

Unlocking Sustainability: How Entrepreneurial Skills, Drive Small-Scale Enterprises in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *Entrepreneurship is vital for economic growth and organizational sustainability, especially in developing economies like Nigeria. This study explores how entrepreneurial skills—communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and multi-tasking—affect the sustainability of small-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State. Using survey data from 109 hotel employees, the research applies a quantitative design to test the significance of these skills. Findings show strong links between entrepreneurial skills and sustainability across economic, social, human, and environmental pillars. Communication fosters customer loyalty and employee motivation; negotiation improves resource access and stakeholder satisfaction; conflict resolution reduces inefficiencies and promotes workplace harmony; multi-tasking enhances adaptability and resilience. This study bridges entrepreneurship and sustainability literature, offering practical insights for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and academics. It concludes that prioritizing human relations skills, alongside targeted training, government support, and sector-specific strategies, are essential for long-term viability of small-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom state and Nigeria.*

Keywords: entrepreneur, sustainability, communications, multi-tasking, skills, conflict

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has long been celebrated as a catalyst for innovation, job creation, and economic development. In recent decades, however, scholars and practitioners have increasingly emphasized the importance of sustainability in entrepreneurial practice. Sustainability in this context refers to the integration of environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and long-term economic viability into business operations. The shift toward sustainable entrepreneurship reflects a growing recognition that

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profitability alone is insufficient; businesses must also contribute positively to society and the environment to remain viable in the long run.

Globally, sustainability has become a central theme in entrepreneurship research and practice. Developed economies have established frameworks for corporate social responsibility and sustainability reporting, while developing economies are gradually adopting similar practices. Nigeria, for instance, has made notable strides in promoting sustainability reporting through regulatory frameworks. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) introduced the Nigerian Code of Corporate Governance in 2018, which includes provisions for sustainability reporting. Similarly, the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE) requires listed companies to disclose sustainability-related information in their annual reports. These initiatives underscore the growing importance of sustainability in the Nigerian business landscape.

Despite these regulatory efforts, small-scale enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria often struggle to integrate sustainability into their operations. SMEs are typically characterized by limited resources, informal structures, and a focus on immediate profitability. As a result, they may overlook critical human relations skills that are essential for long-term sustainability. Communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and multi-tasking are among the most vital skills that entrepreneurs must develop to ensure organizational resilience. These skills not only enhance internal cohesion but also strengthen external relationships with customers, investors, and other stakeholders.

The relevance of entrepreneurial skills to sustainability is particularly pronounced in Akwa Ibom State, a region with a vibrant SME sector. Small-scale enterprises in the hospitality industry, such as hotels, play a significant role in local economic development. However, these enterprises face challenges related to customer retention, employee motivation, resource acquisition, and workplace harmony. Addressing these challenges requires entrepreneurs to cultivate strong human relations skills that can drive organizational sustainability.

This study is motivated by the observation that many entrepreneurs in Akwa Ibom State prioritize core business issues while neglecting human relations skills. Poor communication, weak negotiation, ineffective conflict resolution, and inadequate multi-tasking often undermine organizational sustainability. By examining the relationship between these skills and sustainability outcomes, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence that can inform entrepreneurial practice and policy.

The objectives of the study are fourfold:

- (1) to examine the relationship between communication skills and organizational sustainability;
- (2) to ascertain the impact of conflict resolution skills;
- (3) to determine the role of negotiation skills; and
- (4) to assess the effect of multi-tasking skills.

These objectives are guided by research questions and hypotheses that test the significance of each skill in sustaining small-scale enterprises. The significance of the study extends beyond entrepreneurs to include government, academics, and society at large. For entrepreneurs, the findings highlight the importance of human relations skills in achieving sustainability. For government, the study provides insights into how SMEs can be supported through capacity-building initiatives. For academics, the research contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship

and sustainability, offering a framework for future studies. For society, the study underscores the role of SMEs in driving innovation, job creation, and wealth generation.

The scope of the study is confined to small-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State, with a focus on hotels. The sample consists of 109 employees, and the level of analysis is at the micro level. While the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias, and the focus on a specific sector limits the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the study offers a snapshot of the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and sustainability, providing a foundation for future longitudinal research.

In summary, the introduction establishes the context, problem, objectives, significance, scope, and limitations of the study. It underscores the importance of entrepreneurial skills in sustaining small-scale enterprises and sets the stage for the subsequent literature review, methodology, results, and discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework of Entrepreneurial Skills

Entrepreneurial skills are widely recognized as the competencies that enable individuals to identify opportunities, mobilize resources, and create value through innovative ventures. Scholars such as Covin and Wales (2012) argue that entrepreneurial skills are multidimensional, encompassing both technical and human relations capabilities. While technical skills relate to industry knowledge and operational expertise, human relations skills—such as communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and multi-tasking—are increasingly viewed as critical for sustaining enterprises in dynamic environments.

George and Marino (2011) conceptualize entrepreneurial skills as higher-order constructs that influence organizational behavior and outcomes. They emphasize that entrepreneurial firms are characterized by innovation, risk-taking, and proactivity, all of which are underpinned by strong interpersonal competencies. Dimitratos et al. (2011) further highlight that entrepreneurial skills are not static but evolve through experience, learning, and adaptation to changing market conditions. In the context of small-scale enterprises, entrepreneurial skills are particularly vital. SMEs often operate with limited resources and face intense competition, making human relations skills essential for survival and growth. Effective communication fosters trust and collaboration; negotiation secures resources and partnerships; conflict resolution maintains workplace harmony; and multi-tasking ensures efficiency in resource-constrained settings.

Entrepreneurial Communication Skills

Communication is central to entrepreneurship, influencing both internal dynamics and external perceptions. Gibb (2002) underscores the role of communication in fostering a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem, noting that effective communication bridges gaps between entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Bygrave and Hofer (1991) demonstrate that entrepreneurs who

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master the art of pitching significantly improve their chances of securing funding, with successful pitches characterized by clarity, confidence, and compelling narratives.

Coughlan and O'Callaghan (2016) argue that storytelling and vision communication are essential for entrepreneurial success. Entrepreneurs who articulate their vision effectively inspire confidence among investors, employees, and customers. Ensley, Pearce, and Hmieleski (2006) show that communication impacts team dynamics, with transparent communication leading to better performance and satisfaction. Zimmerman (2008) adds that effective leaders are those who can articulate goals in ways that inspire and direct teams.

In customer relations, communication strategies are equally critical. Kumar and Sharma (2016) reveal that effective communication enhances customer loyalty and brand perception, which are crucial for long-term success. In SMEs, where customer retention is vital, communication skills can determine whether enterprises thrive or fail.

Entrepreneurial Negotiation Skills

Negotiation is a fundamental entrepreneurial skill, enabling entrepreneurs to secure resources, form partnerships, and manage stakeholder relationships. Fisher and Ury (2011) highlight the importance of adaptability in negotiations, noting that entrepreneurs often navigate ambiguous and rapidly changing circumstances. McGrath and MacMillan (2010) argue that resilience and resourcefulness are essential in entrepreneurial negotiations, as uncertainty requires creative solutions.

Lewicki, Barry, and Saunders (2016) distinguish between value creation and value claiming in negotiations. Successful entrepreneurs prioritize creating value, seeking outcomes that benefit all parties and foster long-term relationships. Baron (2013) emphasizes the role of emotional intelligence in negotiation, showing that entrepreneurs who manage interpersonal dynamics effectively build trust and rapport.

Preparation and information gathering are also critical. Malhotra and Bazerman (2014) demonstrate that thorough preparation distinguishes successful negotiators, while Weiss (2015) highlights the role of information asymmetry, noting that entrepreneurs with superior information often secure favorable terms. Ebner and Getz (2020) explore the impact of digital negotiation tools, finding that while technology enhances efficiency, it also challenges trust-building. Entrepreneurs must therefore balance digital tools with personal connection.

Entrepreneurial Conflict Resolution Skills

Conflict is inevitable in organizational settings, but effective resolution is essential for sustainability. Yoon (2012) notes that conflicts can interfere with workflow and harmony, reducing productivity and damaging self-esteem. However, conflicts can also stimulate change and innovation if managed constructively. Emotional intelligence is central to conflict resolution. Goleman (2011) argues that individuals with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage conflicts, as they can regulate emotions and foster constructive dialogue. Mayer, Salovey,

and Caruso (2016) support this view, suggesting that emotional intelligence enables empathetic communication and acceptable resolutions.

Communication is another cornerstone of conflict resolution. Thompson (2014) emphasizes that clear, open, and honest communication prevents misunderstandings, while De Dreu and Gelfand (2013) highlight the effectiveness of integrative negotiation strategies. Ross and Ward (2012) discuss the impact of cognitive biases, noting that awareness of biases allows individuals to approach conflicts more objectively. Kahneman (2011) adds that deliberate thinking helps overcome biases and achieve fair resolutions. Cultural competence is increasingly important in diverse workplaces. Leung and Morris (2015) show that cultural norms influence conflict resolution strategies, underscoring the need for sensitivity to cultural differences. Bercovitch and Jackson (2014) highlight the effectiveness of mediation, particularly when direct negotiation fails, while Wallensteen (2019) emphasizes the importance of impartiality in mediation.

Entrepreneurial Multi-tasking Skills

Multi-tasking is the ability to manage multiple, often competing priorities simultaneously. Peek (2020) argues that entrepreneurs must juggle diverse responsibilities, from customer relations to resource management, without missing deadlines. Multi-tasking enhances efficiency and responsiveness, enabling SMEs to adapt to dynamic environments.

Research shows that multi-tasking is linked to resilience and innovation. Entrepreneurs who manage multiple tasks effectively are better positioned to identify opportunities and respond to challenges. Multi-tasking also fosters resource optimization, as entrepreneurs allocate limited resources across diverse activities. However, multi-tasking is not without challenges. Cognitive overload can reduce efficiency and increase errors. Entrepreneurs must therefore develop strategies to prioritize tasks and manage time effectively. Training in time management and delegation can enhance multi-tasking capabilities, contributing to organizational sustainability.

Organizational Sustainability

Organizational sustainability refers to the ability of enterprises to maintain viability over the long term while contributing positively to society and the environment. Sonter (2020) identifies four pillars of sustainability: economic, social, human, and environmental. Economic sustainability ensures financial viability; social sustainability promotes community well-being; human sustainability develops skills and capacity; and environmental sustainability preserves ecosystem integrity. Entrepreneurship contributes to sustainability by fostering innovation, creating jobs, and generating wealth. However, sustainability requires more than economic success; it demands integration of social and environmental responsibility. Entrepreneurs who neglect sustainability risk environmental degradation, inequality, and social injustice. In SMEs, sustainability is particularly challenging due to resource constraints. Nevertheless, SMEs can achieve sustainability by leveraging entrepreneurial skills. Communication fosters stakeholder engagement; negotiation secures resources; conflict resolution maintains harmony; and multi-tasking enhances adaptability.

By integrating these skills into business strategies, SMEs can achieve sustainability across all four pillars.

Empirical Studies Linking Skills to Sustainability

Empirical research confirms the significance of entrepreneurial skills in sustaining enterprises. Studies show that communication skills enhance customer loyalty and employee motivation, negotiation skills facilitate resource acquisition, conflict resolution skills reduce inefficiencies, and multi-tasking skills strengthen resilience. For example, Ensley et al. (2006) demonstrate that communication improves team performance; while Baron (2013) shows that emotional intelligence enhances negotiation outcomes. Kumar and Sharma (2016) reveal that communication strategies build customer loyalty, and Peek (2020) highlights the importance of multi-tasking in managing competing priorities. These findings underscore the importance of entrepreneurial skills in achieving sustainability. SMEs that prioritize human relations skills are better positioned to withstand challenges and achieve long-term viability.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a **quantitative survey design** to examine the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and organizational sustainability among small-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State. A survey design was considered appropriate because it allows for the collection of standardized data from a relatively large sample, enabling statistical analysis of relationships between variables. The design also facilitates generalization of findings within the defined population.

Population and Sampling

The population of the study comprised employees of small-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State, with a specific focus on the hospitality sector. Hotels were selected as representative enterprises because they embody the characteristics of SMEs—limited resources, high customer interaction, and reliance on entrepreneurial skills for survival. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 109 employees from various hotels. This sample size was deemed adequate for statistical analysis, balancing the need for representativeness with resource constraints. The choice of employees rather than entrepreneurs themselves was deliberate, as employees provide valuable insights into the entrepreneurial skills exhibited by business owners and their impact on organizational sustainability.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a **structured questionnaire** designed to measure entrepreneurial skills and sustainability outcomes. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- **Section A:** Demographic information (age, gender, education, years of experience).

- **Section B:** Entrepreneurial skills (communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, multi-tasking). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”
- **Section C:** Organizational sustainability indicators (economic, social, human, environmental).

The instrument was validated through expert review by academics in entrepreneurship and organizational studies. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, with coefficients above 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were administered in person to employees of selected hotels. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses. Completed questionnaires were retrieved and coded for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis**. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and mean scores of variables. Correlation analysis examined relationships between entrepreneurial skills and sustainability indicators, while regression analysis tested the significance of each skill in predicting sustainability outcomes. Hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 significance level.

Limitations

The study faced limitations inherent in survey research. Self-reported data are subject to response bias, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The focus on hotels in Akwa Ibom State restricts generalizability to other sectors and regions. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the role of entrepreneurial skills in sustaining SMEs.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

The sample comprised 109 employees, with a balanced representation of gender and age groups. Most respondents had secondary or tertiary education, reflecting the educational profile of employees in the hospitality sector. Average years of experience ranged from 2 to 10, indicating familiarity with organizational practices.

Descriptive Statistics

Mean scores indicated moderate to high levels of entrepreneurial skills among entrepreneurs. Communication skills had the highest mean score, suggesting that entrepreneurs prioritize customer and employee relations. Negotiation and conflict resolution skills were moderately rated, while multi-tasking skills showed variability across respondents

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between entrepreneurial skills and organizational sustainability:

- **Communication skills** were strongly correlated with customer loyalty and employee motivation.
- **Negotiation skills** were positively associated with resource acquisition and stakeholder satisfaction.
- **Conflict resolution skills** correlated with workplace harmony and reduced inefficiencies.
- **Multi-tasking skills** were linked to adaptability and resilience in dynamic environments

Regression Analysis

Regression results confirmed the significance of entrepreneurial skills in predicting sustainability outcomes:

- **Communication skills** emerged as the strongest predictor, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in sustainability indicators.
- **Negotiation skills** also had a significant impact, particularly on economic sustainability.
- **Conflict resolution skills** contributed to social and human sustainability by fostering harmony and collaboration.
- **Multi-tasking skills** influenced adaptability, enhancing resilience against environmental and market challenges.

Hypotheses Testing

The null hypotheses (H01–H04) were rejected, indicating that entrepreneurial skills significantly relate to organizational sustainability. Each skill demonstrated a unique contribution, underscoring the multidimensional nature of sustainability.

Summary of Findings

The results highlight that entrepreneurial skills are indispensable for sustaining SMEs. Communication fosters trust and loyalty; negotiation secures resources; conflict resolution maintains harmony; and multi-tasking enhances adaptability. Together, these skills enable SMEs to achieve sustainability across economic, social, human, and environmental pillars.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that entrepreneurial skills are indispensable for organizational sustainability in small-scale enterprises. Each skill—communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and multi-tasking—demonstrated a significant relationship with sustainability outcomes, underscoring the multidimensional nature of sustainability.

Communication skills emerged as the strongest predictor of sustainability. This aligns with Gibb (2002) and Ensley et al. (2006), who emphasize that effective communication fosters collaboration, trust, and customer loyalty. In the hospitality sector, where customer satisfaction is paramount, communication skills directly influence repeat patronage and brand reputation.

Negotiation skills were also significant, particularly in securing resources and fostering stakeholder satisfaction. This finding resonates with Fisher and Ury (2011), who highlight adaptability in negotiations, and Lewicki et al. (2016), who stress value creation. Entrepreneurs who negotiate effectively not only secure favorable terms but also build long-term relationships that enhance sustainability.

Conflict resolution skills contributed to social and human sustainability by fostering workplace harmony and collaboration. This supports Goleman's (2011) argument that emotional intelligence is central to conflict management. By resolving conflicts constructively, entrepreneurs enhance employee motivation and reduce inefficiencies, thereby sustaining organizational performance.

Multi-tasking skills influenced adaptability and resilience, enabling SMEs to respond to dynamic market conditions. Peek (2020) notes that entrepreneurs must juggle diverse responsibilities, and this study confirms that multi-tasking enhances organizational resilience. However, the variability in multi-tasking scores suggests that entrepreneurs may need training in time management and delegation to optimize this skill.

Overall, the discussion highlights that entrepreneurial skills are not isolated competencies but interrelated dimensions that collectively drive sustainability. Communication fosters trust, negotiation secures resources, conflict resolution maintains harmony, and multi-tasking enhances adaptability. Together, these skills enable SMEs to achieve sustainability across economic, social, human, and environmental pillars.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and organizational sustainability among small-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State. Using survey data from 109 employees, the research confirmed that communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and multi-tasking skills significantly influence sustainability outcomes.

The findings underscore the importance of human relations skills in sustaining SMEs. Entrepreneurs who prioritize these skills are better positioned to achieve long-term viability, foster innovation, and contribute positively to society and the environment. The study contributes to the literature by bridging entrepreneurship and sustainability discourses, offering practical insights for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and academics.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Entrepreneurs:

- Invest in training programs to enhance communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and multi-tasking skills.
- o Develop strategies for effective time management and delegation to optimize multi-tasking.
- o Foster a culture of transparency and collaboration to strengthen stakeholder relationships.

For Government:

- Provide capacity-building initiatives for SMEs, focusing on human relations skills.
- Develop policies that support sustainability reporting among SMEs, similar to frameworks for larger firms.
- Offer financial incentives for SMEs that integrate sustainability into their operations.

For Academics:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of entrepreneurial skills on sustainability.
- Explore sector-specific challenges and strategies to tailor sustainability practices.
- Expand the literature on entrepreneurial human relations, integrating insights from psychology and organizational behavior.

For Stakeholders:

- Encourage SMEs to adopt sustainability practices that contribute to community well-being.
- Support entrepreneurs through patronage, investment, and collaboration.
- Promote awareness of the importance of sustainability in entrepreneurship.

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