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Strategic scaling initiatives and client networking dynamics for small and medium-sized enterprises growth: a comprehensive case study analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – The research investigates scaling and client networking in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), using ABCD, an Indonesian telecom tower provider, as a case study. Key findings underscore the importance of strategic planning, human resource management, networking and customer-centric approaches for successful scaling. ABCD's experiences inform practical guidance for SMEs, advocating strategic scaling, leveraging personal networks, implementing customer relationship management (CRM), fostering adaptability and prioritizing customer satisfaction. Theoretical implications enrich discussions on demand-driven scaling, network dynamics and CRM application. Overall, the study offers concise insights into SME growth strategies, drawing from ABCD's experiences and broader literature.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology employed in this study adopts a case study approach, focusing on ABCD, a telecom tower provider in Indonesia. Qualitative analysis of textual data is conducted, combining deductive reasoning to establish theoretical frameworks from existing literature and inductive reasoning to identify emergent themes. Interviews, structured around four thematic domains, were conducted with a diverse cohort of participants selected through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Ethical considerations were paramount, with written consent obtained and interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure linguistic alignment. Grounded Theory was applied to analyse data, seeking to enrich theoretical frameworks and inform managerial practices in SMEs.

Findings – The findings illuminate strategies applicable to all SMEs in scaling up and fortifying client networks. Emphasizing demand-driven scaling and strategic client acquisition, SMEs are encouraged to leverage personal networks and exhibit adaptability in response to market trends. Implementing CRM principles fosters lasting client relationships and profitability. Practical implications underscore the

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importance of strategic planning, proactive networking and customer-centric approaches for SMEs aiming to navigate growth complexities. Theoretical insights contribute to scholarly discourse on SME growth strategies, network dynamics, CRM application and organizational strategies, enriching understanding of SMEs' journey in scaling up and client networking.

Research limitations/implications – The study's limitations encompass its reliance on a single case study, necessitating caution in generalizing findings to diverse SME contexts. Further empirical validation is warranted to enhance the study's robustness. However, the study offers exciting implications for both academia and practice, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of scaling strategies and client networking in SMEs. Its critical appraisal of conventional notions challenges prevailing wisdom, paving the way for future research to explore innovative approaches and enrich scholarly discourse.

Practical implications – The practical implications underscore the transformative potential for SMEs, urging strategic adoption of scaling strategies and client networking dynamics. Emphasizing proactive planning and adaptive approaches, SMEs can navigate growth complexities and fortify client relationships. By prioritizing human capital, leveraging personal networks and embracing customer-centricity, SMEs can enhance profitability and sustainability. These insights serve as a roadmap for SMEs, guiding them towards strategic growth and success in a dynamic business landscape.

Social implications – The research unfolds critical insights with profound social implications for SMEs worldwide. By illuminating effective strategies in scaling up and nurturing client networks, it empowers SMEs to thrive in competitive landscapes, fostering economic growth and job creation. Additionally, its emphasis on leveraging personal networks and adopting customer-centric approaches underscores the importance of social capital and community engagement in business success. This not only strengthens SME resilience but also cultivates a culture of collaboration and innovation within local communities. Ultimately, the research serves as a catalyst for social transformation, empowering SMEs to become engines of prosperity and positive change.

Originality/value – The findings critically appraise strategies imperative for all SMEs, challenging conventional notions and offering pragmatic insights into scaling and client networking dynamics. By juxtaposing empirical evidence from ABCD's experiences with existing theoretical frameworks, the study exposes nuances often overlooked in scholarly discourse. Its value lies in bridging the gap between theory and practice, shedding light on the intricate challenges facing SMEs in navigating growth complexities.

Keywords Strategic scaling initiatives, Client networking dynamics, Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), SMEs growth, Case study analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in the economic development of both developed and developing nations. Defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as businesses with up to 250 employees and financial assets up to 50 million euros, SMEs, including small and micro enterprises, contribute significantly to employment and GDP. In developing countries, recent studies highlight that SMEs account for 45% of employment and 33% of GDP (Zamani, 2022; Teima *et al.*, 2010).

The concept of scaling up, denoting growth in both workforce and turnover resulting from transformative business strategies (OECD, 2021), is crucial for SMEs aiming to thrive in a competitive market. However, not all companies successfully navigate this growth, with some facing the risk of bankruptcy (Killen and Springerlink, 2019). Renowned business strategist Harnish (2014) identified four key strategies for scaling up: attracting and retaining the right people, implementing a differentiated strategy, achieving flawless strategy execution and ensuring financial preparedness for emergencies (Kumar *et al.*, 2023).

This research focuses on one of these strategies—attracting and retaining the right people—by examining the practices of a leading independent tower company in Indonesia, henceforth called “ABCD”, established in the mid-2000s, has evolved into a significant player in the industry, with a robust financial position and an extensive network of clients and subsidiaries.

The study centres on understanding how ABCD, which started as a small company, successfully attracted and maintained a strong network of clients. With revenue reaching

6,179.6 billion rupiahs and total assets of 41,870.4 billion rupiahs in the early 2020s, ABCD serves as a compelling case study for SMEs aspiring to scale up.

This research delves into key inquiries aimed at understanding the strategies employed by SMEs when expanding and sustaining their client networks. The questions driving this investigation are as follows: Firstly, what are the approaches SMEs undertake to upscale their client base?; and, secondly, what are the methods employed by SMEs to sustain their existing client networks? Furthermore, the study scrutinizes ABCD, examining the initial steps taken by the company to establish its client network and subsequently, the strategies employed to maintain it. These research questions collectively form the focal point for exploring effective client network management strategies among SMEs.

Literature review

Scaling up within SMEs, as defined by the [OECD \(2021\)](#), entails a multifaceted expansion encompassing both qualitative and quantitative improvements driven by strategic business transformations. This expansion includes growth in human resources and financial turnovers. The propensity for scalability is particularly noted in industries such as information and communications, alongside finance and insurance, which are predisposed to rapid expansion due to their inherent market dynamics and technological advancements ([Thakur and Hale, 2013](#)).

While younger firms are commonly perceived as naturally inclined towards rapid scaling due to their agility and innovative capabilities, empirical evidence suggests a more nuanced reality. [Nichter and Goldmark \(2009\)](#) argued that older firms often exhibit more effective scaling processes, utilising established resources and market connections to leverage growth, challenging the conventional wisdom that associates scale with the age of a company.

The literature indicates that scaling events in firms are sporadic, contrasting sharply with the linear growth models often idealised in economic theories. [Achtenhagen et al. \(2010\)](#) critique existing models for failing to account for the contextual triggers of growth spurts, such as emergent market opportunities or regulatory changes, which can significantly influence a firm's scaling trajectory. This observation underscores the necessity for SMEs to adopt adaptive and responsive scaling models that accommodate fluctuations in external market forces and internal capabilities.

Moreover, the integration of sustainability within scaling strategies remains critically under-theorised. [Yusoff et al. \(2018\)](#) highlighted the imperative for SMEs to embrace a holistic approach to growth that transcends economic considerations to include environmental and social governance. This broader conceptualisation of sustainable development demands that SMEs align their scaling strategies with the principles of sustainability, encompassing the triple bottom line of people, planet and profits ([Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011](#)).

The dual role of technology as both an enabler and a barrier to scaling is especially relevant for SMEs. [Prasanna et al. \(2019\)](#) discussed the paradoxical nature of technological investments, where the immediate benefits of enhanced efficiency and market expansion must be carefully weighed against the substantial costs and challenges of technology adoption. [Nambisan \(2017\)](#) extended this discussion by exploring how digital platforms can redefine traditional business models, positioning technology as a strategic asset that can transform market engagement and product development processes.

Open innovation is increasingly recognised as a vital strategy for promoting growth and productivity within SMEs. [Surya et al. \(2021\)](#) argued that open innovation can catalyse both incremental and radical innovations, facilitating significant transformational changes. However, [West and Bogers \(2014\)](#) identified several barriers to effective open innovation,

including rigid corporate cultures and a lack of strategic alignment, which must be overcome to fully harness the benefits of collaborative innovation efforts.

In conclusion, while existing frameworks provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of SME scaling, they often overlook critical intersections of sustainability, technology and innovation. The literature advocates for a more integrated theoretical model that not only captures the economic imperatives but also embeds sustainability and innovation at the core of scaling strategies. Such a model offers a nuanced understanding of the scaling process, providing practical pathways for SMEs to achieve resilient and ethical growth, thereby redefining the parameters of success within the contemporary business landscape.

Role of customer relationship management in scaling up

Customer relationship management (CRM) is increasingly recognized as a critical strategy in achieving business scalability, particularly in the acquisition and retention of customers. This recognition is grounded in a comprehensive understanding of CRM's role in adapting to and pre-empting consumer demands effectively (Raab *et al.*, 2016). However, while CRM is celebrated for its potential to foster long-term profitability, its implementation within SMEs often reveals a gap between theoretical frameworks and practical application, suggesting a need for a more nuanced understanding of CRM's foundational principles: durability, relational focus, profitability and adept management (Ngai *et al.*, 2009).

Durability in CRM implies not just ongoing customer engagement but the formation of resilient business practices that withstand market volatility. This aspect of CRM is critical as it involves building trust, a fundamental yet often under-theorised element in CRM literature. The relational focus, while aimed at aligning customer and business interests, frequently encounters challenges in balancing these against the imperative of profitability, which demands a deeper exploration of ethical considerations in customer engagement strategies (Smith, 2015).

The success of CRM also hinges significantly on the integration of personnel, technology and organisational structures. Despite the wide acknowledgement of human capital as central to CRM success, the strategic retention of skilled personnel is often overshadowed by technological investments (Harnish, 2014). Studies indicate that, while technology accounts for approximately 40% of CRM success, its effectiveness is critically dependent on the strategic oversight provided by human agents, suggesting that investments in technology should be complemented by equivalent, if not greater, investments in human capital (Gobbel, 2001 in Raab *et al.*, 2016).

Addressing the customer-centric ethos, it is crucial to recognise that customer orientation goes beyond mere service delivery to encompass a broader understanding of consumer needs, market dynamics and competitive landscapes. Killen and Springerlink (2019) highlighted the importance of "recurring revenues" from satisfied customers; however, this focus on financial metrics sometimes neglects the broader impact of CRM on customer well-being and societal values, which are essential for sustainable business practices (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

In the SME context, the adaptation of CRM strategies often necessitates a balance between sophisticated techniques and practical, resource-sensitive implementations. While simplified CRM models have proven effective in some contexts, they may not fully capture the complexity of customer relationships or the long-term sustainability of business practices (Harrigan *et al.*, 2011; Hassan *et al.*, 2019; Garatsa and Dlamini, 2021). Yusoff *et al.* (2018) stressed that sustainable growth in SMEs requires not only economic gains but also a strong consideration of environmental and social impacts. This perspective is echoed by Prasanna *et al.* (2019) and Surya *et al.* (2021), who advocate for the integration of innovative

technologies to enhance both performance and sustainability, suggesting a more integrated approach to CRM that includes technological, economic and environmental dimensions.

Networking as a strategy to scale up

The literature offers a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing SMEs in cultivating successful networks. Central to this discourse is the pivotal role of trust, which emerges as a cornerstone for SMEs to foster relationships with their business counterparts (Amoako, 2018). Trust operates as a mechanism facilitating the exchange of crucial information and engendering coordination between parties, thus mitigating the risk of unfair advantage (Amoako, 2018). Trust manifests on both interpersonal and institutional levels, with interpersonal trust being rooted in familiarity from various social bonds, while institutional trust relies on legal, political and socio-cultural frameworks (Amoako, 2018).

However, the extent to which institutional trust shapes business relationships varies across contexts. Developed nations rely more on institutional structures, whereas developing economies place greater emphasis on personal trust due to inadequacies in institutional frameworks (Amoako, 2018) which underscores the adaptive nature of trust dynamics within differing socio-economic environments. Concurrently, empirical evidence from regions such as Africa and the Arab world underscores the strategic utilization of political connections, termed “wasta”, by entrepreneurs to bolster their business networks and access essential resources (Sefiani *et al.*, 2018). Wasta facilitates access to financial resources and suppliers and influences recruitment practices, thereby reinforcing relational ties and conferring competitive advantages.

Moreover, the imperative for network development extends beyond business owners and managers to encompass middle managers and staff. Specifically, within the context of SME internationalisation, peer networks, international relationships forged through trade fairs and industry associations emerge as pivotal for survival and growth (Puthusserry *et al.*, 2020). Managerial attributes such as access to influential networks and prior entrepreneurial experience significantly impact SMEs’ networking capabilities and subsequent performance (Adama and Nadif, 2018a, b; Presutti and Odorici, 2019). Strategic networking, predominantly orchestrated by SME managers/owners, correlates positively with logistics integration and overall company performance (Madzimore, 2019).

Nonetheless, SMEs must exercise caution against over-reliance on external partners. Excessive dependency may render them vulnerable. Instead, a balanced approach entails leveraging internal strategic resources and fostering collaborative relationships to fortify resilience and attract further partnerships (Partanen *et al.*, 2020). Beyond interpersonal relationships, knowledge and information sharing constitute integral facets of networking, facilitating the accumulation of intellectual capital crucial for enhancing organisational performance and fostering innovation (Jordão *et al.*, 2019; Eggers *et al.*, 2020).

Incorporating sustainable growth perspectives, Yusoff *et al.* (2018) argued that SMEs must integrate economic, environmental and social dimensions into their growth strategies. This comprehensive approach is critical for ensuring long-term success and resilience. Sustainable growth models necessitate that SMEs not only pursue financial objectives but also adhere to environmental stewardship and social responsibility principles, thereby aligning with broader societal goals (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011).

Moreover, technological advancements present both opportunities and challenges for SMEs aiming to scale. Prasanna *et al.* (2019) identified technological adaptation as a critical factor in maintaining competitive advantage and discussed the paradox where the benefits of enhanced efficiency and market reach must be balanced against the costs and complexities of technology adoption. Nambisan (2017) further explored how digital platforms can redefine

business models, suggesting that technology can transform market engagement and product development strategies, positioning SMEs for scalable growth.

Open innovation is posited as a strategic approach that can drive growth and productivity in SMEs. [Surya *et al.* \(2021\)](#) highlighted the potential of open innovation to facilitate both incremental and radical innovations within SMEs. [West and Bogers \(2014\)](#) noted that structural and cultural barriers, such as rigid corporate cultures and lack of strategic alignment, often hinder the effective implementation of open innovation practices. Overcoming these barriers is crucial for SMEs to fully leverage the benefits of collaborative innovation efforts.

For SMEs eyeing international expansion, adept networking skills are indispensable. These skills are crucial for navigating diverse market landscapes and capitalising on growth opportunities ([Torkkeli *et al.*, 2016](#)) as the integration of sustainable practices and technological innovations into networking strategies enhances the capacity of SMEs to adapt and thrive in competitive international markets.

In conclusion, the literature underscores the multifaceted nature of networking for SMEs, encompassing trust dynamics, strategic alliances, knowledge sharing and technological integration. These insights prompt further investigation into the nuanced interplay between ABCD and their clientele and business partners, particularly concerning information exchange and collaborative knowledge management practices. Integrating sustainable growth and open innovation into these strategies offers a pathway for SMEs to achieve resilient and ethical growth, redefining success in a rapidly evolving business landscape.

Methodology

The case of ABCD

ABCD is a leading telecommunications infrastructure provider in Indonesia. Established in early 2000s, the company has grown significantly in terms of assets and market reach and, as of 2023, reported a revenue of more than 6 billion rupiahs and total assets amounting to 40,000 billion rupiahs. It is one of the largest independent tower companies in Indonesia and operates a substantial portfolio of telecommunication towers and distributed antenna system (DAS) networks, primarily in urban areas. This dominant market position is reinforced by its strategic acquisitions and organic growth, allowing it to cater to major telecommunications operators in the region. ABCD's competitive edge is underpinned by its extensive network infrastructure and its commitment to high service standards, which has solidified its reputation as a reliable service provider in the telecommunications sector.

ABCD's primary customers are telecommunication operators and include major players in the Indonesian market such as Telkomsel, Indosat, XL Axiata and Smartfren. The company's business model focuses on leasing space for antennas and other equipment for wireless signal transmission at tower sites under long-term lease agreements. Additionally, ABCD provides telecommunications operators with access to their DAS networks in high-density areas such as shopping malls and office buildings, which enhances signal coverage and capacity. Thus, we believe this is one of the most representative cases to be analysed and our methodological discussion continues with the research approach and design.

This study adopts a case study approach, aiming to conduct an in-depth investigation of a singular case or organisation, specifically focusing on ABCD. By employing a qualitative methodology, the research seeks to analyse primarily textual data, thereby facilitating a comprehensive examination of the chosen case. The utilisation of both deductive and inductive reasoning methodologies allows for the synthesis of existing theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence garnered from the case study.

Deductive reasoning is employed to establish a theoretical foundation drawn from existing literature, thereby informing the research objectives, formulation of inquiry and

interpretation of findings. This approach enables the researchers to align the study within the broader theoretical landscape and elucidate potential avenues for investigation. Conversely, inductive reasoning facilitates the identification of emergent themes and patterns within the empirical data, which may either corroborate existing theories or unveil novel insights that contribute to the advancement of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence.

Through the amalgamation of deductive and inductive approaches, this research endeavours to provide a nuanced understanding of ABCD, elucidating both its conformity to established theories and its potential to enrich the existing body of knowledge through the revelation of novel empirical findings and mechanisms.

The methodology employed in this research embodies a critical qualitative approach, centred on the intricate process of data collection via in-depth interviews. These interviews were meticulously crafted to serve as conduits for probing the intricacies of ABCD's operational dynamics, drawing upon a synthesis of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence gleaned from previous studies to sculpt the investigative framework. With a deliberate alignment to the research objectives, the interview protocol encompassed four distinct thematic domains: demography and historical underpinnings of ABCD, strategies for client acquisition and expansion, and mechanisms for sustaining client relationships.

The selection of research participants was methodologically nuanced, blending elements of convenience sampling with the strategic application of snowball sampling techniques. Initial access to subjects was facilitated through convenience sampling, leveraging the researchers' pre-existing affiliations within ABCD to secure interviews with pertinent stakeholders. Subsequent diversification of the participant pool was orchestrated via the snowball sampling method, wherein recommendations from initial interviewees acted as springboards for identifying additional subjects possessing unique insights. Despite inherent constraints, such as temporal limitations and logistical complexities, a judiciously curated cohort of five subjects was interviewed, with each contribution serving as a nuanced facet in the mosaic of research inquiry.

Conducted under the aegis of the principal investigator, each interview adhered to a meticulously structured framework. Preceding the onset of interactions, subjects were afforded a comprehensive written consent form, elucidating the research objectives and soliciting their informed consent. Documentation of consent via signed forms served as a tangible testament to ethical diligence. The spatial and temporal milieu for interviews was intentionally curated to foster an environment conducive to candid dialogue, with informal settings outside the confines of the workplace and non-working hours earmarked to mitigate extraneous disruptions.

Throughout the interview process, the researchers adopted a reflexive stance, dynamically modulating question phrasing and tonality to engender an atmosphere of collaborative inquiry. Leveraging a repertoire of informal linguistic cues tailored to the cultural milieu of the subjects, the researchers endeavoured to transcend the veneer of formality inherent in structured interviews, thereby eliciting authentic responses imbued with contextual richness.

The linguistic dimension of the interviews was also a subject of methodological deliberation, with the deliberate choice of conducting interactions in Bahasa Indonesia—a lingua franca shared by both the researchers and participants—emerging as a strategic imperative. This linguistic alignment, coupled with the judicious use of audio recording, served as a potent catalyst for crystallising the veracity of participant responses and circumventing the pitfalls of translational ambiguity.

The methodological approach employed in this research endeavoured to comprehensively analyse the data obtained from recorded interviews, which were transcribed and translated into English, constituting the initial phase of data refinement.

The informal conversational tone inherent in both the questions posed and the responses provided was meticulously distilled to distil the salient information conveyed by the subjects.

Subsequently, the gathered data, comprising verbal expressions and narrative excerpts from the interviews, underwent a process of fragmentation, following which key thematic elements were identified through the application of predefined keywords or codes. These codes, partly informed by existing literature on client networking strategies within SMEs, served as analytical tools deployed to address the research inquiries.

Central to the data analysis methodology was the adoption of grounded theory, as advocated by [Bell et al. \(2019\)](#), wherein emergent patterns and insights derived from the analysis contribute to the theoretical framework underpinning the research endeavour. The resultant findings were subjected to dual scrutiny: firstly, through an examination of their contextual relevance within the domain of the subject company (ABCD), and secondly, through their alignment with extant theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence documented in the literature.

While the research design eschewed hypothesis testing, as prescribed by the analytic induction method ([Bell et al., 2019](#)), the researchers' preconceived notions regarding anticipated findings, informed by their familiarity with the subject company, informed the analytical process. It is envisaged that the findings will corroborate the hypothesis that ABCD, in its nascent phase, cultivated its client network through the personal connections of its managers/owners within government and banking circles. Additionally, it is anticipated that the managerial acumen and entrepreneurial experience of ABCD's leadership cadre played a pivotal role in augmenting its customer base.

However, the research remains open to the possibility of uncovering novel insights that may challenge or augment the researchers' existing understanding. Moreover, the exploration of ABCD's utilisation of CRM tools and the evolving dynamics of its client relationships constitute avenues for further investigation, underscoring the ongoing quest to elucidate the mechanisms underpinning ABCD's current success trajectory.

In essence, the primary objective of this case study is to unravel the intricate interplay between ABCD's client networking strategies, CRM utilisation and relational dynamics, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and informing managerial praxis within the SME landscape.

Analysis

The demographic profile of the interviewees underscores a deliberate selection process aimed at capturing individuals holding pivotal positions within ABCD, thereby offering valuable insights into the company's strategic planning and operational dynamics. Employing a convenience sampling method, the researchers targeted five interviewees, all serving as heads of their respective divisions or departments within ABCD (see [Table 1](#)). This strategic selection illustrates a methodological approach designed to access individuals

Table 1.
Summary of the
interviewees' positions
and years of service

Subjects	Positions	Length of service
1	Division Head	11 years
2	Head of Assets and Property Division	20 years
3	Regional Operation Manager	16 years
4	Lead Project Manager	7 years
5	Section Head of Asset Renewal Community	7 years

Source(s): Table by authors

with nuanced understandings of both macro-level strategic decision-making processes and micro-level operational intricacies within the organisation.

The deliberate targeting of middle management personnel is particularly noteworthy, as it positions the interviewees as key stakeholders with the requisite knowledge and experience to provide comprehensive insights into ABCD's strategic trajectory and operational challenges. Their tenure within ABCD further enhances the depth of their perspectives, endowing them with a longitudinal understanding of the company's evolution and serving as a foundational basis for analysing its scaling-up endeavours. For instance, Interviewee 1, a Division Head with 11 years at ABCD, highlighted the importance of networking and the pivotal role played by leaders in securing key clients like Telkomsel: "First, it's networking. Then ABCD could handle the four preliminary/test projects successfully."

Furthermore, the inclusion of interviewees who previously worked for competitor companies adds a layer of comparative analysis, enabling the researchers to juxtapose ABCD's strategies and practices against those of its competitors. Interviewee 2, who previously worked for Indonesian Tower SKP before its merger with ABCD, provided insights into how strategic partnerships and acquisitions were instrumental in scaling up: "ABCD came and offered a partnership which SKP agreed to. At the time SKP had around 2,000 towers while ABCD had only around 1,000."

ABCD's evolution from an SME to a significant player in the telecommunications infrastructure sector underscores a nuanced approach to client acquisition, marked by strategic foresight, managerial acumen and industry positioning. The analysis of ABCD's client acquisition strategy reveals several key insights into the mechanisms underpinning its growth trajectory. Initially, ABCD's client portfolio consisted of a select group of major telephone operators within the region, reflecting a deliberate targeting strategy aimed at securing high-value contracts. This approach, while effective in establishing a foothold in the market, also highlighted the company's reliance on a limited pool of clients, potentially exposing it to volatility in client preferences or market dynamics.

The pivotal decision to acquire two other tower providers emerged as a strategic manoeuvre to address this vulnerability by diversifying ABCD's client base and augmenting its tower assets. Interviewee 3, a Regional Operation Manager, emphasised how these acquisitions not only expanded ABCD's market reach but also positioned it as a dominant force within the industry, capable of catering to a broader spectrum of client requirements: "ABCD acquired Bali Telkom where I used to work . . . this not only expanded our reach but also positioned us as a dominant force."

ABCD's emphasis on service excellence emerged as a central tenet of its client acquisition strategy, leveraging its reputation as a reliable and proficient service provider to attract and retain clients. The successful execution of high-profile projects, such as the construction of multiple towers for a leading telephone operator, served as a testament to ABCD's operational prowess and differentiated it from competitors. Nonetheless, the sustainability of this competitive advantage hinges on continual investment in service innovation and quality assurance to meet evolving client expectations and industry standards. Interviewee 4, a Lead Project Manager, noted: "We have an excellent system to make sure on-time project delivery. We have good track records of performance so that they have a lot of trust in us."

The proactive involvement of owner/managers/directors in client acquisition activities underscored ABCD's recognition of the strategic importance of personal relationships and industry connections in securing lucrative contracts. Interviewee 5, the Section Head of Asset Renewal, highlighted how leveraging networks within the telecommunications sector and political spheres allowed ABCD's leadership to capitalise on opportunities for collaboration and partnership: "I think they have good connections with people in politics. Then they also deliver what they promise to customers."

Furthermore, ABCD's marketing efforts played a crucial role in reinforcing its brand positioning and fostering client engagement. The company's commitment to transparent communication, coupled with a focus on highlighting its track record of successful project delivery and customer satisfaction, served to instil confidence among existing and prospective clients. Interviewee 1 explained: "First by maintaining trust through performance commitment. Second by strengthening their relationship with the clients. Third by maintaining their integrity."

The emergence of ABCD's clients as advocates for its services underscores the significance of establishing enduring relationships grounded in mutual trust and value creation. The dissemination of positive experiences and testimonials among industry peers facilitated by professional networks further solidified ABCD's reputation as a preferred service provider, enhancing its competitive positioning and market visibility. ABCD's client acquisition strategy embodies a strategic synthesis of industry insight, operational excellence and relationship-building prowess. While the company's trajectory thus far reflects commendable achievements and strategic foresight, ongoing scrutiny of market dynamics, competitive pressures and technological advancements is imperative to sustain its growth momentum and competitive edge in the ever-evolving telecommunications landscape.

The sustenance of client relationships within ABCD constitutes a critical dimension warranting rigorous examination within the telecommunications tower provisioning industry. Central to this inquiry is an interrogation of the mechanisms underpinning ABCD's client retention strategies and their efficacy amidst a landscape characterised by dynamic market forces and intensifying competition. Analysis of testimonial data reveals a recurrent motif attributing ABCD's client retention success to the consistent delivery of exemplary performance. Through a multifaceted approach encompassing adherence to project timelines, adept trouble-shooting capabilities and meticulous post-sale maintenance initiatives, ABCD engenders a profound sense of trust and confidence among its clientele. Such trust not only fosters repeat engagements but also positions ABCD as a preferred provider in the eyes of discerning stakeholders, thereby consolidating its market dominance. Interviewee 3 stated: "ABCD always maintains sensible pricing and backs it up with high-standard performance."

Crucially, the role of ABCD's marketing apparatus emerges as a linchpin in nurturing and fortifying client relationships. However, beyond the mere allocation of budgetary resources, a critical examination reveals nuanced insights into the strategic alignment between marketing endeavours and overarching organisational goals. The efficacy of ABCD's marketing initiatives lies not solely in their ability to foster communication channels but also in their capacity to cultivate enduring partnerships founded on mutual trust and shared value propositions. Nevertheless, the bedrock of ABCD's client retention prowess resides in its operational cadre and field operatives, whose unwavering commitment to performance excellence serves as the cornerstone of organisational resilience. Here, a deeper analysis unveils the intricate interplay between middle management directives, operational imperatives and frontline execution, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between strategic intent and operational execution. Moreover, an exploration of internal dynamics elucidates the pivotal role played by organisational culture in perpetuating performance standards and engendering a collective sense of purpose among employees. Interviewee 4 highlighted: "Marketing has a big role in maintaining the relationship and networks with clients."

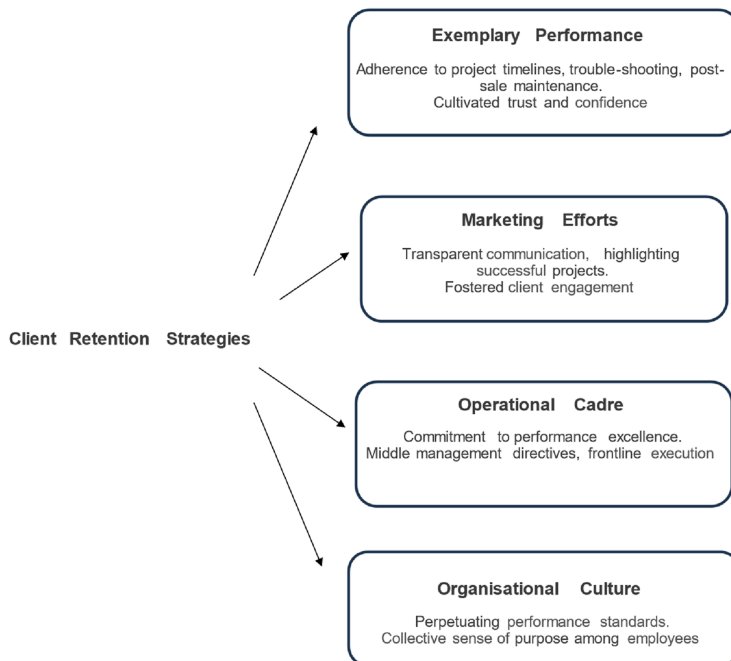
However, amidst a backdrop of heightened market competition and disruptive industry dynamics, ABCD confronts an array of challenges to its client retention paradigm. The emergence of aggressive pricing strategies and the formation of strategic alliances among smaller players necessitate a recalibration of ABCD's market positioning and value

proposition. Critically evaluating ABCD's response to these challenges unveils a nuanced strategy that transcends mere price competition, instead emphasising the primacy of service excellence, operational resilience and value-added propositions in securing and retaining clientele. Interviewee 2 observed: "Competition always exists . . . the biggest threats come from new acquisitions/mergers of small companies so that they can become bigger to compete with ABCD."

By incorporating these detailed insights and quotes from the interview transcripts, the analysis provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of ABCD's strategic approaches to scaling up through CRM and networking (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)). This enhanced discussion not only highlights the practical implications for SMEs but also offers theoretical contributions to the understanding of client relationship management and strategic growth in dynamic markets.

The visual framework delineating ABCD's client acquisition and retention strategies ([Figures 1 and 2](#)) underscores the intrinsic interconnectedness of these pivotal business processes. The client acquisition strategies—including the development of an initial client portfolio, strategic acquisitions, service excellence and the cultivation of personal relationships—are meticulously designed to attract and secure new clientele. These strategies form the cornerstone of business expansion, targeting high-value contracts, diversifying the client base, showcasing operational expertise and leveraging critical industry connections.

Conversely, the client retention strategies—comprising exemplary performance, strategic marketing efforts, operational cadre and a robust organisational culture—are instrumental in maintaining and enhancing relationships with existing clients. These



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 1.
Client retention
strategies

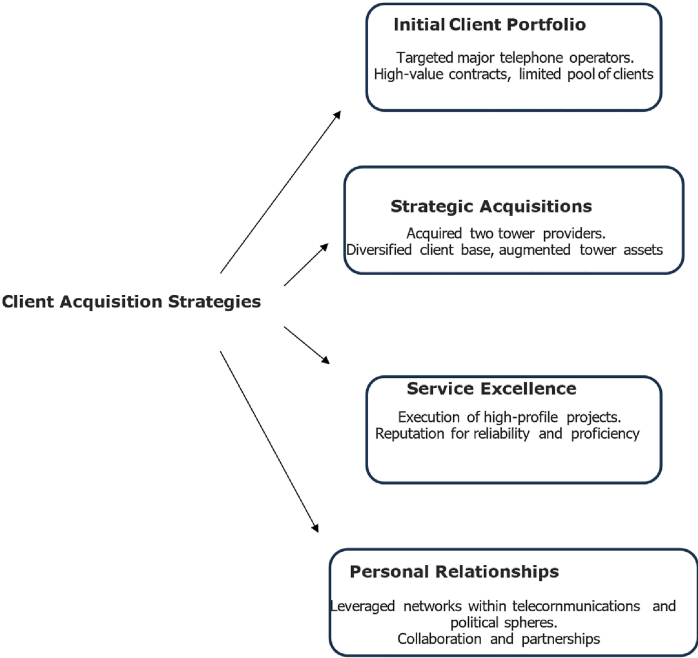


Figure 2.
Client acquisition
strategies

Source(s): Figure by authors

strategies ensure sustained business growth by consistently delivering superior service, fostering client engagement through strategic marketing initiatives and nurturing a performance-driven organisational ethos.

The seamless integration of these acquisition and retention strategies engenders a comprehensive approach wherein the successful onboarding of clients transitions effortlessly into their long-term retention. This symbiotic relationship not only fortifies ABCD's competitive positioning within the telecommunications infrastructure sector but also augments its resilience and capacity for sustained growth amidst a fluctuating market landscape. This holistic strategy thereby enhances ABCD's ability to navigate and thrive in a complex and competitive environment, ensuring enduring success and market leadership.

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of ABCD's client retention strategies reveals a multifaceted approach characterised by a symbiotic interplay between operational efficacy, strategic marketing endeavours and organisational culture. Moreover, a critical appraisal of ABCD's response to market dynamics underscores its adaptability, resilience and unwavering commitment to client satisfaction as key pillars of its enduring success within the telecommunications tower provisioning industry.

Discussion

In this section, the empirical findings from interviews conducted are scrutinised and deliberated in light of the pertinent literature discussed in the second chapter of this research paper. The discussion is organised around the identified research questions, progressing from a specific examination of ABCD's case to broader considerations applicable to SMEs.

Before delving into ABCD's strategies for acquiring and expanding their client network, it is imperative to comprehend the contextual factors that shaped the company's scaling-up journey. ABCD, a key tower provider for telecommunication operators in Indonesia, underwent significant scaling-up experiences, aligning with OECD reports (2021) suggesting that companies in the information and communication sector are prone to such expansion. ABCD witnessed major scaling-up phases, first around 2007 during the boom in wireless mobile phones and internet usage and later in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, accentuating the surge in demand for internet connectivity globally (OECD, 2021).

ABCD executed its scaling-up strategies by augmenting its assets, primarily through the construction of additional towers and strategic acquisitions of direct competitors. This approach, termed as a "scaler who does more of the same", involves expanding business operations by increasing production facilities without fundamentally altering the production process (OECD, 2021). The COVID-19-induced surge in demand for internet connectivity further propelled ABCD's scaling efforts, positioning the company as a demand-driven scaler, capitalising on external factors to meet heightened product or service demands (OECD, 2021). Wisely reinvesting the windfall from this surge, ABCD ensured sustained scaling and prolonged success in the industry.

In terms of acquiring clients, ABCD initially relied on the influential connections of its managers within the telecommunications industry and political spheres. This aligns with findings in developing countries, where entrepreneurs leverage political connections to build business networks (Sefiani *et al.*, 2018). The trust established between ABCD's managers and influential figures, particularly in government, facilitated access to crucial information and financial resources for significant projects (Adama and Nadif, 2018a, b). Notably, this personal trust, especially in developing countries, fosters collaborative relationships and mutually beneficial business ventures (Amoako, 2018).

Building and expanding the client network also hinged on strategic hiring practices. ABCD retained personnel from acquired competitors, tapping into their entrepreneurial experience and industry connections. This strategic move not only contributed to significant company growth (Presutti and Odorici, 2019) but also strengthened relationships with partner companies (Sefiani *et al.*, 2018). Leveraging the network of key hires, ABCD extended its reach within the industry, showcasing a smart approach to client acquisition (Gilmore *et al.*, 2006). Crucially, ABCD's emphasis on hiring and retaining skilled individuals aligned with the recommendation to attract and retain the right talent for optimal business performance (Harnish, 2014). The company's commitment to excellence was evident in its evaluation of staff performance against company goals and project objectives. This dedication to perfect execution became a driving force behind ABCD's scaling efforts, as good performance and a stellar track record attracted clients, minimising the need for extensive marketing efforts.

The role of technology and digital platforms in facilitating client networking

The integration of technology and digital platforms has emerged as a transformative force in facilitating client networking and scaling strategies for SMEs. ABCD's use of digital platforms, including CRM systems, underscores the critical role of technology in enhancing client acquisition and retention processes. By leveraging advanced CRM tools, ABCD was able to streamline its client management processes, ensuring that client interactions were tracked, analysed and optimised for maximum engagement and satisfaction.

Digital platforms enable SMEs to gather and analyse vast amounts of data on client preferences, behaviours and feedback, which can be utilised to tailor services and communication strategies to meet client needs more effectively. This data-driven approach not only enhances client satisfaction but also fosters long-term loyalty and retention. For

example, ABCD's commitment to transparent communication and the use of digital marketing tools allowed the company to highlight its track record of successful project delivery and customer satisfaction, thus reinforcing its brand positioning and fostering deeper client engagement.

Moreover, digital platforms facilitate the expansion of client networks beyond geographical constraints, enabling SMEs to tap into global markets. ABCD's strategic use of online trade fairs and virtual networking events during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies how digital platforms can be leveraged to build and maintain relationships with clients and partners worldwide. This approach not only mitigates the limitations imposed by physical distance but also opens up new avenues for business growth and collaboration.

The maintenance of a client network

The maintenance of a client network is as vital as acquiring new clients for sustained business growth. ABCD employed strategies aligned with CRM principles, as recommended by Raab *et al.* (2016). The four key objectives of CRM—durability, relationship, profitability and management—were manifest in ABCD's practices.

Durability, signifying regular customer patronage and long-lasting relationships, was achieved through ABCD's commitment to excellence in project completion and after-sale maintenance. This commitment, upheld by operational staff and field officers, cultivated trust and satisfaction among clients, fostering enduring relationships (Raab *et al.*, 2016). The profitability pillar of CRM was evidenced by ABCD's ability to charge higher prices, justified by guaranteed satisfaction, leading to significant profits as demonstrated in their 2021 financial report.

The personnel and organisational pillars of CRM implementation were evident in ABCD's structure. The right personnel, with the necessary skills and experience, played a pivotal role in executing CRM strategies. A dedicated marketing division, operating under the guidance of top management, demonstrated a commitment to CRM throughout the organisation. ABCD's customer-oriented approach ensured that client needs and expectations were central to their operations, leading to customer satisfaction, retention and positive word-of-mouth marketing (Tobiassen and Pettersen, 2022).

The broader understanding of how SMEs scale up and maintain their client networks aligns with existing literature, further substantiated by the findings in this study. The literature review, spanning global studies, provided a comprehensive framework for understanding SME dynamics in scaling up and client network maintenance.

SMEs, mirroring ABCD's approach, are advised to adopt strategies aligned with CRM principles for maintaining client networks, including cultivating trust, prioritising customer interests and ensuring profitability through lasting relationships are paramount (Raab *et al.*, 2016). The importance of personnel, technology and organisational aspects in CRM implementation resonates with the findings of this research, where ABCD's success is attributed to the right people and organisational commitment.

In conclusion, the intricate interplay of scaling-up strategies and client network maintenance in the context of ABCD and SMEs echoes the global discourse on business expansion and relationship management. The empirical findings from ABCD's case not only corroborate established theories but also offer nuanced insights into the practical applications of these principles in the dynamic landscape of the information and communication sector. Moreover, the critical role of technology and digital platforms in facilitating client networking cannot be overstated, as they provide SMEs with the tools needed to enhance client acquisition, retention and overall business performance in an increasingly digital world. This holistic approach ensures that SMEs can navigate and thrive amidst the complexities of modern markets, securing their growth and competitive edge for the future.

Conclusion

ABCD's journey in scaling up and client networking serves as an illuminating case study in the dynamic information and communication sector. The company's strategic scaling-up efforts, marked by timely expansions in response to industry booms and external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplify a nuanced understanding of demand-driven scaling. ABCD's adeptness in leveraging these opportunities, coupled with prudent reinvestment strategies, underscores the company's resilience and prolonged success.

ABCD's client acquisition strategies reveal a blend of political acumen, strategic hiring and an unwavering commitment to excellence. The utilisation of managerial connections within the telecommunications and political spheres showcases the importance of leveraging personal networks for business growth, especially in developing countries. The strategic hiring of individuals with entrepreneurial experience and industry connections not only contributed to ABCD's growth but also demonstrated the company's foresight in building a robust client network.

In maintaining its client network, ABCD aligns with established CRM principles, emphasising durability, relationship building, profitability and effective management. The company's focus on excellence in project completion and after-sale maintenance ensures customer satisfaction, fostering lasting relationships and recurrent revenues. ABCD's ability to charge premium prices while retaining client loyalty speaks to the profitability pillar of CRM, affirming the company's commitment to delivering superior value to its clients.

SMEs scaling up – strategies on client networking

The broader implications for SMEs seeking to scale up and fortify their client networks are discernible from ABCD's experiences and the extant literature. Key takeaways encompass:

Strategic Scaling: SMEs are encouraged to adopt a strategic approach to scaling, recognising opportune moments for expansion and considering external factors that may influence demand. ABCD's success in identifying and capitalising on industry booms and shifts highlights the importance of adaptive scaling strategies.

Network Building: Leveraging personal and professional networks, especially in political and industry circles, proves to be a valuable strategy for client acquisition. The significance of hiring individuals with entrepreneurial experience and existing connections underscores the importance of human capital in expanding client networks.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM): Implementing CRM principles, including a focus on durability, relationship-building, profitability and effective management, is critical for sustaining and expanding client networks. SMEs can learn from ABCD's commitment to customer satisfaction, premium pricing and organisational alignment with CRM objectives.

Organisational Commitment: Successful scaling and client network maintenance require organisational commitment at every level. SMEs should prioritise hiring and retaining the right talent, cultivate a customer-oriented culture and ensure that CRM principles are ingrained in the company's structure and operations.

Adaptability and Innovation: SMEs should be adaptable to changing market conditions and be open to innovative approaches in scaling and maintaining client networks. The landscape of the information and communication sector, as exemplified by ABCD, necessitates a dynamic and forward-thinking approach.

In conclusion, the lessons drawn from ABCD's experiences and the broader considerations for SMEs provide valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in scaling up and client networking. As SMEs navigate the intricate landscape of the business world, a strategic, customer-centric and adaptive approach will be instrumental in achieving sustained growth and success.

Practical implications

The practical implications emanating from the case study of ABCD offer valuable insights for SMEs aiming to navigate the complexities of scaling up and client networking. Firstly, the case underscores the imperative of strategic planning for SMEs as it highlights the necessity for meticulous market analysis to identify growth opportunities and formulate adaptable strategies that harness industry trends. SMEs must proactively anticipate market shifts and position themselves to leverage emerging opportunities, ensuring resilience and sustained growth.

Secondly, the case emphasises the critical role of human resource management in SMEs. Strategic hiring and retention of individuals with industry experience and influential networks underscore the importance of cultivating a workforce that contributes to operational excellence and plays a pivotal role in expanding client networks. SMEs should prioritise attracting talent that not only meets immediate operational needs but also enhances the organisation's strategic capabilities.

Furthermore, the practical implications stress the importance of proactive networking and relationship building for SMEs. Actively engaging in industry events, establishing relationships with peers and leveraging political connections are practical avenues for effective client acquisition. SMEs should invest in building robust networks that facilitate access to key industry players and decision-makers, thereby enhancing their market positioning and competitive advantage.

Additionally, the case study underscores the importance of customer-centric approaches. SMEs can significantly enhance client retention and attract new customers by aligning organisational goals with customer needs, ensuring excellence in product and service delivery and building a positive reputation. The adoption of a customer-centric ethos, supported by continuous feedback mechanisms and quality assurance processes, is essential for fostering long-term client loyalty and satisfaction.

Finally, the adoption of CRM practices emerges as a practical recommendation for SMEs. Implementing structured approaches to maintain client relationships, ensure customer satisfaction and optimise profitability contributes to long-term success and growth. SMEs should leverage CRM systems to gain actionable insights into customer behaviour, tailor their offerings and strengthen their customer engagement strategies.

Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications drawn from ABCD's experiences contribute significantly to academic discussions surrounding scaling strategies and client networking. Firstly, the case enriches the discourse on demand-driven scaling, providing practical insights into how companies can effectively scale in response to industry trends and external factors, particularly within the information and communication sectors. It illustrates how strategic asset augmentation and opportunistic reinvestment can drive sustained scaling efforts.

Secondly, the case study offers theoretical insights into the dynamics of network building in business. It underscores the importance of personal and professional connections in the acquisition and maintenance of clients, providing nuanced perspectives on the role of social capital in business development. This enriches the theoretical understanding of how relational networks influence business scalability and operational success.

Moreover, the theoretical implications extend to the successful application of CRM in the scaling process. The case study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how customer-centric approaches play a pivotal role in sustaining growth and fostering client networks for SMEs. It highlights the critical elements of CRM that drive customer satisfaction and loyalty, thereby reinforcing the importance of customer-focused strategies in academic literature.

Additionally, the organisational dynamics and scaling discussed in the case contribute to theoretical discussions on how organisational structures, culture and management practices influence successful scaling and client relationship management. It prompts an examination of how internal organisational factors can be aligned to support strategic scaling initiatives and enhance overall business performance.

Lastly, the adaptive strategies showcased by ABCD in response to changing market conditions contribute to theoretical discussions on adaptive strategies in dynamic markets. The case prompts discussions about how businesses can navigate uncertainties, capitalise on opportunities and foster sustained success through strategic flexibility and innovation. This enriches the theoretical discourse on organisational adaptability and strategic resilience, offering valuable insights for both practitioners and scholars.

In conclusion, the intricate interplay of scaling-up strategies and client network maintenance in the context of ABCD and SMEs echoes the global discourse on business expansion and relationship management. The empirical findings from ABCD's case not only corroborate established theories but also offer nuanced insights into the practical applications of these principles in the dynamic landscape of the information and communication sector. Moreover, the critical role of technology and digital platforms in facilitating client networking cannot be overstated, as they provide SMEs with the tools needed to enhance client acquisition, retention and overall business performance in an increasingly digital world. This holistic approach ensures that SMEs can navigate and thrive amidst the complexities of modern markets, securing their growth and competitive edge for the future.

Limitations of the study

Due to time limitation and the difficulties in connecting with the top management of the subject company, the researchers were only able to interview five middle managers. It was enough to get information required to answer the research questions, but to uncover the practical strategies and detailed recounts of the early stages of the company, researchers need to interview the company's top management.

As this research takes the form of a case study, the findings from this study may not be applicable to other SMEs within the country. Researchers interested in performing a similar study with similar themes should investigate and collect data from a wider audience or from the clients' points of view, such as the telecommunication operators or the internet service providers. They can provide important information to substantiate the findings from similar studies.

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