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Navigating Market Volatility: The Role of Consulting in Driving Agile Business Model Change in Small and Medium Enterprises.

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operate in a persistent state of vulnerability created by environmental turbulence, competitive volatility, technological disruption, and fragile organizational resource structures. Unlike large corporations, SMEs lack financial slack, formalized routines, and diversified portfolios that could absorb strategic errors. Consequently, survival and growth in this sector depend less on static efficiency and more on the firm's capacity for continuous strategic reconfiguration, organizational learning, and business model renewal. Over the last two decades, the academic fields of strategic agility, organizational learning, business model innovation, and consulting-driven organizational change have evolved largely in parallel. Yet these streams remain insufficiently integrated into a unified analytical framework that can explain how SMEs practically build, maintain, and leverage agility over time.

This article addresses that gap by developing a comprehensive, theoretically grounded, and empirically informed framework that positions business consulting as a central catalyst in the development of strategic agility and performance resilience among SMEs. Anchored in the complex consulting model proposed by Kovalchuk (2025), this study integrates classical organization-environment theory, strategic management under turbulence, workforce agility, organizational memory, and dynamic capability perspectives into a single explanatory architecture. Rather than treating consulting as a peripheral support function, the article conceptualizes it as a knowledge-based governance mechanism that aligns strategic foresight, operational flexibility, and organizational learning within SMEs.

The article advances three central arguments. First, environmental turbulence systematically weakens the effectiveness of traditional planning-based management models in SMEs, necessitating a shift toward strategic agility and adaptive governance. Second, strategic agility is not a spontaneous organizational trait but a structured capability that emerges from the interaction of leadership cognition, workforce flexibility, organizational memory, and business model architecture. Third, consulting interventions, when designed as long-term learning partnerships rather than short-term technical fixes, provide the institutional infrastructure through which SMEs can internalize agility, continuously realign strategy, and avoid the rigidity traps that characterize failing firms.

Methodologically, the article adopts an integrative theoretical design grounded in systematic synthesis of prior empirical and conceptual studies on SMEs, agility, and organizational performance. Rather than producing new numerical data, it constructs an interpretive analytical model that explains how strategic agility is created, stabilized, and converted into performance outcomes through consulting-supported organizational processes. This approach is particularly appropriate because the phenomenon under study—strategic adaptability under uncertainty—is fundamentally dynamic, socially embedded, and resistant to purely quantitative measurement.

The results demonstrate that SMEs that align consulting processes with internal learning systems, agile human resource practices, and strategic foresight mechanisms achieve higher levels of resilience, innovation, and performance sustainability, even under extreme turbulence such as economic crises and pandemic shocks. In contrast, firms that treat consulting as episodic problem-solving remain trapped in reactive cycles that erode competitiveness.

The article contributes to theory by unifying strategic agility, business model innovation, and consulting into a single explanatory framework. It contributes to practice by offering SME leaders a scientifically grounded rationale for embedding consulting into their long-term governance structures rather than using it as an emergency tool.

KEYWORDS: Strategic agility; Small and medium-sized enterprises; Business consulting; Environmental turbulence; Organizational learning; Business model innovation

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises represent the structural backbone of modern economies, not only in terms of employment generation and innovation, but also in their capacity to absorb social and technological change. Yet, despite their importance, SMEs remain disproportionately vulnerable to environmental turbulence, including market volatility, regulatory shifts, technological disruption, and unexpected crises such as pandemics or geopolitical instability (Arokodare, 2020). Classical organizational theory has long argued that organizational survival depends on the degree of fit between a firm and its environment, a principle that remains foundational for understanding SME performance (Aldrich, 1979). However, the accelerating pace of environmental change has fundamentally altered the nature of that fit. Where stability once allowed incremental adaptation, contemporary turbulence requires continuous strategic reconfiguration and learning, particularly for firms with limited resources and narrow margins of error.

In this evolving context, strategic agility has emerged as one of the most influential conceptual lenses for explaining how organizations, and especially SMEs, cope with uncertainty and complexity. Strategic agility refers to an organization's capacity to anticipate change, rapidly reallocate resources, and continuously realign its strategic intent with shifting environmental conditions (Ansoff and Sullivan, 1993). Unlike operational flexibility, which concerns short-term adjustments, strategic agility is a higher-order capability that links environmental sensing, leadership cognition, organizational learning, and business model innovation into a coherent adaptive system (Clauss et al., 2019). The growing body of empirical research demonstrates that SMEs exhibiting high levels of strategic agility outperform less agile competitors across diverse contexts, including during periods of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Gerald et al., 2020).

Yet, despite the theoretical maturity of the agility concept, there remains a significant gap between its academic articulation and its practical implementation in SMEs. Many SME owners and managers lack the analytical tools, cognitive frameworks, and organizational infrastructures required to transform abstract agility principles into everyday managerial practices (Muthuveloo and Ping, 2020). This gap is particularly pronounced in resource-constrained firms, where managerial attention is absorbed by operational survival rather than long-term strategic learning. As a result, SMEs often oscillate between reactive crisis management and ad hoc innovation without developing the deep organizational capabilities needed for

sustained adaptation (Kasim et al., 2020).

It is precisely within this gap that business consulting acquires its strategic significance. Traditionally, consulting has been viewed either as a transactional service focused on solving discrete problems or as a temporary supplement to internal managerial expertise. However, this narrow view fails to capture the transformative potential of consulting when embedded in long-term organizational development processes. The complex consulting model proposed by Kovalchuk (2025) offers a fundamentally different perspective. In this model, consulting is not merely an external intervention but a systemic process through which knowledge, methodology, and organizational learning are integrated into the core governance structures of SMEs. By aligning strategic diagnosis, methodological rigor, and implementation support, the consulting process becomes a driver of continuous capability building rather than episodic troubleshooting.

The relevance of Kovalchuk's (2025) framework becomes even more evident when viewed through the lens of environmental turbulence and strategic agility. SMEs facing volatile conditions cannot rely solely on internal routines or managerial intuition to guide strategic reconfiguration. They require structured analytical frameworks, external benchmarking, and facilitated learning processes that allow them to perceive environmental shifts before they become existential threats. Consulting, when designed as a knowledge partnership, provides precisely this function by translating complex environmental signals into actionable strategic choices while simultaneously strengthening internal learning systems.

The literature on workforce agility and organizational memory further reinforces this argument. Workforce agility refers to employees' capacity to learn, adapt, and reconfigure their skills in response to changing organizational needs (Averineni and Rama Swathi, 2019). Organizational memory, in turn, represents the accumulated knowledge, routines, and experiences that allow firms to avoid repeating past mistakes and to build on prior successes (Al-Faouri et al., 2014). Both constructs are essential for strategic agility, yet they often remain underdeveloped in SMEs due to limited formalization and high managerial turnover. Consulting processes that emphasize documentation, knowledge transfer, and reflective learning can significantly strengthen these capabilities, thereby converting individual expertise into collective organizational intelligence (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Another critical dimension of this debate concerns business model agility. SMEs do not merely compete through products or services; they compete through the coherence and

adaptability of their business models. Research shows that firms capable of rapidly redesigning value propositions, revenue mechanisms, and customer interfaces are more likely to survive and grow in turbulent environments (Battistella et al., 2017). However, business model innovation is cognitively demanding and often constrained by the mental models of SME founders who may be deeply attached to legacy assumptions about markets and customers. Consulting interventions, when grounded in structured analytical methodologies, can challenge these assumptions and open new strategic pathways that internal managers may not perceive on their own (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Despite the richness of these insights, the academic literature still lacks a fully integrated framework that explains how consulting, strategic agility, workforce adaptability, and business model innovation interact over time within SMEs. Existing studies often focus on isolated variables, such as the relationship between agility and performance (Arokodare and Asikhia, 2020) or the impact of human capital on SME success (Suroso et al., 2017), without examining the systemic processes through which these elements co-evolve. This fragmentation limits both theoretical understanding and practical relevance, particularly for SME leaders seeking coherent guidance rather than disconnected best practices.

The present article addresses this gap by synthesizing the diverse strands of research into a unified theoretical and analytical framework centered on the complex consulting model of Kovalchuk (2025). By doing so, it seeks to answer a fundamental question: how can SMEs institutionalize strategic agility in a way that is sustainable, scalable, and aligned with their resource constraints? The answer proposed here is that consulting, when conceived as a learning-based governance mechanism, provides the missing link between environmental sensing, strategic choice, and organizational capability building.

This integrative approach is especially important in the current era of VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—which has been identified as the defining characteristic of contemporary business environments (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). In such contexts, linear planning models collapse, and organizations must rely on iterative learning, experimentation, and rapid feedback loops. SMEs, because of their size and structural simplicity, are in principle well positioned to exploit these dynamics, but only if they possess the cognitive and methodological infrastructure to do so. Consulting, as articulated by Kovalchuk (2025), offers a means of constructing that infrastructure through disciplined inquiry, strategic reflection, and continuous improvement.

By grounding the analysis in established organizational theory, strategic management research, and contemporary studies of SME performance, this article aims to move

beyond abstract advocacy of agility toward a concrete, theoretically justified model of consulting-driven transformation. The following sections elaborate this model through a detailed methodology, interpretive results, and an extended discussion that situates the findings within broader scholarly debates on organizational adaptation and performance sustainability.

METHODS

The methodological approach adopted in this study is grounded in integrative theoretical synthesis rather than primary empirical data collection, a choice that reflects both the complexity of the research problem and the nature of the available scholarly evidence. Strategic agility, consulting-driven transformation, and SME performance are multidimensional constructs that emerge from dynamic interactions among organizational, environmental, and cognitive variables. Such phenomena cannot be fully captured through isolated quantitative indicators without stripping away their contextual and processual richness. Accordingly, this research follows a qualitative-analytical design that synthesizes prior empirical findings, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical models into a coherent explanatory architecture, as advocated by scholars of organizational theory and strategic management (Aldrich, 1979).

At the core of this methodology lies the complex consulting model articulated by Kovalchuk (2025), which serves as the primary conceptual anchor for integrating disparate strands of literature. Rather than treating this model as an isolated contribution, the study positions it as a meta-framework capable of absorbing and organizing insights from research on strategic agility, workforce adaptability, organizational memory, and business model innovation. This interpretive strategy is consistent with the view that organizational phenomena are best understood through layered theoretical lenses that capture both structural and processual dimensions (Bititci et al., 2012).

The first step in the methodological process involved the systematic selection and analytical reading of the reference corpus provided. These sources span multiple disciplines, including strategic management, organizational behavior, innovation studies, and SME research, thereby ensuring a comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon under investigation. Each source was examined not merely for its findings but for its underlying assumptions, conceptual definitions, and methodological orientations. This allowed for the identification of both convergent and divergent perspectives on how SMEs achieve agility and performance under turbulence (Ansoff and Sullivan, 1993; Arokodare, 2020).

The second step consisted of thematic coding and conceptual mapping. Key constructs such as environmental turbulence, strategic agility, workforce agility, organizational memory, consulting intervention, and business model innovation

were extracted from the literature and analyzed in terms of their causal relationships. For example, studies on workforce agility emphasize the role of learning, empowerment, and adaptive HR practices in enabling rapid organizational response (Averineni and Rama Swathi, 2019), while research on organizational memory highlights the importance of knowledge retention and retrieval for avoiding strategic drift (Al-Faouri et al., 2014). These constructs were then mapped onto the consulting phases identified by Kovalchuk (2025), including diagnosis, design, implementation, and institutionalization.

This mapping process served two methodological purposes. First, it allowed for the integration of micro-level processes, such as employee learning and managerial cognition, with macro-level outcomes, such as business model transformation and firm performance. Second, it enabled the identification of feedback loops through which consulting interventions reinforce or undermine strategic agility over time. Such feedback loops are central to dynamic capability theory, which views organizational performance as the outcome of iterative sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring activities (Tende and Ekanem, 2018).

The third step involved the construction of an interpretive analytical narrative that explains how these mapped relationships unfold within SMEs operating under turbulence. Rather than presenting numerical results, the study employs thick description and theoretical triangulation to demonstrate how different scholarly perspectives converge on the central role of consulting-supported learning and adaptation. For instance, evidence that strategic agility improves SME performance during crises (Gerald et al., 2020) is interpreted alongside findings on business model innovation (Clauss et al., 2019) and strategic foresight (Arokodare and Asikhia, 2020) to show how consulting mediates these relationships.

A key methodological principle guiding this synthesis is reflexive iteration. The analytical model was not constructed linearly but through repeated cycles of comparison between theory and conceptualized practice. Whenever inconsistencies or gaps emerged, the framework was refined by revisiting both Kovalchuk's (2025) consulting model and the broader literature. This iterative process reflects the epistemological position that organizational knowledge is provisional and continuously reconstructed through dialogue between theory and practice (Bessant et al., 2002). Limitations are explicitly acknowledged as part of the methodological rigor. Because the study does not generate new empirical data, its conclusions depend on the validity and generalizability of the underlying literature. However, the diversity of contexts represented in the reference corpus, including SMEs in Asia, Africa, and Europe, enhances the robustness of the synthesized model (Anggraini and Sudhartio, 2019; Arokodare, 2020). Furthermore, by grounding the analysis in a well-articulated consulting framework, the study mitigates the risk of conceptual

fragmentation that often characterizes purely narrative reviews (Kovalchuk, 2025).

In sum, the methodology combines systematic literature integration, conceptual mapping, and interpretive analysis to construct a theoretically coherent and practically relevant model of consulting-driven strategic agility in SMEs. This approach is particularly suited to exploring phenomena that are dynamic, context-dependent, and embedded in organizational learning processes, thereby aligning closely with the realities faced by SMEs in turbulent environments (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014).

RESULTS

The integrative analysis of the literature, structured through the complex consulting model of Kovalchuk (2025), reveals a consistent and theoretically meaningful pattern: SMEs that embed consulting into their strategic and organizational learning processes achieve higher levels of strategic agility, business model adaptability, and performance resilience under environmental turbulence. This result is not derived from isolated empirical observations but from the convergence of multiple streams of evidence that, when interpreted together, point toward the same underlying mechanisms (Arokodare, 2020; Clauss et al., 2019).

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of environmental sensing. Studies on strategic foresight and competitive intelligence demonstrate that SMEs often struggle to detect weak signals of change due to limited analytical capacity and cognitive biases among owner-managers (Atkinson et al., 2022). When consulting is introduced as a structured diagnostic process, these limitations are mitigated through systematic data collection, benchmarking, and scenario analysis. Kovalchuk (2025) conceptualizes this phase as the epistemic foundation of consulting, where external expertise expands the perceptual field of the organization. The result is a measurable increase in strategic awareness, which enables SMEs to anticipate rather than merely react to environmental shifts.

A second key result relates to workforce agility and organizational memory. Empirical research indicates that SMEs with agile HR practices and strong knowledge-sharing cultures are better equipped to reconfigure their operations in response to change (Averineni and Rama Swathi, 2019; Al-Faouri et al., 2014). The integrative model shows that consulting interventions reinforce these capabilities by formalizing learning processes, documenting best practices, and aligning individual competencies with strategic priorities. Over time, this leads to the accumulation of organizational memory that supports faster and more coherent responses to future disruptions (Kovalchuk, 2025).

The analysis also reveals a strong link between consulting-supported agility and business model innovation. Research

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on business model agility emphasizes that value creation mechanisms must be continuously adjusted to reflect changing customer needs and technological opportunities (Battistella et al., 2017). However, SMEs often lack the analytical frameworks needed to redesign these mechanisms systematically. Consulting provides methodological tools for mapping value chains, testing new revenue models, and evaluating strategic trade-offs, thereby enabling SMEs to implement business model changes with lower risk and greater strategic coherence (Clauss et al., 2019).

Performance outcomes emerge as the cumulative effect of these interrelated processes. Studies conducted during the Covid-19 crisis show that SMEs with higher levels of strategic agility experienced less severe performance declines and were more likely to identify new growth opportunities (Gerald et al., 2020; Kasim et al., 2020). When these findings are interpreted through the lens of Kovalchuk's (2025) model, it becomes clear that consulting acts as the catalyst that aligns environmental sensing, workforce adaptability, and business model innovation into a unified performance system.

In contrast, SMEs that engage in consulting only sporadically or in a narrowly technical manner fail to realize these benefits. Without the institutionalization of learning and strategic reflection, consulting outputs remain isolated reports rather than drivers of organizational transformation. The result is a pattern of reactive adaptation that erodes competitive advantage over time (Arokodare and Asikhia, 2020).

Overall, the results demonstrate that the effectiveness of consulting in SMEs is not determined by the volume of external advice but by the degree to which consulting is embedded in the firm's strategic and learning architectures. When aligned with the complex consulting model of Kovalchuk (2025), consulting becomes a dynamic capability that enhances strategic agility, supports continuous innovation, and ultimately improves organizational performance under turbulence.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have profound implications for both theory and practice, as they challenge conventional views of consulting, strategic agility, and SME governance. At a theoretical level, the integration of Kovalchuk's (2025) complex consulting model with the literature on strategic agility and organizational adaptation reveals that consulting is not an auxiliary managerial tool but a core component of the dynamic capability architecture of SMEs. This insight helps reconcile long-standing debates between structural and processual perspectives on organizational change (Aldrich, 1979). While structural theories emphasize the

alignment between organizations and their environments, processual theories focus on learning, sensemaking, and iterative adaptation. Consulting, when properly institutionalized, bridges these perspectives by providing both analytical structure and processual learning mechanisms.

The discussion of environmental turbulence further illustrates this point. In VUCA environments, the speed and unpredictability of change undermine the effectiveness of traditional planning-based management (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). Strategic agility, therefore, becomes the primary determinant of survival and growth. However, agility itself is not a spontaneous property; it must be deliberately cultivated through leadership cognition, organizational routines, and knowledge systems (Ansoff and Sullivan, 1993). The complex consulting model explains how these elements are coordinated through disciplined inquiry, strategic dialogue, and continuous feedback loops (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Scholarly debates on workforce agility and organizational memory also gain new coherence within this framework. Some authors argue that flexibility and stability are inherently contradictory, suggesting that highly agile organizations risk losing accumulated knowledge (Al-Faouri et al., 2014). The present analysis shows that consulting resolves this tension by creating mechanisms for capturing and codifying experiential learning, thereby allowing SMEs to remain flexible without becoming amnesic. In this sense, consulting transforms agility from a chaotic reaction to a structured evolutionary process.

The role of business model innovation further strengthens this argument. While some scholars view business model change as a disruptive event that threatens organizational identity, others see it as a continuous process of value reconfiguration (Battistella et al., 2017). Consulting provides the analytical and cognitive scaffolding that allows SMEs to navigate this tension by experimenting with new models while preserving core competencies (Kovalchuk, 2025).

From a practical standpoint, the implications are equally significant. SME leaders are often reluctant to invest in consulting due to cost constraints and skepticism about its tangible benefits. The integrative model presented here demonstrates that such skepticism is justified only when consulting is used in a fragmented and short-term manner. When embedded in long-term strategic governance, consulting becomes a multiplier of internal capabilities, enabling SMEs to achieve levels of strategic agility that would otherwise be unattainable (Muthuveloo and Ping, 2020).

The limitations of the study also point toward future research directions. While the integrative framework is grounded in a diverse body of literature, empirical validation

through longitudinal case studies would further strengthen its explanatory power (Anggraini and Sudhartio, 2019). Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons could illuminate how institutional contexts shape the effectiveness of consulting-driven agility.

In theoretical terms, future research could also explore the micro-foundations of consulting effectiveness, including the role of trust, power dynamics, and knowledge asymmetries between consultants and SME managers. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of how external and internal knowledge systems interact within the complex adaptive systems that characterize modern enterprises (Kovalchuk, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This article has developed a comprehensive and theoretically integrated framework for understanding how strategic agility and consulting-driven transformation shape the performance and resilience of SMEs operating under environmental turbulence. By anchoring the analysis in the complex consulting model proposed by Kovalchuk (2025) and synthesizing a broad range of organizational and strategic management research, the study demonstrates that consulting, when institutionalized as a learning-based governance mechanism, becomes a central driver of dynamic capability development.

Rather than viewing agility, innovation, and performance as separate outcomes, the article shows that they are interdependent dimensions of a single adaptive system. SMEs that succeed in turbulent environments are those that align environmental sensing, workforce adaptability, organizational memory, and business model innovation through structured consulting processes. In doing so, they transform uncertainty from a threat into a source of strategic opportunity.

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