



2025

Reviewing the Application Process for GBEA



Subn 3



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Geelong Chamber of Commerce oversees the Geelong Business quality Awards (GBEA), which are a renowned venue for recognising quality, innovation, and resiliency in the local business community. The GBEA still has a participation gap among small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), despite its strong reputation and broad category offerings. In order to close this gap, MavenBridge created this report as a component of the Deakin University Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) consulting program. It does this by identifying obstacles to participation and suggesting workable, scalable solutions.

Through stakeholder input and competitor analysis, the report highlights three major obstacles to SME participation: SMEs' belief that they are unlikely to win, a lengthy and complicated application procedure, and restricted access to application support resources. The report's response consists of five strategic recommendations aimed at improving GBEA's operational efficiency, accessibility, and inclusivity:

- In order to accommodate a range of applicant strengths, a multi-stage application process that divides the procedure into manageable stages and combines multiple-choice questions, video responses, and templated writing submissions is used.
- Chatbots, AI authoring tools, and automated grading are examples of AI-powered support and automation that can improve fairness, cut down on administrative burden, and offer real-time assistance.
- Using a professional award management platform, like Award Force, to facilitate smooth communication, centralise entries, and expedite adjudication.
- Introduction of a low-cost, non-monetary category called the "Small and Medium Business Resilience Recognition Award," which uses public voting and storytelling to honour resilience.
- A specific "Why Enter" social media campaign and a dedicated small business winners' area on the GBEA website are examples of strategic marketing and engagement improvements aimed at increasing awareness, trust, and an emotional bond with prospective SME candidates.

In order to facilitate a phased deployment of these initiatives, the report ends with comprehensive implementation plans and dates that guarantee their actionability and alignment with GBEA's objectives. These suggestions aim to improve the GBEA's general reputation, community outreach, and influence in addition to boosting SME participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Business awards play a vital role in recognizing excellence and fostering growth within the Australian business landscape, offering opportunities for reputation enhancement, networking, and stakeholder trust.(Keyter, 2024) The Geelong Business Excellence Awards (GBEA), managed by the Geelong Chamber of Commerce, exemplify this by honouring outstanding businesses, entrepreneurs, and leaders across the Geelong region in categories such as marketing, customer service, and operational excellence (Awards | Geelong Chamber of Commerce, 2024). Even though the GBEA is highly regarded, many small and medium-sized businesses—an important part of the local economy—are reluctant to apply. This is often due to challenges like a complicated application process and limited time or resources.

This report is developed by MavenBridge as part of a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Unit under the Australian Business Consultancy Experience offered by Deakin University, in partnership with the Geelong Chamber of Commerce. The project focuses on identifying and addressing the obstacles that prevent SMEs from participating in the GBEA, to enhance accessibility and boost application numbers. Drawing on competitor analysis and insights into decision-making factors, the report proposes actionable strategies to streamline the process and support applicants.

The report comprises several key sections. The Strategic Analysis evaluates competing business awards and examines factors influencing SMEs' reluctance to apply for business awards. The Recommendations section presents solutions. Finally, the Implementation Plan details steps to enact these changes. Through this analysis, the report aims to empower the Geelong Chamber of Commerce to make the GBEA more inclusive and appealing to SMEs.

2. REPORT FINDING AND ANALYSIS

2.1 Competitor Analysis

The business awards landscape in Australia (and around the world) is diverse and highly competitive, with numerous award categories that recognize excellence across industries, business sizes, and operational achievements (Australian Business Awards [ABA], 2023). Winning and/or getting shortlisted for business awards are often viewed as valuable opportunities for businesses to enhance their reputation, increase industry network, gain industry recognition, and build trust with stakeholders (ABA, 2023). The table below provides an overview of five different business awards with varying time frames, award categories, application processes, and use of support and technology.

Award Name	Time Frame	Categories	Application Process	Support/Current Use of Technology
 Telstra Business Award (Small to medium sized business)	12 Hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerating Women Building Communities Championing Health Embracing Innovation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous Excellence Outstanding Growth Promoting Sustainability 	Multiple Choice Questions -> Video and written submissions -> Judging	Video Based Questionnaire
 Lord Mayor Small Business Award - City of Melbourne (Small businesses)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small Business Innovation Small Business of the Year Small Social Enterprise 10+, 20+, 40+ years 	Nomination -> Judging	Online portal (no use of advanced tech)
 WA Regional Business Excellence Awards (Small, medium, and large businesses)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sole Trader Business with 1 to 5 Employees Business with 6-10 Employees Business with 11-20 Employees Business with 20+ Employees Aboriginal Business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start up Business Leading with Innovation Sustainable & Environmental practices Regional Business of the year 	Registration -> Submission of Business Profile & Achievements -> Judging
 Australian Small Business Champion Awards	10-15 Hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accounting and Financial Service Business Services Health Improvement Services Educational Services Retail and Hospitality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beauty and Personal Care Trades and Construction Community and Disability Services Environmental Business 	Nomination and application -> submission of business profile -> Shortlisting -> Final judging
 Cairns Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Awards	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business Resilience Community Contribution Customer Service: Professional Services Customer Service: Trade, Retail & Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous Business Innovation Marketing and Communications People Management Sustainability and Environmental Emerging Leader 	Download Submission kit -> Review categories -> Nominate business -> Complete detail
				Online portal to upload the filled form (Award Force Platform)

Table 1: Provides the detailed comparative study on existing award programs. The Geelong Business Excellence Awards currently offers 20 award categories, one of the most comprehensive business award programs compared to other programs within the scope of assessment of this report. Major national and regional business awards typically offer around five to ten categories. The breadth and depth of categories are intended to provide a comprehensive and holistic list of businesses of all sizes and various industries, allowing them to represent the growth and diversity of business context in the

Geelong region (GBEA, 2023). In other words, the diversity and inclusivity aspects of the client's business award are their key strength.

However, the application process for the GBEA takes the longest (30+ hours) compared to 10-15 hours for the Australian Small Business Champion Awards and 12 hours for the Telstra Business Awards. GBEA's submission is initially broad and then categorized by judges; the majority of other awards have specific categories and nomination procedures. While some other awards use digital platforms (such as Awards Force), event management systems, or online portals, the GBEA's use of technology is unclear. GBEA judges volunteer more than 60 hours, which is a substantial amount more than most other prizes.

In addition to the traditional one-winner-per-category format, Melbourne's Lord Mayor Small Business Award offers something different. It incorporates recognition elements that honor businesses for reaching significant milestones: 10-plus, 20-plus, and 40-plus years of operation. Rather than limiting recognition to a single winner per award, these awards allow multiple businesses to be acknowledged for their achievement and longevity. This kind of award structure reinforces that excellence is not just about being the best in a given year but also about enduring success and resilience over time (Ahmed & Ismail, 2023; National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2024). In contrast, GBEA and the other business awards within the scope of this report do not currently include a similar category that recognises multiple businesses based on milestone achievements or resilience in a non-competitive, community-focused manner. The absence of such a category suggests an opportunity to further enhance the recognition framework by incorporating a format where multiple businesses can be celebrated simultaneously, particularly those that have demonstrated exceptional resilience in overcoming external challenges.

2.2 Factors Hindering Small Businesses from applying for business awards

i. Complex and Time-Consuming Application Process

The complex and time-consuming application process can have a significant impact in hindering small and medium-sized businesses from applying for business awards. Many awards require extensive resource preparation, including financial records, business performance data, and compelling narratives, which demand substantial time and effort

(Asante et al., 2023). This challenge is amplified by the diverse number of business awards and their associated award categories, each with distinct eligibility criteria, submission requirements, judging, and evaluation methods. For instance, industry-specific awards may focus on innovation or sustainability, while general business excellence awards emphasize financial performance and leadership. Larger corporations often have dedicated teams to manage submissions, giving them a competitive edge over smaller businesses that may struggle to navigate a wide array of submission formats, key performance indicators, and judging expectations, making the process overwhelming. As a result, many small businesses prioritize daily operations over award submissions, perceiving them as a lower priority rather than a growth opportunity (Touriki et al., 2022).

ii. Impact of External Environmental Factors on Decision-Making

The influence of external environmental factors on decision-making is one of the significant obstacles that small enterprises frequently encounter while applying for business awards (Asante et al., 2022). The uncertainties created by these external factors, which include economic conditions, regulatory changes, and technological improvements, draw business owners' attention away from strategic activities like award applications (Legal Literacy Foundation, 2024).

a. Regulatory Complexity: Small business owners are frequently overwhelmed by the complex legal frameworks governing pay, employee rights, and compliance regulations, which makes it challenging to devote time and resources to award applications. Businesses that meet eligibility requirements may be deterred from participating in award programs for fear of non-compliance or legal blunders (Asante, S. ,2023).

b. Economic Pressures: Small enterprises are compelled to prioritize financial security over external recognition due to economic factors including inflation, supply chain interruptions, and shifting consumer demand. A well-documented application, financial data, and operational insights are frequently needed when applying for business awards; small enterprises may find it difficult to obtain these resources due to budgetary constraints (Jones et.al, 2014; Asante, S. ,2023).

c. Technology Advancements: Technological developments also impact decision-making, especially when award applications call for sophisticated data analysis or digital technologies. Many small firms might not have the means or technical know-how to showcase their accomplishments properly in a data-driven manner. This lack of technology can discourage participation by making the application procedure appear difficult (Legal Literacy Foundation, 2024).

d. Market Dynamics: Small businesses frequently work in fiercely competitive markets where day-to-day operations and survival are more important than long-term branding initiatives like business awards. Businesses may decide that the application is not worth the effort due to the perceived low chance of success against larger, well-resourced organizations (Asante, S., 2023).

Organizers could consider streamlining the application process, give more precise instructions, and provide assistance through workshops or mentorship programs to entice more small firms to participate in award programs. Furthermore, using digital tools to improve accessibility and expedite compliance procedures might lessen the influence of outside environmental elements on decision-making.

By removing these obstacles, small firms can be confident in highlighting their accomplishments, receiving recognition, and using business awards as a means of expanding and establishing their credibility (Legal Literacy Foundation, 2024).

iii. Perceived Low Chances of Winning

One of the biggest reasons that small businesses do not apply or hesitate to apply for business awards is that they feel like they do not have a chance at winning. They may feel disadvantaged compared to larger competitors and see the effort as not worth the potential outcome (Jones et al., 2014). There's a strong perception that these awards mostly go to larger businesses that have more resources, higher visibility, and teams dedicated to making applications (Jones et al., 2014). For smaller businesses who do not necessarily have a marketing team or someone to write up the application, it can feel like they're already behind before they even start.

When small business owners do not see people like them being recognised, it can make the whole process feel out of reach (Densham, 2024). On top of that, the judging process is often unclear, and without proper feedback, without knowing why their submission wasn't successful or how to improve, many business owners feel the application process lacks transparency (Lennox, 2023).

Due to these reasons, many small business owners ultimately decide not to enter awards, prioritising daily operations instead. As a result, they potentially miss valuable opportunities that could significantly boost their business profile and growth. To address this challenge, our report recommends practical solutions, including clearly showcasing past small-business winners and proactively communicating the benefits of entering the awards. These strategies aim to reassure small businesses that the awards are accessible, achievable, and worth their effort, ultimately increasing SME participation in the Geelong Business Excellence Awards.

3. RECOMMENDATION

3.1 Strategic Enhancements to the GBEA Application and Judging Framework

Our analysis of the GBEA application process includes a number of strategic recommendations meant to improve the overall experience for administrators, judges, and applicants. A multi-phase application procedure, the incorporation of artificial intelligence techniques, and the use of a specialised award administration platform like Award Force are a few of them. Collectively, these efforts aim to improve the process's scalability, efficiency, and usability.

In addition to being resource-intensive for judges and administrators, the existing one-step application process can be overwhelming for candidates. The goal of enhancing the effectiveness, calibre, and accessibility of the awards process is directly supported by our suggestions. Every solution tackles a significant area of friction, such as operational inefficiencies or entrance obstacles, making the process of identifying entrepreneurial excellence more sophisticated, inclusive, and scalable in the end.

These suggestions immediately address the main issues with the current procedure, namely the excessive time commitment for applicants, the administrative strain on the panel of judges, and the absence of efficient digital infrastructure. Our goals are to decrease manual labour, enhance the calibre and consistency of submissions, and streamline the application process.

Additionally, the suggested adjustments address important findings from previous award cycles, including the comments that judges struggle to handle large numbers of unstructured entries and that applicants frequently find the existing process burdensome. We think GBEA can provide a more interesting, equitable, and future-ready experience by segmenting the application into digestible steps, utilising AI to assist pre-assessment, and putting in place an easy-to-use awards platform.

3.1.1 Multi-Stage Application Process:

An organised, multi-stage application procedure is advised for the GBEA in order to improve the applicant experience, raise the calibre of submissions, and boost evaluation efficacy. A

staged submission structure that strikes a balance between applicant accessibility and material richness is included in this method, which is in line with best practices seen in top award programs.

STAGE 1: Multiple Choice Questions

A structured multiple-choice questionnaire intended to gather important business data and marketing tactics is the first task applicants must complete. This approach minimises the initial time commitment needed from applicants while guaranteeing that data may be reviewed and compared with ease.

Goal: Determine application eligibility and efficiently collect high-level business insights.

STAGE 2: Video Based Responses

After being shortlisted, candidates record and videotaped answers to a series of questions designed to simulate an interview. This phase gives candidates the opportunity to more expressively and personally describe their accomplishments, values, and customer service philosophy.

Goal: Provide judges with verbal and visual clues to evaluate passion, involvement, and sincerity.

STAGE 3: Written Submissions

Written submissions must be made by finalists using standardised templates that GBEA provides. Detailed answers about team building, organisational culture, and financial success will be prompted by these templates.

Goal: Encourage consistency and lucidity in applications, particularly for small enterprises that might lack the means to write them.

3.1.1.2 Strengths of Proposed Approach

Tiered Structure: The suggested approach's tiered structure has the advantage of easing applicants' time and cognitive strain by breaking the application procedure up into sequential phases. It enhances the entire experience and boosts engagement by offering a clear path from the first indication of interest to the last assessment.

Mixed Media Format: By allowing both textual and video submissions, a greater variety of candidate strengths are acknowledged. While written comments offer room for in-depth and thoughtful analysis, video responses enable more expressive personality and enthusiasm.

Use of Standardised Templates: Providing templates for intricate parts, especially those pertaining to organisational culture and financial data, promotes uniformity in assessment and helps candidates organise their answers. Small firms that might not have access to expert writing or reporting assistance can particularly benefit from this.

3.1.1.3 Considerations and Potential Limitations

Although there are several strategic advantages to the suggested multi-stage application procedure, a number of possible drawbacks must be taken into account to guarantee successful implementation and use:

- o Enhanced Complexity of Administration: It takes careful planning, scheduling, and communication to oversee a tiered process with several formats (forms, videos, and written submissions). To guarantee a seamless transition through each step, clear instructions and robust backend assistance are required.
- o Digital literacy and access to technology: Candidates with little familiarity with digital tools or restricted access to high-speed internet may be at a disadvantage due to the requirements for video submissions and online form completion. It will be crucial to guarantee mobile-friendly platforms and provide assistance resources (such as help desks and frequently asked questions).
- o Assessing Uniformity in Various Formats: Subjectivity and possible score fluctuation are introduced when evaluating video responses. Standardised evaluation rubrics and judge training will be required to guarantee impartial and uniform evaluations.
- o Time Dedication of Candidates: Even while a tiered model lowers upfront requirements, moving through the three stages could still take a substantial amount of time overall. To keep applicants interested, it will be crucial to be open and honest about deadlines and expectations.
- o Resource Requirements for Small Groups: Even with the available templates, it could be difficult for sole proprietors or smaller enterprises to create thorough financial and cultural documentation. This gap might be filled by optional mentoring or example submissions.
- o Security and Privacy of Data: There will be higher standards for data management, confidentiality, and safe storage as a result of the submission of financial and video data. It will be crucial to have clear data governance policies.

A strategic improvement to the GBEA process is the implementation of a multi-stage application paradigm. It will make administration easier, enhance the calibre and comparability of entries, and promote wider involvement from a range of industries and company sizes. Video interviews, structured forms, and guided writing submissions all work together to provide a thorough, equitable, and easy-to-use experience for all parties.

3.1.2 AI Powered Support and Automation

The integration of automation and AI-powered solutions across critical touchpoints is advised in order to further improve the GBEA application process and conform to contemporary,

scalable award administration procedures. All applicants, especially small enterprises and non-native English speakers, can benefit from these technologies' enhanced user experience, streamlined operations, and guaranteed impartiality and accessibility.

AI-based automated scoring, AI chatbot support, and AI writing aid are the three main pillars of this recommendation.

3.1.2.1 AI Writing Assistance

Incorporate artificial intelligence (AI)-based writing aids to help candidates polish their written responses, enhancing tone, grammar, and clarity, especially for non-native English speakers.

The detailed implementation plan is discussed in the Appendix I

Benefits

- improves the tone and clarity of written comments.
- saves applicants' time and effort
- reduces language barriers to encourage various applicants to participate.

3.1.2.2 AI Chatbots

Use chatbots driven by AI to offer candidates real-time assistance and direction, reducing misunderstanding and administrative strain.

The detailed implementation plan is discussed in the Appendix I

Benefits:

Provides instant answers and guidance

Reduces administrative inquiries and delays

Enhances the user experience through round-the-clock support

3.1.2.3 AI Based Automated Scoring and Shortlisting

Automate the shortlisting and scoring of candidates using machine learning models and natural language processing (NLP) to ensure impartiality, speed, and fairness.

The detailed implementation plan is discussed in the Appendix I

Benefits

- speeds up the preliminary review procedure.
- makes certain that all entries receive the same score.
- uses more in-depth language analysis to find applications that stand out.

Benefits of AI Integration

- User-Centric: Assists a wide range of candidates, including those with little application experience or language skills.
- Time-saving: Less time is spent by administrative teams and applicants.

- Focused on inclusivity, it promotes involvement from under-represented groups and non-native speakers.
- Scalable: Allows for managing high applicant volumes without sacrificing the calibre of the evaluation
- Innovative: Establishes GBEA as a progressive and technologically sophisticated awards program.

3.1.3 Adoption of an Award Management Platform

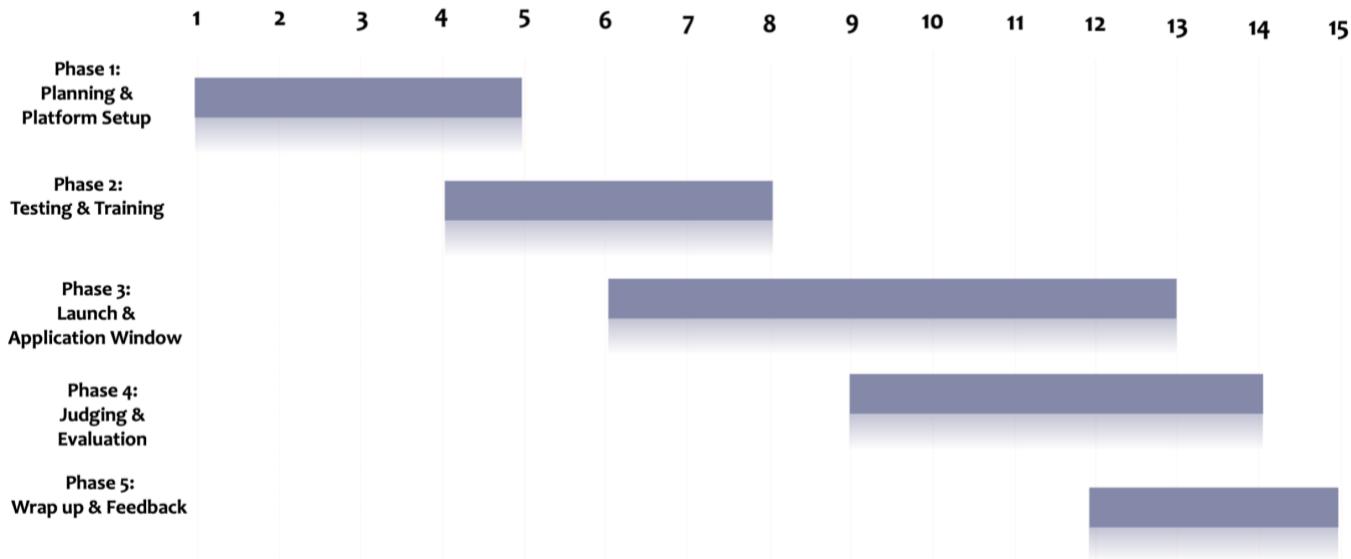
The Geelong Business Excellence Awards (GBEA) application and judging procedure should be modernised and streamlined by implementing a dedicated award management platform. Scalable, feature-rich, and user-friendly platforms designed especially for handling competitive award programs are provided by Award Force, Good Grants, Submittable, OpenWater Awards, and Evalato.

Submissions are centralised, procedures are automated, judging is made easier, and administrative overhead is decreased using an award administration system. Most significantly, it supports scalability for future program expansion while enhancing the user experience for both applicants and assessors.

Benefits

- Centralised Application Hub: All resources, communications, evaluations, and submissions are kept in one safe, easily accessible place.
- Simplified Judging Process: Judges gain from automated scoring rubrics, well-organised dashboards, and simple review phases.
- Workflow Automation: Automates important tasks including conditional movement through application stages, status updates, and email reminders.
- Better Applicant Experience: All users benefit from a more seamless experience thanks to intuitive user interfaces, integrated help features, and real-time feedback.
- Flexibility and Scalability: Allows for a greater number of award categories, more entries, and a variety of entry formats, such as text, video, and attachments.
- Professionalisation and Credibility: Boosts the awards' reputation and brings GBEA into compliance with both domestic and global norms.

3.1 Implementation Plan



Phase 1: Planning & Platform Setup (Weeks 1-3)

Objectives:

- Define the structure and subject matter of every application stage.
- Decide on and set up the award platform. (If Applicable)

Key Tasks:

- Create a timeline and outline the three steps of the application process.
- Stage 1: Draft multiple-choice questions; Stage 2: Video prompt content; Stage 3: Template structures
- Create standardised scoring rubrics and judging standards for every stage.
- Configure the following platform features:
 - Ability to upload videos;
 - MCQs using branching logic
 - Features for submitting and downloading templates

Deliverable:

- Charter of the project
- Platform ready for testing, fully configured
- Assigning user roles (admin, Judge, applicant)

Phase 2: Testing & Training (Weeks 4-8)

Objective:

- Check the platform's usability and functionality.
- Get every user group ready for the launch.

Key Tasks:

- Perform internal testing at every level.
- To replicate live use, do a pilot with a limited group of applicants.
- Create and disseminate FAQs, video tutorials, and user manuals.
- Teach judges and employees how to use the platform and navigate it.

Deliverables:

- Pilot test feedback log
- Completed and operational award platform
- All pertinent users receive training materials.

Phase 3: Launch and Application Window (Weeks 6 - 12)

Objectives:

- Launch the platform and open applications successfully.
- Track involvement and offer prompt assistance.

Key Tasks:

- All applicants can access Stage 1 with automated MCQ scoring.
- Invite those who made the short list to move on to Stage 2 (video submission).
- Make sure that the upload choices and format standards are obvious.
- Make available downloadable templates for written contributions in Stage 3.
- Continue to offer technical and helpdesk support.

Deliverables:

- Weekly updates on application submissions and progress
- FAQs that are updated dynamically in response to current queries
- Helpdesk problem tracking record

Phase 4: Judging and Evaluation Weeks (9-14)

Objectives:

- Simplify the evaluation procedure while preserving equity.

Key Tasks:

- Judges use automatically generated scores to evaluate Stage 1 results.

- Judges use platform-based viewing and scoring tools to assess Stage 2 videos.
- The platform's structured rubric is used to score stage 3 written submissions.
- Every score and comment is monitored centrally.

Deliverables:

- Combined scorecards for judges
- Reports on the shortlist and finalist were produced using the platform.

Phase 5: Wrap-up & feedback (Weeks 12 - 15)

Objectives:

- Consider the procedure and record the lessons discovered.

Key Tasks:

- Give questionnaires to judges and candidates.
- Hold internal debriefings for platform administrators and employees.
- Keep track of platform performance, important insights, and areas for improvement.

Deliverables:

- Report on post-implementation summary
- Analysis of performance and feedback
- A roadmap for upcoming improvements

Below is the list of tools that can be utilised in overall implementation roadmap described above;

Function	Tool Examples
Application & Judging	Award Force, Submittable
Video Recording	Loom, Vidyard (embedded)
Template Creation	Microsoft Word/Google Docs
Training	Zoom, Google Slides
Analytics & Feedback	Typeform, Google Forms

3.2 Launch of the Small and Medium Business Resilience Recognition Award

MavenBridge recommends that GBEA launch the Small and Medium Business Resilience Recognition Award, a simple, inclusive, low-cost, and non-monetary award designed to celebrate and publicly acknowledge SMEs in the Geelong region that have demonstrated exceptional resilience in the face of significant challenges. This award will allow SMEs to share their experiences and gain visibility without the need for a complex or time-consuming application process.

This recommendation aims to provide a simplified application pathway that reduces the entry barrier and extend its reach to SMEs that may be held back from participating due to resource constraints or lack of confidence.

Details on the award format, submission process, and timeline are outlined in the implementation section of this report.

Benefits and Limitations

Benefits	Limitations
Value beyond monetary incentives	Lack of financial incentives
Increase visibility & community engagement	Potential bias in public voting
Validation of resilience	Perceived dilution of prestige
Simple & accessible process	

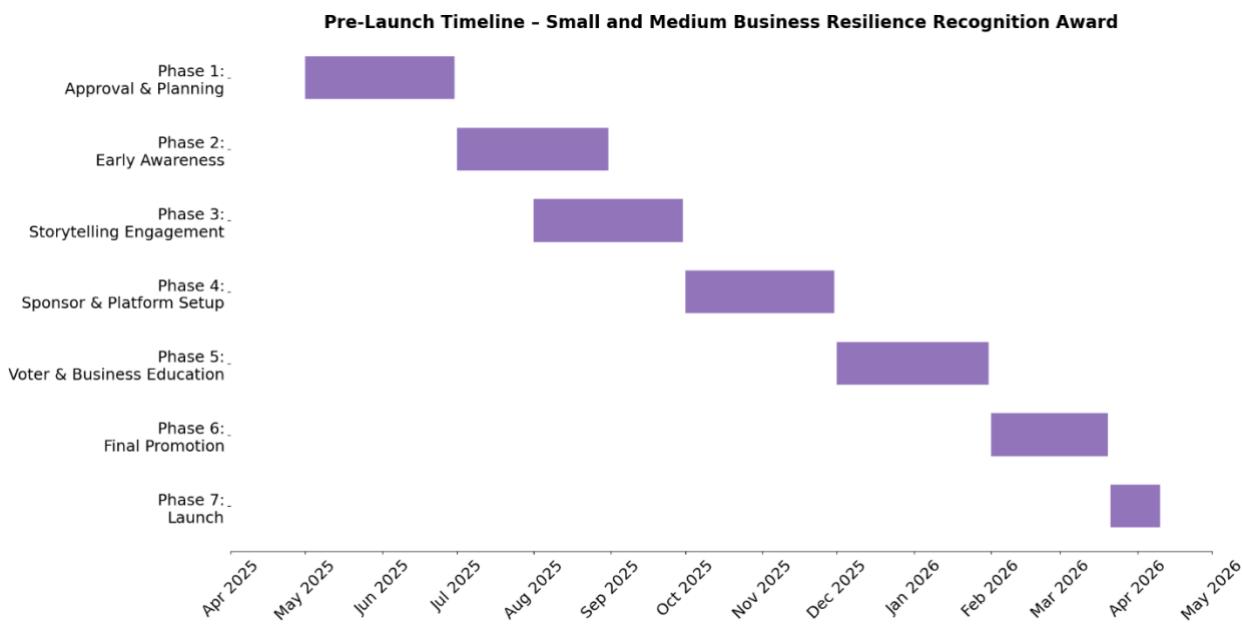
Further discussion of benefits and limitations of this recommendation can be found in [Appendix](#).

3.2 Implementation Plan

Format Details

Recognition format	Details
Eligibility	<p>Open to all SMEs in Geelong that want to share their stories of overcoming significant challenges in the past years.</p> <p>Examples of challenges: financial difficulties, economic disruptions, regulatory changes</p>
Submission process	<p>Businesses to submit a short story of up to 500 words describing how they overcame a significant challenge in their business (Appendix).</p> <p>This allows them to share their resilience story without complex documentation or detailed data</p>
Voting process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public voting conducted on Award Force's platform (Appendix) - One vote per person (via email verification and IP restriction)
Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Top 20 most-voted businesses featured in the Resilience Spotlight Campaign - All participants receive a digital recognition badge
Resilience Spotlight Campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Featured webpage on GBEA site with story excerpts, logos, and quotes - Social media highlights: 1 post/day for 4 weeks on Instagram - Optional: 30-60s video reels submitted by top 20-voted businesses - Special GBEA email feature and press release to local media
Judging process	This award is fully community-voted; no judging required
Promotional strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promotion of the new award via Instagram, Facebook, website, and newsletters - SMEs are encouraged to share their story and voting link to build local engagement
Timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Submission: 1 month - Voting period: 2 weeks - Announcement: Before or during main ceremony
Budget and costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low: non-monetary prize - Main costs: marketing and promotions - Leverages: GBEA's existing channels and systems
Potential sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bendigo Bank - Business Victoria

Proposed Pre-launch Timeline



Phase	Timeframe	Key Activities	Objective
Phase 1: Approval and Planning	May – June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Final approval of the category - Confirm Award Force configuration - Allocate internal responsibilities for award setup 	Align internal team and prepare foundational logistics
Phase 2: Early Awareness	July – August 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Soft announcement: “New award coming in 2026” via newsletter, website, or the award night in 2025 - Share initial overview of the award’s purpose 	Build early awareness and anticipation among the business community
Phase 3: Storytelling Engagement	August – September 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Launch informal “Resilience Stories” series via Instagram and LinkedIn - Pilot short-form interviews or testimonials on GBEA’s website and Instagram story 	Familiarise the community with storytelling format
Phase 4: Sponsor and Platform setup	October – November 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reach out to potential naming right sponsors - Set up Award Force voting template and entry form 	Secure naming support and preparing technical system

Phase 5: Voter and Business Education	December 2025 – January 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inform how the voting will work - Post sample entries and voting FAQs - Promote transparency and inclusivity 	Educate the public and businesses to engage confidently
Phase 6: Final promotion and Partner Prep	February – early March 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finalise marketing materials - Schedule promo posts and teaser campaigns - Lock in media/spotlight collaborators 	Ensure launch readiness
Phase 7	Late March – Early April 2026	Open submission for the new award in through Award Force	Officially launch the new People's choice award category

3.3 Strategic Marketing and Engagement Enhancements to Increase SME Participation

3.3.1 Create a Dedicated “Small Business Winners” Section on the Website

We recommend enhancing the existing “Past Award Winners” section on the GBEA website by creating a segmented layout that separates past winners by business size into specifically small, medium, and large businesses. This redesign would allow small business owners visiting the site to immediately filter or browse winners within their own category, helping them discover stories and examples they can relate to. Each featured winner in the small business section could include a quote, photo, and short paragraph about their journey, category won, and impact of the award on them.

This recommendation addresses the insight that many small businesses perceive they have little chance of winning. When they don’t see businesses like theirs among the past winners, it reinforces their hesitation to apply. This recommendation works to break that perception by increasing visibility of relatable success stories and creating a stronger sense of inclusion. By showcasing previous small business winners in a dedicated, easily accessible space, GBEA can bring a change in their mindset

Benefits:

- **Improves relatability and trust:** Helps first-time or hesitant SME applicants see businesses like theirs being recognised, making the awards feel more accessible.
- **Reinforces inclusivity of the GBEA program:** Aligns with GBEA’s commitment to supporting a diverse business community across Geelong.
- **Leverages existing content:** Makes use of already available winner data and stories, requiring minimal new content creation which is a cost-effective solution.
- **Encourages organic engagement:** Recognised businesses are likely to share their featured profiles, increasing GBEA’s reach and visibility.

Limitations:

- **Time required to gather and organise content:** Identifying past winners by business size and obtaining permissions for quotes/photos may take time and administrative effort.
- **Needs regular updates to remain relevant:** The page would need to be updated annually after each award cycle to include new winners.
- **May have limited visibility without promotion:** To be effective, the new section must be actively promoted across GBEA’s social media, email newsletters, and during the nomination phase.

3.3.1.1 Implementation Plan

Component	Details
Objective	Make small business winners more visible and relatable by creating a segmented section on the GBEA website.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and categorise past winners by business size (small, medium, large) Reach out to selected small business winners for updated quotes, photos, and permission Design and publish the new segmented layout on the GBEA website Promote the updated page on social media and via email newsletters
Timeline	<p>4-6 weeks total</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weeks 1-2: Sort winners and gather content Weeks 3-4: Web page design and content upload Weeks 5-6: Launch and promotion
Responsible Team	GBEA marketing and web admin team, with support from the awards coordination team
Resources Needed	Access to past winner database, basic graphic design and web editing tools, email and social media promotion platforms
Success Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of page visits to the new section Increase in SME entries in the next award cycle Social media engagement (likes, shares, clicks) Applicant feedback referencing the page
Estimated Cost	Low to moderate - mostly internal staff time and basic web updates
Risks & Mitigations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Delay in winner approvals:</i> Start outreach early and provide clear examples of how content will be used <i>Low visibility:</i> Support launch with a strong social and email campaign

3.3.2 “Why Enter” Campaign for Social Media

We recommend that GBEA run a targeted “Why Enter” campaign across its social media platforms, particularly Instagram and LinkedIn. The campaign should focus on encouraging small and medium-sized businesses to apply by sharing stories from 3 to 4 recent SME winners. The content could include short-form videos, image carousels, or quotes in which winners explain the benefits they received from entering the awards. The campaign should be launched at the start of the nomination period and to refresh the currently “Reasons to Enter” highlight on Instagram.

This campaign is designed to counter their perception and addresses the key issue of low SME engagement. By showing that small businesses not only win but also gain visibility, credibility, and confidence from participating, the campaign encourages more SMEs to engage. It communicates that entering the awards is a worthwhile investment that offers long-term value. By highlighting real winners and their outcomes, the campaign helps reshape how SMEs view the value of applying.

Benefits:

- **Builds emotional connection and credibility**

Authentic SME stories make the awards feel more inclusive and trustworthy for small businesses.

- **Encourages a “businesses like mine” mindset**

Seeing relatable winners helps break the perception that the awards are only for large or well-established companies.

- **Increases visibility and engagement during nomination phase**

Timely storytelling can drive awareness and motivate SMEs to submit their applications during the key nomination window.

- **Content can be reused across platforms**

Once developed, the materials can be shared across Instagram, LinkedIn, email, and the website for extended impact.

Limitations:

- **Requires coordination with past winners and time for content creation**

Planning, permissions, and content production will demand time and resources from the team during the nomination period.

- **Effectiveness depends on campaign reach and timing**

The success of the campaign relies heavily on how well it is timed and how actively it is promoted across social channels.

3.3.2.1 Implementation Plan

Component	Details
Objective	Encourage more SME submissions by launching a targeted “Why Enter” social media campaign featuring stories from recent small business winners.
Key Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify 3-4 recent small business winners to feature • Obtain consent and collect short quotes, videos, or testimonials • Design engaging social media content (reels, quote cards, carousels) • Update the “Reasons to Enter” Instagram highlight • Launch campaign across Instagram and LinkedIn during nomination phase • Monitor engagement and track hashtag use throughout the campaign
Timeline	<p>3-5 weeks total</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Week 1: Identify winners and gather content • Week 2: Design and schedule content • Weeks 3-4: Campaign rollout • Week 5: Track engagement and collect insights
Responsible Team	GBEA marketing and communications team, with monitoring by social media officer
Resources Needed	Access to past winner stories, graphic design and video editing tools (e.g., Canva), social media scheduling tools (e.g., Meta Business Suite), analytics tools
Success Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media engagement (likes, shares, saves, comments) • Click-throughs to nomination page • Increase in SME submissions • Number of views on “Reasons to Enter” highlight • Hashtag performance and reach
Estimated Cost	Low - primarily internal staff time and basic design tools
Risks & Mitigations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Delays in getting winner approvals:</i> Begin outreach early with clear communication on how content will be used • <i>Low reach or engagement:</i> Boost with email marketing, cross-promotion, and consistent posting during key nomination weeks

4. CONCLUSION

In the Geelong region, the GBEA is an essential tool for praising achievement and fostering company expansion. The design and implementation of the awards program must, however, change in tandem with the operational and competitive environment. The report's findings point to important chances to lower obstacles, update procedures, and foster a more welcoming atmosphere for SMEs, especially those who have traditionally felt left out or overburdened by the current system.

GBEA may improve its effectiveness, equity, and user experience by adopting a multi-stage application process, utilising AI-powered tools, and switching to a professional award administration platform. The program can also improve its visibility, accessibility, and cultural relevance by implementing a community-driven Resilience Recognition Award and bolstering outreach through digital storytelling initiatives.

In addition to increasing SMEs' involvement, these strategic improvements will strengthen GBEA's position as a leader in promoting the adaptability, diversity, and creativity that characterise the Geelong business community. GBEA is in a strong position to develop into an awards platform that is more inclusive, scalable, and prepared for the future with careful implementation and ongoing stakeholder involvement.

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6. APPENDICES

6.1 Implementation Plan for AI Writing Assistance

Step 1: Choose an AI Platform or Tool

Choose an appropriate AI writing helper that can offer grammar and style feedback, such as Grammarly, ProWritingAid, or a specially designed solution. Integrate a plugin or API to guarantee compliance with the GBEA submission platform.

Step 2: Create an Integration Strategy

Easily incorporate the chosen tool into the application environment, including document uploads and web forms. Add functions like readability scoring, sentence structure recommendations, vocabulary expansions, and grammatical checks.

Step 3: Tailor to the Target Market

Make the tool specifically designed to help non-native speakers with common language difficulties. In order to make the tool accessible and non-disruptive, include an intuitive interface (such as a "Check My Answer" button).

Step 4: Pilot Examination

To confirm usability and efficacy, test the product with a sample of users. Adjust the tool in response to user input.

Step 5: Training & Rollout

To increase adoption, distribute the solution platform-wide along with training materials and user manuals.

Resources & Tools:

Grammarly API or similar tools for language improvement

Technical experts for a smooth application portal integration

6.2 Implementation Plan for AI Chatbots

Step 1: Choose a chatbot platform.

Select a reliable platform with excellent natural language understanding (NLU) capabilities, such as Microsoft Bot Framework, Google Dialogflow, or Rasa.

Step 2: Establish FAQs and Use Cases

Determine the most frequent questions and issues raised by applicants. Create a knowledge base and response flows that address subjects like eligibility, document upload procedures, and submission deadlines.

Step 3: Integration

Include the chatbot as a popup or web widget in the application platform. Make sure all gadgets are accessible at all times.

Step 4: Training AI

Use pre-established scenarios to train the chatbot, and use machine learning techniques to enable ongoing learning. Facilitate feedback loops to enhance quality.

Step 5: Optimisation & Testing

Test the chatbot's usability and make adjustments in response to applicant interactions and feedback.

Step 6: Implementation

If necessary, launch the chatbot with multilingual support throughout the entire platform. Keep an eye on dependability and performance.

Tools & Resources:

Dialogflow, Rasa, or Microsoft Bot Framework

Conversational designers and developers for implementation

6.3 Implementation Plan for Automated Scoring and Shortlisting

Step 1: Establish Criteria for Evaluation

Establish precise, quantifiable grading criteria based on important application elements (e.g., clarity, relevance, impact) in conjunction with subject matter experts.

Step 2: Choose an AI scoring model

Select a platform that supports natural language processing (NLP), like IBM Watson NLU or Google Cloud Natural Language API. Adapt models to the particular evaluation framework used by GBEA.

Step 3: Construct an NLP Model

Utilise artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse and extract characteristics from applicant responses, such as sentiment, keyword density, grammatical accuracy, and thematic relevance.

Step 4: Integration

To automatically evaluate and grade textual comments, integrate the AI scoring system into the submission platform. Provide the ability to manually override for detailed assessments.

Step 5: Pilot Examination

Use simulated or historical applications to test the model. Verify the alignment and fairness of AI-generated scores by comparing them to professional human assessments.

Step 6: Optimisation & Iteration

Make constant improvements to the model in response to user input, outcomes, and new submission patterns.

Step 7: Complete Execution

Install the scoring system for every entry, and conduct audits on a regular basis to make sure it remains accurate and relevant.

Resources & Tools:

Custom AI models, IBM Watson, or Google Cloud NLP

Data scientists and machine learning engineers for implementation and training

6.4 Comparative Analysis on Award Management Platform

Platform	Key Features	Ease of Use	Customisation & Flexibility	Pricing	Strengths	Potential Limitations
Award Force	Built specifically for awards. Supports multi-round judging, video upload, automated scoring, and branding.	☆☆☆☆☆ Easy	High – Custom workflows, branding, categories	Mid-to-High	Enterprise-grade features, excellent judging tools	Premium pricing, may be overkill for smaller programs
Good Grants	Ideal for grants and awards; strong budget-friendliness; supports scoring matrices and multi-stage evaluation.	☆☆☆☆ Easy	Moderate to High – Especially for small-to-medium scale	Affordable	Affordable, intuitive UI, powerful filters	Limited design flexibility compared to Award Force
Submittable	Supports submissions, workflow automation, team collaboration, and integrations with Slack, Salesforce, etc.	☆☆☆☆ Moderate	High – Strong API support and form builder	Mid-Range	Excellent team collaboration and review features	Slight learning curve, less awards-specific
OpenWater Awards	Highly customisable with CRM tools, judging automation, and advanced reporting; popular with large enterprises.	☆☆☆ Moderate	Very High – Includes backend workflow customisation	High	Suitable for complex, high-volume programs	Complex to set up; high cost; may exceed GBEA's needs
Evalato	Modern UX, supports international applicants, fast setup, multi-language support, video uploads, templates.	☆☆☆☆☆ Very Easy	Moderate to High – Strong template management	Competitive	User-friendly interface, fast deployment	May lack deep judging analytics for larger juries

In summarization below table explains the feature with best performer:

Recommended Option: Award Force

Why? Because it is designed with awards in mind, supports multi-stage processes well (as suggested by the GBEA's application structure), has great judging capabilities, and is scalable for

Ideal for: GBEA multi-format video, interface that is use.

Criteria	Best Performer
Ease of Use	Evalato, Award Force
Customization Options	Award Force, OpenWater
Cost-Effectiveness	Good Grants, Evalato
Judging Tools	Award Force
Scalability	OpenWater, Award Force

future expansion.

professionalisation, entries (written, templates), and an easy for judges to

Some Insights on Pricing

1. Award Force - URL <https://awardforce.com/pricing/>

SaaS plan	SaaS plan	Tailored solution
<h2>Growth</h2> <p>For free to enter programs, with low entry volumes. Get organised, ready to grow.</p> <p>Annual</p> <p>\$3,300 AUD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Configurable entry process ◦ All judging modes ◦ Unlimited managers, users ◦ Up to 10k annual entries ◦ 10MB limit per file upload ◦ And more— see below <p>Sign up online</p>	<h2>Pro</h2> <p>For sophisticated, branded or multilingual programs. Maximise your time and thrive.</p> <p>Annual</p> <p>\$8,250 AUD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Everything in the Growth plan, and: ◦ Branding + custom domain ◦ Accept entry fees in any currency ◦ Activate multiple languages ◦ Email broadcast communication ◦ Streaming HD hosted video ◦ Unlimited file upload size / qty ◦ Access to the integration marketplace + API ◦ And more— see below <p>Sign up online</p>	<h2>Premier</h2> <p>For uncommon needs, high submission volumes or multi-award requirements.</p> <h3>Custom quote</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The pinnacle of awards management excellence. Everything in Pro, with options: ◦ Exclusive features, including collaborative entries ◦ Major submission volumes (10k+) ◦ Enterprise-grade security with custom options ◦ Enhanced awards services, including procurement support and non-standard contractual agreements between us. ◦ Dedicated account manager ◦ Support and application uptime SLA <p>Learn about Premier</p>

2. Good Grants - URL <https://goodgrants.com/pricing/>

Annual Monthly

For long term or ongoing opportunities.
4 months free on all annually paid plans.

SaaS plan	SaaS plan	Tailored solution
<h2>Intro</h2> <p>Perfect for modernising any giving or grantmaking program. Track, manage, review and fund.</p> <p>\$4,800 AUD Annual cost</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Application management tools ◦ Unlimited users, managers ◦ Unlimited fund allocations ◦ Fund management tools ◦ Up to 10k applications ◦ And more— see below <p>Try free</p>	<h2>Premium</h2> <p>Most popular with established grantmakers. Communicate, automate, integrate and centralise.</p> <p>\$9,600 AUD Annual cost</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Everything in Intro, and: ◦ Broadcast email communication ◦ Eligibility screeners ◦ All review modes ◦ Activate multiple languages ◦ Action flow (Workflows) ◦ Integration / API ◦ And more— see below <p>Try free</p>	<h2>Enterprise</h2> <p>Most popular with public organisations, large social enterprises, global foundations and governments.</p> <h3>Custom quote</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Everything in Premium, with options: ◦ Exclusive functionality, including submission collaboration ◦ Over 10k applications ◦ Enterprise-grade security with custom options ◦ SLA-backed support and uptime ◦ Custom feature requests ◦ Implementation service ◦ Procurement support ◦ Non-standard contractual agreements between us and more. <p>Explore Enterprise</p>

3. Evalato - URL <https://evalato.com/pricing>

GROW	PRO	ENTERPRISE
<p>starting from €1,900</p> <p>View price in USD GBP AUD</p>	<p>€4,900</p> <p>View price in USD GBP AUD</p>	<p>Get a quote</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Limited entries ⓘ ✓ Customizable forms ✓ Charge entry fees ✓ Program webpage ✓ Embeddable registration form ✓ Multiple judging modes ✓ Public voting ✓ Automatic & broadcast emails ✓ Analytics & data export 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All Grow features ✓ Up to 10,000 entries ✓ Branding ✓ Custom domain and email ✓ Video hosting & playback ✓ Unlimited file upload ✓ All judging modes ✓ Score normalization ✓ Awards & Lists ✓ Premium integrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All Pro features ✓ Large submission volumes ✓ White-labeling ✓ Procurement support ✓ Non-standard contract terms ✓ Priority SLA support ✓ Dedicated account manager
<p>START FOR FREE</p>	<p>START FOR FREE</p>	<p>CONTACT SALES</p>

6.4 Benefits and Limitations on Resilience Award

6.4.1 Benefits

Benefits	Details and Explanation
Value Beyond Monetary Incentives	This award is non-monetary, which makes it less about financial gain and more about public recognition and community support . Gaining visibility is essential for all businesses, especially SMEs, and this award helps them stand out in a crowded and competitive business environment, especially during challenging times (Luo et al., 2024).
Increased Visibility & Community Engagement	By allowing businesses to share their stories and be voted on by the community, this award fosters deeper connections between businesses and local consumers (Kozlov, 2024). The social media exposure and public recognition on GBEA platforms have the potential to greatly increase local customer engagement and loyalty (Nkegbe & Abor, 2023).
Validation of Resilience	Businesses that are voted through this award will gain public recognition for their hard work, determination, and resilience, which potentially boosts their credibility. This award boosts their trustworthiness with customers, which is vital in staying afloat, especially during uncertain times.
Simple & Accessible Process	Many small businesses do not have the time or resources to navigate lengthy application processes. By creating a simple and straightforward story-based submission with community voting , this award category aims to make the application process quick, easy, and low-cost, ensuring businesses are not overwhelmed.

6.4.2 Limitations

Limitations	Details and Explanation
Lack of financial incentives and perceived dilution of prestige	Since this award does not offer cash or other financially valuable rewards (marketing packages, or advertising budgets), some SMEs may feel less motivated to apply (Riedl et al., 2024). It may also be perceived as less prestigious than traditional awards that include financial benefits and a single winner.
Potential bias in public	Businesses with a larger customer base or online following may have an

voting	advantage in collecting votes, making it harder for smaller or lesser-known businesses to get the same level of support.
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6.5 Use of Award Force for Community Voting

Purpose: Incorporate Award Force Platform to manage the Business Resilience Recognition award through its public voting functionality, in addition to managing the judging process (3rd suggestion for the 1st recommendation), to ensure a secure, professional, and seamless voting process.

Justification: Award Force provides a public voting mode that is effective for brand promotion and includes an extensive system for securely accepting public votes.

Benefits

Benefits	Details
Simple configuration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not require IT experts to set up - Easy to set up layout of entries on voter page, content block, filter, and fields or any attachments and entry information
Designed to minimise fraudulent voting to ensure transparency and fairness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Registration is required before voting to keep track of voters - Number of public votes is hidden (as part of the default mode of Award Force) to discourage abusive voting behaviours - Award Force allows users to run an audit in case of suspecting voter fraud
Consistent if GEBA were to use Award Force to help streamline the judging process (as discussed in Recommendation 1)	GEBA would not need complicated setup or procedure if it were to adopt the first and second recommendation

Source: Award Force

6.6 Suggested Template for SMEs Storytelling Submission

Objective: This template aims to help SMEs navigate their story-based submission for the Small and Medium Business Resilience Recognition Award. It provides a simple structure to guide businesses in telling their resilience story clearly, authentically, and compellingly.

Suggested Template

Title of Story: A short, meaningful headline that captures the journey of overcoming past years challenge

Structure	Details	Word count
About your business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Name, industry, and location - How long you've been operating - What products/services you offer - What makes your business unique or community-focused 	80 to 100 words
The challenge you faced	<p>Suggested significant challenge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial pressure due to inflation or cash flow issues - Market changes or supply chain disruptions - Staff shortages or regulatory changes/pressures - Any other external or internal difficulties 	100 to 150 words
How you responded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What steps or decisions did you take? - How did you adapt or pivot your operations? - How did your team or community play a role? 	150 to 200 words
What you learned Why it matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did the experience teach you? - How has it changed your business or your approach to crisis management? - Why do you believe your story represents resilience? 	100 to 150 words

Table . Suggested Template for the Small and Medium Business Recognition Award