

Creating a Competitive Advantage for Thai SMEs towards Thailand 4.0 Era

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Abstract

Thailand 4.0 era or “Innovative Drive Economy” has been focused significantly in order to move forwards to generate prosperity, security and sustainability. Small and medium enterprise (SMEs) has been reaching huge economic growth for Thailand. The objective for this research was to explore how Thai SMEs reached a competitive advantage under Thailand 4.0 era. The case of Ban Nong Khon Village located in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand was selected purposively by considering in both of its strengths and operation period. This village is popular in various handmade products and has granted many awards from Thai government. The in-depth interview and focused-group interview were employed through 15 members by qualitative approach. Triangulations were strictly concerned with a data interpretation. The findings shown that the competitive advantage of Thai SMEs was driven from being learning organization and organization creativity. The competitive advantage revealed in bundled potential resources. Importantly, dynamic capability in term of technology and innovation forced moderately between organization creativity and competitive advantage. The conceptual framework representing in this study is able to contribute for both of theoretical and practical paradigm.

Keywords: Competitive Advantage, SMEs, Thailand 4.0

Introduction

In the present, transferring to be Thailand 4.0 periods or “Innovative Drive Economy” has been emphasized significantly in order to move forwards to generate higher income (Ministry of Industry, 2016). An entrepreneur operates his business to serve the needs of the interaction among individuals, families and communities (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). Interestingly, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) plays significant role in driving economic growth in Thailand (Chittithaworn et al., 2011). The 37.4 percent of proportional contribution in SMEs forces total Thailand’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2013. The total national

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employment by 81.5 percent comes from SMEs. Additionally, new SMEs entrants increase by 5.41 percent in year 2013 (The Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP), 2013). However, in 2015, SMEs found a huge obstacle in a continuing economic slowdown in Thailand.

Department of Industrial Promotion (2016) represents economic slowdown in Thailand affected SMEs' entrepreneurs lose their income. There are more than 2.7 million entrepreneurs or 97.2 percent of total enterprises seem problematic. Importantly, the SME Trade & Service Sentiment Index (TSSI) remained on the low side for most of the year. The main barriers found in SMEs are financial performance, human resource management, marketing, and technology and innovation (Department of Industrial Promotion, 2016). Interestingly, according to relevant information, global changes are progressing continuously, dynamically and unpredictably in economies, politics, society, culture, technology and the environment. Competition is also widely varied in the various business industries (Daniels, Radebaugh & Sullivan, 2009). It is therefore Thai' SMEs has to go beyond these obstacles for creating a competitive advantage themselves.

Competitive advantage can be considered from two factors, such as resources and capabilities (Lee, 2001) for reaching a superior performance (Hoopes & Madsen, 2008). The concept of resource-based view (RBV) has been discussing widely for sustaining a competitive advantage (Acedo, Barroso & Galan, 2006; Barney, 2001). However, the competitive advantage can arise from a company's capabilities when a firm's operations result from the bundling resources working together (Colgate, 1998). Additionally, the notion of effective knowledge management capability concerns can enhance other resources such as innovative capability (Lindner & Wald, 2011). In sum, for many Thai's SMEs which had been originally developing from community-based enterprise, being learning organization and organizational creativity are very necessary and significant.

With increasing dynamic environments characterized as in rapid change and uncertainty, risk occurs inevitably. However, decision-making based on knowledge and information is necessary. So learning becomes a crucial process within all organizations to reduce uncertainty in judgments (Rowley & Gibbs, 2008). Fundamentally, the concept of learning organization was originally found in the 1980s (Ismail, 2005; Wang & Ahmed, 2003) in more human-centered workplaces, and emphasized the capability of information communication technology (Dymock & McCarthy, 2006) under rapid global changes (Lorange, 1996) or in the globalization arena (Barkur, Varambally, Rodrigues, 2007). Organizational learning is expected to achieve a firm's superior performance, it also contributes to firm's

resources (e.g. ideas, innovation etc.) to create and plan strategically for defining preferred organizational changes (van Woerkum, Aarts & de Grip, 2007). So that, being a learning organization provides positive effect for reaching a competitive performance.

The case of Ban Nong Khon Village located in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand was selected by considering in both of strengths and more than 10 years operation period in which well-known community-based enterprise in the specific area. Most of products which launched to both local and outside market are handmade goods. There are many generations worked as a member of community-based enterprise and trained by their families and communities. Some kind of product line is promoted to be One Tambol One Product (OTOP). Especially, some product is developed as official business operation and becomes competitive SMEs. It firstly implies that this village is a learning organization which able to implement a competitive advantage for a business. It is therefore the objective for the present study is to explore how community-based enterprise reaches a competitive advantage under the umbrella of learning organization. The findings could be contributed further to answer the question of “how do they establish a competitive advantage through learning organization?”.

This paper is structured into five main sections. The first part is presented the literature review of relative issues of SMEs in Thailand, Thailand 4.0 Era, resource-based view (RBV), learning organization and organization creativity, and competitive advantage. The methodology section is secondly explained the data collection by using inductive approach following the exploratory research through a case study. Also, with the findings is then further addressed. Fourthly, it is the section of summary and discussion. Finally, the limitation and future research are also discussed.

Literature Review

SMEs in Thailand

By the information following the yearly report of The Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP) (2013), Ministry of Industry that is responsible in coordinating the work of related agencies, helping to guide and promote the operation of Thai SMEs, it represents the important and reliable database of SMEs in Thailand. This is because OSMEP was endorsed by the Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion Act, B.E. 2000 (A.D. 2000).

In 2013, Thailand's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reaches by 11.899 trillion baht. The portion of GDP is to SMEs by 4,454,939.6 million (4.455 trillion) baht, or a 3.8 percent increase over the previous year. The 37.4 percent portion shared of overall GDP. At the

same time, contributions to GDP of small business enterprises (SE) in 2013 reached at 3.014 trillion baht, or 4.6 percent up from the previous year, and which made up 25.3 percent of the overall GDP. Furthermore, from medium enterprises (ME), it hit at 1.441 trillion baht, representing a growth of 2.4 percent and a proportional contribution of only 12.1 percent. The most significant of SME contributions to economic growth came from the services sector driving 34.8 percent of GDP.

At the end of 2013, the status of SMEs in both of number and employment is represented. There are 2,763,997 SMEs' entrepreneurs or 97.2 percent of the total enterprises which 684,730 entrepreneurs are registered as commercial juristic persons, however 2,079,267 are not. The largest group of SMEs is in trade and repair sector by 1,201,070 operators. The next largest group is in services sector by 1,083,593 operators. And the rest, some 479,334 operators (17.3 percent), they are in the manufacturing sector. In addition, employment figures for Thai industries of all sizes reached at 14,470,437 jobs. Some 2,668,951 jobs (18.4 percent) were recruited by large enterprises (LE), and the remaining of 11,799,948 jobs (81.5 percent) belongs to the national SME hiring. The highest extent of SME employment is in services sector which provided 5,238,207 jobs (44.4 percent).

In summary, SMEs is very important and significant for economic growth in Thailand by consideration in both of portion in GDP and employment. It means that establishment of competitive advantage for SMEs is a necessity (Bakiewicz, 2005).

Thailand 4.0 Era

Under the Thailand Industrial Development Strategy 4.0 during year 2017 to 2036, Thailand development model is addressed dominantly. Ministry of Industry (2016) has reported that originally, agriculture development was implemented in Thailand 1.0 era. Then, for Thailand 2.0, light industry was employed. Following with heavy industry for Thailand 3.0 was later publicized. Lastly, in the recent, Thailand 4.0 has been promoting in which "Innovative Drive Economy".

According to Ministry of Industry (2016), there three targeted-dimensions for being Thailand 4.0 are prosperity, security and sustainability. Technology and innovation are emphasized to move the nation forwards. For instance, changing a traditional farm to be smart farming. Moreover, for traditional SMEs, they have to develop to be a smart enterprise and startup. Lastly, a traditional service must be transferred to be high value services.

In brief, the three common goals of Thailand 4.0 era is mentioned in generating higher income, distributing wealth, and being friendly environment. Technology and innovation have to be developed and implemented in both of manufacturing and service sectors.

Resource-Based View (RBV)

Competitive advantage can be considered from two factors, such as resources and capabilities (Colgate, 1998) for constructing a superior performance (Hoopes & Madsen, 2008). In strategic management, there are a number of researches about creating competitive advantage through resources called “resource-based view (RBV)”. The concept of RBV has been discussing widely for enhancing sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 2001; Black & Boal, 1994). The notion of RBV is used to explain business practices, namely strategic management, marketing, management, international business, entrepreneurship, human resource management, finance, and accounting (Ussahawanitchakit, 2005). However, the competitive advantage can arise from a company’s capabilities when a firm’s operations result from the bundling resources working together (Colgate, 1998). For example, product development, marketing research and brand management are included in bundled capabilities (Amit & Shoemaker, 1993), so that the source of competitive advantage is in both resources and capabilities.

Conclusions of Ray, Barney & Muhanna (2004), suggest that resources and capabilities are used interchangeably in order to initiate and develop a firm’s strategies. Basically, the RBV perspective, constructing organizational capabilities of a firm, is concerned with the interconnection of both tangible and intangible resources (Almor & Hashai, 2004) that are owned or controlled by the firm (Newbert, 2008) and able to improve efficiency and effectiveness (Irwin, Hoffman & Lamont, 1998). The resources categorized differently by each researcher included financial, physical, human, technological, reputation, and organizational resources (Shapiro, 1999). Also, the sustainable capabilities of organizations include the capacity or ability to perform or deploy positively firm’s resources (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). However, firm’s resources can be transformed successfully into finished goods or services by knowing and using other firm’s mechanisms within their own organization (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993).

During the time a firm faces environmental change, Jarratt (2004) states that it should engage in organizational renewal, including changing a firm’s resources and competences over time and especially a firm’s product. Conversely, McGuinness & Morgan (2005) call this ability as an organizational change capability. Besides, Liu & Hsu (2011) recommend that the degree of dynamic capability of any firm depends on the firm’s size and age. The key roles of strategic management including adaptability, integration and re-structuring of a firm’s resources adapted to the changing environment (Fang, Huang & Huang, 2010). Basically, the managerial processes, organizational routines, and managerial know-how are included

in the process for building dynamic capabilities and competitive advantage (Zheng et al., 2011). The notion of RBV has been developed to provide core competencies over time, and dynamic capability applied uncompromisingly and harmonically for effective response to business environmental changes (Chien & Tsai, 2012).

In summary, the concept of RBV theory is mentioned typically in the field of strategic management. A firm's resources are heterogeneity represented in both tangible and intangible forms within the firm. The bundled resources together are directed towards capabilities to reach a competitive advantage. A firm's capability is its ability to allocate its competent or strategic resources to generate a competitive advantage over competitors responding to business environmental changes (Killen & Hunt, 2010; Witcher & Chau, 2007). It is therefore resources and capabilities linked together that execute effective strategies for ensuring survival in the long term.

Learning Organization and Organization Creativity

Lee & Roth (2007) explained that an organization will exist through each member's action following individual roles and responsibilities. Individuals and others can learn through time, studying methods characterized as organizational learning. Learning is a dynamic relationship resulting from the learning processes. However, Bhatt (2000) instructs that under the notion of organizational learning, it is not the sum of individual knowledge that will equate to overall organizational knowledge. Interestingly, Kriegesmann, Kley & Schwering (2007) state that learning from past failed experience also adds to organizational learning. Moreover, an organization is a place of an interdisciplinary learning zone (Arora, 2012).

Fundamentally, the concept of learning organization was originally found in the 1980s (Ismail, 2005; Wang & Ahmed, 2003) in more human-centered workplaces, and emphasized the capability of information communication technology (Dymock & McCarthy, 2006) under rapid global changes (Lorange, 1996) or in the globalization arena (Barkur, Varambally, Rodrigues, 2007). The above relative contexts attempt to provide the creation of freedom and autonomy at work. However, in the mid-1990s, a Sun & Scott (2003) brief said that there are two notions defined as organizational learning and learning organization. For a clear understanding, organizational learning is addressed as a learning process within an organization (Ismail, 2005). Its roots originate from social and cognitive psychology. In addition, a learning organization becomes the prescriptive side that provides a strong practical focus. Actually, these two streams of study are linked. As a result, the notion of either learning organization or organizational learning is interpreted in this study.

Especially, Dymock & McCarthy (2006), and Chen, Chuang & Chen (2012) recommend that the organizational culture and climate are influenced to create effective organizational learning. A positive climate leads to creativity in the workplace (Cangemi & Miller, 2007) towards innovation (Ahmed & Shepherd, 2010). Furthermore, the diversity in the workplace is beneficial for creativity and innovation (Govendo, 2005; Wang & Rafiq, 2009). It is therefore having a learning environment or climate within an organization liberated both for creativity and innovation (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010).

In a modern society, Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt (2012) argue that the idea of a sustainable learning organization is significantly reviewed. Within the atmosphere of a learning organization, all members are encouraged to draw from knowledge within the organization to strengthen the firm's ability for critical and creative thinking (Collins & Cooke, 2013). In addition, Loewen & Loo (2004) suggest that teams influence the creative climate within organizations too, particularly, producing novel work that will creatively affect the climate in a workplace (Lin & Liu, 2012). In sum, a learning organization is a powerful means for maintaining sustainability and affecting a firm's success. Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt (2012) conceptualize that a sustainable learning organization requires both individual and group cooperation to influence a firm's success.

In short, learning organizations and organizational learning are linked together (Sun & Scott, 2003). Organizational learning encourages organizational innovation of available resources to influence management practices (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008) during globalization and rapid fluctuation in a world market (Al-Beraidi & Rickards, 2003). In addition, under a shift in power from businesses to consumers, learning to create product innovation (Ju, Li & Lee, 2006) becomes critical to satisfy consumer requirements effectively (Jenner, 1994). A greater ability to learn enables an organization to sustain their performance over their competitors (Khadra & Rawabdeh, 2006). Importantly, learning generates knowledge (Fiol & Lyles, 1985) and learning is a crucial source to support a sustainable competitive advantage for a firm (Kearns & Lederer, 2003). And building a learning organization is very important for sustaining a firm's creative climate (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010) and innovation (Lin & Liu, 2012). A learning climate is seen as affecting both individual and organizational performance (Isaksen et al., 2001) and is also found to be different among varying cultures (Mostafa & El-Masry, 2008). Moreover, everybody within a firm affects a learning organization (Hodgkinson, 2000) in the area of change (Drew & Smith, 1995).

Competitive Advantage

In general, firms face a complex and turbulent business environment, so it increases competition (Franco & Haase, 2013) and makes it hard for a firm to stay in a position of superior competitiveness (Doyle, 1998). Competition will be between different groups of interconnected organizations adding and generating value through cooperation (Carrie, 1999) as rivals (Wagner, 2001). The natural alignment of competitive strategies and competitive priorities of a manufacturing strategy focus on four main criteria: cost, quality, delivery performance and flexibility (Santos, 2000). Competitive advantage, of the most common use in business today, is widely applied as a key concept in strategic management (Wiggins & Ruefli, 2002). Ansoff (1965) defines competitive advantage as characteristics of product or market that provide strong positions from which to compete with other firms. Besides, Fahy, Farrelly & Quester (2004) argue that competitive advantages are any activities that a firm can apply to produce individual products or markets based on its skills. Importantly, Porter (1990) defines competitive advantage as the organizational factors which can drive a firm to outperform its competitors. Competitive advantage is directly connected to a firm's performance (Li et al., 2006; Powell, 2001).

Theoretically, the resource-advantage theory refers to a process which emphasizes the importance of market segments and resources and how a firm should act among its competitors (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Hunt, 1997). According to Douglas, Jenkins & Kennedy (2012), a firm is able to reach competitive advantage through a resources-based view (RBV) theory when it has valuable capabilities, as bundles of resources that give it advantage over other firms.

In summary, the source of a competitive advantage lies in a firm's resources (Serra & Ferreira, 2010). Furthermore, Runyan, Huddleston & Swinney (2007) argue that competitive advantage is attributed to a firm's resources and capabilities. Only specific resource(s) of a firm can create competitive advantage in the long term (Lockett, Thompson & Morgenstern, 2009). As a result, the resources and capability by using RBV to promote a competitive advantage within a learning organization and changing environment need to be explored further.

Methodology

This study used an inductive approach through exploratory research (Hair et al., 2007). The case of Ban Nong Khon Village located in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand was selected by considering in both of strengths and revealing more than 10 years operation period in which well-known enterprise in the specific area. Most of products which launched

to both local and outside market are handmade goods categorizing in mainly of decorations and household uses. There are many generations worked as a member of community-based enterprise and trained by their families and communities. Some kind of product line was promoted to be One Tambol One Product (OTOP). Especially, some product was developed as official business operation and becomes competitive SMEs. This village is popular in various handmade products and granted many awards from Thai government.

The in-depth interview with 5 administrative staffs and focused-group interview for 10 members of Ban Nong Khon Community-Based Enterprise were on the average of 1.5 to 2 hours. Interview was tape recorded and the respondents offered the opportunity to view the transcripts. Two stages-data collection as in the first was interview and second stage was representing data interpretation to the key informants for confirming the results were organized. For triangulation typologies, the theory and methodological triangulation were employed for conducting in both of validity and reliability (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Neuman, 2006; Smith, 2015).

Findings

The key informants reveal how to reach a competitive advantage as their group is a community-based enterprise, and further develop continuously to be SMEs in the future. All members were trained how to produce handmade products by their members in family and community. Learning was taken from watching and self-practices. The near experiences stimulate them skillful. Knowledge or how to make a product is organized for transferring automatically and naturally to members.

“We don’t get any official training programs... I watch how to make it from my parents and then practice following my parents’ guidance ... I really believe that everyone here did like me [...].”

“I don’t know why and when I can do it. My skills are developed unsystematically and unofficially from my family for a long time [...].”

“I don’t know what exactly knowledge that I have is. I’ve just tell the know-how of it to my son and my daughter. The know-how of making this product is come from my parents and my relatives. I’ve learnt from them.”

“The new products were made by some of us help to guide ... most of handmade products in our shop came from our basic skill and experience ... I don’t think what such a thing is new... just only some of new machine for streaming, drying and labeling our logo is necessary to learn how to operate it [...].”

The products were created depending on members' experiences. Members help to share their idea through encouraging and stimulating preferable atmosphere. The leader was very important for being strong group and network. Leadership is able to force members to work following the timeframe and products' design. Moreover, the members have worked on their culture, organizational structure and system. Community culture origins from surrounding working atmosphere, way of doing business norms and rules (Chittithaworn et al., 2011). It also helps an enterprise to reach their goal (Cullen & Parboteeah, 2014). Furthermore, organizational structure and system are addressed in how working of chain of command and line authority (Robbins, DeCenzo & Coulter, 2015). As mentioned above, the factors of organizational creativity namely organizational climate, leadership, culture, and organizational structure and system (Dewett, 2004; Powell, 2008) provide a relationship in reaching a competitive advantage for SMEs (Bakiewicz, 2005; Kruasom, 2016).

"[...] the working atmosphere is very important to us ... we may lucky that we got a very powerful and energetic leader in encouraging us to work ... Our leader seeks and provides us the equipment, raw material and spare part to assembly some piece of work [...]"

"[...] till we were young, this atmosphere has been closely to our life. It seems to be our guidelines in practicing or producing these handmade products within our community [...]"

"[...] even our organizational structure and system is not official, it makes us comfortable to work. It is suitable for us to manage with all members [...]"

However, dynamic capability on term of technology and innovation plays moderately role between organization creativity and competitive advantage.

However, dynamic capability or adaptability in uncertain changes, on term of technology and innovation influences between organization creativity and competitive advantage. This factor is particularly interpreted in how much a firm can be competitive to the rivals (Kruasom & Saenchaiyathon, 2015).

"[...] under the rapid change nowadays, we have to use various technologies for production as we have streaming machine, drying machine and electric logo-stamping machine. Also, with new patterns of our products must be modified to serve to customer's satisfaction as well. ... also importantly using social media makes us sell our product easier and higher [...]"

"The ability of us to use new machine and having new style of product continuously, it makes us keep going our business for many years as you know."

“[...] always having a new idea for our handmade products, it drives us to have new product as well. Some case, the government supports us by a new machine and so on it helps us effective to produce. It helps us in production process as well [...].”

“[...] we can launch our products to the -new market by helps of both municipality and some education institutes. Also, they supports us money to invest. Some professional helps us to create communication marketing channel such as social media; Facebook and website, and it causes a big order volume in the past [...].”

“[...] we can launch our products to the new market by helps of both municipality and some education institutes. Also, they support us money to invest. Some professional helps us to create communication marketing channel such as social media; Facebook and website, and it causes a big order volume in the past [...].”

“[...] Management of finding some raw material of product is very preferable because of made us having a new style or pattern of these products [...].”

To be concluded, being a competitive advantage for Thai SMEs in Thailand 4.0 era, it relates to learning organization and organizational creativity by which dynamic capability moderates between organization creativity and competitive advantage.

Summary and Discussion

The competitive advantage of SMEs is driven from being learning organization and organization creativity (Kruasom, 2016). Learning organization of a community-based enterprise that will be developing to be a small and medium enterprise comes from practicing by near experiences. Knowledge was organized, kept and transferred automatically and naturally on both implicit and explicit knowledge. As a result, knowledge management capability reveals within being a learning organization (Kruasom & Chunhapinyokul, 2017). It drives further to be organization creativity. The components of organization creativity are organizational climate, leadership, culture, and organizational structure and system (Awwad & Ali, 2012; Ismail, 2005; Leavy, 2005; Mathisen, Einarsen & Mykletun, 2012; Powell, 2008; Sun, Zho & Chen, 2011).

Empirically, a community-based enterprise that will become a SMEs, community culture origins from surrounding working atmosphere, way of doing business norms and rules (Chittithaworn et al., 2011) are very important to obtain success (Sun, Zhao & Chen, 2011). In addition, organizational structure and system are addressed in how working of chain of command and line authority (Robbins, DeCenzo & Coulter, 2015). It is therefore the factors of organizational creativity namely organizational climate, leadership, culture, and

organizational structure and system (Dewett, 2004; Powell, 2008) provide a relationship in reaching a competitive advantage for SMEs (Bakiewicz, 2005; Kruasom, 2016).

The competitive advantage of a Thai SMEs is derived from bundled potential resources such as worker, machine, knowledge etc. Interestingly, the dynamic capability in both of technology and innovation plays important role between organizational creativity and a competitive advantage (Lee & Hsieh, 2010). Similarly with the argument of Swierczek & Ha (2003), they mentioned that Thai SMEs were aware in risk-taking through the uncertainty in order to obtain profitability. The figure 1 shows the conceptual framework driven from exploratory findings of the present study.

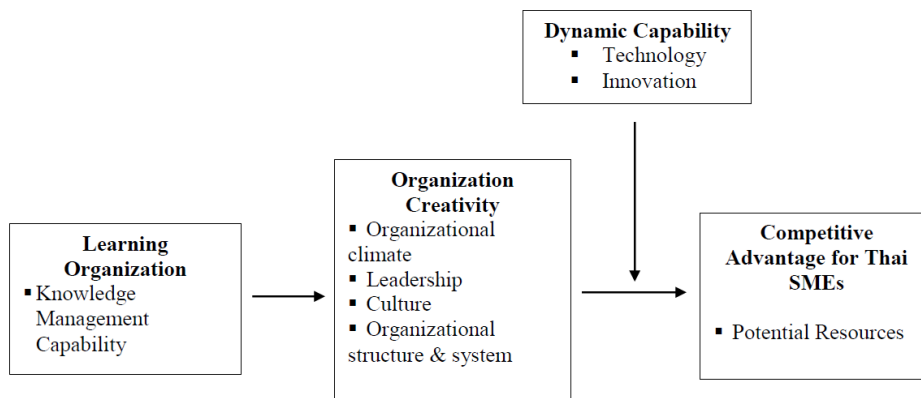


Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework

Limitation and Future Research

Even the case of Ban Nong Khon Community-Based Enterprise for this study provides rich context and gains in-depth data (Yin, 1994, Palakshappa & Gordon, 2006), the sample was chosen by purposive sampling from information-rich cases (Patton, 2002; Djuric, 2009) instead real SMEs. However, as the suggestion of Eisenhardt (1989) and Grill (1993), the selected case is used for theoretical rather than statistical generalizability for conducting theory development. The other key informants of other areas should be investigated for future study. Additionally, the key informants in other kind of business should be employed to compare the results. Also, the conceptual framework should be examined by quantitative approach.

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