow-up actions often distinguish successful bids by demonstrating the commitment of the undertaking to the project.

Finally, the closure and learning phase helps businesses to refine their future strategies by providing feedback on successful and unsuccessful bids. This virtuous circle of continuous improvement is essential for small businesses in order to stay competitive.

5.3.2 *Strengthen client engagement*

Small businesses should prioritise regular communication with clients, ensuring transparency and responsiveness. This is top tier, as clients value personalised services. For example, when an individual looks for a particular service or product, they expect the company to be helpful. They also require a company to be responsive in a timely manner in addition to making the client feel like they are the only client that matters. Therefore, using specific strategies to enhance the relationship with existing and new clients could be beneficial to the client. These do not have to be process bund processes but can be a simple check-in now and then or a coffee date to discuss any new developments and what is in the pipeline. This can include providing progress updates, addressing client concerns promptly and fostering trust through proactive problem-solving.

5.3.3 *Invest in workforce development*

It is imperative to further enhance the professional development of professionals in the workplace. Therefore, establishing training programmes to upskill employees and collaborating with larger firms can help small businesses overcome skills shortages and deliver quality projects. Investing in workforce development is not only limited to external training, but fellow employees can help upskill one another. Furthermore, the small business can invest in in-house libraries with short courses, allowing the employees to choose the courses that are relevant to them. This also gives a good name to the business, as employees always remember which business gave them an opportunity to upskill themselves, whether to grow in the business or elsewhere. Furthermore, skilled professionals, e.g., engineers, can be upskilled by getting

professional accreditations. These professional accreditations include South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions (SACNASP). Another one is the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) professional accreditation. These professional accreditations will allow them to bid for bigger contracts, as normally the bigger contracts require professionals to have certain accreditations.

5.3.4 *Leverage networking opportunities*

By being present at key industry events and obtaining professional associations accreditations for businesses, such as the Consulting Engineers South Africa (CESA), among others, and using platforms like LinkedIn and other websites, in addition to word of mouth, can help small businesses build relationships and increase visibility in the market. To penetrate the market, the small business has to be known, create a name for themselves and have a reputation. By leveraging these networking opportunities, they are exposed to a wide array of opportunities and can create new connections for the sustainability of the business.

5.3.5 *Implement KPIs*

Adopting metrics such as client satisfaction scores, project completion rates and financial performance indicators can help businesses measure and track their progress toward success and effective prospecting. For a business to succeed, the need for KPIs is imperative as they can be used to measure if the business is going in the right direction and improvements in certain areas, such as having a visible pipeline and maintaining it. Without KPIs, a business is unable to progress effectively.

5.5 Limitations

This research focused specifically on South African small businesses in the energy sector, which may limit the validity of the findings to other regions or industries. The relatively small sample size and reliance on qualitative methods may also restrict the scope of insights.

5.6 Areas for future research

Future research should look into include integration of digital strategies in prospecting and client management. Future research could explore success strategies across different geographic regions and what best works for different geographies. Additionally, future research

could look into exploring the long-term impact of networking on business growth in the energy sector.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg



Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number: WBS/BA806622/437

This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

Project title	Building a sustainable future: Prospecting for success in South Africa's energy sector
Investigator / Researcher	Miss Theodorah Thando Mthembu
Nature of Project	MBA (Research Article)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.
Issue Date of Certificate	16/07/2024
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project / research report
Chairperson	Dr Ayanda Magida  +27 11 717 3953  ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za 

Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

18/07/2024

Date:

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT - INTERVIEW GUIDE

Section A

Objective 1: To examine how small energy sector businesses in South Africa step up their efforts in identifying and prioritising opportunities

Research question 1: How could small energy sector businesses in South Africa step up their efforts in identifying and prioritising opportunities?

1. Do effective prospecting and client relationships impact project success rates?
2. How can small businesses in the energy sector identify priority project opportunities that are suitable for their business?
3. Do you think market research and understanding the client's needs are important for successful prospecting? If so, why?

Section B

Objective 2: To identify strategies small businesses employ to build strong and sustainable relationships with new and existing clients in the sector

Research question 2: What strategies did small businesses employ to build strong and sustainable relationships with new and existing clients in the sector?

1. Do you think market research and understanding the client's needs are important for successful prospecting? If so, why?
2. How can a small business leverage sector-specific experience to win projects?
3. What are the best communication methods or relationship-building strategies to be effective in the sector?
4. What strategies do you use to build strong and sustainable relationships with potential and existing clients?

Section C

Objective 3: To explore how small businesses can be sustainable in securing and delivering priority projects by capitalising on industry-specific experience

Research question 3: How could small businesses be sustainable in securing and delivering priority projects by capitalising on industry-specific experience?

1. How can a small business leverage sector-specific experience to win projects?
2. How can small businesses in the energy sector establish themselves as a preferred business of choice for a client for future projects?
3. What are some of the challenges small businesses in this sector are at risk of facing in terms of project delays, budget overruns and the skills of their workforce?

Section D

Objective 4: To identify which KPIs could be instilled to measure how effectively to secure and deliver projects in the energy sector?

Research question 4: Which KPIs could be instilled to measure how effectively to secure and deliver projects in the energy sector?

1. How do you define success for a small business securing and delivering projects in this sector? E.g., could it be creating employment or contributing to the country's economy?
2. What are the KPIs that small businesses in this sector can use to measure success? E.g., project completion and client satisfaction?