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How the Internal Business Environment contributes to the Growth of Female-Owned Mid-Scale Enterprises in East Africa

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Abstract

Female entrepreneurship in emerging economies faces significant barriers, primarily stemming from inadequacies within the internal business environment, entrenched cultural norms, emerging market trends, and management inefficiencies. These challenges constrain women's capacity to effectively address the external pressures their businesses encounter, impeding both their growth and sustainability. This study investigates how three female entrepreneurs from East Africa manage their internal business environment to navigate external demands while maintaining a focus on scaling their enterprises. A qualitative, phenomenological research approach was adopted, employing in-depth interviews to treat each entrepreneur as a distinct case study. The analysis yielded eight thematic areas, highlighting critical internal elements that must be collectively optimized to mitigate external business challenges and foster enterprise growth. These insights provide practical, context-specific knowledge from the African female entrepreneurial perspective on internal mechanisms essential for sustaining and expanding their ventures. This study contributes to the existing literature on women's economic empowerment by identifying the vital role of internal business environments in ensuring continued growth and long-term sustainability for female entrepreneurs in emerging economies.

Keywords: Internal Business Environment, Female Entrepreneurship, Economic empowerment; business sustainability, management inefficiencies

JEL classification: I3, O4, J6, Q2, Q4

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1. Introduction

Female entrepreneurship is instrumental in the growth and development of emerging economies (Stefan et al., 2021) yet its full potential remains underutilised. Studies reveal that women through their leadership and management roles, contribute significantly to organisational success, especially in fast-paced and dynamic environments (Colvin, 2015; Msila & Gumbo, 2016; Isabirye, 2017). Their unique leadership abilities, such as fostering collaboration, adaptability, and resilience, are instrumental in driving business success and sustainability (Moodley et al., 2016; Msila et al., 2016). Despite these capabilities, the entrepreneurial potential of women in emerging economies has not been fully exploited (Potter et al., 2016). Women leaders are particularly effective in promoting corporate

sustainability, which in turn enhances business resilience and growth (Imran & Shafique, 2022a; Imran et al., 2022b). Furthermore, African women in leadership positions not only contribute to organisational success but also positively impact broader societal livelihoods, making their leadership crucial to both economic and social progress (Moodley et al., 2016). These insights emphasize the need for greater support and recognition of female entrepreneurship to harness its full potential in contributing to the sustainable development of emerging economies. However, most mid-scale enterprises owned by women, do not thrive beyond inception due to various internal and external impediments that they face (Stefan et al., 2021) with the possibility of being dissolved within five years (Akhtar et al., 2015). Challenges related to internal operations and management of business enterprises have increasingly been seen as obstacles to successful entrepreneurship in emerging economies (IFC, 2017a & IFC, 2017b). Female entrepreneurs face additional barriers such as limited access to critical market information, which restricts their ability to achieve sustainable entrepreneurial success (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017).

One of the critical insights from these studies is the tendency of female entrepreneurs to engage in necessity-driven entrepreneurship, often focusing on survival rather than growth. This limits their potential for scaling their businesses and curtails innovation (Cirera & Qursum, 2014b; Odebrecht, 2013). Unlike opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, which is propelled by innovation and growth, necessity entrepreneurship often results in stagnation, as these enterprises lack the effective internal mechanisms required for expansion and sustainability (Stefan et al., 2021).

These challenges highlight the need for structural support and capacity strengthening initiatives to help female entrepreneurs develop more robust internal business environments. By addressing management inefficiencies and improving access to market information, female-owned mid-scale enterprises could shift from necessity-driven operations to opportunity-based growth models, thereby enhancing their long-term viability and contribution to economic development. Thus, overcoming these barriers is essential for fostering successful and sustainable female entrepreneurship in emerging economies.

Exploring the relationship between the internal and external business environment is crucial for enhancing the sustainable innovation of mid-scale enterprises. Despite the recognised importance of this relationship, existing literature suggests that it has not been thoroughly examined from an empirical perspective (Engidaw, 2021a; Imran et al., 2022a; Imran et al., 2022b; Seo & Lee, 2019a). For female entrepreneurs, understanding and effectively managing the interplay between internal business operations and external market pressures is essential to overcoming modern entrepreneurial challenges. Doing so would allow them to withstand external shocks and maintain their competitive edge in increasingly volatile environments (Radzi et al., 2017).

Given these gaps in the literature, the present study seeks to address two primary research objectives: (1) to investigate how the internal business environment of female-owned mid-scale enterprises influences their ability to respond to external challenges, and (2) to identify the key internal mechanisms that enable these enterprises to sustain innovation and growth despite external pressures. By examining these factors, the study aims to provide actionable insights that will contribute to the long-term sustainability and competitive positioning of female entrepreneurs in emerging economies.

2. Literature Review

The narrative literature review approach provides overviews of various topics related to this study and has been applied to explore how other researchers have examined issues related to female entrepreneurship, the external business context and the internal business environment to synthesise their literature based on the perspectives of the authors of this study (Snyder, 2019).

The Case for Female Entrepreneurship

The economic empowerment of women has become a central focus of the global socio-economic agenda, as it is not only a matter of human rights but also a crucial driver of poverty reduction

and economic growth. Empowering women economically allows them to gain access to resources, opportunities, and freedoms that are critical for their social and economic advancement (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017). Studies have shown that in Africa, this empowerment has facilitated the rise of women as successful entrepreneurs across various sectors, demonstrating their capacity to significantly contribute to the economy (Odebrecht, 2013; Verhoef, 2017). Despite this progress, the full potential of female entrepreneurship remains underexplored, particularly regarding how women can leverage their internal business mechanisms to mitigate external challenges and drive growth (Stefan et al., 2021; Imran et al., 2022a).

Female entrepreneurship plays a vital role in fostering social and economic development globally, contributing to income diversity, community stability, and social progress (Ascher, 2012; Bosma & Kelley, 2019). Women entrepreneurs, due to their ability to manage multiple roles and responsibilities, bring flexibility to their enterprises, which enhances their capacity to contribute both to their families and the wider community (Lain, 2016). This adaptability has broader social implications, promoting well-being and strengthening the socio-economic fabric of communities (Ascher, 2012).

Furthermore, research consistently highlights that women's leadership styles, centered on relationship-building, mentorship, and the empowerment of others, foster professional and personal growth within organisations (Odebrecht, 2013; Shmailan, 2016a). Women-led organisations are often associated with enhanced financial performance, progressive organisational cultures, and greater corporate responsibility. These enterprises also exhibit increased levels of innovation, enriched talent development, and higher collective intelligence, all of which contribute to their long-term success and sustainability (Gita & Buiting, 2013; Madsen & Ngunjiri, 2015; Moodley et al., 2016). However, challenges related to internal operations, such as limited access to market information and management inefficiencies, remain significant obstacles to sustained entrepreneurial growth (IFC, 2017a; IFC, 2017b; Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017).

Despite these positive impacts, there remains a gap in understanding how female entrepreneurs can better equip their businesses to withstand complex external challenges. Studies suggest that the internal mechanisms women entrepreneurs employ are critical to maintaining competitiveness and fostering growth in the face of external pressures (Radzi et al., 2017; Stefan et al., 2021). This study aims to address this gap by exploring the strategies female entrepreneurs use to navigate these challenges, thereby contributing to the sustainability and success of their enterprises.

2.1 The External Business Context

Seo et al. (2019b) assert that external business conditions, such as government policies, access to finance, market structure, and competition, play a critical role in determining entrepreneurial success. While these factors are pivotal, they simultaneously present significant challenges that entrepreneurs must navigate. This perspective is supported by Engidaw (2021a) and Halmaghi et al. (2017a, 2017b, 2017c), who argue that the external business environment constitutes a fundamental variable influencing an industry's capacity to support and shape organizational strategies.

Customers, as influential components of this external environment, are particularly noteworthy. Their behaviour and demands significantly affect the growth trajectories of mid-scale enterprises, as highlighted by recent studies (Alemu, 2020a; Ungerer et al., 2016a & 2016b). Beyond customer dynamics, a broader range of external elements, including industry characteristics, socio-cultural, technological, economic, environmental, political, and legal trends, as well as global and local risks, critically shape a business's operations and performance (Arshed et al., 2016b). A pertinent example of this is the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a prolonged global recession and substantial business disruptions, illustrating the profound impact that unforeseen external factors can have on enterprises (Indriastuti & Faud, 2020a; Indriastuti & Faud, 2020b).

Given this context, several scholars emphasize the importance of robust internal mechanisms to effectively address these external challenges. The strategic interpretation and response to the

external environment should, therefore, be integral to an organization's internal strategies, enabling businesses to adapt and remain resilient amidst external fluctuations (Pártlová, 2017a; Pártlová, 2017b; Pártlová, 2017c; Shmailan, 2016b; Struwig et al., 2019). This approach ensures that businesses are not merely reactive but are strategically positioned to leverage or mitigate external conditions to sustain long-term growth and stability.

2.2 What Constitutes the Internal Business Environment?

The internal business environment encompasses factors within an organization that influence its operations and performance (Barney, 1991; Daft, 2015). It is critical in promoting entrepreneurship as it shapes the capacity of enterprises to innovate, adapt, and grow (Engidaw, 2021b; Engidaw, 2021c; Rahim et al., 2015a & Rahim et al., 2015b). A strong alignment between internal capabilities and external opportunities or threats is essential for organizational success (Halmaghi et al., 2017; 2017b; 2017c; Porter, 1985). The internal environment, often shaped by external trends, necessitates firms to adapt their internal structures accordingly (Pártlová, 2017a; Johnson et al., 2017). Key components include management practices, organizational frameworks, resources, networks, and unique capabilities under the enterprise's control; when effectively integrated, these elements can determine organizational success (Arshed et al., 2016b; Barney Hesterly, 2015).

Female entrepreneurship is significantly influenced by internal factors such as access to start-up capital, credit availability, entrepreneurial experience, education level, training, and skill acquisition, all of which are critical determinants of success and growth (Cirera et al., 2014b; Brush et al., 2009; Jamali, 2009). However, mid-scale enterprises led by women often face internal challenges hindering their growth and expansion, including difficulties in capital generation, talent identification, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (IFC, 2017a & IFC, 2017b; Coleman & Robb, 2012). To overcome these obstacles, female entrepreneurs must leverage their internal strengths to balance the risks inherent in the external business environment. This necessitates a clear understanding of external patterns and trends when navigating the entrepreneurship process (Arshed et al., 2016b; Carter & Shaw, 2006).

Alemu (2020b) and Shmailan (2016a) underscore the crucial role of internal resources—such as human capital, financial assets, physical assets, and strategic capabilities—in the success of mid-scale enterprises. Efficient management of these resources is fundamental for female entrepreneurs in establishing and operating their ventures (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, has accentuated the necessity for increased digitalization as an internal resource to enhance operational efficiency and output (Indriastuti & Wahyudi, 2020; Seetharaman, 2020). Adapting to digital technologies has become imperative for businesses to survive and thrive in the new normal (Guo et al., 2020; Priyono et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial leadership orientation is a fundamental component of entrepreneurship, significantly contributing to business performance (Rahim et al., 2015a & Rahim et al., 2015b; Gupta et al., 2004). By maintaining a balance with external environmental risks through entrepreneurial leadership, firms can enhance performance by leveraging their competitive strengths, fostering innovation, being proactive, and demonstrating a willingness to take calculated risks (Alemu, 2020c; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). An empirical study by Hewitt (2012) involving 500 SMEs revealed that internal process efficiency scores showed a small but significant negative correlation with the entrepreneurial orientation of the owner, irrespective of gender. This suggests that the more effectively the internal environment is regulated to address external influences, the less the entrepreneur may need to innovate or take risks. Furthermore, a variance of 45.1% was explained by the alignment between the external environment, entrepreneurial orientation, and business performance, highlighting the importance of strategic fit (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Zahra & Covin, 1995).

Halmaghi et al. (2017a) emphasize the crucial role of entrepreneurs' personal attributes, given the direct influence that owners and managers exert on the internal dynamics of their enterprises. These attributes are instrumental in determining how businesses adapt to external factors, as entrepreneurs

are the primary decision-makers (Engidaw, 2021a; Stewart & Roth, 2001). Entrepreneurs must be cognizant of external conditions affecting their businesses, and their leadership attributes—including leadership style, vision, expertise, risk tolerance, planning and administrative capabilities, educational background, and strategic execution abilities which are all pivotal (Bass & Bass, 2008; Vecchio, 2003). The manner in which entrepreneurs interpret and respond to the external business environment is reflected in their enterprises' strategic positioning and performance (Cirera et al., 2014a; Cirera et al., 2014b; Miller, 1983).

Ungerer et al. (2016a & 2016b) provide insights into how stakeholders influence and are influenced by organizations in the pursuit of their objectives, particularly in terms of enhancing confidence in a company's intentions and activities (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). Effective stakeholder engagement entails collective decision-making that acknowledges the roles of multiple actors and systems in shaping entrepreneurial practices (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Greenwood, 2007). Building robust linkages with internal and external stakeholders is therefore essential in stimulating venture creation and growth, achieving competitiveness, and promoting sustainability (Alemu, 2020a; Seo et al., 2019; Strand & Freeman, 2015). Internal principles and the organizational mandate are critical components of business success. Success is more attainable when internal growth initiatives align with the organization's core mandate, which should be clearly understood and executed by a dedicated and diverse team (Pártlová, 2017a; Kaplan & Norton, 1996). This includes adherence to robust corporate governance practices (Imran et al., 2022a; Shleifer & Vishny, 1997), encompassing reforms and standards guided by rules and practices that govern relationships among corporate stakeholders. Effective corporate governance ensures integrity in financial management, stability for growth, and reinforces market confidence and economic efficiency (Arshed et al., 2016b; Claessens & Yurtoglu, 2013). Internal principles and mandates also involve implementing control mechanisms that enable management to navigate an evolving external environment effectively (Alemu, 2020a; Simons, 1995).

Competence and capabilities, particularly in the form of skilled human resources, are critical internal dynamics for mid-scale enterprises (Akhtar et al., 2015; Alemu, 2020a; Barney & Wright, 1998). Competence results from organizational learning and experience, reflecting proficiency in performance (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Core competencies are internal activities performed exceptionally well, contributing to competitiveness and profitability, thereby providing companies with a significant competitive advantage (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Radzi et al., 2017; Ungerer et al., 2016a). The advent of new technologies, especially those emphasizing digital literacy, has necessitated improved skills in technology and communication across various media (Indriastuti et al., 2020c; Vial, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of telecommunication technologies, leading to significant boosts in multiple sectors and calling for enhanced competencies in digital domains (Seetharaman, 2020; Brynjolfsson et al., 2020).

Internal leadership culture is a critical element of the internal business environment, particularly as globalization necessitates evolving leadership approaches to suit emerging contexts (Veldsman et al., 2016a & 2016b; House et al., 2004). Entrepreneurs must therefore be equipped with the appropriate competencies to adapt to various contexts and fully exploit international entrepreneurship opportunities (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002). Support, cooperation, solidarity, and communal tendencies are vital within the entrepreneurship sector. African corporations have been observed to thrive when they incorporate people-centered approaches, such as the Ubuntu leadership style widely practiced in South Africa (Khomba & Kangaude-Ulaya, 2013a; Mangaliso, 2001). The Ubuntu model emphasizes communalism and shared values and is a leadership feature embedded in the attributes of female leaders, prioritizing employees and ensuring a conducive workplace environment that meets the needs of internal staff (Brubaker, 2013a; Brubaker, 2013b; Nkomo, 2011).

In essence, the literature underscores that the success of female-led mid-scale enterprises is

significantly influenced by internal business environment factors. By effectively managing internal resources, adopting an entrepreneurial leadership orientation, upholding strong internal principles, and engaging stakeholders, female entrepreneurs can overcome internal challenges and external pressures, leading to sustained growth and success.

3. Methodology

A qualitative, phenomenological research approach was adopted collecting primary data via in-depth structured interviews (Hameed, 2020; Rajasekar et al., 2013).

3.1 Population

The East African region was the focus of this study due to the growing business prospects within the region including the thriving economy, skilled workforce and stable political environment. High profile female entrepreneurs from East Africa operating in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania were the population for this study due to the unique women business profiles that these countries possess, their promising entrepreneurship status and overall potential for economic growth within the East Africa region. Uganda is renowned globally for producing high numbers of women entrepreneurs (Mastercard, 2017), Kenya has been commended for the government's affirmative action efforts that promote female entrepreneurship (Wanjala, 2018) and the government of Tanzania's transition from socialism to privatisation has continued to witness a flourishing female entrepreneurship sector (Verhoeef, 2017).

3.2 Sampling

A judgemental sampling process was applied based on the participants' availability, the authors' personal judgement in selecting well experienced participants on female entrepreneurship issues and a set of criteria for inclusion and selection (Table 1). This entailed a small, non-random and purposively selected sample of three instrumental female mid-scale entrepreneurs from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania who currently own and manage successful mid-scale enterprise and whose insights were sufficient in answering the interview questions. These women were capable of providing relevant entrepreneurial insights, therefore they were deliberately selected due to their extensive knowledge and understanding of internal business issues. (Howitt, 2019; Panneerselvam, 2018). All three women were identified by looking at owners of successful businesses within their respective countries and they were contacted through mutual connections that were known to the participants and the authors. This made it easier for rapport to be established between the participants and the author.

The small sample size applied, have generated findings that are not representative of the wider African setting (Howitt, 2019), however, the authors utilised Williams (2000)'s arguments that depict how aspects of the primary focus of this study (exploring significant aspects of the internal business environment of female-owned mid-scale enterprises) represent a sub-section of the larger African setting and anticipate that the collected data relatively represent the wider entrepreneurial setting in Africa. Hence, insights from the three participants were useful in achieving the research objective and complimented reviewed literature, which was among the intentions of this study. The findings generated can potentially be applied by female-owned mid-scale enterprises within the wider African setting (Haslam & McGarty, 2014).

Table 1. An overview of the sample profile of the participants

Sample	Three (3) female entrepreneurs from East Africa; Kenya (1), Tanzania (1), Uganda (1)
Profiles	KENYA – CEO of a Brand Strategy and Design Company; Brands industry, Over 20 years in operation; Around 1.5 million USD annual turnover; 18 staff + 50 associates and partners TANZANIA – Founder of a Spa and Co-Owner of a flourishing Hotel Resort in Tanzania; Hospitality industry; Over 10 years in operation; around 650,000 USD annual turnover; More than 20 employees UGANDA – Co-Owner of an Interior Design and Furnishing Company; Furniture and Interior Design industry; Over 25 years in Business; around 4 – 5 million dollars annual turnover; 87 staff
Criteria for selection	Female-owned mid-scale entrepreneurs with more than 10 years' experience owning/running a business Capital turn over above US \$ 100,000; Capital investments above US \$ 100,000 Above 20 employees Willing and able to participate

Source (Authors' own work)

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were adopted as the typical data collection approach. This enabled the researchers determine meanings that the female entrepreneurs attach to their entrepreneurship experiences including reasons behind their decision making (Panneerselvam, 2018; Rajasekar et al., 2013).

Table 2. Example of Interview questions asked and responses

What does the internal business environment mean to you?
1st Response: It's the culture, It's the structures, it's the value systems, the quality of talent, it's the vision, it's the mission, it's the adequacy in resources, It's the attitude of the leadership
2nd Response: The internal business environment, I'm looking at the stakeholders from within, that's my staff, the leadership, the management, and the customers and possibly the suppliers
3rd Response: : I think what you mean by the internal business environment is how do we operate
1st Response: Culture and adequacy of resources... like culture I would put 8.5 out of 10, adequacy of resources I would say 10 out of 10 or 9 out of 10. Culture is the business behavior, the attitudes of the teams, their cognizant of the bigger vision and mission and their ability to implement on the promises they made to their customers or clients. If those things are not well harmonized... forget it
2nd Response: Systems. I would say the systems must be kept simple, here I think I am looking at Operations. I am looking at the systems in Operations, the systems that you create must be kept simple, it must create accountability, it must be to curb fraud but whatever it is, it must work to make service delivery faster and better for the customers because the focus of any business is the customer.
3rd Response: Operating manuals in the sense that each department has a guideline not necessarily followed in the same procedure but they should be guidelines on how to do things such that even when things are not going well and somebody has to take responsibility, you can always refer back to the operations manual, what did the operation manual tell you? Is this part of the operations? Is this part of your tasks? Is this part of what you are supposed to be doing? With operating manuals, it means people have a guideline to fall back to, so it's very important, it's very critical to have the Operating manual, it's very critical to have trainings, internal trainings.

Source (Authors' own work)

3.4 Data Analysis

The authors interacted closely with the data by manually conducting the analysis, giving the process enough time and focus to ensure quality of the findings generated (Taylor et al., 2016). The female entrepreneurs were the units of analysis (Ponelis, 2015) due to their comprehensive entrepreneurship experiences. Primary data plus reviewed literature was condensed and summarised using content analysis (Haslam et al., 2014; Howitt, 2019). Coding mechanisms by Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied during the thematic analysis process, which entailed familiarising with the data; generating codes; searching for and reviewing themes; and defining and labelling the final themes generated.

The authors have presented two screen shots in figure 1 for transparency purposes (O'Connor et al., 2020). These screenshots are from two interview transcript for two different participants to illustrate how different colours were allocated to distinguish ideas generated from each interview extract as part of the coding process adopted. After which the coded text was categorised accordingly based on similarities.

Question 1: What does the internal business environment mean to you?

Interviewer: So when we talk of internal business I know this is self-explanatory but what would you say it means? The internal business environment?

Interviewee: The internal business environment – I'm looking at the stakeholders from within (Interviewer acknowledges). That's my staff. (Interviewer acknowledges), the leadership, the management, and the customers and possibly the suppliers... maybe. Ok I would look at that as our internal (Interviewer acknowledges).

Question 2: What in your experience are the most critical aspects of the internal business environment?

Interviewer: What in your experience are the most critical aspects of the internal business environment?

Interviewee: (Thinks). Systems (Interviewer acknowledges). I would say the systems must be kept simple (Interviewer acknowledges), here I think I am looking at Operations (Interviewer acknowledges). I am looking at the systems in Operations (Interviewer acknowledges), the systems that you create must be kept simple. It must create accountability. It must be to curb fraud but whatever it is, it must work to make service delivery faster and better for the customers because the focus of any business is the customer (Interviewer acknowledges).

Interviewer: What would you say about your staff? Anything in terms of for a business... what would you tell people about staff since we are talking about internal?

Interviewee: You know how they say you have to keep your staff happy so that they can look after your customer (Interviewer acknowledges). But also your staff can also be your greatest competitor (Interviewer acknowledges). Here in Uganda where ethics is a problem (Interviewer acknowledges). You find yourself competing directly with the staff because the service that you want to charge your customer for, that customer can contact your staff directly and do it under the table (Interviewer acknowledges and expresses understanding). So for example a service of me coming to re-hang your curtains, (Interviewer acknowledges). I do it professionally and you have a whole institution that you can depend on but you choose to contact my staff directly. He will even over charge you but you assume he is charging less and all he does is he asks for a day off and he goes and does your work. I'm paying his salary, I'm paying his medical bills, I'm paying his NSF (Interviewer acknowledges). It is a real problem (Interviewer concurs). You have fraud, you have theft (Interviewer acknowledges). It's a problem.

Question 3: How from your experience would you ensure a thriving internal environment?

Interviewer: I think you even started with this but in case you have anything else where you I remember you talked about structures should be in place, should be able to run without you, so in case you have anything to add I will appreciate but if you don't have it's ok we can move on to the next. Like how from

Question 4: How in your experience should existing and upcoming mid-scale female entrepreneurs use their internal business dynamics (such as their internal leadership orientation, innovation and other strategic processes) to deal with the challenges faced within the external environment?

Interviewer: Ok this is maybe a repetitive question but I will ask it anyway... How in your experience should existing and upcoming mid-scale female entrepreneurs use their internal business dynamics (such as their internal leadership orientation, innovation and other strategic processes) to deal with the challenges faced within the external environment? Like say the government is giving you problems in terms of taxation, the political environment is not favourable... what message do you have for them like patience? What should they do? Should they seek external advice? (Interviewer requests for the question to be asked again and the interviewer obliges).

Interviewee: They need to belong to business associations because those are advocacy groups (Interviewer acknowledges). You can't advocate as an individual but you can advocate as EPSA or Chamber of Commerce or the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (Interviewer acknowledges).

Interviewer: And in terms of structure like say you, you have your own leadership orientation, the way you manage your business, is there something that they can have within them that they can use to deal with such things like drive? Like you mentioned we have courage... you mentioned certain qualities that women have.

Interviewee: They need to have defined their value system (Interviewer acknowledges) but most importantly they need to belong to support structures at a corporate level as a business association and as a personal level, probably mentorship groups, to also engage with a trusted coach (Interviewer acknowledges), an executive coach perhaps.

Interviewer: And when you talk of coach you are talking of individuals right?

Interviewee: Both. You can have a business coach and you can have a personal coach (Interviewer acknowledges).

Interviewer: And is there anything you can talk about innovation as an internal business dynamic in terms of dealing with these... I'll give Covid as an example because it's in our face. There is a lot of technology that people are now adopting so that they can work from home and so on and so forth. But in other aspects, can you say something about innovation and how important this is when dealing with the challenges that you face or dealing with your customers or dealing with your day to day business?

Interviewee: One should always ask how others have dealt with it. And that answer may be online, that answer may be with that coach, that answer may be with a mentor, that answer may be with a business association, that answer maybe with a support group. Maybe one belongs to a group of women

Source: (Authors' own work).

Figure 1. Example of interview transcripts

3.5 Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was given by the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Ethics Committee. The study was designed and executed in a morally defensible manner and entailed the participants' verbal and written informed consent voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study. It excluded any force, duress and coercion and the available amount of information about all aspects of the research was provided prior to their participation and the rights of participants were upheld (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Haslam et al., 2014; Howitt, 2019). The authors avoided any form of researcher bias by selecting participants indiscriminately without any peer debriefing and applied Braun et al., 2006's coding mechanisms.

4. Findings

Findings have been structured into eight thematic areas incorporating insights from interviews and reviewed literature that prove the need for a robust and dynamic internal business environment, which underlines some internal features that have a considerable impact on the success of female-owned mid-scale enterprises. These internal features are useful in dealing with external business challenges and should therefore be in place to create a favourable internal climate that can respond positively to complexities within the external business environment as authors like Arshed et al., 2016b; Booysen, 2015; Halmaghi et al., 2017a and Pártlová, 2017a postulate. A dynamic internal business environment illustrates how female-owned mid-scale entrepreneurs use information gathered from the external environment to promote positive change reflected in the growth of their enterprises (Hewitt & van Rensburg, 2018) and deal with recurring internal and external challenges to promote growth.

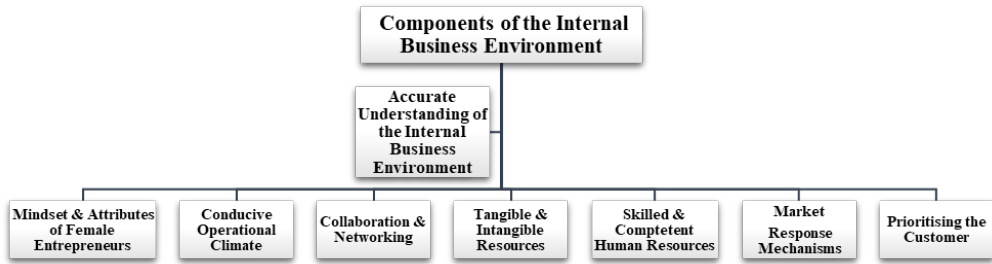


Figure 2. A conceptual framework of the eight thematic areas generated as findings of this study, depicted as components of the internal business environment.

Theme 1: Accurate Understanding of the Internal Business Environment

Accurate understanding of the internal business environment has been determined as the first theme derived from findings of this study and the initial step in attempting to establish the appropriate internal practices for a successful business enterprise. All participants stated their understanding of the internal business environment and indicated some processes that reflect a thriving internal climate. One participant described the internal business environment as “*the stakeholders from within, my staff, leadership, management, customers and possibly suppliers.*” Another participant suggested that “*I think what you mean by the internal business environment is how do we operate*” while one participant classified it as “*the structures, value systems, quality of talent, vision, mission, adequacy in resources, attitude of the leadership.*”

These insights reflect reviewed literature, which describes intricacies of the internal business environment (Pártlová, 2017a) and represents certain elements, that need to be interconnected to achieve success (Arshed et al., 2016b). This overview is useful in instilling knowledge among female entrepreneurs about the importance of understanding internal mechanisms and how these elements contribute to internal efficiency and growth.

Theme 2: Mind-set and Attributes of Female Entrepreneurs

Some studies (Alemu, 2020a; Rahim et al., 2015a) on internal entrepreneurial leadership orientation feature how female entrepreneurs should aggressively adopt internal decision-making actions to deal with existing risks and uncertainties while embracing innovation, proactiveness and other pragmatic elements aimed at dealing with external threats. This is in line with the insights yielded from participants, which reveal the importance of a dynamic entrepreneurial mind-set and some significant female entrepreneurial attributes to influence internal firm dynamics. These strengthen the ability of female entrepreneurs to adapt to external factors and achieve growth, since they are the primary decision makers in their enterprises (Halmaghi et al., 2017a). Therefore, the authors combined the two variables of mind-set and attributes to form the second major theme and finding of this study, classified here as mind-set and attributes of female entrepreneurs. This notion is featured among the African leadership requirements which embrace Ubuntuism as a leadership agenda (Khomba et al., 2013b), said to be a critical female leadership trait that ensures a conducive working environment for staff (Brubaker, 2013a & Brubaker, 2013b).

The Mind-set of Female Entrepreneurs

Some authors contend that certain leadership characteristics such as being vision oriented, with the right expertise and education level, the ability to take risks, being results oriented, translating strategy into action and interpreting the impact of external scenarios are all useful for growth (Cirera et al., 2014b). These characteristics also reflect the importance of a dynamic mind-set, which enables female

entrepreneurs to operate within a healthy potential for growth. The participants urged other female entrepreneur to ensure that they possess the necessary strength to enable them navigate external forces.

These mind-set features include what one interview participant revealed as having, *“an eye for opportunity...a sixth sense for opportunity and the courage to grab that opportunity.”* Another participant pointed out *“courage because setting up a business in Africa is very different from setting up in the UK, the U.S or Canada. The environments are a lot harsher to start up enterprises and particularly to women doing business.”* Therefore, female entrepreneurs are urged to adopt a mind-set that proactively looks out for business prospects courageously within the market and to take advantage of such a potential for the good of their business. This notion has also been depicted by authors on entrepreneurial leadership orientation (Hewitt, 2012; Rahim et al., 2015a).

As female entrepreneurs, enforcing work life balance is another critical mind-set component and includes the willingness and ability to balance domestic and professional responsibilities by applying multitasking and delegation skills according to participants. *“Play both worlds. If you can learn to master that in your home, rest assured when you go out to work, it’s just a play field”* one female entrepreneur opined. Another participant stressed the need for *“a woman to be able to balance those roles of mother, wife and business woman”* while the entrepreneur from Kenya maintained that *“family is important, as the female entrepreneur there is a lot of personal sacrifice...so one ought to know what is important and what is priority for it to work out well. You don’t want your business to succeed at the detriment of your family.”*

Appreciating the competition was also revealed as a critical mind-set feature with the participant from Uganda candidly pointing out *“then also with regards to competition, respect your competition and watch them, don’t hate the competitor, just watch them, follow them so that they don’t get you unawares.”* The participant from Tanzania concurred with this and stated that *“you need these social activities so now and then it is ok to mingle with your peers so you know what the competition is talking about out there because how else will you know what is happening?”* While the participant from Kenya believes *“one should always ask how others have dealt with it...”* and urged other female entrepreneurs to *“find the right competitive skill set because you are competing with others who are taking business away from you or diverting business from your opportunity.”*

Embracing challenges was also disclosed by female entrepreneurs who use challenges as learning opportunities for progress. As the participant from Kenya alluded, *“entrepreneurship is tough, it is often a lonely journey, you will fail many times before you succeed and that is fine.”* Another participant posed the following questions, *“How you take whatever is dished in front of you will determine what type of a leader you are, what type of an entrepreneur you are...Are you weak? When the tough gets going how do you handle your situation? This is a test of your character, of your personality, your mental growth, your spiritual growth...”* while the participant from Uganda is resigned to the fact that *“nowadays I really see challenges as opportunities in disguise so whatever challenges come you have to turn them into an opportunity and it will inspire you to take a direction on growth.”*

Focusing on creativity and innovation as a core value and maintaining relevance within their respective industries were also considered useful mind-set features. One participant revealed some captivating insights about how creativity and innovation is tackled in her business enterprise, *“creativity is one of our core values. We used to have internal competitions for creativity for styles. People would be challenged to come up with something creative and there would be cash rewards. Now what I’m trying to come up with is like an innovation bank.”* Another participant added some other useful insights about how creativity and innovation are entrenched within her hotel resort *“you must constantly be up to date with what is happening...Especially in our industry, we need to learn new cocktails and new menus. We need to have new skills every day for the chefs and for the waiters.”* The participant from Kenya suggested the need to *“keep the business purpose focused and ensure that the business is still relevant to its customers”* adding that *“you must constantly check to see that your business is still relevant.”*

Attributes of Female Entrepreneurs

The need for female entrepreneurs to embrace and utilise certain leadership traits including their inherent feminine attributes (Moodley et al., 2016; Msila et al., 2016) when dealing with entrepreneurial issues is vital. Female entrepreneurs are the primary decision makers of their respective enterprises, therefore their leadership attributes are critical in influencing internal dynamics directly. This has an impact on how they adapt to external factors including the success or failure of their enterprises, therefore being cognizant of external factors according to reviewed literature (Booysen, 2015; Halmaghi et al., 2017a) is imperative. Participants outlined some critical leadership qualities that stress the need for personal traits, attributes and behaviour by leaders, which are critical for entrepreneurial success.

A certain level of decency, respect, integrity, discipline, strong value system, a positive reputation and lack of corruption are some of the personal ideals that female entrepreneurs either possess (Colvin, 2015; Moodley et al., 2016; Msila et al., 2016) or need to adopt and utilise in their day to day operations to promote value and growth of their business enterprises. *“First of all you have to really respect yourself so much that people find it hard not to respect you,”* one participant opined. *“I would also add financial discipline, mental discipline and physical discipline. It’s very important to have overall discipline,”* she added. This was echoed by the participant from Uganda who intimated that female entrepreneurs should always *“have respect for each other.”* Another participant pointed out that *“you need to have a robust character and a very strong value system.”*

Caution and the protective, gentle and patient nature of women which reveals their sense of care are all fundamental for growth and according to one participant. Women have *“patience, more care in delivery of growth and less recklessness. Female entrepreneurs are often risk averse... with a sense of diligence and a sense of patience.”* Another participant observed that *“as a woman whether you have a child or not, the natural instincts of a mother are engraved in you. I see my employees as my children, my little sisters and brothers.”* The participant from Uganda lovingly shared that *“to begin with our boss was mummy to everyone”* and also presented the element of caution *“today we have 87 staff. Those 87 staff have children, they have mothers they are looking after so if I make a rush decision that closes down this company, there are going to be 87 people out of a job. So a woman has that thing of being cautious.”*

Theme 3: Conducive Operational Climate

A conducive operational climate emerged distinctly among the insights provided by all three female entrepreneurs and has been classified as the third thematic element and another finding of this study. A favourable operational climate is said to be useful in responding to external challenges, therefore female-owned mid-scale enterprises are urged to define a proper internal structure which will evidently be transformed into outputs. Participants emphasised the significance of internal policies and procedures to ensure that their enterprises are operationally ready to tackle external challenges and promote growth. This reflects existing literature on internal principles and mandate that guarantee success when the internal mandate of the organisation is fostered and implemented by dedicated and competent employees (Pártlová, 2017a).

The need for a distinct value system, a proper organisational structure, a communications strategy and the importance of culture in the form of business behaviour, attitudes, focus on the wider vision and mission including the promises made to customers were all emphasised by participants and should be well harmonised for the wider organisational goal. *“And then the operational readiness...the culture...they need to have defined their value system... a clear organisational structure and communication strategy”* the entrepreneur from Kenya remarked and elaborated that *“culture is the business behaviour, the attitudes of the teams, their cognizant of the bigger vision and mission and their ability to implement on the promises they made to their customers.”* The participant from Tanzania implied that *“operating manuals in the sense that each department has a guideline on how to do things such that even when things are not going well and somebody has to take responsibility, you can always refer back to the operations manual.”*

The importance of systems was underlined by the participant from Uganda, *“one thing critical to have in place is systems...the systems must be kept simple, must create accountability, must curb fraud but whatever it is, it must work to make service delivery faster and better for the customers.”* She added the need for structures to promote internal efficiency *“structures should be put in place, or you will end up being the one doing everything.”*

Theme 4: Collaboration and Networking

Collaboration and networking is another principal theme and finding of this study, revealed by how the three entrepreneurs echoed the importance of practising entrepreneurial activities in a more social, inclusive and collaborative manner. This reflects literature on the importance of engaging stakeholders to enforce financial value and determine success while embracing collective decision making to shape entrepreneurial practices (Halmaghi et al., 2017a; Ungerer et al., 2016). The need to create internal and external loyalties by enforcing the appropriate alliances is vital and goes a long way in ensuring stability, driving success and ultimate growth (Isabirye, 2017). Participants highlighted the collaborative nature of the internal and external business environment and constantly underlined the people aspect when conducting business. They emphasised the importance of functional relationships with internal and external stakeholders and how this is key in promoting successful female-owned mid-scale enterprises. These enterprises grow and last due to useful linkages, long-term relationships, sincere loyalties and trust, which are fundamental aspects of the internal business environment. Hence building significant relationships with internal and external stakeholders has an impact on improving efficiency and consequently increasing competitiveness, which is vital for successful female entrepreneurship (Seo et al., 2019a & Seo et al., 2019b).

As the participant from the hospitality industry alluded, *“you have to respect the people around you and you must learn to co-habit with them, you must learn to work hand in hand with them, appreciate them and come to love them.”* Another participant made reference to the fact that *“you have to keep your staff happy so that they can look after your customers.”* One of the participants was particularly emphatic about the need *“to be committed to your employees...”* adding that *“the things I’ve had to sacrifice at a personal level, the risks I’ve taken at a personal level on behalf of my staff, risks on my own personal equities and collateral to just have them salaried.”* This indicates the importance of employee relations as an essential instrument for internal efficiency.

The significance of mentors and networking (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017; Odebrecht, 2013; Shmailan, 2016a) also came up frequently during interviews and includes the need for positive social interactions, which cultivate information acquisition and the guidance useful in tackling internal and external complexities and building lasting female-owned mid-scale enterprises. The hotel resort owner indicated that success depends on interactions with people and how they deal with situations *“...so for me with the stakeholders, when it comes to matters pertaining to hotel policy...we work hand in hand.”* The owner of the furniture and design enterprise believes that *“networking especially for women is something that’s not very easy and yet it’s at these parties where you would meet your next customer, where you get validation, find a venture partner just from networking.”* The participant from Kenya pointed out the need to advocate as a group *“they need to belong to business associations because those are advocacy channels. You can’t advocate as me but you can advocate as KEPSA, Chamber of Commerce or the Kenya Association of Manufacturers.”*

The mentorship aspect was highlighted by one participant lovingly referring to her former business partner and his impact on her professional growth. *“He was like a father to me so he took me under his wing as his daughter and we started working together...slowly by slowly I started running the hotel.”* The participant from Uganda impressed that *“maybe I am overly cautious but you know the people that my mum planted in my life were always reminding me to be cautious...”* The participant from Kenya suggested that female entrepreneurs *“need to belong to support structures at a corporate level as a business association and at a personal level, probably mentorship groups, to also engage with a trusted coach...and to*

identify spaces that will generate mentors and coaches.”

Theme 5: Tangible and Intangible Resources

Evidence from reviewed literature and interviews with participants suggested that the adequate tangible and intangible internal resources and their appropriate use can promote value which leads to organisational strength and excellence (Shmailan, 2016; Ungerer et al. 2016a). This positions tangible and intangible resources as the fifth theme and finding generated for this study. Resources are the foundation of any female-owned mid-scale enterprise and should be prioritised from inception. All female entrepreneurs reiterated the importance of various forms of resources from start-up through to growth of their enterprises. According to the female entrepreneur from Uganda, “if you are going to start out a business, for the beginning it’s about putting in money, time, every effort, your creativity and all that. And you can’t take out from the business until it has grown.”

The female entrepreneur from Kenya cautioned that growth can be inhibited by inadequate resources therefore human capital, financial and other resources should be prioritised to sustain growth. She maintained that their “*growth has been curtailed by resource inadequacy...*” and added that “*the resources must be adequate. One has to think through human resource or human capital as a resource, one has to think through financial resources.*” The entrepreneur from Tanzania reminisced about how she mobilised funds to open posh premises, which attracted distinguished clientele, “*with the little money I had been saving, I opened a spa in xxx...Still in xxx, I got this big house so I opened a bigger spa with more rooms and I started having women and men from government officials to business people, it started growing.*”

Theme 6: Skilled and Competent Human Resources

The availability of skilled and competent human resources has also been classified as a theme and finding in this study as revealed extensively by interview participants. This reiterates the significance of competence and intellectual abilities as specified in literature and is crucial for gaining competitive edge for female-owned mid-scale enterprises (Akhtar et al., 2015; Radzi et al., 2017; Ungerer et al., 2016a). Literature also stipulates that building skilled human resources is a critical internal business dynamic (Akhtar et al., 2015). Mid-scale enterprises require a significant level of internal intellect, the necessary skills and talent plus the appropriate staff development initiatives according to interview participants who revealed their different educational background during the interviews. They also expressed the need for an optimal amount of internal human resources capabilities to promote efficiency.

This echoes insights from participants about the need for female entrepreneurial abilities and strengths as an internal business dynamic for improved value and competitiveness useful in tackling internal and external complexities (Cirera et al., 2014b). “*Since I started my business, I have been to business schools, every 2, 3 years. I go to a Business school...I study something, I take a course,*” the participant from Kenya remarked. “*I did Political Science, after Political Science I went and I did Interior Design...I’m finally going to do my MBA. The direction that my life is taking I need to have that credential*” admitted the participant from Uganda. “*Things that I learnt when I was doing my Masters in Entrepreneurship Management...I have a BCOM in Marketing and I jumped from BCOM to my Masters*” the participant from Tanzania declared. Employing the right talent for a successful business is equally essential as participants acknowledged. “*I’ve seen many successful businesses where the founder has a limited education background. My mum for example was a secretary ...but she has managed to get this business far ahead. She hires people who can do what she cannot do for herself*” the participant from Uganda intimated. “*So he started grooming me on operations, he wanted me to learn the operations side like how do you handle the staff, how do you take orders, how do you do procurement, how do you handle finances, how do you deal with auditors, the whole thing*” according to the hotel resort owner. “*I think it is also important for a woman entrepreneur to know where to source talent for her business, to have a talent acquisition and development strategy*” the owner of the Brands company professed.

Theme 7: Market Response Mechanisms

Market response mechanisms is another principal theme and one of the findings generated during this study especially because market access limitations are some of the impediments to growth of female-owned enterprises (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017). Markets are a fundamental element of the external business environment (Struwig et al., 2019) and market penetration is a critical factor to growth, therefore significant efforts should be dedicated to this phenomenon (Arshed et al., 2016a; Arshed et al., 2016b; Booysen, 2015; Seo et al., 2019c). This highlights some of the perspectives revealed during interviews about market response as a fundamental internal variable, which should be given considerable attention in the path towards growth of female-owned mid-scale enterprises.

The owner of the hotel resort in Tanzania suggested that *“the marketing has to be on form because without marketing how will people know about us?”* The owner of the Brands Company undertakes specific courses on an annual basis to explore market opportunities and added that the good-will of the market is necessary. *“Every other year I step away and I go to do a course to network, understand how I can engage with other market opportunities. You need to have the goodwill of the market... the market segment needs to be very well appreciated... one has to have a very good succinct understanding of the local market in which they are targeting to grow into.”* The owner of the interior and furniture design enterprise underlined the importance of understanding the market and products that need to be sold which is how she enlarged her footprint into another country. *“Which market are you trying to sell and who are you selling to?”* She pondered and added that *“to enlarge my footprint, that is how I ended up in country x. It was the demand.”*

Theme 8: Prioritising the Customer

Attracting and maintaining customers is a fundamental growth factor for the success of female-owned mid-scale enterprises and is among the findings generated in this study, which makes importance of the customer the eighth and final principal theme that has emerged in this study. All female entrepreneurs stressed the importance of the customer for successful female entrepreneurship and revealed some of the customer-focused approaches that they implement. This reiterates existing studies on the power of customers and their linkage to entrepreneurship success (Alemu, 2020a; Ungerer et al., 2016a). As all participants resonated, female-owned mid-scale enterprises are customer driven, without their customers, these enterprises are bound to fail. Therefore, they revealed some insights about how customers should be prioritised because they are the determinants of a business enterprise's success.

According to the female entrepreneur from Uganda, *“make the customer a priority, with Customer Service you have to train and train again and again...never lose sight of the customer...because they are truly the reason you exist...you grow in response to your customers' needs.”* The participant from Tanzania recommended the need for *“constantly learning on Customer Care, constantly upgrading our skills for Customer Care,”* while the participant from Kenya advised female entrepreneurs to be able to implement the promises they made to customers. She believes that *“businesses that don't manage their growth well often fail their customers...they should implement the promises they made to their customers or clients.”*

Evidently, the internal business environment is a critical aspect of female-owned mid-scale enterprises and contributes to business growth in multiple ways. Therefore, this is a significant variable, which should be incorporated when dealing with matters related to growth.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Study Contribution

The principal contribution of this study is the construction of practical insights on the fundamental role that the internal business environment plays on the growth of female-owned mid-scale enterprises while strengthening their entrepreneurial status by enabling them progress beyond business start-up. Hence, the study adds to current literature on women economic empowerment by investigating

internal business practices as comprehensively, as possible, specifically, how to streamline various internal processes collectively, with the aim of furnishing female entrepreneurs with some of the most critical mechanisms that are useful for business growth and to enable female business owners to cope with the contextual demands that emanate from their external business environment.

5.2 Study Limitation and Recommended Areas for Future Research

The authors recognize the vast and culturally diverse nature of the African continent and as such, the experiences of female entrepreneurs can vary significantly between countries and regions. However, the insights gathered from the female entrepreneurs targeted during this study underpin the inner workings of various businesses as stipulated by several authors (Alemu, 2020a; Halmaghi et al., 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; Shmailan, 2016a) and are generally applicable to most female business owners that are looking at strengthening their internal processes. Therefore, it is sufficient to confirm that the findings of this study are applicable to the female business environment in Africa. The authors are also cognizant of the fact that the small sample size adopted has mainly generated perspectives on the internal business environment from only three female entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is recommended that further research is conducted using a larger sample derived from a wider selection of African countries to determine how the internal business context impacts on the growth of female-owned mid-scale enterprises.

The study further recommends a comprehensive analysis of the external business environment and how this features in the success and failure of female-owned mid-scale enterprises in Africa as an area for future research. Cirera et al. (2014b) and Odebrecht, (2013) point out that successful female entrepreneurship is affected significantly by socio-cultural and other challenges that arise from the external business environment especially because of the societal expectations and demands that, female entrepreneurs face as a result of their gender. Therefore, it would be essential to explore how the wider business environment affects the growth of female-owned mid-scale enterprises in Africa, where existing cultural norms have persistently hindered the increased participation of women in entrepreneurial activities (Singer et al., 2018).

5.3 Conclusion

The study concludes with the observation that the growth of female-owned mid-scale enterprises is a holistic process that incorporates a sum of different parts including but not limited to a dynamic internal business environment which is a major driving force in building stable enterprises. This internal business setting is a fundamental variable that should be given significant consideration during any growth-related decision making. Female entrepreneurs are therefore urged to tackle their growth process systematically by looking inwardly at how they can streamline their internal business practices as efficiently as possible using their relational and other exceptional leadership tendencies to keep up with global entrepreneurial demands and the requirements of their external business context. Emphasis should be on ensuring effectiveness, which can be translated by the level of congruence between all internal components at the individual and organisational level for the good of the entire enterprise.

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