
Achieving Competitive Advantage Via Value Chain Model: Case of Oman's Micro and Small Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The economy of Oman is highly dependent on the Oil and Gas sector; hence, the government had significantly encouraged the diversification of the economy through non-oil dependent economic activities. The challenge in this gargantuan endeavor is to assure the survival and eventually sustained the competitiveness of the players who predominantly belong to the Micro and Small Entrepreneurs. The ever-changing business environment had posed a challenge to Oman's Micro and Small Entrepreneurs for survivability and competitiveness; hence continuous effort is needed. It shows that the sector of Oman's Micro and Small Entrepreneurs barely achieve competitiveness both in the local, regional and global value chain. This study purportedly determines the level of adoption of various activity and strategy based on the Value Chain Model which establishes as the source of achieving competitiveness of Oman's Micro and Small Entrepreneurs. The gathered data were analyzed using statistical tools through SPSS to determine the significant activity within the value chain model using correlation analysis. The results significantly showed that the adoption of VCM is not a well-explored basis for establishing a competitive advantage for Oman's Micro and Small Entrepreneurs. The study concludes that the VCM will be a source of competitive advantage; i.e., innovation and creation of new business ideas across the five primary activities and four support activities within the Value Chain Model.

Keywords: Micro and Small Entrepreneurs, value chain model, Oman, competitive advantage, entrepreneurs

Introduction

SMEs has its importance for the economic success and economic performance of any country due to which all nations are focusing on the growth of their SMEs. The success of a business endeavor in the local market, it is essential business growth towards international market or at large scale businesses. According to Badriya Hilal Said Al Bulushi and Sammena Bagum (2017), in Oman, the Micro and small entrepreneurs are confronted with challenges and issues in areas of human resource management, financial management, operations management, and marketing management which are deterrent to the development and implementation of functional strategies.

The significance of contribution on production growth and linkage with various sectors in society, the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has increasingly gained importance as an area to focus on curbing economic and social problems, especially on developed and developing countries. The survivability of companies particularly SMEs under the current and fast-changing dynamics of the global business environment; the need to restructure and to adapt to meet the fierce global competition is vital (Hussein Elasrag, 2011)

In the global business environment, the contribution of micro, small, and medium entrepreneurs are instrumental in increasing economic activities, poverty alleviation and curb unemployment (Ayyagari, Beck, & Demirguc-Kent, 2007). The value chain activity had created SMEs the competitive advantage through its supply chain partnership, well defined organizational functions, and acquisition of vital information (Bhagwat and Sharma, 2012). Moses (2014) had stated that e-commerce has helped in SMEs compete and allow their presence in the global arena.

The SMEs mostly build their competitive advantage on internal elements supported by resources and capabilities challenging to imitate by larger competitors. According to Aragon-Sanchez and Sanchez-Martin (2007) found that the basis SMEs' competitiveness.

Additionally, Chetty and Wilson (2003) highlight the need for social ties and external networks to create opportunities for alliances and corporation. Gassmann and Keupp (2007) affirm that SMEs mostly achieve competitive advantage through experimental knowledge in line with the knowledge-based view- an outgrowth of the RBV (Gray and Gray 2012; Grant 1996).

Entrepreneurs of small organizations conduct the initial search for strategic fit in the market and the environment and persist in their search for a better fit in the market (Majumdar, 2008). Several types of research expressed the relationship between SMEs' strategic implementation and performance. Escriba-Esteve, Sanchez-Peinado, and Sanchez-Peinado (2008) had noted a significant positive relationship between SMEs' strategic orientation and performance. Maney et al. (2014) find that strategic intensity is positively related to performance; firms that deviate from real cost leadership or differentiation and achieve a balance on both dimensions report superior performance; they further report that strategic intensity may act as a mediator of the relationship between strategic type and performance. Asikhia and Jansen van Rensburg (2015) identify the main SMEs' strategies as; product differentiation, strategic entrepreneurship, niche strategy, cost parity, opportunity seeking abilities, advantage-seeking abilities, and growth orientation. Hence, previous researchers pave ways for this research intends to establish means of gaining competitive advantage for micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman.

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2010), the challenge to SMEs in the adoption of the 'Adoption Process' is the mental process stage in which the entrepreneur hurdles learning the process of innovation to final approval.

The consumer adoption model has five stages. The person learns, but they lack full information about it. After which, the person seeks information about it. The evaluation follows, where they consider the likely benefits of the products, after which, the trial phase where they make trial to determine its usefulness. And finally, adoption or rejection occurs when trial results are satisfactory and decide to adopt regularly (Boone and Kurtz, 2011). Understanding the stages of adoption that affect the MSMEs integration of Value Chain is vital; this is to realize its benefits to any business endeavor fully.

Review of Related Literature

Oman is focusing on bringing economic diversification in a country so that overall economy of a nation will grow (Dietsch & Petey, 2004). The economic diversification had put the government to find ways to motivate the people to start their own SME that deal with different sectors.

SME of Oman is working in a very successful way but, growth is not yet widespread and only significant to some in sporadic phase (Hertog, 2010). Welter and Smallbone (2003) stated that SMEs

faces problems on a strategy to adapt, grow, and expand businesses in a successful manner (Welter & Smallbone, 2003).

Based on previous studies, financial management, marketing management, operations management, and human resource management are independent variables, and SME's growth strategies highly depend on these fundamental management functions (Badriya and Sammena, 2017).

The study conducted by Badriya Hilal Said Al Bulushi and Sammena Bagum (2017) revealed that all the management functions have a negative impact on the growth strategies of SME in Oman. The following reasons were noted; lack of availability of credit for the business growth and expansion, short-term financial assistance repayment scheme, which deters the SMEs to expand or grow their business. The shortfall in managerial skills specifically on capital management and low-cost loans acquisition restricts business expansion. Other areas such as marketing management, research, and development component, operational awareness, logistical knowledge, environmental issues, technological know-how, and legal structures impact the SME of Oman.

The work of previous researchers in Oman had a focus on the functions of management and the entrepreneurial interest of the SME sectors which all agrees that in the current situation, SME must have developed a strategy for growth and expansion to fully realized its inclusive contribution to the economy.

The increasing integration and globalization have led to recognizing SMEs as an essential sector in both developed and developing economies. There is growing consensus that SMEs are a partner in nation-building contribution to inclusive economic growth as recognized in 1997 during the forum of the G-8 group in Denver, Colorado, USA. Notably, during the meeting, participants agreed that SMEs help spurred economic diversification and job creation especially in the developed countries that eventually followed by the less developed countries (Raynard & Forstater, 2002). While SME growth flourished due to incentives and relaxation of labor laws in most developed and emerging countries, their development in transition countries was a result of significant enterprises break up and the privatization of public firms (Caner, 2013).

Across the world, there is a growing sentiment and interest in the SMEs sector, and both public and private entities had encouraged the industry to act more. Countries in the MENA region like Algeria had shown SMEs growth generation; hence, intensive promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation development had been initiated (Merzouk, 2009; Hanafi, 2010 and Datoussaid, 2011).

According to the of Ministry of Commerce and Industry of the Sultanate of Oman (2015 Report), there are 121,000 SME 's, representing 90% of the aggregate business in the entire country. The current state of MSMEs supports the effort and the notion that the right propeller for development and achievement in Oman are the SMEs. Furthermore, based on the definition of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, an annual microenterprise sales is less than RO 100,000 with some employees between 1 to 5. Meanwhile, the small enterprise has an annual sales between RO 100,000 and RO 500,000 with 6 to 25 employees.

With the current statistics in labor generation, Oman's performance in SMEs, compared to other countries in the MENA Region is less. MENA has 70% while in Oman accounts only for 40% (www.wamda.com).

The records of the NCSI (2017), shows that there was a fall in the number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Oman in the first quarter of 2017 accounting to 31.2 %, compared with the same period the previous year. The historical trend in the last five years is a downturn; thus, it is imperative to tap the SME sector via the value chain link to fully realized its potential to contribute to the nation's economic growth

The current trend in the global business arena poses numerous challenges; hence, survivability is a gargantuan task. It is an absolute case of survival of the fittest; organizations that create value for the customers survive through faster, better, affordable and quick response business activity. Proactivity results in competitiveness, i.e., provision of timely and right solutions relative to the needs and specifications of the market (Man et al., 2002).

The most difficult tasks and issues in Value Chain integration is the perception and awareness; ultimately the adoption of people. The value chain identifies and shows the links, or string, of the distinct activities and processes that a business organization performs to create, manufacture, market, sell, and distribute a product or service.

The VCA recognizes the processes that produce value for customers. The VCA is a chain of systematic and concerted distribution and utilization of resources in the organization; from raw materials to final consumption stage. The primary objective of the VCA is to acquire and assure the entire business endeavor. The important concept behind the VCA is to identify consumers value and are willing to pay for the value attributes of product or service, and where that value is created or

destroyed in the chain. VCA focuses on what consumers want and needs, functions, and activities in the value chainlink.

The essential of value chain analysis is to help a business organization assess the cost in the business chain of activities that affect the chain process. The comparison or isolation of the value chain to competitors and the strategic business activity can be determined to create differentiation. The creation of differentiating action will define the organizational value proposition which is unique and vital to address the needs of the market.

Meanwhile, the understanding and adoption of activity within the value chain is a result of awareness of what is a valid business strategy and knowing the concept of value creation. The research was conducted to determine the level of adoption of activities within the Value Chain Model among micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman. It aimed to identify the level of approval on various primary and support activities within the Value Chain that significantly determine the supporting mechanism to address the problems and issues in the adoption of Value Chain model from among MSMEs in Oman. The study aims to:

- Determine the level of adoption of activity within the value chain Micro and Small Entrepreneurs in Oman
- Determine the level of approval or adoption of specific business activity within an action or activity in the value chain of micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman
- Identify the particular business activity that micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman needs to focus on achieving competitiveness within the value chain model.

Methods

The study gathered data through questionnaires from micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman within the Al Batinah Region with regardless of industry sectors. The selection of respondents is via purposive and convenient sampling technique. The research was conducted to identify and analyze the level of adoption of specific activities within an activity or area in the Value Chain model from among the respondents. The variables were measured using a four-point Likert Scale. The data generated were computed and analyzed using SPSS in determining the level of awareness and adoption; descriptive analysis and correlation analysis.

Results

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.997	.997	45

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
1. Inbound Logistics	.976	.977	5
2. Operations	.983	.984	5
3 Outbound Logistics.	.967	.969	5
4. Marketing and Sales	.963	.973	5
5. Services	.973	.974	5
6. Procurement	.983	.984	5
7. Technology Dev.	.984	.985	5
8. Human Resource	.969	.969	5
9. Firm Infrastructure	.946	.940	5

The study used 45 specific activities as variables, based on the classification, 25 are primary activities and 20 support activities within the Value Chain of the MSMEs. The variables which are particular business activities were identified and developed through the discussion with various academic experts in areas within the value chain model.

The variables in each activity were designed and structured based on observation, discussion, and analysis for the maximum possible result.

The results had focused on the significant findings based on the weighted mean effects which are indicative of activities. The respondents determine the business activity if they are 1) I will not adopt 2) may adopt 3) surely adopt 4) adopted. Significant findings showing specific activities that respondents surely adapt and may adopt, and specific activity in each particular activity in the Value Chain.

Descriptive Analysis Results

<i>Descriptive Results</i>				
VCM Activity	Specific Activity within an activity	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Inbound	1.1. Linkages and networking	2.5000	.99488	50
	1.2. Supplier Integration/Relationship	3.2400	.91607	50
	1.3. Quality Materials /Inspection	3.1000	.93131	50
	1.4. Warehousing/Storage (raw materials)	3.0600	.84298	50
	1.5. Distribution of materials	2.9200	.94415	50
Operations	2.1 Layout	2.8800	1.08119	50
	2.2 Inventory	2.9000	.99488	50
	2.3 Scheduling	2.8200	.98333	50
	2.4 Production Schedule	2.7600	1.00122	50
	2.5 Process Flow/Chart	2.8400	.84177	50
Outbound	3.1 Handling System	2.6200	1.00793	50
	3.2 Transport System	3.0000	.90351	50
	3.3 Storage/Warehousing	2.7600	.77090	50
	3.4 Delivery time	2.8200	.96235	50
	3.5 ERP/Technology	2.3200	.81916	50
Marketing/Sales	4.1 CRM	2.4800	.99468	50
	4.2 Price Discrimination	2.6200	.87808	50
	4.3 Promotional Activity	2.7400	.85261	50
	4.4 Product Handling	3.0400	1.00934	50
	4.5 Service Process	2.6600	.74533	50
After Sales Service	5.1 Complaint Handling	2.7400	.89921	50
	5.2 Customer Feedback	2.6800	.91339	50
	5.3 Warranty period response	3.0000	.96890	50
	5.4 Accessibility	2.8600	.88086	50
	5.5 Procedures and guidelines	2.5400	.86213	50

Procurement	1.1. Negotiation	2.6200	1.08590	50
	1.2. Suppliers Intimacy	3.1200	1.00285	50
	1.3 Record Maintenance	2.8400	1.09470	50
	1.4 Purchasing	2.8200	1.02400	50
	1.5 Process and procedures	2.8000	.96890	50
Technology	2.1 E-commerce	2.5400	.95212	50
	2.2 Automation	2.5000	1.03510	50
	2.3 Digitization	2.4800	.97395	50
	2.4 Standard operating procedures	2.4600	.99406	50
	2.5 Structure	2.9000	1.05463	50
HR	3.1 Promotion Policies	2.5600	.95105	50
	3.2 Training and development	2.6800	.99877	50
	3.3 Talent Management	2.5800	.99160	50
	3.4 Employee Manual/Handbook	2.7000	.90914	50
	3.5 Recruitment and Selection	3.4000	.94761	50
Management	4.1. Sound management	2.7800	.93219	50
	4.2 Participative planning/DM	2.7000	.95298	50
	4.3 Financial Management	2.4200	.67279	50
	4.4 Accounting Procedures	2.8200	.91896	50
	4.5 Organizational Structure	2.9200	.89989	50

Summary of Descriptive Results

	Areas	Most Significant Activity			
		Highest Weighted Mean	Rating	Lowest Weighted Mean	Rating
1	Inbound Logistics	Supplier Integration	surely adopt	Linkages and Networking	may adopt
2	Operations	Inventory	surely adopt	Production Schedule	surely adopt
3	Outbound Logistics.	Transport System	surely adopt	ERP/Technology	may adopt
4	Marketing and Sales	Product Handling	surely adopt	CRM	surely adopt
5	Services	Warranty period	surely adopt	Procedures & Guidelines	surely adopt
6	Procurement	Suppliers Intimacy	surely adopt	Negotiation	surely adopt
7	Technology Dev.	Structure	surely adopt	SOP	may adopt
8	Human Resource	Recruitment and Sel.	surely adopt	Talent Management	surely adopt
9	Firm Infrastructure	Org's Structure	surely adopt	Financial management	may adopt

The above results show that micro and small entrepreneurs showed the highest interest in adopting an innovative and creative strategy or idea in the areas of recruitment and selection, and in supplier integration or well-defined relationship. On the other hand, the areas of adopting ERP business solutions and financial management engagement received the lowest response rate; hence these are areas needed to focus on creating awareness as a source of competitive advantage.

The overall results show that 38 specific activity received a positive outcome of surely adopting the activities, and only seven particular activities received cold shoulder of ‘may adopt’ response. The following areas that were on the downside are: establishing linkages or networking with the supplier, integrating ERP solution, adopting customer relations management, automation, digitization, standard operating procedures, and financial management. The results further show that micro and small entrepreneurs are not keen to adopt improvement in the area of technology deployment within the value chain model.

Summary of Significant Correlations(Pearson’s r value)

No.	Activities (Variables)	Pearson’s r value
1	Inventory and layout	.956220
2	Production and Scheduling	.97094
3	Warehousing and Transport	.96462
4	Distribution and Transport	.95695
5	Customer Feedback and Complaint Handling	.965027
6	Product handling and Warranty	.95993
7	Accessibility and Production Schedule	.95615
8	Inventory and Purchasing	.96356
9	Delivery time and Purchasing	.96051
10	Process/Procedures and Delivery Time (3)	.9893
11	Purchasing and Process/Procedures	.97088
12	Automation and Linkages/Networking (4)	.98097
13	Digitization and Linkages/Networking	.96884
14	Customer Relations Management and Digitization	.97916
15	Standard Operating Procedures and Linkages/Networking (5)	.98019
16	Maintenance and Structure (1)	.997577
17	Structure and Purchasing	.96566
18	Participative Planning and Sound Management (2)	.995797
19	Accounting Procedures and Delivery Time	.95491
20	Organizational Structure and Distribution	.97713

The results show that there are 20 highly significant relationships of business activity within the value chain activity link where the micro and small entrepreneurs can create a specific strategy to

achieve competitive advantage. The record maintenance and technology deployment structure shows the top highly significant particular activity to be given focus to gain competitive advantage; respondents are less willing to adopt. Other specific activities that show lesser adoption are participative planning and sound management, process and procedures and delivery time, automation and linkages, and standard operating procedures and networking. It can be noted that support activities like technology deployment, procurement, and organizational infrastructure or management had shown a significant result. On the other hand, after-sales service, inbound, and outbound activities are remarkably substantial from among the primary activities. Overall, the study shows significant results that in each activity within the Value Chain Model are sources of competitiveness where micro and small entrepreneurs may implement to realize the expected margin in the business entirely.

Interestingly, the micro and small entrepreneurs can have a variety of the combination of any particular activity to create a competitive advantage from the 45 listed specific activities as categorized in Primary Activity and Support Activity. The 45 highly correlated specific business activity drawn from a potential combination of $1.1962222e+56$ (factorial).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Micro and small entrepreneurs are significantly not interested in the application of technology in their business endeavors, and linkages to vendors, They also lack the desire to implement automation and ERP solutions; hence there needs to be campaign awareness in the effective and maximize utilization of technology to be competitive. On the other hand, micro and small entrepreneurs are willing to explore the relative significance of accounting principles and infusing leadership training in the business.

Furthermore, the respondents are willing to adopt/ introduce new service process, sales flow, and sales personnel engagement but not ready to explore the areas of CRM, automation, digitization, e-commerce, organizational structure and participative planning as sources of competitive advantage. This study revealed that micro and small entrepreneurs faced many challenges of adoption, of which are more specific to Oman particularly CRM, automation, digitization, e-commerce, organizational structure and participative planning as critical business linking areas to gain competitive advantage.

The survivability and the degree of competitiveness of micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman lie to the current chaotic business environment and the strategy to find and use creative techniques as a source of competitive advantage, as the dynamics of the competitive game of business regularly change. Adopting and amending the ways of implementing strategies and business activities could be considered as the only choice to remain relevant and competitive.

The willingness to adopt VCA model from among the micro and small entrepreneurs is highly dependent on awareness. The partnership of the private sector which includes financial institutions and non-profit organizations and the government sector through its mandated arm in promoting robust micro and small entrepreneurial activity is a crucial element. That business activities in the value chainlink is a vital element for business survival and growth. But during the research, the respondents are not showing interest to evaluate the positive net effect of adopting or focusing on the various business activity emanating from the value chain link model.

Micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman should draw from a strategic perspective that to be a successful business entity the crafting and implementation of a unique competitive advantage that creates value for customers and difficult for competitors to copy or replicate is needed. The achievement of economic growth in Oman will be through diversification by integrating solutions via the Value Chain model which are proven to be practical and economical.

Primarily, the government has done a lot to encourage the SMEs in the country and translated to enhanced contribution to the industrial base of the nation. However, a lot needed to be done to promote further the participation of the SMEs in this sector in the area of facilitation of technological innovation and creativity whose contribution to the wealth created was low comparatively. Continuous information drives to the SMEs to encourage innovation and creativity to be competitive. Hence, the need for the government to organize workshops that could enlighten the micro and small entrepreneurs to be vigilant and proactive towards the competitive business environment. Finally, the government may need to fully engage private entity to mobilize and help the SMEs in understanding the global business environment that would facilitate the acquisition of relevant and compelling information which could also enhance global positioning and material sourcing that is cost-effective; thereby sustaining competitiveness.

The study concludes that adoption of Value Chain Activities will be a source of competitive advantage of the micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman. The research findings show micro and small entrepreneurs should create awareness and interest to encourage the adoption of any of the identified business activities within the Value Chainlink to establish a competitive advantage.

The researcher concludes that micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman have a high potential to be competitive in the market provided they are willing to craft and implement strategies based on the numerous areas of business activities within in the Value Chain Model. It is recommended to micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman to be competitive through the following:

1. The adoption of the value chain model, primarily technology deployment such integrating e-commerce platform like Alibaba, Middle East B2B, Amazon, etc., take advantage of the strategic geopolitical position of Oman, and its established global trading with China, India and the African continent.
2. Aggressively campaign and promote VCA Model in developing and creating a source of competitive advantage through entrepreneurship in the education system, workshops, and tapping the dynamic young population of Oman.
3. Identify and craft a specific business activity to be implemented in crucial industry or sectors to achieve competitive advantage.
4. Finally, create awareness and massive dissemination advocacy campaign on the Vision of Oman, and promote business endeavor that is in support of the promotion of tourism, logistics, manufacturing, farming, and fisheries sector.

Therefore, the researcher recommends further studies be conducted to devise appropriate strategies to overcome the challenges identified that would facilitate the integration of value chain activity from among micro and small entrepreneurs in Oman.

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