

**ORIGINAL**  
**Research article**

## **Strategic Direction: multiple case study in small and medium enterprises in the city of Medellín\***

**Direccionamiento Estratégico: estudio de caso múltiple en pequeñas y medianas empresas en la ciudad de Medellín**

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Mauricio Alejandro Bedoya-Jiménez\*\*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5958-2197>

Luis Fernando Quintero-Arango\*\*\*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6268-065X>

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**Abstract**

This manuscript aims to describe the organizational morphology and strategic planning of MSMEs in the city of Medellín, linking the articulation between strategic planning (SP) and organizational morphology (OM). The qualitative approach is used with a descriptive design under a phenomenological method, using the semi-structured interview as an instrument of information collection and the categorical analysis for the results. Seven companies from different economic sectors, MSMEs, were selected based on convenience, proximity, and easy access to information. The general results show that there are failures in the EP since it does not respond to the market requirements, and its MO is not aligned with such needs; concerning the organizational culture, it is not possible to find that there is a clear conception of its importance within the analyzed companies, since there were deficiencies in teamwork and personnel retention. From the analysis of the results, guidance is provided to MSMEs so that they can consider that the EP provides direction to the organization and can allow them to make decisions for continuous improvement; likewise, the OM can provide a corporate identity that identifies a company, thus consolidating endogenous strategies that seek the permanence of the organization in the market.

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\*\* Master in Economic and Financial Administration by the Technological University of Pereira. Colombia. Professor and researcher at the Universidad ESUME, Colombia. Email: [malejobedoya@gmail.com](mailto:malejobedoya@gmail.com)

\*\*\* Master in Marketing Management by the Universidad Viña del Mar, Chile. Professor and researcher at the Universidad católica Luis Amigó, Colombia. Email: [luis.quinterora@amigo.edu.co](mailto:luis.quinterora@amigo.edu.co)

**Keywords:** Strategic Planning, Organizational Morphology, Organizational Culture, Strategy and Organizations

### Resumen

El presente manuscrito tiene por objetivo describir la morfología organizacional y la planeación estratégica de Mipymes en la ciudad de Medellín, vinculando la articulación entre la planeación estratégica (PE) y la morfología organizacional (MO). Se utiliza el enfoque cualitativo con un diseño descriptivo, bajo un método fenomenológico, utilizando como instrumento de recolección de información la entrevista semi estructurada y para los resultados el análisis categorial. Se seleccionan siete empresas, de diferentes sectores económicos, que fueran Mipymes con el criterio de conveniencia, cercanía y fácil acceso a la información. Los resultados generales demuestran que se encuentran fallas en la PE al no responder a los requerimientos del mercado, su MO por tanto no se encuentra alineada con dichas necesidades; con respecto a la cultura organizacional no se logra encontrar que exista al interior de las empresas analizadas una clara concepción de su importancia, ya que se presentaba deficiencias en el trabajo en equipo y en retención de personal. Desde el análisis de los resultados se brinda una orientación a las Mipymes, para que puedan considerar que la PE brinda rumbo a la organización y puede permitir tomar decisiones de mejora continua; así mismo, la MO puede dar una identidad corporativa que identifique a una empresa logrando consolidar estrategias endógenas que busquen la permanencia de la organización en el mercado.

**Palabras Clave:** Planeación Estratégica, Morfología Organizacional, Cultura Organizacional, Estrategia y Organizaciones

### SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION. - RESOLUTION SCHEME. - I. Research problem. - II. Methodology. - III. Writing Plan. - 1. Strategic Direction. - IV. Research results. - CONCLUSIONS. - REFERENCES.

### Introduction

Any organization, however small it may be, needs to have a Strategic Direction (SD), which allows it to aim at achieving a series of objectives aimed not only at its permanence in time but also at business growth. This SD must be in accordance with its internal structure, which determines the interaction with the market, customers, competitors, and collaborators.

The statement of objectives, goals, projects, and way of working is a sine qua non issue for any organization, which is known as Strategic Directions (SD) or Strategic Planning (SP), a concept that is understood as a planning process (Medina, Arévalo & Rico, 2015) and which as stated by Leyva, Cavazos & Espejel (2018) becomes relevant within Small and Medium Enterprises - MSMEs because it influences their competitive success. This process of DE or PE allows organizations to prepare for the future; such action must be carried out in a coordinated manner, thinking about the success not only of the DE or PE but also of the evolution of the company in its different organizational levels; thus achieving adequate coordination within it (Salazar, 2021).

For authors such as Bernal (2018), the ED or EP requires the development of three phases: i) formulation, ii) implementation, and iii) evaluation of the strategy. It is essential to be clear that these phases should contemplate the existence of aspects to be achieved in the short, medium, and long term, which, regardless of their temporality, should generate value for the organization (Serrato, 2019). The first phase, strategy formulation, is conceived as the one in which the mission, vision, objectives, and strategy are established. In this, the business model

is clearly identified; it should be noted that the strategy, when created, should not only respond to the growth of the business but also the search for profitability. Finally, it is not about being the best in the field where the organization performs; in reality, success lies in being unique; for this, it is necessary to understand that the size and growth of an MSME do not matter if this is not accompanied by profitability (Canal IEB - Spain, 2018). For their part, authors such as Salazar (2021) state with reference to strategy that it is what is done and what is organized for what is done.

During the formulation, in the words of Medina et al. (2015) and Salazar (2021), it is necessary to take into account that the ED or EP must be oriented from an analysis of the context that allows directing the path of companies, not only to adapt but also to respond to the different changes and demands that arise in the environment, in this way, an organization will have the opportunity to anticipate occurrences that could be favorable or not. In this sense, Ulrich & Yeung (2019) states that what an organization seeks is to understand the context in which it performs, and the result will be the anticipation and observation of business challenges and challenges; both should then become opportunities for MSMEs to strengthen their internal competencies and be able to respond to the external environment.

Now, it is essential to bear in mind that the competitive environment in which organizations are, in the words of Porter & Kramer (2006), has an impact on the margin of maneuverability at the time of implementing their strategy, especially when its temporality is long term. In this sense, Quintero, Bedoya, Mafud & Romero (2022) state that when performing this analysis, it is necessary to be clear about the risks and situations in the future, allowing the organization to be aware of complex situations that may affect the company. Finally, within the ED or EP, it will be essential to take into account: a) that organizational success will be to the extent that it has the capabilities to recognize and adapt to the changes that the environment demands and b) as established by Valencia & Erazo (2016), the importance of the analysis of the environment will be given by the appropriate decision making within the organization.

In the second phase, strategy implementation, policies, and organizational structure (OS), among others, are designed. Regarding the latter, Malgajes (2020) calls it designing the organization, i.e., drawing the lines and distributing responsibilities according to the type of structure and company, to achieve communication; in addition, human, financial, and technological resources must be allocated to achieve this. For authors such as Murillo González (2019), OE is not only a central part of any organization but also allows for achieving the functioning of the proposed ED regardless of whether it is traditional or emerging. When referring to OE, it will be essential to keep in mind that today, the main competitive advantage of an organization comes from the way it is designed or structured and how it operates from its human capabilities and its Organizational Culture (OC) (Sisodia et al., 2020).

In management literature, organizational structure is also known as Organizational Morphology (OM). In this regard, Ulrich & Yeung (2019) propose an evolution from the morphological point of view of organizational structures, describing three models: In the first, the hierarchical model, aspects such as knowledge, power, and control prevail; it is oriented to operational efficiency, in this model the leaders represent the roles and rules. It should be noted that most organizations are still hierarchical; in the second model, the systematic, the leader or leaders seek to align all the company's systems, understanding these as the set of strategies, structures, people, processes, among others; its purpose is organizational health and the third, called by capabilities, this is based on both the individual talent of the employees and the organization, to focus on strengthening the internal structure in what is done well, thus allowing to offer a differential value.

Now, with respect to the term organizational health, Lencioni (2012) states that the most significant advantage that any company could have is related to a healthy organization; it is essential to note that this should develop four disciplines within it: 1) build and maintain a cohesive leadership team, 2) cohesive leadership team behaviorally 3) create organizational clarity (what is the strategy, what are the main goals, what are the organizational values), and 4) have clarity in communication (Canal Speakers' Spotlight, 2014). Within this second phase are two fundamental elements that could be more tangible: organizational culture and innovation.

In recent years, organizational culture has been of particular interest to the business sector. This alludes to the assumptions, regulations, and everything that is shared by the collaborators of an organization, which Yopan, Palmero & Santos (2020) call the social or normative environment that keeps an organization together and becomes an intangible that allows generating value (Núñez and Rodríguez, 2015 & Rodríguez, 2020). Shein (2016), on the other hand, calls these patterns of basic assumptions that the organization shares.

Authors such as Laloux (2019) and Rodríguez (2020) agree that Organizational Culture (OC) is related to the way in which activities are carried out within the organization and that it is represented by a set of patterns shared by people and processes within the company, identifying it as the character of an organization. Rodríguez (2020) states that CO is made up of values and beliefs; the former is positive and called levers that end up mobilizing people, and beliefs can become limiting; they refer to the absolute "truths" of people that are traced by beliefs or judgments.

Now, when talking about innovation, it is necessary to take into account that for authors such as Kremer, Villamor, and Aguinis (2019), innovation, i.e., implementing creative ideas within organizations, has become in the 21st century, one of the main factors related to competitive advantage; thereby achieving organizational success (Cascio & Aguinis, 2019). Kremer et al. (2019) stipulate that in order to understand innovation processes, it is necessary to take into account the difference that exists between creativity and innovation; creativity refers to the generation of valuable ideas. Meanwhile, innovation refers to the implementation of these ideas; two factors give rise to creativity and innovation: the voice of employees, which refers to aspects related to the communication of ideas that are part of everyday situations within the work, and the exchange of knowledge, which contributes positively to creativity and innovation; involving factors such as culture, policies, information systems and the organization's collaborators (Aguinis, 2019 and Saeid, 2021). Finally, it should be noted that the responsibility for creating organizational contexts or environments that promote innovation lies with its leaders, who promote the process of transformation of creative ideas (Hill et al., 2014).

The third phase, the evaluation, which is not developed within the research but which is essential to address, allows the identification of its achievements and possible adjustments that should be made. At this point, it is necessary to be clear that, as Ghiglione (2021) states, the problem of the vast majority of organizations is related to the lack of continuous evaluation of the results originated in the strategy implementation process, which makes necessary the correct definition of objectives and indicators. Evaluation then becomes an essential stage in the SP or ED process, which is oriented to the proper management of the resource strategy. Finally, the objective of the research was to describe the organizational morphology and strategic planning of MSMEs of companies in the city of Medellín. The approach applied was qualitative, using a phenomenological method and a descriptive design.

## Resolution scheme

### 1. Research problem

How do MSMEs in the city of Medellin describe their strategic planning and organizational morphology?

### 2. Methodology

In the research conducted, the qualitative approach was used, which, according to Vasilachis de Gialdino (2006), is interested in understanding the realities of the participants from their lived world and their narrated experiences, establishing a systematic relationship between their subjectivities and what happens in the environment of the subjects. Likewise, for Denzin & Lincoln (1994), qualitative research manages to connect the environment and the context in order to find the naturalness of the participants and understand the meaning that they provide from their experiences.

The research design was descriptive; for Aguirre & Jaramillo (2015), this design focuses on the what of the phenomenon to be studied; it determines how the object of study is presented according to the reality of the situation itself, according to the way people describe the facts that are addressed within the research process.

In the different perspectives of the qualitative approach, different methods are present, which allow guiding the development of research; in this case, the selected method was phenomenology, according to Martínez-Miguel (2004), which aims to understand the lived world of people, through their narratives and experiences, which allow approaching the specific realities of the studied phenomenon. Likewise, the criteria established for the inclusion of the participants were: managers of companies in the city of Medellin, which were classified according to their size as medium, small, and micro companies, from different productive sectors, selected for their intentionality in the approach and ease of access to the information.

On the other hand, the instrument used for the collection of information was the semi-structured interview; according to Diaz, Torruco, Martinez & Varela (2013), this technique allows an in-depth study to be carried out in relation to the realities of the object of study investigated, thus achieving a rich dialogic interaction between interviewee and interviewer, allowing to respond to the specific objectives proposed in the research project. Based on the semi-structured interview, three central categories were proposed for the analysis of the information determined by means of the categorical system: strategic planning, analysis of the environment, and organizational morphology; subcategories were also identified in each of the categories, which allowed a structured and contrasted analysis, facilitating a theoretical triangulation that gave reliability to the research (Martínez Miguélez, 2004).

On the other hand, from the qualitative approach, the multiple case study is presented as an opportunity for analysis to detail and address research that is conducted with different actors, in this case, small and medium enterprises of two industry sectors, such as services and manufacturing sector, for Yin (2018) this type of case study alternatives, allow comparing the behavior of the same situation in different scenarios, thus providing a broad opportunity for comparative analysis. Likewise, Kazez (2009) considers that the cases provide a possibility of broad analysis, allowing the topic to be deepened clearly and concretely according to the context and the environment in which the study is presented. Table 1 below describes the

categories and subcategories that were generated from the objectives proposed in the research project.

**Table 1. Categories and subcategories**

Category	Subcategorías
Strategic Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strategies</li> <li>● Values</li> <li>● Mission and vision</li> </ul>
Environment analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Internal factors</li> <li>● External factors</li> </ul>
Organizational morphology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Type of structure</li> <li>● Innovation</li> <li>● Organizational culture</li> </ul>

**Source:** own elaboration.

Within the methodological process, it should be noted that the information that was collected by each of the managers of the participating companies is confidential, and the intention of publishing it is done in the anonymity of each company; this is part of the ethics of the research and the researchers. Table 2 shows the interview protocol used for the collection of information, which was analyzed by professors and other managers before being applied to the selected participants.

**Table 2. Question protocol**

CORE THEME	GUIDING QUESTIONS
<b>Strategic Planning</b>	What does the concept of strategy mean? Is there any procedure to analyze information to formulate a strategy? Does the company monitor results? How is monitoring done? Carry out strategic planning in the organization. Does strategic planning allow for adequate orientation of the company? Believe that SP is an ideal tool for achieving the proposed objectives. Could the SP be replaced by another tool? Which one? How?
<b>Analysis of the environment</b>	What tool(s) do you consult and use to identify how the competition, the sector, and the market in which you compete are doing? How do these tools contribute to the development of the organization? From what sources do we obtain the information that allows us to understand the environment? Have any technological tool that helps this? Describe During the last few years, has the company had to adapt to market conditions? Describe the new conditions.
<b>Organizational structure and morphology</b>	What is the organizational structure? During the history of the organization, has the structure changed? What has been the reason for these changes? Does the company have any software to measure and evaluate the management of the different areas of the organization? Are the accounting and financial reports made by the company's employees or by external companies that advise on these issues? What types of management or administrative reports does the company generate to analyze its current status and be able to take the necessary actions? How does the company invest in talent retention? Are there any training activities (technological, undergraduate, or graduate) and training in different topics for employees? Does the company provide training to new employees? Mention the last training that the company carried out. Has any process, exemplary, or service improved during the last 3 years? What has been the fundamental element to carry out this innovation? Encourage teamwork? How? How many work teams currently have? Know of any form of teamwork?

**Source:** own elaboration.

### **3. Writing Plan**

#### **3.1. Strategic Direction**

Today, it is more important that organizational structures are strengthened in order to respond to the needs of the environment, both internally and externally. It is how Gutiérrez, Rozo & Flórez (2019) explains that a company, regardless of its size, sector or corporate purpose, must define aspects of the route that will be drawn up in order to achieve the strategic objectives defined from the very conception of the business.

In order to think about meeting these strategic objectives, management will draw up a strategic direction that, according to Lora, Cardona & Brito (2021), is the basis for designing and proposing strategic planning in an organization, thus determining key elements, such as; goals, short, medium and long-term strategies, tactics and human, physical, technological and financial capacities; that are facilitators of achieving what is proposed within the organization and establishing management indicators that allow measuring what has been done with respect to what is established in its strategic planning. It is how, from the establishment of the strategic direction and proposing the strategies and goals, a value proposition must be achieved, where the organization facilitates the relationship between the client and its interest groups; likewise, it determines that the company has and where it can generate a competitive advantage, which manages to generate differentiation with respect to the competition (Leyva et al., 2018).

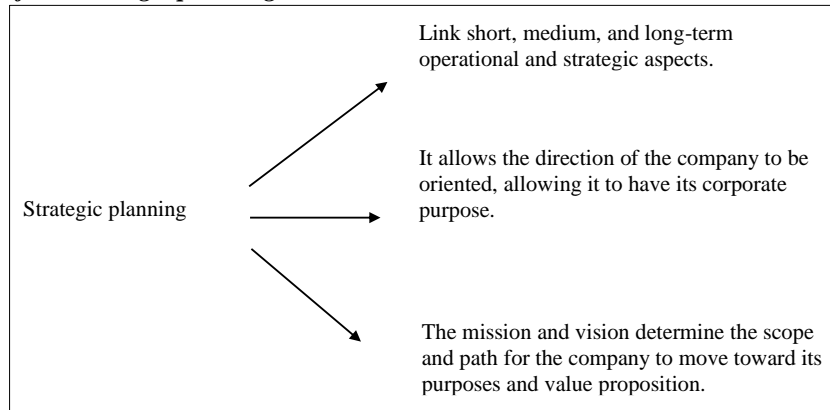
For Gutiérrez Suárez et al. (2019), there are some models to apply and evaluate the strategic direction; we find the Ansoff matrix, which allows the evaluation of the proposal from the business, evaluating aspects of penetration, market development, product development, and diversification. Likewise, the SWOT matrix, where it is possible to analyze endogenous elements from the weaknesses and strengths that the organization may have and from the exogenous threats and opportunities, can be valued to minimize the impact that the company may suffer.

### **4. Research results**

In the study of the results, coding, and categorization was carried out through direct analysis of the interviews, which were created from a dynamic table in Excel. From the realities of each company, it was possible to have unified information for each question, thus achieving a unit of analysis corresponding to the main category created. Figure 1 shows the results regarding the PE or DE of the seven participating companies; in their entirety, they express that they have had short, medium, and long-term strategies, which allow, in a way, the achievement of the proposed objectives, according to the mission and vision of the company, thus fulfilling aspects directly related to strategic planning.

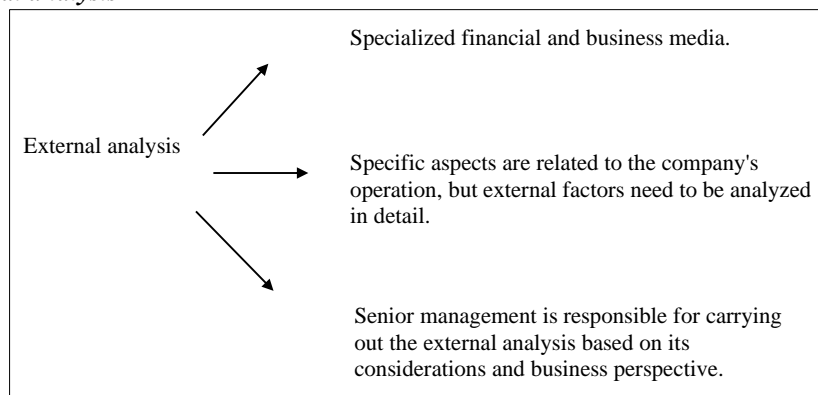
Regarding the analysis of the external environment, four of the seven participating companies, that is, 57.00%, report that they carry out external analysis based on some studies that are published in specialized newspapers, such as La República or Portfolio, but the remaining 43.00% do not consider external analysis, they only focus on activities that are directly related to their business, for example, considering obtaining a supplier or changing an input or raw material required for their productive activity. Figure 2 details the results of this category.

**Figure 1. Results from strategic planning**



Source: own elaboration.

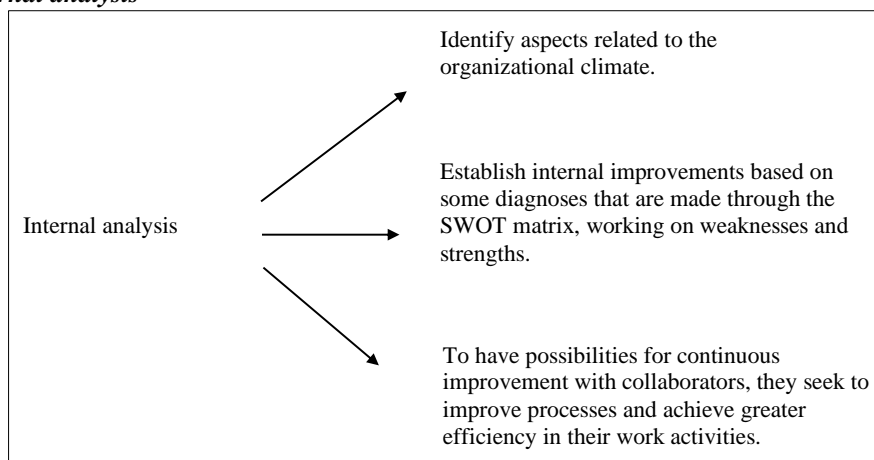
**Figure 2. External analysis**



Source: own elaboration.

Below, the categorization of the results obtained from the question based on internal aspects is explained. In this case, the seven companies carry out an analysis based on some endogenous factors, which allows them to know the current state of the company in its internal relations, especially in relation to the organizational climate. Figure 3 graphically explains the results achieved.

**Figure 3. Internal analysis**



Source: own elaboration.

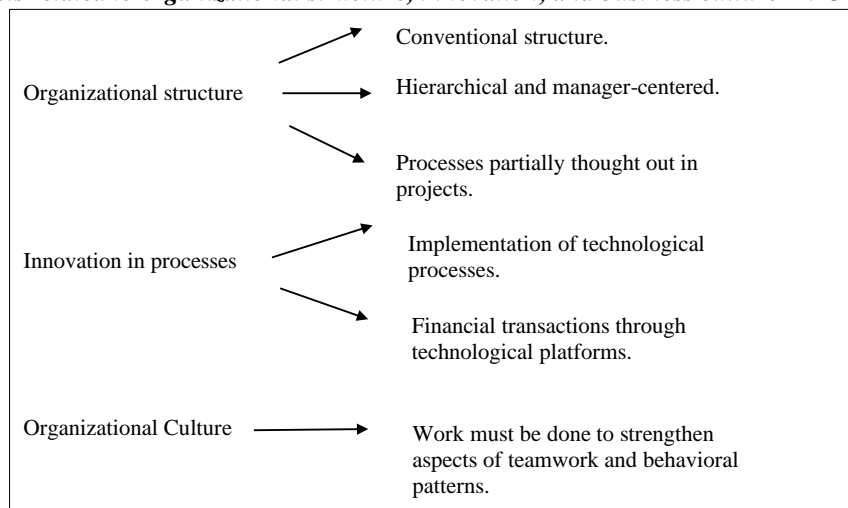


Finally, the topic of MO will be addressed. Figure 4 details the specific aspects of the organizational structure, innovation, and organizational culture. In the analysis of each of these elements, it is evident, for example, in the organizational structure, only one company has a flexible structure and works with processes that are focused on the development of projects; the other productive units have a traditional or hierarchical structure, with a central axis in decision-making that is the management or the owners. Regarding the topic of innovation, it was evident that all have managed to adapt to changes in their processes, especially after the pandemic generated by COVID-19. The highlight, which is common among the seven companies, is the incursion into technological processes in some of the areas of the organizations, especially in the areas of payments and collections by different means and technological platforms—assuming in this way that innovation is only directly related to the insertion of technology in the processes.

Now, with respect to the organizational culture, it is evident that there is a favorable organizational climate. However, it is not possible to consolidate a corporate identity or a pattern of behavior where each collaborator positively assumes teamwork and collaboration as a synergy to obtain favorable results for all members of the organization. According to Bernal (2018), strategic planning involves thinking in three phases (formulation, implementation, and evaluation), contemplated by senior management; this is how, in the participating companies, the planning process manages to be aligned with the strategic formulation and its implementation. However, this implementation process is done traditionally from a hierarchical structure, thinking more about less dynamic organizations that do not attend to external needs but rather to responses from internal analysis; in addition to this, there is a lack of environments that favor the processes of creativity and innovation as proposed by Aguinis (2019) and Saeid (2021).

Likewise, what Serrato (2019) states regarding strategic planning being a fundamental element for a company to be successful and have an opportunity for growth in the market, it is observed that, within the companies analyzed in the research, all manage to have a managerial view of the planning process. However, their execution process is minimal, which does not allow a direct transcendence within the organization. According to Ulrich and Yeung (2019), an organization must go through a process of modernization, which is why an adaptation to the current environment is required; these two authors consider today it is necessary to respond to the market, with companies that are flexible, adaptable and with value generation, for which, it is necessary to work on different internal aspects and achieve that flexibility until the company manages to function as a self-managed, adapted, agile and multifunctional organization.

**Figure 4. Aspects related to organizational structure, innovation, and business culture - MO**



Source: own elaboration.

## Conclusions

Based on the general objective of the proposed research, which was to describe the organizational morphology and strategic planning of MSMEs in companies in the city of Medellín, it can be deduced that organizations from different sectors of the economy still have flaws in their organizational structure, where sometimes processes are carried out manually and do not respond quickly to the needs that the market requires. Likewise, within the findings, we can conclude that a formal company must be aligned with the needs of the environment, seeking to be competitive and participate in the market with innovative processes and products, which only one of the seven participating companies manages to meet these purposes.

The organizational culture and the environmental analysis processes need to be improved in these companies. First, there is no clear awareness of the importance of recognizing organizational values and how these influence the positive or negative behavior of employees. Second, there is no in-depth approach to studying what happens in the market and how to respond to the needs of the market and its customers. On the other hand, something favorable is that SMEs have an opportunity to continue growing in the market, seeking different ways and aspects to compete in local, national, and international markets. In general, the objective proposed in the research was deepened, which managed to describe aspects directly related to strategic planning and the organizational morphology of this type of company.

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