



Reconfiguring Strategic and Operational Architectures in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Through Integrated Business Consulting Models

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of most national economies, serving as engines of employment creation, innovation diffusion, and regional development. Yet their structural fragility, limited access to resources, and dependence on volatile market conditions make them particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, competitive pressure, and strategic misalignment. Over the last two decades, these vulnerabilities have been amplified by global crises, digital disruption, and changing patterns of consumption, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate effects on service-oriented and hospitality-based SMEs (Asmelash and Cooper, 2020; Fernandes, 2020). Against this backdrop, business consulting has increasingly been recognized as a critical mechanism through which SMEs can reorganize their strategic priorities, redesign business models, and align operational processes with long-term sustainability and competitiveness. However, despite the growing relevance of consulting interventions in the SME sector, the academic literature has remained fragmented, often focusing either on narrow functional advice or on abstract models of business model innovation without integrating these perspectives into a holistic, implementable framework.

The complex model of business consulting proposed by Kovalchuk (2025) represents a major theoretical and practical advancement in this area. By conceptualizing consulting as a multidimensional system that integrates strategic diagnostics, organizational learning, business model design, and performance monitoring, Kovalchuk (2025) provides a foundation for understanding how consulting can move beyond episodic problem-solving to become a sustained driver of enterprise transformation. Building on this foundation, the present study develops a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework for examining how integrated consulting models reshape SME competitiveness, resilience, and growth trajectories in turbulent economic environments.

Drawing on a wide range of theoretical traditions, including the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991), population ecology theory (Hannan and Freeman, 1977), business model innovation theory (Foss and Saebi, 2017; Giesen et al., 2010), and entrepreneurship and innovation scholarship (Drucker, 1985b; Chaston, 2009a), this article argues that effective business consulting for SMEs must be understood as a dynamic, co-evolutionary process. In this process, consultants and entrepreneurs jointly construct strategic meaning, identify latent capabilities, and design adaptive organizational architectures that respond to both market and institutional pressures. The article further integrates empirical insights from studies of SME performance, sustainability strategies, and crisis responses (Ayyagari et al., 2014; Barnett et al., 2015; Baum and Hai, 2020), demonstrating that consulting interventions are most effective when they align business model innovation with human capital development and stakeholder engagement.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design inspired by Creswell

(2014), combining interpretive analysis of secondary sources with comparative theoretical synthesis. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the aim is to generate analytically rich propositions about how consulting models operate within the specific constraints and opportunities faced by SMEs. The results highlight how integrated consulting frameworks enable SMEs to convert intangible assets into competitive advantage, mitigate the liabilities of smallness and newness, and navigate periods of extreme uncertainty. The discussion elaborates these findings by situating them within ongoing scholarly debates about strategic management, entrepreneurship, and organizational adaptation, while also identifying key limitations and avenues for future research.

By grounding its analysis in the complex consulting model articulated by Kovalchuk (2025) and embedding it within a broader theoretical ecosystem, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how business consulting can function not merely as an external service but as a transformative institutional mechanism for SME development. In doing so, it offers both scholars and practitioners a robust conceptual lens through which to rethink the role of consulting in shaping the future of small and medium-sized enterprises.

KEYWORDS

Small and medium-sized enterprises; business consulting; business model innovation; strategic management; organizational resilience; competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises occupy a paradoxical position within contemporary economic systems. On the one hand, they are widely acknowledged as the primary generators of employment, innovation, and regional economic vitality, particularly in developing and transitional economies (Ayyagari et al., 2014). On the other hand, they are structurally disadvantaged in comparison to large corporations, lacking the financial buffers, technological infrastructures, and political leverage that enable larger firms to absorb shocks and shape market conditions. This structural asymmetry has become even more pronounced in an era marked by globalization, digital transformation, and recurrent crises, most recently illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which left vast segments of the hospitality and service sectors with unprecedented levels of idle capacity and revenue loss (Asmelash and Cooper, 2020; Fernandes, 2020).

Within this turbulent environment, the strategic and organizational challenges faced by SMEs have intensified. Entrepreneurs are required not only to identify viable market opportunities but also to design business models capable of capturing value in increasingly complex and competitive ecosystems (Foss and Saebi, 2017; Giesen et al., 2010). At the same time, they must manage scarce resources, build organizational routines, and comply with evolving regulatory and social expectations, all while responding to unpredictable shifts in consumer behavior and technological standards (Barnett et al., 2015; Baldassarre et al., 2017). These demands often exceed the internal managerial capacities of small firms, creating a growing reliance on external expertise in the form of business consulting.

The role of business consulting in SME development, however, has long been under-theorized. Traditional consulting models have tended to focus on discrete functional problems, such as accounting, marketing, or operations, rather than on the integrated strategic and organizational challenges that define SME survival and growth (Chaston, 2009a). Moreover, much of the academic literature has treated consultants as exogenous agents who transfer best practices from large corporations to smaller firms, without sufficiently accounting for the contextual specificity and resource constraints that shape SME behavior (Boyle, 2016). This gap between theory and practice has limited the explanatory power of existing models and has contributed to inconsistent outcomes in consulting interventions.

A major attempt to address this limitation is found in the complex model of business consulting for SMEs developed by Kovalchuk (2025). Unlike linear or tool-based approaches, this model conceptualizes consulting as a systemic process that encompasses diagnosis, strategic design, implementation, and continuous feedback. Kovalchuk (2025) argues that effective consulting must be embedded within the internal dynamics of the enterprise, enabling organizational learning, capability development, and business model reconfiguration. This perspective aligns with broader shifts in management theory that emphasize dynamic capabilities, co-creation of value, and the role of knowledge integration in sustaining competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Clauss et al., 2019).

Despite its conceptual richness, the implications of Kovalchuk's (2025) model have not yet been fully explored within the broader literature on SME strategy and performance. Existing studies on business model innovation, for example, have demonstrated that SMEs can enhance customer value and financial outcomes by redesigning their value propositions and revenue mechanisms (Aspara et al., 2010; Cucculelli and Bettinelli, 2015), but they rarely explain how such redesign processes are facilitated in practice. Similarly, research on organizational ecology has shown that small firms face high mortality rates due to environmental selection pressures (Hannan and Freeman, 1977), yet it provides limited guidance on how strategic interventions, such as consulting, can alter these evolutionary trajectories.

This article seeks to bridge these strands of research by developing a comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework for understanding integrated business consulting in SMEs. By situating Kovalchuk's (2025) model within a wider ecosystem of strategic, entrepreneurial, and organizational theories, the study aims to elucidate how consulting interventions can enable SMEs to overcome structural constraints, leverage intangible resources, and adapt to rapidly changing environments. In doing so, it responds to calls in the literature for more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to SME support and development (Barnett et al., 2015; Foss and Saebi, 2017).

The remainder of the article is structured around a qualitative-dominant methodological approach that draws on secondary sources and theoretical synthesis to generate new insights into the mechanisms and outcomes of business consulting in SMEs (Creswell, 2014). Through an extensive analysis of existing research and conceptual models, the study identifies key dimensions of effective consulting, including strategic alignment, business model innovation, organizational learning, and stakeholder engagement. These dimensions are then examined in relation to empirical findings on SME performance, sustainability, and crisis resilience, highlighting both convergences and tensions within the literature (Baum and Hai, 2020; Ayyagari et al., 2014).

By foregrounding the complex and dynamic nature of consulting relationships, this article contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of how external expertise can be integrated into the strategic fabric of small and medium-sized enterprises. In a world where economic volatility and competitive intensity are likely to remain high, such an understanding is not merely of academic interest but of profound practical significance for policymakers, consultants, and entrepreneurs alike (Kovalchuk, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

The methodological orientation of this study is grounded in the recognition that business consulting for small and medium-sized enterprises is a complex social and organizational phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative or purely positivist approaches. SMEs operate within heterogeneous institutional, cultural, and economic contexts, and consulting interventions are shaped by the interactions, interpretations, and power relations between consultants and entrepreneurs (Chaston, 2009a; Boyle, 2016). For this reason, the research design adopted here follows the principles of qualitative-dominant mixed methods as articulated by Creswell (2014), emphasizing interpretive depth, theoretical integration, and analytical rigor over statistical generalization.

At the core of the methodology is an extensive, systematic review and synthesis of the scholarly literature on SMEs, business consulting, business model innovation, and organizational strategy. This includes both foundational theoretical works, such as the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991) and population ecology theory (Hannan and Freeman, 1977), and more recent contributions that address sustainability, innovation, and crisis management in small firms (Barnett et al., 2015; Baum and Hai, 2020). Within this broad corpus, particular attention is given to the complex consulting model proposed by Kovalchuk (2025), which serves as the central analytical lens through which other studies are interpreted and compared.

The use of secondary data and theoretical sources is justified by the exploratory and integrative aims of the study. Rather than testing a narrowly defined hypothesis, the objective is to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that explains how consulting processes interact with SME structures, strategies, and environments to produce specific outcomes. This approach is consistent with prior research on business models and entrepreneurship, which has often relied on qualitative synthesis to generate new theoretical insights (Foss and Saebi, 2017; Giesen et al., 2010). By drawing on multiple streams of literature, the study seeks to avoid the fragmentation that has characterized much of the existing work on SME consulting.

The analytical process involves several interrelated steps. First, the key constructs and propositions of Kovalchuk's (2025) model are identified and articulated in relation to broader theories of strategic management and organizational change. This includes an examination of how diagnostic, design, and implementation phases are conceptualized, as well as how feedback and learning are integrated into the consulting cycle. Second, these constructs are compared with empirical and conceptual findings from studies of SME performance, business model innovation, and crisis response, allowing for the identification of convergences, contradictions, and gaps in the literature (Aspara et al., 2010; Cucculelli and Bettinelli, 2015; Fernandes, 2020).

Third, the study employs a form of analytic generalization, in which patterns observed across different theoretical and empirical contexts are used to develop broader propositions about the role of consulting in SME development (Creswell, 2014). For example, evidence that SMEs with innovative business models tend to outperform their peers (Cucculelli and Bettinelli, 2015) is interpreted in light of Kovalchuk's (2025) emphasis on consulting-driven strategic reconfiguration, leading to propositions about the mediating role of external expertise in business model transformation. This process does not aim to establish causal laws in a positivist sense but to construct a coherent and plausible explanatory narrative that integrates diverse sources of evidence.

A critical dimension of the methodology is reflexivity, particularly with respect to the normative assumptions embedded in both consulting practice and academic theory. Much of the literature on business consulting implicitly assumes that external expertise is inherently beneficial and that best practices can be transferred across contexts (Boyle, 2016; Giesen et al., 2010). By contrast, Kovalchuk's (2025) model emphasizes the co-creative and context-dependent nature of consulting, highlighting the need for mutual adaptation between consultants and SMEs. The present study adopts this reflexive stance, critically examining not only the successes but also the limitations and unintended consequences of consulting interventions, as reported in empirical studies and theoretical critiques (Barnett et al., 2015; Foss and Saebi, 2017).

The limitations of this methodological approach must also be acknowledged. Because the study relies primarily on secondary sources and theoretical synthesis, it cannot provide direct empirical validation of the propositions it develops. Furthermore, the diversity of contexts in which SMEs operate means that no single model, however complex, can fully capture the variability of consulting outcomes (Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Chaston, 2009a). Nevertheless, by systematically integrating insights from a wide range of studies and grounding them in a robust conceptual framework, the methodology offers a solid foundation for advancing both theory and practice in the

field of SME consulting (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Results

The analytical synthesis of the literature reveals several interrelated patterns that illuminate how integrated business consulting models shape the strategic and operational trajectories of small and medium-sized enterprises. One of the most consistent findings across studies is that SMEs which engage in structured, ongoing consulting relationships are more likely to develop coherent business models and to adapt these models in response to changing market conditions (Aspara et al., 2010; Cucculelli and Bettinelli, 2015). This pattern aligns closely with the complex consulting framework proposed by Kovalchuk (2025), which emphasizes the iterative alignment of strategy, resources, and market positioning through continuous diagnostic and feedback processes.

A central result concerns the role of consulting in unlocking and mobilizing intangible resources. According to the resource-based view, firms achieve sustained competitive advantage by effectively deploying valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources, many of which are intangible, such as knowledge, reputation, and organizational routines (Barney, 1991). For SMEs, these resources are often underdeveloped or poorly articulated, limiting their strategic potential. The literature indicates that consultants frequently act as catalysts in this process, helping entrepreneurs to identify latent capabilities, codify tacit knowledge, and translate these assets into differentiated value propositions (Clauss et al., 2019; Kovalchuk, 2025). As a result, consulting interventions are associated with improved customer satisfaction, stronger brand identities, and more robust revenue models (Aspara et al., 2010).

Another significant result relates to the relationship between consulting and business model innovation. Studies have consistently shown that SMEs which engage in systematic business model experimentation and redesign tend to outperform those that rely on replication or incremental change (Giesen et al., 2010; Foss and Saebi, 2017). The analysis suggests that consultants play a crucial role in facilitating this experimentation by providing analytical tools, benchmarking information, and strategic perspectives that are often unavailable within small firms (Boyle, 2016; Kovalchuk, 2025). In particular, the ability of consultants to integrate market analysis with internal capability assessment enables SMEs to pursue more ambitious and coherent innovation strategies (Baldassarre et al., 2017).

The results also highlight the importance of consulting in times of crisis and environmental turbulence. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, exposed the vulnerability of many SMEs, especially in sectors such as hospitality and tourism, where demand collapsed almost overnight (Asmelash and Cooper, 2020; Baum and Hai, 2020). Research indicates that firms which had access to strategic consulting support were better able to pivot their business models, adopt digital channels, and implement cost-saving measures without undermining their long-term viability (Fernandes, 2020; Kovalchuk, 2025). This finding underscores the adaptive and resilience-building functions of integrated consulting frameworks.

At the organizational level, the synthesis reveals that consulting interventions are associated with enhanced learning and capability development within SMEs. Rather than simply delivering solutions, effective consultants engage in processes of joint problem-solving and knowledge transfer that build the internal competencies of entrepreneurs and their teams (Chaston, 2009a; Creswell, 2014). This learning-oriented approach is a key component of Kovalchuk's (2025) model, which views consulting as a means of fostering self-sustaining organizational change rather than dependence on external experts. Empirical studies support this view, showing that SMEs which adopt a collaborative consulting relationship are more likely to internalize strategic thinking and to apply it in future decision-making contexts (Boyle, 2016; Cucculelli and Bettinelli, 2015).

Finally, the results point to a complex interaction between consulting, institutional environments, and SME survival. From the perspective of population ecology, small firms face high mortality rates due to competitive selection

pressures and resource constraints (Hannan and Freeman, 1977). However, the literature suggests that consulting can alter these dynamics by enabling SMEs to better align their strategies with regulatory, technological, and market conditions (Barnett et al., 2015; Kovalchuk, 2025). By helping firms to anticipate environmental changes and to proactively adapt their business models, consultants contribute to lower failure rates and more stable growth trajectories.

DISCUSSION

The patterns identified in the results section acquire deeper theoretical significance when they are situated within the broader intellectual traditions that have shaped research on entrepreneurship, strategy, and organizational change. The complex model of business consulting articulated by Kovalchuk (2025) functions as a conceptual bridge between these traditions, enabling a more integrated understanding of how external expertise interacts with the internal dynamics of small and medium-sized enterprises. Rather than viewing consulting as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from expert to client, this model conceptualizes consulting as a co-evolutionary process in which consultants and entrepreneurs jointly construct strategic meaning, organizational capabilities, and pathways for sustainable value creation (Kovalchuk, 2025).

From the standpoint of the resource-based view, this co-evolutionary perspective is particularly important. Barney (1991) argued that competitive advantage arises not simply from possessing valuable resources but from the firm's ability to organize and deploy those resources in ways that competitors cannot easily imitate. SMEs often possess unique localized knowledge, close customer relationships, and entrepreneurial agility, yet they struggle to convert these assets into systematic competitive advantage due to limited strategic planning and managerial formalization (Chaston, 2009a; Cucculelli and Bettinelli, 2015). Consulting, when practiced in line with Kovalchuk's (2025) model, addresses this gap by helping SMEs to articulate, structure, and leverage their intangible resources through coherent business models and strategic frameworks. In this sense, consulting becomes a mechanism of resource orchestration, transforming dispersed and tacit assets into organized and scalable sources of value (Clauss et al., 2019).

The implications of this argument extend to the long-standing debate between business model innovation and business model replication. Aspara et al. (2010) demonstrated that firms emphasizing innovation in their business models tend to achieve superior financial performance compared to those that focus primarily on replication. However, innovation is inherently risky, especially for SMEs with limited financial and organizational slack (Ayyagari et al., 2014). Kovalchuk's (2025) integrated consulting framework helps to resolve this tension by providing a structured environment in which experimentation can occur in a controlled and analytically informed manner. Consultants, by introducing scenario analysis, customer feedback mechanisms, and performance monitoring tools, enable SMEs to test and refine new value propositions without exposing themselves to excessive risk (Giesen et al., 2010; Foss and Saebi, 2017). This suggests that consulting not only facilitates innovation but also acts as a risk-mitigation device that makes innovation more accessible to resource-constrained firms.

The discussion also intersects with the literature on sustainability and stakeholder engagement. Barnett et al. (2015) argued that firms facing economic constraints are often tempted to abandon sustainability initiatives in favor of short-term survival strategies, yet such retrenchment can undermine long-term legitimacy and performance. For SMEs, this dilemma is particularly acute, as they often operate at the margins of financial viability while being embedded in local communities that hold them accountable for social and environmental impacts (Baldassarre et al., 2017). Kovalchuk's (2025) model implicitly incorporates a stakeholder-oriented perspective by emphasizing the alignment of business goals with broader social and market expectations. Consulting interventions that integrate sustainability considerations into business model design enable SMEs to pursue growth strategies that are both

economically viable and socially legitimate, thereby strengthening their long-term resilience (Baum and Hai, 2020).

Another critical dimension of the discussion concerns the role of consulting in shaping organizational learning and identity. Organizational theorists have long recognized that small firms are not merely scaled-down versions of large corporations but are characterized by distinctive cultures, informal structures, and entrepreneurial identities (Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Chaston, 2009a). Traditional consulting approaches, which often impose standardized tools and metrics, can clash with these characteristics, leading to resistance or superficial compliance (Boyle, 2016). By contrast, the complex consulting model proposed by Kovalchuk (2025) emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and the co-creation of solutions, thereby respecting the unique identity of each enterprise. This approach fosters deeper learning and commitment, as entrepreneurs perceive consulting not as an external imposition but as a collaborative process that enhances their own agency and competence (Creswell, 2014).

The COVID-19 crisis provides a powerful empirical lens through which to evaluate these theoretical claims. The collapse of demand in sectors such as hospitality and tourism, where nearly 80 percent of hotel rooms in the United States were reported to be empty at the height of the pandemic, illustrates the vulnerability of SMEs to exogenous shocks (Asmelash and Cooper, 2020). Although the present study does not focus on the United States as a research context, the global nature of the crisis means that similar dynamics were observed in many other economies (Fernandes, 2020; Baum and Hai, 2020). SMEs that had engaged in strategic consulting were often better positioned to reconfigure their operations, adopt digital channels, and renegotiate relationships with suppliers and customers, thereby mitigating the worst effects of the downturn (Kovalchuk, 2025). This suggests that consulting can be understood as a form of organizational preparedness, enhancing the adaptive capacity of firms before crises occur.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and potential downsides of consulting interventions. Not all consultants possess the contextual knowledge or ethical commitment required to support SME development effectively (Boyle, 2016). In some cases, consultants may promote fashionable management practices or business model templates that are ill-suited to the specific circumstances of small firms, leading to misalignment and wasted resources (Foss and Saebi, 2017). The integrated framework proposed by Kovalchuk (2025) mitigates these risks by emphasizing diagnosis, customization, and continuous feedback, yet its effectiveness ultimately depends on the quality of the consulting relationship and the willingness of both parties to engage in honest and critical dialogue (Creswell, 2014).

The discussion also raises important questions about the institutional and policy context in which SME consulting takes place. In many countries, public agencies and development organizations subsidize or provide consulting services as part of broader economic development strategies (Financial Gazette, 2016). While such programs can expand access to expertise, they may also impose bureaucratic constraints or standardized reporting requirements that undermine the flexibility and responsiveness of consulting interventions (Barnett et al., 2015). Kovalchuk's (2025) model, with its emphasis on adaptive and enterprise-specific design, suggests that policymakers should prioritize frameworks that allow consultants and SMEs to tailor their interactions to local conditions and evolving needs.

Future research can build on the insights developed here in several ways. One promising avenue is the empirical testing of the propositions generated by this theoretical synthesis through longitudinal case studies and comparative analyses across different institutional contexts (Creswell, 2014; Hannan and Freeman, 1977). Such studies could examine how variations in consulting style, duration, and intensity influence SME outcomes, thereby refining and extending Kovalchuk's (2025) model. Another avenue is the exploration of digital and platform-based consulting services, which have become increasingly important in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and may offer new opportunities for scaling and democratizing access to expertise (Fernandes, 2020; Giesen et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that business consulting, when conceptualized and practiced as an integrated, dynamic, and collaborative process, plays a crucial role in shaping the strategic and organizational trajectories of small and medium-sized enterprises. By grounding this argument in the complex consulting model developed by Kovalchuk (2025) and situating it within a rich theoretical landscape that includes the resource-based view, business model innovation theory, and organizational ecology, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how external expertise can be transformed into sustained competitive advantage for SMEs. In an era of heightened uncertainty and rapid change, such a framework is indispensable for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to support the vitality and resilience of the SME sector.

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