

Strategic Management in Local MSMEs: A Comparative Analysis of the Execution of the Planning Phase

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Abstract

A large number of organizations in Mexico operate without formal strategic-planning processes that enable them to sustain competitive advantages in dynamic environments. In response, this study conducted a comparative analysis of the planning phase within the strategic-management process implemented by 19 micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in the service sector in southern Sonora, with the aim of generating strategies that strengthen their competitiveness and sustainability amid continuous change and uncertainty.

The methodology followed a qualitative design with a comparative case-study approach, drawing on checklists, SWOT matrices, and interviews with the individuals responsible for the analyzed MSMEs. The findings indicate that, although most firms articulate mission and vision statements, these statements frequently show signs of obsolescence or reflect limited alignment

with technological and market transformations. The analysis also revealed weaknesses related to innovation and employee training, along with threats arising from the country's economic and regulatory instability.

The study concludes that the systematic and well-structured execution of strategic planning would enable service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora to strengthen both sustainability and competitiveness. It further recommends the formal adoption of evaluation mechanisms and strategic-training processes that contribute to continuous improvement and the achievement of organizational objectives. This research contributes to the literature on strategic management in MSMEs by demonstrating that, although the planning phase remains present, it tends to lack formalization and updating—conditions that help explain existing limitations in innovation, adaptability, and competitive sustainability. The study also proposes a strategic-diagnosis model applicable to micro-enterprise contexts, expanding empirical understanding of strategic-management practices in emerging regions.

Keywords: *Organizational Performance, Strategic Management, Strategic Planning, Strategy.*

Introduction

Over recent decades, strategic management has evolved, according to David and David (2021), into an essential component of business administration. It integrates elements of planning, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Scholars regard it as indispensable for any organization because, as Barney and Hesterly (2020) argue, it enables firms to generate sustainable competitive advantages rather than merely survive in international contexts shaped by advanced digitalization and increasingly competitive environments. This perspective aligns with Wheelen et al. (2022), who maintain that strategic management has consolidated its role as a fundamental tool for organizational competitiveness.

Grant (2021) emphasizes that strategic management functions as a core mechanism for organizational sustainability by integrating resources, dynamic capabilities, the competitive environment, and both internal and external analyses. Similarly, Hitt et al. (2021) contend that strategic management has strengthened its relevance by combining strategic formulation, implementation, and learning in highly uncertain environments. These authors also note that the pandemic exposed the limitations of static approaches and highlighted the need for systemic frameworks that incorporate resources, stakeholders, and capabilities to reconfigure organizations.

Within the broader strategic-management process, strategic planning occupies a central position and has demonstrated significant influence on the organizational performance of MSMEs through multiple empirical studies (Aldehayyat & Al Khattab, 2013; O'Regan & Ghobadian, 2002; Wang et al., 2007). Mousa et al. (2024) identify a positive correlation with organizational performance. Prior research confirms that MSMEs engaging in formal strategic-planning practices report higher profitability (Rue & Ibrahim, 1998), sales growth (Shrader et al., 1989), and long-term survival capacity (Jiménez-Barragán & Fuentes-Calle, 2024). These studies suggest that environmental analysis contributes positively to financial performance. In emerging economies, strategic planning acquires particular relevance because it partially offsets resource constraints and environmental volatility—structural characteristics of MSMEs (Brouthers et al., 2015; Sandada et al., 2014).

In a related study on strategic planning and organizational performance, Okech and Aosa (2025) indicate that existing research adopts a structured approach to the development of strategies, emphasizing environmental analysis, goal and objective setting, strategy development, and activity planning. This systematic method has undergone empirical validation in multiple MSME contexts, demonstrating that formalizing the planning process—through written documentation, periodic review, and management-team participation—correlates with superior organizational outcomes (Berman et al., 1997; Bracker et al., 1988; Schwenk & Shrader, 1993). The same authors also identify studies examining the impact of strategic planning on sustainable organizational performance, although they characterize these studies as incomplete due to their focus on conceptual, contextual, or methodological dimensions. Nevertheless, recent systematic reviews confirm that, despite methodological variability, scholars widely agree on the positive

influence of strategic planning on both financial and non-financial performance indicators in smaller firms (Brinckmann et al., 2010; Miller & Cardinal, 1994).

International organizations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assert that MSMEs experienced disproportionate impacts during the recent pandemic. Their capacity to recover and adapt to crises and challenging environments depends on supportive policies, access to credit, managerial capabilities, and integration into value chains (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2023).

In the same global context, both Ayyagari et al. (2020) and the OECD (2021) recognize MSMEs as drivers of innovation and economic development. However, Tiburcio-Sánchez (2023), drawing on survey results from the International Trade Center (ITC), argues that these organizations experience performance constraints related to technological levels, accumulated capabilities, financial conditions, and innovation agility. González-Pérez and Vélez-Ocampo (2021) reach similar conclusions, stating that MSMEs frequently operate with limited financing, informality, low technological adoption, and restricted strategic management. In other words, despite their economic importance, these organizations often lack the attention and support required to survive, sustain themselves, and grow in constantly evolving environments.

As in the international sphere, MSMEs in Mexico represent the primary source of employment and productive activity, accounting for more than 99% of economic entities in the country and generating approximately 70% of formal employment (INEGI, 2023). In the state of Sonora, MSMEs represent more than 95% of economic units (Gobierno de Sonora, 2023). However, according to the OECD (2019), INEGI (2024), and the Secretaría de Economía (2023), these firms face persistent gaps in productivity, financing, and technology adoption—factors that condition their overall performance.

Arzola (2021) argues that strategic models adapted to the characteristics of Mexican MSMEs can extend their longevity and competitiveness. Parallel studies by Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2016) and Lozano (2020) demonstrate that integrating sustainability practices into MSMEs strengthens resilience and enhances reputation. Considering that sustainability functions as a critical element of competitiveness (Hahn & Figge, 2022; Dangelico & Pujari, 2021), and given that the United Nations positions it as a transversal axis of business management through the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020), both strategic management and sustainability contribute substantially to improving MSME performance. Empirical evidence from Prieto-Sandoval et al. (2019) and Chong et al. (2022) reinforces this claim by highlighting the importance of integrating strategic management, resource management, and social responsibility to strengthen competitiveness and performance.

Cillo et al. (2022) and Bag et al. (2021), drawing on studies by Neely et al. (2021) and Kaplan and Norton (2020), provide further evidence indicating that improvements in organizational performance remain closely linked to strategic management and sustainability. Their findings show that MSMEs adopting innovation- and sustainability-oriented strategies achieve better financial and social outcomes.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that strategic management, strategic planning, strategy, and performance improvement operate as interconnected variables that decisively shape MSME success. Global and regional trends indicate the growing need for adaptive processes that enable these firms to generate or sustain competitive advantages in highly dynamic environments.

In light of this evidence, this study emerges from the need to understand how firms operationalize strategic planning. The research question guiding this work asks: How do service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora implement the planning phase of the strategic-management process in order to compete in a dynamic environment? The study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of this phase in 19 service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora, identifying areas for improvement and recurrent patterns to develop strategies that strengthen competitiveness and sustainability amid continuous change and uncertainty.

Theoretical background

The concept of strategy has undergone multiple transformations over the years. Initially conceived as a tool rooted in military practice, it gradually evolved toward broader organizational applications. According to López (2013), contemporary strategy demands that organizations pay close attention to their current context while combining vision, action, and adaptation to environmental change. Maldonado-Mera et al. (2017) explain that this shift reflects the concept's adjustment to the dynamics of modern markets and its transition toward a more flexible and multidimensional approach. For these authors, strategy no longer operates as a static or inflexible construct; instead, it functions as a dynamic practice that directs organizational resources toward the pursuit of sustainable competitive advantages. They agree that strategic success depends on the coherence between organizational objectives and the shifting conditions of the environment.

In a context shaped by technological advances, globalization, and rapid changes in business models, strategy must adopt a dynamic and adaptive character. Lukac and Frazier (2012) argue that strategy originates in the organization's vision of itself—how it perceives its present, how it envisions its future, and the intention that guides its aspirations—while also defining what it deliberately chooses not to pursue.

Performance constitutes another essential concept in organizational analysis. Cuello et al. (2020) describe performance as a mechanism that enables the assessment of employees' effectiveness in carrying out their functions and the understanding of behaviors, tasks, and results that contribute to institutional goals. This perspective highlights that evaluating technical skills alone remains insufficient; performance also depends on the work environment, leadership style, and team motivation.

The model developed by Campbell, as cited by Cuello et al. (2020), offers a comprehensive framework by classifying performance into several dimensions. Task performance relates directly to the execution of duties tied to a specific position. Contextual performance encompasses proactive and voluntary behaviors that enhance a positive work climate. Counterproductive behaviors involve actions that hinder or negatively affect organizational objectives.

Pedraza et al. (2010) maintain that job performance plays a central role in achieving organizational effectiveness and success. Consequently, organizations seek not only to measure performance but also to strengthen and reinforce it, using it as a differentiating factor that generates competitive advantages. A highly committed and efficient workforce increases productivity, stimulates innovation, and enhances resilience in the face of change. In the same vein, Dastmalchian et al. (2020) explain that organizational performance reflects the outcomes achieved once the mission, vision, and objectives have been established. Namada (2022) adds that performance gauges efficiency, effectiveness, output, and quality of both services and products offered to the market.

Management represents another key concept in this study. Dolan et al. (2020) define management as the planning, organization, direction, and control of human, material, and financial resources to achieve organizational goals effectively. In this sense, managing entails coordinating actions, supervising processes, and ensuring that each area functions coherently with strategic objectives.

Strategic management functions as a dynamic and continuous process that integrates the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of organizational strategies. Wheelen et al. (2022) describe it as a system of processes designed to develop, implement, and assess strategies that enable organizations to accomplish long-term objectives. Dolan et al. (2020) emphasize that this process demands a thorough analysis of the environment, the identification of opportunities and risks, and the efficient allocation of resources to secure long-term goals. From a classical perspective, Taylor (1994) argued that managerial success depends on efficiency, standardized processes, and optimal resource use. Although later perspectives have surpassed this mechanistic approach, many of its principles remain relevant, particularly in fields focused on process optimization. In a more contemporary view, Molano (2024) argues that management must go beyond merely technical dimensions and incorporate strategic leadership, assertive communication, and collaborative work—elements that foster innovation, motivation, and commitment among organizational talent.

Strategic planning constitutes the first phase of the strategic-management process. Mousa et al. (2024) conceptualize it as a deliberate process that aligns objectives, mobilizes resources, and coordinates actions over time to improve financial and non-financial performance. Theoretically, strategic planning in MSMEs draws on the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) and dynamic-capabilities theory (Teece et al., 1997), which explain how planning contributes to the development of distinctive organizational capabilities that influence performance (Beaver, 2007; Kraus et al., 2006). Its effectiveness increases when environmental analysis, top-management participation, and process formalization remain present. Empirical evidence shows that MSMEs with formal strategic planning: (a) exhibit a 25% higher probability of surviving five years (Perry, 2001), (b) achieve an average sales growth 30% higher (Gibson & Cassar, 2005), and (c) report significantly higher profit margins than those without formal planning (Richbell et al., 2006). Likewise, Dwikat et al. (2022) argue that strategic planning operates systematically and incorporates routines, metrics, and defined cycles.

In MSMEs, strategic planning functions as an organizational resource that, when combined with innovation, enhances economic, social, and environmental performance—especially in uncertain

environments. Keelson et al. (2024) note that performance-oriented planning incorporates competitive analysis and process innovation, contributing to improved results in highly intensive markets. Strategic planning therefore represents a critical factor for MSME competitiveness and sustainability by enabling adaptation, continuous improvement, and the development of sustainable advantages (Ruiz & Delgadillo, 2025; García et al., 2023).

Sandoval et al. (2025) show that MSMEs require both planning and strategic management because these processes support top management in making timely decisions, identifying opportunities and challenges, and optimizing financial resources to achieve business sustainability in highly competitive and constantly changing global environments. Their findings indicate that firms that adopt planning and strategic management with a sustainability focus demonstrate greater capacity to address challenges and make decisions that optimize long-term profitability, thereby generating confidence among business owners.

The connection among these concepts remains essential for understanding contemporary organizational functioning. Strategy establishes direction and objectives. Management plans, organizes, directs, and executes actions required to materialize that vision. Performance reflects the degree of effectiveness and goal attainment (Maldonado-Mera et al., 2017; Cuello et al., 2020).

In other words, strategy defines the what and the why; management, through planning, determines the what and specifies the how; performance reveals how effectively planned actions unfold. Proper alignment among these elements results in more efficient, competitive, and adaptable organizations capable of responding to the challenges of a globalized environment. Understanding strategy, strategic management, strategic planning, and performance becomes indispensable for analyzing how organizations function in dynamic contexts. Strategy helps organizations anticipate and adapt to environmental changes by directing their resources toward sustainable competitive advantages.

Performance, for its part, demonstrates the effectiveness of implemented actions. It reflects not only the completion of assigned tasks but also the level of commitment, innovation, and responsiveness of work teams. Finally, management complements resources, coordinates processes, and aligns actions with strategic objectives defined during strategic planning, ensuring that decisions translate into measurable and tangible results.

According to the authors reviewed, the interaction among strategy, strategic management, strategic planning, and performance should not be examined in isolation but as a system that systematically drives organizational development. Longitudinal studies confirm that these variables operate as an integrated system in which strategic planning mediates the relationship between top-management strategic orientation and organizational outcomes (Delmar & Shane, 2003; Gruber, 2007). In highly competitive environments, firms that integrate these components effectively respond more rapidly to market demands, innovate in internal processes, and strengthen their positioning. Research on manufacturing and service-sector MSMEs shows that alignment among formal planning, consistent implementation, and performance-measurement systems generates sustainable competitive advantages (Garengo et al., 2005; Hudson et al., 2001).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2018) grounded in a case-study analysis of 19 MSMEs operating in the service sector in southern Sonora. The research design follows a descriptive and exploratory orientation and seeks to understand the situation of these firms through a comparative analysis of the selected cases (Hernández et al., 2014). The approach aims to capture a comprehensive view of business practices, strategic responses to environmental conditions, and sectoral competitiveness.

The study utilized several instruments for data collection and analysis. Checklists served to evaluate key characteristics of the MSMEs. A SWOT matrix (Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, and Threats) also guided the identification of internal and external factors influencing each firm. The use of the SWOT matrix responded to its adaptability as an environmental-analysis tool, as it “provides an assessment of the firm’s situation by focusing on its internal features and external conditions” (Prieto, 2015, p. 131, cited in Huerta et al., 2023). In addition, qualitative interviews targeted managers or area supervisors in the selected MSMEs, enabling a deeper understanding of established business strategies, corporate decision-making, and managerial perceptions of the environment.

The analysis unfolded in three main phases, employing qualitative and comparative techniques to examine the collected data:

Thematic coding of strategic variables. The study examined information derived from the applied instruments (checklists, SWOT analysis, identification of competitive advantage, and development of proposed strategies).

Comparison of results across the 19 MSMEs. The analysis explored how each firm addressed strategic variables such as organizational philosophy, competitive advantage, and environmental adaptation, which facilitated the identification of significant similarities and differences.

Strategy design. Drawing on the SWOT matrices and cross-case comparisons, the study developed a set of improvement strategies for the MSMEs. These strategies aim to leverage organizational strengths, mitigate weaknesses, and capitalize on environmental opportunities.

Results

This section presents the findings derived from the analysis conducted on the information collected from the 19 MSMEs, organized into tables to facilitate understanding. Table 1 displays the main activities carried out by each firm, highlighting the type of services they offer.

Table 1. Main Activities of the MSMEs Studied

| Company | Main Activity | Type of Activity |
|-----------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Company 1 | Business consulting services | Services |
| Company 2 | Business consulting services | Services |

| Company | Main Activity | Type of Activity |
|----------------|--|----------------------------|
| Company 3 | Consulting services and chemical product sales | Services and product sales |
| Company 4 | Technology consulting services | Services |
| Company 5 | Financial and accounting services | Services |
| Company 6 | Financial services | Services |
| Company 7 | Design and construction services | Services and product sales |
| Company 8 | Hotel services | Services |
| Company 9 | Industrial maintenance and repair services | Services |
| Company 10 | Educational services | Services |
| Company 11 | Educational services | Services |
| Company 12 | Educational services | Services |
| Company 13 | Psychotherapy services | Services |
| Company 14 | Recycling services | Services |
| Company 15 | Gastronomic services | Services |
| Company 16 | Video game development (digital product) | Services and product sales |
| Company 17 | Industrial maintenance and repair services | Services |
| Company 18 | Gastronomic services | Services |
| Company 19 | Dry-cleaning services | Services and product sales |

Note. Prepared by the authors using information from the MSMEs studied.

The comparative analysis of the 19 service-oriented MSMEs enabled the identification of differences and similarities based on the checklist results and the SWOT analysis prepared for each organization. This process offered insight into the strategic maturity of each firm and their operational and structural particularities within the service sector. Table 2 presents these elements organized by category.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of MSMEs in the Service Sector in Southern Sonora

| Company Checklist | SWOT Matrix Analysis |
|---|--|
| Company 1 Lack of structure in internal processes. | S: Network of institutional alliances with public, private, and academic organizations. O: Industrial digitalization; government support programs. W: Limited operational capacity due to a reduced number of permanent staff. T: Need to reduce dependence on quotas by improving operational efficiency. |
| Company 2 Financial management and staffing require improvement. | S: Openness and management capacity. O: Government leverage and diversified support for different sectors. W: High operational costs. T: Dependence on government budgets and fiscal requirements affecting competitive strengthening. |
| Company 3 Sales procedures show limited standardization. | S: Specialized niche, service quality, and trained staff. O: Customer consumption trends. W: Insufficient staff; |

| Company Checklist | | SWOT Matrix Analysis |
|-------------------|--|---|
| | | inflation in products. T: Rising costs of commercialized products. |
| Company 4 | Lack of internal process formalization. | S: Skilled personnel with academic and professional training. O: Technological ties and linkages. W: Need to strengthen processes and performance evaluation. T: Highly competitive market. |
| Company 5 | Need to expand commercial relationships and client portfolio. | S: Innovation capacity and trained personnel. O: Commercial relationships and customer-consumption behavior. W: Need to strengthen labor-market competitiveness and talent management. T: Unstable macroeconomic regulations. |
| Company 6 | Need to strengthen organizational structure. | S: Well-established operations manuals and processes. O: Expansion into nearby markets and economic growth. W: Need to improve organizational climate and decision-making. T: Intense local competition. |
| Company 7 | Lack of measurement in key processes. | S: Portfolio of exclusive designs for structural renovations. O: Growth in the construction industry. W: Lack of procedures manuals. T: Competition in services and products; shortage of trained personnel. |
| Company 8 | Weak internal communication and low hotel occupancy. | S: High service quality. O: Potential to maximize installed capacity. W: Low productivity; lack of training and communication. T: Poor city image and insecurity. |
| Company 9 | Excessive dependence on few industrial clients; lack of personnel. | S: Market experience and competitive pricing. O: Opportunity to strengthen internal processes and communication. W: Insufficient use of local networks. T: Dependence on key suppliers. |
| Company 10 | Need to differentiate from competitors and strengthen human resources. | S: Educational updating and innovation. O: City growth and potential clients. W: Lack of procedures manuals and staff for key areas. T: Direct competition and high tax burdens. |
| Company 11 | Centralized decision-making processes. | S: Strong organizational structure. O: Robust government support. W: Shortage of qualified academic personnel. T: Low socioeconomic level in the locality. |
| Company 12 | Service quality depends on human resources. | S: Wide academic offering and highly qualified staff. O: Release of state funding. W: Lack of career and development plans. T: Local competition and declining enrollment. |
| Company 13 | Lack of internal business philosophy and poor communication. | S: Professionalized services through certification, technology, and infrastructure. O: Sector growth and increased technology use. W: Absence of business philosophy. T: High competition and sector instability. |

| Company Checklist | | SWOT Matrix Analysis |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Company 14 | Lack of strategic planning and insufficient infrastructure. | S: Market positioning and established supplier networks. O: Strategic alliances and collaboration. W: Insufficient infrastructure and investment. T: Price instability. |
| Company 15 | High staff turnover, high production costs, and low sales. | S: Quality products and trained staff. O: Greater use of technology for market positioning. W: Growing population interested in the product. T: High production costs and competition. |
| Company 16 | Small team and limited experience but high creativity. | S: Creativity and strategic vision. O: Growth in retro-gaming markets. W: Limited resources and experience. T: Platforms and competitors offering similar products. |
| Company 17 | Limited standardization in internal processes. | S: Technical knowledge and customer relationships. O: Expansion to emerging sectors. W: Key processes lack formalization. T: Inflation and rising input costs. |
| Company 18 | Poor interdepartmental communication. | S: Trained staff and effective processes. O: Rising demand for healthy food. W: Lack of internal structure. T: Limited financing. |
| Company 19 | Non-standardized customer-service processes and resistance to new technologies. | S: Established brand known for trust and quality. O: Comparison favorable for smaller competitors. W: Resistance to adopting new technologies. T: Price-based competition. |

Note. Prepared by the authors using information from the MSMEs studied.

The comparative analysis also enabled the identification of each firm's competitive advantage and the development of strategies tailored to their specific contexts. Table 3 presents these elements.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Competitive Advantage and Strategy Design

| Company | Competitive Advantage | Proposed Strategy Design |
|-----------|---|---|
| Company 1 | Operational efficiency, personalized service, specialized technical support, and solution management tailored to the needs of the manufacturing sector. | Innovate processes to enhance operational efficiency and strengthen the technical capabilities of the industrial ecosystem. |
| Company 2 | Regional representation supported by a national network that promotes training and business-management initiatives. | Establish a management model to support industrial development in southern Sonora through synergies with organizations and government entities to promote incentives, training, and certification programs for members. |
| Company 3 | Cost leadership and a wide variety of products in the region. | Deliver high-quality service with unique customer experiences, emphasizing supplier collaboration, environmental stewardship, and personal development. |

| Company | Competitive Advantage | Proposed Strategy Design |
|------------|--|--|
| Company 4 | Strong brand recognition, job creation, and linkages within the sector. | Improve organizational performance by establishing clear criteria for feedback and development plans for current and future talent. |
| Company 5 | A highly trained team of accountants and tax advisors with experience across multiple sectors, allowing accurate, up-to-date, and client-specific accounting and tax services. | Implement an innovation-driven and sustainable differentiation model. |
| Company 6 | Personalized service and close relationships with clients supported by trained personnel. | Form strategic alliances and expand market reach while increasing client satisfaction and trust through transparent and ethical practices. |
| Company 7 | Differentiated products and services through custom designs tailored to client needs, using innovative materials and cutting-edge equipment. | Conduct a feasibility study to assess the introduction of new products and services into the market. |
| Company 8 | Competitive pricing and high-quality hotel services. | Improve internal communication and strengthen marketing, commercialization, and human-resources strategies. |
| Company 9 | High-quality maintenance services, competitive pricing, personalized service, and on-time delivery. | Implement techniques and strategies to strengthen stakeholder relationships and reflect these improvements in the firm's profitability. |
| Company 10 | Strong positioning as a school offering cutting-edge educational services and high-quality systems at lower prices than competitors. | Consolidate its status as the preferred local educational institution by highlighting its bicultural model and ensuring quality in both student services and internal processes. |
| Company 11 | Recognized educational institution with high-performing graduates and strong academic quality. | Design and implement a model to increase university enrollment. |
| Company 12 | Academic quality, diverse program offerings, and very low prices compared to competitors. | Implement a student-support program that provides academic guidance and progress monitoring to reduce dropout rates. |
| Company 13 | High-quality services and strong customer care. | Develop a robust customer-loyalty plan and expand the firm's digital presence. |
| Company 14 | Differentiation through high-quality recycled products and a strong commitment to environmental sustainability. | Leverage market positioning to diversify and expand offerings within the Special Handling Waste (SHW) segment. |
| Company 15 | Authenticity of ingredients used in food preparation and strong reputation built over years of customer service. | Pursue gastronomic innovation and personalized service by developing new dishes aligned with wellness trends and using data analytics to tailor the customer experience. |
| Company 16 | Strong differentiation in the retro-gaming market and capacity to continue developing unique and innovative games in a saturated sector. | Expand international market presence and increase digital distribution while forming strategic collaborations and adapting to emerging trends. |

| Company | Competitive Advantage | Proposed Strategy Design |
|------------|---|---|
| Company 17 | A comprehensive value proposition that integrates operational efficiency, technological innovation, and responsibility, differentiating it from competitors. | Position the firm at the state level as a provider of industrial services, software development, and integrated solutions. |
| Company 18 | A strong, capable, productive, and adaptable team—its key differentiating factor within the city’s gastronomic sector. | Implement a quality-management program to meet community and customer expectations by maximizing the potential of organizational resources. |
| Company 19 | Differentiated offering based on innovation, advanced technology, sustainability, and a customer-experience focus, enabling strong performance in a traditionally homogeneous sector. | Offer personalized services, implement digital loyalty programs, automate key processes, and promote continuous staff training to improve adaptability. |

Note. Prepared by the authors using information from the MSMEs studied.

The findings derived from the comparative analysis of the 19 service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora reveal recurrent patterns illustrating partial and misaligned implementation of the strategic-planning phase. First, most organizations—approximately 84%—maintain basic elements such as mission and vision statements. However, these statements often show signs of obsolescence or remain insufficiently aligned with technological and market shifts, which limits their strategic usefulness. Another common pattern involves repeated internal weaknesses, such as low innovation capacity (present in 79% of firms), insufficient continuous training (68%), and the absence of formalized internal processes (74%). These factors jointly explain the limited adaptability of the firms to dynamic environments.

External threats linked to national economic and regulatory instability also appear consistently across all cases, intensifying competitive vulnerability. These patterns, derived from a systematic analysis of checklists, SWOT matrices, and qualitative interviews, not only confirm the partial nature of strategic planning but also contribute new knowledge on how misalignment manifests in regional microenterprise contexts. This perspective differs from generic approaches by highlighting local factors such as dependence on volatile markets in Sonora.

To illustrate the similarities and differences identified in the comparative analysis, Table 4 summarizes key convergences and divergences in strategic-planning elements.

Table 4. Convergences and Divergences in the Implementation of the Strategic-Planning Phase Among the MSMEs Analyzed

| Strategic Aspect | Convergences (Common Similarities) | Divergences (Observed Variations) |
|---|--|---|
| Organizational Philosophy (Mission and Vision) | Basic elements appear in 84% of Educational cases, though outdated or misaligned with technological and market changes across all firms. | Industrial firms (e.g., Companies 3, 7, 9) emphasize academic quality and affordable pricing; prioritize operational efficiency and specialized niches. |

| Strategic Aspect | Convergences (Common Similarities) | Divergences (Observed Variations) |
|---|--|---|
| Internal Processes and Formalization | Lack of formalized processes in 74% of cases, with reliance on informal structures. | Microenterprises (e.g., Companies 1, 4, 13) depend more heavily on limited staff; small/medium-sized firms (e.g., Companies 2, 8, 15) maintain partial manuals but struggle with weak communication. |
| Organizational Weaknesses | Low innovation (79%) and insufficient continuous training (68%) constrain adaptation to dynamic environments. | Gastronomic services (e.g., Companies 15, 18) face high staff turnover; educational services (e.g., Companies 10–12) highlight the absence of career-development plans. |
| Organizational Strengths | High service quality and close customer relationships in 89% of cases serve as foundations for competitive advantages. | Firms with institutional backing (e.g., Companies 1, 2) highlight alliances; independent firms (e.g., Companies 3, 16) emphasize creativity and brand positioning. |
| External Threats | Economic and regulatory instability affects 100% of firms, heightening competitive vulnerability. | Firms dependent on government budgets (e.g., Companies 2, 11) face fiscal cuts; private-sector firms (e.g., Companies 9, 17) confront input-price inflation. |
| Identified Competitive Advantages | Focus on differentiation through quality and personalization in 68% of cases. | Specialized industrial niches (e.g., Company 3: cost leadership in chemical products) contrast with generalist service providers (e.g., Company 13: psychotherapy services with limited differentiation). |
| Proposed Strategies | Emphasis on innovation and training in 79% of cases to strengthen competitiveness. | Educational firms propose academic expansion; gastronomic and industrial firms focus on operational efficiency and strategic alliances. |

Note. Prepared by the authors based on the comparative analysis of checklists, SWOT matrices, identified competitive advantages, and proposed strategies for the 19 service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora. Percentages derive from observed case frequencies (e.g., 84% represents 16 of 19 firms with mission/vision statements present but outdated).

Additionally, to deepen the understanding of the variations observed, the MSMEs were classified according to their level of strategic maturity, identifying representative examples and the underlying causes. Based on the comparative analysis, the 19 MSMEs fall into three levels of strategic maturity: low (present in 58% of cases, equivalent to 11 firms), medium (32%, or 6 firms), and high (10%, or 2 firms). The classification relied on the degree of formalization, systematic updating of planning practices, alignment with environmental changes, and effective integration of tools such as SWOT analysis.

Firms with lower strategic maturity—such as Companies 1, 4, 13, and 16 (predominantly microenterprises operating in general and gastronomic services)—exhibit only partial implementation of the planning phase. Their mission and vision statements show signs of obsolescence; internal processes remain undocumented; and innovation levels stay low. These conditions stem from internal constraints, including limited human resources and insufficient managerial training, and from external threats such as regional economic instability, which restricts investment in strategic development.

In contrast, firms with medium maturity—such as Companies 3, 7, 9, and 15 (small and medium-sized firms in industrial and educational subsectors)—demonstrate basic elements partially

aligned with market demands but reveal shortcomings in technological adaptation. These variations arise from moderate dependence on informal structures and from regulatory volatility that prevents regular updates to strategic practices.

Finally, firms with the highest maturity levels—exemplified by Companies 2 and 11 (characterized by institutional backing and an emphasis on alliances)—display more systematic and integrated planning. Their strengths in service quality and close customer relationships generate sustainable competitive advantages. These outcomes emerge from stronger internal resource allocation, continuous training, and external resilience shaped by support networks that help mitigate the economic uncertainty of southern Sonora.

This classification not only highlights variation in the application of strategic planning but also guides targeted interventions aimed at enhancing competitiveness and organizational sustainability in emerging microenterprise contexts.

Discussion

The comparative analysis carried out on the 19 service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora—using checklists, SWOT analyses, competitive-advantage identification, and proposed strategy design—allowed a detailed understanding of their operational and structural particularities within their respective subsectors. The analysis also revealed their strengths, weaknesses, and common patterns, along with significant differences in the application of the strategic-planning phase. The findings indicate that, although most organizations maintain formally defined mission and vision statements, many of these statements remain outdated or insufficiently aligned with technological and market shifts. Prior literature on MSMEs documents this recurring disconnect between formal planning (mission/vision on paper) and effective planning (strategic actions executed) (Analoui & Karami, 2002; Fuller-Love, 2006). Grant (2021) similarly argues that strategic management must integrate resources, dynamic capabilities, and continuous environmental scanning to sustain relevance and long-term viability.

Likewise, the lack of formalized processes and persistent weaknesses in innovation and training confirm the patterns described by González-Pérez and Vélez-Ocampo (2021) regarding Mexican MSMEs: limited formalization, modest technological adoption, and restricted strategic management. The literature further establishes that both innovation strategies and formal structures exert a positive and significant effect on MSME performance (Terziovski, 2010). The absence of clear methodologies for implementing strategic planning reduces firms' adaptive capacity, reinforcing the argument made by Hitt et al. (2021), who contend that MSMEs require flexible, dynamic, and systemic strategic frameworks to navigate uncertainty. Empirical studies also show that MSMEs with systematic strategic-management training programs demonstrate a higher probability of successfully executing their strategic plans (Blackburn et al., 2013; Kotey & Folker, 2007).

The SWOT analysis highlights that the most critical threats stem from national economic and regulatory instability. This finding aligns with World Bank (2020, 2023) and OECD (2019, 2021) reports, which emphasize that MSMEs hold particular vulnerability to external crises and need public-policy support and internal capabilities to strengthen resilience. However, the

organizations analyzed also exhibit strengths related to service quality, customer proximity, and technical specialization—elements that converge with findings from Mousa et al. (2024), who conclude that environmental analysis and the definition of long-term objectives exert a positive influence on financial and non-financial performance.

Additionally, the study reveals that MSMEs incorporating higher levels of innovation and digitalization achieve superior growth and competitiveness compared to those operating with more traditional structures. This observation corresponds to the work of Cillo et al. (2022) and Bag et al. (2021), who emphasize the critical role of innovation and knowledge management in organizational sustainability. Similarly, integrating strategic management with social responsibility and sustainability—as proposed by Prieto-Sandoval et al. (2021) and Chong et al. (2022)—expands opportunities for strengthening resilience and reputation.

Another key finding highlights the need to formalize strategic-planning processes by adapting methodologies to the size and specific characteristics of MSMEs. This conclusion aligns with Arzola (2021), who argues that designing strategic models tailored to MSMEs enhances their continuity and competitiveness. Research by Prieto-Sandoval et al. (2019) and Chong et al. (2022) further confirms that integrating strategic planning with sustainability and social-responsibility practices strengthens organizational competitiveness.

Taken together, the findings reaffirm what the literature consistently reports: strategic planning significantly influences organizational performance (Okech & Aosa, 2025; Kaplan & Norton, 2020). When combined with innovation, digitalization, and sustainability practices, it can substantially enhance competitiveness and long-term viability. However, its impact on MSMEs depends strongly on managerial capacity to implement planning methodically, dynamically, and in alignment with the constant changes of an uncertain environment.

Conclusions

This study enabled a comparative analysis of the planning phase within the strategic-management process implemented by 19 service-sector MSMEs in southern Sonora. The analysis identified strengths, weaknesses, and common patterns across their organizational practices. The findings reveal that, although most firms maintain formally defined mission and vision statements, these elements often lack updating and fail to align with environmental changes. Such misalignment reduces their adaptive capacity and competitiveness. This result reinforces the need to conceptualize strategic planning as a dynamic and continuous process—rather than an episodic activity—as contemporary models of strategic management in MSMEs assert (Chwolka & Raith, 2012; Stonehouse & Pemberton, 2002). The analysis also showed that the most critical weaknesses relate to limited innovation, insufficient training, and the absence of formalized internal processes, while the most significant threats arise from national economic and regulatory instability.

The analysis helped identify areas for improvement and informed the development of strategies aimed at strengthening sustainable competitive advantages. The findings also reaffirm that strategic planning plays a key role in supporting both sustainability and organizational performance in MSMEs, consistent with the arguments of Mousa et al. (2024), Okech and Aosa

(2025), and Kaplan and Norton (2020). Accordingly, the study addressed the research question, demonstrating that systematic and well-executed strategic planning enhances the capacity of these organizations to compete in dynamic and uncertain environments.

The scientific contributions of this study include enriching the literature on strategic management in MSMEs through empirical evidence from the regional context of Sonora; identifying the gap between possessing strategic-planning documents and using them as competitive tools; explaining that this gap emerges primarily from low formalization, limited innovation, and insufficient training; and proposing a practical improvement pathway grounded in empirical evidence to support progress toward greater competitiveness and sustainability (Sandoval et al., 2025).

Methodologically, the study contributes by applying a comparative approach that integrates checklists, SWOT matrices, and qualitative interviews to evaluate strategic maturity. Practically, it offers feasible strategy proposals that guide MSMEs toward innovation, digitalization, training, and sustainability as pathways to strengthen competitiveness.

Future research should further examine the relationship between strategic planning and the adoption of emerging technologies in MSMEs, as well as the role of sustainability as a mediating variable in organizational performance. Likewise, replicating this study in other economic sectors and regions of the country would help contrast findings and deepen the understanding of the strategic factors that influence competitiveness in these organizations.

Ultimately, the evidence confirms that strategic planning must function as a dynamic and adaptive process which, when formalized, enables service-sector MSMEs not only to remain in the market but also to consolidate their position and project themselves competitively toward long-term sustainable development.

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