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Motivating Employees Through Talent Management: Employee Engagement in SME Sustainability Across Internationalisation and Digitalisation

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ABSTRACT: Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a pillar of worldwide economic activity, but they are confronted with ongoing challenges to sustain competitive advantage in the face of rapid digitalization and mounting internationalization pressures. Such challenges are at the core of the ability of SME leaders to motivate employees, manage talent effectively and promote strong employee engagement, which are prerequisites for long-term organizational sustainability. This conceptual paper reviews the recent literature on talent management, employee motivation, leadership skills, organizational behavior, digitalization and internationalization in relation to sustainable performance of SMEs, based on a systematic review of the existing literature. In this paper, we propose an integrative theoretical framework that conceptualizes employee engagement as the critical mediating mechanism between talent management practices and SME sustainability outcomes. Results show that transformational leadership and ethical organizational behaviors strengthen the positive association between talent management and engagement. Digitalization is seen as a double-edged sword: an enabler of internationalization and a disruptor of existing HR practices. The paper ends with practical recommendations for SME managers, policy makers and HR practitioners and directions for future empirical research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for over 90% of businesses and over 50% of employment (ILO, 2023). SMEs are of economic importance but are disproportionately vulnerable to macro-environmental disruptions, resource constraints and talent attrition. In this era of accelerating digitalization and globalizing markets, SMEs face a double transformation: to embrace digital technologies to stay competitive and to embrace internationalization strategies to open up new markets (Hervé, Schmitt & Baldegger, 2020; Pergelova et al., 2024).

At the core of this change is the human element. Employees are not passive recipients of strategic change; they are active agents whose motivation, engagement and behavior determine whether organizational strategies succeed or fail (Sinisterra, Peñalver & Salanova, 2024). Talent management - as the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention and deployment of those individuals with the potential to create value for the organization - has become a critical lever for SME sustainability.

But the academic literature is missing something important. There is research on the talent management – engagement nexus in large corporations, but its application within the resource-constrained, owner-managed context of SMEs, particularly as they internationalize and digitalize, is under-researched (Arraniri et al., 2025; Ametefe et al., 2025).

Moreover, the role of leadership skills and organizational behaviour as an enabling or constraining force in the relationship is under-theorised.

This paper seeks to address these gaps by answering three research questions: (1) How do talent management practices motivate employees and engage them in SMEs? (2) What is the role of leadership skills and organizational behaviour in digitalization and internationalization? (3) How does employee engagement mediate the talent management and SME sustainability relationship?

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

2.1 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) argues that people are intrinsically motivated when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within the SME context, talent management practices that provide developmental opportunities, clear career pathways, and social belonging directly cater to these needs, promoting intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement (Danarilia & Rosari, 2025; Shah et al., 2024).

2.2 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees have a reciprocal exchange relationship with their organizations. If the organization invests in their development through talent management initiatives, then the employees react with higher commitment, effort and performance – the core dimensions of employee engagement (Karim, Jebunnesa & Rabiul, 2025). This reciprocal dynamic is especially evident in SMEs, where interpersonal relationships are more direct and visible.

2.3 Resource-Based View (RBV)

In the Resource-Based View, organizational capabilities are seen as sources of sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Human capital – the knowledge, skills, motivation and engagement of employees – is a rare, valuable and non-substitutable resource in SMEs. Hence, talent management is not merely an HR function, but also a strategic capability for SME sustainability (Arraniri et al., 2025; Altamimi et al., 2019).

2.4 Upper Echelon Theory

The Upper Echelon Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) posits that organizational outcomes are a function of the top managers' cognitions, values and capabilities. In SMEs, where leadership is usually concentrated in a founder or a small management team, the owner-manager's leadership skills, digital competences and internationalization orientation are important in shaping organizational behavior, culture and the effectiveness of talent management practices (Velinov et al., 2020; Dióssy, 2025).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Employee Engagement: Conceptualisation and Dimensions

Employee engagement has been variously conceptualized as a psychological state (Kahn, 1990), a performance orientation (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and a motivational construct (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The most widely adopted definition describes engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that has vigor, dedication and absorption as its features (Schaufeli et al., 2002). In the sustainability literature, Khan et al. (2016) showed by means of social network analysis that engagement is among the closest associated constructs with sustainable organizational performance.

In the SME-specific context, Kazawa et al. (2022) used a cross-sectional study of 377 employees from three Japanese SMEs and found that individual health conditions, interpersonal relationships, and perceived organizational support were the most important determinants of work engagement. Putra (2024) conducted a bibliometric analysis of engagement research in Indonesian SMEs (2020–2024), finding digital transformation and innovation as emerging research themes reshaping the engagement landscape.

3.2 Talent Management Practices in SMEs

Talent management is a range of practices such as talent attraction, identification, development, deployment and retention (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Shah et al. (2024) showed that talent identification, development, culture and retention positively and significantly impacted both employee satisfaction and organizational performance in 403 respondents from Pakistani universities. Crucially, employee satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between most talent management practices and performance outcomes.

Widodo and Nurhayati (2024) discovered that talent management had a positive and significant effect on employee engagement mediated by intrinsic motivation. However, job rotation was found to have a negative effect on engagement, which is an important implication as job rotation is a commonly employed talent management tool in SMEs. Therefore, the sequencing and communication of talent management interventions is critical.

In a PRISMA-guided systematic review of 43 studies, Sinisterra et al. (2024) confirmed that talent management practices consistently increase employee engagement and decrease turnover intention. Karim et al. (2025) further showed that perceived supervisor and organizational support mediate the relationship between talent management and work engagement, which in turn positively affects sustainable organizational performance.

3.3 Motivation and Organisational Behaviour

Motivation theory is the psychological structure that helps explain why talent management interventions are successful or not. The first motivation theories were Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), followed by Herzberg's two-factor theory (1959) and Vroom's expectancy theory (1964). Danarilia and Rosari (2025) questioned the traditional assumptions about intrinsic motivation and discovered that in collectivist cultures, the alignment of compensation with workload and company regulation was a more significant predictor of job satisfaction than intrinsic motivation itself.

According to Wahyudi et al. (2024), work motivation and job satisfaction had significant effects on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and employee performance. In line with Rukumpur et al. (2026) who find that ethical leadership cultures directly reduce employee turnover, enhance CSR credibility and foster engagement in their analysis of Indian SMEs, Paulienė et al. (2024) found that organizational culture significantly moderated the relationship between structural conditions and motivational outcomes.

3.4 Leadership Skills and SME Performance

High performance, innovation and sustainability in SMEs were most consistently linked to transformational leadership, according to a synthesis of 32 studies by Ametefe et al. (2025). Democratic leadership enabled innovation, but slowed decision-making Autocratic leadership enabled fast responses, but limited engagement. Transformational leadership had a positive impact on work engagement and job satisfaction but had a negative impact on turnover intention (Thahrim, Amarullah, and Damayanti, 2025).

In the digital context, Liversage and Belitski (2019) studied e-leadership in SMEs in developing countries, noting that digital leadership skills are increasingly important. Dióssy (2025) found that digital transformation mediates the link between leadership styles and operational performance in SMEs.

3.5 Digitalisation and Employee Engagement

Apostoaie et al. (2025) studied the intention to adopt AI in Romanian SMEs and identified the lack of digital skills of employees as the most important barrier, emphasizing the crucial link between talent management, upskilling and digital engagement. Dong et al. (2023) used longitudinal data from Dutch SMEs to show that the performance benefits of digitalization were strongest for organizations with a radical change orientation.

3.6 Internationalisation, Digitalisation, and SME Sustainability

According to Hervé, Schmitt and Baldegger (2020), digital technologies enable SMEs to enter new markets, decrease transaction costs, and build ecosystem relationships. Pergelova et al. (2024) systematically documented the role of digital technologies in SME sustainability via employment creation, poverty reduction and human wellbeing. In the setting of Palestinian SMEs, Ying and Allaqtta (2025) showed that sustainability practices have a positive and significant effect on business performance, and employee engagement is a strong mediating variable.

Table 1: Summary of Key Literature on Talent Management, Engagement, and SME Sustainability

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Key Findings	Relevance
Sinisterra et al. (2024)	TM, Engagement, Turnover - Systematic Review (43 studies)	TM increases engagement; engagement mediates TM–turnover	Core TM-engagement link
Karim et al. (2025)	TM, Work Engagement, Sustainable Performance - Bangladesh	Supervisor/org support mediates TM–engagement; engagement drives sustainability	Sustainability mediation
Ametefe et al. (2025)	Leadership styles and SME performance - 32 studies	Transformational leadership most effective; flexible styles recommended	Leadership skills in SMEs
Shah et al. (2024)	TM practices, satisfaction, performance - Pakistan	TM dimensions impact performance via satisfaction	TM dimensions
Ying & Allaqtta (2025)	Safety culture, sustainability, engagement - Palestinian SMEs	Employee engagement mediates sustainability → business performance	Engagement mediation
Rukumpur et al. (2026)	Ethical leadership, engagement, CSR - Indian SMEs	Ethical leadership bridges CSR and engagement; reduces turnover	Ethics and leadership

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Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Key Findings	Relevance
Arraniri et al. (2025)	Talent practices, knowledge sharing, green innovation - SMEs	Talent practices mediate knowledge sharing → engagement → green innovation	TM and sustainability
Hervé et al. (2020)	Digitalisation and internationalisation of SMEs	Digital technologies enable SMEs to access new markets	Digitalisation-internationalisation nexus
Pergelova et al. (2024)	Digital technologies and SME sustainability	Digital tech contributes to sustainable growth, employment, and wellbeing	Digitalisation-sustainability
Thahrim et al. (2025)	Transformational leadership, engagement, turnover - SMEs	TL positively affects engagement; both reduce turnover intention	Leadership-engagement-retention

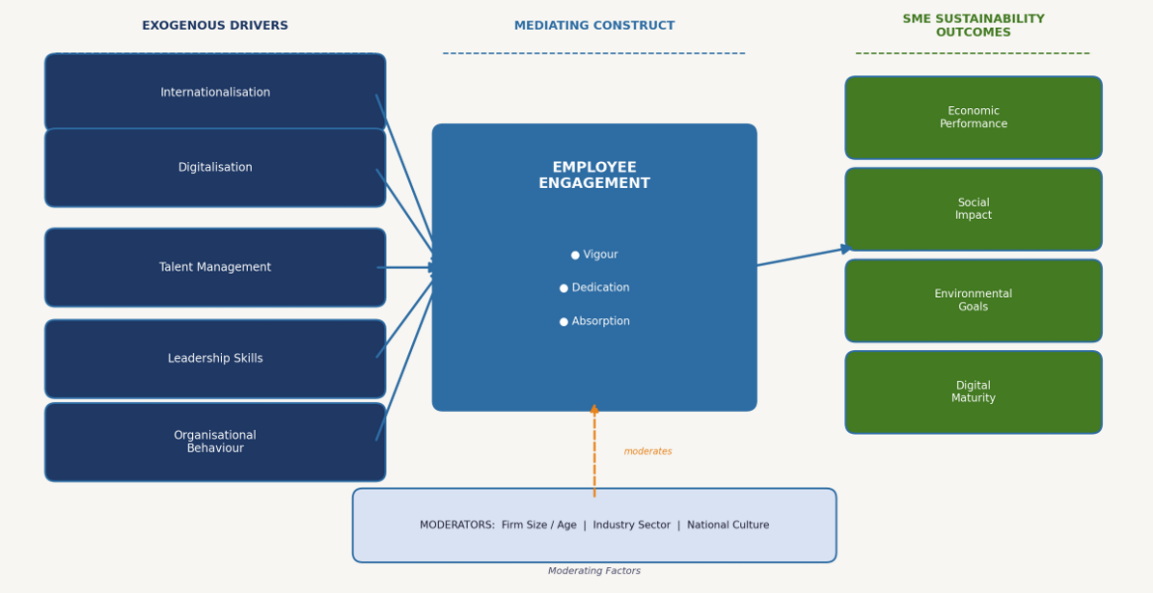


Figure 1: Conceptual Research Framework - Employee Engagement as Mediator of SME Sustainability

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

This paper draws on SDT, SET, RBV and Upper Echelon Theory, as well as the empirical literature reviewed in Section 3, to propose an integrative conceptual framework (see Figure 1 above). The framework views employee engagement as the critical mediating mechanism between the set of exogenous drivers - talent management, leadership skills, organizational behaviour, digitalization, and internationalization - and SME sustainability outcomes.

4.1 The Talent Management–Engagement–Sustainability Chain

Proposition 1: Talent management practices have a positive effect on employee engagement, which mediates the relationship between talent management and SME sustainability outcomes (Sinisterra et al., 2024; Karim et al., 2025; Ying & Allaqtta, 2025).

4.2 Leadership Skills as Amplifiers

Proposition 2: Leadership skills moderate the relationship between talent management and employee engagement, with transformational and ethical leadership enhancing the positive effect (Ametefe et al., 2025; Rukumpur et al., 2026).

4.3 Organisational Behaviour as Contextual Moderator

Proposition 3: Organizational behavior moderates the relationship between engagement and sustainability, such that participatory and ethical cultures amplify the positive impact of engagement on sustainable performance (Kaluba & Chasha, 2025; Dong et al., 2023).

4.4 Digitalisation as Catalyst and Disruptor

Proposition 4: Digitalization positively moderates the TM–engagement relationship when it is supported by digital upskilling initiatives but unmanaged digital disruption has a negative effect on engagement (Apostoaie et al., 2025; Gonzalez-Varona et al., 2024).

4.5 Internationalisation and Talent Complexity

Proposition 5: The internationalization of a business increases the strategic importance of talent management for employee engagement, at the same time increasing the complexity of its implementation (Hervé et al., 2020; Arrasvuori et al., 2022).

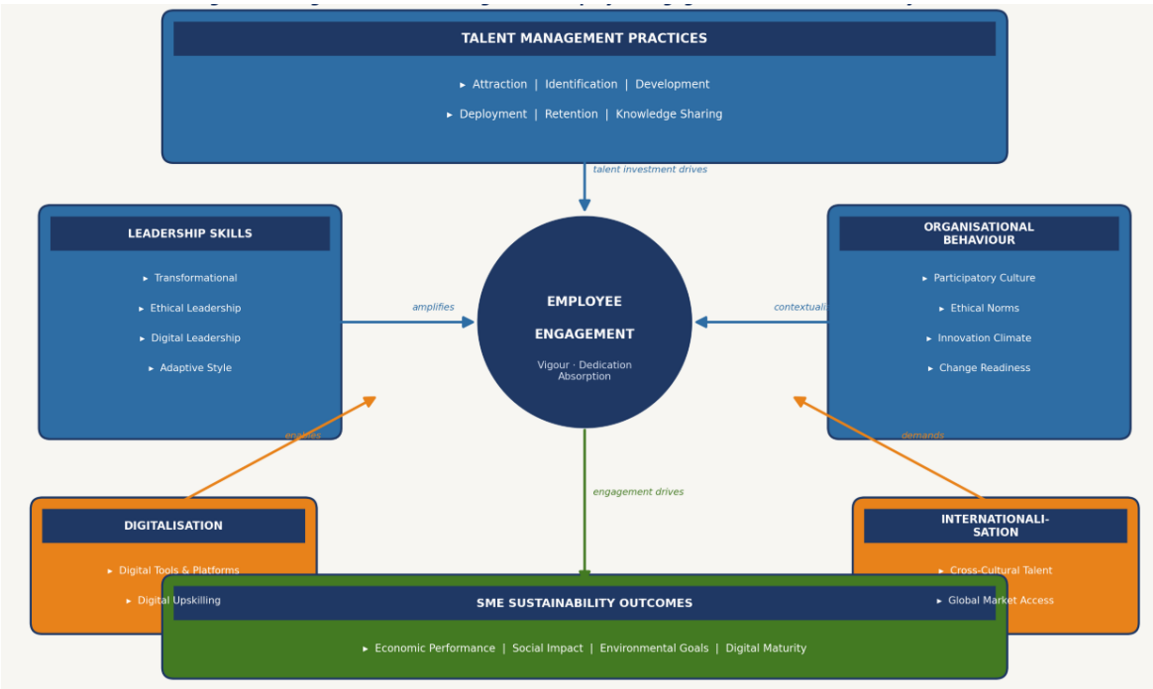


Figure 2: Integrative Talent Management–Employee Engagement–SME Sustainability Model

Table 2: Talent Management Strategies for SME Employee Engagement

TM Practice	Engagement Mechanism	Digital Enhancement	Internationalisation Relevance
Talent Identification	Clarity of career pathway; recognition	AI-driven talent analytics	Cross-border competency mapping
Training & Development	Autonomy and competence needs (SDT)	E-learning platforms; micro-credentials	Cross-cultural leadership development
Compensation & Rewards	Equity and expectancy fulfilment	Real-time performance dashboards	Global benchmarking and pay equity
Career Management	Relatedness and long-term commitment	Digital career portals	International assignment management
Leadership Development	Role modelling; psychological safety	Virtual coaching and mentoring	Global leadership pipeline
Knowledge Sharing	Collaborative engagement; innovation	Intranet and collaboration tools	Cross-cultural knowledge transfer
Retention & Wellbeing	Trust, belonging, and reduced burnout	Wellbeing apps; pulse survey tools	Retention of international talent

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Talent Management as a Strategic Enabler

The surveyed literature is convergent in one consistent observation: talent management is not just a support function but a strategic enabler of SME sustainability. The evidence from Karim et al. (2025), Shah et al. (2024) and Sinisterra et al. (2024) taken together show that well-designed talent management systems fuel employee engagement, which in turn sustains performance along economic, social and environmental dimensions. This is particularly the case for SMEs, that are

not blessed with economies of scale or large HR budgets to attract talent – and thus the quality of talent management is a real differentiator (Arraniri et al., 2025).

5.2 Leadership Skills: The Critical Amplifier

A common theme is the disproportionate influence of individual leaders in SME contexts (Ametefe et al., 2025; Rukumpur et al., 2026; Dióssy, 2025). Transparency, developmental orientation and adaptive digital competence are the defining characteristics of positive leadership. Positive leadership creates virtuous cycles where talent investment creates engagement, which in turn reinforces sustainability, which in turn justifies further talent investment. Therefore, SME leadership development programs should not only develop technical skills but also ethical foundations, digital capabilities and interpersonal competences (Hage et al., 2021; Liversage & Belitski, 2019).

5.3 Digitalisation: Navigating Opportunity and Risk

SMEs are able to utilize robust tools to enhance the efficiency of talent management through digital technologies; for example, AI-powered talent analytics can help identify high-potential employees, e-learning platforms can democratize access to development, and digital performance management systems can facilitate real-time feedback that sustains engagement (Gonzalez-Varona et al., 2024). However, role ambiguity, fear of redundancy through automation and cognitive overload can induce disengagement. The message is clear: digitalization needs to be managed as an organizational change process and employee engagement needs to be put explicitly at its center (Dong et al., 2023; Putra, 2024).

5.4 Internationalisation and the Talent Complexity Challenge

The complexity of talent management increases significantly with the internationalization of SMEs (Hervé et al., 2020; Westerlund, 2020). International employees' cross-cultural competences and adaptive capacity have to be purposefully developed through specific talent management practices. Pergelova et al. (2024) demonstrated that digital technologies can help to overcome these challenges, at least partially, by enabling virtual teams to collaborate and share knowledge across borders. However, Arrasvuori et al. (2022) warned that face-to-face leadership and embedded relational trust are still critical to maintain engagement in international SME teams.

Table 3: SME Sustainability Dimensions and Employee Engagement Linkages

Sustainability Dimension	Key Indicators	Engagement Linkage	Supporting Evidence
Economic Sustainability	Revenue growth; productivity; profitability	Engaged employees drive innovation and productivity	Karim et al. (2025); Shah et al. (2024)
Social Sustainability	Employee wellbeing; turnover rates; safety	Engagement reduces turnover; improves wellbeing	Ying & Allaqtta (2025); Thahrim et al. (2025)
Environmental Sustainability	Carbon footprint; green innovation; SDG alignment	Engaged employees adopt pro-environmental behaviours	Arraniri et al. (2025); Gahir et al. (2024)
Digital Sustainability	Digital maturity; technology adoption; digital skills	Engagement facilitates digital transformation	Dong et al. (2023); Apostoaie et al. (2025)
International Sustainability	Export growth; cross-cultural performance	Engaged employees build relational capital globally	Pergelova et al. (2024); Arrasvuori et al. (2022)

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Figure 3: SME Digitalisation–Engagement Impact Matrix (Adapted from Dong et al., 2023; Putra, 2024)

6. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 For SME Owner-Managers and Leaders

SME leaders should be investing in structured talent management systems that are not limited to informal HR practices. Specifically, leaders are advised to: (1) perform routine talent audits to pinpoint high-potential employees and succession risks; (2) create personalized development plans tailored to individual aspirations; (3) implement transparent, values-based reward and recognition systems; and (4) exemplify the behaviors - curiosity, adaptability, ethical integrity - that uphold engagement amidst digital and international change (Shah et al., 2024; Rukumpur et al., 2026).

6.2 For HR Practitioners

Given the usual constraints on resources for SMEs, HR practitioners should concentrate on high-leverage interventions, such as mentoring programs, exposure to cross-functional projects, digital upskilling pathways and regular engagement surveys. Digital HR tools, such as AI-driven talent analytics, e-learning platforms and pulse survey technologies, offer cost-effective ways of scaling talent management practices (Gonzalez-Varona et al., 2024; Apostoaie et al., 2025).

6.3 For Policymakers and SME Support Organisations

Policy actions should target the development of digital leadership capabilities in SME owner-managers, affordable talent management technologies, and employee engagement metrics in SME sustainability reporting frameworks. The link between SME talent management practices and SDG targets - in particular, SDG 8 (Decent Work) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) - makes a compelling case for mobilizing public and private investment in SME human capital (Jimenez et al., 2021; Pergelova et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This paper developed and articulated an integrative framework that positions employee engagement as the critical mediating mechanism for SME sustainability through talent management practices. The framework integrates insights from Self-Determination Theory, Social Exchange Theory, the Resource-Based View and Upper Echelon Theory with a comprehensive review of recent empirical evidence.

There are three primary findings. First of all, talent management is not a luxury of large corporations, but a strategic necessity for SMEs that aim at sustaining competitive advantage in digitalized, internationalized markets. Second, leadership skills, especially transformational, ethical and digital leadership, have an over-proportional impact in SME contexts and contribute to the positive effects of talent management on engagement and sustainability. Thirdly, digitalization and internationalization should not be seen as constraints on talent management, but as accelerators of its evolution.

Future research should empirically test the propositions advanced here through longitudinal and multi-country empirical studies with mixed methodologies. Special attention should be given to the moderating effects of national culture, industry sector and firm age in the relationship between talent management, engagement and sustainability. The digitalization of the SME landscape makes the integration of artificial intelligence into talent management processes an especially urgent frontier for research and practice alike.

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