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Accountant Competence and Independence in Providing Accountancy Services to Small and Medium-Sized Entities: Evidence from a Developing Economy Perspective

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In most developing nations, such as Ghana, SMEs provide a significant portion of the GDP to ensure economic growth, employment, income stability, and poverty alleviation. Despite the aforementioned duties, most of these SMEs are currently failing as a consequence of poor performance. By this, the study investigates accountants' competence and independence in delivering accounting services to small and medium-sized organisations as a method of sustaining their vitality and allowing them to play the expected crucial roles as the engine of growth in the country's economic development. The study delivered questionnaires to a sample of eight hundred and seven (807) employees who were selected using the purposive sampling technique from the targeted demographic. The descriptive and inferential quantitative techniques were utilised to investigate the influence of the independent factors on the dependent variable in the Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages whilst inferential statistics such as correlation and regression were run using SPSS version 23. The results of the study show that competence and independence have a positive and significant effect on how well accounting services are delivered among SMEs in Ghana. The findings of this study may be utilised as a source of reference and beneficial information for researchers, additional studies, and parties who require it to get too concerned concerning accountants' competence and independence in delivering accountancy services.

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INTRODUCTION

SMEs are recognised globally for their contribution to economic advancement and people empowerment. According to Chege and Wang (2020), SMEs are the driving force behind many inventions and help grow the economy by creating new employment. Ghana's successive administrations have favoured SMEs since independence to boost economic growth and decrease poverty (Ameyaw et al., 2016; Mensah et al., 2017). The government recognises that this industry may reduce unemployment and expand the economy. Most SMEs fail because of a lack of planning and marketing experience, managerial abilities, and competency (Sitharam & Hoque, 2016). Given this, SME owners employ others who provide them with managerial services to help keep them in business. Managers and accountants are reliable providers of managerial and advisory services to support SMEs. A few examples of these services include business advice, emergency guidance, help for financial management, and statutory advice to enhance overall performance. However, this list is not exhaustive (Blackburn et al., 2018). Accountants are uniquely positioned to build trusted relationships with the people who depend on their professional assistance and judgement for making decisions, whether that be their workers, their customers, or the general public

(Blackburn et al., 2018; Cahyaningtyas & Ningtyas, 2020). Therefore, maintaining a high level of ethics and professionalism is essential to retaining the faith of both customers and the general public.

Kiradoo (2020) states that to enhance public trust in the dependability and integrity of financial statements, accounting professionals are required to adhere to a specified set of principles and ethical standards in the reporting of financial information. In the past, problems with ethical standards in accounting have given rise to new developments in areas such as creative accounting, bribery, the independence of auditors, and the quality of audits (Blackburn et al., 2018; Kiradoo, 2020). As a result, there has been a rise in demand for the implementation of ethical norms that are more stringent. In general, the concepts of objectivity, independence, honesty, competence, and due care predominate when discussing ethical concerns in the field of accounting. If an accounting professional does not exercise his or her obligations with the appropriate level of care and attention, this will cast doubt on the credibility of the accounting profession as well as the financial statements (Akpanuko & Umoren, 2018; La Torre et al., 2020).

According to Shafer (2015), a high degree of ethics is required for the sort of work that is often performed by accountants. In addition, stakeholders

depend on the financial statements to make educated judgments about their investments and choices; thus they want the accountants who generate these financial accounts to uphold a high standard of ethics in their work (Blackburn et al., 2018; Kiradoo, 2020; Ramanna & Sletten, 2014). Implementing ethical standards in accounting would do away with unethical accounting practices as well as accounting controversies (Mabil, 2019). According to Mabil (2019), several difficulties such as a lack of impartiality, independence, erroneous professional judgement, ethical insensitivity, bad culture, and poor leadership, might contribute to unethical behaviours. Acceptable ethical practices have the potential to raise the standards and values of both professionals and society as a whole, leading to increased social justice, equity, peace, and fairness (Blackburn et al., 2018; Mabil, 2019).

Accounting research is done for a variety of reasons, including improving accounting services, advancing one's career, achieving institutional goals, and resolving industry issues, such as the role of accounting ethics in providing accounting services to SMEs. The changing environment requires firms to refocus and alter their business models and procedures. The function of accountants as service providers for SMEs is undergoing significant shifts at the moment (Husin & Ibrahim, 2014; Shafer, 2015). Accounting professionals with higher abilities and experience have a more noteworthy impact on the basic leadership procedures of a business (Ramli et al., 2013; Tout et al., 2014). When it comes to determining the quality of accounting services provided to SMEs, the understanding of accounting, the skill and integrity of the accountant, as well as the independence demonstrated by the accountant are all crucial factors (Blackburn et al., 2018; Melnyk et al., 2020). The research, therefore, aimed to investigate the effects of an accountant's competence and independence on accountancy service delivery in SMEs in Ghana.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agency Theory

The agency theory is one in which one party, referred to as the principal, delegates certain responsibilities to another party, referred to as the agent. Jensen and Meckling (1976) proposed that there would be agency costs wherever there was a split between management and shareholders. The expense of supervising and reprimanding those individuals who work to curb the misuse and abuse of authority is referred to as agency costs (Bosse & Phillips, 2016). According to (Zogning, 2017), the agency relationship may have various drawbacks that are related to the self-interest and opportunism of the agent, which may cause the agent to fail to act in a manner that is in the best interest of the principal. There are several facets to this, such as when the agent abuses the power he has to gain financial or other benefits or when the agent does not take acceptable risks following the principal's interests (Bosse & Phillips, 2016; Zogning, 2017). This might be due to the fact that the agent has an inaccurate perspective of the hazards, while the principal may have a different outlook on the dangers that are there (Lawter et al., 2015). Both sides have access to different degrees of knowledge, which creates an information imbalance in the connection, which is another problem that emerges in the partnership.

Therefore, according to the agency theory, the hiring of an accountant ought to be based on the requirements of both the management and the requirements of third parties (Lan & Heracleous, 2010). Guping et al. (2020) posit that the agency theory views accounting services as a crucial monitoring instrument for minimising the difficulties that may occur as a result of the principal-agency relationship. The principals in this scenario are the stakeholders, while the agents are the people in charge of managing the project. Integrity, competence, and independence on the part of the accountant are three qualities that are

necessary for producing accurate and useful financial reports. Mitnick (2019) argues that to fully understand agencies, one must examine both institutional structures and incentives. This study will use agency theory to explain the connection between accountants and the quality of accounting services given to SMEs.

SMEs in Ghana

In 1981, Ghana's government recognised the SME sector's importance in economic progress. In response, it created the National Board for Small-Scale Industries (NBSSI) (Act 434) (Awiagah et al., 2016). The Act was passed in 1985. In the 1990s, the NBSSI merged the Cottage Industries and Rural Housing Department and the Ghana Enterprise Development Corporation to defragment MSME assistance operations in Ghana (Dzisi & Ofofu, 2014). Despite the best efforts of the NBSSI, the sector is nevertheless faced with several obstacles. According to Donkor et al. (2018), the organisation has, ever since it was founded, struggled mightily under the weight of meagre money and resources. In addition, even while there has been a growth in the number of organisations and programmes that are designed to help the SME sector, these institutions and programmes have, for the most part, been ineffective, disorganised, and fragmented, and they have been largely centred in metropolitan regions (Donkor et al., 2018; Dzisi & Ofofu, 2014; Quaye & Mensah, 2018).

A wide variety of stakeholders, including government ministries, departments, agencies, private sector groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and development partners, are involved in the creation of programmes in Ghana that are intended to assist the SME sector. These institutions, for the most part, lack the resources necessary in terms of equipment, staff, and operational money (Donkor et al., 2018; Yeboah, 2021). As a result, they are unable to fulfil the statutory tasks that have been placed on them to establish the enabling environment that is needed

for the sector. Because they rely more heavily on human labour than bigger companies do, small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) have lower capital expenses connected with employment generation (Fatoki, 2014; Yeboah, 2021). The vast majority of them are set up as sole proprietorships, and the number of working proprietors makes up the largest employment group (Gherghina et al., 2020). The majority of businesses have members of the owner's family working there in some capacity. Although they are not often compensated for their work, they play an active role in the operation of the business and account for around one-quarter of the workforce (Dzisi & Ofofu, 2014). The remaining members of the labour force may be broken down into two categories: Employees and trainees or apprentices. Most of their time is spent in manufacturing or retail commerce. It's usually believed that most SMEs fall into the first group, yet the ratio of SMEs in retail varies substantially between rural and urban locations (Awiagah et al., 2016; Donkor et al., 2018).

Dzisi and Ofofu (2014) explain that it is because the retail activity is more prevalent in urban areas. Most retail enterprises are in urban and peri-urban regions, whereas most industrial plants are in rural or urban locations. In Ghana, SMEs are classified further as either urban or rural businesses. The former can be further segmented into "formal" firms and "informal" businesses. Formal enterprises have paid workers, a registered office, and pay employees' Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) (Ocloo et al., 2014; Yeboah, 2021). In addition, formal businesses typically have a formal business name. Family companies, individual craftsmen, and women who own food stands and other businesses in rural areas make up the majority of the rural economy's small businesses (Alhassan & Sakara, 2014; Awuah & Addaney, 2016). Over 80% of employment (compared to 67%) and over 70% of private sector production (compared to 52%) are attributed to SMEs, as stated in the NBSSI's SME Support

Services Strategy (Donkor et al., 2018; Dzisi & Ofosu, 2014). Some of the challenges facing SMEs failure in the country include weak institutional and regulatory framework, high cost of doing business, poor integration and interaction along the value chain, lack of specific policies to develop women and youth entrepreneurs, dearth of credit and business development services, lack of a strong, coherent, and organised SME voice to represent the sector, inability to meet production standards, dearth of export opportunities are the top reasons for small business failure (Awiagah et al., 2016; Donkor et al., 2018; Dzisi & Ofosu, 2014; Yeboah, 2021).

Empirical Review and Hypothesis Development

Accountants' Competence and Accountancy Service Delivery

Accountants at a firm must have the proper education, experience, and professional credentials to carry out a variety of accounting tasks (Setiyawati, 2013). To provide high-quality accounting services, the company's accountants must be competent. To be deemed proficient, accountants need a wide variety of skills, knowledge, and other important abilities (Bhasin, 2015; Tan & Laswad, 2018). The accountant competence framework emphasises the skills needed to be a competent accountant. Excellent interpersonal, listening, speaking, and writing skills are vital to an accountant's growth potential, according to earlier studies (Iskandar & Setiyawati, 2015; Setiyawati & Iskandar, 2020). According to Setiyawati and Iskandar (2020), these skills are meant to improve financial reporting, not the accountant's potential. When assessing an accountant's competency, experience, academic level, accounting standards and professional progress are examined (Kasim, 2015; Octavia & Widodo, 2015). The research conducted by Setiyawati and Iskandar (2020) revealed that competent internal accountants have a substantial

effect on the quality of financial reports. Therefore, the first hypothesis of the study is;

H₁: Accountant's competence has a positive influence on accountancy service delivery to SMEs

Accountants' Independence and Accountancy Service Delivery

The idea of independence is laden with ambiguity and can be interpreted in a variety of ways since it does not have a definitive sense or interpretation (Sulistiyo et al., 2018). For this research, independence is defined as being free from management interference while accountants perform accounting processes and submit reports (Octavia & Widodo, 2015; Tobi et al., 2016). If an accountant is not independent in appearance and facts, creditors and investors won't trust their reports (Tobi et al., 2016). Thus, according to Haeridistia and Fadjaranie (2019), if they are not independent, then the trustworthiness of the accountant is compromised. In addition, accounting involves the entirety of the management process since it raises the information's dependability, gives reasonable views, keeps neutrality, and, as a result, demands independence. Independence means accountants may do their jobs honestly, impartially, and objectively while avoiding conflicts of interest (Octavia & Widodo, 2015). Rahman et al. (2019) studied the influence of accountant independence and financial report quality on firm performance. According to their study, a negative correlation was found between independent accountants and the effectiveness of financial reporting. Therefore, to accomplish their jobs without having their work interrupted, accountants, need to be able to maintain their autonomy from the people to whom they are expected to report (Abbott et al., 2016; Johl et al., 2015). Accountants' work is made more accurate and reliable when they maintain their independence and objectivity, and this instils confidence in their employers that they can rely on the accountants' reports and findings (Duska et al., 2018).

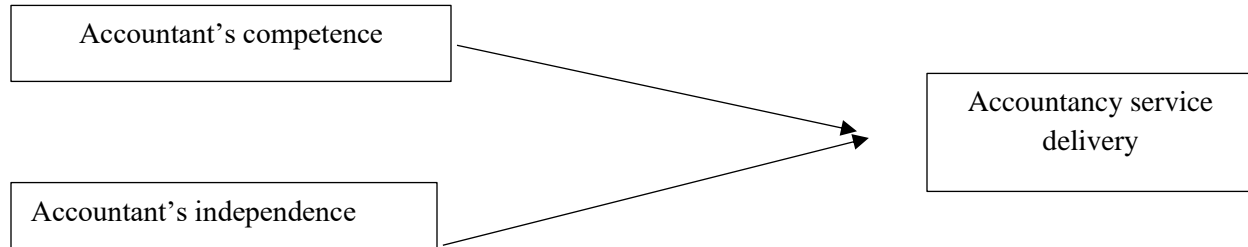
Accountants must preserve their independence through their prestige and position inside a business. They can operate more autonomously and with

more objectivity as a result of this. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the study is;

H₂: Accountant’s independence has a positive influence on accountancy service delivery to SMEs

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Source: Author’s construct, (2022)

The conceptual framework illustrates the direct connection between the two independent variables (the accountant’s level of expertise and independence) and the dependent variable (accountancy service delivery). A previous study has indicated that accountants are the most significant consultants to small firms, coming in first place, followed by bankers, attorneys, friends, professionals, entrepreneurial groups, and SME networks (Blackburn & Jarvis, 2010; Carey, 2015). Many people believe that accounting and tax requirements are difficult to grasp, and one must indeed have a comprehensive understanding of both the accounting standards and the tax legislation (Blackburn & Jarvis, 2010). Since SMEs may not always have access to the requisite knowledge and skills in-house, small business owners typically seek the advice of external accountants for assistance with accounting and tax-related concerns (Blackburn et al., 2018; Carey, 2015). The developments that are currently taking place in the accounting profession, on the other hand, make it abundantly clear that accountants are providing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with an increasing amount of individualised business advice and are conducting additional accounting and

finance-related analyses to support the decision-making process of SME managers.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive and inferential research designs were adopted to achieve the aim of the study. The descriptive research design helped the researcher describe how the competence and independence of accountants influenced the accountancy service delivery of SMEs. On the other hand, the inferential research design assessed the impact of the competence and independence of accountants on the accountancy service delivery of SMEs. The quantitative approach was used to describe and examine the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable by administering questionnaires to a sample of staff from the target population. The population of the study included all SMEs registered in the Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly. Cape Coast is the regional capital of the Central Region of Ghana. The Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi areas were not selected for this study because most of the studies have concentrated on these two regions in Ghana. Thus, this study takes a look at another region, which is the Central region. According to the Cape Coast Metropolitan

Assembly, the registered SME population stands at about 2,345 (Yeboah, 2021).

The researchers focused on the effects of an accountant's competence and independence on accountancy service delivery in SMEs in Ghana. Thus, the purposive sampling technique was adopted to select staff that are in the best position to give information on that. Because of the sampling technique, the researchers had to visit particular employees in the SMEs located in the Metropolitan Area for data. Most of the respondents were not available for data collection and some were not ready to take part in the study. Thus, out of a total of a thousand (1000) research questionnaires distributed, the researchers received a total of nine hundred and fifty-four (954) questionnaires. After data screening and editing, the researchers could make use of eight hundred and seven (807) research questionnaires. Thus, the sample size of eight hundred and seven (807) respondents was used in this study.

A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect data from the targeted respondents. This data supplied the study with dependable and accurate information gleaned from first-hand experience (Anaman et al., 2022; Wilcox et al., 2012). According to Borgobello et al. (2019), questionnaires are quick and convenient to be used for data collection. The variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The dependent variable was measured using variables such as tax services, audit and assurance services, financial management services, and management consulting services (De Bruyckere et al., 2017). The researcher was responsible for developing or designing the questionnaires, which were then given to experts in accounting research who reviewed the items measuring the individual construct to determine whether or not they measured the precise constructs that they were required to measure. An investigation was carried out to perform preliminary tests on the research instrument. At this point, it was determined

whether or not the instruments that had been used in the study were appropriate.

As a direct consequence of this, early flaws and distortions in the questionnaire were brought to light, and they were subsequently rectified during the process. Cronbach's alpha was utilised in a calculation to determine the reliability, which resulted in the acquisition of reliability coefficients. According to the recommendations made by Hair et al. (2013) and Pavot et al. (1991), instruments utilised in primary research should have a reliability value of at least 0.70 to demonstrate internal consistency. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used to analyse the data. To facilitate better comprehension of the data, both descriptive and inferential analysis was utilised. This analysis was done at the end of the data collection. The demographic data of respondents were presented and interpreted using frequency and percentages. Correlation and regression analysis were used to establish the relationship and assess the impact of accountant competence and independence on the delivery of accountancy services to SMEs. Ethical issues were adhered to in the conduct of this study. Respondents were made aware of the study being conducted and respondents were further assured that the information would be used for research purposes only and would not be shared with a third party (Anaman & Ahmed, 2021; Dowling, 2009; Zyphur & Pierides, 2017).

The regression model for the relationships include;

$$ASD = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CO + \beta_2 ID + \varepsilon$$

Where; ASD = Accountancy services delivery, CO = Competence of accountants, ID = Independence of accountants, B₀ = constant, B₁ = regression coefficient relating to the competence of accountant, B₂ = regression coefficient relating to the independence of accountant, ε = error term

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics Characteristics

This section of the study presents the survey respondents' profiles. The biographic data reflects

the profile of the respondents in terms of the gender of the respondent, level of education of the respondent, the number of years the respondent has been handling accountancy services in the organisation and experience level of the respondent.

Table 1: Demographic information of respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	442	54.8
	Female	365	45.2
Level of education	Degree	325	40.3
	Masters	220	27.3
	Doctorate	130	16.1
	Professional	132	16.4
Handling of accountancy services in the organisation	Less than a year	207	25.7
	1 – 5 years	399	49.4
	6 – 10 years	148	18.3
	10 years and above	53	6.6

Source: Field study (2022)

From Table 1, it can be realised that the majority of the respondents who took part in the study were males, representing 54.8%, with females being the minority of the respondents, representing 45.2%. Also, it can be observed that most of the respondents are degree holders, representing 40.3%. Respondents with Master's degrees, Doctorate and Professional Certificate holders accounted for 27.3%, 16.1 and 16.4%, respectively. Moreover, it can be observed that the majority of the respondents have been handling accountancy services in the organisation for one to five years, representing 49.4%. Respondents who had less than a year, six to ten years, and more than ten years experience in handling accountancy services accounted for

25.7%, 18.3%, and 6.6%, respectively. This shows that the sample selected for this study had the right characteristics when responding to the questionnaire.

Reliability

The result of Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is provided in *Table 2*, demonstrates that the scales and items utilised in the study to assess the constructs in question surpassed the traditionally accepted threshold of 0.7 (Pavot et al., 1991). This shows whether the construct of the research was reliable or not for further analysis.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items	N of Items
.890	.942	26

Source: Field study (2022)

Cronbach's alpha, a statistical measure of reliability, assigned a value of 0.942 to the validity of the 26-question survey. This is much higher than

the standard allowable value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013; Pavot et al., 1991). This demonstrates that the questions and scales that were used to sort the data

from the respondents were accurate and robust enough to be used for further research.

Correlation Analysis of Variables

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the competence and independence of accountants and accountancy service delivery.

Table 3: Correlation results

		CO	ID	ASD
CO	Pearson Correlation	1	.848**	.641**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	807	807	802
ID	Pearson Correlation	.848**	1	.656**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	807	807	802
ASD	Pearson Correlation	.641**	.656**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	802	802	802

***: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

NB: ASD = Accountancy services delivery, CO = Competence of accountants, ID = Independence of accountants

Source: Field study (2022)

The correlation results between the competence of accountants (CO) and independence of accountants (ID) show a positive coefficient of 0.848. This shows that there is a strong and positive association between the competence of accountants and their independence. It was further revealed that accountancy services delivery (ASD) shows a positive coefficient of 0.641. This indicates that there is a strong and positive relationship (correlation) between the competence of accountants and accountancy service delivery. The p-value for the test is 0.000, which is less than 0.01. This implies that the result obtained for the correlation between CO and ASD is significant (using a 1% significance level). Thus, there is a significant and positive relationship between the competence of accountants and the services they deliver. Moreover, the correlation results between the independence of accountants (ID) and accountancy services delivery (ASD) show a positive coefficient of .656. This indicates that there is a strong and positive relationship (correlation)

between the independence of accountants and accountancy services delivery. The p-value for the test is 0.000, which is less than 0.01. This implies that the result obtained for the correlation between ID and ASD is significant (using a 1% significance level). Thus, there is a significant and positive relationship between the independence of accountants and the services they deliver.

Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to test the impact of the relationship between the variables under study. It includes model coefficients, a model summary, and an analysis of variance (ANOVA). The section presents the regression results for the dependent variable accounting services delivery (ASD) and the independent variables accountant competence (CA) and accountant independence (ID).

$$ASD = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CO + \beta_2 ID + \epsilon$$

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.675 ^a	.456	.455	.78412

a. Predictors: (Constant), ID, CO

NB: ASD = Accountancy services delivery, CO = Competence of accountants, ID = Independence of accountants

Source: Field study (2022)

It could be observed in Table 4 that the coefficient of determination (adjusted R²) is 0.455, which means that about 45.5% of the variation in the ASD variable is explained by the two variables CA and

ID capability simultaneously. At the same time, the remaining 54.5% is explained by other variables outside the model.

Table 5: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	412.053	2	206.027	335.090	.000 ^b
	Residual	491.256	799	.615		
	Total	903.309	801			

a. Dependent Variable: ASD

b. Predictors: (Constant), ID, CO

NB: ASD = Accountancy services delivery, CO = Competence of accountants, ID = Independence of accountants

Source: Field study (2022)

The results of the influence significance test of CA and ID concurrently towards ASD with F statistics are presented in the table. The Fcount for this test is 335.090, and the error probability is 0.000. This

demonstrates that the significance level is less than the p-value, which is 0.01. It is possible to conclude that the variables CA and ID both had a substantial influence on the variable ASD concurrently.

Table 6: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.326	.137		2.371	.018
	CO	.399	.066	.299	6.083	.000
	ID	.561	.068	.403	8.198	.000

a. Dependent Variable: ASD

NB: ASD = Accountancy services delivery, CO = Competence of accountants, ID = Independence of accountants

Source: Field study (2022)

Table 6 shows that the regression coefficient of an accountant's skill is 0.326 and the t statistic is 6.083 with an error probability of (p) = 0.000 at the

significance level of 0.01. Thus, CA somewhat favourably impacts ASD. The regression coefficient of accountant independence is 0.399, and the

coefficient of significance test with the t statistic is 8.198 with an error probability of $(p) = 0.000$ at the significance level of 0.01. Thus, it can be concluded that ID somewhat positively and strongly influences ASD.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The correlation results show a positive and strong correlation between the independent variables to the dependent variable. The correlation result between the competence of accountants (CA) and accountancy services delivery (ASD) is a significant and positive value of 0.641, whilst that of independence of accountants (ID) and accountancy services delivery (ASD) is a significant and positive value of 0.656. This indicates that the level of the accountant's expertise, as well as their level of independence, is directly proportional to the quality of the services that are provided by the accountant. This implies that when accountants are competent and independent in discharging their duties, the quality of the services they render increases. The results from the regression analysis conducted indicate that the two independent variables have a positive impact on the dependent variable. This is because the coefficients of CA and ID in the regression model were found to be positive and significant. This explains that the independent variables have a positive influence on the dependent variable. Competence is defined as the fundamental information, skills, beliefs, and attitudes represented in dynamic, growing habits of thinking and doing that may be attained through time (Bhasin, 2015; Tan & Laswad, 2018). A competent person possesses the core information, talents, values, and attitudes that enable them to do everything they sets their mind to. Iskandar (2015) indicates that the habit of routinely and continually thinking and behaving enables a person to be competent. The competence of accountants may be evaluated based on their years of experience, education level, adherence to accounting standards, and efforts to advance their professional development. Indicators of knowledge as the most

important factors in the formation of competency variables are factors such as skills or expertise possessed, indicators of continuous professional education and training, and indicators of attitudes that account for a minor proportion of the formation of competency variable (Bhasin, 2015; Setiyawati, 2013).

On the other hand, the role of the accountant demands them to be independent to issue acceptable conclusions, to keep their impartiality, and to do so while preserving their objectivity. Independence refers to the ability of accountants to carry out their duties in an honest, impartial, and objective manner while avoiding any potential conflicts of interest. The findings of this study are supported by Octavia and Widodo (2015), Setiyawati (2013) and Tan and Laswad (2018), who found a positive relationship and impact of the accountant's competence on the services they deliver. The studies by Octavia and Widodo (2015), Rahman et al. (2019) and Sulistiyo et al. (2018) also support the findings of this study that the independence of an accountant positively affects the quality of the services delivered by them. In essence, the hypotheses H1 and H2 are accepted. This is because the study found a positive influence of accountants' competence and independence on the accountancy service delivery to SMEs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For SMEs, accountants are reliable suppliers of consulting services and support in the areas of providing business advice, emergency assistance, aid with financial management, and statutory direction to improve performance (Ismail & Mat Zin, 2009). Awiagah et al. (2016) indicate that a lack of planning, marketing experience, management skills, and capability competency is the primary cause of failure or expansion for the vast majority of SMEs. According to Donkor et al. (2018), the majority of SMEs in Ghana are managed by their owners. These owners believe they have a reduced need for financial accounting information owing to their involvement in the day-to-day

operations of the business. The development of high-level accounting practice necessitates the routine analysis of any deviations from the predefined, mandated process flow so that mistakes may be identified and the underlying reasons can be remedied. This degree of self-examination is only achievable if the accounting staff has a high enough level of training and the ability to comprehend and function independently. In light of the foregoing, the current study finds that when accountants are competent and autonomous in the performance of their tasks, the services they provide are of the highest quality. This will help to boost the performance of the country's SMEs in the long run. Improving this area of the economy aids in economic growth (Donkor et al., 2018). Thus, this study suggests that SMEs choose chartered accountants rather than just anyone to manage their accounting needs. This is because the study found that the accountant's expertise influences the services offered. Furthermore, to assist SMEs in improving their performance, accountants must constantly upgrade their understanding of accounting standards and tax and auditing standards, among other disciplines in the field. The study recommends that a comparative study of the impact of accounting ethics on the performance of SMEs in the manufacturing, service, and trade sectors be conducted.

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