

Proactiveness Strategies of Small and Medium Construction Firms in Nigeria: A Qualitative Assessment

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Abstract

Proactively pursuing business opportunities is a crucial aspect of the entrepreneurial approach required by firms in today's highly competitive business environment. This paper explores the practical steps for implementing proactive strategies in the construction small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of Nigeria. The study conducted qualitative face-to-face interviews with 14 owners/CEOs and senior managers of construction SMEs in Abuja and Lagos. The collected data was analyzed using the Content Analysis Technique. The findings indicate that construction SMEs employ various proactive actions to drive business growth. These actions include actively seeking and utilizing information on upcoming construction projects, establishing networks with influential government officials and stakeholders, engaging in proactive marketing by advertising their services, and diversifying their activities within and beyond the construction sector. The study concludes that the adoption of proactive techniques has the potential to enhance the performance of construction SMEs by providing them with a competitive edge in capturing market opportunities. To further improve performance, it is recommended that construction companies foster a culture that encourages a proactive attitude within their overall business strategy. This approach allows firms to strategically position themselves and take advantage of emerging market trends and opportunities.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Construction firms, Opportunity, Proactiveness, Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Business survival presents a significant challenge for construction organizations, particularly small and medium-sized firms (SMEs), due to the highly competitive nature of the sector (Abd-Hamid *et al.*, 2015; Amer, 2020). Construction, being primarily project-based, involves carrying out temporary activities within permanent organizations. This unique characteristic adds complexity to the operational dynamics of construction firms (Abd-Hamid *et al.*, 2015; Amer, 2020). Construction enterprises are therefore expected to manage both their company operations and projects, each of which have distinct requirements.

While business procedures entail repetitive actions, projects are temporary and unique. As a result, construction firms have the dual challenges of competing for projects on the one hand, and successfully managing projects on the other (Setiawan *et al.*, 2015; Abd-Hamid *et al.*, 2015). To be successful in the sector, firms must therefore, continually adopt and apply exceptional business strategies. It was however, argued by Abd-Hamid *et al.* (2015) that most performance improvement studies in the construction sector are focused on project-related success factors, with

less attention paid to corporate business-related concerns, despite their importance in determining the overall success of a construction business.

Entrepreneurship has been identified as a viable corporate strategy for enhancing company performance, particularly for SMEs (Mwangi & Ngugi, 2014; Milovanovic & Wittine, 2014; Magaji *et al.*, 2015; Zeng, 2018). There are however, claims by researchers such as Abd-Hamid *et al.*, (2015) that the literature on entrepreneurship and construction project management has typically developed independently, with little cross-fertilization. As a result, there is scarce literature on the entrepreneurial exploits of construction businesses, particularly in developing nations such as Nigeria.

Some of the few known entrepreneurship related studies in the construction industry of developing countries include the work of Okangi & Lethmanthe (2015) and Okangi (2019), both of which examined the entrepreneurship orientation (EO) and its impact on the growth and profitability of Tanzanian construction enterprises. One may argue that the subject of entrepreneurship among Nigerian construction firms is an essential but under researched area, particularly given the numerous reports of poor performance among Nigerian construction firms (Odediran *et al.*, 2012; Mudi *et al.*, 2015). There is therefore, an obvious need for greater research focus in this field, especially given the overwhelming documented favorable influence of entrepreneurship and its dimensions on business performance in earlier studies (Okangi 2019; Ibrahim and Abu 2021; Olowofeso, *et al.*, 2022).

The objective of this research, therefore, is to examine the techniques for implementing a proactive strategy as a core dimension of entrepreneurship among construction SMEs in Nigeria. Proactiveness is recognized as one of the key components of entrepreneurship orientation (EO), alongside innovativeness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy, all of which are considered critical for enhancing firm performance.

The Need for Proactiveness in the Construction Industry

The goal of every construction entrepreneur is to create and capture value by identifying and seizing construction opportunities. To achieve this effectively, businesses must be responsive to changes and adopt best practices that optimize resource utilization (Abd-Hamid *et al.*, 2015). In this context, the significance of adopting a proactive approach within construction firms cannot be overstated. Proactiveness refers to a company's mindset towards actively seeking and exploiting opportunities. Lumpkin and Dess (2005) describe it as a forward-looking perspective that involves introducing new products or services ahead of competitors and taking anticipatory actions to drive change and shape the business environment. Proactiveness plays a critical role in building capabilities by displaying opportunistic behavior, not only to meet immediate market needs but also by cultivating forward-thinking to accurately forecast future market demands (Waibe *et al.*, 2018).

According to Hao and Song (2016), proactive activities enable organizations to keep pace with technological advancements and consistently seek to acquire and integrate resources that align with technological progress. A proactive firm can anticipate emerging market demands and pool resources to better satisfy these demands compared to competitors (Waibe *et al.*, 2018; Zeng, 2018). Several studies have established a positive relationship between proactiveness and firm

success (Zheng, 2018; Waibe *et al.*, 2018; Onyenma and Hamilton, 2020; Mburu *et al.*, 2021; Funmilayo *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, a proactive stance is considered a source of competitive advantage for firms, particularly in today's fiercely competitive business landscape. However, there is a scarcity of empirical data on the practices and implementation of proactiveness among Nigerian construction SMEs. Thus, the present study aims to qualitatively analyze the proactive practices within construction firms, specifically focusing on the major proactive actions implemented by Nigerian construction SMEs. The findings of this study will enhance our understanding of proactive strategies within the construction industry and serve as a valuable reference for firms in their business practices.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research approach was adopted to examine the practical implementation of proactiveness strategy by construction SMEs due of the paucity of previous studies in this field. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with owners and senior managers of construction SMEs were used to collect qualitative. According to Alshenqeeti (2014), the interview approach aims to explore and characterize the "quality" and "nature" of how individuals act, experience, and comprehend issues. It enables collection of rich and detailed information about how individuals experience, understand and explain events in their lives (Cresswell, 2013; Alshenqeeti, 2014). Data in this study was collected from fourteen (14) owners/CEOs and top managers of construction SMEs in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria. Participants were chosen using convenient sampling technique where samples were picked based on their perceived ability to contribute relevant information about the subject. The profile of the respondent is presented in table 1. An interview guide containing a list of open-ended questions was used to aid the conduct of the interviews. All interviews were conducted politely in English language with the consent of respondents sought to record the interviews. The interviews lasted between 48 to 67 minutes.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained in the study was analyzed using content analysis technique. Content analysis involves the classification of parts of a text through the application of a structured, systematic coding scheme from which conclusions can be drawn about the message content (Rose *et al.*, 2015). The basic coding process in content analysis allows for the organization of large quantities of text into much fewer content categories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The directed approach to content analysis which allows the researcher to use existing theories or prior research to identify key concepts or variables as initial coding categories was adopted in this study. This approach was chosen because the concept of Proactiveness has well established theories and variables in literatures. These key variables were used as the initial coding categories in the content data analysis. All recorded interviews were first transcribed and the transcripts was used as the primary source of data for the content analysis. The transcribed data was read carefully several times and sentences/paragraphs that indicated potential practice of proactiveness were highlighted. The highlighted texts were then coded using predetermined categories based on issues that explained the practice of proactiveness by construction contractors. Coding was done carefully by examining the transcript line by line.

RESULTS

The demographic profile of interviewed participants in the study is shown in Table 1. According to the table, seven (7) of the fourteen participants were the owners or co-owners of their enterprises,

while five (5) were the managing directors of their respective firms. One of the respondents was the firm's Zonal Manager, while the other was the North East Regional Manager. Only two (2) respondents had less than ten (10) years of construction experience, while the remainder have more than ten (10) years of construction experience. Nine (9) of the respondents work on both building and civil engineering constructions, while the remaining five (5) only work on building construction contracts. The firms interviewed had between six (6) and one hundred and fifty (150) permanent workers. Seven (7) of the companies had fewer than ten (10) permanent employees, while five (5) had between ten (10) and fifty (50). Only two (2) of the firms interviewed had more than fifty (50) full-time employees. Because the construction industry is project-based, the bulk of personnel are normally hired on a casual or contract basis, depending on the availability and quantity of projects at hand. Although most of the enterprises have a small number of permanent employees, their annual average turnover in Naira is deemed considerable. Among the enterprises interviewed, the lowest annual turnover was thirty million naira. The survey classified enterprises into SMEs solely based on the number of permanent employees in accordance with the NBS/SMEDAN (2013) criteria.

Practice of Proactiveness among Construction Firms

Findings from the qualitative interviews reveals a mix of various proactive tactics demonstrated by the respondents in pursuing opportunities in their businesses. The following key practices of proactiveness were summarized from the general analysis of the interview data: (i) Active search for and exploitation of information on upcoming projects. (ii) Participation in both local and international workshops and conferences to keep abreast with current trends. (iii) Establishing linkages and networks with politicians and government officials. (iv) Proactive marketing and engagements with prospective clients (v) Quick implementation of new ideas in the construction business and (vi) Diversification to other areas of business activities.

(i) *Active Search for and Exploitation of Information on Upcoming Projects.*

Most of the respondents submitted that they are always actively in search of and seeking information on upcoming construction projects. The various sources of information on construction business opportunities mentioned by participants include: government budgets, tender journals, newspaper adverts, personal contacts and internet sources. The participants reveals that they deploy various proactive moves to take advantage of new and upcoming business opportunities as illustrated by the following responses:

“Any time we see project adverts, we meet and discuss the actions we take as a company” (P3)

“We looked at the budget and the federal tenders’ journal. We also use our networks to find out about new projects (P6)

“Yeah we work ahead, we are proactive most times we try to look at what are the new things we can explore so that we can gain more profit” (P1).

“Like I told you earlier we try to be proactive in dealing with our issues. We think ahead and try to be at the forefront”(P10).

Table 1: Profile of Interviewed Participants

Variables	Category	Percentage Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14
Position of Participant in Firm	1. Owner/CEO	50.0%			1	1	1			1		1	1			1
	2. Managing Director	35.7%	2	2				2			2			2		
	3.Zonal Manager	7.1%							3							
	4. Regional Manager	7.1%													4	
Years of Experience	1. 1-5	0.0%														
	2. 5-10	14.3%								2						2
	3. 10-15	35.7%			3			3			3	3			3	
	4. 15-20	35.7%		4		4			4				4	4		
	5. Above 20	14.3%	5				5									
Firm Activities	1. Building Construction	35.7%	1	1			1	1								1
	2. Civil engineering	0.0%														
	3. Building/Civil Engr.	64.3			3	3			3	3	3	3	3	3	3	
	4. Specialized Sub–contra.	0.0%														
Number of Permanent Employees	1. Less than 10	50.0%	1	1			1			1			1	1		1
	2. 10-50	35.7%			2	2		2			2	2				
	3. 50-200	14.3%							3						3	
Average Annual Turn over	1. Less than ₦ 5M	0.0%														
	2. ₦5M –₦ 50M	14.3%								2						2
	3. ₦50M–₦ 500M	64.3%	3	3	3		3	3			3	3	3	3		
	4. Above 500M	21.4%				4			4						4	
Firm Location	1. Abuja	64.3%	1	1	1	1	1	1					1		1	1
	2. Lagos	35.7%							2	2	2	2		2		

The respondents admitted that they apply both formal and informal means to exploit new business opportunities in the construction industry. The formal means involves the normal process of going through tender processes while the informal channels entail the use of political networks to facilitate chances of getting jobs especially for government projects. One of the respondents puts it thus:

“You know the formalities, but eventually the informalities will have to set in. Businesses are like that the world over. From the experiences we have had, whatever you do, the informalities too will have to come in at the end of the day. Because, if it is about qualification; a lot of other people may also be qualified. So sometimes you have to use your networks, sometimes you use your knowledge of the area to get some projects” (P6).

(ii) Establishing Networks and Linkages among political and Government Officials.

The respondent also emphasized the need for having strong links with politicians and government officials as an important strategy for improving their chances of getting projects. The need for contractors to have some political connections was also emphasized by respondent P4 as a sure way of influencing projects opportunities for construction businesses.

“The first thing is to identify the projects and then use your political networks. If you are a contractor, you have to be a politician one way or the other to a certain extent. You have to be a multi-party politician so that where ever it goes you will be relevant.” (P4).

(iii) Participation in Local and International Workshops and Conferences to Keep Abreast With Current Trends.

Another proactive move identified from the interview participants was the efforts invested in attending seminars, workshop and conferences in order to keep tract of current developments within the construction sector. Some of the interviewed participant indicated that they strive to attend both local and international conferences, workshops, trade fairs and exhibitions in order to acquire new information and knowledge that enhances their business pursuits as stated by P4 below:

“We always try to update ourselves. Of recent, of course last week, I came back from the United Kingdom where I attend training on project communication skills and management. So we have it as a tradition in our firm to allocate some certain budget for staff training and capacity development. Because we believe that if you don't train you wear out and you lose, because we have to stay inward for us to maximize and optimally support the services we render to our clients... P4.

“I was in the USA for exhibitions on building materials. Affordable and qualitative materials. We were also in China sometimes in April last year where they showcase their annual trade fair. I think we try our best to modernize our services” P4.

(iv) Proactive Marketing and Engagements with Prospective Clients

The interview reveals that construction SMEs engage in marketing their services/product largely through sending company profiles to their prospective clients as a means of attracting their patronage.

“We usually send our company profiles and sometimes presents make power points presentations to prospective customers”

(v) Being Quick in Adopting New Ideas and Products

The interview reveals that most of the participants have not been pioneers of new ideas in their business. It was however discovered that majority of the respondents are quick in adopting new ideas into their firms as suggested by some of their responses.

“Construction is dynamic, it is not static, it is moving almost daily and if you are not careful within a short period you will be left behind. Whenever we see new processes, we quickly implement it, especially if we believe it is going to be beneficial to us, we implement it immediately. There is no two ways about it because you can save cost and you save time” (P5).

“I am the kind of person that even when am looking at the television, if I see something I like I will snap it with the hope of using it someday. I always try to see what I can do to add value in order to attract my customers” (P2)

“You see in construction most a times we normally react to issues. So, with the coming of facilities management, we are one of the early people that embrace such concept which is proactive, unlike the reactive ways we do things” (P1).

Some respondent however, revealed that they are cautious in adopting new ideas as illustrated by participant P3:

“I can say we examine new ideas and see how it works for others before we adopt it.”(P9).

(vi) Diversification of Business Activities

To ensure the survival of their businesses, some respondent mentioned diversification as a strategy for mitigating the risk of uncertainty of not getting regular construction jobs. This was considered a proactive move adopted by construction firms as elucidated by P13:

“Our firm is involved in different other businesses like production of building materials such as blocks, interlocks, caves and other concrete products. We also fabricate qualitative doors and windows, rails and other steel components. We are also engaged in transportation business” (P13)

Another respondents reveals that his company has invested money in the SUKUK bond (a form of Islamic funding bond adopted and used by the Nigerian government) as a means of diversifying resources in order to keep afloat and maintain some level of overhead.

DISCUSSION

Proactiveness involves the initiatives taken by a firm to seize opportunities ahead of competitors in the market place (Lumpkin & Dess 1996). A proactive behavior enable firms to collect relevant information on available opportunities to be exploited within an industry (Kusumarwardhani, 2013). According to Setiawan *et al.* (2015), proactiveness impacts firm performance in several ways such as generating innovation, gaining competitive advantage and enhancing risk management. The majority of interviewees in this study reported that they actively look for information on upcoming business opportunities through sources like government budgets, tender journals, newspaper advertisements and personal contacts to identify projects that are of interest to the company. Through such actions, they are able to learn about fresh upcoming projects and other business opportunities that they can pursue. In addition to conventional sources of

information, some of the respondents use new ICT sources such as the internet to seek for information on business prospects in the industry. One of the major features of entrepreneurial firms, according to Lumpkin and Dess (2001) and Kusurmawardany (2013) is their ability to proactively find and exploit new market possibilities by aggressively seeking information to stay ahead of competitors. The majority of the SME contractors in this survey were found to exhibit this proactivity very clearly.

According to the findings, respondents do attend and participate in local as well as international conferences, workshops, trade shows, and exhibitions in order to acquire new information and skills that can aid in planning of their firms' future. By participating in such forums, they have the opportunity to learn about emerging trends and challenges that may impact the future of their business in the sector.

According to Setiawan *et al.* (2015), contractors need to proactively learn about expected future trends and demands in order to periodically modify their focus if they are to succeed in the construction industry. Some participants mentioned that as a proactive measure, they look for and offer helpful information about new development to clients who are frequently unaware of current trends in the sector. These tips and recommendations on cutting-edge products, techniques, and strategies help the client overcome problems related to their requirements. According to Setiawan *et al.* (2015), contractors are supposed to be problem solvers for their clients by providing them with useful information to help them identify the best solution to their construction-related difficulties.

Another example of proactive involvement demonstrated by some participants is the habit of transmitting company profiles and, on occasions, showcasing power point presentations to prospective clients in order to promote their businesses. According to the survey participants, their marketing efforts are typically focused on acquiring information about new projects and then proactively interacting with the client through acts such as providing a company profile and making presentations. According to Setiawan *et al.* (2015) construction firms, unlike other firms, do not often participate in direct product sales.

The participants also devised strategies to improve their market potential through networking and establishing connections, particularly with influential politicians and government officials. This decision is significant as the impact of contacts like these can often be utilized for future advantage. Some respondents claimed that these networks frequently make it easier to find new business opportunities by providing the firm with timely, relevant information on available projects.

According to Robinson (2022), networking is one of the most effective ways for construction professionals to expand their business opportunities. It enables business owners and managers to meet the right individuals, build solid relationships, and gain access to new projects. Networking is essential in the construction industry since human connections are what genuinely distinguishes organizations. Another proactive strategy identified in the survey was the tendency to respond quickly in adopting new ideas that help their businesses. According to Setiawan *et al.* (2015), proactive contractors should be able to seek out new opportunities and develop new business models to maintain organizational sustainability rather than focusing primarily on projects as a core business.

Diversification into other lines of businesses by construction SMEs was also recognized as a significant proactive step identified by the study participants. Previous research by Setiawan *et al.*, (2015) and Han, Lee, & Kim, (2019) recognized diversification as a crucial strategy for construction enterprises to sustain their business operations. Diversification, according to Han *et al.* (2019), is responsible for supporting and improving the financial sustainability of Korean construction enterprises. Participants in this survey claimed that they diversify into other business activities both within the construction sector and into other industries such as transportation and stock investment.

CONCLUSION

The study has explored qualitatively, the tactics utilized by SMEs in the Nigerian construction industry to be proactive in their business interactions. Findings showed that construction firms engaged in six crucial proactive opportunity-seeking behaviors, including: i) Active search for and exploitation of information on impending construction projects. ii). Establishing networks and connections with politicians and top government officials. iii) Participation in both local and international workshops and conferences to keep abreast with current trends. iv) Marketing of products and services through sharing of company profiles and/or making presentations to prospective clients. v) Rapid adoption and use of innovative ideas and products; and vi) Diversification into other lines of business activities within and outside the construction industry, especially during downturns in the sector. It was concluded that the outcomes of this study will provide construction firms with the requisite knowledge for practical implementation of proactive methods in their business transactions. To take advantage of the enormous opportunities in the construction sector, the study recommends construction firms to integrate proactiveness into their overall business strategies.

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