



Framework for recycling entrepreneurial talent to sustain SMMEs in Botswana



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Background: Research that interrogates entrepreneurial talent recycling (ETR) is lacking; hence, limited information exists in this regard. Despite the progress made in developing policies and advancing entrepreneurship, the transfer of enterprising expertise within the entrepreneurial context remains a neglected topic.

Aim: This study sought to create a framework for ETR that ensures the sustainability of small, medium and microenterprises (SMMEs). The research question of the study was: What framework can be developed for ETR to be utilised for the sustainability of Botswana's SMMEs?

Setting: The empirical study was conducted among recycled entrepreneurs operating in SMMEs in Botswana.

Methods: The research examined participants' live entrepreneurial experiences through an inductive method and qualitative descriptive design. Snowball sampling was used to interview 12 recycled entrepreneurs in Botswana.

Results: The developed framework demonstrated how SMMEs can achieve sustainability by employing sustainability measures, leveraging ecosystem actors and resources and making entrepreneurial decisions. The measures for sustainability included customer service, social sustainability, operational skills, personal resilience and economic sustainability. The study showed that entrepreneurs, policymakers, corporate leaders and educators need to heed the advice of recycled entrepreneurs to preserve SMMEs.

Conclusion: This article presents a framework for sustainable SMMEs in emerging nations and may guide their operations as well as economic and educational policies.

Contribution: The article presents new literature on ETR, identifies measures for SMME sustainability in a developing economy and suggests a framework for ETR that ensures the sustainability of SMMEs.

Keywords: entrepreneurial recycling; entrepreneurial talent; recycling talent; entrepreneurial talent recycling; entrepreneurial activities.

Introduction

Regional production and productivity are significantly higher in areas with greater entrepreneurial capital (Rico & Cabrer-Borrás 2019:1364) compared to those lacking such resources. Research indicates that entrepreneurial talent and the quality of entrepreneurial education serve as key accelerators of economic growth (Menshikov et al. 2022:274). Ultimately, entrepreneurial talent recycling (ETR) enhances the business ecosystem, benefiting both the region and the broader economy (Slavec Gomezel & Stritar 2022:64).

In Indonesia, as in other developing nations, the talent and perspectives of entrepreneurs are viewed as predictors of business success (Palahudin et al. 2024:111). Furthermore, the Nordic entrepreneurial ecosystem invests in a specialised pool of individuals with exceptional talents and competencies to stimulate entrepreneurial activity (Steigertahl & Mauer 2023:8). Recycling successful entrepreneurs' talent can optimise entrepreneurial business success by enabling them to reinvest their experience and wealth as mentors or venture capitalists within their local ecosystems (Spigel & Harrison 2018:7). However, there is limited research on how emerging businesses can be supported through funding and soft skills provided by recycled entrepreneurs (Nate et al. 2022:1).

Studies have highlighted the importance of knowledge recycled from prior work for entrepreneurial ecosystems (Walsh, Nelles & Stephens 2023:1). Strong ecosystems rely on entrepreneurs transitioning

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from successful and failed ventures to advise, invest in, or work for others, thereby fostering the establishment of startups and spin-offs (Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:5). Additionally, ETR has been shown to contribute to venture development, job creation, venture capital funding, innovation, high-growth entrepreneurship and philanthropic donations at the ecosystem level (Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:3). This result from Spigel and Vinodrai is different from what other research has found, which is that entrepreneurial recycling may make people less likely to be directly entrepreneurial (Walsh et al. 2023:709).

Research on entrepreneurial recycling remains fragmented and underdeveloped (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:64). Despite advancements in policy and business, the literature on entrepreneurship education in Africa is still limited (Madzikanda, Li & Dabuo 2021:257). While some ETR studies have been conducted in developed countries (Jones et al. 2018:2), developing nations like Botswana lack research on this pertinent issue. The study aimed to examine the ETR of Botswana's former formally employed entrepreneurs, ultimately seeking to advance the sustainability of small, medium and microenterprises (SMMEs).

To develop a framework for SMME sustainability, the study employed an approach that facilitated recycled entrepreneurs in sharing their experiences. The study employed an inductive research methodology that involved observing the phenomenon, identifying patterns and subsequently constructing a framework.

Research problem and question

Historically, entrepreneurship has been a catalyst for economic advancement. Contrary to findings from studies that underestimate the significance of ETR, research has demonstrated that the recycling of entrepreneurial talent is a critical factor in achieving business success (Manafe et al. 2023:12540). Given that ETR underpins economic growth and prosperity, it was essential to understand how skills, experiences and competencies are recycled to bolster the economy (Walsh et al. 2023:1).

Kantis (2018:32) has noted that robust entrepreneurial ecosystems are predominantly fostered by recycled entrepreneurs who manage accelerators, incubators or entrepreneurial capital funds. Such ecosystems necessitate the continued engagement of recycled entrepreneurs within the local environment following their success with larger enterprises (Walsh et al. 2023:1). The study analysed the collected data to identify the key challenges and opportunities that these individuals faced during their entrepreneurial journeys. By understanding their perspectives, we hope to inform policy recommendations that can support the growth and resilience of SMMEs in Botswana. In contrast, unhealthy ecosystems are characterised by exits and cash-outs from failing organisations (Slavec, Gomez & Stritar 2022:78). The transfer of talent from unsuccessful enterprises is influenced by local cultural contexts. In many instances, the entrepreneurial ecosystem in sub-Saharan

Africa tends to overlook the valuable lessons derived from failures, which could otherwise enhance the development of more resilient business practices (Jones et al. 2018:2). When cultural norms penalise failures (De Andrade et al. 2024:4), entrepreneurs with unsuccessful ventures may find it challenging to recycle their talents and expertise.

While entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, their contributions to talent recycling are frequently overlooked (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:65). Although the nature, value and relevance of entrepreneurship have been extensively studied, the concept of recycling talent has received insufficient attention (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:66). The experiences of recycled entrepreneurs remain inadequately explored, as highlighted by Boso et al. (2019:1).

Moreover, acquisitions and mergers serve as additional catalysts for ETR, as entrepreneurs who have cashed out leverage their wealth and experience to initiate new ventures and investments as venture capitalists or business angels (Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:4). Quas et al. (2022:13) assert that entrepreneurial recycling ensures that skilled individuals from successful firms continue to contribute to the ecosystem following a purchase or closure. This ongoing contribution is vital for fostering economic growth and innovation. Identifying skilled individuals from both successful and failed firms in Botswana could significantly enhance entrepreneurship, thereby addressing economic development and unemployment challenges (Rudhumbu, Du Plessis & Maphosa 2020:13; Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:1). Conversely, non-recycled entrepreneurs encounter various internal and external challenges, including the need to learn new skills, establish routines, build social networks and gain credibility with key stakeholders and resource providers (O'Toole & Ciuchta 2020:1).

The Botswana government has implemented key initiatives to support entrepreneurs, including technical assistance, market access, research innovation, training and financial support (Pansiri & Yalala 2017:74). However, funding and supporting entrepreneurship without considering factors such as ETR may result in a higher incidence of unsuccessful enterprises (Pansiri & Yalala 2017:53). There exists a gap in understanding how ETR education in developing economies can enhance entrepreneurial skills and mindsets, thereby promoting innovation, economic growth and job creation (Lei 2023:50).

Jones et al. (2018:2) highlight that while the dynamics of entrepreneurship are well-documented in developed countries, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding entrepreneurial behaviours and practices in Africa, including Botswana. This lack of literature and research on ETR in developing nations motivated this study.

The present research investigated ETR within Botswana's SMMEs and aimed to develop a framework to ensure their sustainability. 'What framework can we develop to utilise

ETR for the sustainability of Botswana's SMMEs?' was the central research question.

Literature review

Small, medium, and microenterprises

The SMMEs are divided into three groups based on their annual turnover and number of employees. In Botswana, microenterprises are those that employ fewer than six people and make less than P60 000.00 in annual turnover. Small enterprises are those that employ 7 people to 25 people and make between P60 000.00 and P1 500 000.00, and medium enterprises are those that employ 25 people to 100.00 people and make between P1 500 000.00 and P5 million (Muchuchuti & Mahambo 2020:116; Munodawafa, Naude & Govender 2024:254).

Entrepreneurial talent

A comprehensive definition of 'entrepreneurial talent' can be derived from several sources that highlight its multifaceted nature and significance in fostering entrepreneurship. According to Sjaiful (2023:56), entrepreneurial talent encompasses the skills and attributes that influence an individual's interest in entrepreneurship, competency in managing entrepreneurial activities and overall success in entrepreneurial endeavours. This talent is characterised by various competencies, including business focus, self-assurance, creative thinking, risk-taking and relationship building, all of which are essential for navigating the complexities of starting and managing a business (Sjaiful 2023:57). Moreover, Vaillant (2022:13) emphasises that entrepreneurial talent is crucial for driving innovation and economic growth, particularly in the context of public administration prioritising entrepreneurial initiatives to transform local economies. The allocation and effective utilisation of this talent are vital for enhancing the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as they directly impact the capacity for innovation and value creation within an economy (Vaillant 2022:13). In summary, entrepreneurial talent can be defined as a combination of skills, attributes and competencies that empower individuals to engage sustainably in entrepreneurial activities, thereby contributing to economic development and innovation.

Entrepreneurial recycling

Entrepreneurial recycling is a concept that involves the systematic exchange and transformation of human, social, organisational and financial resources throughout the entrepreneurial lifecycle, particularly during phases of entry, growth and exit (Slavec et al. 2022:64). It refers to the movement of resources, including skilled personnel, financial capital and innovative ideas, from both successful and unsuccessful companies into the local community (Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:1). Entrepreneurial recycling makes entrepreneurial ecosystems more dynamic by making it easier for talent, information and resources to flow. It also lets people change roles and become mentors, investors or skilled

employees, which encourages the growth of new businesses and spin-offs (Ajirowo 2024:324). This flexible recycling of knowledge and skills from previous ventures illustrates the potential for continuous innovation and growth within the entrepreneurial landscape (De Andrade et al. 2024:4).

In summary, entrepreneurial recycling is a critical mechanism that supports the sustainability and evolution of entrepreneurial ecosystems by enabling the effective use of resources and experiences across various entrepreneurial endeavours.

Recycled entrepreneurs

The process of reusing knowledge, skills and resources in business is called entrepreneurial recycling (Hopkins & Bassett 2015:21; Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:1; Walsh et al. 2023) and includes recycled entrepreneurship. This makes the business ecosystem more dynamic and open to new ideas. Recycled entrepreneurs, often referred to as 'boomerang entrepreneurs', are individuals who have previously exited formal employment and, using the gained experience or insights from other ventures or employment, return to the entrepreneurial landscape to start new businesses or invest in existing ones (Hopkins & Bassett 2015:21; Walsh et al. 2023:714). Recycled entrepreneurs contribute to the ecosystem by leveraging their prior experiences, which can lead to the creation of new ventures, mentorship opportunities and the overall strengthening of the entrepreneurial community (Spigel & Harrison 2018:17; Walsh et al. 2023:1).

Entrepreneurial talent recycling

Entrepreneurial talent recycling and entrepreneurial recycling are interconnected phenomena within entrepreneurial ecosystems. The movement of resources, such as human capital, skills, knowledge and financial assets, between different businesses in the same ecosystem is called entrepreneurial recycling (Walsh et al. 2017:711). Entrepreneurial talent recycling is more focused on the entrepreneur, and it refers to the process whereby entrepreneurs transition from both successful and unsuccessful companies to roles as mentors, investors or skilled employees in other firms (Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:5; Tessier, Ramadan and Renaud 2024:475). The entrepreneurs – referred to as recycled entrepreneurs – exit formal employment and re-enter the entrepreneurial landscape, utilising the experience or resources gained from their previous roles in formal employment. Resources acquired during exits, such as exit packages, are crucial to this entrepreneurial recycling process. The ETR mechanism enables entrepreneurs to draw upon their experiences, whether derived from successful or unsuccessful ventures, to stimulate new entrepreneurial activities (Frimanslund 2022:24). Exits, which may occur because of bankruptcy, mergers, closures or acquisitions, present opportunities for recycled entrepreneurs to initiate new ventures with clearly defined economic objectives, such as deal-making, angel investing and consulting (Quas et al. 2022:650). Furthermore, ETR is not solely motivated by

economic objectives; noneconomic factors, such as the desire to share knowledge and resources, also play a significant role in this process (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:70).

Existing literature often categorises entrepreneurs as habitual, novice, portfolio or serial, with a predominant focus on ownership status rather than the processes involved in entrepreneurial recycling. These categories don't take into account the complicated ways that entrepreneurs recycle, which includes exchanging and changing resources, knowledge and experiences as they go through their business journeys (Das & Das 2023:1374). There is a pressing need for a deeper understanding of these processes, as merely labelling entrepreneurs based on ownership fails to capture the complexities of entrepreneurial recycling (Das & Das 2023:1374).

The current study holds off on classifying habitual, novice, portfolio or serial entrepreneurs as recycled entrepreneurs until it gathers more comprehensive data. Notwithstanding, ETR and entrepreneurial recycling have the same meaning in this study. This cautious approach underscores the necessity for empirical research that explores the mechanisms and motivations behind entrepreneurial recycling. By concentrating on the processes rather than static classifications, researchers can gain a better understanding of how entrepreneurs leverage their past experiences – both successes and failures – to inform future ventures.

Research methods and design

A cross-sectional and qualitative descriptive design was adopted for this study. The qualitative descriptive study is inductive and subjective, allowing the researcher to grasp and describe the phenomena; it is ethical and it is performed spontaneously (Bradshaw, Atkinson & Doody 2017:2). Qualitative descriptive design is useful for researching the people, acts and places involved in events or experiences (Sousa et al. 2023:1).

A qualitative descriptive method allowed for extensive descriptions (Bradshaw et al. 2017:3) of ETR experiences in Botswana. The flexible architecture of the design allowed for conducting interviews, which provide a rich dataset that reflects the complexity of the real world (Zhang et al. 2024:2).

Study population and sampling

The study population consisted of SMMEs whose entrepreneurs met specific inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria outlined the necessary characteristics for entrepreneurs to be eligible for participation in the research, while the exclusion criteria identified the traits that would disqualify them (Cardella et al. 2021:17). To qualify for inclusion in the study, participants were required to be actively involved with SMMEs in Botswana, have exited a business, received an exit package and either created or supported entrepreneurial activities. On the other hand, entrepreneurs who were not running SMMEs, had not exited or received an exit package, or

were not involved in starting or supporting entrepreneurial activities were not included in the study.

The Local Enterprise Authority (LEA) of Botswana was established under Section 4 of the *Small Companies Act* (Government of Botswana 2004) to oversee entrepreneurship and business growth in Botswana on behalf of the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (Pansiri & Yalala 2017:59–60). Acting as a gatekeeper in fostering the growth and development of entrepreneurs in Botswana (Munodawafa et al. 2024:255), the LEA was approached by the researcher to facilitate access to recycled entrepreneurs, utilising an introduction letter from North-West University of South Africa.

As the LEA did not have a defined category of entrepreneurs that fit the inclusion criteria, the LEA provided a few names, and the study employed convenience sampling to select the first interviewee (Bryman et al. 2017:375). Subsequently, additional relevant entrepreneurs were identified through snowball sampling, a method in which existing study participants recruit further participants (Waring, Kernes & Bui 2023:641).

While qualitative samples are typically small, they must be adequate for replication, and interviewees should possess a clear understanding of the study phenomenon (Vasileiou et al. 2018:2). Hennink and Kaiser (2022:9) often advocate for the concept of saturation, a measure of qualitative rigour that occurs when no new data emerges. This study initially examined data saturation from the perspective of information power. This theory says that fewer participants are needed when they already know a lot about the study topic (Vasileiou et al. 2018:2). The study also looked at Hennink and Kaiser's research, which says that 12–13 interviews are enough to get a full picture of a fairly uniform population (Hennink & Kaiser 2022:6). As a result, excluding two participants used for pilot testing, 12 recycled entrepreneurs from different locations in Botswana were selected (refer to Table 1) as research participants through the application of snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling enhances sample diversity and facilitates data collection from specific populations by

TABLE 1: Research participants' entrepreneurial recycling profiles.

Participant	Area of entrepreneurial activities	Years recycling	Interview length (minutes)
1	Buying and selling	6	116.00
2	Transport, training and consultancy	9	74.00
3	Training and consultancy	6	50.39
4	Farming and multiresidence	9	60.00
5	Tourism and farming	14	88.00
6	Tourism and hospitality	1	72.00
7	Pest control	16	64.00
8	Farming	1 and a half	87.00
9	Construction	5	68.00
10	Building automation systems	7	84.00
11	Business consultancy	3	120.00
12	Motor mechanic	5	70.00

allowing participants to refer others with varying experiences and insights, thereby enabling the study to access knowledgeable individuals about the phenomenon under investigation, irrespective of their years of experience (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie 2017:2).

Method

Through convenience sampling to get the first respondent from the few names provided by the LEA and then snowballing to get 13 other respondents, the first two respondents, including the convenience sampled one, were interviewed face-to-face to pilot test the interview guide. Subsequently, the preliminary interview guide was revised based on participant comments to make the questions simpler and more logical (Aung, Razak & Nazry 2021:600). The contributions of the first two respondents were not analysed.

The other 12 respondents participated in interviews conducted either in person or via Zoom. Specifically, 8 interviews were conducted face-to-face, while 4 were conducted through Zoom. Gaborone, the capital city and commercial centre of Botswana, served as the location for the face-to-face interviews. Of the eight respondents interviewed in person, four were based in Gaborone, while the remainder arranged to be interviewed during their Gaborone business visits, owing to difficulties with internet connectivity in areas they operated from. Section 14 of the *Botswana Data Protection Act (32/2018)* was adhered to, ensuring that subjects gave consent before data were collected and the recorded data kept safely in a password-controlled computer (Presidency 2021:A542). The researcher conducted and recorded all the interviews on a password-controlled researcher's laptop, which the researcher duly saved. The study facilitated an open dialogue with participants during the interviews, encouraging responses to prepared questions while fostering a safe, respectful and enjoyable environment (Bergström et al. 2022:888). Reflective listening skills were utilised to make sense of the interviewees' comments and identify opportunities for follow-up questions while empathising with them (Lavee & Itzhakov 2023:622).

With open-ended questions, the researcher could ask more in-depth questions as follow-ups to the main topic. This reduced the chance of getting bad answers that would stop the conversation (Tombs & Strange 2024:283). Labelling conversations with numbers from Participant 1 (first interviewee) to Participant 12 (twelfth interviewee) deidentified the participants (Turcotte-Tremblay & McSween-Cadieux 2018:5). Interviews varied in length from 50.39 min to 2 h (Table 1).

Data analysis

The study used verbatim transcriptions during data analysis to establish reliability and trustworthiness (Coleman

2022:2044). The data were inductively analysed using Creswell and Poth's five-loop spiral analysis, whereby the researcher manually coded and categorised the data (Creswell & Poth 2018:151).

First loop

The data management process began by creating individual folders for each participant, containing audio recordings and transcripts (Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019:6).

Second loop

The study engaged with the data through audit trail records and reflexivity, generating memos that documented insights on codes and relationships (Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019:18).

Third loop

Coding involved labelling data segments into 12 themes, resulting in a codebook with 2038 informant-centric codes (Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019:19–21), which enhanced transparency and interpretation. Codes and themes from the codebook were extracted, written on cards and arranged on a wall to create a tree-like structure for each theme (Wæraas 2022:158). The wall tree-like structure facilitated code adjustments and the development of subcategories and themes (Mattimoe et al. 2021:3). Themes were trimmed from 12 to 9: motivation, talent recycling experience, sustainability measures, sustainability challenges, overcoming challenges, ecosystems, the impact of sustainability decisions, economic contributions and recommendations.

Despite the complexities involved (Nigbur & Chatfield 2025:2), the development of network diagrams for each theme, organised on tables, enhanced the credibility of the findings (Mezmir 2020:20).

Fourth loop

Step four of this iterative process (Mezmir 2020:17) presented a data structure (see Table 2) illustrating the transformation of raw data into corresponding themes.

Fifth loop

Selective coding was employed to determine the final output by linking themes, categories and codes to establish a framework (Figure 1) for SMME sustainability in Botswana (Wang et al. 2022:16).

The study conducted participant member verification to validate the findings and preserve data authenticity (Candela 2019:619).

Reliability and validity

As a result of differing theoretical foundations and study objectives, qualitative research cannot universally apply validity and reliability, which were originally associated with quantitative research (Vu 2021:1). For qualitative research to contribute to knowledge, it must be sufficiently

TABLE 2: Data structure.

Raw data	Code	Sub-category	Category	Theme
'Getting someone [employee] with the right attitude is a challenge. But we have got to struggle to do that.' (Participant 5, Male, Masters)	Employees with the right attitude.	Workforce planning	Social sustainability	Measures for sustainability
'Through faith and determination.' (Participant 9, Female, Masters)	Faith and determination	Overcoming fear	Personal resilience	Overcoming challenges
'Government has created an enabling environment for us players.' (Participant 2, Male, Doctorate)	Enabling environment	Ecosystem sustenance influence	Institutions' influence	ecosystem
'In terms of your life, you can be around family more.' (Participant 11, Male, Chartered Secretary)	Around family more	Impact on relations	Self (positive)	Sustainability decisions impact
'By paying tax.' (Participant 10, Male, CCNA Certificate)	Pay tax	-	Economic growth	Economic contributions
'Changing of the mindset of the youths. Younger people are seeing that entrepreneurship is a risk but is a risk that is worth taking.' (Participant 9, Female, Masters)	Changing youth mindset	-	Role model	Economic contributions

CCNA, Cisco Certified Network Associates Certificate.

rigorous to earn the trust of its readers (Coleman 2022:2041). Validity and reliability in qualitative research typically correlate with trustworthiness. This method emphasises that qualitative research uses detailed, rich data instead of numerical analysis to understand how people experience things. To make sure the results are accurate, rigorous methods are needed (William 2024:290). The study used triangulation, which involved asking the same research questions to three different recycled entrepreneurs, and member checking, which meant that participants were asked to come back and confirm the information that was gathered in the first interviews.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) on 26 August 2022 (Ethics number: NWU-01807-22-A4).

Results and discussion

The primary objective of this study was to develop a framework for ETR to ensure the sustainability of SMMEs in Botswana. Figure 1 shows the framework that was made from the information gathered. It includes ETR, entrepreneurial activity, measures for sustainability, decisions that affect SMMEs and the benefits of long-term SMMEs.

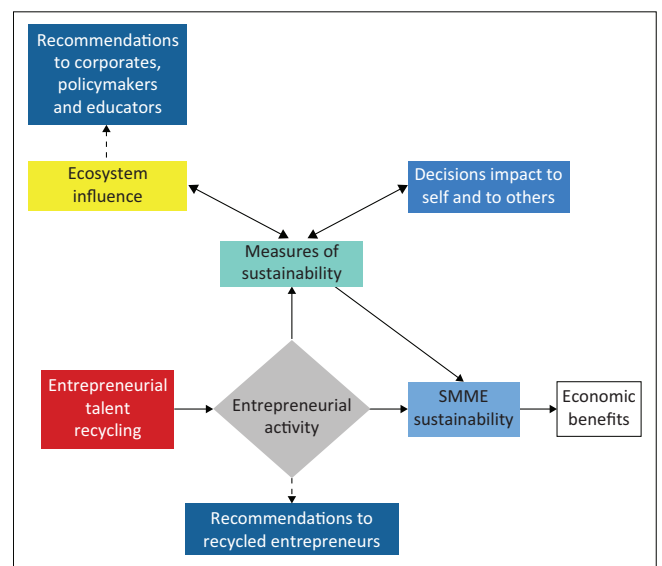
Entrepreneurial talent recycling

This study revealed that participants utilised a diverse skill set, including responsiveness, collaboration and innovation, to start and support entrepreneurial firms. Prior experience and industry exposure were significant factors, as noted by one participant:

'I had some experience and industry exposure ... [after exiting] I said let me get back into this business' (Participant 2, Male, Doctorate)

Lei (2023:48) supports what the entrepreneur did, indicating that business experience provides essential skills and contacts for new ventures. Even when a recycled entrepreneur enters a sector he hardly has any knowledge of, he tries to augment his knowledge. One participant remarked:

'I got in this [business] without any business background, so I started schooling again.' (Participant 1, Male, Diploma)



SMME, small-, medium- and micro enterprises.

FIGURE 1: Entrepreneurial talent recycling framework.

Before establishing SMMEs, participants considered market saturation, distinctiveness and demand, emphasising the importance of market research. Mullins (2017:9) advises conducting thorough macro and micro evaluations before launching a business. One participant identified the Botswana manufacturing sector as unsaturated and profitable, stating:

'I realised that the manufacturing industry is still one area one can go into because it is not saturated.' (Participant 1, Male, Diploma)

Environmental factors, such as crime and corruption, influenced decisions to leave firms. For instance, one participant noted:

'If the industry develops uncontrollably through corruption ... that will make me leave.' (Participant 9, Female, Masters)

Additionally, indicators of permanent loss, such as low profitability and high income fluctuation, prompted exits (Charalambakis & Garrett 2019:489). Recycling entrepreneurial skills led to personal growth and a desire to empower others, with participants expressing a strong motivation to avoid poverty:

'I didn't want to end up being destitute.' (Participant 5, Male, Masters)

The satisfaction derived from serving customers further solidified their interest in recycling, as one participant stated:

‘It’s just giving that satisfaction to see those satisfied customers.’ (Participant 11, Male, Chartered Secretary)

However, challenges persist, including a mismatch between work experience and reality, a lack of job security, and government policies favouring entrepreneurship among youth over adults (Botshelo 2018:12). One participant lamented:

‘By exiting at that young age, I became a disadvantaged adult.’ (Participant 1, Male, Diploma)

In summary, the findings highlight key elements in ETR: prior information, considerations for starting or leaving a business, interest and associated risks. These factors are leveraged during ETR.

Entrepreneurial activity

Entrepreneurial talent recycling occurs through entrepreneurial activities that identify and exploit new products, processes or markets to enhance economic growth (Masango & Lassalle 2020:1). Participants focused on three key dimensions: cost reduction, market introduction of new products and operating multiple enterprises.

Cost management, particularly in labour, was emphasised as critical for corporate sustainability, with one participant stating:

‘Cost control ... is the critical one [*for sustainability*].’ (Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

To manage costs, participants adopted an ad hoc staffing model, employing workers only as needed (Li, Rees & Zhang 2024:13).

Participants also experimented with new products to maintain competitiveness. For instance, one farmer increased yields by using hybrid seeds, noting:

‘Hybrid maize gives you about 50% more yield.’ (Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

This aligns with Bohra et al. (2020:2400), who highlight the unmatched productivity gains from hybridisation. Additionally, participants operated multiple businesses to ensure economic resilience. One participant explained that a diversified approach mitigates risk:

‘If one business is not doing well, the others [*businesses*] will compensate.’ (Participant 2, Male, Doctorate)

This strategy reflects the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) matrix, where cash flow from successful ventures supports struggling ones (Pan 2023:373).

In summary, the findings underscore that effective ETR involves controlling costs, introducing new products and managing multiple enterprises to sustain entrepreneurial activities.

Measures for sustainability

Participants emphasised that sustainability measures are crucial for the survival of SMMEs. Five key principles emerged from their responses: customer care, economic sustainability, operational strategy, social sustainability and personal resilience. These principles also served as strategies to overcome challenges.

Customer care is vital for business success, as highlighted by one participant:

‘Customer care says a lot about the business.’ (Participant 5, Male, Masters)

This aligns with findings by Ozkan et al. who assert that customer satisfaction and loyalty are significantly influenced by sustainable practices, suggesting that a focus on customer care can enhance business performance (Ozkan, Cek & Eyupoglu 2022:1). Economic sustainability involves creating value for the community and ensuring long-term viability, with one participant noting:

‘If your costs continue going up without getting any good income, you might as well go out of business because you can’t sustain the business if it is not profitable. Suppose the business is not meeting the needs. There is no point in continuing.’ (Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

However, he cautioned that quick returns in competitive environments are unsustainable, echoing the sentiments of Asbullah and Tarigan, who found that integrating sustainability into operations positively impacts business performance in small ventures (Asbullah & Tarigan 2024:1609).

Social sustainability benefits both society and stakeholders, with participants implementing practices like fair wages and community support, which is supported by Moursellas et al., who noted that customer demand for socially responsible practices drives SMEs to adopt sustainability measures (Moursellas et al. 2023:836). One participant stated:

‘We ensure we don’t underpay people [*employees*].’ (Participant 5, Male, Masters)

While another contributed to local housing for the needy:

‘We contributed to [*the*] building [*of*] one house for a destitute.’ (Participant 11, Male, Chartered Secretary)

This reflects the findings of Sulaiman and Laksmi, who emphasise the importance of social responsibility in enhancing business reputation and performance (Sulaiman & Laksmi 2024:174).

Operational strategy is closely linked to success, considering factors like pricing and delivery. One participant advised:

‘Understand the needs of your customers ... Don’t just be influenced by profit.’ (Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

This perspective is supported by Susiati et al., who found that successful firms are more likely to engage in sustainable

practices, highlighting the connection between operational strategy and sustainability (Susiaty et al. 2024:195). Delivery reliability was also emphasised, with one participant noting the negative impact of delays:

'If the service is not on time ... it affects my delivery period.'
(Participant 12, Male, Certificate in Motor Mechanics)

This aligns with the assertion by Pereira-Moliner et al. that operational efficiency is crucial for maintaining competitive advantages in sustainability (Pereira-Moliner et al. 2021:134).

Personal resilience emerged as essential for overcoming challenges and fear of failure. One participant expressed the need to confront fear, stating:

'Even if I continue to fear, I have kids to take to school.'
(Participant 2, Male, Doctorate)

Resilience, characterised by tenacity and perseverance, is crucial for entrepreneurial success (Al-Omouh, Ribeiro-Navarrete & McDowell 2024:2621). Another participant remarked:

'If you don't have endurance, the business can easily collapse.'
(Participant 3, Male, Doctorate)

This notion is further supported by Yacob et al., who emphasised that dynamic capabilities, including resilience, facilitate the correlation between sustainability dimensions and business practices (Yacob, Peter & Chin 2022:73).

Overall, the identified sustainability measures should leverage ecosystem influences to enhance SMME sustainability. By integrating customer care, economic and social sustainability, operational strategy and personal resilience, SMMEs can navigate challenges effectively and contribute positively to their communities, thereby reinforcing their role in sustainable development.

Ecosystem influence

Entrepreneurial recycling involves community stakeholders and entrepreneurs coexisting within an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:66). This study identified several ecosystem components supporting SMMEs, including regulations, lobbying, financing and cultural factors.

Effective regulations foster transparent markets, but excessive laws can stifle innovation (Keller 2024:33). One participant noted the importance of adhering to regulations in Botswana:

'You don't just do business without looking at the regulations.'
(Participant 2, Male, Doctorate)

Entrepreneurs actively lobby for changes to government incentives, although profit-driven companies may focus more on rent-seeking than productive work (Heijdra & Heijnen 2024:18). Participants highlighted their lobbying efforts to support local agricultural markets:

'We have a lobby group ... to influence powers that be.'
(Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

This lobbying led to the Botswana government banning South African agricultural imports, creating a supportive platform for SMMEs:

'If it hadn't been for that, there would be serious problems.'
(Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

Localisation initiatives were also prevalent, with participants noting the government's support for local businesses, particularly in tourism:

'The government is pushing for localisation [*in the tourism sector*].'
(Participant 6, Male, Masters)

The cyclical flow of entrepreneurial capital, including borrowing and sharing resources, was evident in the ecosystem (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:66). One participant shared:

'I had to borrow from friends because the government and banks did not want to help.'
(Participant 7, Male, 'O' Level [Defense Forces])

Cultural elements positively impacted businesses, as illustrated by a tourism participant:

'When tourists are standing on the side of the road, people are going to stop for them [*to pass*].'
(Participant 6, Male, Masters)

The effectiveness of entrepreneurship promotions depends on cultural context (Aziz & Salloum 2023:4). Family support also plays a crucial role in business sustainability, with one participant stating:

'My parents sacrificed their savings to help me start the project.'
(Participant 9, Female, Masters)

The country's economic performance directly influences firm success (Muturi & Kalui 2022:133), with participants agreeing that a strong economy boosts entrepreneurship:

'The economic performance [*of the country*] will determine the flow of revenue [*in businesses*].'
(Participant 3, Male, Doctorate)

The ecosystem comprises key participants essential for sustaining SMMEs, with recommendations for educators to focus on the integration of Science Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)-based, result-orientated curricula, for corporates to employ experienced officers, and for policymakers to provide tax exemptions and combat corruption. Tax incentives are vital for the sustainable growth of SMMEs (Sibiya, Van der Westhuizen, J., & Sibiya 2023:5).

The impact of decisions

Sustainability decisions significantly impact recycled entrepreneurs, affecting their health and relationships. Positive outcomes include improved health, empowerment and a higher quality of life, as noted by one participant:

'Being in control ... has quite a positive impact on your health.'
(Participant 11, Male, Chartered Secretary)

However, sustainability decisions can also lead to negative effects such as burnout and anxiety, with one participant stating:

'We sometimes overwork beyond the normal working hours.'
(Participant 12, Male, Certificate in Motor Mechanics)

In terms of relationships, recycled entrepreneurs experience enhanced family dynamics and social lives, facilitated by networking opportunities. One participant remarked:

'When customers see you, they see somebody who adds value to their lives.' (Participant 8, Male, Tertiary Certificate)

Conversely, business challenges can have detrimental long-term effects on well-being and family time, as highlighted by another participant:

'My leisure time is less; my family time is less because of the business.' (Participant 7, Male, 'O' Level [Defense Forces])

Recycled entrepreneurs also contribute to corporate responsibility by educating employees, providing financial assistance and preserving ecosystems. One participant emphasised their commitment to environmental sustainability:

'What we do is (to) preserve the ecosystem in the (Okavango Delta).' (Participant 6, Male, Masters)

Tschelisnig and Westerlaken (2022:177) indicate that sustainable strategies enhance workplace enthusiasm and employee satisfaction. However, the health issues faced by recycled entrepreneurs can affect their partners and employees.

Overall, the decisions made by recycled entrepreneurs yield significant economic benefits.

Economic benefits

Sustained enterprises benefit the economy through food security, economic growth, corporate social responsibility, training, employment creation, construction of houses and schools and transport provision. Entrepreneurs who recycle create a mutually beneficial trust loop that benefits the business environment, the local community and the country's economy (Slavec Gomez & Stritar 2022:64). In agreement, one participant proudly highlighted his role in this regard:

'Our government is so concerned about food security. That we cannot produce our food in Botswana, and so on. So, I am proud because I am a player in food security.' (Participant 4, Male, Masters)

Most participants asserted that paying tax in Botswana is mandatory, stating that it is impossible to operate without fulfilling this obligation. One participant remarked:

'By paying tax. That one, there is no negotiation about it.' (Participant 1, Male, Diploma)

Study strengths and limitations

This project may have pioneered recycled entrepreneur research in Botswana, affecting Southern Africa and Africa. A unique framework was developed to demonstrate how ETR may sustain SMMEs in emerging economies. The study focused on the sustainable operational and managerial strategies of Botswana entrepreneurs who exited enterprises in diverse ways and established new entrepreneurial activities. In addition to highlighting the recycled entrepreneurs' sustainable entrepreneurship,

the study showed the relevance of the entrepreneurial environment and its obstacles for skill, money and knowledge recyclers.

Challenges experienced during the study included that, in the beginning of sampling, individuals were not forthcoming. Participants missed their interview times and days. Internet outages also occurred during certain interviews, which might have distracted participants and hindered the interviewer's ability to create rapport and momentum with participants (OliFFE et al. 2021:4–5). The small sample size limits the ability to generalise findings to a broader population, as qualitative research often focuses on specific contexts and experiences that may not be representative (Subedi 2023:60).

Considerations and recommendations for future research

Currently, there is a notable scarcity of research and expertise regarding ETR within the African context. Consequently, future scholars are encouraged to expand this exploration across various African settings (Ajide 2022:3). Additionally, despite the critical role that small businesses play in society and the economy, there is a significant gap in research concerning the health of their owners. Given the economic contributions of recycled entrepreneurs, it is imperative that future studies investigate their health and well-being. Furthermore, this study had a limited representation of female recycled entrepreneurs among its participants, highlighting the need for more research that specifically includes female perspectives in this area.

Future research should examine how local cultural attitudes toward failure impact the recycling of entrepreneurial talent and knowledge, as understanding these dynamics can foster supportive learning environments (Li 2019:943). Additionally, studies should investigate the role of social networks in facilitating the recycling of entrepreneurial talent, focusing on the mechanisms that enable these connections (Menshikov et al. 2022:275). Finally, further exploration of anchor firms' influence on talent recycling within entrepreneurial ecosystems is essential, particularly regarding how their success or failure affects the movement of skilled workers and the creation of new ventures (Spigel & Vinodrai 2021:3).

Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to provide a framework for recycling entrepreneurial talent to guarantee the long-term viability of SMMEs in Botswana. The ETR paradigm helps economists and educational planners to construct more effective entrepreneurship-sustaining policies and curricula.

Entrepreneurial talent recycling is a complex process that significantly enhances the sustainability and growth of SMMEs. Participants in the study demonstrated that their diverse skills, including responsiveness and innovation, are vital for navigating the entrepreneurial landscape. Prior experience and industry exposure are essential, as they

provide the necessary skills and networks for launching new ventures. Market research is crucial for assessing saturation and demand before starting a business, highlighting the importance of informed decision-making. The findings also indicate that ETR promotes personal growth and a desire to empower others, driven by motivations to avoid poverty and derive satisfaction from customer service. However, challenges such as job insecurity and unfavourable government policies persist, necessitating supportive frameworks for recycled entrepreneurs.

Key sustainability measures identified include customer care, economic viability, operational strategy, social responsibility and personal resilience, all of which are critical for the survival of SMMEs. The entrepreneurial ecosystem, influenced by regulations, lobbying and cultural factors, plays a significant role in supporting ETR. Overall, the sustainability of ETR is shaped by a combination of prior knowledge, market considerations, personal motivations, sustainability practices and ecosystem dynamics, underscoring the need for ongoing support to ensure the long-term success of SMMEs.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

W.C. conceived the topic, researched and authored the article. S.v.d.M. offered comments, discussion and supervision during the study.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, W.C., upon reasonable request.

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