

Improving the Competitiveness of SMEs through Management Control. Empirical Study for North Lebanon SMEs

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Abstract:

Upon our observations and interviews, most of the companies depend on administrative control in the process of advice, control and forecasting, and it is considered to be the most important tool to support the decisions taken by them.

Regarding its location, it depends on the size and status of the company, from which we can distinguish two situations:

For small and medium-sized enterprises, administrative control is an important function and its effective role at all levels is that it has an advisory and supervisory role on the one hand and it has a predictive role on the other hand, and we cannot forget its role of managing costs and streamlining them efficiently, which helps the company to make profit and pay less costs.

We note that in SMEs, the accountant is responsible for the process of administrative control, and here it is necessary to mention the need to separate this work from other jobs.

In fact, management control provides indicators and tools for evaluating the company's performance. Among the tools mentioned in this paper we have the budget management, dashboards and cost calculation methods, the latter is considered to be the more efficient. This paper used the analysis center method, the ABC method and a reasonable allocation in order to calculate the cost price of each product and each activity, and find out the real reason for the management.

In general, the answer provided by management control in order to manage company's performance lies in the management of the effectiveness and the efficiency of the company and of the adaptability to the problems of management of the company.

Key Word: *SME; competitiveness; management control; cost; profit; accountant; performance; Lebanon.*

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I. Introduction

Small and medium enterprises are the beating heart of the Lebanese economy and they are the mainstay of it, so once you enter the economy of the country, you can find that these enterprises 95% of companies. In addition, these companies employ around 50% of the country's population¹.

SMEs play an important responsibility in the economy of countries, they allow the entry of flows to the public treasury through the taxes they pay to the government, in return for the diversity of SMEs at all levels and in all fields (food, clothing, agriculture and others) lead to a decrease in imports and an increase in exports and consequently a decrease in the trade deficit². In addition SMEs deal with many of the social problems the most notable among them is unemployment where SMEs employ as 50% of the population, it prevents unemployment, immigration, crime and theft.

After careful research and examination, we found out that these companies make up 97% of the total business in Lebanon, they are considered as Key Economic Engine for Growth & Job Creation contributing to employment opportunities and high value-added economy¹.

Globalization and the opening of borders between countries have played an important role in the diffusion and growth of SMEs in all countries and this has strengthened the competition between local SMEs among themselves among international SMEs in a significant way³. This can led to significant problems. The most notable problem is the bankruptcy of these SMEs and consequently the exit from the market. This problem has resulted in many social effects like unemployment, economic effects like financial and economic crises and demographic effects like brain drain⁴.

In general, five years can be considered the average life expectancy of a small and medium-sized business⁵. This duration is quite tight for two essential causes:

The first reason is the absence of legislation to protect small and medium-sized enterprises so that the laws supporting these institutions are absent at a remarkable rate so that there are no tax exemptions or subsidized loans to help these institutions. Despite this, the Lebanese government in general and the Ministry of the Economy in particular have made efforts. The Minister of Economy approved certain measures which would protect these companies and further ensure their continuity in order to make them more efficient and therefore to support the Lebanese economy and the protection of the country against catastrophic consequences. This text has been announced for several months, and it outlines some forty directives and decisions to develop small and medium-sized enterprises and strengthen their competitiveness and therefore their effective contribution to the Lebanese economy from 2014 to 2020⁶. But the question remains:

"At what level has the government delivered this program today? "

"Is the government capable of implementing this program in light of the crises that are going through Lebanon?"

The second cause of SME deficit is the lack of knowledge among entrepreneurs and managers in the conduct and management. Briefly, the lack of "good management control".

The management control function in small and medium-sized enterprises suffers from many problems due to the lack of coordination between them and the rest of the departments of the enterprise and the low importance attributed to it according to some. So this work is affected by several factors and is closely related to the culture and awareness of the owner of the institution. The higher the awareness and the culture of the owner of the institution, the more effective and homogeneous the management control is with the management of the company and vice versa. This profession is sensitive to many factors including the size of the company, its economic objective, the expansion of the range of products offered, the basic training of the manager-owner and his culture⁷.

As a result, if medium and small enterprises are the beating heart of the government economy, management control is the beating heart of the institutions themselves, and without them, enterprises will fall outside the scope of the market and out of control.

If we ask the directors and founders of companies questions: What is the accounting system approved by your company? How are the costs calculated? How are budgets set and on what basis? What is the company's policy towards the future? And how do you deal with the issues? And another technical question arises but the leaders of Lebanese SMEs have no answer to these questions.

Many researchers believe that the reason for the decline in the average rate of business life is either poor management and the lack of clear and simple budgets and policies that help the business continue, or because of ignorance. and the lack of knowledge of the leader or the person responsible for the policies, ideas and methods that he must implement in order to run the business in the right direction⁸.

The sustainability of SMEs is directly linked to perfection and continuous improvement. As a result Management control is the right way for the company to reach the performance stage, because it represents a mechanism which allows an "efficiency" In order to achieve its short and long term aspirations at the same time and "a efficiency "when the quantities obtained are maximized and in this case these institutions are able to meet their needs and rationally cover its expenses, thus ensuring its continuity in the market and facing strong competition, whether internal or external⁹.

It is very important to build a strong and robust management control system through the use of available means such as general accounting, cost accounting, and budget accounting, all of which would correct the way the company adopts and serves its purposes.

The assumptions prepared in our research are all mutated around the absence or weak management control in SMEs that negatively influence the improvement of their competitiveness and consequently their performance and sustainability.

We are interested to study the following questions:

- Can a company with weak management control survive?
- Can a company that does not have a management controller survive?
- How can managers carry out management control mechanisms?
- Is there a link between management control and the various departments of a company?
- Does the application of administrative control and its use in the company help the company to achieve the highest level of performance?

Our study's Research axes are:

- Historical overview of management control (characteristics, functions ...)

- The relationship between administrative control and the rest of the company's departments and the study of the strength of the relationship between the two parties
- The relationship between management control and the dashboard and the need for the latter.
- Management control serving the competitiveness performance of SMEs.

II. Literature Review

We will deal with the dimensions of management control and the tasks of the person exercising this function, in addition to a comprehensive overview of the historical development of this concept.

In order to deal with the issue accurately and effectively, we need to focus on the main pillar of our research, which is 'management control' and its evolution over time and space, and how it has played a fundamental role in the construction of the company and its development in the short and long term.

The dual evolution of management control and its missions:

In order to understand and explain the management of surveillance, it is necessary to focus on the basic concepts that are related to all other administrative services.

The historical evolution of administrative control:

In the past, accounting was defined as administrative control, so the accountant was the one who performs the tasks related to administrative control, but after the industrial revolution and after the emergence of the concept of division of labor, administrative control become an independent unit that has its own administrative entity and its own concept, which differs in all the differences with management accounting. Knowing that everyone is complementary in a specific area¹⁰.

In fact, the job of administrative operations is to provide cost accounting, manage budgets, estimate and submit periodic reports. This model has been certified by American companies (DuPont de Nemours; General Motors), European and international companies¹¹. Its main characteristics can be summarized as follows:

- Financial performance indicators: By studying the ratios set by the financial analysis of the company and the figures highlighted by the functional balance sheet and the financial balance sheet, and how to read these figures, study them and put them at the service of the 'company: among them, we mention the solvency ratios, liquidity, the stock turnover rate and the company's capital turnover rate. The figures are a fundamental vision of the future of the company.
- The existence of a responsibility center: The presence of an administrative control reduces the control of other departments in the control of their daily tasks, so that the administrative control is the authority and control over these departments and control in a manner consistent with company objectives
- The need for planning: The planning process is one of the most important processes that the administrative observer has to adhere to, so that he has to develop many varied plans that are developed in the short, medium and long term in order to that the company can understand its current and future situation.

Administrative control consists of a triple ring which can be classified and defined as follows:

- Prediction: So that the administrative controller seeks to organize and plan the work of all the administrative services of the company.
- Regularly measure the consequences and compare them with the expected results to highlight the differences.
- Corrective actions in order to analyze the differences¹².

During the eighties, a new electronic method was born (in collaboration with the Computer and Telecommunications Association), some researchers in management sciences sought to develop the concepts of administrative control and sought to develop this concept by moving from the old classic concept of management control to advanced management control¹³, the difference of which we will present later. . In short, its goal was to move from the regular model to the advanced model that pays attention to the smallest details of the business.

Table no 1 gives us a comparison between the ancient management control system and the advanced one¹⁴.

Table no 1: comparison between the two management control models

Ancient management control	Advanced management control
Control	Stimulate
Establish	Expose
Recognize mistakes	Prejudice
Resource	Jobs
Suspicion	Mistrust

Practitioner	Authorizing officer
Poor	Collaborator
Demanding	Cooperative
Declining flow	Rising flow
Financial whistleblower	Physical whistleblower
Internal rules	External objective
Closed plan	Open theory
Very operational	Very strategic
Processing activity	Active life cycle

According to Anthony (1965) Management control is the control by which the administrator ensures that all the resources are used, used and employed within the company are used in an efficient and correct manner, in order to achieve the objective of the company through which he is searching¹⁵.

In 1988 he added another definition: It is the influence that managers exercise within the company to encourage all the company's employees to achieve its objectives by various techniques and means¹⁶.

It should be noted that the achievement by the manager of a specific goal is the result of taking charge of a specific party or member and the effective and efficient use of that resource.

According to A. Khemakhem, It is the control that companies embrace, regardless of size, type of business and history in which all existing resources are used with precision and efficiency in order to achieve the objective sought by the business¹⁷. In this definition, A. Khemakhem insists that administrative control consists of using resources, all resources in a correct and efficient manner, taking into account [that each company has its own entity and its private life which differs from the other and distinguishes it from other companies and most important of all is to achieve the desired goal.

According to H. Bouquin, Administrative control is defined as the daily relation between all decisions and actions taken by the administrative controller with all other systems within the company with an emphasis on daily and precise monitoring¹⁸. H. Bouquin believes that managers responsible for defining strategies have required systems and processes to ensure that individual day-to-day behaviors are consistent with strategies.

Table no 2 shows the comparison between the two types of control: Internal Control and Management Control¹⁹.

Table no 2: comparison between the Internal Control and the Management Control

	Internal control	Management control
Reality	Security and protection	of decisions and stages its main objective is to process, analyze and correct administrative errors.
Objectives	control the work of the entity: Protect assets Data efficiency Performance development Application instructions and instructions	Easily collect, count and trade information Ensure that all desired goals are correctly achieved Group your results in a circle so that you can see them in a wide perspective. Preparation of forecasts
demonstration	Organize and implement control procedures	· Development of supply and production management · Production process and interpretation of the analytical result.

It is important to highlight the relationship between management control and company performance. We will present the management control methods and tools and their differences, diversity and differences between them. We will also address the idea of performance, the idea of the dashboard and the development of these concepts within the company.

Khemakhem highlighted the difficulty and ambiguity of the notion of performance in his book « Dynamics of Administrative Control ». He explained as follows: « Performance is a word not found in classical French Like all new words, it causes a lot of confusion The origin of this word is the Latin word, but the English language gives it its meaning the word closest to performance is... » Performare « in Latin, which means » « Interpreter » and « » performance in English prompts these words are enough to clarify the meaning of performance control management. Performance means: to completely shape things. The performance of the organization's staff lies in the form and reality of the standard system planned and formulated by the leader²⁰.

As for specific authors, the means of execution are to complete a task more regularly and appropriately, including fulfilling an obligation, keeping a promise and performing the following tasks and conditions of contract or order²¹.

Therefore, performance is linked to the achievement of objectives. It is important to test the relationship between the effort provided by the company and the performance with which it interacts. However, to increase the size of income in a given region, employment opportunities must be increased in the same region²².

Good efficiency is the good use of resources in the production of goods and services without any underuse and non-use of these resources. In efficiency operations, for all the resources used, for any product or service of a given quality and quantity, the product obtained is the greatest, or the average value used is the smallest, In a sense more precise, efficiency is compatible and better aligned with the resources, products and capacities associated with the results²³.

The concept of relevance remains one of the difficult concepts to measure, study, monitor, examine and analyze clearly and correctly. However, it can be said that it is the term of coordination and communication between procedures and techniques used to reach the targets of the company. This link is the effective link with the specific objectives set by the institution²⁴.

The economic process is linked to obtaining human and material resources, that is to say, obtaining these resources of high quality, high efficiency and with the least possible cost, and it must be as low as possible. It should be noted that the performance process requires a clear, comprehensive and coherent vision of all management standards. Therefore, managers must look for an entire performance, which includes several levels of review²⁵. In the field of manufacturing, there is an increase in continuous production, and therefore an increase in physical efficiency, while maintaining high quality. For sales, it is the competitiveness of the market or the difference in cost in value.

III. Research Methodology

In order to obtain the most representative image of current and future SMEs, we have developed a list of selection criteria for SMEs. These six standards are listed as follows:

- SME's criteria
 - The number of employees must be between 60 and 500
 - Company for more than five years
 - A company that uses an accounting and information system
 - A company that does not work in the field of money and the stock market
- SME's owner/manager criteria
 - Director with no management diploma
 - Experience for more than five consecutive years

In order to collect the required information from SME's owners/managers, we referred to several data collection tools such as: surveys, interviews, individual monitoring, etc. The semi-structured interview was chosen because it seemed more suitable to the current situation. Interviews allow more communication and interaction between the researcher and the research subject, which leads to more participation in the interview. Then, a real communication was established with the interviewees, who were able to freely express their views, opinions or explanations. In fact, no specific response category is predetermined. Guiding questions are used to ensure that all necessary information is obtained during the interview.

The Interview questionnaire was divided into two main sections:

The first section is the one that will identify the company: general information about it, its founder, its capital, and other information that will confirm that this company meets the conditions required in our research.

Table no 3 shows the most important information we need to know about the SME and its journey.

Table no 3: Historical information

SME History	Owner / Manager's profile
Date of constitution	Total years of Experience
Founder	Years of experience of chosen SME
Business Type	His past and current motivations and aspirations
Reasons for incorporation	
Development History	
Products and services	
Number of employees	
Turnover	

As for the second part of the questionnaire, it includes a series of questions addressed to the owner/manager and the management controller who is assessing the financial situation of the company. These questions include views, aspirations, statements, impressions and perceptions of this person on financial management and administrative control.

It is important that these questions were asked correctly and clearly, taking into consideration the re-explanation of the question in case it was not understood by the person, and that the interview is smooth, without any interruption.

Tripoli, largest city in northern Lebanon and the second-largest city in the country, has a dense distribution of small and medium-sized enterprises, diversified at several industrial levels. SMEs were chosen randomly.

Table no 4 shows the selected SMEs where 50.6% are commercial SMEs and 40% are petrochemical SMEs.

Sample size is calculated by the following formula:

Necessary Sample Size = $(Z\text{-score})^2 * StdDev^2 / (\text{margin of error})^2$; With 90% Trust level and 10% margin of error, the ideal sample size is 68. Our sample size is 75 SMEs from North Lebanon.

Table no 4: Research Sample

Sector	Number of SMEs	% of SMEs
Commercial	38	50.6%
Petrochemical	30	40%
Agriculture	7	9.4%
Total	75	100%

IV. Results

Figure no 1 shows the need for management control in SMEs; 65.3% of SMEs see that management control as a fundamental, sensitive and important function, and it has an essential presence within the company and its absence in some cases can lead to the loss of the company and the loss of its balance.

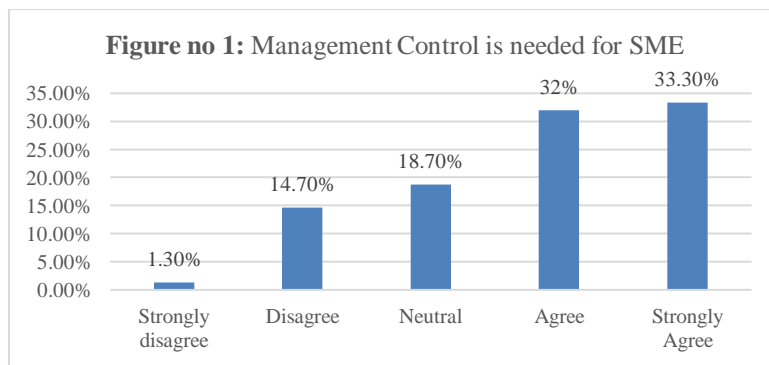


Figure no 2 shows that 38.7% of SMEs consider that the tasks performed by the management control is simple control task, while 36% of SMEs consider the management control as guidance for their work, 24% of SMEs refer to the management control for projection and prediction.

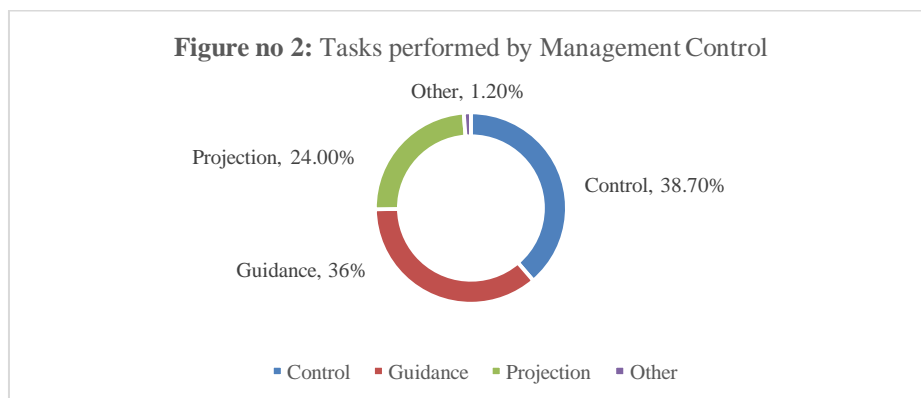


Figure no 3 shows that for 48% of SMEs, the management control is performed by a management controller and this signifies the importance of this function in most SMEs in different areas (forecasting, control, cost analysis and etc.)

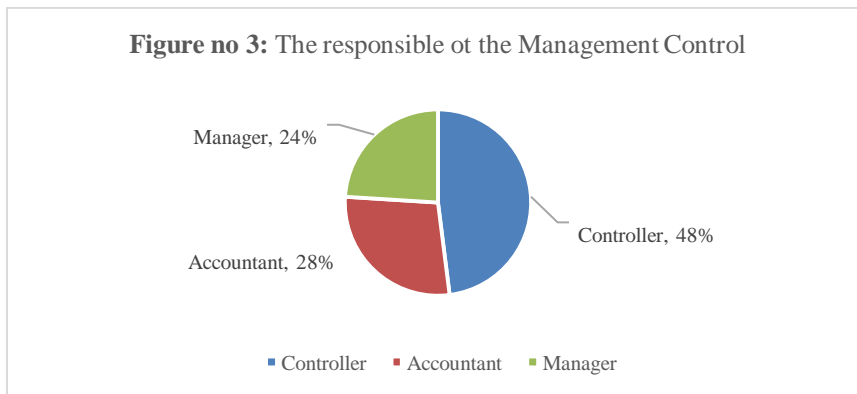


Figure no 4 shows the management control relationship with the other services of the SME; 70.67% of the interviewed SMEs affirm that there is a strong solid relationship between the administrative control and the rest of the functions of the SME. This relationship is very important and necessary in order to coordinate all the tasks of the services within the company and in order to monitor the performance of the company

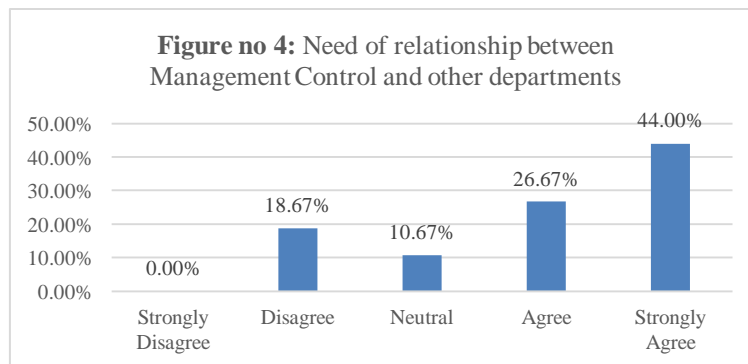


Figure no 5 shows that 52.52% of the SMEs consider that administrative control contributes in improving the performance of the company by achieving the greatest amount of profits and 36.36% by achieving SME's objectives.

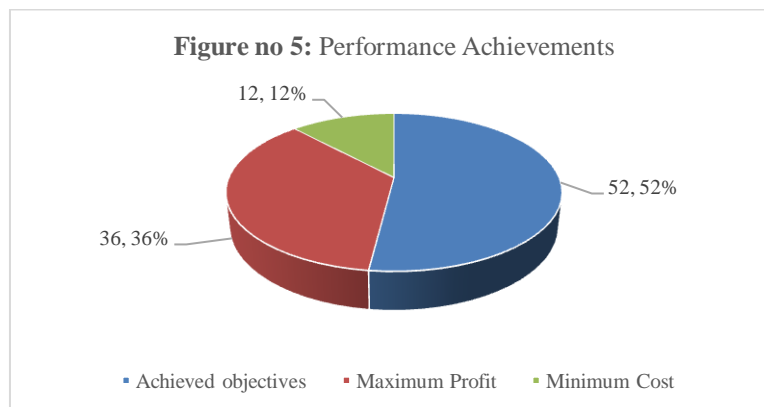


Figure no 6 shows the calculation method adopted by SMEs; 96.05% of SMEs adopt the full cost allocation that it is based on the analysis of products and services.

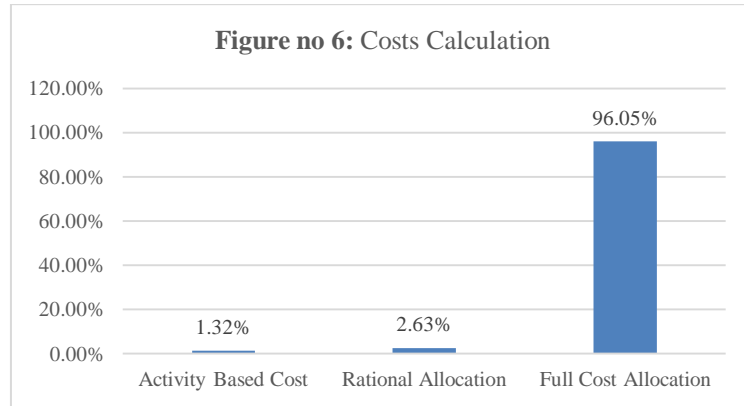


Figure no 7 shows the objective of the cost calculation method; 76% of the targeted SMEs look for good cost management, while 17.33% of the SMEs look for investigating about cost's main sources in order to control and reduce them.

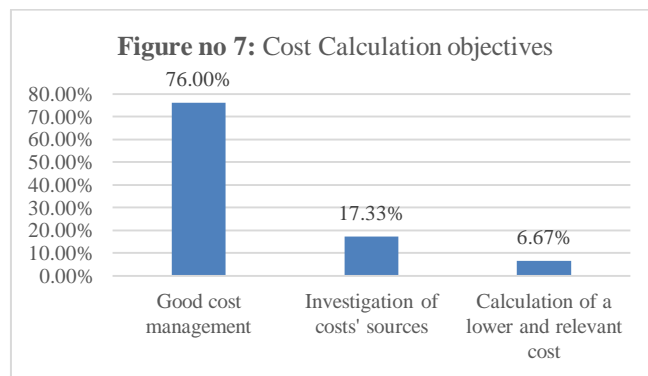


Figure no 8 shows the efficiency of the calculation method used; 88% of SMEs consider that the proper choice of a cost calculation method plays an important role in achieving competitiveness.

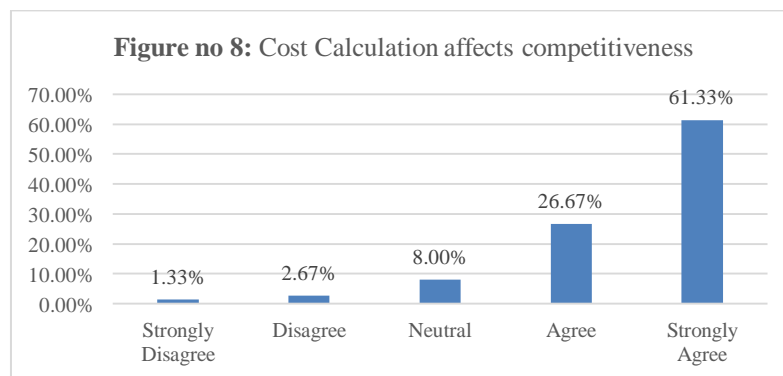


Figure no 9 shows the need for a dashboard; 62.7% of SMEs consider the dashboard as an important mechanism that help them achieve their goals.

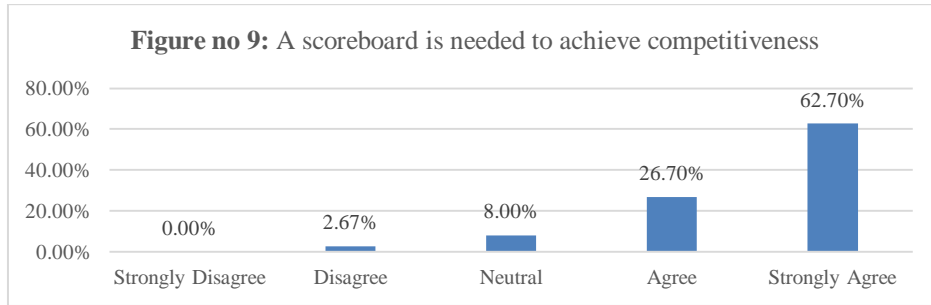


Figure no 10 shows the importance of performance tools; 70.67% of SMEs find that budget management is the most effective way to monitor performance because it helps to deal well with management issues caused by economies in production.

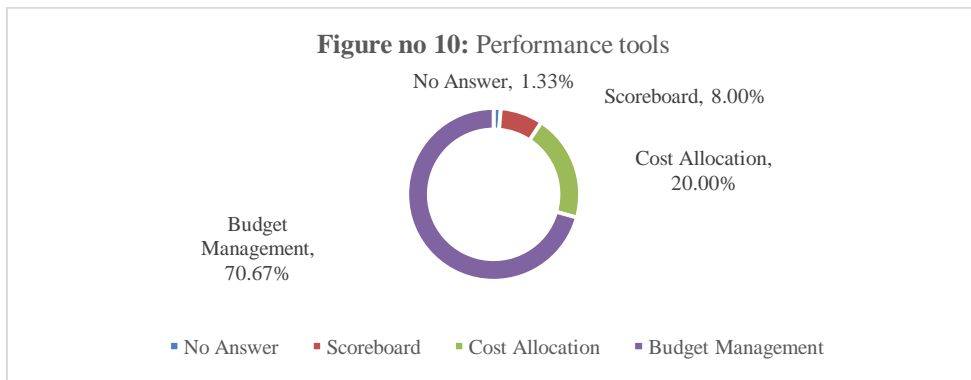


Figure no 11 shows that 85.34% of SMEs believe that monitoring performance depends on control management, seen as using indicators and tools to help monitoring effectiveness and SME's efficiency.

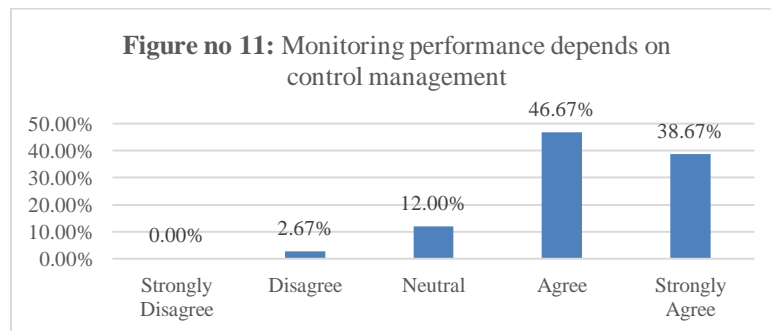
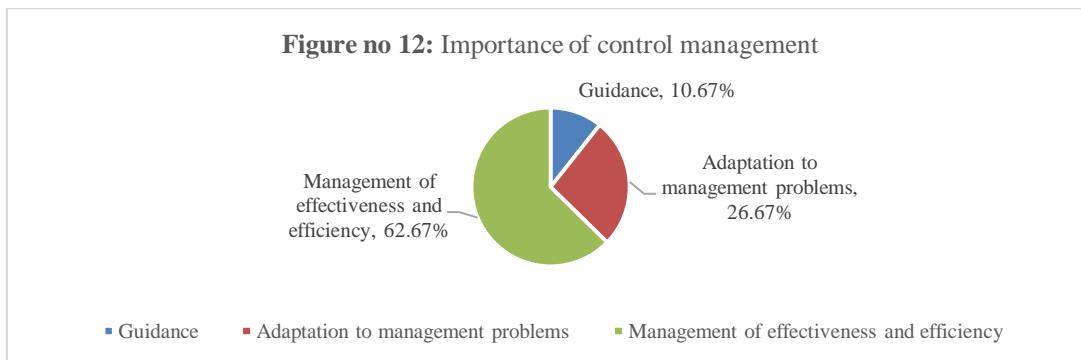


Figure no 12 shows that 62.67% of SMEs consider that the importance of control management remains in the management of effectiveness and efficiency of the SME while 26.67% give this importance to the adaptation to management problems and 10.67% give it to SME's guidance. All that indicates the effectiveness of management control and its ability to help the business adapt to internal and external changes and then achieve performance.



V. Conclusion

As a result of the study we conducted, it can be considered that most of the companies we interviewed depend on management control in the process of advice, control and forecasting, and it is considered to be the most important tool to support decisions made by businesses.

For small and medium-sized enterprises, management control has an effective role at all levels, it has an advisory, supervisory and predictive role. In addition, it manages costs and control them efficiently, which helps the SME to make more profits and reduce its costs.

It is to note that in small and medium-sized enterprises, the accountant is responsible for the administrative control process, and here it is necessary to mention the need to separate this work from other jobs.

In fact, management control provides indicators and tools for evaluating the company's performance. Among the tools we have mentioned: budget management, dashboards and cost calculation methods, the latter is considered the more efficient.

In general, the answer provided by management control to manage the performance of the company lies in the management of the effectiveness and the efficiency of the company and the adaptability to the problems of management of the company.

After completing the study we carried out on 75 small and medium-sized enterprises, we can summarize our findings as follows:

- Management control has become, nowadays, an essential element of SMEs work, an effective and efficient element in the management and monitoring of the SME to achieve its objectives at all levels.
- Management control not to be combined or merged with any other job, because this field must be occupied by specialists and technicians who are able to follow and study seriously and effectively at any time and under any circumstance.
- Management control has grown into a vast field and has moved beyond the stage of costing and pricing to expectation and comparison, to conduct research and develop the company's products and services, and to put the business on the right track.
- Controlling is a process of checking, comparing and reconciling.

We recommend that companies do the following:

- Adopt management control and not combine it with another profession.
- Adopt an efficient and appropriate cost management.
- Ensure that all management control methods are implemented with precision and efficiency.
- Periodic market monitoring.
- Lead the process of monitoring, comparison, approximation and forecasting.
- Develop a dashboard

Small and medium-sized enterprises have a fundamental role to play in reviving the government economy and in moving the economic wheel. The work of these businesses has positive repercussions at all levels, social, economic or even political. Therefore, the role of these SMEs must be activated, monitored and assisted, such as tax exemptions or subsidized loans.

A recommendation for future research paper could be an increase in the sample size in order to increase the trust level and decrease the margin of error, noting that the lockdown period related to COVID-19 limited our access to SMEs.

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