

A Research Framework for Assessing the Impact of Business Mentoring on Long-Term SME Performance in Slovenia

Zara Krivec

DOBA Business School, Maribor, Slovenia

Mirjana Pejić Bach

The University of Zagreb, Faculty of Economics and Business, Zagreb, Croatia

Berislava Starešinić

Privredna banka d.d., Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract

This paper proposes a research framework to examine the long-term impact of business mentoring on the performance and sustainability of Slovenian micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating for more than 25 years. The framework is conceptually grounded in theories of entrepreneurial learning and developmental mentoring and aims to address a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of mentoring in mature firms. The proposed study relies on a mixed-methods design, combining secondary financial data from the BIZI. The SI platform with primary data gathered through structured surveys and semi-structured interviews. Profit per employee is identified as the key performance indicator for assessing financial outcomes. The framework includes three testable hypotheses related to the presence, perceived value, and structure of mentoring relationships. By outlining a straightforward methodological approach, this paper sets the stage for future empirical research and guides policy-makers and practitioners involved in SME support and mentoring programs.

Keywords: business mentoring; SMEs; Slovenia; profit per employee; research framework

JEL classification: L26, M13, M53

Paper type: Research article

Received: 14 March 2025

Accepted: 6 August 2025

DOI: 10.54820/entrenova-2025-0074

Citation: Krivec, Z., Pejić Bach, M., Starešinić, B. (2025). A Research Framework for Assessing the Impact of Business Mentoring on Long-Term SME Performance in Slovenia. ENTRENOVA - ENTERprise REsearch InNOVation, 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.54820/entrenova-2025-0074>.

Introduction

Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent a key pillar of the Slovenian economy, accounting for 99% of all registered businesses and playing a vital role in employment, innovation, and regional development (UMAR, 2021; OECD, 2019). However, sustaining long-term performance in a dynamic business environment remains a significant challenge, even for mature firms that have demonstrated operational resilience over decades.

Business mentoring has increasingly been recognized as a strategic support mechanism for SME development, particularly in navigating growth, transformation, and market complexity (European Commission, 2020). Through the transfer of knowledge, experience, and strategic insight, mentors can support business owners and managers in improving decision-making, adapting to change, and identifying new opportunities (Clutterbuck, 2014). While previous research has highlighted the positive effects of mentoring on early-stage firms and start-ups (Ghosh & Reio, 2013; St-Jean & Audet, 2012), there is a notable gap in understanding its relevance and impact among long-established SMEs.

This paper aims to address this gap by proposing a conceptual framework for future empirical research on the relationship between business mentoring and SME performance in Slovenia. The focus is on enterprises established before the year 2000 that are still active and solvent today. These firms represent a unique segment of the SME landscape, having already overcome multiple economic cycles and structural changes.

Rather than presenting empirical results, the paper outlines relevant theoretical perspectives, formulates research questions and hypotheses, and proposes a methodological approach for examining mentoring effectiveness in this specific context. The central performance indicator considered is profit per employee, a widely used measure of operational efficiency in SME research. The proposed framework is intended to inform both future academic inquiry and the development of evidence-based mentoring programs within SME support policy.

Literature review

Business mentoring is increasingly recognized as a strategic practice that supports the growth, learning, and long-term sustainability of SMEs. The theoretical foundation of this study lies in the intersection of entrepreneurial learning theory, developmental mentoring models, and strategic human resource development. These perspectives offer complementary insights into how mentoring relationships can influence the capabilities and performance of small firms over time.

Entrepreneurial learning refers to the process through which entrepreneurs acquire, interpret, and apply knowledge to navigate uncertainty and develop their ventures (Politis, 2005). Unlike formal education or structured training, entrepreneurial learning is often experiential, iterative, and socially embedded. Mentoring, in this context, serves as an informal yet structured learning channel through which experienced individuals transfer not only knowledge but also business acumen, values, and strategic insight (Deakins & Freel, 1998). Learning through mentoring thus extends beyond cognitive skill development to shape the entrepreneur's mindset, resilience, and decision-making orientation (Sullivan, 2000; Higgins & Kram, 2001).

The impact of business mentoring on the long-term performance of SMEs is an increasingly critical area of inquiry, particularly as these firms are essential to economic growth and resilience. Numerous studies indicate that effective mentoring

relationships significantly contribute to the growth and sustainability of SMEs through mechanisms such as knowledge transfer, skill development, and network access.

Mentoring can positively influence the growth trajectories of SMEs by providing critical support through career guidance and psychological encouragement. Adudu et al. (2022) demonstrated a significant relationship between mentoring practices, such as knowledge transfer and psychological support, and the growth of small-scale businesses. Their findings align with additional research highlighting that structured mentoring programs substantially enhance business performance metrics, including profitability and operational efficiency (Otis et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2016).

Another dimension of understanding mentoring's impact on SMEs is its role in identifying and exploiting opportunities. St-Jean et al. (2016) emphasized that mentors act as opportunity brokers, facilitating entrepreneurial processes for nascent entrepreneurs by improving their capacity to identify and seize opportunities. This aspect of mentoring directly correlates with long-term performance, as effective opportunity recognition is fundamental to sustainable business growth.

Furthermore, mentoring programs that specifically target women entrepreneurs can be particularly beneficial. For instance, women small business owners often deal with unique challenges that can inhibit their business growth. By tailoring mentoring approaches to the specific socio-economic conditions of female entrepreneurs, the programs can yield significant long-term positive outcomes (Sharafizad, 2018). Supporting this, research by McGowan et al. (2015) identified that gender-matching between mentors and mentees fosters an empathetic understanding, leading to improved support mechanisms for women in entrepreneurship.

The role of collective action through multi-stakeholder mentoring models also merits attention. Rosyadi et al. (2020) developed a multi-stakeholder mentoring model that involves government, business, and creative communities in addressing the mentoring needs of SMEs. This Penta Helix approach has shown promising results in supporting SMEs through their initial developmental stages, thereby underpinning long-term sustainability and performance enhancement.

Moreover, technology mentoring has emerged as a crucial support avenue in the context of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Woodley et al. (2015) showed that technology mentors, often younger individuals with tech skills, successfully facilitated the integration of ICT into small businesses, thereby enhancing operational efficiencies and market reach. The practical implementation of such technology solutions is increasingly important in today's digital economy.

According to Clutterbuck (2014), mentoring relationships provide both psychosocial and career-related support, enabling entrepreneurs to build confidence, reflect on their leadership practices, and adopt long-term perspectives. These benefits are particularly relevant to SMEs, which often lack the formal structures and internal resources needed for strategic development. Mentors can fill critical gaps by helping SMEs formulate strategies, prioritize goals, and build networks (Garavan et al., 2016). In this sense, mentoring acts as a relational form of human capital development, aligned with the broader goals of organizational learning and innovation (Chaston & Sadler-Smith, 2012).

Several empirical studies have shown that mentored firms tend to outperform their non-mentored counterparts in terms of growth, market expansion, innovation, and resilience to external shocks (St-Jean & Audet, 2012; Eby et al., 2008). Moreover, mentoring has been linked to increased managerial competence, improved employee retention, and enhanced adaptability during crises (Ensher & Murphy, 2011; Lester et al., 2011). A meta-analysis by Ghosh and Reio (2013) further confirms the

positive effects of mentoring for both mentees and mentors, suggesting that developmental relationships can serve as a mutually beneficial learning environment.

However, most of the existing research focuses on start-ups, early-stage entrepreneurs, or SME growth acceleration programs (Garavan et al., 2016; European Commission, 2020). Much less is known about the effects of mentoring on mature SMEs, particularly those that have already demonstrated longevity in volatile markets. The question remains whether mentoring continues to deliver added value in such contexts, or whether its impact diminishes once core organizational routines and strategies have stabilized.

Another relevant gap concerns the quality and duration of mentoring relationships. While some studies emphasize that even short-term mentoring can deliver results (Allen et al., 2004), others argue that sustained, trust-based relationships are more likely to produce transformative outcomes (Kram, 1985; Haggard et al., 2011). The mentoring process is inherently complex and shaped by multiple variables, including the mentor's experience, the organizational context, and the mentee's openness to feedback and change (Bozionelos, 2004). These relational and contextual factors deserve further empirical attention—especially within established firms navigating long-term strategic adaptation.

Finally, the literature increasingly calls for more localized studies that consider national economic systems, institutional environments, and cultural factors (Liao & Welsch, 2005; Chaston & Sadler-Smith, 2012). In Slovenia, programs such as PONI and other EU-cofinanced initiatives have sought to formalize mentoring within the entrepreneurial support ecosystem. However, rigorous academic evaluation of their long-term effectiveness is still lacking. This study responds to that need by proposing a research framework focused on Slovenian SMEs established before 2000, to understand whether mentoring remains a relevant and effective form of strategic support for firms that have already survived multiple economic cycles.

Hypothesis development

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes that business mentoring can positively influence the long-term performance of mature SMEs. Mentoring provides knowledge transfer, strategic support, and psychosocial guidance that can enhance organizational learning and adaptability (Clutterbuck, 2014; Garavan et al., 2016). Although most prior studies have examined start-ups or early-stage firms (St-Jean & Audet, 2012; Eby et al., 2008), the exact mechanisms may also benefit long-established companies, particularly in improving efficiency and navigating competitive challenges.

Based on the reviewed literature and conceptual foundations of mentoring and entrepreneurial learning, the following hypotheses are proposed. Each reflects a different dimension of the mentoring process and its potential link to SME performance.

Empirical findings suggest that mentored firms tend to perform better than their non-mentored counterparts in various domains such as revenue growth, productivity, and profitability (St-Jean & Audet, 2012; Ghosh & Reio, 2013). Mentoring provides mentees with access to expert knowledge, external perspectives, and strategic guidance that may not be available within the organization, especially in resource-constrained SMEs. By supporting managerial decision-making and encouraging efficiency-enhancing practices, mentors can influence firm-level performance indicators such as profit per employee. Prior research also highlights that mentoring may help entrepreneurs avoid costly mistakes, respond more effectively to market dynamics, and allocate resources more strategically (Eby et al., 2008; Allen et al.,

2004). Therefore, it is expected that mentored firms will show higher financial efficiency. Based on that, the first hypothesis is formulated:

- H1: SMEs that have received business mentoring demonstrate higher levels of financial performance, measured by profit per employee, compared to SMEs without mentoring experience.

While mentoring is often associated with skill development or emotional support, it also plays a key role in strategic thinking and business model evolution (Clutterbuck, 2014; Ensher & Murphy, 2011). This hypothesis posits that mentoring can influence a firm's long-term orientation by helping managers clarify goals, anticipate future challenges, and explore new growth opportunities. Through mentoring, SME leaders may gain support in refining their strategic plans, managing innovation processes, and responding to external shocks such as economic downturns or regulatory changes (Garavan et al., 2016). As such, the perceived value of mentoring—specifically in strategic dimensions—is likely to correlate with improved outcomes such as competitiveness, adaptability, and financial sustainability. This gives a basis for the formulation of the second hypothesis:

- H2: The perceived strategic value of mentoring (e.g., support in long-term decision-making, innovation, and crisis management) is positively associated with SME performance.

The quality, structure, and duration of mentoring relationships have been identified as critical factors influencing mentoring effectiveness (Kram, 1985; Haggard et al., 2011). Structured mentoring relationships that include regular meetings, goal setting, and mutual accountability tend to foster deeper trust and more effective knowledge transfer. In contrast, ad hoc or informal engagements may lack consistency and strategic focus, limiting their impact. Studies show that sustained mentoring relationships allow mentees to develop reflective learning processes, engage in more open dialogue, and receive more tailored advice over time (Bozionelos, 2004; Garvey, 2009). Therefore, it is hypothesized that the longer and more structured the mentoring process, the greater the perceived impact on firm performance, particularly in strategic growth, innovation, and leadership development.

- H3: Longer and more structured mentoring relationships produce greater perceived benefits for SMEs than shorter or informal engagements.

Proposed methodology

Quantitative research

A quantitative research design is proposed to test three hypotheses concerning the relationship between business mentoring and the performance of mature SMEs in Slovenia. The aim is to examine whether mentored firms demonstrate higher financial efficiency, whether the perceived strategic value of mentoring is associated with better outcomes, and whether more structured and longer-lasting mentoring relationships generate greater perceived benefits.

Data

The research framework is based on two main data types. Secondary financial data are proposed to be sourced from the BIZI.si platform, which provides publicly accessible records on company performance. These data include annual profit and the number of employees, enabling the calculation of profit per employee as the

central key performance indicator (KPI). This measure serves as a standardized benchmark for comparing business efficiency across firms of varying sizes and sectors.

In parallel, primary quantitative data will be collected via an online survey administered to SME owners and managers via the 1ka platform. The questionnaire is designed to gather information on mentoring experiences—such as whether the firm engaged with a mentor, the duration and structure of the mentoring relationship, and the frequency of interaction—as well as subjective evaluations of mentoring outcomes. Respondents are also asked to provide basic firm-level data, including profit, number of employees, industry classification, and location, which are required both for KPI calculation and as control variables in subsequent statistical analyses.

The target population consists of Slovenian SMEs established before 2000 that are currently active and solvent. The BIZI.si database is proposed as the primary source for identifying eligible firms. A stratified sampling strategy is suggested to ensure representation across mentored and non-mentored firms, which is necessary to support meaningful comparison and hypothesis testing.

Research instrument

The research instrument is structured to reflect the constructs defined by the study's hypotheses. Mentoring experience is measured using binary and categorical questions; perceived strategic value is operationalized through Likert-scale items focusing on strategic planning, innovation, and crisis response; and subjective outcomes are captured through statements assessing satisfaction and perceived business impact. These variables form the basis for the quantitative analyses aligned with the three hypotheses.

The research instrument is proposed to consist of four sections (Table 1). The first section captures basic information on the presence and structure of business mentoring within the firm. It includes binary and categorical questions to determine whether the firm has engaged in a mentoring relationship, the duration of that relationship, and its organizational structure (formal, semi-structured, or informal).

The second section is designed to measure the perceived strategic value of mentoring, aligned with the second research hypothesis. This section includes Likert-scale items that assess the extent to which mentoring contributed to long-term decision-making, innovation, crisis management, and market development. These items were developed based on prior studies examining the strategic impact of mentoring (Clutterbuck, 2014; Garavan et al., 2016; St-Jean & Audet, 2012).

The third section includes items that measure subjective mentoring outcomes, including overall satisfaction with the mentoring relationship, perceived usefulness, and perceived contribution to business growth. These variables are aligned with the third hypothesis regarding the relationship between mentoring structure and perceived effectiveness.

The fourth section collects financial and firm-level information necessary to calculate the key performance indicator—profit per employee—used to test the first hypothesis. Respondents are asked to report the company's total profit and the number of full-time employees in the most recent fiscal year. Additional contextual variables, such as industry sector and firm location, are also included.

All multi-item measures in the second and third sections are proposed to be based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument is designed to ensure internal consistency and face validity and will be pre-tested on a small sample of SMEs before full-scale distribution.

The existing literature serves as the basis for developing the research instrument on mentoring outcomes, entrepreneurial learning, and SME performance evaluation. The

structure follows the logic of previously validated frameworks, such as the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1992) and mentoring effectiveness models (Eby et al., 2008), and is adapted to the specific context of long-established Slovenian SMEs.

Table 1

Research instrument

Construct	Code	Item
Mentoring experience	MENT1	Has your company ever received business mentoring from an external mentor? (Yes/No)
	MENT2	Duration of mentoring relationship (Less than 3 months / 3–6 months / 6–12 months / More than 1 year)
	MENT3	Structure of mentoring (Informal / Semi-structured / Fully structured)
	MENT4	Frequency of mentor interaction during mentoring (Less than monthly / Monthly / 2–3 times a month / Weekly or more)
Perceived strategic value	STRAT1	Mentoring helped us improve our long-term strategic planning.
	STRAT2	Mentoring contributed to innovation in products, services, or processes.
	STRAT3	Mentoring helped us better respond to crises or external shocks.
	STRAT4	Mentoring supported our exploration of new market opportunities.
	STRAT5	Mentoring contributed to improvements in internal organization and processes.
Perceived mentoring outcomes	OUTC1	Overall, mentoring had a positive impact on our company's development.
	OUTC2	I would recommend mentoring to other SMEs in a similar position.
	OUTC3	The benefits of mentoring justified the time and resources invested.
	OUTC4	Mentoring had a measurable impact on our business performance.
Firm-level data	FIRM1	Total company profit in the last fiscal year (numeric entry in EUR)
	FIRM2	Number of full-time employees in the last fiscal year (numeric entry)
	FIRM3	Primary industry sector (Manufacturing, Services, Trade, etc.)
	FIRM4	Region in which the company is headquartered

Source: Authors' work

Statistical analysis

Regarding statistical analysis, independent-samples t-tests are proposed to compare profit per employee between mentored and non-mentored firms (H1), with nonparametric alternatives, such as the Mann–Whitney U test, available if assumptions are not met. To test H2, correlation analysis and linear regression models are proposed, examining the relationship between perceived strategic value and performance outcomes, while controlling for firm size and industry. H3 is to be assessed using one-way ANOVA to determine whether differences in mentoring duration and structure correspond to variations in perceived benefits, followed by post hoc tests if required.

Descriptive statistics are proposed to summarize sample characteristics, mentoring prevalence, and key trends related to structure, duration, and strategic impact of mentoring. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a theoretically

grounded and empirically testable framework for evaluating the effects of mentoring on SME performance in a long-term business context.

Qualitative approach

A qualitative research approach is proposed to complement the quantitative component and provide a deeper understanding of how mentoring is experienced and perceived by SME owners and managers. While quantitative methods allow testing relationships among predefined variables, qualitative methods enable exploration of individual interpretations, contextual dynamics, and nuanced effects of mentoring that standardized instruments may not capture. This approach is beneficial for examining subjective elements such as trust, motivation, strategic insight, and emotional support, which are difficult to quantify yet critical to understanding the full scope of mentoring influence.

The qualitative component is grounded in the traditions of interpretive inquiry and thematic analysis, aiming to generate insight into how mentoring relationships develop, function, and translate into perceived value in long-established SMEs. It supports hypothesis generation, deepens explanatory depth, and contributes to theoretical refinement. Importantly, it aligns with the study's objective to explore not only whether mentoring matters, but also how and why it makes a difference in firms that have already demonstrated business resilience and maturity.

Purposive sampling

A purposive sampling strategy is proposed to identify information-rich cases—specifically, SME managers or owners who have previously participated in a mentoring relationship. Participants will be selected from respondents to the quantitative survey who indicate mentoring experience and express a willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. This form of non-probability sampling is justified by the need to focus on participants with direct, relevant experience, thereby enabling the exploration of mentoring practices in context. The sample will aim to be heterogeneous in firm size, industry sector, and geographic location to ensure diverse perspectives.

While saturation principles will determine the sample size, it is anticipated that 10-15 interviews will be sufficient to uncover recurrent themes and patterns. This range is consistent with established qualitative research standards for semi-structured interviews in organizational settings.

Interview approach

Semi-structured interviews are proposed as the primary data collection method. This format allows the interviewer to follow a consistent set of core questions while retaining flexibility to explore emerging themes in greater depth. Interviews will be conducted remotely via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or by telephone, at the participant's preference. Each interview is expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with participant consent.

The interview guide is designed to explore key dimensions of the mentoring experience, including initiation and motivation, expectations, duration and frequency of interaction, the nature of mentor support, perceived benefits, obstacles, and reflections on personal and business impact (Table 2). Particular emphasis will be placed on understanding how mentoring contributed to strategic thinking, innovation, crisis response, and leadership development—dimensions consistent with the constructs explored in the quantitative part of the study.

The interviews will also address relational and emotional aspects of mentoring, such as trust, confidence-building, and perceived empowerment. This broader scope is

important to capture the holistic influence of mentoring beyond strictly economic outcomes.

Table 2
Interview guide

Theme	Example Questions
Mentoring context	Can you briefly describe the context in which your company engaged in a mentoring relationship?
Initiation and motivation	What motivated you to seek or accept mentoring? Was it a personal or organizational decision?
Structure and duration	How long did the mentoring last, and how structured was the process (formal/informal)?
Interaction and communication	How often did you meet with your mentor, and what did your typical interaction look like?
Strategic outcomes	Did the mentoring help you in making long-term or strategic decisions? If so, how?
Innovation and adaptability	Were there any examples where mentoring led to new products, services, or improvements?
Crisis management	Did your mentor help you navigate any crises or unexpected business challenges?
Relational quality	How would you describe the relationship with your mentor in terms of trust and communication?
Perceived business impact	What concrete business outcomes, if any, do you associate with the mentoring experience?
Reflections and suggestions	Looking back, what would you improve about the mentoring process? Would you recommend it to others?

Source: Authors' work

Interview analysis

Thematic analysis is proposed as the analytical method, supported by MAXQDA software. After transcription, all interviews will be subject to systematic open coding. Codes will be grouped into higher-level categories through axial coding, and overarching themes will be developed through selective coding. The analytical process will follow a recursive and iterative logic, allowing initial codes and categories to evolve as patterns emerge from the data.

The goal of the analysis is to identify familiar narratives, divergences, and latent structures in participants' accounts of mentoring. Specific attention will be given to how participants frame mentoring in terms of strategic value, relationship quality, learning outcomes, and business implications. Insights will also be triangulated with quantitative findings to identify convergence or contradiction across methods.

To ensure trustworthiness and transparency, the analysis process will include reflective memos, coding comparison, and validation of themes through member checking with selected participants. The results are expected to provide rich, context-sensitive insights that inform both academic understanding and practical design of mentoring programs for mature SMEs.

Conclusion

Business mentoring has gained increasing recognition as a strategic support mechanism for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), yet its long-term effectiveness in mature, established firms remains underexplored. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a research framework to evaluate the impact of mentoring on the performance and strategic resilience of Slovenian SMEs that have been in

operation for over 25 years. Grounded in theories of entrepreneurial learning and developmental mentoring, the framework combines quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate whether, how, and under what conditions mentoring contributes to sustained competitiveness.

Rather than presenting empirical results, the paper outlines a conceptually robust and operationally feasible research design that includes a survey instrument, interview guide, and defined performance indicators. The framework enables testing key hypotheses on financial outcomes, perceived strategic value, and the structural characteristics of mentoring relationships. By targeting a distinct and under-researched SME population, this study sets the stage for evidence-based inquiry that can inform future policy, program development, and academic understanding of mentoring effectiveness beyond early-stage entrepreneurship.

Expected contributions

This research is expected to contribute to the academic and practical understanding of how business mentoring affects the long-term performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly those with a long operational history. By focusing on Slovenian SMEs that have been active for more than 25 years, the proposed framework offers a novel perspective on mentoring beyond its traditional association with start-ups and early-stage firms. The study contributes to the literature by integrating theories of entrepreneurial learning and developmental mentoring into the analysis of mature businesses. It also advances methodological practice by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines secondary financial data, survey responses, and qualitative interviews. Practically, the study is designed to inform policy-makers and SME support organizations about the relevance of mentoring in sustaining competitiveness, resilience, and innovation capacity in long-established firms. Furthermore, the findings are intended to guide the design of targeted mentoring programs tailored to the strategic needs and maturity levels of participating SMEs.

Limitations of the proposed approach

The proposed research framework has several limitations. The cross-sectional design would limit the ability to infer causal relationships between mentoring and performance outcomes. Since the data will be collected at a single point in time, it may not fully capture the dynamic, evolving nature of mentoring relationships. Another limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported data in the survey and interviews, which may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall error. Although secondary financial data is planned to be included to strengthen the objectivity of performance measurement, the accuracy of respondents' self-reported mentoring experience and perceived value may vary. Additionally, the qualitative component based on purposive sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the specific national context of Slovenia means that the findings may not be directly transferable to other economic systems or cultural environments without further validation. These limitations are acknowledged to inform the interpretation of results and guide future research.

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About the authors

Zara Krivec, M.A., with over 39 years of experience in accounting, entrepreneurship, and small and medium-sized business development; entrepreneur since 1986; licensed business mentor; author of two books, *Let's Go Our Own Way* and *5 Steps to Monetize Your Hobby Successfully*; until recently, she was the CEO of V.I.P. Accounting in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and the Academy for Successful Business. Zara is known for her work in financial consulting, mentoring, and education, helping small business owners deal with strategic and operational challenges. She is enrolled in a doctoral program at the DOBA Faculty in Maribor, Slovenia. Her expertise is based on decades of practice and a passion for supporting entrepreneurs on their development journey. The author can be contacted at: zara.krivec1@net.doba.si

Mirjana Pejic-Bach, PhD, is a Full Professor at the Department of Informatics, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Economics and Business. Her current research areas are system dynamics modelling, data mining, and web content research. She is actively engaged in several scientific projects. The author can be contacted at: mpejic@efzg.hr

Berislava Starešinić, Ph.D., is Director for Affluent Segment Development, Function of Affluent Clients, Retail group, Privredna banka Zagreb. Berislava also holds a position of visiting lecturer at the Department of Informatics, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Economics and Business. Her research interests include the banking sector, organizational behaviour, banking reputation, and direct and digital channels. The author can be contacted at: bstaresinic@pbz.hr.

Appendix 1. Survey instrument

The following structured survey instrument is designed to examine the relationship between business mentoring and the performance of mature SMEs in Slovenia. The aim is to collect standardized data on mentoring experience, perceived strategic value, and business outcomes. The survey also includes questions related to company characteristics and performance indicators to enable comparative analysis between mentored and non-mentored firms.

Participants are expected to complete the survey within approximately 10 minutes. The instrument is divided into four sections: (1) mentoring experience, (2) perceived strategic value, (3) perceived outcomes, and (4) firm-level financial and contextual information. All responses are anonymous and will be used exclusively for academic research purposes.

The survey is designed for online distribution and will be administered using the 1ka platform. Participants are encouraged to respond honestly and may skip any question they do not wish to answer.

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Dear participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey on the role of business mentoring in the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Slovenia. The purpose of this research is to understand better how mentoring affects long-term business performance in mature companies.

The survey is part of an academic research project conducted by [name of researcher or institution].

Your responses are anonymous and will be used exclusively for scientific and research purposes.

Completing the questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes.

Participation is voluntary. You may skip any question or withdraw at any time without explanation.

Your responses will help us better understand how mentoring contributes to business success and resilience in long-established Slovenian SMEs. This research aims to support the development of future mentoring programs and SME support policies.

If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact us at [email address].

Thank you again for your valuable contribution!

Please answer the following questions based on your company's experience. This questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Name of the company: _____

Section 1: Mentoring Experience

- Has your company ever received business mentoring from an external mentor? (Yes/No)
- Duration of mentoring relationship (Less than 3 months / 3–6 months / 6–12 months / More than 1 year)
- Structure of mentoring (Informal / Semi-structured / Fully structured)
- Frequency of mentor interaction during mentoring (Less than monthly / Monthly / 2–3 times a month / Weekly or more)

Section 2: Perceived Strategic Value of Mentoring

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree):

- Mentoring helped us improve our long-term strategic planning.
- Mentoring contributed to innovation in products, services, or processes.
- Mentoring helped us better respond to crises or external shocks.
- Mentoring supported our exploration of new market opportunities.
- Mentoring contributed to improvements in internal organization and processes.

Section 3: Perceived Mentoring Outcomes

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree):

- Overall, mentoring had a positive impact on our company's development.
- I would recommend mentoring to other SMEs in a similar position.
- The benefits of mentoring justified the time and resources invested.
- Mentoring had a measurable impact on our business performance.

Section 4: Company Information

- Total company profit in the last fiscal year (numeric entry in EUR): _____
- Number of full-time employees in the last fiscal year: _____
- Primary industry sector (Manufacturing, Services, Trade, etc.): _____
- Region in which the company is headquartered: _____

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix 2. Interview Guide

The following semi-structured interview guide is designed to explore SME managers' and owners' experiences with business mentoring. The aim is to gain deeper insight into mentoring practices, outcomes, and perceived strategic value. Interviews are expected to last 30 to 60 minutes. Interviewers should follow the guide flexibly, allowing participants to elaborate on themes of personal significance.

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Hello, and thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.

My name is [Name], and I am conducting this interview as part of a research study on the role of business mentoring in the development and performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Slovenia.

The purpose of this interview is to better understand your personal experience with mentoring in a business context. What worked well, what could be improved, and what impact, if any, it had on your company's development. Your insights will help us develop a more complete understanding of how mentoring affects long-established SMEs.

The interview will take about 30 to 60 minutes. With your permission, I would like to record the conversation to capture your responses accurately. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential and anonymized in any reports or publications. You are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

If you agree, may I start the recording now?

Theme	Example Questions
Mentoring context	Can you briefly describe the context in which your company engaged in a mentoring relationship?
Initiation and motivation	What motivated you to seek or accept mentoring? Was it a personal or organizational decision?
Structure and duration	How long did the mentoring last, and how structured was the process (formal/informal)?
Interaction and communication	How often did you meet with your mentor, and what did your typical interaction look like?
Strategic outcomes	Did the mentoring help you in making long-term or strategic decisions? If so, how?
Innovation and adaptability	Were there any examples where mentoring led to new products, services, or improvements?
Crisis management	Did your mentor help you navigate any crises or unexpected business challenges?
Relational quality	How would you describe the relationship with your mentor in terms of trust and communication?

Perceived business impact	What concrete business outcomes, if any, do you associate with the mentoring experience?
Reflections and suggestions	Looking back, what would you improve about the mentoring process? Would you recommend it to others?

Instructions for Interviewers:

- Begin by thanking the participant and briefly explaining the purpose of the study.
- Obtain verbal consent for recording the interview.
- Use open-ended questions and follow up with probing questions if necessary.
- Maintain a neutral tone and avoid leading the participant.
- Ensure participant confidentiality and offer the option to skip any question.
- At the end, thank the participant and ask if they would like a summary of the results.