

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY AS A TOOL FOR REPOSITIONING THE NIGERIAN SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

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Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), from every indication, has not been able to provide the expected drive to the Nigerian economy in spite of the overwhelming support from government and other local and foreign agencies. Researches have attributed this observed concern to some armies of factors among which are owners' knowledge gap and indiscipline, power inadequacy and failure, managerial mistakes, finance sourcing and management, crude technological applications, and regulatory burden to mention few with less attention to inadequacy in human resource management (HRM) and lack of purposeful human resource management strategies to address employees' management. It was based on this observation that this paper explored issues within HRM and Nigerian SMEs to suggest basic pertinent strategies of HRM that can reposition SMEs in Nigeria to bring about desired economic growth and development of the country.

Key Words: Human resource management, Nigeria, Small and medium enterprises, Strategy

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Introduction

Discussions have concentrated on the challenges confronting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria such as power inadequacy and failure, finance sourcing and management, crude technological applications, and regulatory burden (Akinbode & Imhonopi, 2015; Adisa, Abdulraheem & Mordi, 2014; Etuk, Etuk & Baghebo, 2014), with less attention to the issue of SME strategy and more precisely human resource management strategies within SMEs in Nigeria. Whereas, copious literature exists on human resource management strategies in SMEs of some developed climes. This literature suggests that the adoption of HRM and its strategies contribute significantly to SMEs performance. Therefore, it can be agreed that the human component of the enterprise is very vital and devising means of deploying human capital appropriately to gain edge in the market is also very important.

Historically in Nigeria, people's management as a designated management function in SMEs, was belated when compared to other management functions and activities in large enterprises owing to the mind set of SMEs owner-managers that it is their role to manage their employees' hiding under the unaffordability of HR specialists to manage employees in their SMEs. Also, the size of the enterprises in question is observed not to have encouraged a designated position for human resource manager/executive/officer as their large enterprises; however, the responsibilities are sacrosanct for SMEs to thrive.

The deployment of HR strategies such as paternalistic strategy, employee training and development strategy, employee participation strategy, commitment strategy, high performance management strategy, talent management strategy, among others (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2010) in SMEs, will drive employee sense of commitment, productivity and sense of enterprise ownership which is rare because of family dominance in this type of businesses in Africa. For instance, it is uncommon to have employees of SMEs work for a lengthy tenure in such an enterprise as they often aspire to join either public sector and blue chip companies on the ground that their career is often not guaranteed with SMEs. This suggests the need for SMEs to introduce employee retention strategy as employee attrition rate in SMEs is often high.

This clearly shows that the inability of SMEs in Nigeria to drive the nation's economic growth is due to her sluggish performance occasioned by inconsistencies in management of the SMEs, especially in the area of human resource, a vital component of the enterprise and by extension, the none applicability of HRM strategies that can provide the direction to bring out the best from the human resource over a reasonable time of employment. Therefore, if this issue is not addressed, Nigerian SMEs will continue to lag behind in economic development because SMEs contributions to economy of developed countries attest to the fact that its' inputs are significant. It is in this regard that this paper provided an abridged outlook of SMEs in Nigeria with emphasis on the human resource management dimension to suggest likely HRM strategies that will reposition the Nigerian SME sector for improved performance.

Methods

This is a conceptual research paper conducted to analyse observed issues within Nigerian SMEs space as regard human resource management strategies. In this regard, the paper adopted Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) tenets which suggest the use of keyword search. The search on subject areas were done in three databases namely; Wiley Online Library, SpringerLink and Google.

The search was conducted in two phases with the first on SMEs (e.g., Adisa, Abdulraheem & Mordi, 2014) and second on HRM strategies (e.g., Abdul, 2015). All the selected articles were found to be

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germane to the present review and published before December 2018. The inclusion criteria were based on the following: journal quality, and context of study (developed and developing climes). In all, initial search provided 59 actively related articles while 15 articles were reviewed.

Literature Review

SMEs in Nigeria

Enterprise is any business activity that are owned by an individual or group of individuals. Enterprise varies in size and the common ones are micro, small, medium and large enterprises. Within the context of this review, small and medium enterprises are of interest. In Nigeria, small enterprise is a business that started and operated between twenty-five thousand Naira and two million Naira (Adisa, Abdurraheem & Mordi, 2014), while medium enterprise is a business whose total asset are above ₦50 Million, but not exceeding ₦500 Million with employees between 50 to 200 (Akinbode & Imhonopi, 2015). According to the Central Bank of Nigeria (2012), small enterprises are enterprises with ten employees, but not exceeding forty-nine employees and a total asset of ₦5 million to less than ₦50 million (excluding land and buildings), while medium enterprises are concerns with fifty employees to two hundred employees and above with asset base of ₦50 million and not less than ₦500 million (excluding land and buildings). SMEs have been found to operate in mining activities, agriculture, fishing, construction, manufacturing, retails and whole sales and services.

Historically, Nigerian SMEs is as old as the emergence of the nation 'Nigeria'. Ogechukwu, Oboreh, Umukoro and Uche (2013) account of SMEs development in Nigeria spanned through four epochs; namely, pre-independence, post-independence, 1977-1989 and 1990 beyond. Those enterprises were initially dominated by the colonial masters with few blacks, government indigenisation policy in Nigeria after independence promoted active participation of Nigerians in SMEs with the creation of industrial development centers and Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) to further encourage interested Nigerians into SMEs. The authors were of the opinion that during these periods, government and individuals made concerted effort at floating different types of SMEs along sectors.

There are however mixed reports on the activities of SMEs in Nigeria as established in different studies. The studies of Etuk et al., (2014) and Ogechukwu et al., (2013) believed that SMEs in the country assist in promoting the economic growth and development as they have provided jobs, goods and services to individuals and corporate bodies. On the other hand, some studies (Muriithi, 2017; Adeyemi, 2014; Adisa et al., 2014; Olatunji, 2013) have identified numerous characteristics of Nigerian SMEs such as largely owned by individuals, few employees, high employee attrition rate, unstructured, poor financing and lack of adequate financing, inability to separate business fund from personal money, poor record keeping, and lack or inadequate business management skills, among others. Muriithi (2017) account of SMEs in Africa did not exclude Nigeria as he identified some of the challenges confronting SMEs in the continent such as power shortage, poor management skills, corruption and lack of capital.

From every indication, Nigerian SMEs have not provided the desired drive for the nation's economy. This is obvious in the poor economic growth and development indices of the country such as Gross Domestic Product, productivity, quality of life, among others. One factor that is neglected and central to enterprise performance is people (human resource). Human resource management, development and deployment is imperative to SMEs performance and this cannot be achieved without deploying appropriate strategies. Studies (Rabie, Cant and Wiid, 2016; Abdul, 2015; Ravi and Santosh, 2015) have also shown that human resource management is fundamental to SMEs. The study of Abdul (2013) in

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Republic of Macedonia among one hundred and fifty SMEs explored the role human resource management in these enterprises and established that people's management is pivotal to SMEs performance.

The importance of HRM was also established in the work of Abdul (2015) which investigated talent attraction and retention among family owned small and medium scale enterprises in. In the study which involved 150 SME managers/owners, result revealed that the enterprises do not have formal HR department, nor HR Policies and practices. Result of the study identified lack of qualified employees as one of the challenges confronting SMEs. This signifies HRM issue. In another study conducted by Omolo (2015), influence of training and development on the performance of SMEs was investigated and non-availability/inadequate training of SMEs employees was identified as a peculiar challenge that affects SMEs performance. Again, this is an HR issue which the existence of effective HRM should have catered for, but because this function is not well recognised in SMEs. On the contrary, in the study conducted among SMEs by Rabie, Cant and Wiid (2016), training and development was investigated and it was revealed that training and development initiatives in SMEs are encouraging as owners of these enterprises are dedicated to training of their employees as it has brought about optimal utilisation of resources. This underscores the importance of HRM in SMEs and the need to come up with HRM strategies in SMEs.

The study of Ravi and Santosh (2015) shows another relevant input of HRM in SMEs as it studied compensation and rewards practices in small and medium sized enterprises. According to the authors, compensation is one of the practices of human resource function in SMEs. Results revealed significant difference in the mean scores of financial and non-financial performances of SMEs. It further revealed improved performance of SMEs that adopted formal compensation practices. Another study that shows that relevance of HRM to SMEs is that of Young-Thelin and Boluk (2012) which studied six small hotels, looked into recruitment of employees, training and performance issues, found that these hotels employ low-cost recruitment sources, informal training methods, and arbitrary performance appraisal system.

From this review, the development and application of basic HRM strategies to address employee attraction and retention, compensation, training and performance, among others, are germane to SMEs performance and survival. Therefore, appropriate HRM strategies should be developed and used to sustain SMEs. In this regard, human resource management strategies will provide solutions to the unimpressive performance of the country's SMEs.

Human Resource Management Strategies

According to Armstrong (2016), HRM is a strategic and coherent access of management. The most valuable asset of an organisation-people that work there, individually or collectively, contribute to achieve the objectives of the organisation. In context, human resource management encapsulates practices and policies in place to implement all management activities relating to employees in the areas of employment, training, compensation and performance management. A framework that would give direction to these areas of HRM is called strategy and according to Wright (2008), this strategy means a system of human resource practices. It must emphasise the scheme of HRM practices which is a web of practices that can drive an enterprise. For instance, such strategies must be designed and deployed to address a particular job or a set of jobs with the understanding of job holders' attitude and behaviour. In this regard, HRM strategies would differ along jobs, individuals and enterprise considering a number of factors such as industry, organisation life cycle, enterprise strategic plan, among others.

However, choice of HRM strategies should seek to drive SMEs to best performance for sustainability, which means attracting and retaining the best set of employees, enhancing their performance through

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continuous training and development in terms of skills, attitude, abilities and competencies, establishing fair and competitive compensation system to earn employees' commitment, motivation and engagement, among others (Wahyuningsih, Sudiro, Troena & Irawanto, 2018; Armstrong & Taylor, 2015). Armstrong (2016) was precise on this when he identified three types of HRM strategies namely;

- i. Umbrella strategy: This is a broad statement of intent on HRM in an enterprise which entails core components of building a strong performance culture, attracting and retaining talent, developing HRM systems and developing leadership capability of employees.
- ii. High performance management strategy: These set of HRM strategies are based on specific models of HRM such as control-based model, resource based model, and integrative model to achieve enterprise essence of being.
- iii. Talent management strategy: These are HRM strategies that address issues of talent attraction and development through learning and development strategy.

It is obvious that human resource management strategies remain pivotal to enterprise performance. Human resource management strategies are built around attraction and retention, employee compensation, training and development, performance management, on-boarding, and career advancement, among others (Itika, 2011). Existing models such as the control-based model, resource based model, and integrative model have shown that human resource management strategies is a web and SMEs owners or owner-manager need to adopt it. For instance, resource based model explains employer–employee exchange philosophy which entails set of employee attitudes, behaviours and manager–subordinate relationship quality.

Aside this, Bamberger and Meshoulam's (2000) human resource management strategies classification seems more appropriate for SMEs. According to the authors, HRM strategies can be categorised into

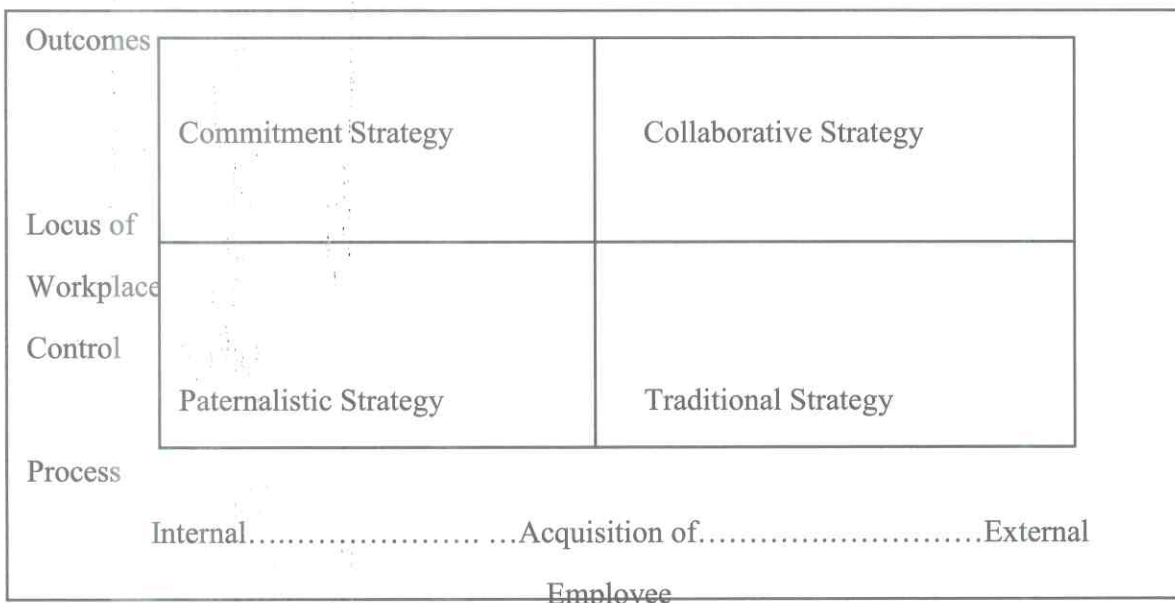


Figure 1: Categorising HRM Strategies
Source: Bamberger & Meshoulam (2010)

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- i. Commitment HRM strategy focuses on internal development of employees' competencies and outcome control.
- ii. Collaborative HRM strategy encourages subcontracting activities to external independent experts such as consultants to promote autonomy and evaluate performance when it comes to end results.
- iii. Paternalistic HRM strategy is centered on employees training and development through internal processes.
- iv. Traditional HRM strategy focuses on external issues such as recruitment of competencies and behavioural based control.

Beyond this, existing theories on HRM such as descriptive, normative and strategy (Guest, 1997), all explain the possibilities of getting the best within human organisations such as SMEs. While the descriptive theory captures possible interrelationships between HRM policy and practice and organisation outcomes with emphasis on essential inputs of HRM that can best suit operations in the areas of employee influence, HR flow, rewards system and conducive work systems (Kochan, Katz & McKersie, 1986); the normative theory advocated for the basis for prescribed HRM best practice on the premise that an integrated set of HRM practices in form of strategies will drive employee high commitment towards organisation's mission and vision statements (Walton, 1985); and lastly the strategy dimension explored the relationship between a range of possible contingencies and HRM issues. In reality, the contingencies often evolve from within and external contexts of the enterprise which the business needs to manage timely to weather the threats and convert same to opportunities.

In this instance, the strategy dimension to HRM has been considered as the central theory of the discourse to explain the possibility of how HRM can be used to reposition the Nigerian SMEs on the ground that what seems lacking with all efforts committed over decades has not yielded the desired results obviously seen in the state of the nation's economy which largely depends on crude oil income and civil service system. To reverse this trend in lieu of active SME, the adoption of HRM strategy approach into the space will no doubt make the difference.

Contending Issues in Discourse

Human resource management strategies no doubt play significant role in repositioning SMEs for improved performance. Unlike in developed countries such as America, France, and United Kingdom that have deployed HRM strategies in their SMEs (Longenecker Carlos & Petty, 2012), innovative human resource management strategies are lacking among SMEs in Nigeria. It is therefore imperative for SMEs in Nigeria to pursue these basic HRM strategies:

1. Talent attraction and retention strategy: It is not an understatement that Nigerian SMEs lack skilled employees while also retaining competent few ones remains a serious challenge. Major contributions to this are level of SMEs informality, low degree of bureaucracy and flat structure which over the years has made these enterprises vulnerable to attracting competent hands and retaining talents. According to Krishna, Mousumi and Vasanth (2012), talent attraction and retention strategy is required among SMEs to survive and provide the drive to economy. However, employee attraction is commonly done within circle of relatives, religious bodies and acquaintances or based on existing employee recommendation. This is not often objective and does not embrace human resource management strategy that can address the challenge of attracting competent hand or high attrition of employees among the Nigerian SMEs.
2. Employee training and development strategy: Human resource management in SMEs needs to evolve strategy around employee training and development to reposition the SME sector in

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Nigeria. Studies (Omolo, 2015; Bélanger & Hart, 2012; Kotey & Folker, 2007) have shown that SMEs disposition to employees training is insignificant and in SMEs where training has been conducted it has not been proactive but reactive and mostly informal. SMEs need to continuously train her workforce to remain in the market and meet customers' expectations, if not exceed them. This issue makes training and development strategy imperative for SMEs as it will serve as the guide for executing training and development programs.

3. Employee compensation strategy: SMEs in Nigeria do not have competitive compensation system and as such it has been difficult for them to attract talents, retain and motivate employees. It is not desirable for any enterprise to remain small or medium for life. Small and medium enterprises can become large enterprise if well managed with appropriate HRM strategies. One of those strategies that could bring about committed employees that would be intrapreneurs is this compensation strategy, if reward is based on employee performance. The existence of functional employee compensation strategy in SMEs will achieve a desirable performance of the sector. The strategy will work if SMEs can determine the best level of fixed and variable pay for employees' optimal performance. Fixed pay standards are predetermined, such as base pay method.
4. Performance management strategy: SMEs do not emphasise performance management like large enterprises, as such they rarely have a strategy to pursue this. Employees' performance gap can easily be obvious in SMEs and it will be of immediate great loss as such deliverables of individuals must be clearly stated with time bounds clearly communicated. Although, characteristics of SMEs do not favour the operationalisation performance management, however, it must be put in place now. The strategy is to identify job components and activities to determine deliverables along employee's strength and abilities with technology available.
5. Employee participation and risk management strategy: Employees in SMEs are often alienated from the enterprise as owners deny them that sense of involvement due to fear of losing the enterprise to these employees. Experiences of existing SMEs owners revealed that majority of SMEs have closed businesses due to the betrayal tendencies of their employees who have compromised the knowledge and secrets of the enterprise for personal gains. However, this can be prevented if human resource management strategy of employee participation and risk management is well articulated in the enterprise. This strategy will define the bound of employee participation and put in place risk management tools to prevent and avert employee compromise at any time.
6. Effective communication strategy: Many SMEs in Nigeria have become moribund due to information gap between employees and their owners. Assumptions and grapevine have generated a lot of ill feelings between them and this has resulted into misconceptions and conflict. It is expected that SMEs should come up with a definite strategy of passing information without any obstacle. The barrier of communication gap between owner and employee should be address to promote SMEs. Therefore, the strategy should create and encourage how to easily transmit information between owner and employees without fear. Similarly, information receipt preferred mode of communication should be encouraged while preferred choice of language be used.
7. Grievance handling and disciplinary strategy: As small or medium an enterprise can be, chances of complaints or grievance are also high. Expectedly, SME owner must put in place a strategy to cope and address complaints and grievances in a timely manner. This might be a simple model, but must give room to thoroughly investigate observed or reported grievance within SMEs. The follow up to this is an open and transparent trial of culpable employee within the

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enterprise. SMEs owners must discourage dictatorial tendencies in addressing grievance or punishing perceived culpable employee in their enterprise.

Conclusion

SMEs in Nigeria have not provided the required drive for the economy owing to some lapses in the sector and one of observed challenge is absence of well-articulated human resource management strategies. This article has reviewed how human resource management strategies can address the unimpressive performance of Nigerian SMEs to make it sustainable and contribute to the nation's economic growth and development significantly. In this regard, purposeful human resource management strategies have been recommended as significant driver of sustainable SMEs towards buoyant economic recovery. Thus, maximising these strategies among SMEs in Nigeria would reposition the sector.

Managerial Implications

SMEs owners, managers and regulators desiring to reposition enterprise within the context of this discourse, particularly now that COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the woes of SMEs, is evolving HRM centered strategies:

- i. Address the issue of none existence of SMEs business strategy because it is the basis on which HRM strategies is to be built as so many SMEs in the country seem not to have it.
- ii. Where there are HRM strategies, it is pertinent to revisit such strategies in line with business strategy and in the light of current realities to drive the performance of SMEs in the country.
- iii. Sensitisation: SME owners and managers need to be sensitised about how to formulate such strategy and implement same within the context of their enterprises.
- iv. It is important to evolve a bundle of HRM strategies as a strategic thrust for SMEs use.

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