

DOES CONSULTATION PLAY IMPORTANT ROLES IN ENTREPRENEURIAL TRAINING PROGRAM?: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EMERGING MARKETS

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Abstract:

Purpose - This paper aims to shed the importance of consultation as the intervention towards realizing the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial training conducted. Consultation deemed as pivotal in supporting the training initiatives which involved reflective learning among the participants.

Theoretical Framework - Business performance acts as the dependent variable, entrepreneurial training as the independent variable while consultation plays a significant role of a mediator. The model of structured entrepreneurial training for SMEs is conceptualized based on the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and the Absorptive Capacity Theory (ACT).

Methodology - Mixed-method design is proposed to be employed in carrying out this research. An explanatory sequential approach of quantitative followed by qualitative data collection are used to achieve the set objectives.

Findings - The expected findings that could shed the light on the importance of consultation in the likelihood of the training effectiveness, thus lead towards favourable performance of the business among SMEs.

Research Implication - From the policymaker perspective, this research paper sheds new light for the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Cooperative (MEDAC) to design a handful and effective entrepreneurial training and development program among SMEs. This helps to spearhead the national agenda on supporting the SMEs development overall.

Originality/Value - Theoretically, this research could contribute to the current entrepreneurship literature specifically on the entrepreneurial training over the significance of consultation as the mechanism towards effectiveness in training. Also, this research practically implicates the current government agencies' practices which to incorporate consultation as a pivotal part in the planning and implementation of the training conducted.

Keyword: Entrepreneurial training, consultation, SMEs, experiential learning theory, absorptive capacity theory.

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Introduction

The provision of entrepreneurial training is one of the mechanisms in developing Small medium enterprises (SMEs) around the globe including Malaysia. According to Kamarudin, Afendi, Mohamad and Sufahani (2021a), entrepreneurial training is defined as a tool to increase entrepreneurs' capacity in terms of business knowledge and skills that stimulate performance. Indeed, it is become one of the most popular tool in the enterprises development in the emerging market, besides business incubation, financial assistance and business coaching.

It is reported that there are various ministries and government agencies are conducting entrepreneurial training and development program particularly among small medium enterprises (SMEs). Among them are the Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC), MED, the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), SME Corporation (SME Corp.) and many others (Kamarudin, Nordin, & Siti Nabiha, 2021b; Ali, Mohamad, & Bahador, 2018; Zainol, Osman, Shokory, Samsudin, & Hashim, 2018).

1. Background of the Study

In Malaysia, SMEs, which include micro-enterprises, account for more than 98 percent of all commercial entities. It is estimated that their share of the nation's overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is around 40.4%. (Wasiuzzaman & Nurdin, 2019; Ali et al., 2018; DOSM, 2017). The government has focused its attention on SMEs to foster continued developments because of the significant contribution made (Raki & Shakur, 2018). To further this agenda for entrepreneurship growth, the Ministry of Entrepreneurs Development (MED) has worked especially closely with other relevant ministries and agencies (Kamarudin et al., 2021a; Raki & Shakur, 2018; Shamsuddin, Sarkawi, Jaafar, & Abd Rahim, 2017).

Particularly during the 9th and 10th Malaysian Plans (MP) of 2006 - 2015, the allocations worth RM3.8 billion and RM11.9 billion, respectively, the theme of SME growth was given additional priority and concentration (Zainol et al., 2018; Hung, Effendi, Talib, & Rani, 2011). SMEs are viewed as the nation's engine for growth and innovation for the nation's continuing economic growth, and this effort is continued during the 11th MP (Ali et al., 2018). The provision of entrepreneurial training and development activities is one of the measures adopted to assure SMEs further development (Kamarudin et al., 2021b; The Economic Planning Unit, 2016; Hung et al., 2011).

In addition to finance and training, efforts have been made to collaborate with the private sector to increase the capacity of SMEs (The Economic Planning Unit, 2016). For instance, the partnership with the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) to develop industry-relevant modules and designing skilled apprenticeship programme that is aligned with the needs of SME, and the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), a national trade promotion agency under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), to develop and promote Malaysia's export to the world (Kamarudin et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, the national entrepreneurial training programme does not place enough focus on follow-up, thorough observation, ongoing assistance, and development, which may be done through a proper consultative activity.

2. Problem Statement

Previous reports claim that the development initiatives conducted by the government among SMEs in the country have resulted onto several unfavorable outcomes (Kamarudin, 2019; Aznam Shah, 2018; Ministry of Finance MOF, 2015; Hashim & Wok, 2013; Hung et al., 2011; Abdullah, Latif, Bakar, & Nor, 2001). Kamarudin (2019) for instance, posited that the reality behind the entrepreneurial training programs conducted by the government were rather dissatisfying. While, Hashim and Wok (2013) highlighted the upsetting issues related to the training mechanisms and measurement.

According to Kamarudin (2019), apart from the overlapping roles played in by several government agencies in embracing the entrepreneurial agenda (Aznam Shah, 2018; Ministry of Entrepreneur Development, MED, 2018), the current practices of the entrepreneurial training in Malaysia were lacking in a comprehensive planning especially mid or long term planning were missing (Kamarudin, 2019). Kamarudin (2019) highlighted that the government agencies who conducted the entrepreneurial training have only short term (one year) planning and works on different focus or agenda for the upcoming years.

Additionally, Hashim and Wok (2013) highlighted the problems with the methods and evaluation of the government-sponsored entrepreneurial training. The training is said to be less effective because there aren't any reported improvements in sales, market share, losses, or customer complaints, which are examples of indicative or tangible measurements. While Hung et al. (2011) emphasised unfavourable outcomes and concerns with inadequate observation during the implementation of entrepreneurial training.

Moreover, it was observed that the differences in putting successful measures into practise are well documented in earlier literature as well as the government study with regard to training assessment methods and in-depth observation (MOF, 2015; Hashim & Wok, 2013). A subsidiary of MARA, FIT Centre Sdn. Bhd. (FITEC), which offers diverse technical and entrepreneurial training to SMEs, failed to establish any methods in evaluating the participants' progress, according to a report by the Malaysian National Audit Department (AG) (MOF, 2015). This can be because efforts to achieve the success of the training programme were not made in a structured way.

Therefore, it is significant to take a proactive action in assessing and improving the current entrepreneurial training programs conducted by the government and new mechanism could be proposed to find a solution towards such issues and challenges surrounding the training.

3. Research Questions

This research embarks on the following objectives;

1. Do consultation influence the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial training among SMEs in Malaysia?
2. What is the role of consultation in entrepreneurial training and how it is impacting the performance of SMEs in Malaysia?

4. Research Objectives

This research embarks on the following objectives;

1. To examine the effect of consultation on the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial training among SMEs in Malaysia
2. To understand the role of consultation in entrepreneurial training and it's impact towards the performance of SMEs in Malaysia.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Small and Medium Enterprises in Malaysia

The two primary categories of businesses in Malaysia are big and SME firms. According to Aris (2007), both are essential for economic growth, and their relationship notably promotes the development of SMEs. SMEs are a dominant force in Malaysia's business enterprises, as they are in other economic forces around the world (The World Bank, 2016). Malaysian SMEs accounted for more than 98 percent of all establishments in 2015 (DOSM, 2017) and contributed significantly to the GDP total for the nation. Table 1.1 displays the number of businesses and their relative contributions to the GDP of the country.

Table 2.1: Number of Establishments According to Size and GDP Contribution

	Number of	Percentage (%)	GDP Value (RM Million)	Percentage Establishment (%)
Large	13,559	1.47	1,483,203	59.6
SME	907,065	98.53	1,006,270	40.4
Total	920,624	100.0	2,489,473	100.0

Source: Department of Statistic Malaysia (2017)

From table 1.1 above, it is realised that majority of establishments are among SMEs which comprise more than 98 percent (907,065) of total business establishments in Malaysia. However, DOSM (2017) reported that this number is not significantly high in GDP contribution as which reportedly at 40.4 percent in the year 2015, although positive growth is seen compared to 2010 figure.

According to the updated SME Corporation definition (www.smeCorp.gov.my), which includes all industries, including services, manufacturing, agriculture, construction, mining and quarrying, both entities were split based on sales turnover and the number of full-time employees. According to a Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM, 2013) circular, the newly amended definition of a SME is timely given the numerous changes that have occurred in the Malaysian economy since 2005, including price inflation, structural changes, and changes in business practises.

Figure 2.1 lists the distinguishing characteristics of two industries, namely manufacturing and services, together with other industries, in terms of business sales turnover and the number of full-time employees. A business will only need to meet one of the two criteria in order to be classified as a SME under one of the categories indicated (www.smeCorp.gov.my) .

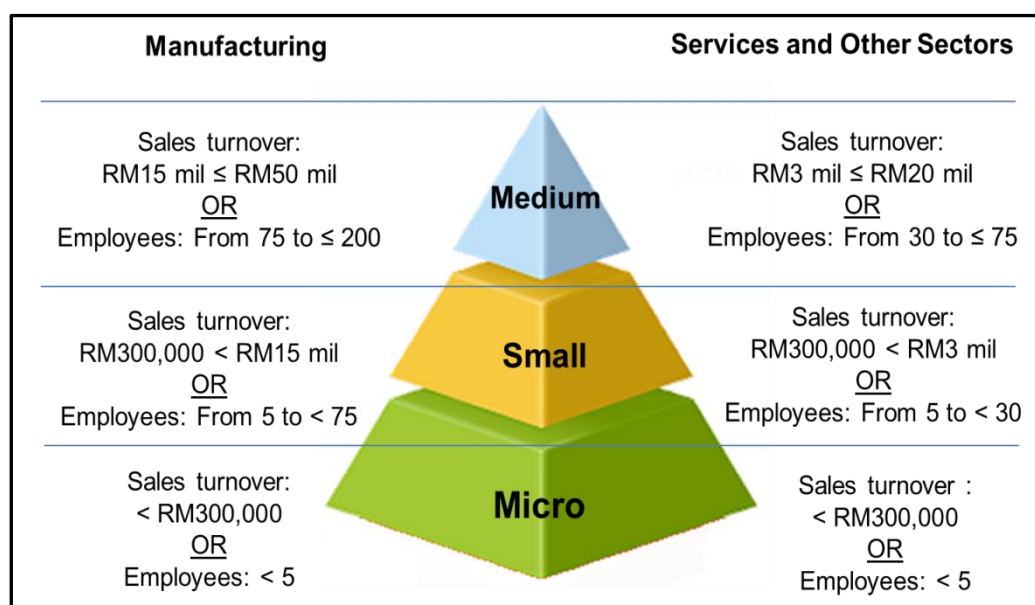


Figure 2.1: SME Definition in Malaysia

Source: www.sme.gov.my

5.2 Entrepreneurial Training Program

The government is actively leading the implementation of policies and strategies pertaining to SMEs, including the provision of entrepreneurial training (Ali et al., 2018; Hung et al., 2011). The government uses entrepreneurial training as a strategy to improve the knowledge and abilities of SMEs in order to boost performance (Kamarudin, 2019).

According to a study by Kamarudin (2019), the training is put into practise by creating new entrepreneurial programmes, entrepreneur incubators, and advisory supports to support the agenda. It also serves as a reflection on the necessity of supplying SMEs with the knowledge and skills they

require in practically every area of business (Ali et al., 2018; Hussin, Alias, & Ismail, 2013; Yahya, Othman, & Shamsuri, 2012; Hung et al., 2011).

In the past, more than 12 ministries and 38 affiliated organisations collaborated closely to promote entrepreneurship in Malaysia (Zahari Ismail & Zamberi Ahmad, 2013). MED, the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC), the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), the Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), SME Corp., and numerous more are among them (Kamarudin et al., 2021a; Ali et al., 2018).

However, under the current National Entrepreneurship Framework (NEF), such arrangements have been reorganised (MED, 2018). In addition to aiming for cost effectiveness in duties allocation, the restructure is intended to resolve the overlapping roles of the agencies and rationalise their operations (Aznam Shah, 2018).

A tool for the growth of SMEs is the Government Support Program (GSP), which is further expanded at both the ministry and agency levels (Kamarudin et al., 2021b; MED, 2018; Shamsuddin et al., 2017). For instance, MITI develops and enhances the entrepreneurial abilities of business owners while also developing and putting into practise strategies for industrial development, global commerce, and investment (www.miti.gov.my).

While MATRADE offers a variety of training programmes, one of them is the Exporters Training Program, which aims to improve entrepreneurs' knowledge of global market potential and build their export marketing skills (www.matrade.gov.my). Additionally, the organisation has the "e-TRADE" programme to expand commercial operations through online commerce (Toh, 2018).

5.3 Intervention in Training Program

Intervention in training is deemed indispensable in realising the effectiveness of the training program. Intervention in training can be defined as the activities that serves to deliver learner-centric experiences in the training program (Laaksolahti, 2020). It involves the needs assessment analysis, content design, and development, which includes presenting content and learning activities, program implementation, and evaluation. Specifically, intervention in entrepreneurial training, which includes creativity and innovation, is described as a crucial element for business survival and sustainable growth (Sheeba & Christopher, 2019).

A study by Sarri, Bakouros, & Petridou (2010) highlighted one important element of learning intervention: consultation, which translated as guiding, mentoring, and coaching activity based on the learning experiences and opportunities for the training review sessions entails reflective learning received by the participants. Such interventions are deemed necessary in supporting the training initiatives held for any entrepreneurial training programs (Sarri et al., 2010; Petridou & Glaveli, 2003).

Furthermore, consultation is defined as a custom-tailored development intervention that uses a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship to achieve professional outcomes that are valued by the participants or audiences (Kotte, 2019). Kotte (2019) asserted that consultation demonstrated as an effective outcome that is suitable and as a promising way of assisting the entrepreneurs (Kotte, 2019).

Moreover, a wide range of different interventions have been labeled "coaching" within entrepreneurial education, including start-up consultancy and mentoring (Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Müller & Diensberg, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to include the element of consultation or mentoring in the process of training and development among SMEs to see the effectiveness of the program.

5.4 Consultation as an Intervention in Entrepreneurial Training

Consultation is a pivotal competency conducted by which described as a process that facilitates problem-solving for individuals, groups, and organizations (Newman, Gerrard, Villarreal, & Kaiser, 2021; Clinton, 2020). It is generally conducted by experts such as psychologists, therapists, and business consultants from their respective fields.

From the entrepreneurial training perspective, the consultation serves as a guide and allows more in-depth information to be gathered such as issues, difficulties, behaviour, practices and techniques used by the entrepreneurs and the businesses (Matos & Hall, 2020; Omar, Ishak & Rahid, 2010). From there, specific action plans would be proposed for the entrepreneurs to perform the

suggested plan and the outcomes of the action will be discussed in order to measure its effectiveness in improving the business situation (Omar et al., 2010).

Businesses require both creativity and innovation to remain relevant in the market while counter intensified competition in the current globalized economy. While in addition, Botha, Nieman, & Van Vuuren (2007) highlights the importance of training intervention in assessing the nature and effectiveness of specific entrepreneurial training program named Women Entrepreneurial Program (WEP). The study found out that the intervention effectively trains and develops various stages of entrepreneurs; potential, start-up and established women entrepreneurs in South Africa.

In addition, Omar et al. (2010) asserted that the intervention of consultation in entrepreneurial training could lead to the development of trusting relationship among the relevant parties (entrepreneurs and consultant or training provider). From there, the entrepreneurs especially small business operators, could enhance their growth capacity with the inputs and ideas generated from the professional and trusting relationship. Also, through the hands-on experience, it allows the entrepreneurs to update their knowledge and skills in accordance to the industrial insights.

5.5 The Proposed Theoretical Framework

In this research, the absorptive capacity theory (ACT) is employed as one of the underpinning theories. The theory suggested that an individual possess their own ability or capability to absorb knowledge from the entrepreneurial training programs (Andersen, 2015). Two categories of potential absorptive capacity (PAC) and realized absorptive capacity (RAC) could be used to further categorise the capacity to absorb knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002).

PAC is defined as the acquisition and assimilation of knowledge and skills received from the training, while RAC is defined as the transformation and use of knowledge learned for the business (Zahra & George, 2002). Figure 2.2 illustrates this research theoretical framework which emphasizes the importance of consultation as the intervention mechanism between entrepreneurial training and performance.

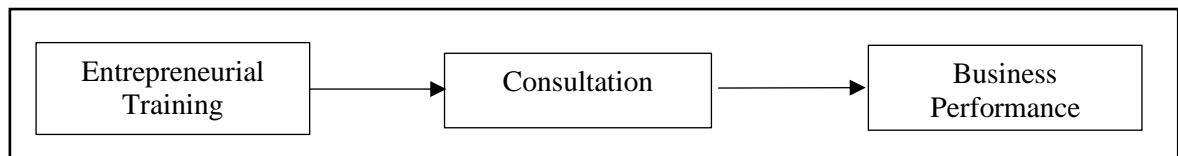


Figure 2.2: Research Theoretical Framework

Also, the experiential learning theory (ELT) works as a complementary or a coping strategy towards the current practice of the entrepreneurial training programs conducted by the government. This theory emphasizes the pivotal role that experience plays in the learning process, which serve as the difference between ELT and other learning theories (Kolb & Boyatzis, 2014; Kolb, 2004). The ELT explained as a suitable approach in adult learning as per discussed in past literatures (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021; Falloon, 2019; Fewster-Thuente & Batterson, 2018; Lee & Yang, 2013).

From the entrepreneurial training perspective, the learning (knowledge and skills) gained from the training program are applied and subsequently, those learning were monitored or accessed through consultation session with respective consultants or experts (Lee & yang, 2013). The consultation session acts as measure to assess the effectiveness of the training program towards the training participants or audiences.

For instance, a study conducted by Lee and Yang (2013) revealed that the significance of consultation for entrepreneurship helps in the entrepreneur's venture performance. The competent government departments or consulting groups provide consulting services to entrepreneurs or invite experts with different backgrounds to provide consulting assistance by addressing the doubts and needs of entrepreneurs. Subsequently, such consulting service enable them to be equipped with required entrepreneurial know-how in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies in running their businesses (Lee & Yang, 2013).

6. Materials and Methodology

6.1 Mixed-Method Approach

A mixed-method approach will be used in this study. In research, a mixed-method design can be defined as an approach that includes gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two types of data, and using separate research designs that may include philosophical presumptions and theoretical frameworks, according to Creswell and Clark (2018). Additionally, it is argued that the mixed method approach adds a strong methodological foundation and develops an integrated strategy, which is beneficial in tackling complicated practical issues (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018).

Ivankova and Wingo (2018) emphasised that from the standpoint of action research, a research could result in scientifically sound, contextually relevant, and successful plans for action or intervention by using a mixed method approach. As a result, the study may offer a solid foundation for encouraging the sustainability of meaningful change and for better assuring that the action/results intervention's may be applied to other professional and community settings (Ivankova, 2015).

6.2 The Explanatory Sequential Design of Mixed-Method Approach

This study will use a mixed-method of explanatory sequential design, which involves first gathering quantitative data and then qualitative data to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results (Bakla, 2018). This strategy is justified by the fact that quantitative information and findings give a broad overview of the study issue, whilst qualitative information is utilised to deepen or explain the general image of the phenomena.

This research will be conducted in two main stages, i) pre and post-questionnaire survey which will be conducted to examine the effect of consultation over the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial training conducted. The respective respondents will be required to fill-up the questionnaire both before and after the training conducted. The element of knowledge absorption including acquisition, assimilation, transformation and exploitation (Andersen, 2015; Zahra & George, 2022) is measured.

This stage is a quantitative nature of data collection and the data collected from the owners of SMEs in Malaysia who attended the entrepreneurial training programs conducted by the government. It is served as explanatory in nature because it is intended to explain and generalize the findings of the study.

Next, the second stage of the research involved in-depth interviews among SME respondents. The data will be gathered from interviewees (SME owners) and analysed using the NVivo12 software. The interview serves as the complimentary data to support the findings gathered from the quantitative data collection method of using questionnaire (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In addition, it is descriptive in nature as only limited knowledge is available on the effectiveness of the consultation as the intervention towards entrepreneurial training effectiveness, which then translated into favourable performance of the business.

6.3 Focus Group

This research will be employed a focus group approach as the main research methodology whereby both the training programs and the quarterly consultation meeting will be conducted. The focus group will consist of five (5) to ten (10) entrepreneurs among SMEs, including micro-enterprises.

There are few pre-determined criteria to be included in the selection of the participants in this focus group. These criteria is pre-determined in order to ensure smooth process throughout the research timeline including during data collection. Eventually, this will lead towards achieving the research objectives. The criteria are as follows per below;

- i. The entrepreneurs who have access to a stable internet facility for online/virtual training purposes
- ii. The entrepreneurs who have a strong desire to be developed and improve in their business
- iii. The entrepreneurs who have a positive attitude towards learning
- iv. The entrepreneurs who could give their commitment in every program and meeting scheduled within a year of this project

For the best research interest, this study is proposed to collaborate with several local government agencies for the sake of screening and selecting the potential entrepreneurs to be

involved in this research. The agencies potentially selected for the research collaboration are those involved in the entrepreneurial training and development among SMEs in Malaysia, for instance, Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), Tekun Nasional (Tekun), Unit Pembangunan Usahawan Kedah (UPUK) and other relevant agencies.

7. Result and Discussion

Based on the aforementioned discussion, this research could significantly and positively impact various levels or stakeholders, including society, economy, and nation. From the societal perspective, a structured way in conducting the entrepreneurial training can be very beneficial for SME owners. The training could improve their knowledge and skills subsequently improve the performance of the business.

In addition, the training provider 'community' among the government agencies could benefit from the program in designing and conducting effective entrepreneurial training based on this program's structured design and planning. The consideration of incorporating consultation within the agencies' planning and implementation of the entrepreneurial training seems as mandatory, rather than optional. Thus, their current practices could be reviewed for better training and development program in their execution.

It is also expected to positively improve the development of entrepreneurship activity. The result might significantly enhance the entrepreneurial training structure for the entrepreneurs, both as individuals and businesses. It is also an intervention as there will be a periodic consultation between the training given. The design of the structured entrepreneurial training program which coupled with close follow-up (consultation) with the participants (entrepreneurs) could be the novelty and new findings out of this study. It can be a valuable framework to be expanded to other government agencies and training providers.

While from the macro-level perspective, structured and effective entrepreneurial training could save the government's resources in terms of funding, allocation, and efforts in reaching a larger number of beneficiaries. A structured training could benefit more people or entrepreneurs, especially among SMEs. The program's effectiveness is reflected through their business practices and performance improvement, thus leading towards higher contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

8. Conclusion

It is also viable to highlight that this research comes with certain limitations and challenges in carrying out this research work. First, it could be difficult to get responses or good cooperation from various government agencies who conducted entrepreneurial training in Malaysia for data collection purposes. Therefore, series of meetings are conducted with few local agencies to set the expectation straight towards the completion of this research.

Second, the commitment from group of SME entrepreneurs to participate and involve in this focus group could be a challenge. Indeed, this research requires commitment, cooperation and determination from all relevant parties particularly entrepreneurs to sit through series of training. Therefore, it is crucial to set a pre-determine criteria for focus group selection and some rewards offered (i.e., Priority Lane for grants and business opportunities) for those committed participants.

As a conclusion, this piece of research could answer the big question of how significance and pivotal role played by consultation is within entrepreneurial training and development program conducted by the government. Through the series of training and consultation sessions projected, it is believed that the objectives of this research will be met. From there, it is believed that crucial inclusion of such an important element of consultation certainly helpful to increase the likelihood of the training effectiveness. More importantly, it could lead towards positive performance of SME businesses subsequently, supporting the nation's economic agenda overall.

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