

On a Wing and a Prayer:  
Stories of the Use of Improvisation by  
NEIS Businesses During the Start-up Phase.

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*“Data is like humans, torture it enough and it will tell you anything”*

## **Abstract**

The focus of this study is to consider the concept of ‘improvisation’ as a business process used by small businesses when faced with unanticipated events. Although the business news and literature is dominated by the activities of big businesses, there is little disagreement among researchers and business commentators about the role that small businesses plays in contributing to the economic activity of Australia. The contribution that small businesses make to the economy includes job creation, competitive power, economic growth and innovation. Furthermore, there is evidence that a flourishing small business sector can assist with creating and maintaining political and social stability.

It is widely acknowledged that businesses are operating in a turbulent, unstable and at times chaotic commercial environment. Many business operators are spending increasing amounts of their time responding to unanticipated events in circumstances where there is little or no time to plan solutions or build up resources. There has been little research into how small businesses respond to such unanticipated events.

A review of previous literature showed that business operators were likely to respond to unanticipated events in one of three ways; they either ignored the event, undertook planning or they improvised. The term ‘improvisation’ in this context was used to reflect either the time convergence between the realisation of a solution and its implementation or the application of selected resources for purposes other than that for which they were intended. A model of the process of improvisation was developed using the elements previously described in previous studies. The model falls into three parts; pre-improvisation, improvisation and post-improvisation.

The methodology used was a qualitative process consisting of a semi-structured interviews with twenty-nine owners of small-business start-up firms, to explore their experiences with dealing with unanticipated events and to try to establish the nature of the improvisational process. It was important for the participants to tell their stories of improvisation and for the researcher to reflect their experiences in relation to the model of improvisation.

The data collected provided greater insight into the process of improvisation and a refined model evolved which better represents the experience of participants. The study confirmed that small businesses do at times, use improvisation to respond to unanticipated events. Consequently, this study has made a significant contribution to the field by extending on the work undertaken to date and by the development of a model that more comprehensively represents the process of an improvisational response to an unanticipated event, in the context of small business.

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## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

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