

The e-Business Potential for Home-Based Businesses in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The Internet technology has brought major changes to the way business is conducted today. Many terms have been coined to represent the electronic concepts and applications such as e-Business and e-Commerce. These terms are commonly used to represent the transformation of business processes and transactions. In Malaysia, the e-Business adoption has not only captured the interest of large organizations but has also been acknowledged and adopted by small, medium and micro sized enterprises. Implementing e-Business requires significant changes in a company's structure, culture, strategy, procedures and responsibilities. However, the challenges do not stop people from venturing into this new business concept. A study is conducted to look into e-Business potential for micro sized businesses that operate from home in Malaysia. In this study both qualitative and quantitative methods are used. This paper reviews the issues pertaining to e-Business and home-based business, describes the methodology and reports the early findings from the study

Keywords: Internet, E-Business, Home-Based Businesses, E-Home-Based Business, Methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of the Internet and web technology has introduced various web-based applications and strategies for businesses such as the e-Business development. Today, the e-Business concept is widely adopted by large organizations and gradually followed by small-to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (Al Qirim, 2006; Yeung et al, 2003). e-Business can be seen as a new way of conducting a business that has changed the traditional buying and selling process into an online-based process. It has also changed the way people perceive their Internet technology investment by focusing on new business models and concepts (Damanpour, 2001).

This research looks into e-Business potential for micro sized businesses that operate from home called the Home-Based Businesses (HBBs). A definition by Fong et al. (2000) is adopted to define the HBB concept. It is described as a *business, which primary business activities are carried out from home and it can be of any size or any type as long as the office itself is located in a home* (Fong et al., 2000). In earlier practices, the HBBs are categorized as a business that operates from home and mostly carried out as a part time job. It is also claimed to be mostly suitable for women; for example, women can sew clothes or sell homemade cookies while taking care of the family and doing house chores (Fong et al., 2000; Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004). Today with the Internet technology, these perceptions may have changed as it allows not just the type of home-business as above but also the professional workers in utilizing the Internet and web-based applications to perform their tasks from home. Bateman (2000) states that, the emergence of technology especially the web-based technology has created a new trend in home-based working.

This paper offers some insights into e-Business potential for the HBBs and it is divided into six sections. Section 1 introduces this paper and Section 2 briefly reviews the concept of e-Business and e-Business strategy. The study on HBBs is discussed in Section 3 and the methodology used is described in Section 4. The early findings of this research are discussed in Section 5 and Section 6 concludes the paper.

THE OVERVIEW OF E-BUSINESS

The increasing pace of business changes is often driven by technology and the development of the digital environment is creating a new landscape for companies. Information Technology (IT) plays an important role in redesigning the basics of business activities including customer service, internal operations, internal communications,

products and services as well as marketing strategies. Among the many applications of IT in business activities, Internet-based e-business systems appear to be the most significant. In the late 1990's, there were many enterprises formed or converted into e-Commerce and a term 'dot.com bubble' was coined to describe this phenomenon. However, due to poor investment and business practices at that time the dot.com bubble 'burst' in 2001, (Samson, 2003) when many 'dot-com' enterprises vanished from the market (Samson, 2003; Pinker et al., 2002). The rise and fall of numerous 'dot-com' enterprises triggered many questions about *the future of e-Business and what it would take to succeed* (McGann and Lyytinen, 2002). These include the emergence of new business models, related systems and the use of Internet as an essential business tool that is continuing to grow tremendously (McGann and Lyytinen, 2002; Pinker et al., 2002). Studies also show that the 'bubble burst' scenario creates awareness for e-Business and e-Commerce all over the world and increases the e-Business usage significantly (Fillis et al., 2003; Samson, 2003; Pinker et al., 2002). Enterprises are also looking forward for a better way to adopt the e-Business concept and to improve their business operations (Rodgers et al., 2002; Pavic et al., 2007).

In Malaysia, the e-Business adoption for Micro and Small Medium Enterprises (MSME) is still at the initial stage. The acceptance of e-Business among the government and society seems to be encouraging as attested by related conferences and programs held by the Government and business associations. However, the e-readiness towards the implementation of the e-Business concept is still at a very early stage such as the e-Business infrastructure in terms of the Internet coverage, the accessibility of payment method, level of trust and security, *etc.*

The e-Business term was first introduced by IBM in 1997 as *the transformation of key business processes through the use of Internet technologies*. In this definition e-Business is perceived as a *secure, flexible and integrated approach to delivering the business values by combining the systems and processes*. It also involves the buy-side and sell-side of e-commerce transactions as well as the effectiveness of servicing the customers, collaborating with business partners and conducting electronic transactions within an enterprise (Gottschalk, 2006; Chaffey and Wood, 2004). Based on the above discussion, this study defines e-Business as:

“Business processes that are conducted using Internet technologies that help to improve the quality of services and values in terms of the way people work, collaborate, and communicate with their stakeholders and business partners. It also includes the changes in the company’s structures, strategies, procedures and culture”.

The definition highlights that e-Business can be seen as a new way of handling business and business processes in which people do not have to be in a specific physical place to conduct the business. The business operations can be done from home or any other places as long as they are connected to the Internet. However, the implementation of the e-Business concept requires major changes to the company’s structure, strategy, procedure and culture. This is supported by Gale and Abraham (2005) and Jackson (2003) who suggest that the implementation of e-Business involves rethinking of fundamental aspects of enterprises’ strategies, business models, structure and culture.

e-Business Strategy

Many studies have reported the benefits of implementing e-business strategies to organizations. Initially, the e-Business concept was introduced to address the issue of how the Internet technology can reshape an enterprise and provide competitive advantage. The internet-based tools can only be fully benefited with the right strategy.

In this research a definition by Jutla et al. (2001) is adopted to define the e-Business strategy as *a strategy that must address how partners, employees, governance, communities, and customers facing processes can be e-Business enabled*. The definition highlights the meaning of e-Business enabled as how the business processes are improved using the technologies, new knowledge management and online trust capabilities. From the definition, it is essential for enterprises to really understand the existing business processes and the relationship among the stakeholders as well as the requirements needed to adopt the e-Business. Such understanding is important because the e-Business implementation will definitely require radical changes to the current business structure as well as the business strategy. Norton (2000) suggests two stages in adopting the e-Business strategy: *1) improving the efficiency of existing structure and supply chain and 2) transforming the nature of the industries*. Enterprises also need to be aware of the new capability that e-Business offers and to relate back to specific requirements of their own business. Sanchez (2003) describes a number of Internet strategies for small businesses for instance, an efficient online market research that allows the business owners to do their research on the industries, their competitors, and the potential market as well as

looking for information on suitable products or services. Findings from the study also indicate that the small businesses have shown positive impact on their business growth, performance, and the increase number of customers due to the implementation of e-Business strategies. The similar impact of e-Business strategies for HBBs can also be seen through the early findings and is discussed in Section 5.

HOME-BASED BUSINESSES (HBBs)

A few terms have been referred closely to HBBs such as tele-working or telecommuting, Small Office Home Office (SOHO) and electronic cottage. However, each concept is implemented differently. A home-worker framework from Salazar (2001) is adopted to define the scope of HBBs in this research. This framework is divided into four categories: *employees working at home*, *sub-contractors*, *employed professionals or managers*, and *home-business* (see Figure 1).

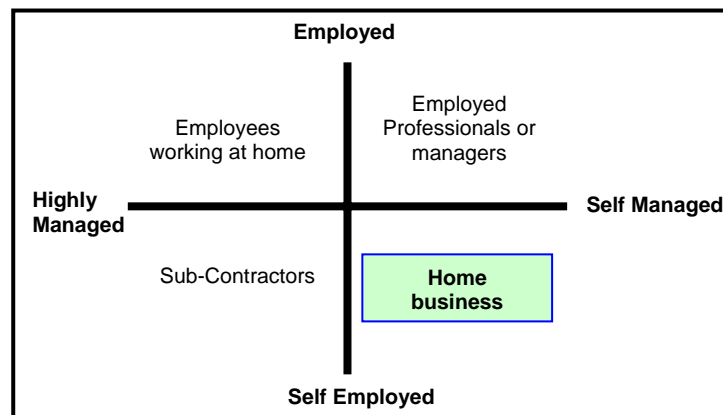


Figure 1: Home-worker Framework (source: Salazar, 2001)

The *employees who are working at home* are grouped under telecommuting in which the employees are employed by an organization and managed by their supervisors such as service providers. For the *sub-contractors*, they are also highly managed by the contracting organization but have more flexibility in job selections as they are self employed. The third category, *the employed professionals* are also employed by the organization but have more flexibility and ability to make almost all decisions related to their work such as system engineers who can perform their tasks from home. They are self-managed, which means they are not required to report to any supervisors. The fourth category, *home business* is self employed and self managed in which the business owners

may have more autonomy in making choices and decision but constrained by the need to earn a living. Since they are highly self-managed they are more concerned with their day-to-day business affairs in terms of engaging suppliers or promoting the business (Salazar, 2001).

In Malaysia, the business at home concept refers to *people who are self employed and work from home or employed by an organization but perform their tasks at home* (Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat (KPWKM), 2007). The definition basically covers both the HBBs and telecommuting concepts. As shown in Figure 1, the focus of this research is on 'home business' that refers to the business owners who are self employed and self managed the business from a home office. The HBB or office at home (office @home) concept has been discussed broadly by the KPWKM, a Ministry in charge for this type of business with other Non Government Organizations (NGOs). Throughout the discussion, they have come out with two (2) alternatives that allow Malaysian citizens to work from home: *1) to become a virtual worker that provides services based on expertise from home or a tele-worker who engages with any organization but work from home and 2) to start a business.*

From the literature and observations via portals and yahoo groups, most of the participants in this type of business are women (Mattis, 2004; Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004; Walker et al. 2008). Most of them have been involved with this business for quite some time and some started with a hobby and interest. Some participants treat the HBBs as part time jobs to earn extra income (Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004). Among the motivations of the participants to start the HBBs are to have time flexibility for their career, an opportunity to balance family and work as well as to contribute to the family economy (Mattis, 2004; Walker et al., 2008; Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat (KPWKM), 2007). It is reported that most women who started their own businesses have adequate management skills and competencies in their area (Walker et al., 2008). Some are using their experiences gained in the prior work to build their skills and contacts. However, women businesses are reported to have lower growth compared to their male counterpart due to some constraints such as to have a balanced business and personal responsibilities as well as to minimise the business risks. Mattis, (2004) and Walker et al. (2008) suggest a few reasons for the lower growth in women businesses *e.g.* women like to keep their businesses small, operate on part time basis and in low profitable sectors such as personal services and retails as well as to begin the businesses from home (Walker et al., 2008). The literature shows that the HBBs have a

potential to adopt the e-Business concept as they are operating at a small scale and structure and thus more flexible to adapt the changes and implementing new technologies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this research is to explore the potential of e-Business for the HBBs in Malaysia. To assess and evaluate the circumstances, qualitative case study and quantitative survey approach are applied. Yin (2002) suggests the multi-method approach to strengthen and increase the validity of findings. For the case study approach, three HBBs and one e-HBB companies, two government agencies, one financial institution and one business association around the Klang Valley area are chosen. For the quantitative method, a survey using questionnaires is conducted to get as many feedbacks as possible to strengthen the findings from the case study approach. Data for this research are collected through interviews, direct observations, documents analysis and questionnaire feedbacks. Due to space constraints, this paper only discusses the qualitative method only.

Case Study Approach

The case study approach is described as *an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and with the use of multiple sources of evidence* (Yin, 2002). In this research, the approach is used as it allows the exploration of the subject matters in-detail and openness, as well as to reach the selected cases in various ways such as in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis. The data gathered through these techniques help to provide detailed information and understanding about the case studies. Riege (2003) and Kumar (1999) state that this approach can be applied to *'discover new relationships of realities'* and to build up an understanding in a particular context of study.

The unit of analysis for this research is determined based on the research statement which is to explore the potential of e-Business strategies and applications for HBBs in Malaysia. Consequently, a few HBB and e-HBB enterprises in Malaysia are selected for the main case studies. From the literature review, observation and feedbacks gathered during the interview sessions with HBB enterprises, a few other entities that may contribute directly or indirectly to the growth of HBBs in Malaysia have been identified which include the government agencies, business associations and financial institutions. Thus, these entities are included as supporting case studies to investigate their roles and

contributions to the HBBs in Malaysia. Furthermore, the involvement of these supporting case studies can help strengthen and support the findings from the main case studies.

1. In-Depth Interview

In-depth interviews are conducted with the respective enterprises to get more complete view of e-Business adoption for HBBs in Malaysia, As stated above, the cases are selected to ensure full representation from all relevant parties in the HBBs environment such as the HBBs, e-HBBs, government agencies, business associations and financial institutions. For the interview session, a few documents are prepared such as a case study protocol, interview questions, and profiles for selected companies and the relevant forms. At the time of writing, a few HBBs and e-HBB have been interviewed and data analysis has started. The expected inputs from the government agencies and business associations are more of exploring their role, current related policies, and infrastructure to support the e-Business as well as acceptance and readiness of the nation for e-business.

The interview questions prepared for the HBBs' case study includes *personal information, HBBs' current practices, e-Business awareness, HBBs' structure, problems and issues in implementing e-Business and level of acceptance and readiness*. The e-HBB case study covers the same aspects as above with one additional aspect that is *e-Business design*. A different set of the interview questions is prepared for the government agencies and business associations that consists only one aspect which focuses on the role of the agencies, the offered programs for HBBs such as workshops or training sessions, as well as their awareness, acceptance and readiness of e-Business implementation. The feedbacks acquired from the supporting case studies are used to answer the research questions that focus on the agencies' roles and their level of acceptance and readiness only

2. Direct Observation

During the data collection process, the direct observation technique is performed in two ways, firstly during the interview session and secondly at the company websites. Since the interview sessions mostly take place at the HBBs home offices, they provide an opportunity to observe a real setting of Malaysian home-based offices. A direct observation form is prepared prior to the interview sessions and it is filled upon the completion of the session. The companies' websites are observed from time to time during the period of study to see the changes and the improvement of their businesses. This technique helps to experience not just the way people conduct a business from home

but also to get to know the players in this type of business. In addition, the observation is also done during the conference or workshop sessions such as taking notes of the welcoming speech from the respective minister during the opening ceremony of SOHO conference. The data gathered during the events are also used to enrich and complement the data from the other techniques.

3. Documents Analysis

Data is also collected by analysing all related documents about the case companies which include newspapers cutting, articles, magazines, pamphlets, newsletters, and the companies' websites and portals. The document analysis technique provides ideas for preparing the interview questions as well as the related categories to be observed during the interview sessions. The information gathered is used to create a case profile at the early stage of the case study approach. The information has also influenced the decision during the case study design and the preparation of data collection tools for example, to design the direct observation form and the interview questions. The information gathered through this technique is also used to support and complement the findings from the interview sessions.

THE IMPACT OF E-BUSINESS STRATEGY ON HBBs

The emergence of Internet technology and other ICT applications have created opportunities for small businesses in particular the HBBs, to adopt the e-Business concept. Pratt (2002) states the small businesses such as the HBBs have benefited from the new technology. In the past only large organizations can afford to have computers and other business equipment but it is now affordable and potential for the HBBs. The demand from other stakeholders such as suppliers and customers also contribute to these changes and needs. Clegg and Tan (2007) claim that a micro sized enterprise needs to evolve the way it communicates with suppliers and customers as well as to come out with a well designed, well executed plan and strategies to face the challenges of e-Business. In Malaysia the e-Business and e-Commerce adoption for MSMEs are still at the early stage (Ramayah et al., 2004; Khatibi et al., 2003). But, the acceptance and awareness of e-Business among the government and society seems to be encouraging as attested by e-Commerce and e-Business conferences and programs held by the Government and business associations.

Figure 2 illustrates a summary from the findings. It shows the main entities of the Malaysian HBB structure, which include entities such as the government agencies,

business associations or NGOs, suppliers, clients and business partners. In this research, the Malaysian HBBs are seemed as multi-purpose businesses. The HBBs can act as a distributor, service provider, agent or trader and retailer. However, to operate legally in Malaysia, the HBBs have to be registered under a sole proprietor or partnership or limited company. Some business operations such as tuition centres or salons have to seek approval from the local authority (Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat (KPWKM), 2007).

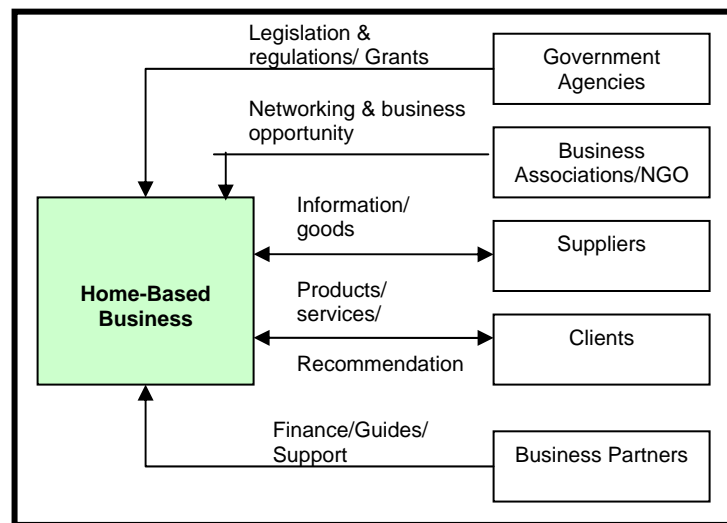


Figure 2: Summary of Malaysian Home-Based Business Structure

The HBBs can also apply business grant or fund for the business expansion and join the related trainings and workshops organized by the government agencies. The business association such as Women Entrepreneur Network Association (WENA) provides a channel for the HBBs to expand or build their business network and relationships and helps members with business opportunities, security and trainings, *etc.* The feedbacks from the interview sessions and forum discussions show that most of the HBBs are registered with at least one business association and have benefited from it especially at the early stage of their business operations. For instance, they have an opportunity to join any visits or programs organized by the government with sponsorship from the business association. For the supplier component, the HBBs provide information and specification of the products or services to the suppliers who supply the goods or materials to be sold by the HBBs. The client or customer component has bilateral interaction in which the HBBs sell the product or services to the clients and normally, the satisfied clients provide

recommendation to others. The HBBs in Malaysia seem to work well through close relationship with the clients. The fifth component is the business partner. Most of the HBBs are currently owned by individual or through partnership with the spouses, close friends and relatives. They may get finance, guide and support from their partners or working together with them.

With the Internet technology and the availability of various types of web-applications, it is possible for the HBBs in Malaysia to be operated as an electronic-Home-Based Business (e-HBB). The term, e-HBB specifically refers to the HBB that are conducted over the Internet using Internet-based technologies and applications such as, online shopping carts, instant messaging, web services, *etc.* For instance, the HBB may have an Internet presence that provide information on their products and services as well as the e-commerce functions such as online ordering and online payment among others. Based on the descriptions above, this study defines e-HBB as:

“a business which, primary business activities are carried out away from a conventionally defined office and conducted through a computer-mediated network and usually based on virtual structure” (Sulaiman et al., 2007)

In this definition, a *conventionally defined office* means a workplace that may include a formal office setting such as furniture arrangement, employees, and formal working hours, *etc.* The definition also includes a set of *primary business activities* such as buying, selling and ordering that could be conducted throughout a *computer-mediated network* such as web applications and services and could be operated at any place, pace and time. Whereas, the *virtual structure* represents the situation in which virtual resources such as web and content developers, e-community, electronic payment, *etc.* are used to support the business. Some of the development process or functionality could be outsourced from a third party or using the e-Business solution that are available in the market (Sulaiman et al., 2007). This is supported by Sanchez (2003) who states that small and micro businesses such as the HBB may start the e-business concept by using the Internet technology to improve communication, efficiency and effectiveness of the business processes within the company itself. For instance, they may use the Internet for market research, communication such as liaising with suppliers and customers as well as sales and marketing tools. However, in order for the HBB in Malaysia to be effectively transformed to e-HBB, e-readiness in terms of policy, infrastructure, trust, support and recognition from all the entities in Figure 2 are needed.

Based on the feedbacks gathered from forums and interview sessions, the adoption of e-Business for the HBBs in Malaysia is still at a very early stage. However, they are improving in terms of communication where most of the communications with suppliers, clients and partners are done via email. According to Sanchez (2003), sharing information online can improve the processes workflow, and lead to cost saving and increase productivity within a small business. Figure 3 illustrates the current process flow of HBB/e-HBB in Malaysia and how it is conducted or could be conducted via the Internet technology. This diagram is based on the early findings of this study. However the diagram will be improved again based on further analysis from the study.

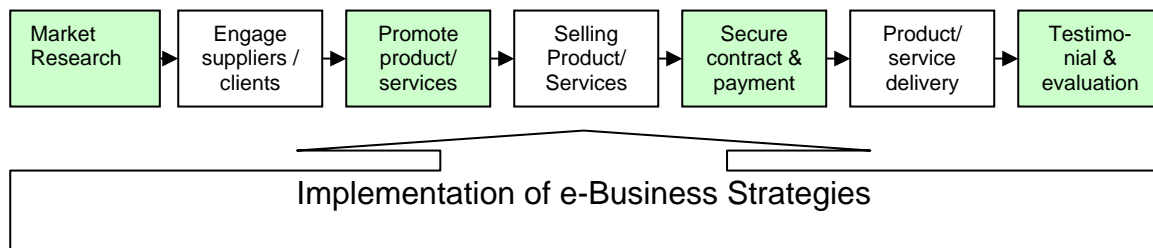


Figure 3: Current Process Flow of HBB/e-HBB in Malaysia

This diagram illustrates the current process flow for e-HBBs which includes the following:

1. Market research

The HBBs/e-HBBs are using the Internet as their research tools for surveying the market and to develop the material such as a new content design for their products and services. Some claim that using the Internet helps to reduce their research time and improve their quality of work.

2. Engaging suppliers and future clients

The HBBs/e-HBBs currently are using email or telephone for communication and discussions with the potential suppliers and clients as well as to set up an appointment for the business meeting. Normally they are requested to submit the printed version of company profiles to the respective suppliers or clients.

3. Promote products or services

The HBBs/e-HBBs in Malaysia are moving forward with the technology and use the Internet as a platform to promote their products and services. Websites are developed to provide further information about the companies. At the same time most of them are registered with yahoo groups or mailing lists for promotion and building relationship with the future clients. But some are still applying the traditional method to keep the business via viral marketing or limit it to a certain area only.

4. Selling products or services

Some HBBs/e-HBBs use the Internet to sell their products and services such as Hilyah.com which sell women clothing online (see www.hilyah.com) but some are still applying the traditional selling and buying process.

5. Secure contract or payment

Securing the contract or payment is mostly done manually but with the availability of online banking system such as Maybank2u.com, it helps to accelerate the payment process in which the client can transfer the payment into the HBB/e-HBB account. The only security control that exists currently is both the client and the companies will keep the transfer receipt as a proof of payment.

6. Product or services delivery

This process depends on the type of products and services offered by the companies. Some HBBs/e-HBBs offer their services from home such as conducting home tuition while others go to the client's place to provide the services such as conducting soft skills training. For product delivery, some HBBs/e-HBBs use cash and carry method or deliver the goods by post. Some HBBs/e-HBBs also provide hand-delivery service to their clients.

7. Testimonial and evaluation

The HBB/e-HBB includes reviews or testimonials from the previous clients in their portfolios or profiles. Some conduct a customer satisfaction survey to measure the level of client satisfaction with their products or services.

From the description above, it can be seen that the use of the Internet technology as a business tools have instigated some changes to HBBs/e-HBBs in Malaysia in terms of company's structure, procedure, strategy and culture. For instance, the Internet presence has caused major changes to their business strategy, marketing and other related business processes. However, the transformation is seemed to be in stages which give the HBBs ample time to develop their knowledge and skills in the e-Business implementation. If the e-Business concept is fully implemented, most of the business processes in Figure 3 can

be integrated and interconnected to one another. Further study will be done to include more details to the findings.

CONCLUSION

The HBB business models have been practiced for many years. The e-Business adoption for HBBs and micro enterprises is still considered at an initial stage in Malaysia. However, the advent of the Internet technology has revolutionized the way businesses are conducted (Damanpour, 2001) that gives a positive impact for the growth of HBBs in Malaysia. Further study is still in progress to gather more information that contributes to e-Business adoption for the HBBs such as readiness, barriers and critical success factors. This paper discusses the literature pertaining to e-Business and e-Business strategy for micro and small businesses. It also discussed the Malaysian HBB structure and process flows based on the early findings from this study as well as the methodology used in this research. In the future, further study will be done to look at various aspects that can be associated with HBBs such as online payment method, integrated value chain system and to formulate a comprehensive framework for e-HBB in Malaysia.

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