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Effect of Training on Employee Engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises in Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study examines the effect of training on employee engagement among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Niger State, Nigeria. Guided by the Human Capital Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the research employed a survey design to assess the relationship between training and employee engagement. Adopting a survey research design, the study collected primary data using structured questionnaire administered to 435 randomly selected owners and managers of SMEs in Niger State. The data were analysed using regression techniques to determine the statistical significance of training on employee engagement. Findings revealed a strong positive relationship between training and employee engagement, with training accounting for 52.2% of the variance in engagement levels. The results revealed that training initiatives such as regular participation, employee improvement, active engagement, task enhancement, and motivation significantly influence engagement outcomes. The study concludes that continuous and targeted training enhances employees' engagement in SMEs. It recommends that SMEs owners and managers should adopt consistent, technology-driven, and competitive training practices to sustain employee engagement and organisational growth.

Keywords: Training, Employee engagement, Small and Medium Enterprises, Human Capital.

1. Introduction

In today's dynamic business landscape, organisations increasingly recognize that their most valuable asset is their human capital. Employees' skills, knowledge, and attitudes are fundamental drivers of organisational success, influencing productivity, innovation, and competitiveness. As a result, training and development have become vital strategies for enhancing employee capability, engagement, and commitment. Employee engagement, in particular, has gained global prominence as a major determinant of organisational performance, reflecting the degree to which employees are emotionally invested in their work and motivated to contribute beyond basic job requirements (Alkali et al 2025).

Despite this growing recognition, many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria continue to experience low levels of employee engagement, a challenge often linked to inadequate training, poor motivation, and limited development

opportunities (Otokiti et al, 2022). Unlike large corporations with structured human capital management systems and dedicated training budgets, most SMEs in Niger State operate with informal or non-existent training programs. Consequently, their employees are frequently ill-equipped to meet emerging business challenges such as technological advancement, market competition, and evolving customer demands (Oziegbe et al, 2022).

Although prior studies in Nigeria have examined the relationship between training and employee engagement, most focus on large organisations or public institutions, leaving a clear empirical gap concerning SMEs, particularly those in Niger State. Addressing this gap is crucial, as the sustainability and competitiveness of SMEs depend heavily on how effectively they develop and engage their workforce.

Training serves as a systematic approach to improving employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet both current and future job demands. It also plays a critical role in enhancing motivation and job satisfaction (Huang, 2019). Scholars such as Khayinga (2018) and Al Karim (2024) argue that targeted and continuous training fosters employee productivity, creativity, and commitment. Hence, organisations that invest consistently in training are more likely to sustain high levels of employee engagement and adaptability in an ever-changing business environment.

SMEs play a central role in economic development worldwide, contributing significantly to employment generation, innovation, and poverty reduction (Abisuga-Oyekunle et al., 2020). In Nigeria, SMEs account for over 90% of businesses and provide substantial industrial employment (Etuk et al., 2014). However, their contribution is often undermined by persistent challenges such as limited access to finance, technology, and skilled human capital. Many SMEs, particularly in Niger State, operate under resource constraints and may not prioritise employee development as a strategic imperative.

In such a context, ensuring employee engagement through effective training initiatives becomes a cornerstone of sustainable performance. A committed and well-trained workforce enables SMEs to improve innovation, reduce turnover, and enhance overall productivity. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the effect of training on employee engagement among SMEs in Niger State, Nigeria, thereby filling the identified empirical gap and contributing to a better understanding of human capital development within the SME sector.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Small and Medium Enterprises

In the Nigerian context, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are defined as business entities with limited workforce size, asset value, and annual turnover, yet play a crucial role in national economic development. The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria **(**SMEDAN**)**, in collaboration with the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), classifies SMEs based on employment and asset criteria. According to them, small enterprises typically engage between 10 and 49 employees with assets ranging from ₦5 million to less than ₦50 million, while medium enterprises employ between 50 and 199 workers with assets between ₦50 million and less than ₦500 million (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). These enterprises are recognised as the backbone of Nigeria's private sector, contributing to job creation, poverty reduction, and industrial diversification (Abor & Quartey, 2010). Their flexible structures and adaptability enable them to operate across various sectors such as manufacturing, trade, and services, often within resource-constrained environments. However, the

definition and operational classification of SMEs in Nigeria are also influenced by sectoral policies and institutional frameworks governing enterprise development.

From an analytical standpoint, SMEs in Nigeria function as strategic drivers of inclusive and sustainable growth by integrating informal sector activities into the formal economy (Fodio & Yakura, 2024). They serve as engines of entrepreneurship and innovation, particularly in local economies where access to large-scale industrial opportunities is limited. Nevertheless, Nigerian SMEs face systemic challenges such as inadequate access to finance, weak infrastructure, and limited managerial competence, which hinder scalability and competitiveness (Olawale & Garwe, 2010). Their operational effectiveness is also shaped by the regulatory environment, government support programmes, and financial inclusion initiatives targeting enterprise development (Osotimehin et al., 2012). Hence, the Nigerian conceptualisation of SMEs is both quantitative as defined by measurable economic indicators, and qualitative, by reflecting the structural realities of the nation's business landscape.

2.1.2 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a significant non-financial indicator of performance, measuring the commitment and involvement of employees, which can be greatly enhanced through effective human capital development. This indicator measures the commitment and involvement of employees within the organisation. High levels of employee engagement correlate with improved productivity, lower turnover rates, and better customer service, ultimately driving performance and innovation. Employee engagement is critical to corporate performance, and there are numerous benefits to having engaged staff. Employee engagement has various benefits for organisational performance, including better team performance, enhanced employee productivity, higher retention rates, lower attrition, and decreased burnout (Mansor, et al, 2023). Engaged employees are passionate, motivated, and committed to their roles and the company's goals. Deepalakshmi (2024) stressed that engaged employees are willing to put in extra effort that is not required by their job description. They voluntarily contribute more, take on new challenges, and seek ways to improve their skills and the organisation's performance. Ibua (2021) opined that employees who are committed to the organisation will perform to achieve the organisation's goals and meet customer demands.

2.1.3 Training

Training is defined as a systematic approach to learning that develop individual, team, and organizational effectiveness through improving knowledge, developing skills, and bringing about attitudinal and behavioral changes, to perform tasks effectively and efficiently (Al Karim, 2019). Odunayo (2023) opined that training is the act of increasing the knowledge and skill of an employee for doing a particular job well. More so, Khayinga (2018) describes Training as a systematic growth of knowledge, attitude, and skills an individual need to work. Chika and Chike (2021) revealed that human capital development helps improve the performance of firms through the training of employees for greater performance. Agbakwuru and Gbadero (2020) thought that the implementation of human capital development activities like training, development, and education contributes greatly to the competitiveness of an organization. Aruoren et al (2023) opined that employees become more efficient and productive when well-trained, which in turn will boost productivity and enhance performance.

Sampson et al. (2016) opined that training, seminars, workshops, and skill acquisition are the human capital development programs that are significantly related to the performance of employees. Anosa (2021) found that training and development have a significant influence on organizational productivity. Furthermore, Tagha et al., (2019) recommended that SMEs should use on-the-job training as the first form of training for the required knowledge, skills, and abilities for employees, which should be complemented with training from participating in workshops. Eyikorogha and Agullah (2021) in their opinion believe that staff training and development enhance effective human capital development as it is critical to ensuring the actualization of organizational goals. Chowdhury et al (2015) opined that training the learner to recognize relevant cues and associate them with desired responses.

In addition, Okoh et al. (2023), suggested that training and retraining of staff in the manufacturing sector enable them to acquire requisite skills and knowledge to enhance productivity and make provision of new technological equipment and training workers on new technologies. Udoudo et al. (2018) believe that manufacturing companies should promote human capital development by training employees in formal education, improving the skills of the employees through on-the-job and off-the-job training, and encouraging employee creativity by way of reward.

2.1.4 Training and Employee Engagement

Several recent empirical studies reaffirm the positive relationship between training and employee engagement in SMEs. Research in Malaysia, Lebanon, Czech Republic, and Nigeria have reported that structured training programmes, when aligned with organisational needs, significantly enhance employee skills, motivation, and commitment. For instance, Sannagy and Hassan (2023) found that training and development significantly improved employee performance through higher engagement levels in Malaysian manufacturing firms.

Research examining sectoral and geographic variations indicates that the effectiveness of training depends on alignment with the firm's strategic goals and the inclusion of on-the-job, practical elements. Studies of SMEs in Lebanon and the Czech Republic observed that SMEs that embed continuous, practical training show better knowledge transfer and employee engagement outcomes (Ramesh Kumar et al., 2022; Business Perspectives, 2021).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on two key theories that explain the relationship between training and employee engagement: Human Capital Theory and Social Exchange Theory.

2.2.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory (HCT) posits that investments in education, training, and development enhance individual productivity and, by extension, organizational performance (Becker, 1964). According to HCT, training is a key mechanism for augmenting employees' skills, knowledge, and competencies, thereby increasing their value to the organization. By investing in training, organizations can boost employee engagement in several ways. Training enhances employees' sense of competence and self-efficacy, leading to greater job satisfaction and motivation (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, training opportunities signal organizational investment in employees' growth, fostering affective commitment and reducing turnover intentions (Meyer & Allen, 1991). As employees acquire new skills, they become more adaptable and confident, leading to

increased participation and engagement in organizational activities (Saks, 2006).

2.2.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that relationships are based on exchanges of resources, where individuals weigh costs and benefits (Blau, 1964). In organizational contexts, employees exchange their efforts and loyalty for tangible and intangible rewards. Training, as a form of organizational investment, can enhance employee engagement by fostering a sense of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When organizations provide training opportunities, employees perceive this as a benefit, leading to increased commitment and engagement as they seek to reciprocate (Saks, 2006). Training demonstrates organizational support, strengthening the psychological contract and encouraging employees to invest discretionary effort (Eisenberger et al., 1986). By investing in employees' development, organizations signal value and trust, promoting a positive exchange relationship that boosts engagement.

Together, these theories establish the conceptual foundation for understanding how training interventions influence engagement and performance within small and medium enterprises.

Empirical Review

Ramadhany et al. (2020) investigated the impact of training and job satisfaction on employee engagement and performance among millennial employees at PT Midi Utama Indonesia Tbk in Makassar. The research utilized a quantitative approach, employing path analysis to examine the relationships between the variables. The sample consisted of 52 store employees from Alfa Midi, and data were collected through questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS. The study found that both training and job satisfaction significantly impact employee engagement. Furthermore, employee engagement was found to mediate the relationship between training, job satisfaction, and employee performance. This suggests that training and job satisfaction lead to higher employee engagement, which in turn enhances performance. However, the study's sample size of 52 participants is relatively small. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. A larger sample would provide more robust and reliable results. The study was conducted in a specific geographic location (Makassar, Indonesia), which may not represent the experiences and dynamics in other regions or countries. Also, it failed to state the actual statistical method used as the current study clearly stated the used of regression in SPSS.

Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2021) intensify this understanding investigating how Human Resource Management (HRM) practices influence the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), with a specific focus on the mediating role of employee engagement. The study employs a quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire distributed among employees of SMEs. Data were analysed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which allowed the authors to test both direct and indirect relationships between HRM practices, employee engagement, and SME performance. The findings revealed that Employee engagement partially mediates the relationship between HRM practices and performance, suggesting that engaged employees are a key mechanism through which HRM practices translate into better organisational outcomes. However, the generalizability of findings may be constrained by the geographic or sectoral focus of the sampled SMEs. Hence, the need for the current study.

Also, Ibua (2021) investigated the effect of employee engagement on the performance of small and medium-sized

enterprises (SMEs) in Mombasa County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive research design, stratified random sampling technique was used to select 105 SME operators, ensuring representation across different business sectors. The study utilised Pearson's product-moment correlation and multiple regression analysis to test hypotheses and determine the strength and nature of relationships between employee engagement and performance. The findings show that Employee engagement was positively correlated with SME performance, indicating that higher engagement levels are associated with better organisational outcomes. Aside the cross-sectional design that limits the generalizability of the outcome, it may not also remain the same when repeated in another country. Hence, the need for the current study.

In the same vein, Sannagy and Hassan (2023) investigate how training and development and employee engagement influence employee performance in medium-sized manufacturing enterprises (MMEs) in Malaysia. Data were collected via a comprehensive questionnaire from 280 randomly selected employees. Analysis conducted using SmartPLS 3.3.9 and PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling). The findings indicate that training and development have a significant impact on employee performance. Employee engagement also plays a crucial role in enhancing performance. However, the study is cross-sectional, limiting its applicability across different industries or over time. Hence, the need for the current study.

Moreover, Siswanto (2024) empirically investigated the impact of employee training, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment on employee performance within the tech industry. The research adopted a qualitative approach, specifically a literature review, to explore the intricate interplay between these factors. The study reviewed existing literature and synthesized findings from various sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The findings indicated that targeted and continuous employee training programs are essential for enhancing the skills and knowledge necessary for optimal job performance. Job satisfaction was found to significantly influence employee performance, with higher levels of satisfaction leading to better performance outcomes. Additionally, organisational commitment was identified as a crucial factor in driving employee performance, with committed employees demonstrating higher levels of productivity and engagement. However, the reliance on a qualitative literature review approach means that the findings are based on secondary data, which may not capture the nuances of primary empirical research. Additionally, the study does not provide specific details on the methodology of the reviewed studies, which could affect the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn. The lack of primary data collection also limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Furthermore, the study's focus on the tech industry may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sectors.

3. Methodology

This study employed a survey research design to systematically examine the relationship between training and employee engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Niger State, Nigeria. This method of design enables the researcher to assess the relationship between training and employee engagement through statistical analysis. The design allows for a comprehensive analysis of the variables under investigation and provides a detailed account of the current state of affairs. The

primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire that was administered to the randomly selected owners/managers of SMEs across the zone A local government areas of Niger State. The study focuses on the population of SMEs located in Zone A of Niger State not only because it consists of eight local government areas out of a total of twenty-five in the state, but it is also a zone with the highest number of registered SMEs in the state indicating a high level of contribution to the development of the state. The local government areas within Zone A include Agaie, Bida, Edati, Gbako, Katcha, Lapai, Lavun, and Mokwa. Therefore, the population of this study is thirty-one thousand, one hundred and twenty-four (31124) owners/managers of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in zone A that have so far registered with the Niger State Agency for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (Abubakar, 2022). To obtain a statistically acceptable sample size from the population of thirty-one thousand, one hundred and twenty-four (31124) Small and Medium Enterprises in Niger State, the Yamane (1967) formula with a 5% precision/error margin was applied. Since the population for this study is finite, this formula is chosen because it is simple and yields an accurate estimate of the sample size required to conduct an adequate research study. Additionally, adopting this formula improves the level of precision and confidence, reducing the risk associated with determining the actual sample size required for the study. Using the formula, we obtain the following:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}$$

Where n = Desired sample size
N = Population of the study
e = precision of sampling error (0.05)
Thus:
N = 31124
e = (0.05)

$$n = \frac{31124}{1+31124(0,05)^2} = \frac{31124}{1+31124(0.0025)} = \frac{31124}{1+77.81} = \frac{31124}{78.81} = 394.923 \text{ (Aprox 395)}$$

Using the Taro Yamane formula with a population size of 31124 and a margin of error of 5%, the required sample size is approximately 395.

Since it not possible to have a 100% valid response rate which has the potential to lower the sample size, researchers such as Abdullahi (2022) and Andrade (2020) suggested the addition of 10% to the actual sample size in order to cater for unreturned and invalid copies of questionnaire. This constitutes 39.5 and when added to the actual sample, it becomes 434.5 (435 approximately).

To ensure representation from various geographical locations within Zone A, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. The zone was divided into different strata based on the specific locations within it. From each stratum, a random sample was selected to capture a diverse range of participants from different areas. This approach aims to ensure a more comprehensive and representative sample for the study.

In the development of the research instrument, 3 items of 5 Likert scale item statement were structured for each of the proxies of training such as regular participation, improvement, active engagement, task enhancement, and motivation. This made up the 15 statements. As for the dependent variable, 5 items in 5 Likert were structured to indicate employees' engagement. After the development of the instrument, the face and content validity were done through the help of professionals in the field of management studies. This effort was later augmented with statistical method by using Cronbach's alpha to guarantee the measurement tool's reliability. The Cronbach's alpha result for the training is 0.726 and for the engagement is 0.724 making the tools reliable, since the result

of Cronbach's alpha is higher than 0.7. Administration of the instrument took almost three months with the aid of trained research assistants to cover the eight local government in the zone.

In order not to violate the ethical standard in when administering the questionnaire, the research sought for the permission from the chairman of each of the SMEs in each of the 8 local governments in the considered zone. Also, it was made known to them that the data supplied would be basically for research purpose and that their identities remained anonymous.

Research Model

The research model to empirically address the specific objectives of this study by examining the nature of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The effect of employee engagement of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is expressed as a function of training as follows:

$$Y_1 = \alpha + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + b_4x_4 + b_5x_5 + \varepsilon$$

Where:
Y = Employee engagement
X_1 = Regular participation
X_2 = Employees' improvement
X_3 = Active engagement
X_4 = Task enhancement
X_5 = High motivation

4. Results and Discussion

423 indicating 97.24% of 435(100%) copies of questionnaire administered were returned and considered valid for analysis. This suggests a reasonable number of the respondents with little or no response bias rate.

4.1 Hypothesis Testing

Regression analysis is employed in testing the hypotheses as follows.

Hypothesis I: There is no significant relationship between training and employee engagement of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Niger State, Nigeria. Ho_1:

Table 1: Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.723[a]	.522	.519	.26614	1.848

a. Predictors: (Constant), Regular participation, Employees' improvement, Active engagement, Task enhancement, High motivation
b. Dependent Variable: Employees' Engagement (DV1)
Source: *Field Survey, 2025.*

The Table 1 above is a model summary indicating the R value of 0.723, indicating the strength of the relationship to be 72.3%. The R-square value of 0.522 indicates that work Training proxies account for 52.2% of the variance in employees' engagement. This value is within the Durbin-Watson test values of 1.5 to 2.5, which shows that the variables are independent of each other.

Table 2: *ANOVA*[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	170.903	5	34.181	482.586	.000[b]
	Residual	29.606	418	.071		
	Total	200.509	423			

a. Dependent Variable: Employees' Engagement (DV1)
b. Predictors: (Constant), Regular participation, Employees' improvement, Active engagement, Task enhancement, High motivation.
Source: *Field Survey, 2025.*

The ANOVA results in Table 2 confirm that the regression model examining the effect of Training on Employees' Engagement is statistically significant. The regression sum of squares is 170.903, indicating the proportion of variation in Employees' Engagement explained by the predictors such as Regular participation, Employees' improvement, Active engagement, Task enhancement, and High motivation. The residual sum of squares is 29.606, representing the variation not accounted for by the model. The F-value of 482.586 with a p-value of less than 0.000 demonstrates that the Training proxies jointly and significantly explain variations in Employees' Engagement. This strong level of significance confirms that Training has a meaningful effect in building the Engagement of SMEs Employees in Niger State.

Table 3: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Std Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-.475	.096		-4.92	.000		
	Regular participation	.230	.018	.285	12.59	.000	.688	1.454
	Employees' improvement	.176	.017	.209	10.29	.000	.858	1.165
	Active engagement	.197	.017	.271	11.91	.000	.681	1.467
	Task enhancement	.298	.019	.335	15.55	.000	.762	1.312
	High motivation	.199	.019	.238	10.46	.000	.685	1.460

a. Dependent Variable: Employees' Engagement
Source: *Field Survey, 2025.*

The model from the table becomes:

$$Y_1 = \alpha + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + b_4x_4 + b_5x_5 + \varepsilon$$

$$E.Eng = -0.475 + 0.230RP + 0.176EI + 0.197AE + 0.298TE + 0.199HM + \varepsilon$$

The Table 3 above is a coefficient of variables where the constant value of -0.475 indicates that with or without training as captured in the study, Employees' Engagement of SMEs in Niger State would be at the decreasing level by 0.475. But however, with incorporation of Training via its proxies, a unit change in regular participation yields 0.230 unit of change in employee engagement provided other variables remain constant and this is significant at *t*-value of 12.59 > ±1.96 and p-value< 0.05 level of significance. Also, a unit change in Employees' improvement yields 0.176 unit of change in Employees' Engagement provided other variables

remain constant. This change is significant at *t*-value (10.29) > ±1.96 and p-value < 0.05 level of significance. Similarly, a unit change in Active engagement yields a 0.197 unit of change in Employees Engagement provided other variables remain constant. This rate of change is significant at *t*-value (11.91)> ±1.96 and p-value< 0.05 level of significance. More so, a unit change in Task enhancement stimulates 0.298 unit of change in Employees' Engagement provided other variables remain constant. This rate of change is significant at *t*-value (15.55)> ±1.96 and p-value < 0.05 level of significance. On the same vein, a unit change in High Motivation generates 0.199 units of change in Employees' Engagement provided other variables remain constant. This rate of change is significant at *t*-value (10.46)> ±1.96 and p-value < 0.05 level of significance. In addition to the identified parameters, the Table also displays the collinearity statistics involving tolerance value and variance inflationary factors (VIF) results for the Training's proxies in the model. A collinearity exists when tolerance value is less than 0.2 and VIF is greater than 10. But there is no multi-collinearity issues when the tolerance value is greater than 0.2 and VIF is below 10. In this analysis, all tolerance values are greater than 0.6 and VIFs are less than 10. Overall, consideration of the *t*-statics value of being greater than ±1.96 and *p*-value less than 0.05 across all the proxies of training leads to concluding that the null hypothesis is rejected and accepting the alternative that training has a significant effect on employees' engagement.

4.1.2 Discussion of Findings

Based on the findings of the study, the data collected were analysed, and a number of findings were arrived at and presented in line with their key implications.

The study found that Training has a significant effect on Employee engagement among the owners and managers of Small and Medium Enterprises in Niger State. This, however, necessitated the rejection of the null hypothesis as earlier stated and accepted the alternative hypothesis that training has significant effect on employees' engagement in Niger State. This finding implies that the more owners and managers of SMEs in Niger State adopt training practices, the better the engagement level of their employees. This finding implies that constant training is very instrumental to performance as it stimulates active engagement of both managers and owners of the SMEs in Niger State. This finding in line with the study of Siswanto (2024), who found that continuous employee training is essential for improving employee engagement to optimize job performance. This finding is also in tandem with that of Sannagy and Hassan (2023), who also noted that training and development have a significant impact on employee engagement.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings revealed that training had a significant positive influence on employee engagement. This supports the alternate hypothesis that access to relevant and continuous training improves employees' commitment, motivation, and involvement in organisational activities. SMEs that invested in training recorded higher levels of engagement and more effective performance, showing that training remains a crucial strategy for strengthening the human capital base of SMEs in Niger State. In line with the conclusion drawn, the recommendation is that the owners and managers of SMEs in Niger State should Strengthen Employee Training Programmes. Since training significantly improves employee engagement, SME owners should invest in continuous, structured training programmes tailored to operational needs. Government agencies

such as SMEDAN and the Niger State SME Development Agency should collaborate with training institutions to design affordable training modules for SMEs.

Limitations of the study

Despite this study achieved its objective, it important to understand that its generalization may suffer from certain limitations. This may include its focus on the eight local government areas that are found in zone A, while ignoring other local government in the state. Also, it focused on training as the main variable that influences employees' engagement may also limit the generalization of the finding since other moderating and mediating variables that could strengthen or weaken the same were not considered. Likewise, the outcome may not hold true among other states in the north central, Nigeria.

Suggestions for future research

Having identified the limitations, the generalization of the study may be improved extending the focus of the study to other zones in the state. Also, the effect of other indirect factors such as culture, leadership style, work environment, peer relationship among others may be examined on the employee's engagement. Likewise, there is need for the study to be conducted in other part of the states in the North Central, Nigeria for the outcome to hold true.

Theoretical contributions

This study extends Human Capital Theory and Social Exchange Theory to the SME context in Niger State, Nigeria, by empirically showing that training enhances employee engagement through increased competence, reciprocity, and perceived organizational support. Findings highlight the applicability of these theories in emerging economies, revealing training as a key driver of SMEs performance. Cultural and contextual factors (e.g., communal values, resource constraints) in Nigerian SMEs moderate the training-engagement link, enriching understanding of HCT and SET in non-Western settings.

Policy implications

Policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize investments in structured, continuous training programmes for SMEs in Niger State to boost employee engagement and performance. Government agencies like SMEDAN and Niger State SME Development Agency should collaborate with training institutions to design affordable, tailored training modules for SMEs.

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