

From a Pilot Survey to Improve the Quality of a Research: The Case of the SMEs Survival Research Project in Italy¹

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Abstract

The data collection phase plays a key role in the overall research quality and pilot tests are highly encouraged, especially in quantitative, survey-based research. The context of this study is an investigation about critical factors for the survival of Italian SMEs and the evaluation of these factors is highly dependent on how surveys are administered to entrepreneurs.

The aim of this research method paper is to present the results of an initial pilot survey sample of 37 Italian SMEs to understand and discuss what is necessary to change for the final survey, and how. In particular, validity and reliability issues are addressed, in order to stress the importance of having a pilot survey to improve research quality.

From the analysis of the results the major criticalities of the questionnaire will emerge, and some specific orientation and advices will be underlined. The study will show a list of items included in the pilot version of the questionnaire that: could be dropped, could be added and have to be further discussed with a sample of respondents. Moreover, some consideration on the clarity of language and ambiguity of words such as clarity of instructions will emerge.

Findings of the pilot study will be useful to refine survey items for further steps of the research, which will investigate other Italian regions and compare results with other European and non-European countries.

Keywords: Pilot survey; research quality; validity; reliability; Italian SMEs.

¹ Rossella Baratta contributed to Sections 3 and 4, Francesca Simeoni contributed to Section 2 and 5, while Paola Castellani and Chiara Rossato contributed to Sections 1. All authors proofread and approved the final manuscript.

1. Introduction

The data collection phase plays a key role in the overall research quality and pilot tests are highly encouraged, especially in quantitative, survey-based research.

The context of this study is an investigation about critical factors for the survival of Italian SMEs. SMEs are extremely important to the Italian business economy (OECD, 2014); however, they face a lower productivity with respect to the European average, and a quite high mortality rate. It is therefore important to understand which are the critical success factors and the barriers for business survival, and the evaluation of these factors is highly dependent on how surveys are administered to entrepreneurs.

The aim of this research method paper is to present the results of an initial pilot survey sample of 37 Italian SMEs to understand and discuss what is necessary to change for the final survey, and how. The purpose of this study is not therefore the analysis of the results to reflect on the initial evidence regarding the success factors of the SMEs, but rather the analysis of the results to understand the goodness of the analysis tool.

In particular, validity and reliability issues are addressed, in order to stress the importance of having a pilot survey to improve the overall research quality.

It should be noted that the analysed sample includes not only valid answers, but also partially incomplete questionnaires. The reason lies in the fact that it is possible to understand some problems of the questionnaire exactly from the incomplete answers.

From this pilot research it is therefore possible to obtain two outputs:

- a discussion on the goodness of the analysis tool, i.e. the questionnaire;
- a preliminary discussion on success factors to SMEs survival.

The former output is addressed throughout this article, while the latter is proposed in a different article, also presented in this conference (Castellani et al., 2018).

Findings of the pilot study will be useful to refine survey items for further steps of the research. The main problems that emerged in the pilot test will be presented, and in particular some changes will be proposed, such as items to that can be dropped, items that can be added and items that need further discussion.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the theoretical background is presented in section 2, research methodology is explained in section 3, main results are presented and discussed in section 4 while section 5 deals with conclusions and further research possibilities.

2. Theoretical background

A pilot study consists in a small-scale rehearsal of a full survey, addressing a small sample of the target population, that is not statistically representative (Callan & Teasdale, 1999; Mahanti & Antony, 2009).

The main purpose of pilot tests is to refine the survey instrument for the actual research (Lakal, Joshi, & Jain, 2018), to incorporate suggestions, revise and adjust items where necessary (Aminu & Shariff, 2015). A pilot test serves to reduce the ambiguity of items, and possibly rewording (Lakal et al., 2018), to ensure that respondents will not face problems in answering the questions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Clarity of language in fact is of pivotal importance in self-administered questionnaires, together with clarity of instructions (Bell, 2006), and pilot tests reveal if language was clear to respondents (Fink, 2017). In addition, a pilot test may lead to condense the survey instrument, dropping unnecessary items and retaining only some of them (De Vellis, 2003). Having a pilot test prior to the full research may therefore enhance the final response rate, by eliminating potential sources of difficulty and by making the survey instrument shorter and clearer to respondents (Fink, 2017).

A second purpose of pilot tests is to assess the validity and reliability of the survey. Validity means whether questions make sense to respondents, and the extent to which an item is able to measure what it should be measuring (Sekeran & Bougie, 2010; Saunders et al., 2009). Validity is therefore related to the aforementioned issues of clarity of language, clarity of instructions and reduction of ambiguity. Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency of information and the degree to which an instrument is free from errors (Sekeran & Bougie, 2010). A reliable survey instrument will yield the same results if replicated at different times and under different conditions (Saunders et al., 2009). Reliability is generally calculated with statistical measurements, one of the most frequently used is Cronbach's alpha. To sum up, a valid survey provides accurate information, a reliable survey produces consistent information (Fink, 2017). It becomes clear that all surveys must have a pilot test before the actual research (Fink, 2017).

Nevertheless, pilot testing a survey, even if necessary, may not be sufficient to ensure the validity of the survey instrument and qualitative methods should be included in the full research protocol. Validity and clarity of language should be addressed prior to the pilot survey, for example with face to face interviews with respondents (Aminu & Shariff, 2015; Tang, Wang, & Zhang, 2007), and a focus group could be a useful tool to refine the survey instrument prior to the administration (Sullivan-Taylor & Branicki, 2011). Interviews and focus groups are also recommended after the pilot survey, since they allow to obtain deepen insights into the survey items that revealed criticalities (Antony, 2004).

3. Methodology

The context of the research is an investigation about the critical factors for the survival of Italian SMEs. Due to the explanatory nature of the research, a quantitative, survey-based method was preferred. Questionnaires are in fact deemed appropriate to examine relations between variables, especially cause-effects relations (Saunders et al., 2009).

The pilot survey was conducted through a questionnaire to 43 Italian SMEs. Since the sample of the pilot survey does not need to be representative of the total population, a convenience sampling technique was adopted (Saunders et al., 2009), and the easiest cases to obtain were selected. Even if not representative, respondents should however be similar to the ones who will be addressed by the actual research (Fink, 2017), therefore only Italian SMEs were included in the sample, and only if they respected the selected criterion chosen for the final survey, i.e. companies older than 2 years. The aim of the full research in fact is to examine critical factors for the survival of Italian SMEs, and a 2 years threshold was deemed an appropriate proxy to measure survival (Castellani et al., 2018). Entrepreneurs were chosen on the basis of personal knowledge with the researchers, they were contacted on the phone by the researchers and directly asked to participate to the survey. An online, self-administered questionnaire was then sent to the entrepreneurs that accepted to participate, together with a cover letter explaining the main purposes of the study. From the initial 43 companies that were contacted, 67 accesses were counted on the online platform, of which 30 blank questionnaires (maybe entrances into the platform to see what it was and back to compile later), 4 partially incomplete questionnaires and 33 complete questionnaires were received. For the purposes of pilot tests incomplete questionnaire may be useful too (Estermann, 2014), hence the final sample of the pilot study is made of 37 companies. The questionnaire addresses entrepreneurs, managing directors or executive directors only, since they have a leading role in the company, and they are supposed to have sufficient knowledge about both the company and the business.

The target of the questionnaire was underlined also in the cover letter that was sent to respondents together with the link to get access to the online survey. In the letter it was specifically mentioned that: *“in order to guarantee a better result of the research, the questionnaire should be fulfilled by the entrepreneur himself, or by someone with sufficient knowledge about the company and the entrepreneur, and that is able to answer in his behalf”*. Furthermore, in the third question of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to select their role inside the company among the followings: entrepreneur, managing director or executive director.

The survey instrument was developed after a thorough literature review on SMEs survival and success factors (Castellani et al., 2018).

The questionnaire used in the pilot test is made of 5 sections. The first part of the questionnaire deals with the respondents' demographic details and the company's general characteristics. This is a quite long section, containing 23 questions. Section 2 involves only one question, and respondents are asked their level of agreement on a 5 point Likert scale with respect to 10 personality traits they identify with. In section 3 there is again only one question, and respondents have to select from a list of 13 indicators which ones they use to measure their business performance. The heading “other, please specify” is added, to ensure that all possible relevant topic could be included and to allow potential suggestions to come from respondents (Bell, 2006; Fink, 2017).

Section 4 and 5 involve a list of critical SMEs success factors or barriers to success respectively, as they were derived from the literature review. In particular, section 4 includes 33 possible critical success factors, that can be rated on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from very unimportant to very important; in section 5 instead 29 possible barriers to the business can be rated, again on a 5 point Likert scale, from very small to very large. The heading “other, please specify” is added to both sections.

In the final part of the questionnaire, respondents are asked the time they needed to complete the survey, and whether they have any additional suggestion or observation, as recommended by the literature (Bell, 2006). Respondents also find the possibility to leave their email contact if they wish to receive additional information. A copy of the questionnaire is reported in Appendix 1 (the attached questionnaire shows some modification proposals deriving from the results that emerged with this study).

The full research will require statistical elaborations in order to examine the cause-effect relations and find which are the survival factors for Italian SMEs. The purpose of the pilot is however a different one, i.e. highlighting the items that deserve further study (Callan & Teasdale, 1999). Therefore, each item of the questionnaire was carefully analysed, to assess the survey validity and reliability, whether the questionnaire needs to be refined for the full research, and how.

In the next section, results deriving from the analysis of the pilot questionnaires are presented, with the aim not so much to present the first results of this survey, but, as mentioned, discuss and possibly propose improvements to the data collection tool.

Descriptive statistics do not require a minimum sample size; for correlation a sample of 34 valid responses was deemed appropriate since the literature provides examples of pilot tests performing correlation matrices with $N < 20$ (Cholasuke, Bhardwa, & Antony, 2004).

4. Findings. What is necessary to improve?

The final sample size of the pilot study, in short because this issue is deepened by the other already cited paper (Castellani et al., 2018), is made of 37 Italian SMEs, mainly located in Verona and its province, except one that is located in Mantua and another one in Modena. Limited companies represent the vast majority (34 out of 37), 2 companies are partnerships and 1 is a sole trader. Companies operate in diverse industry sectors, manufacturing is however the most common with 17 companies belonging to this industry. Five companies operate in wholesaling and retailing, 5 in service activities, 4 in professional, scientific and technical activities, 1 in agriculture, forestry and fishing, 1 in constructions, 1 in information and communication, 1 in artistic, sports, entertainment and amusement activities, 1 in accommodation and catering services, and 1 in rental and travel agencies. The oldest company was founded in 1903, while the youngest one derives from a division of enterprises that happened on February 2016. The 2 years survival threshold was than respected in the

sampling method. Company size ranges from 108 full time employees to only 1 employee in the case of the sole trader company.

The careful analysis of each item of the questionnaire provides the following results, that will be usefully adopted for the actual research.

The response rate (about 86%) is very high but there are some signals that worry and may indicate that the questionnaire was found too long by respondents. The first important consideration is that to get complete questionnaires it was necessary to personally call the company, even several times, and request the completion of the questionnaire. An impossible task in a definitive phase of the research, with a much larger sample. The idea that the questionnaire is too long is supported by the fact that in the 4 incomplete questionnaires that were received, missing answers always belong to the final sections of the questionnaire. In particular, 2 respondents only completed Section 1, one respondent left the survey after Section 3 and another one after section 4. Furthermore, the time needed to complete the questionnaire ranges from 3 minutes to 50 minutes, 20 minutes on average.

Some items could be dropped, and the questionnaire become shorter (in the attached questionnaire the dropped items are shown with a double-barred); condensing the survey instrument is indeed one of the main purposes of pilot tests (De Vellis, 2003). Which are the items to retain and the ones to drop is however a crucial choice that requires further investigation.

One possibility to drop unnecessary items from the questionnaire is to select the items that received the lowest rating on frequency scales, and that therefore are supposed to be quite irrelevant for the goal of the final research. Hereafter, some examples that emerged from the analysis of the pilot test. In question 14 respondents have to rate the frequency with which they used 6 sources of business support or advice on a 4 point scale. The item “Government Support Agencies” presents the lowest average frequency: 1.17 with a standard deviation of 0.38.

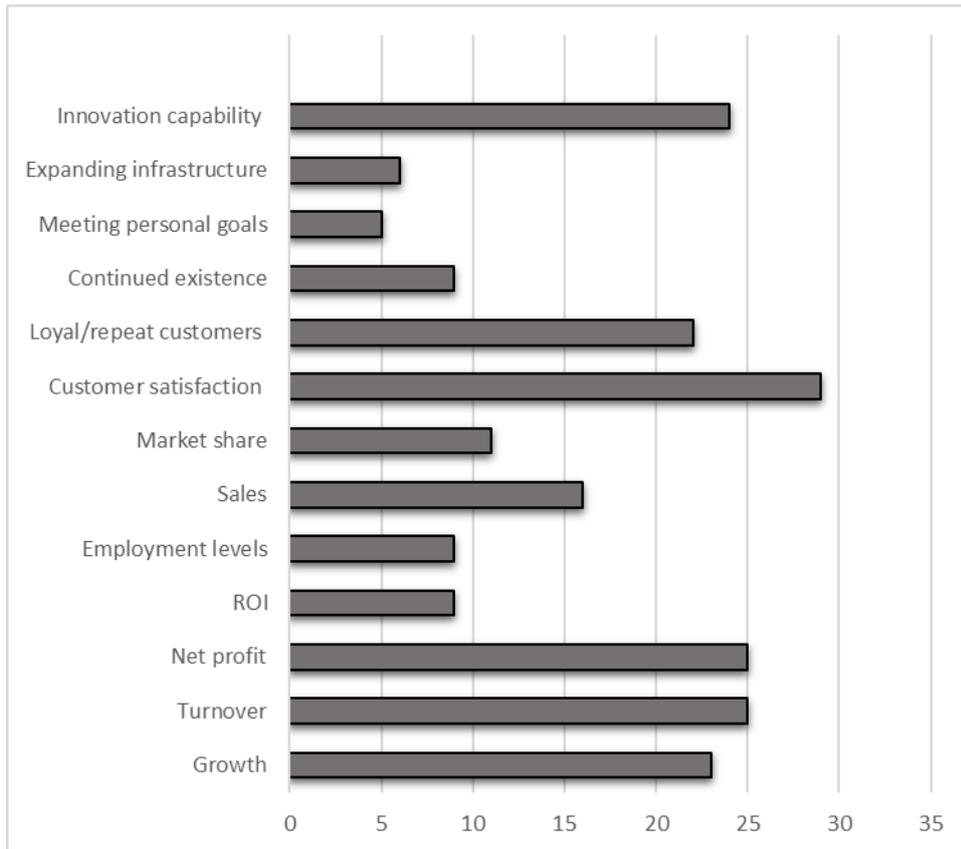
In Section 3, dealing with the indicators to measure Business Performance (Figure 1), only 5 respondents selected the item “Meeting personal goals”, and only 6 the item “Expanding infrastructure”. Interestingly, a relative small number of respondents, i.e. 11 out of 37, selected “Continued existence” as indicator of performance. This, however, does not directly mean that such items should be eliminated from the questionnaire, on the contrary they should rather be better investigated for example through a qualitative methodology involving personal interviews with the entrepreneurs, in order to understand the reasons behind their unexpected answers.

In questions with Likert scales, the problematic items are the ones that are rated with the central value of the scale, because this means that they are deemed irrelevant by respondents.

In Section 4, respondents are asked to rate the relative importance of 33 critical success factors on a 5 point scale. The great majority of items, i.e. 25, received an average level of importance of 4, but 5 items were rated on average neither unimportant nor important, in particular: “Good local knowledge”, “Having previous business experience”, “Having access to short term credit”, “Having a high level of education” and “Good international networks”.

On the contrary, 3 items were deemed extremely important, with an average of 5 points: “Good quality of product or service”, “Maintaining good relationships with customers” and “Ethical behaviour”. Again, this issue does not mean that items with average scores on the central value of the scale should be dropped, also due to the high standard errors that in some cases are higher than 1, as reported in Table 1.

Figure 1. Business Performance



Source: our elaboration

Table 1. Critical Success Factors

	(a) Good local knowledge	(b) Good quality of product or service	(j) Maintaining good relations with customers	(m) Having previous business experience	(o) Having access to short term credit	(v) Having a high level of education	(cc) Good international networks	(dd) Ethical behavior
Mean	3,32	4,62	4,50	3,38	3,47	3,44	3,38	4,50
St.dev	1,22	0,99	1,08	0,85	0,90	0,82	1,13	0,83

Source: our elaboration

In section 5, i.e. Barriers to the Business, of the 29 barriers presented to respondents, only 9 were rated 4 on average, the remaining 20 barriers were instead rated on average as neither small nor large. Standard errors are again very high, as reported in Table 2, and the items would require an additional investigation based on qualitative methods, before deciding for their elimination (in the attached questionnaire all the critical items are shown with a triple question mark).

Table 2. Critical Barriers to the Business

	(c)	(d)	(e)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(j)	(k)	(l)	(o)	(q)	(r)	(s)	(t)	(u)	(v)	(z)	(aa)	(bb)	(cc)
Mean	3,42	3,33	3,27	2,82	3,21	3,06	3,45	3,18	3,33	3,21	3,18	3,39	3,18	3,09	3,18	3,45	2,67	2,82	3,27	2,88
St.dev	1,00	0,92	1,04	1,07	1,05	0,86	0,97	0,95	1,08	1,32	0,92	1,20	1,10	1,16	1,24	1,09	1,41	1,24	1,38	1,29

Source: our elaboration

Another major goal of pilot tests is to refine the survey, adjusting items incorporating suggestions from respondents (in the attached questionnaire all the new suggested items are shown with an additional sign) (Aminu & Shariff, 2015; Lakal et al., 2018). This could be the case for question number 14, addressing sources of business support or advice. Respondents were asked the frequency with which they used 6 different sources of business support or advice and one of the respondents suggested the source: “trade association” in the heading “other, please specify”. This item could be added to the list in order to incorporate respondents’ suggestions.

Another possibility for survey refinement results from question number 16, addressing the social media companies use to promote themselves. Four social media were listed, and none of the respondents selected the answer “Snapchat”, while 4 respondents added “LinkedIn” in the heading “other, please specify”. The final survey should therefore be refined according to these observations and the social media Snapchat should be substituted by LinkedIn.

It is worth adding that 8 respondents suggested the “company’s website” or more generically the “Internet” as social media to promote their companies. These however cannot be classified as social media and obviously cannot be incorporated in the final survey. This evidence can be better discussed, together with other results, in order to define the characteristic features of SMEs when investigating their survival (Castellani et al., 2018).

Question number 19 provides an additional opportunity to refine the questionnaire: respondents were asked to select from a list of 13 indicators which one(s) they use to measure their business performance, and in the heading “other, please specify” one responded added the indicators “product diversification” and “geographical diversification”. Just one respondent is too little to justify a variation to the questionnaire, but it is sufficient to consider it in a qualitative analysis at a useful later time.

With respect to clarity of language and ambiguity of words, that directly relate to the survey validity (Fink, 2017; Lakal et al., 2018), some problematic issues emerged.

The questionnaire involves 2 questions addressing the number of employees: question number 5 refers to part time and full time employees at the start up, while question number 6 to the actual part time and full time employees. However, 7 respondents did not indicate the number of employees at the start up and 3 respondents did not indicate the number of actual employees. This issue could partially result from a problem in the clarity of language, and the ambiguity related to the word “employee”: companies that did not answer these questions were further contacted on the phone by the researchers, and it was found that they simply did not consider themselves or other staff members as “employees” but rather as “partners” or “co-workers”. The term “employees” needs therefore to be reworded with a more generic one to ensure the clarity of language, another major purpose of pilot tests.

Another problematic issue with respect to clarity of language is highlighted by question number 19 in Section 3, addressing the performance indicators. Interestingly, only a relative small number of respondents selected the item “Continued existence”, and one possible explanation is that entrepreneurs consider survival a necessary condition rather than a method to measure their performance. The item therefore should be reworded for the full research to avoid ambiguity.

Additional problems emerged with respect to the clarity of instructions, another issue connected to the survey validity (Bell, 2006; Fink, 2017). The questionnaire in fact was specifically developed to target the companies’ entrepreneurs, managing directors or executive directors only, because of their leading role and their deep knowledge about the company. This was the case for the majority of the questionnaires (24 out of 37): 18 were fulfilled by the entrepreneurs, 4 by managing directors and 2 by executive managers. However, the remaining 13 questionnaires were fulfilled by other members of the staff: 4 administrative officers, 2 associate partners, 1 company’s chairman, 1 company’s manager, 1 legal representative, 1 administrative clerk, 1 accountant and 2 clerks. This issue highlights a problem in the clarity of instructions provided to respondents, that should be therefore adjusted and better specified for the actual research.

It is arguable to believe that some missing answers are the result of insufficient knowledge about the company, such as question number 5, i.e. the number of employees at the start up. Indeed, 7 respondents did not answer this question, and 3 of them are not entrepreneurs, nor managing nor executive directors (3 entrepreneurs, 1 managing directors, 1 administrative officer, 1 accountant and 1 company’s manager).

Besides the problem of some missing answers, the ambiguity in the respondents’ profile obviously calls into question the survey validity and reliability. Therefore, even if a questionnaire is complete it should be rejected in the full research because variables are not measuring what they should be measuring (Saunders et al., 2009).

This is especially true for Section 2. This section investigates the respondents’ personality traits and it is obviously aimed at obtaining insights about entrepreneurs’ characteristics and not the personality of other members of the staff.

In this specific section, 5 questionnaires are left blank: 1 was fulfilled by the entrepreneur and 1 by the managing director, the remaining 3 questionnaires were however fulfilled by 1

administrative officer, 1 accountant and 1 company’s manager. An additional problem connected the survey validity is related to the questionnaires that are complete in this section, but that were not fulfilled from a person having a leading role inside the company.

A problem with scaled questions is that respondents generally do not use all the values of the scale (Gillham, 2000). In the current pilot, however, this appears to be true only in Section 2, related to respondents’ personal characteristics. In fact, 2 respondents (1 managing director and 1 clerk) display no variation, rating 4 all the proposed items. Other 2 respondents (1 entrepreneur and 1 company’s manager) rate 4 all items except 1. This can call into question the validity of the survey and the decision whether to keep or discard the questionnaire. In section 4 and 5 instead, even if not using all the values of the scale, respondents display quite enough variation in rating items.

A related problem lies in the order of presentation of the items in each question: it could be the case that respondents do not use all the values of the scale and assess the same value to items that are presented one after each other. A correlation matrix was calculated for Section 4 and Section 5, since they involve a large list of items, while it was not deemed appropriate for section 2 and 3. Several correlations have been found, however some of them could hardly be motivated from a logical perspective, although the possible link may be evident, and it is possible to argue that respondents just gave the same rating to items because they were listed one after each other in the original questionnaire. This kind of correlations for Section 4 and 5 is reported in Table 3 and 4 respectively (only strong correlation, i.e. >0.7 are reported).

Table 3. Correlation hardly motivated in Section 4

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS. Section 4	Continuous improvement	Being able to retain high quality staff	Having good leadership qualities	Appropriate training	Employee empowerment	Good financial management
Short waiting times	0.842					
Good relations with customers		0.723				
Having good marketing skills			0.746			
Having good operations skills				0.703		
Knowledge management					0.735	
Satisfied employees						0.746

Source: our elaboration

Table 4. Correlation hardly motivated in Section 5

BARRIERS TO THE BUSINESS	Lack of business advisors
Lack of training opportunities	0.711

Source: our elaboration

Another reason to build correlation matrices is to find out items that are highly correlated and that provide the possibility to be merged into only one item, since they can be considered nearly synonyms. This was the case for Section 4, where “Having access to short term credit” was positively correlated to “Having access to long term credit” and “Employee empowerment” with “Employee involvement”. Similar correlations have been found in Section 5 too: “National competition” with “International competition” (but none of them with “Local competition”), and “Too much government regulation” with “High governmental taxes”. These correlations are reported in table 5 and 6.

Table 5. Items to be merged in Section 4

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS	Having access to long term credit	Employee involvement
Having access to short term credit	0.759	
Employee empowerment		0.797

Source: our elaboration

Table 6. Items to be merged in Section 5

BARRIERS TO THE BUSINESS	International competition Too much government regulation
National competition	0.907
High government taxes	0.797

Source: our elaboration

5. Conclusions

The aim of this theoretical paper was to stress the importance of pilot testing a survey before the actual research.

Results provide support for the importance and relevance of pilot testing, because several opportunities for survey refinement resulted from the analysis. The first and general problem concerns the fact that the questionnaire is too long (too many questions and too much time to complete) and to decide how to shorten it, it is necessary to make decisions about the results that emerged in this research:

- 4 items could be dropped,
- 3 items could be added,
- 10 items have to be discussed with a sample of respondents,
- some terms have to be reformulated and clarified,
- the used pre-compilation instructions were not sufficiently effective.

For the present survey, some question could be dropped or could be added to the list in order to incorporate respondents' suggestions. These are highlighted in the questionnaire in Appendix. Some others have not reached an evident reason to drop out and would require an additional investigation based on qualitative methods, such as focus group, before deciding for their elimination or merging. The qualitative research, in this hypothesis carried out through interviews or focus group tools, would serve to reduce the data, from large amounts to meaning, signifying by "date" the items to be considered and then the questions to be formulated (Bluhm et al., 2011). Actually, a focus group could have been usefully foreseen even before the pilot phase to identify the questions and clarify the language for this specific context in line with what the literature advices.

With respect to clarity of language and ambiguity of words from the research it emerges that there are some words and maybe phrases to change (as shown also in the questionnaire in Appendix with the underlined words).

In addition, it would be advisable to review and reinforce the pre-compilation instructions to obtain a higher percentage of questionnaires actually fulfilled by a leading figure in the company.

Surely, how to redefine and correct the questionnaire is a question to reopen after conducting interviews or focus groups with at least some of the current respondents, and this could be a possible future advancement of the research. It would be also useful to enlarge the sample for this pilot phase to better understand some questions.

Another limit of this research that represents a possible future step is the limited geographical extension of the sample. It would be necessary for at least the actual research to enlarge the sample of Italian SMEs making comparison between Northern Italy and Southern Italy, and eventually with other European and non-European countries.

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Appendix 1.

Italian SMEs Survey – Questionnaire

Section 1. About you and your company

Company name _____ (to be removed, if we want to keep the survey anonymous)

Company location (Province) _____

Respondent's role in the company, that has to be a leading role in the company (to select from a list)

- Entrepreneur
- Managing director
- Executive director
- Other (please specify): _____

Education (according to the Italian school system)

- Primary school (age 6-10)
- Middle school (age 11-13)
- High school (age 14-18)
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Postgraduate
- Other (please specify): _____

Age: _____

Gender: F M

<p>1. Are you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sole trader <input type="checkbox"/> Partnership (there exist 3 different kinds of partnership in Italy) <input type="checkbox"/> Limited company (there exist 3 different kinds of limited company in Italy)
<p>2. What is your industry sector? (Please tick ONE only) (According to the ATECO Italian classification)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture, forestry, fishing <input type="checkbox"/> Mineral extraction from quarries and mines <input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing; please specify: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Providing electricity, gas, steam, air conditioning <input type="checkbox"/> Providing water, sewage system, waste management <input type="checkbox"/> Constructions <input type="checkbox"/> Wholesaling, retailing, repairing motor vehicles and motorcycles; please specify: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Transport and storage <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation and catering services <input type="checkbox"/> Information and communication <input type="checkbox"/> Financial and insurance activities <input type="checkbox"/> Real estate activities <input type="checkbox"/> Professional, scientific and technical activities <input type="checkbox"/> Rental, travel agencies, business support service activities; please specify: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Public administration and defense; compulsory social security <input type="checkbox"/> Education <input type="checkbox"/> Healthcare and social assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Artistic, sports, entertainment and amusement activities <input type="checkbox"/> Other service activities; please specify: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel
<p>3. In what year did your company first begin trading?</p> <p><input style="width: 50px; height: 15px;" type="text"/></p>
<p>4. Where do you do business? (please tick ALL that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Locally <input type="checkbox"/> Nationally (Italy) <input type="checkbox"/> Internationally (European Union) <input type="checkbox"/> Internationally (Outside the EU)

<p>5. How many <u>employees</u> did you have at start up?</p> <p>(a) = Full time Staff (nr. _____)</p> <p>(b) = Part time Staff (nr. _____)</p>
<p>6. How many <u>employees</u> do you have now?</p> <p>(c) = Full time Staff (nr. _____)</p> <p>(d) = Part time Staff (nr. _____)</p>
<p>7. Do you employ any family members?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, how many? <input type="text"/></p>
<p>8. Have you had <u>previous</u> experience of managing/owning a business?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, how many years? <input type="text"/></p>
<p>9. (a) Did your parents own a business?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>(b) If yes, did your parents own your company?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>(c) If yes, did your parents manage your same core business?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>(d) If the core business has been changed, please explain why.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

<p>10. (a) Are the company owners (specify also how many owners are male or female):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Male (nr. _____)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Female (nr. _____)</p> <p>(b) Are there family ties between the company owners?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p>
<p>11. Have any of the partners or owners left the business since start up?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p>
<p>12. Have you or any of your partners ever experienced an entrepreneurial failure?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p>
<p>13. (a) Did you receive any preferential financial help at international, national, regional or local level to set up your business?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>(b) What type of financial help have you received?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

14. Please indicate the extent to which you have used any of the following for business support and / or advice:
(1 = never use; 2 = sometimes use; 3 = usually use; 4 = always use)

(a) Market contacts	1	2	3	4
(b) External Accountants	1	2	3	4
(c) Consultants	1	2	3	4
(d) Government Support Agencies	1	2	3	4
(e) Network of social contacts	1	2	3	4
(f) Academics	1	2	3	4
(g) Other (please specify)	1	2	3	4

15. Do you have a company website?

Yes
 No

16. Which of these social media do you use to promote your company?

Facebook
 Twitter
 ~~Snapshot~~
 Instagram
 Other (please specify)

17. Who will take over the running of the company in the event that you can no longer continue to do so for various reasons?

Other family member
 Other partner
 Don't know
 The company will cease to trade when I retire / die

Section 2: Your characteristics

18. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements that best describe you, where:
1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = slightly agree, 5 = totally agree.

I am decisive	1	2	3	4	5
I am resolute	1	2	3	4	5
I am pragmatic	1	2	3	4	5
I am self-confident	1	2	3	4	5
I am creative	1	2	3	4	5
I have high achievement drive	1	2	3	4	5
I am goal oriented	1	2	3	4	5
I have good interpersonal skills	1	2	3	4	5
I have excellent knowledge of my business	1	2	3	4	5
I am an experienced business person	1	2	3	4	5

Section 3: Business Performance

19. Which of the following do you use to measure your business performance?
(Tick all that apply)

- (a) Growth
(b) Turnover
(c) Net Profit
(d) Return on Investment (ROI)
(e) Employment levels
(f) Sales
(g) Market Share
(h) Customer Satisfaction
(i) Loyal / repeat customers
(j) ~~Continued existence~~ ???
(k) ~~Meeting personal goals~~
(l) ~~Expanding infrastructure~~
(m) Innovation capability
(n) Other(s) (please specify) ???

Section 4. Critical Success Factors (CSFs)

20. Please indicate in your opinion the importance of each of the factors listed below to the survival of your business. Where:
1 = Very unimportant, 2 = Unimportant, 3 = Neither unimportant nor important, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important

		1 Very Unimportant	2 Unimportant	3 Neither unimportant nor important	4 Important	5 Very Important
(a) Good local knowledge		1	2	3	4	5
(b) Good quality product or service		1	2	3	4	5
(c) Working in a cluster		1	2	3	4	5
(d) Supplier quality		1	2	3	4	5
(e) Continuous improvement		1	2	3	4	5
(f) Short waiting times		1	2	3	4	5
(g) Use of information technology (IT)		1	2	3	4	5
(h) Being able to recruit high quality staff		1	2	3	4	5
(i) Being able to retain high quality staff		1	2	3	4	5
(j) Maintaining good relationships with customers		1	2	3	4	5
(k) Having good leadership qualities		1	2	3	4	5
(l) Having good marketing skills		1	2	3	4	5
(m) Having previous business experience		1	2	3	4	5
(n) Creating a brand that customers associate with		1	2	3	4	5
(o) Having access to short term credit ???		1	2	3	4	5
(p) Having access to long term credit ???		1	2	3	4	5
(q) Having sufficient cash to pay suppliers		1	2	3	4	5
(r) Having good operations skills		1	2	3	4	5
(s) Having access to appropriate training		1	2	3	4	5
(t) Having government policies that foster an environment that is favorable to small businesses		1	2	3	4	5
(u) Being able to access business advisors		1	2	3	4	5
(v) Having a high level of education		1	2	3	4	5
(w) Good employee relations		1	2	3	4	5
(x) Ability to find new customers		1	2	3	4	5
(y) Benchmarking ability		1	2	3	4	5
(z) Employee involvement ???		1	2	3	4	5

(aa)	Employee empowerment ???	1	2	3	4	5
(bb)	Knowledge management	1	2	3	4	5
(cc)	Good international networks	1	2	3	4	5
(dd)	Ethical behavior	1	2	3	4	5
(ee)	Good financial management	1	2	3	4	5
(ff)	Satisfied employees	1	2	3	4	5
(gg)	Convenient location	1	2	3	4	5
(hh)	Other (s) please specify	1	2	3	4	5

Section 5. Barriers to the Business

21. Please indicate in your opinion the extent to which the factors listed below act as barriers to the survival of your business. Where:
1 = Very small, 2 = Small, 3 = Neither small not large, 4 = Large, 5 = Very Large

		1 Very Small	2 Small	3 Neither Small nor Large	4 Large	5 Very Large
(a)	Inability to recruit quality staff	1	2	3	4	5
(b)	Lack of operations skills	1	2	3	4	5
(c)	Lack of management skills	1	2	3	4	5
(d)	Lack of marketing skills	1	2	3	4	5
(e)	Lack of access to finance	1	2	3	4	5
(f)	Lack of product or service innovation	1	2	3	4	5
(g)	Partial change in ownership (if applicable)	1	2	3	4	5
(h)	Lack of business experience	1	2	3	4	5
(i)	Lack of business advisors	1	2	3	4	5
(j)	Lack of training opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
(k)	Lack of infrastructure	1	2	3	4	5
(l)	Lack of government support	1	2	3	4	5
(m)	Too much government regulation ???	1	2	3	4	5
(n)	High business taxes	1	2	3	4	5
(o)	High rents for premises	1	2	3	4	5
(p)	High local government taxes ???	1	2	3	4	5
(q)	Changing neighborhood environment	1	2	3	4	5
(r)	Lack of business knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
(s)	Local competition	1	2	3	4	5
(t)	National competition ???	1	2	3	4	5

(u)	International competition ???	1	2	3	4	5
(v)	Inability to attract new customers	1	2	3	4	5
(w)	Poor financial management skills	1	2	3	4	5
(x)	Lack of skilled workers	1	2	3	4	5
(y)	High costs of production or labor	1	2	3	4	5
(z)	Conflict between family members (if applicable)	1	2	3	4	5
(aa)	Lack of education of the management	1	2	3	4	5
(bb)	Lack of vision	1	2	3	4	5
(cc)	Difficulties resulting from the generational passage	1	2	3	4	5
(dd)	Other (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5

Additional questions:

How long did it take to complete the survey? _____ min.

If you wish to receive additional information, clarifications, or if you have any suggestion, you may leave here your contact information:

Thank you for participating to our survey!!!

In compliance with the Italian Privacy Law, your answers will be kept anonymous and your personal data will not be communicated to third parts.