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# The Paradigm Shift Needed by Micro, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises to Operate in The International Construction Market

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## **Abstract**

Commercial burdens and dogmas are not always on the same path, especially in the construction sector. In a constantly changing working environment, with strong market fluctuations that need to be absorbed, Micro, Small and Medium sized construction companies might need to seek new market sections overseas. In order to do so, they would need to leverage strong competitive advantages to establish themselves in different contexts, outside of their domestic markets. This paper focuses on the paradigm shift needed by Micro, Small and Medium size construction companies serving the sector venturing overseas. It will be explored the existing gap between theory and practice, before highlighting some of their main features, including their entrepreneurial mind-set when it comes to considering construction technologies and specialist services. After overviewing patterns, values, challenges and features of these companies, the focus will then be on the competitive advantage features and the paradigm shift characteristics to build a framework able to allow these companies to operate in international markets. A mixed methodology gathering information from observations, semi-structured interviews, document reviews about specific case studies, will be put in place. It emerged the importance to raise MSMEs' awareness about how to fit their features to international markets.

**Keywords:** MSMEs; international construction, organisation, management, paradigm shift.

## **1. Introduction**

The world has been facing many dramatic changes over the last few years. "The net effect of these changes is that there are no longer the traditional barriers and boundaries in doing business since everyone is suddenly able to compete with any other at any time. The economic geography that emerges depends mainly on highly specialized professional activities, geographically concentrated in urban contexts and strictly dependent on the innovation paradigm" (Parisi, L. & Eger, J., 2020).

Due to new information communication technologies and logistics methods, the connectedness with customers and marketing partners has increased and improved dramatically (Keegan, W. & Green, M., 2005). Because of these continuous changes of the methods of communication, many companies are facing global competition fiercely and this strongly affects their activities, as this pushes them to compete in international markets. Despite these dramatic transformations within the international marketplace, construction companies of micro, small and medium sizes (MSMEs) are still not well represented within the international economy as much as large firms. However, global competition is an inevitable issue especially for them that usually can rely upon a small financial base, a domestic focus, and a limited geographic scope, hence they are forced to move within their local market boundaries. In this context, MSMEs need to adapt themselves to these changes. With their highly specialised pattern and "innovative marketing behaviour", MSMEs "are of a crucial importance as they are responsible for a country's wealth, and they furnish employment, as emphasized in various reports and academic papers". MSMEs are also able "to foster the networks of relationships and the sharing of knowledge between people, consequently thriving social capital and boosting innovation, which can act as engines of the Local Economic Development" (Cantafio, G. & Parisi, L., 2021). Looking at the construction sector, they are recognised as its backbone, contributing to the regional dispersal of economic activities (Abdullah, MA & Bin Bakar MI, 2000). They are an essential part of overall national development strategies and provide complementary support and services to larger firms by acting as suppliers, contractors, and subcontractors in a range of projects from new builds to repair and maintenance (Baker et al., 2018). Cressy, R. and Olofsson, C. (1997) suggest that MSMEs have a lower fixed to total asset ratio, a higher proportion of trade debt as part of total assets and are heavily reliant on profits to fund investment flows. Therefore, they tend to suffer more from a higher risk of bankruptcy, insolvency, and liquidation.

This paper will focus upon the paradigm shift needed by MSMEs in the construction sector to open to markets overseas, discussing the existing gap between theory and practice. International market is increasingly becoming the centre of attention for all those MSMEs willing to expand their businesses across different markets out of their local business with the aim to generate more revenues and better benefits (Keegan, W. & Green, M., 2005; Terpstra, V. & Sarathy, R., 2000).

After reviewing the main definitions of MSMEs, then, this work will adopt a mixed methodology, and by gathering information from observations, semi-structured interviews and document reviews about specific case studies, will be able to outline characteristics and challenges of those companies, before delving into the features of both the competitive advantage and the theory of paradigm, in order to draft a framework made by specific factors of success necessary for the paradigm shift to be triggered and allow, then, these companies to operate in an international market.

## 2. Definition of MSMEs in the construction sector

Micro, Small and Medium-sized enterprises are socially and economically important as they represent more than 95% of all enterprises. In the European countries they provide around 65 million jobs and contribute to entrepreneurship and innovation. This paragraph will also highlight the specific difficulties that they need to face.

MSMEs help to absorb resources at all levels of the economy and are considered the engine of growth, being essential for markets to be competitive and efficient and critical for poverty reduction and employment creation (OECD, 2004). MSMEs need a formal, statistical, and common definition, which can be based on the number of employees and the total asset or can consider behavioural criteria for improving their consistency and effectiveness and limiting any distortion. According to Burns (2011), number of employees, turnover and balance sheet total can be considered as the main features to define MSMEs. The table below [Table 1] shows the classification for EU within the eligible recommendations.

**Table 1:** MSMEs classification in EU. Source: European Commission (2010)

Enterprise category	Headcount	Turnover (€ m)	Balance sheet total (€ m)
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ 50	≤ 43
Small	< 50	≤ 10	≤ 10
Micro	< 10	≤ 2	≤ 2

## 3. Competitive Advantage

As previously highlighted, unlike large construction companies, MSMEs have usually limited resources, which constrain them from having a domestic focus and stay within their national boundaries. It seems that a model that compare the critical intangible resources and important competitive strategies can influence the international performance of MSMEs. Cash flow leadership strategy, then, has an important impact on the international market. A combination of intangible resources with differentiation and cash flow leadership are, then, key factors in terms of contribution to the international market.

There is also a strong link between competitive advantage and contribution to the outside local market. It has been proved, for instance, that MSMEs with particular skills and capabilities are able to outperform their competitors (Coyne, K., 1986; Ghemawat, P., 1986; Grant, R. M., 1991; Hall, R. 1989; Williams, D. E., 1992). Thus, there are specific features that allow MSMEs to outperform their competitors.

Competitive advantage strategies are more than simply a selection of suitable entry modes and characteristics because they refer to how a firm can compete in a competitive environment. This means that the firm needs to show an outstanding additional strategy allowing it to compete effectively with other competitors. Michael Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies (1985), illustrated in Figure 1, are at the basis of modern business strategy, as the model explains how companies can manage to develop a niche market. According to this model, cost and differentiation could constitute two potential sources of competitive advantage. By combining the two with the desired scope (niche market and total market) it is possible to determine the most appropriate strategy (Porter, M., 1985).



**Figure 1:** Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors  
(Source: Porter, M. (1985))

Chaganti, R. et al. (1989) supported the argument that Porter's framework also applies to small businesses. In economic and cost leadership, a firm sets out to become the low-cost producer in its firm industry. Vargas and Rangel (2007) found that firms whose explicit business strategy emphasises innovation and knowledge creation (which are the basis for the differentiation strategy) have been able to successfully participate in global contexts. Thus, "innovation is strictly related to a conducive innovation ecosystem characterised by a group of diverse agents, profit seeking, who generate and commercialize flows of knowledge, increasing the competitive advantage of the entire region" (Parisi, L. & Biancuzzo, L., 2021). It is, then "the driving force of long-term competitiveness, growth, and employment" (Cantafio, G. & Parisi, L., 2021). MSMEs should not simply rely on a single generic strategy then but should rather integrate the generic strategies with differentiation strategies, while successfully pursuing the financial leadership. Differentiation, then, enables companies to charge premium prices, while finance leadership enables the company to charge the lowest competitive price. Thus, differentiation strategy and cost leadership strategy both make a huge contribution on the performance in the overseas markets.

#### 4. MSMEs and the Paradigm Shift

The term paradigm refers to the set of patterns, techniques, and values which all members of communities or organisations share. In other words, it can be defined as a single element of a whole as a common shared model. Paradigm shift, instead, is a fundamental change in the basic concepts of experimental practices of a scientific discipline. The term has been first used by Thomas Kuhn in 1962 in the book titled "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" and refers to the shift of the assumptions of science (Kuhn, T., 1962). According to Kuhn, when it comes to the historical development of science, paradigms remain consistent in time, until a paradigm shift occurs, and some scientists propose new theories that are able to better explain some specific phenomenon. If knowledge does not progress according to these four stages, then, the process is not scientific (Kuhn, T., 1962).

The paradigm shift requires a multi and interdisciplinary approach, together with knowledge integration, and the ability to communicate with different parties and different ranges of stakeholders.

MSMEs are the most entrepreneurial companies when it comes to the application of technology and the degree of specialisation of the offered services. MSMEs, then can be considered as "pockets of specialisation where it is possible to innervate innovation. Since innovation and specialisation are the two parameters of competitiveness, this... helps to develop new competitive advantages for the territory, helpful to enhance the economic growth" (Cantafio, G. & Parisi, L., 2021). MSMEs need to leverage this competitive advantage for their business.

The UK government has attempted to overcome the difficulty for MSMEs to break into international markets especially for large projects, by introducing standard documentation, including PAS91. Moreover, it continues to review "strategies for making public sector procurement more accessible" to them (*Small and medium-sized enterprises SME*, 2021). PAS91 is part of the Common Minimum Standards for Construction, essential for the pre-qualification process of construction projects and it includes considerations about the level of proficiency in "Building Information Modelling (BIM) and collaborative information exchange" (*PAS 91*, 2021).

Building Information Modelling, then, as a subset of ICT is a good example of a potentially successful tool able to trigger the desired paradigm shift for MSMEs towards the delivery of construction projects internationally (Inyim P. et al., 2014; Mignone G. et al., 2016). Despite the great potential of ICT and BIM, though, construction companies, especially the small and medium sized ones still lag in fully embracing these tools (Fernandez-Sanchez & Rodríguez-Lopez, 2010; Goodrum P. M. et al., 2016; Ikediashi & Ogwueleka, 2016).

MSMEs usually face different challenges. Some of these have a direct relation with their international markets, such as poor financial, managerial, and technological resources, lack of established brands and innovative products, shortage of experience, skills, and knowledge needed to enter the international markets (Bell, J. et al., 1992; Dhanaraj & Beamish 2003; Aulakh, P. S. et al., 2000).

Firm resources and marketing strategies, in particular, are two important determinants for MSMEs and their performance in international markets (Aaby & Slater, 1989; Styles, C. & Ambler, T., 1994; Leonidou, L. C., 1995), where firm resources refer to the stocks of the available tangible or intangible factors that can be used during the production stage of a project, such as capital, tools, equipment, expertise (e.g. skilled people, patents, finance, organisation rules, characters and process of work, capabilities, firm attributes) (Penrose, E., 1959; Daft, R., 1983).

Moreover, the Resource Based View (RBV) define MSMEs as collections of unique resources and capabilities (physical, human, or intangible) (Penrose, E., 1959), constituting the basis for their competitive advantage and strategies.

Johanson and Mattsson (1993), then, define international business as the “process of developing networks of business relationships in other countries, while Johanson, J. and Vahlne, J. (1990) emphasise the importance of network resources like clients, suppliers, competitors on the international performance. Andersson et al. (2002) further found that networks can positively affect firms’ degree of international performance. Filatotchev Igor et al. (2009) found out that the international performance has a close relationship with founder’s global networks.

According to Gemser G. et al. (2004), then, being a member of a Business Group, namely, a cluster of legally distinct firms with a managerial relationship (Khanna, T. & Yafeh, Y., 2007), can provide an opportunity for companies to share each other’s resources, increasing, consequently, their international market share. Also, by joining to a Business Group MSMEs could attain legitimacy and reputation, which, in turn, facilitates their entry into international markets (Khanna, T. & Rivkin, J.W., 2001).

## 5. Methodology

This work adopts a mixed methodology in that by gathering information from observations, semi-structured interviews and document reviews about specific case studies, will be able to outline characteristics and challenges of MSMEs companies, before delving into the features of both the competitive advantage and the theory of paradigm, in order to draft a framework made by specific factors of success necessary for the paradigm shift to be triggered and allow, then, these companies to operate in an international market.

At the outset, the intention was to conduct an in-depth longitudinal research able to grasp information from a limited number of companies working on different projects from commencement to completion. The other aim was to develop a relationship of mutual trust by dedicating enough time to the selected companies and carrying out a detailed investigation of their businesses. For this purpose, three MSMEs have been selected among the initial cohort of twenty companies. The selection has been done on the basis of their inclination to permit a detailed examination on site and allow the researchers to conduct interviews with staff and site operatives. The initial twenty companies were all located in the Southeast of England, operated within a 150 miles radius from Reading (Berkshire) and were identified on the basis of their area of work, namely, construction and building civil engineering.

These businesses were all privately owned and driven by the desire of reaching a net profit margin after tax between 4 and 6%. All the selected MSMEs had short term plans and outlook and believed that they could not control the events, being at the mercy of the market.

As highlighted in Table 2, these MSMEs work on a variety of project types, ranging from small civil engineering projects to new building and refurbishment work, to landscaping works for both private and public clients. Moreover, it is possible to observe that there was a significant fluctuation in their annual turnover.

**Table 2:** Selected MSMEs characteristics. Source: Authors’ elaboration (2022)

MSME	Project Types	Headcount	Turnover (£ m)		
			2005	2008	2010
1	Established in 1992, the company focuses especially on hard and soft architectural landscape	≤ 65	4.9	0.7	5.8
2	Established in 1987, the company focuses especially on building and civil engineering	≤ 135	9.1	1.4	8.9
3	Established in 2001, the company focuses especially on construction – building extensions and refurbishment	≤ 8	2.2	0.09	1.5

The semi-structured interviews were divided into three parts: one evolving around the purchasing process problems, exploring the reasons behind them and the reactions to them, the second part focusing on the technology application, including the owners' attitude in this regard, and the third and last part addressing characteristics and challenges of these companies.

These interviews were undertaken with owners, managers, site managers and foremen, who were asked their opinions and views regarding materials' estimation, purchasing and management processes, among others. All interviews were conducted anonymously.

Nineteen projects have been observed from the first stage of estimating materials, through project completion. In particular, the focus was on both the macro and micro scale of the project, including material specifications, procurement, delivery, and handling.

The aim of both observations and semi structured interview was to collect qualitative and quantitative data on a longitudinal basis. Findings from these case studies, including site observations and interviews, will be described in the next sections and will partially reinforce the issues identified in the literature review, while in part will highlight new matters especially regarding the changing nature of MSMEs operating on the construction sector.

## **6. Case Studies Results and Discussion**

Based on the literature review and the semi-structured interviews conducted with MSMEs' managers and owners, the following observations have been made. Interviews with the MSMEs' owners showed that some of the owners or managers have little formal business experience, or a few generic business skills. However, some owners have a professional higher degree such as MBAs. Management, innovation, organisational and human resource aspects of MSMEs are the main factors, then, determining firms' performance (Aragón, S. A. & Sánchez M. G., 2005).

Since management teams are small, most MSMEs' managers work closely together daily and their management structures tend to be flat, with absence of bureaucracy (Levy, M. and Powell, P., 2005). Management skills are not strong and relative training is rarely undertaken. However, they can respond quickly to situations because of their flexibility.

MSMEs can have a tight family-like culture where the values of the owner are shared by the staff. They are flexible to change during a project because they do not rely upon rigid organisational structures; their workplace practice and projects are flexible and suited to individual employee needs (SBAG, 2006).

MSMEs face different risks. They are a special risk group because of their vulnerability, insufficient funds, dependency on a few clients, and lack of collateral or credit history. There is not a high level of health and safety for their employees and often one person is responsible for many administrative issues, such as insurance, taxation, and finance. Whilst they are rarely trained in the management of risk, they devise effective systems based upon intuition and experience. It is possible to deduct, then, that there is a shortage of specialists in MSMEs.

The research showed that MSMEs establish themselves as micro company with aspirations to grow. As their business starts to grow, in fact, companies move to being Small/Medium. The research showed that growth is a critical factor in the development of companies. Some MSMEs, in fact, grow too fast, take too much risk, and fail to survive, as evidenced by the bankruptcy statistics for construction enterprises. They have insufficient liquid capital to grow their business, or deal with unexpected adverse events, even though they may have the technical skills to undertake the work. Cash flow and liquidity appear, then, to be as important as competencies to do the work.

MSMEs are multi project driven, as they tend to run several projects at the same time. They often are labour intensive as they do not have enough capital, or long-term guarantee of workload, to buy the necessary plants and equipment that would make the business more productive. Despite change being constant in business, it is not easy for them to shift from one structure to something radically different to cope with the changes.

Despite the lack of formal systems, MSMEs are highly innovative. Many of the new technologies, such as applications for mobile phones, were developed by them. Innovations in design emerge from young dynamic designers who make their reputation based upon their ability to push forward the frontiers of knowledge. Some of the MSMEs included in the research sample were innovative in providing design solutions for complex construction problems. They used their experience, skills, knowledge, and entrepreneurship to solve practical problems, but not necessarily replicate the solution again.

Based on the conducted interviews securing workload is seen as the main challenge for MSMEs. They rarely have the chance to repeat business because their clients are not long-term investors, plus they do not employ sophisticated methods of procurement. Relationships, recommendations, and the web are the main methods for doing marketing.

They operate through networks with other MSMEs when resources are stretched; it is then common to have many layers of sub-contracting within the MSMEs. They recognise the importance of price in winning construction works. Informal connections with builders' merchants, architects, surveyors, other contractors, provide a source of work for them. Informality in business is therefore one of their main features. Interviews with MSMEs' managers further showed that they build up relationships with local building inspectors, planners, fire officers, health and safety inspectors, and environmental inspectors to ensure that projects are not delayed by breaches of regulations.

During the interviews with the selected MSMEs' managers and owners it was found that these enterprises operate in the formal sector of the economy and employ mainly wage-earning workers. MSMEs have short-term perspectives of profit maximisation, even though this often means lower income in the long run.

Observations and interview data both showed that the workforce on the job site considers MSMEs as their banker and, in turn, MSMEs consider their builders' merchants as bankers by providing credit lines. MSMEs' payment to their employees depends on the client's payment, yet they frequently pay on a day rate, or a fixed price for a particular project. Where they have the staff on payroll, these are kept to a minimum and rarely have staff benefits offered by larger organisations.

## 7. Conclusions

Considering the analysis of MSMEs conducted in the previous sections of this work, it is possible to draw the attention on a few points that characterise them in the current construction market. It is clear, for instance, that, even in a cut-throat competition, which put them under pressure, as long as they can account on their market segments, they can potentially keep breathing and even grow.

It also emerged that governments are putting all their efforts to support MSMEs in this process, but at the same time, it seems that a lot more emphasis should be given to the development of characteristics that are internal to specific companies.

These companies, being multiskilled and flexible, need to understand that their system is not built upon a specific set of rules and theories but rather on their skills to solve problems.

It emerged that MSMEs have precise data and information about their companies but are not fully aware of market data. It is essential for them, then, to raise their awareness about how to fit their features to international markets. As previously highlighted, for instance, cash flow is an important matter for MSMEs, but this does not match with the international market. Thus, the paradigm shift needs to be fitted to the targeted market.

MSMEs should then be aware of the paradigms and the contexts of their respective application, as well as the particular role of the "community involvement" for a more sustainable development in order to enable them to share their expertise and abilities to facilitate stakeholders internationally and assist them for seeking work outside their local markets.

MSMEs' practices need to be reviewed, feedbacked, and revised continuously to address technical and methodological innovations, and to react to the challenges and demands of changing environments.

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