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Strategic Agility, Entrepreneurial Orientation, and Operational Performance in Small Enterprises: An Integrative Review

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how entrepreneurial orientation, strategic agility, and operational performance are related in small enterprises. It argues that entrepreneurial orientation is best understood as a strategic posture, while strategic agility explains whether that posture is translated into coordinated operational action. The article uses a focused integrative review of 20 published academic sources drawn from strategic management, entrepreneurship, organizational behavior, and operations management. The review is interpretive rather than systematic and aims to clarify conceptual relationships, identify recurring tensions, and develop a more precise account of how performance emerges in small-firm settings. The literature converges on four main points. First, entrepreneurial orientation explains how firms approach opportunity, innovation, and risk more convincingly than it explains operational performance directly. Second, strategic agility is better understood as a disciplined capacity to sense, prioritize, and reconfigure than as generic flexibility or speed. Third, in small enterprises, leadership judgment, informal coordination, and resource scarcity strongly condition whether entrepreneurial intent is enacted effectively. Fourth, operational performance depends on implementation quality, routine alignment, and responsiveness rather than on innovativeness or risk-taking alone.The article offers an integrative argument that strategic agility is the translating mechanism through which entrepreneurial orientation becomes operational performance in small enterprises. In doing so, it shifts attention from broad entrepreneurship–performance claims to the organizational work of prioritization, adaptation, and enactment.

For owner-managers, the central implication is that entrepreneurial energy must be matched by lightweight but explicit decision and operating routines. Small firms improve performance not simply by pursuing more opportunities, but by evaluating them selectively, reallocating scarce effort quickly, and converting strategic intent into reliable execution.

INTRODUCTION

Small enterprises are often portrayed as naturally entrepreneurial, close to their customers, and quick to respond. That characterization captures something important, but it can also flatten a more difficult reality. Many small firms display initiative, experiment readily, and show a high tolerance for uncertainty, yet still struggle with delayed execution, weak coordination, and uneven operating performance. The practical problem is not whether small enterprises can generate entrepreneurial intent. It is whether they can turn that intent into dependable action.

That question matters because, in small firms, strategy and implementation are tightly coupled. Authority is frequently concentrated in one or a few owner-managers, formal systems are relatively light, resources are scarce, and coordination often depends more on shared judgment than on elaborate procedures. Under these conditions, a strategic choice has little value unless it can be translated quickly into priorities, responsibilities, and routines. Entrepreneurial posture may create direction, but performance depends on whether the organization can enact that direction under constraint.

The literature has not always kept these levels of analysis distinct. Research on entrepreneurial orientation has shown, persuasively and repeatedly, that innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking matter for firm outcomes (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Rauch et al., 2009; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005). Yet the explanatory path from posture to performance is often left compressed. Firms do not perform operationally because they are entrepreneurial in the abstract. They perform when strategic intent is converted into timely decisions, selective resource allocation, and coordinated execution. Strategic agility is relevant precisely because it speaks to that conversion.

Recent SME research points in the same direction. Studies of AI adoption, e-commerce adoption, human-resource development, and sustainability in smaller firms suggest that new opportunities become performance-relevant only when firms can organize them into workable processes and capabilities (Putra et al., 2026; Thao et al., 2026; Thongmun et al., 2026; Tuan & Tung, 2026). That observation does not displace the entrepreneurial orientation literature. It sharpens it by showing that the route from posture to performance runs through implementation.

This article develops a more disciplined account of the relationship among entrepreneurial orientation, strategic agility, and operational performance in small enterprises. It asks four related questions: What does entrepreneurial orientation explain, and what does it not explain? How should strategic agility be distinguished from generic flexibility? How do leadership judgment, informality, and resource scarcity shape the relationship between agility and performance? And what does an integrative reading of the literature add to strategic management and entrepreneurship scholarship?

The central argument is that entrepreneurial orientation creates strategic intent, but operational performance depends on whether that intent is translated into adaptive decisions, workable routines, and coordinated action. Strategic agility is the mechanism that performs that translating work. Without it, entrepreneurial posture may remain episodic, overstretched, or strategically noisy. With it, entrepreneurial intent is more likely to become operational responsiveness, disciplined adaptation, and sustained performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurial orientation and the problem of compressed explanation

Entrepreneurial orientation remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how firms behave under uncertainty. Miller (1983) linked entrepreneurship to innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking, and subsequent work established entrepreneurial orientation as a durable construct in strategic management and entrepreneurship research (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). The strength of this literature lies in its ability to show that firms differ not only in outcomes but in strategic disposition: some seek opportunity aggressively, move ahead of competitors, and tolerate uncertainty more readily than others.

What the literature demonstrates less clearly is how such a disposition becomes operational performance. Meta-analytic work has shown a positive relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance, and that finding should not be minimized (Rauch et al., 2009). At the same time, the association does not resolve the mechanism. Wiklund and Shepherd (2005) show that entrepreneurial orientation is performance-relevant in ways that are conditional and configurational rather than automatic. The literature is therefore strongest when entrepreneurial orientation is treated as an antecedent strategic posture, not as a substitute for the organizational processes through which performance is produced.

That distinction becomes more important as the field broadens. Wales et al. (2013) note the rapid expansion of entrepreneurial orientation research across settings and dependent variables. The growth of the field has been productive, but it has also encouraged conceptual overreach. If entrepreneurial orientation comes to stand in for innovation, adaptation, implementation, and performance all at once, its explanatory value becomes diffuse. The core insight remains valuable precisely when the construct is bounded: entrepreneurial orientation explains how firms approach opportunity, not whether they can execute effectively.

Strategic agility beyond generic flexibility

Strategic agility is often invoked to explain how firms cope with change, but the literature is more persuasive when agility is treated as a specific organizational capacity rather than a celebratory label. Doz and Kosonen (2010) define strategic agility in terms of strategic sensitivity, collective commitment, and resource fluidity. Teece et al. (2016) link organizational agility to dynamic capabilities in contexts marked by uncertainty, innovation, and risk. In both accounts, agility is not simply movement. It is purposive, selective, and coordinated adaptation.

That distinction matters because flexibility, speed, and improvisation are not interchangeable with agility. A firm may react quickly and still respond poorly. It may remain open to change and still fail to reprioritize resources or align operating routines. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) sharpen this point by describing dynamic capabilities as identifiable organizational processes rather than intangible strategic gifts. Read in that light, strategic agility is best understood less as perpetual motion than as the capacity to reconfigure with judgment.

Recent SME studies reinforce that interpretation. Research on business performance, digital adoption, and sustainability in small firms repeatedly shows that adaptation matters when it is organized through capabilities, resource choices, and routine change rather than celebrated as change for its own sake (Thongmun et al., 2026; Tuan & Tung, 2026). That is precisely why strategic agility deserves separate conceptual treatment.

Operational performance as an enactment problem

Operations scholarship provides an important corrective to broad strategy language by insisting that performance is an enacted accomplishment. Operational performance is not simply the downstream effect of strategic aspiration. It depends on whether the organization can coordinate tasks, sustain quality, respond to variability, and turn choices into repeatable action. Peng et al. (2008) show that operations capabilities are rooted in routines, while Nelson and Winter (1982) make the larger point that patterned action is one of the conditions of adaptation rather than its opposite.

This literature matters because it shifts the analytical focus from intent to execution. March (1991) shows that organizations must balance exploration and exploitation. Small firms are often celebrated for exploration—new opportunities, new offerings, new market moves—but operational performance depends equally on exploitation: routine refinement, reliability, and disciplined follow-through. Recent studies of micro and small agribusiness enterprises and Vietnamese SMEs similarly suggest that adoption and capability development strengthen outcomes only when firms possess the organizational readiness to absorb them into daily practice (Putra et al., 2026; Thao et al., 2026).

From this perspective, operational performance is not a generic outcome category. It refers to the firm's capacity to deliver efficiently, reliably, and responsively through coordinated routines. That is why the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance cannot be understood without a theory of enactment. Firms do not perform because they aspire strategically; they perform because they can operationalize that aspiration.

Why small enterprises sharpen the issue

Small enterprises are a particularly revealing setting for this problem because they make the translation from strategy to operations unusually visible. Their structures are often lean, decision authority is concentrated, formalization is limited, and organizational slack is modest. These characteristics can support speed, but they also amplify the costs of misjudgment. In small firms, the quality of prioritization is rarely a secondary issue. It is one of the principal determinants of whether entrepreneurial intent becomes effective action.

Behavioral theories of the firm help explain why. Cyert and March (1963) and Simon (1997) remind us that decisions are made under conditions of bounded rationality, selective attention, and limited information. Small firms feel these constraints acutely because owner-managers often serve simultaneously as strategists, coordinators, and operational problem-solvers. Under those conditions, leadership judgment is not an external variable acting on the firm from above. It is one of the mechanisms through which the firm processes uncertainty.

The literature is not perfectly aligned with the article's unit of analysis. Several influential studies address the broader category of small and medium-sized enterprises rather than small enterprises alone. Their relevance nevertheless lies in the mechanisms they illuminate: leadership concentration, limited slack, informality, and rapid reprioritization. Those mechanisms are highly salient in small-enterprise settings, even if the empirical evidence does not always isolate that category cleanly. The result is a literature that points toward a strong explanation without fully integrating it.

Conceptual Framework

The framework advanced in this article is a translation model. Its starting point is entrepreneurial orientation, but its explanatory center lies in the organizational work required to make entrepreneurial intent operationally meaningful. The key claim is not that entrepreneurial orientation is unimportant. It is that entrepreneurial posture alone is too distant from performance to explain how results are actually produced in small enterprises.

Entrepreneurial orientation provides the initial strategic direction. Following Miller (1983) and Lumpkin and Dess (1996), it refers to the firm's orientation toward innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. This posture influences how opportunities are perceived, how boldly a firm moves, and how willing it is to depart from established patterns. What it does not specify is how opportunities are filtered, which initiatives receive scarce resources, how action is coordinated, or how operational stability is preserved while adaptation occurs.

Strategic agility addresses that intermediate problem. In the present argument, it refers to the firm's capacity to detect change, make timely choices, reallocate effort, and modify routines without losing coherence. This is why agility should not be collapsed into generic flexibility. Flexibility may indicate openness to change. Strategic agility implies something more demanding: selective adaptation organized through prioritization, commitment, and reconfiguration (Doz & Kosonen, 2010; Teece et al., 2016).

Organizational routines explain why this capacity matters for performance. Nelson and Winter (1982) treat routines as patterned forms of organizational action, and Peng et al. (2008) show how such patterns underwrite operations capabilities. In small enterprises, routines may be less formal than in larger organizations, but they are no less consequential. Decisions affect performance only when they are translated into recurring practices: who acts, in what order, with what discretion, and under which priorities. Operational performance therefore emerges not from intention alone but from the quality of enacted routines.

Behavioral decision-making provides the final element. Small firms operate under attention scarcity, limited information, and heavy dependence on owner-manager judgment (Cyert & March, 1963; Simon, 1997). Strategic agility is consequently conditioned by leadership interpretation and prioritization. Strong judgment helps distinguish signal from noise, select among opportunities, and communicate operational priorities clearly. Weak judgment does the opposite: it turns entrepreneurial energy into overcommitment, delay, or inconsistency.

Taken together, these perspectives support a clear explanatory sequence. Entrepreneurial orientation shapes strategic posture. Strategic agility governs the translation of that posture into adaptive organizational response. Leadership judgment conditions the quality of prioritization. Routines stabilize enactment. Operational performance emerges from how effectively those elements work together. The claim is conceptual rather than empirically final. It does not assert that the relationship is universal, linear, or settled in all settings. It proposes, instead, that this is the most coherent way to explain how entrepreneurial intent becomes operational performance in small enterprises.

REVIEW DESIGN

This article employs a focused integrative review. Its aim is not exhaustive coverage of every study on entrepreneurial orientation, strategic agility, or small-firm performance. It is to develop a conceptually coherent explanation from a bounded and relevant body of scholarship.

Three selection principles shaped the review. First, sources had to speak directly to one or more of the article's central constructs: entrepreneurial orientation, strategic agility, organizational routines, behavioral decision-making, operational performance, or small-enterprise management. Second, the review privileged studies that were either conceptually foundational or especially useful in clarifying the link between posture, adaptation, and performance. Third, it deliberately drew from adjacent but connected fields—strategic management, entrepreneurship, organizational behavior, and operations management—because the problem under investigation crosses those boundaries.

The final corpus consists of 20 published sources. That number is appropriate to the article's purpose because the review is designed for conceptual precision rather than bibliographic breadth. The synthesis proceeded thematically rather than chronologically. It compared how the literature treated strategic posture, adaptive capacity, decision quality, resource prioritization, routine enactment, and performance under constraint. The review should therefore be read as purposive rather than systematic.

This design has limits. It does not support statistical aggregation, exhaustive neutrality in study inclusion, or strong claims of generalizability. Its value lies elsewhere: in bringing together strands of scholarship that are often cited separately and showing how they can be read as parts of the same explanatory problem.

INTEGRATIVE ANALYSIS

Entrepreneurial orientation explains posture more directly than performance

The literature provides strong support for entrepreneurial orientation as a description of strategic posture. Firms differ in how willing they are to innovate, to act proactively, and to accept risk, and those differences matter for competitive behavior (Miller, 1983; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Covin and Slevin (1989) further show that posture is consequential in difficult environments, where strategic passivity can be costly. Entrepreneurial orientation is therefore a meaningful construct precisely because it captures a firm's approach to uncertainty and opportunity.

What the literature supports less directly is the idea that entrepreneurial orientation, by itself, explains operational performance. Rauch et al. (2009) show that entrepreneurial orientation is positively associated with business performance, but the existence of an association does not settle the underlying process. Wiklund and Shepherd (2005) point in the same direction from a configurational angle: entrepreneurial orientation matters, yet its performance effects depend on how it interacts with other organizational and contextual conditions. The more analytically disciplined interpretation is that entrepreneurial orientation creates strategic potential, not operational accomplishment.

Wales et al. (2013) make this caution especially important. As the entrepreneurial orientation literature has expanded, the construct has sometimes been asked to carry too much explanatory weight. Once posture is treated as if it already contains implementation, adaptation, and performance, the organizational middle disappears. For small enterprises, that middle is precisely where success or failure is often decided.

Strategic agility as the translating mechanism

The literature on strategic agility is most useful when it is read as an account of translation rather than as a celebration of change. Doz and Kosonen (2010) identify strategic sensitivity, collective commitment, and resource fluidity as central dimensions of agility. Teece et al. (2016) similarly frame agility as an organizational response to uncertainty that depends on dynamic capability. In both cases, agility concerns the firm's ability to notice shifts, commit selectively, and redirect effort in time for that response to matter.

That understanding is particularly valuable in small enterprises, where the difference between responsiveness and restlessness is often narrow. Informality may make a firm seem flexible, but flexibility alone does not explain whether it can alter routines, sequence work, and preserve operating coherence. Strategic agility does. It refers to the capacity to convert entrepreneurial intent into organizational movement that is both adaptive and coordinated.

Empirical work offers support for this claim. Shin et al. (2015) show that strategic agility in Korean SMEs is positively related to both operational and firm performance. More recent evidence from Thailand and Vietnam similarly indicates that agility, innovation, and capability development matter when they are translated into organizational systems that improve performance and sustainability (Thongmun et al., 2026; Tuan & Tung, 2026). These studies do not settle the mediation question in every setting, but they strengthen the argument that agility is the capacity through which posture becomes performance-relevant.

Leadership judgment, informality, and prioritization

If strategic agility is the translating mechanism, leadership judgment is one of the forces that determine whether that mechanism works well. Small enterprises often rely on concentrated decision authority, lean information systems, and limited managerial specialization. Those features can accelerate action, but they also intensify the effects of bounded rationality. Cyert and March (1963) and Simon (1997) are useful here because they shift attention away from idealized rational choice and toward selective attention, satisficing, and organizational limits.

For small firms, the issue is not merely whether leaders are entrepreneurial. It is whether they can prioritize under pressure. Bourgeois and Eisenhardt (1988) show that effective strategic decision-making in high-velocity settings combines timeliness with enough structure to preserve direction. That insight travels well to small-enterprise settings. When formal coordination is light, owner-managers must decide which opportunities deserve investment, which trade-offs are acceptable, and which routines need to change first. Resource scarcity makes these questions unavoidable.

Recent SME studies sharpen the same point from a capability perspective. Leadership support, organizational culture, and development policy affect whether firms can absorb new technologies and strengthen internal capabilities (Thao et al., 2026;

Tuan & Tung, 2026). Informality, then, should be treated as double-edged. It can accelerate coordination, but it can also leave responsibilities vague and adaptation overly dependent on personal oversight.

Operational performance as disciplined adaptation

Operations research sharpens the argument by locating performance in routines and capabilities rather than in aspiration alone. Peng et al. (2008) show that operations capabilities are linked to patterned forms of action, while Nelson and Winter (1982) explain why routines matter even in changing environments. Routines do not merely preserve the status quo. They provide the structure that allows adaptation to occur without descending into inconsistency.

This matters because small firms are often encouraged to keep moving—to explore, innovate, and seek out new opportunities. March (1991) reminds us, however, that exploration without exploitation destabilizes organizations. Recent work on e-commerce adoption among micro and small agribusiness enterprises and on AI-enabled performance in Vietnamese SMEs makes a similar point: new tools matter when firms have the readiness and discipline to incorporate them into everyday operations (Putra et al., 2026; Tuan & Tung, 2026). Operational performance depends not on movement alone, but on movement that can be absorbed by the organization's processes.

Strategic agility therefore does not replace routines; it modifies them. In small enterprises, the most consequential routines may remain lightweight and partly informal, but they still perform the same function: they stabilize execution while allowing selective change. Operational performance, then, is best understood as disciplined adaptation—the ability to change without sacrificing delivery.

Resource constraints and performance trade-offs

A persuasive account of small-enterprise performance also has to reckon with trade-offs. Entrepreneurial orientation encourages experimentation, but experimentation consumes scarce time, capital, and managerial attention. Strategic agility improves responsiveness, but too much fluidity can weaken continuity and overload the organization. Informality may accelerate communication, but it can also obscure accountability. None of these tensions disappear because a firm is entrepreneurial.

This is why dynamic-capability language must be used carefully. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) are valuable not because they romanticize adaptation, but because they show that adaptive capacities consist of identifiable processes. In small firms, those processes may be less formal and less resource-intensive than in large organizations, yet they remain necessary. Resource fluidity often means redirecting managerial attention, reassigning a few key employees, or rescheduling limited investment rather than undertaking large-scale corporate restructuring.

The literature therefore points to two recurring failure modes. One is under-adaptation: firms cling too tightly to inherited routines and react too slowly to environmental shifts. The other is over-adaptation: firms pursue too many opportunities, change direction too frequently, or mistake motion for progress. Strategic agility matters because it mediates between these extremes. The strongest small firms are neither rigid nor perpetually in motion. They change selectively, and they anchor change in coordinated execution.

DISCUSSION

The review supports a more precise explanation of small-enterprise performance than broad entrepreneurship narratives usually provide. Entrepreneurial orientation matters because it shapes how the firm approaches opportunity, uncertainty, and competitive initiative. Operational performance matters because it captures whether the organization can deliver efficiently, reliably, and responsively. Strategic agility matters because it connects the two. The contribution of the present article is less the introduction of a new construct than the clarification of an explanatory architecture.

That clarification has three theoretical implications. First, it separates posture from outcome. Entrepreneurial orientation is not redundant with performance, and analyses that treat it as if it were obscure the organizational processes that actually produce results. Second, it narrows the meaning of strategic agility. Agility should not be used as a generic term for speed or flexibility; it refers to the disciplined capacity to sense, prioritize, and reconfigure without losing coherence. Third, it brings operations thinking more centrally into entrepreneurship research by showing that the performance effects of entrepreneurship are realized through routines, implementation, and decision quality.

The synthesis also helps explain why small-enterprise research requires its own analytical treatment. Small enterprises are not simply large organizations with fewer employees. Their strengths and vulnerabilities arise from the same structural features: concentrated leadership, limited slack, and relational coordination. Those conditions can support speed and commitment, but they also heighten the consequences of poor prioritization and weak operational discipline. The entrepreneurial firm is not automatically an agile firm, and the agile firm is not automatically an effective operator.

The mediating claim advanced here should nevertheless be read with discipline. The literature strongly supports the distinction between entrepreneurial posture and operational performance. It also provides substantial conceptual support, and growing empirical support, for the role of strategic agility in connecting them. What it does not yet provide is a settled body of evidence showing the same mechanism in the same way across all small-enterprise contexts. The article therefore offers an integrative explanation, not a definitive empirical closure.

For practice, the implications are straightforward but demanding. Owner-managers are often advised to be more innovative, more proactive, and more opportunity-seeking. Those recommendations are incomplete unless they are matched by mechanisms for selection and follow-through. Small enterprises are more likely to perform well when they establish lightweight but explicit routines for reviewing opportunities, clarifying responsibility, reallocating scarce effort, and learning from implementation. Advisers and support programs should therefore focus not only on entrepreneurial intensity but also on the organizational discipline required to make that intensity productive.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article has the limits of its design. It is a focused integrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis, and its purpose is conceptual clarification rather than exhaustive synthesis. In addition, some of the most relevant empirical studies concern the broader SME category rather than small enterprises alone, which means the argument travels partly through mechanism rather than through perfectly matched units of analysis.

Those limits point directly to a research agenda. Future empirical work should test the proposed translation mechanism more directly by separating entrepreneurial orientation, strategic agility, and operational performance in longitudinal designs. It should examine how owner-manager attention, resource prioritization, and routine modification operate over time and across different sectors, growth stages, and environmental conditions. Comparative work would also be valuable in showing when informality helps small firms adapt and when it becomes a source of fragility.

CONCLUSION

Operational performance in small enterprises is not adequately explained by entrepreneurial orientation alone. Entrepreneurial orientation establishes a strategic posture: it shapes how the firm approaches opportunity, innovation, and risk. Performance, however, emerges only when that posture is converted into adaptive decisions, prioritized commitments, workable routines, and coordinated execution. Strategic agility is the concept that best explains that conversion.

The article's contribution is to locate performance where it is actually made: in the translation of intent into action under conditions of constraint. That translation depends on more than entrepreneurial ambition. It depends on judgment, sequencing, resource discipline, and the capacity to revise routines without losing reliability. For small enterprises, the decisive strategic question is rarely whether opportunity exists. It is whether the firm can recognize the right opportunity, commit to it selectively, and organize itself well enough to deliver.

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