

EFFECT OF TALENT MANAGEMENT ON EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN KADUNA STATE

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Abstract

The impact of talent management dimensions talent acquisition, talent development, talent retention, and career management on effective leadership in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Kaduna State, Nigeria was investigated in this paper. Based on the Resource-Based View (RBV), the study followed a cross-sectional survey approach and gathered data from 362 SMEs chosen by simple random sampling from structured questionnaires. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was applied in data analysis. According to the findings, effective leadership is much influenced by talent acquisition and career management; talent development and talent retention had no appreciable impact. These results imply that in SMEs, attracting the appropriate talent and offering organised career paths are main factors influencing the degree of leadership effectiveness. The study adds to the body of knowledge already in use by stressing the need of career management as a unique but usually underappreciated component of talent management in the SMEs. It ends with sensible advice for SMEs and advocates of future studies to investigate contextual elements affecting talent practices in smaller companies.

Keywords: Acquisition, Career Management, Development, Effective Leadership, Retention, Talent Management

Introduction

The foundation of Nigeria's economic growth is small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), which greatly help to lower poverty rates, create jobs, and boost national productivity. The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) claims that SMEs account for about 96% of all registered businesses in the nation and contribute roughly 46.31% to Nigeria's GDP (Adekunle, 2024). They are mostly in charge of creating over 80% of the jobs in the country (Moniepoint MFB, 2025), so helping to lower the high unemployment rate of 4.1% in Q1 2023 (Izuaka, 2023).

Although their full tax potential is yet underused due to issues of informality, SMEs are essential contributors to government revenue through various forms of taxation including

income tax, value-added tax (VAT), and other local levies in addition to employment creation (Sylvanus & Samuel, 2020). With roughly 6.21% of Nigeria's overall exports (Okojie, 2022) the sector also contributes to non-oil export earnings. Notwithstanding ongoing difficulties including limited access to finance, regulatory burdens, infrastructure shortcomings, and poor capacity development (Abbas, 2024), SMEs across many sectors—including agriculture, trade, manufacturing, and services—continue to show resilience and innovation. Their strategic relevance emphasises the need of focused policy support and leadership development to completely maximise their economic potential and guarantee long-term national development.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are essential for the local economy in Kaduna State, so greatly influencing employment and economic diversification. Understanding their significance, the state government has started several programs to assist SMEs in expansion. For example, a ₦4.2 billion palliative intervention meant to minimise the effects of fuel subsidy removal and inflation helped over 4,000 SMEs in 2024 (Ab Abdullahi, 2024). Furthermore, greatly helping to provide grants and streamline business registration procedures throughout all 23 Local Government Areas is the Kaduna State Enterprise Development Agency (KADEDA). These initiatives are matched by the building of skill development centres in Igabi, Soba, and Zangon Kataf meant to equip young people and women with vocational skills, so improving their employability and lowering their vulnerability (Ab Abdullahi, 2024). Notwithstanding these developments, problems still exist, especially with regard to formal financial services. A 2023 report revealed a notable discrepancy in financial inclusion as 80% of SMEs in Kaduna have bank accounts but only 7% were able to obtain bank loans (Michael, 2024).

Overcoming the many obstacles facing SMEs in Nigeria—including inadequate financing, poor infrastructure, regulatory bottlenecks, and limited capacity for innovation—effective leadership has been generally acknowledged as a key determinant (Ajuwon et al., 2024). Organisational resilience and competitiveness can be much improved by visionary, flexible, and capable of using human capital by strategic talent management leadership (Yu & Xiang, 2024). Effective leadership becomes even more important in Kaduna State, where SMEs are progressively exposed to problems including limited access to credit, skill shortages, and market instability (Ibrahim et al. 2023). Leaders who can attract, develop, and retain skilled personnel are better positioned to navigate the complexities of the business environment and sustain long-term growth (Huang et al. 2022). Furthermore, the integration of talent management practices such as succession planning, continuous training, and employee engagement not only improves productivity but also cultivates a pipeline of capable leaders within the SME sector (Samuel & Isa, 2024). Addressing these leadership gaps is therefore essential for the continued success and scalability of SMEs across Kaduna's diverse economic landscape.

Talent management, which encompasses talent acquisition, talent development, talent retention, and career management, plays a pivotal role in shaping effective leadership within SMEs. Effective talent acquisition ensures that SMEs attract individuals with the right skills, attitudes, and cultural fit necessary to lead and execute strategic objectives (Rožman et al. 2023). Once onboarded, talent development initiatives such as mentoring, leadership training, and on-the-job learning equip employees with the competencies needed to assume leadership responsibilities and drive innovation (Soegiarto et al., 2022).

Equally important is talent retention, as high employee turnover can destabilize operations and undermine leadership continuity. By fostering a positive work environment, recognizing

employee contributions, and providing growth opportunities, SMEs can retain top talent capable of taking on leadership roles (Amah & Oyetuunde, 2020). Career management also plays a strategic role by aligning employee aspirations with organizational goals, thereby creating a motivated workforce that is invested in both personal and enterprise success (Dajnoki et al. 2021). Collectively, these elements of talent management contribute to building a sustainable leadership pipeline that enhances decision-making, promotes organizational agility, and positions SMEs for long-term competitiveness, especially in dynamic environments like Kaduna State.

However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of talent management in enhancing organizational outcomes, existing literature reveals several gaps that necessitate further investigation. Most prior studies have predominantly focused on the relationship between talent management and firm performance (See Aina & Atan, 2020; Latukha et al. 2022), often overlooking its potential impact on leadership effectiveness.

Furthermore, much of the existing research has concentrated on large corporations and multinational enterprises, with limited attention given to the SME sector, particularly in developing economies such as Nigeria (Uzoечи & Udu, 2021). This presents a significant gap, considering the unique operational challenges and resource constraints faced by SMEs, which require tailored leadership and human capital strategies. Additionally, the majority of studies examining talent management have emphasized components such as talent acquisition, talent development, and talent retention (See Sembiring & Damayanti, 2023; Kimiti et al. 2024), while often neglecting the crucial role of career management in sustaining leadership pipelines and employee engagement. The limited empirical evidence on how a holistic approach to talent management—including career management—can influence effective leadership in SMEs, especially within the context of Kaduna State, underscores the need for this study.

Research Objectives

The major objective of the study is to assess the effect of talent management on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state. The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the effect of talent acquisition on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.
2. Examine if there is a significant relationship between talent development and effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.
3. Evaluate whether talent retention has a significant effect on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.
4. Examine if there is there a significant relationship between career management and effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The Resource Based View of the Firm

Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney (1991) improved the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, which provides a strategic framework for comprehending how firms can gain and maintain competitive advantage by utilising internal resources that are valuable, rare, unique, and non-substitutable (VRIN). This study views talent management as a strategic internal resource that includes career management, talent development, talent acquisition, and retention.

Building leadership capacity is greatly aided by these human capital practices, especially in settings with limited resources, such as Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (Barney, 1991).

This study is supported by RBV theory, which highlights that SMEs can attain effective leadership by strategically managing their internal talent assets as well as by investing in external factors. Talent management becomes a crucial skill for maintaining organisational performance and leadership continuity in light of the competitive difficulties and high employee turnover that SMEs frequently face, particularly in areas like Kaduna State (Uzoechi & Udu, 2021). The best use of these internal resources—leaders who are developed, nurtured, and retained through intentional talent strategies—leads to effective leadership (Kehinde, 2012).

The inclusion of career management, a factor that has frequently been overlooked in earlier research, further supports the RBV's focus on creating distinctive internal capabilities that can set SMEs apart from their rivals (Obisi & Odewale, 2019). Therefore, the RBV offers a robust theoretical framework for examining the ways in which comprehensive talent management practices can impact the efficacy of leadership in the SME sector.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership

Effective leadership is the ability of an individual or group to influence, guide, and inspire others toward the achievement of organizational goals with efficiency, adaptability, and ethical consideration. It encompasses various competencies such as strategic thinking, communication, decision-making, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to motivate and develop others (Danişman et al., 2015). In the context of SMEs, effective leadership is particularly vital due to limited resources and the dynamic nature of the business environment. Leaders in SMEs must be agile, innovative, and people-oriented to navigate uncertainties and sustain growth (Puni, et al., 2014). Research has shown that effective leadership positively influences employee performance, organizational commitment, and innovation (Leite & Rua, 2022). Moreover, leadership that fosters participation, trust, and vision significantly contributes to building resilient and competitive organizations (Shinde & Giri, 2025). As such, leadership effectiveness in SMEs is not only a managerial attribute but a strategic asset essential for long-term viability and success.

Talent Management

Talent management refers to the strategic process of attracting, developing, and retaining individuals with high potential and critical skills to meet current and future organizational needs. It is designed to enhance workforce capabilities, align employee potential with business objectives, and ensure a sustainable pipeline of leadership and expertise (Dalahmeh, 2020). In today's competitive and knowledge-driven economy, talent management has become a central component of organizational success, enabling firms to respond to market changes and drive innovation (Lewis & Heckman, 2022). Effective talent management is thus essential for building organizational resilience and achieving long-term performance.

Dimensions of Talent Management

Talent Acquisition

Talent acquisition is the strategic process of identifying, attracting, and selecting individuals with the necessary skills, qualifications, and cultural fit to meet organizational goals. It goes beyond traditional recruitment by focusing on long-term human capital needs and aligning hiring practices with the organization's strategic vision (Praba, 2023). Effective talent acquisition ensures that businesses, including SMEs, have access to high-quality talent capable of driving innovation and sustaining competitive advantage (Xulu & Parumasur, 2023). This process often involves employer branding, workforce planning, and the use of technology to identify top candidates, making it a critical component of overall talent management strategies.

Talent Development

Talent development refers to the systematic process of enhancing employees' skills, knowledge, and competencies to improve their performance and prepare them for future leadership roles. It involves activities such as training, coaching, mentoring, and continuous learning aimed at unlocking individual potential and aligning it with organizational goals (Garavan et al. 2012). In SMEs, where resource constraints may limit external recruitment, developing internal talent becomes especially crucial for sustaining growth and competitiveness (Balcerzyk & Materac, 2019). Effective talent development fosters employee engagement, boosts productivity, and ensures leadership continuity, thereby contributing significantly to organizational resilience and long-term success.

Talent Retention

Talent retention refers to the strategies and practices organizations use to prevent the loss of valuable employees and maintain a stable, skilled workforce. It involves creating a supportive work environment, offering competitive compensation, recognizing employee contributions, and providing opportunities for growth and career advancement (Isfahani & Boustani, 2014). For SMEs, retaining top talent is especially critical due to limited resources and the high cost of turnover. Effective talent retention not only enhances employee satisfaction and loyalty but also ensures continuity, reduces recruitment costs, and preserves institutional knowledge—factors that are essential for long-term organizational performance and leadership stability (Almashyakhi, 2024).

Career Management

Career management refers to the ongoing process through which individuals and organizations jointly plan, guide, and support employees' career paths in alignment with both personal aspirations and organizational objectives. It includes activities such as career planning, mentoring, succession planning, and providing clear advancement opportunities (De Vos & Dries, 2013). In SMEs, effective career management fosters employee motivation, engagement, and loyalty by showing a clear trajectory for growth and development (King, 2024). When employees perceive that their careers are being actively managed, they are more likely to remain committed and prepared to take on leadership roles, thereby contributing to long-term organizational sustainability and success.

Empirical Review

Recent empirical studies have highlighted the growing importance of talent management in enhancing organizational performance, particularly in dynamic and competitive business environments. For instance, Okoye and Ezejiofor (2021) found that talent acquisition, development, and retention significantly influenced employee productivity and operational efficiency in selected Nigerian firms. Similarly, Akinbowale et al. (2020) reported that talent

development practices had a direct effect on leadership effectiveness and employee engagement in medium-sized enterprises. Ojo and Salau (2022) also emphasized that organizations that invest in structured talent retention strategies experience greater workforce stability and improved leadership succession. Despite these findings, most existing studies have primarily focused on large corporations and multinational firms, with minimal emphasis on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which face unique talent-related challenges such as limited resources and higher staff turnover.

Additionally, while studies have explored the link between talent management and firm performance, few have specifically examined its effect on leadership effectiveness—a critical driver of SME sustainability (Yahaya & Alhassan, 2020). Moreover, a significant number of studies narrowly define talent management by focusing mainly on talent acquisition, development, and retention, often neglecting the role of career management as a strategic element (Obisi & Odewale, 2019; Uzoechi & Udu, 2021). This gap is particularly relevant in regions like Kaduna State, where SMEs require robust internal leadership structures to navigate socio-economic challenges. Therefore, there is a need for more context-specific research that adopts a holistic view of talent management and investigates its direct influence on leadership effectiveness within SMEs in Nigeria.

Research Model

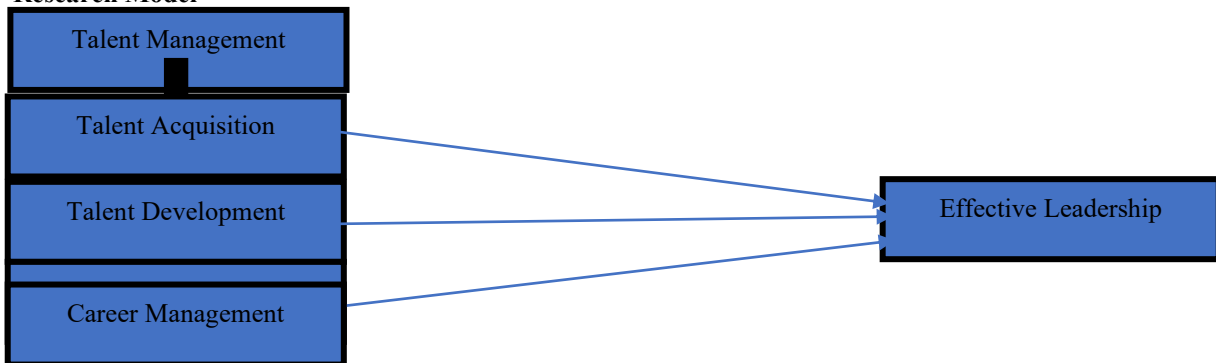


Figure 1: Research Model

Based on the theoretical framework of the study, the empirical review and the research model, the study hypothesized that:

- H₁: Talent acquisition has a significant effect on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.
- H₂: Talent development has a significant effect on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.
- H₃: Talent retention has a significant effect on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.
- H₄: Career Management has a significant effect on effective leadership of SMEs in Kaduna state.

Materials and Method

Because of limitations that made a longitudinal approach impracticable, this study used a cross-sectional research design. According to Kothari and Garg (2014), longitudinal studies necessitate longer time periods, which renders them less appropriate in situations where time and financial constraints are present. Because of its effectiveness and usefulness, a cross-sectional survey was chosen, in accordance with the resource considerations mentioned by Sekaran and Bougie (2010).

Small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in Kaduna State were the main focus of the study. There are roughly 6,000 SMEs in the area, according to the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN, 2021). Using Dilman's (2000) sample size calculation formula, a sample of 350 SMEs was selected from this population. To guarantee impartial representation, participants were chosen using a straightforward random sampling procedure. SME owner-managers were the study's main respondents, and structured questionnaires were used to collect data from them.

The items on the questionnaire were modified from well-known tools that were employed in earlier studies. In particular, six items from the Human Capital Institute (2008) were used to gauge talent attraction, five items evaluated talent development, and six more items evaluated talent retention. To verify the precision and consistency of the measuring tools, validity and reliability tests were carried out before analysis. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were used as indicators; AVE values of 0.5 and above and CR values of 0.7 and above were deemed appropriate (Garson, 2016). The null hypothesis was rejected if the p-value was less than 0.05, and it was accepted if it was equal to or greater than 0.05. The tests were conducted at a 5% significance level.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows that all constructs—talent acquisition, talent development, talent retention, and effective leadership—met the required thresholds for reliability and validity, with AVE values above 0.5 and CR values above 0.7. Item loadings ranged from 0.774 to 0.921, indicating strong indicator reliability. Although TA4, TD1, and EL4 were excluded due to poor loadings, no other items were deleted as all retained items satisfied the measurement criteria.

Table 1: Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Talent Acquisition	TA1	0.921	0.785	0.908
	TA2	0.873		
	TA3	0.862		
Talent Development	TD2	0.781	0.686	0.785
	TD3	0.895		
	TD4	0.804		
Talent Retention	TR1	0.774	0.696	0.892
	TR2	0.905		
	TR3	0.819		
Effective Leadership	EL1	0.883	0.784	0.863
	EL2	0.893		
	EL3	0.880		
Career Management	CM2	0.838	0.727	0.812
	CM3	0.900		
	CM4	0.819		

NOTE: No items were deleted from the data set, as they all met the minimum requirements. AVE stands for Average Variance Extracted while CR represents Composite Reliability. TA4, TD1, CM1 and EL4 were deleted to poor item loadings.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity using Heterotrait-monotrait Ratio

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Career Management					
2. Effective Leadership	0.717				
3. Talent Attraction	0.220	0.361			
4. Talent Development	0.580	0.399	0.365		

The study found that talent acquisition significantly influences effective leadership in SMEs in Kaduna State. This result aligns with findings by Okoye and Ezejiofor (2021), who reported that attracting the right talent enhances organizational leadership and performance. The significance of this relationship may stem from the fact that effective leadership begins with having the right people in key positions. SMEs that adopt strategic recruitment processes are more likely to engage individuals with the potential to lead and drive innovation. In resource-constrained environments like Kaduna, the quality of initial hires plays a critical role in shaping the leadership pipeline. Furthermore, targeted talent acquisition helps SMEs align employee competencies with strategic goals, improving decision-making and team management. This supports the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasizes the role of valuable and rare human resources in achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Thus, hiring the right people enhances leadership capacity in SMEs.

H2: Talent Development and Effective Leadership

The finding that talent development does not significantly affect effective leadership in Kaduna-based SMEs contradicts several earlier studies. For instance, Akinbowale et al., (2020) found a positive link between employee development programs and leadership outcomes. However, this inconsistency may be attributed to the limited investment in formal training and development among SMEs in the study area, possibly due to financial constraints or a lack of structured HR systems. Many SMEs in Kaduna may not prioritize systematic development plans, instead relying on informal, on-the-job learning, which may not be sufficient to cultivate leadership potential. Additionally, where training exists, it might not be targeted toward leadership skills or long-term growth, thereby limiting its impact. The ineffectiveness of development initiatives could also stem from poor implementation or lack of alignment with broader organizational goals. This result suggests a need for SMEs to design intentional talent development programs that are strategically linked to leadership growth.

H3: Talent Retention and Effective Leadership

Talent retention was not found to have a significant effect on effective leadership in SMEs in Kaduna State. This contradicts findings by Ojo and Salau (2022), who emphasized the importance of retaining experienced employees for leadership continuity. One possible explanation for this result is the high employee turnover rate typically observed in Nigerian SMEs, where limited career growth, job insecurity, and poor working conditions may weaken employee loyalty. Even when SMEs succeed in retaining employees, they may not provide the necessary leadership exposure or development opportunities to nurture leadership qualities. In some cases, employees may stay due to a lack of alternatives rather than a commitment to the organization's vision, which limits their contribution to leadership. This suggests that retention alone, without meaningful engagement and development, may not translate into effective leadership. SMEs must therefore go beyond merely keeping employees—they must create an enabling environment that empowers them to grow into leadership roles.

H4: Career Management and Effective Leadership

Career management showed a strong and significant effect on effective leadership in the study. This finding supports the work of King (2004), who emphasized that well-structured career planning fosters leadership growth and organizational commitment. In Kaduna-based SMEs, employees who perceive clear pathways for advancement are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and prepared for leadership responsibilities. The strategic alignment of

career goals with organizational objectives helps SMEs identify and groom future leaders from within. This result also validates the inclusion of career management as a core component of talent management, which has often been overlooked in previous studies (Uzoечи & Udu, 2021). Effective career management enables SMEs to maximize internal talent by offering mentoring, succession planning, and performance feedback systems. Such practices build trust and enhance leadership readiness. This supports the RBV theory by highlighting the importance of internally developed human capital as a source of sustained competitive advantage in small business environments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

Hence, the study concludes that talent acquisition and career management are positive and significant predictors of effective leadership in SMES based in Kaduna state. On the other hand, it is concluded that talent development and talent retention do not significantly predict effective leadership in Kaduna SMEs. Based on this, the study recommends that SME owners and managers in Kaduna State invest more in structured talent acquisition processes to attract individuals with leadership potential. Recruitment strategies should prioritize candidates with both technical and soft leadership skills. Given the strong impact of career management, SMEs should establish clear career paths, mentoring programs, and succession planning to motivate employees and enhance leadership capacity. While talent development and retention were not statistically significant, SMEs are encouraged to reassess their training programs and create more engaging work environments to ensure these practices yield leadership benefits. Policymakers and SME development agencies should provide HR support and training initiatives to help SMEs build internal leadership capacity.

Future research should explore how contextual factors such as organizational culture, leadership style, or industry type may moderate the relationship between talent management and effective leadership. In addition, longitudinal studies are recommended to better capture long-term effects of talent practices. Lastly, future studies should incorporate qualitative approaches to understand employee perspectives on career management and leadership development in SMEs.

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