

# Strategic Direction as an Antecedent between Strategy Implementation and Performance of Small and Medium Manufacturing Firms in Thika Sub-County, Kenya

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**ABSTRACT**----*This paper explores the relationship between strategic direction as an antecedent between strategy implementation and performance of small and medium manufacturing firms (SME) in Thika Sub-County in Kenya. The study is underpinned in the Higgins 8-S strategy implementation framework where strategy and purpose is one of the 8-S component or a key variable required by the firm in maintaining superior performance and competitive edge among the rival firms. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data from 115 firms from the two key industrial subsectors within Thika town and its environs. Guided by the philosophy of logical positivism and for triangulation purposes, the study adopted a mixed research design which incorporated the descriptive, quantitative and qualitative designs. Pearson's bivariate correlation analysis was used to indicate the relationship between the dependent and independent variables of the study and regression analysis was used to test hypothesis proposed in this study. The study findings indicated that there is a positive but insignificant relationship between strategic direction as an antecedent variable between strategy implementation and the performance of SME manufacturing firms in Thika, Kenya. The literature of strategic management had identified three main drivers in strategy implementation that is attention to leadership styles, attention to structure and attention to human resources. This study investigated whether strategic direction as an antecedent variable is a major driver influencing strategy implementations and performance of the manufacturing small and medium enterprises in contemporary organizations in a developing economy like Kenya. The findings in this study are in line with other scholars in strategic management literature who found mixed results between strategic direction and organizational performance. The study findings also revealed that although strategic direction on itself is an insignificant variable in determining manufacturing SME firm's performance, it is often embedded in other key variable influencing performance such as leadership styles, structure, human resources and technology. The study concluded that manufacturing firms interested in enhancing their performance and staying ahead of competition should ensure that their strategic direction in terms of their vision, mission and objectives are well understood by all stakeholders undertaking strategy implementation since its effect in performance is always carried out by other variables. The manufacturing SME firm that lay emphasis on its strategic direction ahead of strategy implementation often experiences superior performance and have a competitive edge among the rival firms in the industry.*

**Keywords**---- Strategy Implementation, Strategic Direction, Firm's Performance, SME

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The strategic direction of the firm is often embedded in its strategic vision and mission statements. The strategic vision and mission of the firm is the first step in formulating and implementing strategies. The firm's strategic vision provides the logical reason for future plans and directions of the organization. It aims the organization in a particular direction while providing a long term strategic direction to follow in line with the aspirations of shareholders [1]. The strategic direction of the manufacturing SME firms in this study was considered as an antecedent variable or a variable

that comes before any strategy is implemented. Before a strategy is implemented, it has to be formulated first. A lot of information and participation of all stakeholders is required during the strategic formulation stage. The firm's leadership work hard to create the awareness among all employees and the stakeholders of the direction the organization is headed to and how the organization will benefit from implementation of a new strategy. These efforts are meant to create a shared vision among all stakeholders about the benefits of the new strategy. This step is very crucial before and during the strategy implementation process.

## **2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of this study was to establish the relationship between strategic direction and performance of SME manufacturing firms in Thika Sub-County, Kenya

## **3. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY**

This study was guided by the following alternative hypothesis;

**H<sub>1</sub>**. There is a significant positive relationship between the emphasis on strategic direction (vision, mission, goals & objectives) and performance of SME manufacturing firms in Thika, Kenya

## **4. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A well-crafted and executed strategy has the potential of putting firms on the competitive roadmap and increases their chances of success through superior performance. Unfortunately, most organizations all over the world today, struggle with strategy implementation to the extent that the past studies have documented that organizations fail to implement between 60 and 80 percent of their strategic plans [2], [3]. In a dynamic and competitive environment that characterizes SME manufacturing firms all over the world today, managers not only need to adapt to the changing trends in management of their strategies in line with environmental changes, but also to ensure that they are committed to their strategic plans to the extent that they are fully implemented. Strategy implementation is the second step in the strategic management process and it is usually regarded by many scholars and practitioners of management as the most difficult, challenging and time consuming activity [4], [3], [5]. Other steps include the strategy formulation and control which come first and third respectively.

The strategy implementation process determines whether an organization excels, survives or dies [4] depending on the manner in which it is undertaken by the stakeholders. In turbulent environments, the ability to implement new strategies quickly and effectively may well mean the difference between success and failure for an organization [6], [7]. The practical experiences and scholarly works in the past have indicated that strategy implementation has a significant influence on organizational performance [8], [9]. Therefore, it follows that successful execution and implementation of strong and robust strategies will always give a firm a significant competitive edge (Sage, 2015), especially in the industries where unique strategies are difficult to achieve [10]. Before a strategy is implemented, it has to be formulated first. The strategy formulation and implementation activities are intertwined. However, the literature indicates that many scholars in strategic management have concentrated their researches on strategy formulation and neglected research works on strategy implementation [11], [12], therefore, the literature on strategy implementation exists in pockets, is fragmented and is inadequate [10]. Strategy implementation is a more elaborate and difficult task than strategy formulation [3] and involves concentrated efforts and actions and by all stakeholders in an organization. Hrebiniak [13] underscored that it is not only true for people to believe that strategy formulation is a difficult task because it is even more difficult to implement that strategy throughout the organization. Strategic direction has been identified in literature as one of the key drivers in strategy implementation process. A superior and strong leadership skill is an important dynamic capability required to drive superior performance in organizations operating in a dynamic environment that characterizes organizations today [14]. Past studies have underscored the importance of leadership in strategy formulation and implementation [15], [16], [17] and [18].

## **5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptualized framework that guided this study is depicted in figure 1 below:

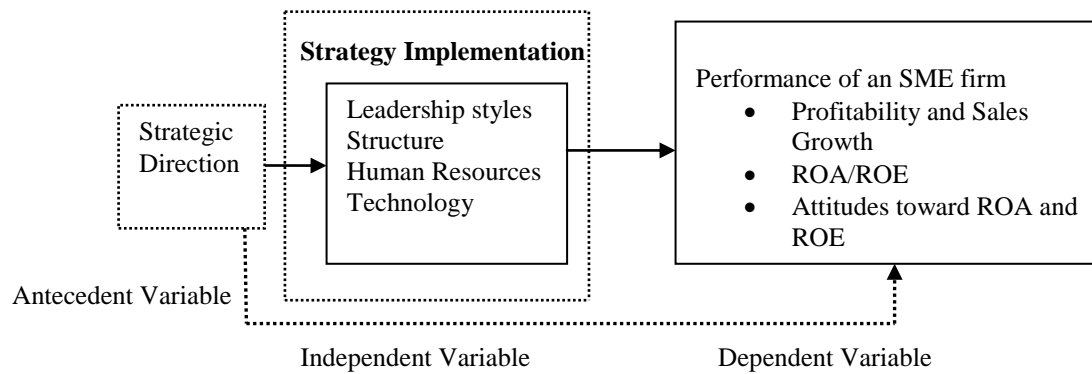


Fig 1.0: Conceptual Framework showing the Relationship between Strategic Direction and SME's Performance

## 6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Higgins [19] revised the original McKinsey's 7-S framework and developed the 8-S framework for implementing strategies in organizations. The famous and widely applied 7-S strategy implementation framework was developed in 1980's by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman [20]. In their study of the "best run" American companies, Peters and Waterman identified seven key components that managers need to pay attention when implementing organizational strategies. These components [21] include the system, structure, systems, skills, staff, style and shared values which are all intertwined. Higgins [19] then revised and improved the McKinsey's 7-S model by adding the 8<sup>th</sup> S component (Strategic performance) which is the derivative or outcome of the interaction of 7-S's components contained in the original McKinsey's 7-S's framework. He also replaced skills as one of the contextual "S" with Re-Resources since organization cannot successfully implement strategy without marshalling additional resources such as money, information, technology and time. Higgins [19] pointed out that the 8-S's framework enables a manager to work more efficiently and effectively in managing the cross-functional duties and activities associated with strategy implementation. He observed that executives who realize that strategy implementation is as important as strategy formulation usually spend a lot of their time and efforts in strategy execution and this enables their organizations achieve better performance.

The 8-S's framework states that successful strategy implementation revolves around aligning the key organizational components (the 8-S's) with the strategy that the organization intends to implement. However, due to environmental dynamism and changes that take place in organization's business environment now and then, it is important for managers to continue reshaping their strategies in line with these changes. Therefore, this call for a continuous realignment of the 8-S's components in line with the new strategy and this presents the greatest challenge to managers in their endeavor to successfully implementation strategies. Since the 8-S's components are intertwined, the executives in the organizations must continuously align all these eight cross-functional components with the new strategy for successful strategy execution and better performance [19].

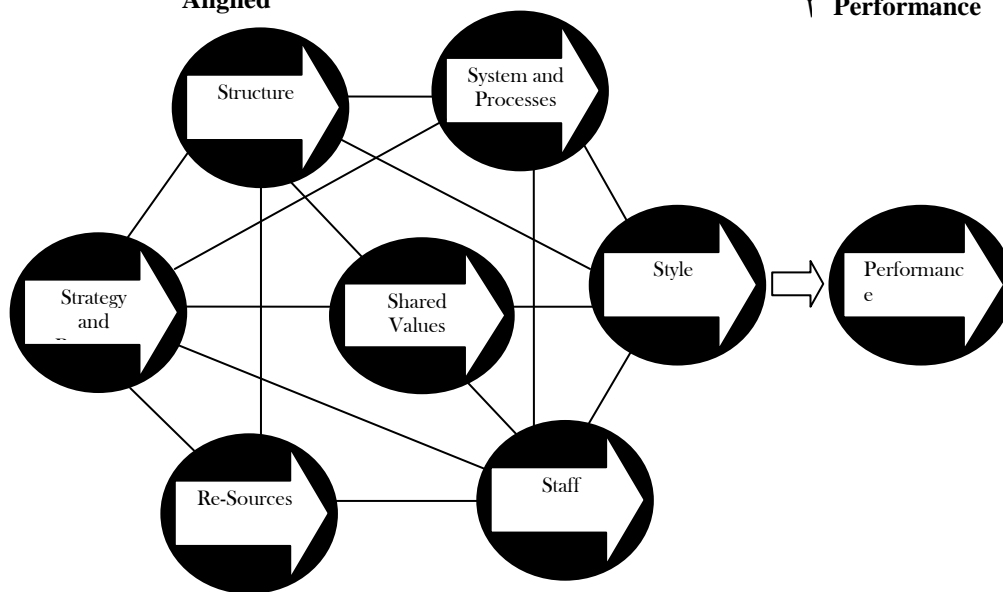


Figure 2.3: Higgin's 8-S Framework: Source: Source: Higgins, (2005):6, *Journal of Change Management* (5)

## 7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To test the relationship between emphasis on strategic direction during strategy implementation and performance of small and medium manufacturing firms, the study adopted a mixed research design involving the descriptive, quantitative and qualitative research designs. The data was collected once over a period of eight months from a sample of 115 targeted firms. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to show the correlation between technology and the performance of the SME manufacturing firm. The linear regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses and to show the nature of the relationships emphasis on strategic direction and performance. The F-Statistics was used to show the model validity while R squared was used to show the model's goodness of fit.

## 8. MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

### a. Firm's Performance

The performance of a firm was measured by the degree of satisfaction on the levels of profitability, Return on Assets (ROA), Return on Equity (ROE) and sales turnover. Due to the sensitivity of obtaining information related to financial performance where owners of a firm were not willing to cooperate or information was not available, A 5 point Likert scale psychometric instrument [22] was developed to capture information using the non-financial measures of performance. The scale ranged from (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree 3= Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree). The mean score was then calculated as an average of the 5 items examined on the enterprises' perceived performance. The higher the score obtained, the better the statement is in terms of the firm's perceived performance.

### b. Emphasis on Strategic Direction

Strategic direction of the firm was used to measure the extent to which a firm emphasizes on her vision, mission and goals/objectives as a key guide in strategy implementation efforts. In order to measure this antecedent variable under strategy implementation, a 5-items Likert scale was used [22] which ranged from (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree 3= Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree). The mean score was then computed as the average of the 5 items. The higher the score, the more the variable is important to the performance of small and medium manufacturing firms in Thika Sub-County.

## 9. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table 1.0: Descriptive Statistics on the SME Performance**

Performance Construct	N	Mean	Std. Dev
Our Total Profits (Total sales – Costs) have been increasing yearly	115	4.139	.475
The volume of sales has been increasing ever yearly	115	4.078	.664
The number of employees has been rising every year	115	3.183	1.064
The geographical market size of our products has been expanding	115	3.635	.921
We are highly satisfied by the returns from assets invested (ROA)	115	3.374	1.013
We are highly satisfied by the returns from borrowed money (ROE)	115	3.504	.921
Number of customers satisfied by our products has been rising each year	115	3.913	.695
The size of our organization has been expanding for the last five years	114	3.895	.643
The quality of our products has improved considerably	114	3.851	.755
Efficiency of our internal work processes has improved tremendously	115	3.965	.576
Valid N (listwise)	113		

Note: Reliability  $\alpha$  – Attention to leadership styles = 0.815

Ranked on a scale where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

The study results in table 1.0 shows that the respondents agreed with most of the Likert-based performance constructs apart from the following two statements; we are highly satisfied by the returns from assets (ROA) invested (mean score, 3.37) and that the number of employees has been rising every year (mean score, 3.18). Before a strategy is implemented, it has to be formulated first. A lot of information and participation of stakeholders is required during the strategic formulation stage. The organizational leadership need to work hard to create the awareness among all employees and other stakeholders of the direction the organization is headed to and the benefits the new strategy will accrue to the organization. These efforts are meant to create a shared vision among all participants of the intentions of the organizations which are beneficial during the strategy implementation. The study sought to investigate whether emphasis on strategic direction contributes positively to the performance of an SME firm. The descriptive statistics on the emphasis on strategic direction are presented in table 2.0.

**Table 2.0: Emphasis of the Strategic Direction of the SME Firm**

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev
Our organization has a clear vision and mission statements to all employees	115	4.226	.663
Our mission statement is in line with what we intend to achieve in future	115	4.191	.544
Our mission is well aligned to the work activities in the entire organization	114	4.044	.643
Deliberate efforts are made to align our vision and mission statements to the changes in the environment	113	3.974	.674
Our employees understand well how their work contributes to the achievement our mission and vision	112	3.786	.853
Employees are always involved in developing strategies	115	3.278	1.048
We regularly revise our goals and objectives to ensure they are in line with the market changes	114	3.597	.993
Most of our employees are aware of the plans which need to be implemented	115	3.348	1.052
Most of our employees work hard in trying to meet the goals and objectives	114	3.904	.704
Meetings are occasionally arranged to discuss successes, failures and challenges arising	115	3.530	.911
Employees are frequently reminded about the direction the organization is headed to	115	3.722	.894
Performance targets are frequently reviewed to ensure that they are in line with the organization's goals and objectives	115	3.852	.797
Valid N (listwise)	107		

Note: Reliability  $\alpha$  – Emphasis on Strategic Direction of the Firm = 0.707

The study results in table 2.0 indicated that the respondents agreed with the following statements concerning the strategic direction of the SME firm: that the organization has a clear vision and mission statements to all employees (mean score, 4.23), the mission statement is in line with what is intended to be achieved in future (mean score, 4.19), the mission is well aligned to the work activities in the entire organization (mean score, 4.04), deliberate efforts are made to align the vision and mission statements to the changes in the environment (mean score, 3.97), most of the employees work hard in trying to meet the goals and objectives (mean score, 3.90), performance targets are frequently reviewed to ensure that they are in line with the organization's goals and objectives (mean score, 3.85), employees understand well how their work contributes to the achievement of the organization's vision and mission (mean score, 3.79), employees are frequently reminded about the direction the organization is headed to (mean score, 3.72), the organization regularly revise her goals and objectives to ensure they are in line with the market changes (mean score, 3.60), meetings are occasionally arranged to discuss successes, failures and challenges arising (mean score, 3.53), the respondents however disagreed with the statements that most of the employees are aware of the plans which need to be implemented (mean score, 3.35) and that employees are always involved in developing firm's strategies (mean score, 3.28)

**Table 3.0: Bivariate Correlation Results: All Variables**

		Y	X <sub>1</sub>	X <sub>2</sub>	X <sub>3</sub>	X <sub>4</sub>	X <sub>5</sub>
Performance (Y)	Pearson Correlation	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N	115					
Leadership Styles (X <sub>1</sub> )	Pearson Correlation	.259**	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005					
	N	114	114				
Structural Adaptations (X <sub>2</sub> )	Pearson Correlation	.442**	.386**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000				
	N	115	114	115			
Human Resources (X <sub>3</sub> )	Pearson Correlation	.408**	.337**	.526**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
	N	115	114	115	115		
Technology (X <sub>4</sub> )	Pearson Correlation	.482**	.337**	.468**	.525**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		
	N	115	114	115	115	115	
Strategic Direction (X <sub>5</sub> )	Pearson Correlation	.137	.527**	.225*	.447**	.358**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.143	.000	.016	.000	.000	
	N	115	114	115	115	115	115

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The bivariate correlation results in table 3.0 indicated that there is an insignificant relationship between emphasis on the strategic direction of the manufacturing SME firm during strategy implementation and its performance in Thika Sub-County in Kenya ( $r = .137$ ,  $p = .143$ ). These finding were subjected to further analysis where a univariate linear regression model  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_5 X_5 + \varepsilon$  was used to determine whether emphasis on the strategic direction of a manufacturing small and medium enterprise during strategy implementation positively and significantly affects its performance. The model containing the explanatory variable (X<sub>5</sub>) representing emphasis on the strategic direction of the SME firm was found to be invalid for further analysis,  $F_{(1, 113)} = 2.174$ ,  $p = .143$  meaning that emphasis on the strategic direction of the firm (X<sub>5</sub>) is not a good predictor of performance in the manufacturing small and medium firms in Thika Sub-County, Kenya.



**Table 4.1: Strategic Direction and Performance: Model Validity**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	.501	1	.501	2.174	.143 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	26.052	113	.231		
Total	26.553	114			

a. Dependent Variable: Performance

**Table 4.2: Strategic Direction and Performance: Regression Weights**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	R <sup>2</sup>	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
Constant	3.161	.0404			7.828	.000
X <sub>5</sub>	.157	.106	.137	.019	1.474	.143

a. Dependent Variable: Performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic Direction (X<sub>5</sub>)

The univariate model in table 4.2 revealed that emphasis on strategic direction only explains 1.9% of variations in performance of an SME manufacturing firm (R<sup>2</sup>=.019). The coefficients in the model show that strategic direction will exist at a certain minimum as shown by the positive constant ( $\beta_0 = 3.161$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the continued emphasis of the strategic direction during strategy implementation does not significantly yield better results ( $\beta_1 = .157$ ,  $p = .143$ ).

### Test of Hypothesis

**H<sub>1</sub>**. There is a positive and significant relationship between emphasis on the strategic direction during strategy implementation process and the performance of SME firms in Thika Sub-County, Kenya.

This hypothesis tested whether emphasis on the strategic direction of the manufacturing SME firm during strategy implementation positively and significantly influence its performance or not. The hypothesis H<sub>01</sub>:  $\beta_1 = 0$  versus H<sub>1</sub>:  $\beta_1 \neq 0$  was tested. Both the correlation and regression results in table 3.0 and table 4.2 respectively showed that emphasis on strategic direction during strategy implementation has insignificant influence on the manufacturing SME firm's performance. This study, therefore, was unable to reject the null hypothesis (H<sub>01</sub>) and concluded that the relationship between the emphasis on the strategic direction during strategy implementation and the manufacturing SME firm's performance in Thika Sub-County is statistically insignificant. It is evident from the bivariate analysis in table 3.0 that strategic direction plays an indirect role in influencing performance by playing its rightful role as an antecedent variable.

### Discussion of Findings on Strategic Direction and SME Performance

The strategic direction of an organization is often embedded in its strategic vision and mission statements. Madu [1] observed that strategic vision is the first step in formulating and implementing strategy in organizations. A company's strategic vision provides the logical reason for future plans and directions of the company, and aims the organization in a particular direction, providing a strategic direction for the organization to follow in the aspirations of shareholders in the long run. The bivariate correlation ( $r = .137$ ,  $p = .143$ ) in table 3.0, the univariate regression results ( $\beta_1 = .157$ ,  $p = .143$ ) in table 4.2 showed that strategic direction does not have a significant relationship the performance of the manufacturing SME firms in Thika Sub-County. This is explained by the fact that strategic direction of the SME firm in this study was considered to be an indirect predictor of performance, that is, an antecedent variable (see figure 1.0).

The implication of this finding is that since strategic direction is an antecedent variable, its role during strategy implementation usually is taken up by the other predictor variables (leadership styles, structural adaptations, human resources and technology). As shown in table 3.0 there is a strong and significant correlations between strategic direction and leadership styles ( $r = .527^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ), structural adaptations ( $r = .225^*$ ,  $p = .016$ ), human resources ( $r = .447^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and technology ( $r = .358^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This confirms the finding by Lumpkin and Dess [23] who observed that the relationship between strategic orientation and organizational performance is influenced by many third-party variables, and the different effects of third variables may lead to different performance levels. The researcher recommended that studies on the complex relationship between strategic direction and other predictor variables should be conducted in specific context. As Liu and Fu [24] noted, several studies on strategic direction has been conducted in large established companies [25], in the context of SMEs [26], in industry cluster context [27], in international background [28] but their

findings on the relationship with performance are not consistent. This study is therefore, consistent with the observations made by Liu and Fu [24] in that it did not establish any significant relationship between strategic direction and performance in the manufacturing SME's context in Thika Sub-County in Kenya.

## 11. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed that an insignificant positive relationship exist between emphasis on strategic direction during strategy implementation and performance of manufacturing SME's firms. However, the study established that strategic direction as a variable is important. Although, the variable does not influence the performance of manufacturing firms directly, it has an indirect effect in that its role is played by other important drivers of strategy implementation and performance like leadership styles, structure human resource and technology. Since the study established that all the manufacturing SME firms in Thika Sub-County have either a formal or informal strategic plan. Then, the owners and the CEOs in these firms should always ensure that the strategic direction of the firm is well understood by all stakeholders during the strategy implementation process. It can, therefore, be concluded that the manufacturing SME firms that plays emphasis on strategic direction during strategy implementation is able to achieve better performance than the rival firms that do not attach any meaningful value to their strategic plans and directions.

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