

CHAPTER 7 - FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains a summary of the findings of the study into how an understanding of information needs, and seeking patterns and information services can lead to the design of sustainable business information services in the SMME sector in Namibia. The summary of the findings are based on Chapters 4 and 5 which presented and interpreted the research data, and on Chapter 6 that proposed a strategy for business information delivery services for SMMEs in Namibia.

7.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Based on the investigation of information needs and seeking patterns of SMMEs and information services offered by business support organisations and on the review of similar studies undertaken in developing countries, it can be concluded that access to reliable business information is a significant constraint to the growth and development of SMMEs in Namibia.

While information is an essential ingredient of doing business, effective demand by SMMEs for information services alone is low and needs to be enhanced by awareness campaigns, direct contacts or packaging with other services. In theory there are a significant number of business organisations in the country providing a broad range of information and services to the sector but the quality and depth of information provided is low. There is little or no specialisation on the part of business information providers, resulting in a significant duplication of effort and poor utilisation of scarce resources. Coordination amongst business support organisations in the provision of information is weak and this lack of coordination was highlighted by both SMMES and business support organisations themselves.

Awareness of and access to information are major issues that were identified by both SMMEs support organisations surveyed. Various reasons were given by SMMEs for this, such as bureaucratic procedures in some organisations related to information access, poor communication, poor promotion and dissemination of information, poor linkages between SMMEs and business support organisations and a general lack of skills in both providing and utilising business information. In addition, there were limitations of staff, budgets and systems in place in most business support organisations for the collection and management of information resulting in ad-hoc approach to the delivery of information.

Dissemination of information to SMMEs is clearly inadequate. While many organisations have at least some useful information in many cases it never reaches the majority of SMMEs. The overall approach of business organisations would appear to be one of passive availability of information from within the business support organisations as opposed to a proactive programme of information dissemination to SMMEs. It should be noted, however, that this might be due to a lack of resources rather than any lack of willingness on the part of business support organisations.

Apart from dissemination, promotion of existing business information services in the sector is also inadequate. As a consequence, SMMEs are not aware of the information that is available, or of the range of information services provided. Indeed, it is also true that business support organisations themselves are often not fully aware of the services provided by other related organisations in the field.

The level of resources within business support organisations surveyed varies, with the commercial ones having more resources and the non-profit ones having limited resources. Most business support organisations surveyed require more staff, equipment, training, transport, etc. Further, the development of information systems would appear to be a priority area. Information management and development skills of business support organisations would appear to be inadequate. Training in the use of information was, in

fact, one of the dominant recommendations from both SMMEs and business support organisations.

Most business organisations clearly recognised their limitations and many had plans in place to further develop their information services. Several organisations surveyed are also planning to expand their information resources, develop their computer facilities and provide additional staff training. As with the establishment of more business information centres, the extent to which these plans will be realised will depend critically on the availability of financial support from the government, the Chamber of Commerce and donor organisations as business support organisations own resources would appear to be limited in most cases.

7.3 FINDINGS ABOUT RESEARCH ISSUES

SMMEs generally face a number of constraints in their growth and development and these constraints can also be viewed as the context in which they require a range of business information services. Information needs however are also a result of positive developments. Despite the existence of a range of services, SMMEs tend to prefer informal information seeking strategies. The overall utilisation of ICTs in the SMME sector is limited, while among business support organisations, it is relatively developed. More detailed findings on the individual research issues explored in the study are presented below.

7.3.1 Findings on SMMEs' information needs

Access to financial service information emerged as the main information need of the enterprises. The other types of information that enterprises ranked as important are: marketing, production, training, and government policies on SMMEs, access to raw materials, government regulations and technical information. The information needs of

the enterprises are closely related to what both the SMMEs and business support organisations identified as constraints to the growth and development of the enterprises. Information needs of the enterprises are, therefore, closely related with solving problems that enterprises face. In the theories of information behaviour (Wilson 1981; Dervin 1986; Ellis 1989; Kuthlau 1993), including Wilson's Information Behaviour Model (1996), it has been clearly demonstrated that an information need is a result of a consequence of a need perceived by an information user (Wilson 1999).

Various small business financial assistance schemes like the Small Business Guarantee Scheme (SBCGT), the Namibia Development Bank and many commercial bank packages have been initiated by government and the private sector to assist small enterprises with easy access to finance. However, despite all these initiatives access to finance still remains a major problem in the sector. This leads us then to the conclusion that it is not only finance that is a problem, but there are many other issues that need to be addressed alongside the provision of financial services. Financial assistance programmes must, be provided alongside management, marketing, production and many other skills required to run a small business.

The market in Namibia is too small for the SMME sector and it faces many challenges from established South African operators as well as the emerging Chinese traders with cheap goods. Information on marketing is, therefore, an important requirement for the sector. Business providers should address this challenge with more innovative means of marketing (through ICTs). They should also address the question of whether or not to lower production costs and improve the standards of the goods so that they can compete on the global marketplace.

The enterprises showed that they require information on training opportunities in many business areas. While many organisations indicated that they run several types of training workshops, it seems that many enterprises do not have access to this type of information. There is a need, on the part of service providers, to widely disseminate information on business training opportunities to SMMEs.

Namibia is an emerging economy and so are its SMMEs. Much needs to be done in the area of the provision of production and technical information as well as the sourcing of raw materials. While international organisations like UNIDO support developing countries with industrial and marketing information, local service providers should form partnerships with international organisations to access such information for the benefit of the SMME sector.

7.3.2 Findings on SMMEs' information seeking behaviour

SMMEs largely depend on informal information sources despite the existence of many services providing more formal channels of accessing business information. Enterprises' staff knowledge, customers' responses and advice, friends and family members are the main sources of information for the enterprises. There is limited use of the trade partners and the media as information sources.

The use of informal information sources has long been recognised in many spheres as trusted information sources. However, as enterprises grow there is need to move towards the use of more formal information sources as they are more reliable. There are just certain types of information that cannot be obtained through informal sources, hence the need to encourage SMMEs to seek the formal sources. The findings point to the small nature of the majority of SMMEs in Namibia. The smaller the enterprise the less likely it relies on formal information sources. The findings, however, also show the importance of social networks that exist among SMMEs and how they are used as important information sources.

SMMEs make little use of publicly available business information sources and services such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, government department dealing with SMMEs, the Small Business Information Centre, and a well developed public library network in Namibia.

While the Internet is growing as a source of business information, the SMMEs in Namibia have not yet fully embraced e-business and e-commerce. There are several advantages that SMMEs can derive from using the Internet and moving to e-business applications. However it was established that the costs of obtaining ICTs is still high and hence SMMEs shun them. SMMEs tend to use mobile phones more widely than computer and Internet technology. The proposed business information delivery strategy in Chapter six has outlined how service providers can expand services to SMMEs through mobile phones. The mobile phones have become the cheapest and most accessible type of communication tool among small enterprises. Hence, business information services should be disseminated through them.

The enterprises also prefer to receive information through face-to-face meetings, through the radio and television, newspapers and tailor-made newsletters. There is more to be gained in information disseminated through face-face meetings as recipients have the advantage of interacting with the service provider and seeking clarity. The radio and television have made an impact in that it can reach out to more people, especially in a sparsely populated country like Namibia and, hence, they must be widely used as business information dissemination tools.

7.3.3 Findings on barriers to information accessing by SMMEs

Despite the high level of literacy recorded among SMME members, the main reason for SMMEs' failure to access business information in the Namibian market was identified as the lack of awareness of the information services available. This lack of awareness is in part blamed on the service providers who do not run adequate or effective information awareness campaigns. The other reasons cited are the bureaucratic difficulties in accessing information from established service providers like government ministries, the Chamber of Commerce and NGOs. The qualitative assessment of the business information services showed that there are many shortcomings in the internal information

management practices of many organisations. Visits to the Ministry of Trade and Industry showed that the ministry's trade information centre was no longer functional. The AIM facility at the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry is also no longer functional, thereby posing many barriers to information access not only for SMMEs but also for the whole business community.

An increasing number of SMMEs, especially those in the northern regions of the country, prefer information to be disseminated in local languages like Oshiwambo. Currently most services are in English and Afrikaans. Service providers should make provision for translation services of information brochures, newsletters, newspaper articles and radio and TV programmes.

7.3.4 Findings on business information services for the SMME sector

There are several small business service providers in Namibia providing business services ranging from financial services, marketing, business information services, training and consultancy services to research and advisory services. The service providers are both in the private and public sector. In order to promote and coordinate business information services in Namibia, the Joint Consultative Council was established in 1996. The membership of this organisation has, however, has been declining due to a number of reasons, chief among them being a lack of funding to continue running programmes. This has, to a large extent, contributed to the lack of coordination among service providers in the provision of business information services to the SMME sector. The area of networking and coordination has, therefore, been identified as one area that needs urgent attention in addressing the effectiveness of business information services to the sector.

The effective coordination and deployment of services depend also, to a large extent, on the state of ICTs in the country and among the service providers. As the findings on ICTs show (in section 7.3.6), the level of ICT utilisation among business service providers in Namibia is very high. Organisations have well developed in-house systems, which could

be used as a platform for improving networking and coordination in business information services.

The Small Business Information Centre another private and public sector initiative has not managed to reach out to many SMMEs as it is only based in the capital city and has no outreach programmes to rural areas.

7.3.5 Findings on business information channels to SMMEs

Business support organisations use both formal and informal channels to disseminate business information services to the SMMEs. Face-face meetings, the radio, training programmes were all part of the channels that service providers are currently using. However, service providers are limited to a large extent in their dissemination activities due to the ICT gap between them and the SMMEs. While ICTs are well developed and used among service providers the story is different among SMMEs that have not yet fully embraced computer technologies.

It has been shown that SMMEs have fully embraced the mobile telephone technology because it is cheap and easily accessible. Hence, business information service providers should also use it as a channel for business information services. Many service providers, for example commercial banks and local authorities are beginning to offer services through mobile phones. There is a need also to have SMME tailor-made packages for dissemination through this technology.

7.3.6 Findings on the utilisation of ICTs in SMMEs

The ownership of the basic communication tools like a fixed telephone, a fax, a mobile phone and a post box is relatively high among SMMEs. The mobile phone is the most widely used communication tool, followed by fixed telephones and the fax. Most enterprises own at least one post box. The telecommunications infrastructure in Namibia

is relatively well developed and, as a result, it does not pose any serious threats to SMME operations. However, the ownership of computers is not that high compared to the other three tools.

The utilisation of computer-based applications among SMMEs is relatively low, focusing mainly on word-processing, spreadsheets and desktop publishing. The use of these packages had a high impact on the performance of enterprises. There is no use of other packages in areas like production and technical management processes, management information systems (MIS) or design processes. There are ranges of computer-based applications that are specifically designed for small enterprises ranging from accounting packages, production management, and MIS to design packages in the market place. These are areas that SMMEs should actively pursue if they are to improve the quality of their products and the management of their in-house information management practices and to put them on the competitive edge.

There is limited use of the Internet for business and for accessing business information services and this has delayed the take off of e-commerce in the SMME sector. There are other obstacles that have slowed down the take off of e-commerce in the SMME sector, and these include low Internet speed, uncertainty about contracts and delivery guarantees over the Internet and the unreliable payment methods. The take off of e-commerce has also been hampered by high telecommunication costs, the monopoly of one service provider and the lack of e-commerce and e-banking legislation to guide the initiatives. Government should address these issues urgently if the quality of business information services to SMMEs is to improve and service providers are to offer Internet-based services.

7.3.7 Findings on the utilisation of ICTs in business support organisations

The level of ICT utilisation among business support organisations is fairly high with various applications in use and this should be used as the basis for future networking and

the provision of better services to SMMEs. The number of business support organisations providing technology-related services to SMMEs is limited.

ICT facilities and support infrastructure among business support organisations is well developed with most organisations having networked PCs and some even subscribing to online business information databases. There is a great desire among business support organisations to provide business information services through the Internet and e-mail, but the low level of ICT utilisation among the SMMEs hampers this.

7.3.8 Findings on the improvement of business information services

There are several approaches to the improvement of service delivery in the business information services sector. The improvement of business information services in Namibia should be based on a sound private and public sector partnership programme.

According to the SMME members in order to improve business, government and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry should lead the development and strengthening of business information services. In other words, there should be a strong private/public partnership in the development and deployment of business information services.

Training is of particular importance in the improvement of business information services in the SMME sector. Enterprises require training in the processes of identifying and using business information. Business advisory service workshops and seminars were seen as the main avenues that can be used for training enterprises in business information use.

There are several areas that require further improvement in business support organisations in order to improve the delivery of business information services to the SMMEs. These areas include more staff to handle business information, further training of business information staff, more networking among service providers, funding, more equipment and information resources and more outreach programmes. Business support

organisations require more capacity building in the areas of information collection, analysis and dissemination. Many have adequate staff providing other business services but not enough in the area of business information services.

7.4 FINDINGS ABOUT THE MAIN RESEARCH PROBLEM

The aim of this investigation was to answer the question: “How can a better understanding of the information needs and seeking patterns of SMMEs contribute to a strategy for successful delivery of sustainable business information services to the SMME sector in Namibia?”

In total 197 enterprises and 32 business support organisations participated in the survey. The response rates achieved for both the SMMEs and business support organisations were 65% and 53%, respectively. In survey research these return rates are considered good. The two participating districts were chosen because Windhoek is the capital of Namibia and home to most industrial and commercial activities, and also home to many small, medium and micro enterprises. The second region, with the small towns of Oshakati, Ondangwa and Ongediva was chosen because it being represents the emerging previously disadvantaged communities in the northern regions of Namibia. Since independence, government has started many development projects in this region, and this has resulted in the establishment of many small businesses. In the final analysis, the data collected from these two regions were assumed to be representative of the whole Namibian SMME sector. More areas could have been covered, but financial limitations prevented coverage of the whole country.

The data collected, presented and analysed in Chapters 4 and 5, the review of the literature presented in Chapter 2 and the strategy in Chapter 6, have all provided the study with a basis for making wide-ranging recommendations that business support organisations can implement to improve business information delivery services in Namibia. What is of particular importance is the fact that the study has provided answers

to questions relating to what kinds of information is required by SMMEs in their daily business operations. The results have also provided information on how SMMEs seek information and how the present business information services in Namibia operate. This information is important for the end product of this study, which was presented in Chapter 6 as a strategic model.

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the study was to gain an understanding of how an examination of information needs, seeking patterns and information services can lead to the design of sustainable business information services in the SMME sector in Namibia. Based on the findings, the study makes a series of recommendations that attempt to address the current weaknesses in the existing supply and utilisation of business information services in Namibia. The following sections provide overall recommendations on the research objectives of the study.

7.5.1 Recommendations on SMMEs' information needs

This study has shown that SMMEs have a range of information requirements that these needs keep evolve over time and are influenced by prevailing social, political and economic environments. The study has also shown that SMMEs face a number of constraints in their business operations, and that information needs are directly linked to these constraints.

It is recommended that in order to keep pace with the dynamic nature of the business environment and changing information needs of enterprises, services providers need to regularly examine and identify the business information needs of enterprises, so that those needs are captured and incorporated into the existing services. Enterprises should then be made fully aware of the changes in the information sources and services. When a website is used, all new changes must be reflected on the site, or the electronic databases hosting the business information must reflect the changes. It is recommended that this

process of re-examining the business information needs of SMMEs become part of the impact assessment of business information services, as outlined in Chapter six (section 6.4.4). Impact assessment, helps the business support organisation to evaluate the services by involving all key stakeholders, including the examination of SMMEs business information needs.

7.5.1.1 What is the level of business information accessibility?

The study has shown that despite the existence of a range of business information services, many enterprises are not fully aware of where to obtain business information services. It has also been shown that there are many barriers that hinder the smooth flow of business information from business support organisations to SMMEs.

In light of the challenges that SMMEs face in accessing business information and other services, it is recommended that business support organisations devise strategies to adequately address issues of information awareness, its use and importance to enterprises. There are various platforms and media channels that can be used in the promotion of business information services to the small enterprise sector in Namibia. These include the use of newsletters, newspapers, radio and television. Furthermore, it is recommended that barriers in accessing business information be adequately addressed. This means paying attention to the removal of barriers that currently exist between the SMMEs and business service providers two. It also requires the design of services that are suitable for the Namibian market.

7.5.2 Recommendations on SMMEs' information seeking patterns

The study showed that the majority of enterprises depend on informal information sources obtained from staff, customers, friends and family members. The dependence on informal information sources is global and it has its advantages and disadvantages.

However, informal sources need to be supported by a good network of established information sources to ensure reliability and usability of information.

It is recommended that service providers should promote the use of formal information sources while keeping in mind the role that informal sources play. As enterprises grow, they should be encouraged to use more formal sources as these provide more reliable information for growth and development. There is scope for the development of various Namibian business databases that service providers should consider and these include: company and products databases, marketing report databases, external or trade opportunity databases, sources of raw materials, labour statistics, transport and many other services for the SMME sector. To date, there is no comprehensive database in Namibia listing SMMEs (indicating their areas of business) and this could be the starting point for the compilation of company databases that can be used in linkage programmes, and by the general public looking for services from the SMME sector.

7.5.2.1 What are the personal barriers to information seeking?

The study has shown that despite the high level of education among enterprises, there is a great lack of awareness regarding where, how and when to access business information. It has also showed that while information is widely disseminated in English many enterprises would also prefer the information in vernacular languages.

It is recommended that specific business information service awareness programmes be put in place for the small enterprise sector (section 7.5.3.6). There are various ways that business support organisations can use to overcome personal barriers that SMME members face in accessing business information. These include proper information repackaging programmes as well as the provision of translation services.

7.5.2.2 What are information source barriers to information seeking?

The study has shown that business support organisations are in themselves problems for enterprises to access business information. Members of different enterprises mentioned that there is too much bureaucracy to access business information, and at times it takes too long to access the right information. Furthermore, the study has shown that many service providers lack adequately trained staff to handle business information services, or they are overburdened with extra duties that do not involve information activities. The study has also shown that there are shortages of extension officers in business support organisations, as well as a lack of adequate resources like directories, product catalogues, price lists and marketing information for enterprises.

In light of the above challenges, it is recommended that service providers make provision for more staff dedicated to business information services. It is also recommended that more financial resources should be made available for the procurement of information resources. Experiences from other developing countries have shown that business service providers can build linkages with Chamber of Commerce, industry associations, foreign trade missions and international trade centres for the exchange of business information at very minimal costs in order to enhance the capacity of enterprises to access foreign market information. It is therefore recommended that business support organisations in Namibia should also build such linkages with international information suppliers so as to improve the range of business information they offer to the local SMME sector.

The idea of initiating an “SMME Trade Point” that facilitates trade with foreign companies should be pursued in Namibia. Trade Points are an initiative of the United Nations and are a platform for the exchange of export and import trade information and other business opportunities. Developing countries that have embraced the idea have benefited as their SMME sectors have had access to global markets and services.

It is also recommended that business support organisations should be sharply focused and specialise in their areas of information dissemination. This will eliminate some of the current problems facing enterprises in accessing information. More resources should be

made available for training of organisations' information services staff to improve the handling of information dissemination activities, as well as the training of enterprise owners to access and use business information services.

7.5.3 Recommendations on practices on information exchange and storage among SMMEs

The study has shown that SMMEs use the telephone, cell-phone and fax to communicate with clients such as suppliers and customers. It has also been shown that the enterprises do not use much of e-mail and Internet in their exchange of business information. The majority of SMMEs use manual means to store business information. There is very little use of computers as storage media among the enterprises.

It is recommended that the business communication tools among enterprises be expanded to include the use of more e-mail and Internet-based technologies. The benefits to be derived from e-business for the SMME sector are enormous. What is important is that service providers and private sector players should form partnerships and come up with solutions for cheaper ICT packages for SMMEs. It is also recommended that SMMEs be encouraged to move towards computerised information management systems to ensure speedy and efficient recovery of information on their business activities

7.5.4 Recommendations about business information services

The study has shown that there is a range of business information services in Namibia. However what is also clear from the findings is that the usage of the services is very low. The majority of the enterprises do not make use of typical business support services. A small number of enterprises make use of market-related business services. This is

coupled with lack of specialization on the part of business support organisations resulting in limited coverage of business information kept.

There is a range of activities that can be employed to improve business information access and awareness in the SMME sector. The following sections provide more specific recommendations regarding the strengthening of existing business information services

7.5.4.1 Information management in business support organisations

The area of business information management within business support organisations is important for the effective dissemination of business information services. If business information is to be accessible, it needs to be being shared internally. This is important for both information dissemination and accountability. The study has revealed that the current information management practices in organisations with business information collections are poor. It is therefore recommended that proper information management practices and guidelines in managing business information collections should be put in place in business support organisations. Business information collections must be catalogued and classified according to international standards. The International Trade Centre provides trade information management tools that can be adapted to suit any business collection in Namibia.

It is also recommended that in order to achieve consistency in building information collections, support organisations must develop in-house collection development guidelines. Collection development guidelines will provide the scope of collection as well as the depth of information coverage, and this helps organisations to focus on specific areas rather than collect any type of business information that comes their way. It is also recommended that there be principles to govern the management of information in business support organisations and these should include:

- The integrity of information that is stored should be protected and appropriate record keeping procedures should be adopted to ensure this;

- Information that is neither private, commercially sensitive nor subject to national security should be accessible;
- Information should be retained for valid reasons, and there should be clear policies on what is retained and what is disposed of; and
- Information should be collected and stored in a format that allows it to be shared.

The management of business information in support organisations requires the adoption of good information management systems. This includes putting in place procedures for the handling of documents, use of common business index thesaurus, designing easily accessible databases and indexing information consistent with terms commonly used by SMME operators.

7.5.4.2 Information access and dissemination

The study has shown the need to improve information access and dissemination to SMMEs. In order to improve information access by SMMEs it is recommended that business support organisations consider a number of activities. Information has to be presented in a way that it can be found by SMMEs and should be seen as credible by SMMEs. Business information services should be located in places frequented by SMMEs or that are easily accessible from them. Business support organisations should review procedures for accessing information within business organisations and amend them where necessary. There should be translation services in place for existing and new publications to translate these documents to other languages (e.g. Oshiwambo and Afrikaans). There is a need to develop (and enhance) existing newsletters and other publications that provide various types of business information relevant to SMMEs.

Support organisations should also improve existing programmes for disseminating information through radio and television. It is generally recognised that exposure to media such as radio, newspapers and TV, creates opportunities for access to new ideas and business information. Government and service providers should consider programmes aimed at improving the information self-sufficiency of SMMEs. This might

include training in the use of the Internet, or use of online business databases. It is also recommended that service providers consider programmes that build linkages and networks among SMMEs.

7.5.4.3 Networking and coordination

The study has shown that networking among sources of information, information services and sources of expertise is highly desirable but very difficult to implement and sustain. There is a need therefore to improve the current level of networking and coordination amongst business organisations providing services to SMMEs.

It is recommended that existing business support organisations, through the Joint Consultative Council, the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry or the Ministry of Trade and Industry, coordinate the establishment of working groups among service providers on the delivery of business information services. This should include the holding of strategic planning workshops to determine suitable approaches and the development of business information directories as well as the organisation of study tours to familiarise business information staff with what is available. It should also include conducting studies on the potential of ICTs to enhance the management and exchange of information, both within and amongst business information services. These activities should result in the creation of an Internet-based portal with information on various support services available for SMMEs and any other type of relevant information. Furthermore, the existing Small Business Services Directory requires revision so that it can contain information on the usefulness and quality of support services.

7.5.4.4 Enhancement of the quality of information provided

The quality of the present information sources in the Namibian market has also been questioned. There is no coordination among service providers as to the standard of information to be disseminated to the SMME sector. A coordinated approach would help improve the quality of information disseminated.

In light of the shortcomings in the quality of business information being supplied, it is recommended that business information service providers undertake further studies to determine the feasibility of establishing an effective network for capturing and disseminating market prices and buyer information on key products to SMMEs. There is a need to expand information collection in key areas and to reduce activity in less essential ones as well as to identify individuals and organisations to repackage various types of business information for dissemination to SMMEs.

7.5.4.5 Linkages

Linkages between SMMEs and buyers, suppliers and business support organisations have been identified as an essential ingredient in the success of SMMEs. The study identified that only a few big businesses have linkages with SMMEs. In addition, those linkages are of a very simple nature and have limited benefits. The Namibian private sector needs to be mobilised to promote business linkages with small enterprises. Larger local firms and international firms should be encouraged to develop more linkages with SMMEs.

It is recommended that a proper national business opportunity database at one of the prominent service providers like the Chamber of Commerce, the Small Business Information Centre or the Ministry of Commerce and Industry be established. This national database would provide linkage opportunities between the government tender board, private sector companies and the SMMEs. The linkage programme could also include pre-selling meetings with buyers and buyer/seller/supplier meetings.

It is recommended that an SMME Business Directory that contains information on enterprises products, services and location be published through the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry. This will address the major problems of competition and lack of customers in the SMME sector.

7.5.4.6 Promotion

The study has shown that promotion of business support services is clearly lacking in the SMME sector despite the existence of many service providers.

It is recommended that business support organisations consider some of the following activities that can be undertaken to improve the promotion of business information services among enterprises:

- Design realistic and cost effective promotional programmes for all major business support organisations;
- Organise study tours for SMMEs to visit business information services in their respective areas;
- Develop simple but informative brochures for business organisations; and
- Disseminate information brochures widely and advertise services through newspapers, radio and TV; and
- Increase awareness through an SMS service with contact information and advice.

Information services need to be well branded and marketed if they are to be used. Many businesses have only an infrequent need of information from service providers, and good branding is essential if the SMME are to think of using information services when the need arises. Business support organisations should also consider hiring the services of professional promotion agencies to design promotional programmes so that such services will increase the visibility of service providers.

7.5.4.7 Resources

It has been shown in the study that business support organisations generally lack adequate resources and trained manpower to deliver effectively business information services to SMMEs.

It is recommended that business support organisations mobilise more resources to improve the delivery of business information services to the SMME sector. A number of international organisations were suggested during the survey as possible partners in building business information services in Namibia. They include the EU, USAID, and the Commonwealth. There are also organisations like UNIDO and the International Trade Centre that have specific business information improvement programmes aimed at developing countries and SMMEs in particular. The stakeholders in the SMME sector should find means and ways of partnering with these international organisations for skills transfers in the area of setting up business information services.

It is also recommended that a strong private/public sector partnership be formed locally to improve the delivery of business information services in Namibia in general. There are many big companies in the mining, fishing and agricultural sector as well as players in the banking sector, NGOs, regional and local councils that can be approached to partner with government in the improvement of business information services in the SMME sector.

7.5.3.8 Training

Training was identified as one of the key areas that need to be addressed in the delivery of business information services. Both SMMEs and business support organisations expressed the need for more training in business information.

In light of this key requirement, it is recommended that business information service staff be trained in the following areas:

- Business;
- The effective use of information;
- Handling enquiries;
- Use of the Internet as a business information resource;

- Development and management of a business information service and
- Operation and maintenance of information management systems.

It is also recommended that the training of SMME operators/managers should include procedures on how to access business information from various print and electronic sources. The training of SMMEs in business information services should be done on a continuous basis as the nature of business information sources is ever-changing. If services include the provision of cyber cafés then training must include the use of the Internet, e-mail, e-business, and the use of many other computer-based packages that are specifically designed for small enterprises.

7.5.5 Recommendations on the utilisation of ICTs in the use and delivery of business information services

The study has shown that the utilisation of ICTs among SMMEs is very low, while it is relatively high among service providers. The study has also shown that SMMEs are still lagging in the use of the Internet and e-business and that, the industry in Namibia is not yet ready for e-business takeoff due to the high costs of procuring IT, legislative limitations and other logistical and operational constraints.

It is recommended that in order to address the current challenges that SMMEs face in accessing ICTs, government and other key stakeholders in the industry must address the issue of costs. We often hear that the costs of technology are going down, but the reality on the ground in many developing countries is that IT equipment is not easily accessible to many entrepreneurs. The only tool that has made an impact is the mobile phone and, as discussed in the information delivery strategy in Chapter six, service providers should build services around this technology, at least for the time being.

In order to close the technological gap between SMMEs and business service providers, special ICT products/services must be designed for SMMEs to enable them to have

access to new technologies. SMMEs must be encouraged to venture into e-business so that they can expand their reach to global markets. But they can only do this if they have access to affordable technologies.

The study has shown that business support organisations have well developed ICT infrastructure with most organisations operating in-house networks. However, this development has not benefited SMMEs, as they do not have complimentary technologies to link up with the service providers. It is, therefore, recommended that business support organisations begin to address the issue of ICT access in the SMME sector through addressing the constraints that SMMEs face like costs, by lobbying government for the right legislative frameworks in e-banking and e-commerce to enable SMMEs to be part of the global market place.

7.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

As outlined in the statement of the problem in section 1.2.1 of Chapter 1, the purpose of the study was to examine information needs, seeking patterns and information services in the SMME sector in Namibia.

The approach to the investigation could be replicated in other developing economies and researchers would probably obtain similar results. It is hoped that the model that has been proposed can be adapted and tested in other developing economies with similar circumstances to Namibia. In this way theoretical development in the field will be advanced.

The research on SMMEs in Namibia has been limited to investigating the general problems that enterprises face. It is evident that no research on information behaviour in the SMME sector included a basis for designing better services. The findings of this study may go a long way in influencing policy and practice. The recommendations of the present study can be taken into consideration to design or improve business information

services in the SMME sector in Namibia, and other developing economies. The study could give government, chambers of commerce and industry, SMME associations, and NGOs the direction they require to improve the current business development services in Namibia.

7.7 FURTHER RESEARCH

The examination of business information needs, seeking patterns and review of business information services in the SMME sector in Namibia is the first such study in the country. Several issues have emerged that require further investigation regarding business information services in the SMME sector.

Future studies on SMME business information services in Namibia should focus on the following:

- Specific industry sectors so that information delivery strategies can be more targeted and effective;
- The use of business information and its impact on SMMEs' competitiveness is another area that warrants further study in the SMME sector. After a pioneering study like this has established the information needs and seeking-patterns of SMMEs, the next stage would be to study the impact of information on the enterprises.
- The role of ICTs in the SMME sector also emerged as another area requiring further investigation. Although a number of studies have been carried out, they have to extend into areas like SMMEs and e-business, and e-commerce.

7.8 CONCLUSION

The study achieved its aim of examining the information needs, seeking patterns and information services in the SMME sector in Namibia. It has also shown that it is important to have a fuller understanding of SMMEs' information needs and seeking patterns if proper information delivery systems are to be implemented. It has also been demonstrated that it is important to review existing services to identify gaps, as well as the use of ICTs in the delivery of business information services. Several recommendations on how to improve the present state of business information delivery to SMMEs have been made. Recommendations have also been made on areas that require further research.

The provision of business information services to the SMME sectors is one of the important areas that service providers in developing countries should consider for building capacity in economic development for poverty reduction and for employment creation. There has been too much emphasis on addressing constraints such as access to finance, markets, transport, training and technology and too little emphasis on access to business information. Access to business information is important in that it opens up many other avenues for enterprises. In many developing countries, information service projects are associated with failure due to a number of factors. Access to business information should, however, not be addressed in isolation from other services. Business information provision solutions should be set alongside other business development services like training, marketing, business advisory services, and a host of other services traditionally offered by Business Development Services.

In summary, the study's conclusion is that while information is an important ingredient of business, the demand by SMMEs for information services alone is not enough. This needs to be accompanied by awareness raising, direct contacts with SMME operators and the packaging of business information with other business development services. There is

a very limited chance of establishing and operating stand alone information services for SMMEs on a commercial basis. However, there is room for service providers in Namibia to coordinate and work together for the effective dissemination of business information services to the SMME sector. This sector has potential for growth, for contributing to national GDP, for alleviating poverty through employment creation and for empowering previously disadvantaged members of the Namibian community. This requires the right mix of business supports services.