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Human Resource Management Strategy: A Tool For Repositioning the Nigerian Small and Medium Enterprises

Erakpotobo V. Oyovwevotu

Department of Business Management
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

Okolie, Ugo Chuks

Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria
E-mail: ugookolie3@gmail.com

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Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria have recently performed poorly, which has caused a lot of concern. It is now crucial to manage SMEs' human resources strategically in order to improve performance. Despite receiving enormous support from the government and other national and international organizations, it appears that small and medium-sized businesses have not been able to give the Nigerian economy the boost that was anticipated. This observed concern has been attributed by researchers to a variety of factors, including owners' lack of knowledge and lack of discipline, power inadequacy and failure, managerial errors, poor financial sourcing and management, crude technological applications, and regulatory burden, to name a few. Inadequacies in human resource management (HRM) and the absence of intentional HRM strategies to address employees' management have received less attention in Nigerian SMEs. Based on this observation, this paper investigated HRM-related issues and Nigerian SMEs to offer fundamentally important HRM strategies that can reposition SMEs in Nigeria. In order to promote improved performance and achieve the desired economic growth and development of the nation, the paper recommends, among other things, the adoption of a strategic approach to HR management in Nigerian SMEs.

Keywords: Strategic human resource management, strategic practices, SMEs Performance, economic growth

Introduction

The issues of SME strategy, and more specifically human resource management strategies within SMEs in Nigeria, have received less attention in discussions than the problems that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria face, such as inadequate power and failure, finance sourcing and management, primitive technological applications, and regulatory burden (Akinbode & Imhonopi, 2015; Adisa, Abdulraheem & Mordi, 2014; Etuk, Etuk & Baghebo, 2014). On the other hand, there is a ton of literature on human resource management techniques in SMEs in some developed regions. According to the literature, SMEs perform significantly better when HRM and its strategies are implemented. 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 un-affordability 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. Additionally, it is noted that the size of the businesses in question did not encourage the creation of a designated position for a human resources manager, executive, or officer, despite the fact that SMEs must fulfill these duties in order to succeed

By incorporating personnel practices into the process of strategic planning, strategic human resources management (SHRM) enables a SME to more effectively accomplish its goals and objectives. According to Ojokuku and Akanbi (2015), SHRM is the integration of human resources with strategic goals and objectives for enhancing organizational culture, business performance, and competitive advantage. By engaging in human resource activities like hiring, selecting, developing, and rewarding staff, the human resource function is accepted and involved as a strategic partner in the creation and execution of the business's strategies (Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2018). The implementation of HR strategies in SMEs, including paternalistic strategies, employee training and development strategies, employee participation strategies, commitment strategies, high performance management strategies, and talent management strategies, among others (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2010), will increase employee commitment, productivity, and a sense of ownership of the company, all of which are uncommon in this type of business in Africa due to the predominance of family-owned enterprises. For instance, it is unusual for SMEs' employees to stay with the company for a long time because they frequently want to work for the government or large corporations because SMEs don't always guarantee a career. This suggests that SMEs should implement employee retention strategies because the attrition rate of employees in SMEs is frequently high.

This demonstrates unequivocally that SMEs in Nigeria are unable to drive the country's economic growth as a result of their slow performance brought on by inconsistent management of the SMEs, particularly in the area of human resource management, a crucial component of the business, and consequently the non-applicability of HRM strategies that can provide the guidance to bring out the best from the human resource over a reasonable period of employment. Because SMEs contribute significantly to the economies of developed countries, Nigerian SMEs will continue to lag behind in economic development if this problem is not resolved. In order to suggest likely HRM strategies that will reposition the Nigerian SME sector for improved performance, this paper gave a condensed overview of SMEs in Nigeria with a focus on the human resource management component.

Methods

This conceptual research paper was written to analyze problems with human resource management strategies that have been seen in Nigerian SMEs. In this regard, the paper incorporated the recommendations for using keyword search made by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003). Three databases were used for the subject searches: Google, Springer Link, and Wiley Online Library. The search was carried out in two stages, the first of which focused on SMEs (Adisa, Abdulraheem, & Mordi, 2014), and the second of which focused on HRM

strategies (Abdul, 2015). All the articles that were chosen and published were found to be pertinent to the current review.

Review of Related Literature

Human Resource Management Strategies

Human resource management has received a lot of attention because it is widely regarded as a unique method of managing people. Interestingly, despite the holistic nature of HRM being emphasized by researchers, much of the early research into the idea concentrated on a narrow range of problems and was criticized as being "micro analytic" (Okolie, Irabor, & Udom, 2017). The current interest in SHRM has emerged from researchers' efforts over the past ten years to demonstrate the significance of HRM in influencing organizational performance. Over the past few decades, the field of human resource management has undergone a great deal of change, which can be divided into two main transformations. The first is the shift from personnel management to human resource management as a discipline. The second is the shift from traditional human resource management to strategic HRM (Eze & Daniel, 2020). The first transformation promoted the understanding that people can be systematically managed and are a valuable asset in organizations. The second transformation is founded on the understanding that human resource practices and policies must be connected to the needs of the organization in addition to being aligned with one another. This change in human resource management became known as "strategic human resource management" because it took into account these needs in the company's strategies (Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2018).

Armstrong (2016) asserts that HRM is a strategic and cogent approach to management. The most valuable resource in any organization is its workforce, which works individually and collectively to further its goals. The practices and regulations put in place to carry out all management activities relating to employees in the areas of employment, training, compensation, and performance management are collectively referred to as human resource management. According to Wright (2008), a strategy is a set of human resource practices that would serve as a framework to guide these HRM domains. The system of HRM practices, which is a web of practices that can power an enterprise, must be emphasized. For instance, such strategies must be developed and implemented with an understanding of the attitude and behavior of job holders to address a specific job or set of jobs. Regarding this, different HRM strategies would apply to jobs, people, and businesses depending on a variety of variables like the sector, stage of an organization's life cycle, and business strategic plan, among others.

Gaining and sustaining a competitive advantage is the focus of strategic human resource management (SHRM). It is the process of integrating conventional human resource functions with a company's strategic goal in order to boost productivity. Employees are considered resources by human resource management, but strategic human resource management views them as strategic assets that can give an organization a real competitive advantage (Adil, 2015). In both the fields of strategic management and human resource management, strategic human resource management (SHRM) is a relatively new idea. SHRM is the efficient use of an organization's human resources to realize its overall business strategies. Through various human resource planning processes, it links HRM and strategic management to improve, coordinate, and harmonize HRM practices with the aim of effectively achieving organizational strategies and goals (Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2018; Okolie & Airhunmwunde, 2018). In order to enable an organization to achieve its goals, strategic human resource management is concerned with a collection of strategies and practices related to the relationship between people and organizations. SHRM is a practice area as well as a field of study.

There are two key ways that HR strategy differs from conventional HR management. In the beginning, SHRM prioritizes organizational performance over individual performance. Second, it emphasizes the importance of HR management systems rather than isolated HR management techniques as solutions to business problems. Building a long-lasting competitive advantage that result in above-average performance is the goal of strategy. The foundational ideas of strategy which are essentially about how to increase firm profitability are the basis of strategic human resource management. Core strategy research, according to Eze et al. (2020), focuses on identifying both external and internal factors that help businesses create a competitive advantage and perform better. Companies need to differentiate themselves in order to charge higher prices in order to achieve superior performance. Alternatively, they can create cost efficiencies that allow them to operate on thin margins. SHRM examines the broad human resource strategies used by businesses and organizations and tries to quantify how they affect performance. During the early stages of the HR field's development, a lot of attention was paid to making sure that employees had the capability and drive to achieve predetermined organizational goals and that there were enough workers with a specific skill set available to meet organizational needs. With the advent of SHRM, the emphasis shifted to the competitive performance of an organization as well as the strategic contributions of human capital (Kusena, 2023). The lens used to describe the expectations of human resource activities within organizations changed as a result of this change, signaling a significant change in the influence and role of human resource professionals.

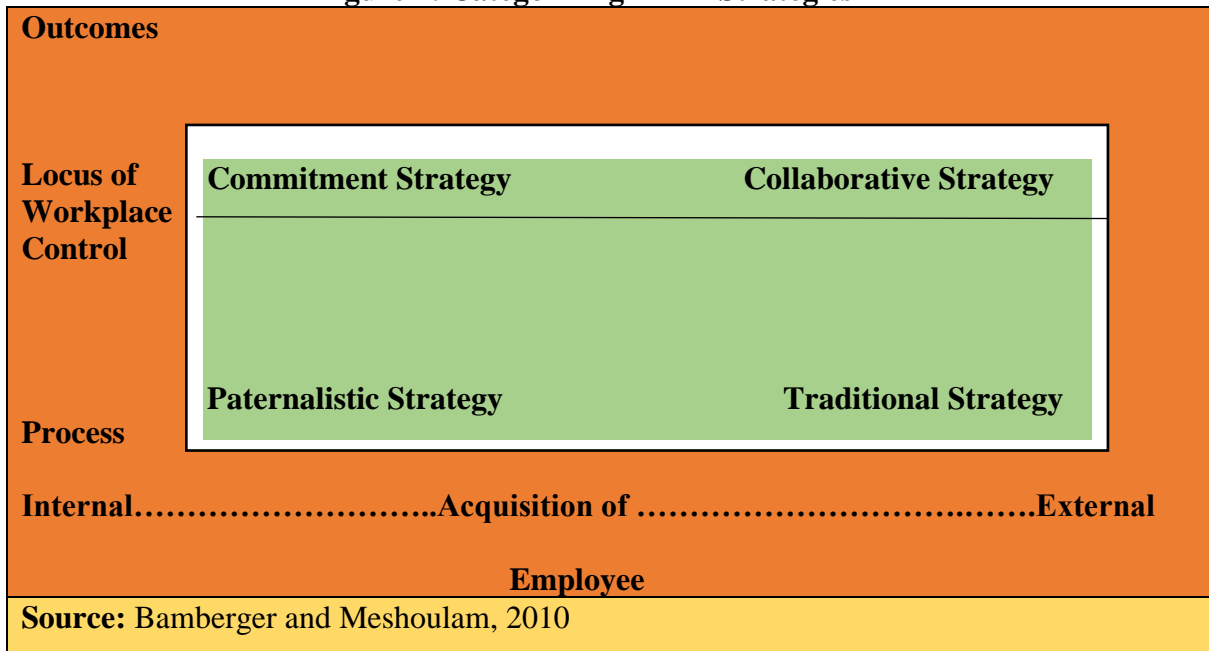
Come in two different forms, according to SHRM. The first is human capital, or an organization's workforce's knowledge, skills, and abilities. Systems within an organization, which support the growth of human capital, serve as the second resource. The difficulty with this resource is choosing the right cost-effective bundle that will enable employees to perform at their peak. Although the claim that SHRM did not suddenly appear has some merit, many of the changes that occurred in the external environment in which organizations operate undoubtedly had a significant impact on how managers perceived the significance of, and managed, their employees, according to Millmore, Lewis, Saunders, Thornhill, and Trevor's 2007 analysis. The process of developing HR strategies using broad strategies that are both horizontally and vertically integrated with the business strategy is known as strategic HRM. The best set of employees should be attracted and retained, and their performance should be improved through ongoing training and development in terms of skills, attitude, abilities, and competencies. A fair and competitive compensation system should also be in place to encourage employees' commitment, motivation, and engagement, among other things (Wahyuningsih, Sudiro, Troena, & Irawanto, 2018; Armstron). Armstrong (2016) was clear in this regard when he distinguished between three categories of HRM strategies:

- i. Umbrella strategy: This is a broad declaration of intent for HRM within an organization and includes the fundamentals of creating a strong performance culture, luring and keeping talent, developing HRM systems, and fostering employee leadership.
- ii. High performance management strategy: To achieve enterprise essence of being, this group of HRM strategies is based on particular HRM models, such as the control-based model, resource-based model, and integrative model.
- iii. Talent management strategy: These HRM strategies use a learning and development strategy to address issues with talent attraction and development.

It is clear that effective human resource management practices are essential to business success. Attraction and retention, employee compensation, training and development, performance management, on-boarding, and career advancement are just a few of the areas around which human resource management strategies are built (Itika, 2011). Existing models,

including the control-based model, resource-based model, and integrative model, have demonstrated that SMEs' owners or owner-managers must adopt human resource management strategies because they are a web. For instance, the resource-based model explains the philosophy of employer-employee exchange, which includes a range of employee attitudes, behaviors, and the nature of the manager-subordinate relationship. In addition, the classification of human resource management strategies by Bamberger and Meshoulam (2000) seems more suitable for SMEs. The following categories, according to the authors, apply to HRM strategies:

Figure 1: Categorizing HRM Strategies



1. Commitment HRM strategy focuses on internal development of employees' competencies and outcome control;
2. 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;
3. Paternalistic HRM strategy is centered on employees training and development through internal processes;
4. Traditional HRM strategy focuses on external issues such as recruitment of competencies and behavioural based control.

Additionally, existing HRM theories like descriptive, normative, and strategy (Guest, 1997) all describe how to get the best results within human organizations like SMEs. While the descriptive theory focuses on the critical HRM inputs that can best suit operations in the areas of employee influence, HR flow, rewards systems, and conducive work systems, it also captures potential relationships between HRM policy and practice and organizational outcomes. (Kochan, Katz & McKersie, 1986); Last but not least, the strategy dimension investigated the relationship between a variety of potential contingencies and HRM issues. The normative theory promoted the basis for prescribed HRM best practice on the premise

that an integrated set of HRM practices in the form of strategies will drive employee high commitment towards the organization's mission and vision statements (Walton, 1985). In actuality, the business must manage the contingencies promptly to weather the threats and turn them into opportunities. These contingencies frequently arise from both internal and external contexts of the enterprise. In this case, the strategy component of human resource management has been taken into account as the main theory of the discourse to explain the possibility of how HRM can be used to reposition the Nigerian SMEs on the grounds that what appears lacking with all efforts committed over decades has not yielded the desired results, which is evident in the state of the nation's economy, which is heavily dependent on crude oil income and the civil service system. The adoption of HRM strategy approach into the space will undoubtedly make a difference in order to buck this trend in place of active SMEs.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria

Any business operations that are owned by a single person or group of people are referred to as enterprises. Micro, small, medium, and large enterprises are the most prevalent sizes of business. Interest in small and medium-sized businesses is pertinent to this review. According to Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Mordi (2014), in Nigeria, a small enterprise is one that began operations and had annual sales of between 25,000 and 2,000,000 Naira. A medium enterprise, on the other hand, has annual sales of between 50 and 200,000,000 Naira and has between 50 and 200 employees. Small businesses are defined by the Central Bank of Nigeria (2012) as having fewer than forty-nine employees and a total asset base of N5 million to N50 million (excluding land and buildings), while medium businesses are defined as having fifty or more employees and a total asset base of N50 million to N500 million (excluding land and buildings). SMEs have been discovered to be active in a variety of industries, including mining, agriculture, fishing, construction, manufacturing, retail, and services. Nigerian SMEs have a long history that dates back to the country's founding. The account of SMEs development in Nigeria by Ogechukwu, Oboreh, Umukoro, and Uche (2013) covered four periods: pre-independence, post-independence, 1977–1989, and 1990 and beyond. The government's indigenization policy in Nigeria after independence encouraged active participation of Nigerians in SMEs by creating industrial development centers and the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) to further encourage interested Nigerians into SMEs. Initially, those businesses were dominated by the colonial masters with few blacks. The authors believed that during these times, individuals and the government made concerted efforts to float various SMEs along sectors.

However, as determined by various studies, there are conflicting reports regarding the activities of SMEs in Nigeria. According to studies by Etuk et al. (2014) and Ogechukwu et al. (2013), SMEs in the nation help to promote economic growth and development by giving individuals and corporate entities jobs, goods, and services. 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. Nigeria was not left out of Muriithi's (2017) account of SMEs in Africa, as he noted some of the difficulties faced by SMEs on the continent, including a lack of capital, poor management abilities, a lack of power, and corruption. Nigerian SMEs do not appear to have given the country's economy the boost it needed. This is evident in the nation's weak economic development and growth indicators, which include measures of GNP, productivity, and quality of life, among others. People (human resource) are one aspect that is overlooked but essential to enterprise performance.

The development, deployment, and management of human resources are crucial to the performance of SMEs, and this cannot be done without using the right strategies. Studies (Abu, 2015; Ravi & Santosh, 2015; Abdul, 2016; Cant & Wiid, 2016; Rabie, Cant &) have also demonstrated the importance of human resource management for SMEs. The study by Abduli (2013) in Republic of Macedonia among 150 SMEs examined the function of human resource management in these businesses and found that the success of SMEs depends heavily on how well people are managed.

The value of HRM was also demonstrated in Abdul's (2015) research on talent attraction and retention in family-owned small and medium-sized businesses. The results of the study, which involved 150 SME managers and owners, showed that the businesses lack a formal HR department as well as HR Policies and Practices. According to the study's findings, one of the problems facing SMEs is a lack of qualified workers. This indicates an HRM problem. Another study by Omolo (2015) examined the impact of training and development on the performance of SMEs, and it identified the lack of access to or inadequate training for SMEs' employees as a unique issue that has an impact on that performance. Again, this is an HR issue that effective HRM should have addressed, but because SMEs do not often value this function, it has not. On the other hand, training and development initiatives in SMEs are encouraging as owners of these businesses are committed to training of their employees as it has brought about optimal utilisation of resources, according to the study conducted among SMEs by Rabie et al. (2016). This highlights the significance of HRM in SMEs and the requirement to develop HRM strategies in SMEs.

The study by Ravi and Santosh (2015), which looked at compensation and rewards practices in small and medium-sized businesses, demonstrates another important contribution of HRM in SMEs. The authors claim that one of the functions of human resources in SMEs is compensation. The findings showed a significant difference between the SMEs' financial and non-financial performance mean scores. It also showed that SMEs with formal compensation practices performed better. Young-Thelin and Boluk (2012) studied six small hotels, looked into employee recruitment, training, and performance issues, and discovered that these hotels use low-cost recruitment sources, informal training methods, and arbitrary performance appraisal systems. This study is another example of how HRM is relevant to SMEs. According to this review, the performance and survival of SMEs depend on the development and implementation of fundamental HRM strategies that address issues like employee attraction and retention, compensation, training, and performance, among others. In order to support SMEs, appropriate HRM strategies should be created and implemented. In this regard, human resource management techniques will offer solutions to the country's SMEs' underwhelming performance.

Human Resource Management Strategy: A Tool for Repositioning the Nigerian Small and Medium Enterprises

Strategies for managing human resources undoubtedly play a big part in repositioning SMEs for better performance. Innovative human resource management strategies are lacking among SMEs in Nigeria, in contrast to developed nations like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom that have implemented HRM strategies in their SMEs (Longenecker Carlos & Petty, 2012). Therefore, it is essential that SMEs in Nigeria implement the following fundamental HRM techniques:

1. Talent attraction and retention strategy: It is not an understatement to say that Nigerian SMEs struggle to find skilled workers, and keeping the small number of qualified workers they do have is a major problem. The informality of SMEs, their lack of bureaucracy, and their flat organizational structure all play a significant role in

this and have made these businesses more susceptible to luring in and keeping talent over time. Krishna, Mousumi, and Vasanth (2012) assert that SMEs need talent attraction and retention strategies in order to thrive and fuel the economy. Employee attraction, however, is typically done within a circle of relatives, religious organizations, and acquaintances, or based on a recommendation from an existing employee. This is not always objective and does not incorporate a human resource management strategy that can address the problem of finding qualified personnel or the high employee turnover rate among Nigerian SMEs.

2. Employee training and development strategy: To reposition the SME sector in Nigeria, human resource management in SMEs needs to develop a strategy around employee training and development. Studies (Omolo, 2015; Belanger & Hart, 2012; Kotey & Folker, 2007) have demonstrated that SMEs do not place a high priority on employee training, and when it is done, it is usually informal, reactive, and not proactive. In order to compete in the market and continue to meet, if not exceed, customer expectations, SMEs must continually train their workforce. 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 have difficulty attracting talent, keeping employees, and motivating them because they lack a competitive compensation system. Any business should not aim to always be small or medium-sized. If properly managed with effective HRM strategies, small and medium-sized businesses can grow to be large corporations. If compensation is based on employee performance, one of those strategies that could produce committed employees who would be intrapreneurs is this compensation strategy. The sector will perform as desired if SMEs have a functional employee compensation strategy in place. 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. Effective communication strategy: The information gap between employees and owners has led to the demise of many SMEs in Nigeria. They have a lot of bad blood between them due to assumptions and grapevine, which has led to misunderstandings and conflict. It is expected that SMEs will develop a clear plan for effortlessly transmitting information. To support SMEs, the barrier of the commuter gap between owner and employee needs to be addressed. Therefore, the strategy should establish and promote how to fearlessly and easily share information between the owner and employees. Similar to how preferred communication methods for receiving information should be encouraged, preferred language should also be used.
5. Employee participation and risk management strategy: Employees in SMEs are frequently cut off from the business because the owners don't want to risk losing the company to these workers. According to the experiences of current SME owners, the majority of SME closures were caused by employees who compromised the company's knowledge and trade secrets for their own personal gain. But if risk management and employee participation are well-articulated human resource management strategies, this can be avoided. This plan will outline the limits of employee involvement and establish risk management tools to guard against and prevent employee compromise at any time.
6. Performance management strategy: Unlike large corporations, SMEs place less emphasis on performance management, and as a result, they rarely have a strategy to pursue it. As such deliverables of individuals must be clearly stated with time bounds

clearly communicated, SMEs can easily identify employees' performance gaps, which will result in an immediate great loss. Although the nature of SMEs makes operationalizing performance management difficult, it must be done right away. In order to determine deliverables and employee strengths and abilities while utilizing available technology, the strategy is to identify job components and activities.

7. Grievance handling and disciplinary strategy: Any business, no matter how small or medium-sized, runs a high risk of receiving complaints or grievances. Expectedly, the owner of a SME must implement a plan to deal with and promptly address complaints and grievances. Although this may be a straightforward model, it must allow for a thorough investigation of any observed or reported grievance within SMEs. An open and transparent trial of the company's responsible employee is the next step. Owners of SMEs must prevent the use of dictatorial methods to resolve disputes or discipline employees who are deemed to be at fault in their company.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Due to flaws in the sector, SMEs in Nigeria have not given the economy the necessary boost. One such issue is the lack of clearly defined human resource management strategies. In order to address the underwhelming performance of Nigerian SMEs and make it sustainable, this paper has examined how human resource management strategies can significantly support the economic growth and development of the country. In this regard, strategic human resource management has been suggested as a key factor in propelling sustainable SMEs toward a robust economic recovery. In Nigerian SMEs, maximizing these strategies would therefore reposition the industry. Without a doubt, the study's findings about strategic human resource management can help Nigerian SMEs perform better if their owners can successfully incorporate SHRM strategies into their overall business operations. Therefore, as part of measures to encourage improved SMEs performance, the following are advised to ensure proactive human resource management strategies or practices that would shape the employees' job satisfaction and motivation:

1. The implementation of a strategic HR management approach in Nigerian SMEs to encourage improved performance and bring about the desired economic development and growth of the nation.
2. SME managers and owners should routinely plan conferences that can give staff members' new tools to improve service delivery. Additionally, it is important to support compensation practices that help Nigerian SMEs perform better, such as overtime pay, bonuses, and commission.
3. To improve employee morale, lower absenteeism, engage staff, and inspire employees, SME owners and managers should implement work-life balance strategies.

Managerial Implications

Owners, managers, and regulators of SMEs are developing HRM-centered strategies in an effort to reposition their companies within this discourse, particularly now that the COVID-19 pandemic has made their problems even worse:

1. Owners, managers, and regulators of SMEs in Nigeria must continue to address the issue of SMEs having no business strategy, as this is the foundation upon which HRM strategies must be built, and as so many SMEs in the nation appear to lack one.
2. Sensitization: SME owners and managers need to be educated on how to create and implement such a strategy within the framework of their businesses. A collection of HRM strategies must be developed as a strategic focus for SMEs.
3. To improve the performance of SMEs across the nation, it is important to review

HRM strategies where they already exist in light of current realities and business strategy.

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