

Training and Development Practices in Small and Medium Enterprises : Exploring A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Development of SMEs is crucial to almost all economies in the world, and especially to those with major employment and income distribution challenges. This sector contributes immensely to GDP, social cohesion, employment and local development. While most literature focuses on enabling external environment, little efforts focused on building internal capabilities, mainly training, the input facilitating firm performance by building employee competencies. Training provides learners with the knowledge and skills needed for their present job and nurtures the future potential of the human force to meet ever changing global requirements. The study intends to probe into the present scenario of HRD with special reference to training and development in small and medium enterprises thereby identifying gaps if any, to establish the need of further research in the area and present a suggestive framework towards progressive development of SMEs. The study found that the perception of employers and employees towards training needs to be revamped. Informal unstructured training planned on the basis of need generated at work place is adopted where focus on technical aspect is relatively more with minimal attention to generic essential skills which impact the attitudes and behavior of employees in the longer course of activities.

Keywords:

CII, Challenges of Training, KSA, OECD, Performance, Small and Medium Enterprises, Training and Development Practices.

Introduction

According to the statistics industrialized economies owe a major contribution from SMEs to private sector employment and gross domestic product. SMEs account for over 95 percent of enterprises and 60-70 percent of employment and generate a large share of jobs in many economies. The contribution of SMEs constitutes about 40 percent in this domain. Present day economies perform on a combined global front with varied technological changes reducing the importance of economies of scale in many activities, the result being increased potential contribution of smaller firms. Similarly the effect of specialization and intense division of labor generates the need of smaller units that act as a feeder to larger giants. Having understood the vital importance of this sector the governments across the globe are making successful efforts to develop this vital sector. There is a strong

conviction among policy makers that SMEs need support for their survival and growth particularly in education and training for building their internal capabilities (Manimala, 2002). Literature supports the undeclared importance of SMEs but still they close down easily due to lack of guidance, training, finance, marketing simultaneously searching niche markets while facing global challenges. As finance is a major issue with most SMEs, researchers suggests the banking institutions to extend specific loans for the purpose of training, the organizations may take the initiative proactively.

Governments across the world are focusing on training for SMEs to develop new avenues of employment generation, increased productivity and in the same way for employees to facilitate quick skill development and better standard of living. Research findings support the fact that government is taking initiative to design and implement programs which directly influence employee development and productivity (Patton, Marlow & Hannon, 2000; Latimore et. al., 1998; West Head & Storey 1996). Training is the most powerful tool that acts as catalyst towards developing employee capabilities and environment towards increasing profit of organizations. It leads to overall development of the individual thereby performing ability. Education and training has a major role to play build the internal capabilities in firms.

With this backdrop the present study is an attempt to examine practices of training and development adopted in small and medium enterprises. Findings of the study will explore a conceptual framework to highlight the ground realities of practices, problems and prospects of training and development in the domain of SMEs.

Review of Literature

“Innovative HRM practices consist of any intentional introduction or change of HRM program, policy or practice or system designed to influence or adapt employee the skills, behavior, and interactions of employees and have the potential to provide both the foundation for strategy formulation and the means of strategy implementation that is perceived to be new and create current capabilities and competencies Som (2006)”. Mac Rae (1991) discovered that education and training is a distinguishing factor between high and low growth of firms. It is a planned HR deployment and activities intended to enable any organization to achieve its goals.

Huselid (1996) found that highly selective staffing and training were positively linked to organizational performance. In addition firms poor performance has been linked to poor management skills (Lattimore et al.1998; Jennings Beaver 1995). Training leads to improvements in productivity and ultimately firm performance and thereby

competitive sustained competitive advantage in business. This has lead to governments of many countries to rethink about investing resources in management and employee trainings in SMEs(Patton, Marlow and Hannon, 2000; Lattimore et al., 1998;Westhead and Storey, 1996). Huselid (1995) further reported that firms using elite training practices had higher labor productivity as it encouraged participation among employees and allow them to improve and redesign how their jobs are performed. A study by Ngo, Turban, Lau and Lui (1998) investigated practices like training and compensation and found a positive relation and increase in organizational performance. Summarizing prior and recent research in the area confirms the impact of HR practices and training to performance and productivity. Harel and Tzafirir (1999) found that organizations within Israel showed positive relation between HR practices and performance. Mixed opinion is stated as Lee and Chee (1996) found no relationship between HR practices and firm performance, whereas Bae and Lawler (2000) reported a significant relation between HR training and firm performance. It is also believed that training is a powerful tool towards developing capabilities and improving profitability of firms (Cosh, Duncan and Hughes, 1998). Despite the undisputed relevance of employee training to small business survival and performance rate little attention has been paid to it by entrepreneurs and government organizations (Reid and Adams, 2001; Loan Clarke et al 1999). Litz and Stewart (2000) established a positive link between employee training and superior firm with performance. It is argued that management training should greatly improve SMEs survival and performance (English 2001; Lattimore et al 1998).

Reid and Harris (2002) noted that the most successful SMEs provide more employee training than average firms. Ibrahim and Ellis (2003) suggested that training would enhance the survival rate of small firms. Katau & Budhwar (2006) suggest that there are commonalities in HRM and performance. Katou and Budhwar (2006) in their study of 178 Greek firms found support that policies of recruitment, training, promotion and involvement in health and safety are positively related to organizational performance. Research supports that HRM effectiveness was directly related to employee turnover.

Massive growth of Chinese SMEs is results of the training programs that aim at training the competent workers to add value to the organization. It boosts the morale of the employees, strengthens their dedication and reduces the rate of attrition as well which is a major factor related to less stress on training in such firms.

Data across OECD countries show that small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) spend 50 percent less in training activities than large firms, with some systematic access gaps

meaning that younger, better educated workers in high-skilled occupations (such as managers, professionals and technicians) have greater access to training opportunities than the less-educated ones (OECD, 2008). The study suggests that attention to informal training carried out in or by SMEs can provide valuable insight into the priorities and training needs of SMEs.

In 2008, companies having 250 or fewer employees were responsible for 66 percent of all jobs and 58 percent of total business turnover (EC, 2009). Despite the undisputed position the SMEs hold there exists concern about their rate of failure. Retraining employee has been projected as a major problem in UK as well. The other major concerns are less productivity, high rate of failure and inability to exhibit full potential. Researchers state that the record investment in training and development activities is poor though challenges the claim stating that most surveys concentrate on measuring external training while the strength of a SME lies in facilitating experiential learning. The limited knowledge about HR practices prevalent in the SMEs and all the more little desire to understand the strength of the system results in underutilization of the human factor. Research conducted concludes that smaller firms do not need HR practices as they need only basic contracts and only the larger firms think about training. Training is more often used as an external support as and when required thereby failing to make a long term impact on attitudes, abilities & thereby performance.

Several studies reveal that training always has been a low priority for SMEs when compared to large organizations (Blackburn and Hankinson, 1989). The existing literature focuses more on management training with the exclusion of employee training. A few researchers have investigated on the role and significance of training to employees in SMEs more concern always being to finance availability to firms. Training more or less has been studied in context of training budget (Reid and Harris, 2002; Loan Clarke et al., 1997).

Owner - Managers perceive formal training as unaffordable luxury involving not only cost in terms of money but also mandays lost when employees are off the job (Curran et al., 1997; WestHead and Storey, 1996). Small firms generally have a short time horizon as they face lot of uncertainties and as the true benefits of training are realized in the long run with more attrition they seem to be less attractive for the employers (WestHead and Storey, 1996). For SMEs the cost of training appears to be more than the benefits because the former is an immediate flow while the latter would take time to materialize (Hillman, 1997). As there are lesser chances of career growth and promotions employees are lost to other rivals due to which the inclination to train is less.

Employee training is generally described as unplanned, informal reactive and short term oriented. Informal training

is less costly, can be easily incorporated into daily operations of the firms and is focused on employee's specific needs (Hill and Stewart, 2000; Curran et al., 1997). Employees learn specifically in relation to the job they do. Informal training is mostly reactive in nature developed for solving diverse problems and pressing issues arising within the organization. It is consistent with the orientation of the SMEs to undergo informal and flexible training systems (Gibb, 1997; Storey, 1994)

Training forms a very essential part of organizational and employee development leading to increased growth and productivity. Literature supports suggesting future development to SMEs by adopting training so that issues like stress, health safety, problem solving, efficiency and responsibility can be developed. It would facilitate better working conditions, improved performance and inclusive growth. Despite this undeclared importance and relevance there is lack of attention towards training amongst Indian firms. These firms conduct training programs as a mere formality to comply with ISO standards. SMEs owners rarely show planned commitment towards training due to their myopic view regarding the benefits of training. Manhours lost during training are more of a concern without realizing the future potential benefits.

In Indian context we may still observe that many Indian SMEs till date have been following personnel management principles at work whereas the world has moved on to HRM as a success tool (Das, 2007). The problem arises because most of the SMEs are not aware of the strategic dimension associated with the benefits of Training and HRD. Indian SMEs can turn the table around if they start learning from their counterparts across the globe. SMEs in India need to understand the relevance of developing human capital to link to their growth prospects rather than measuring the man days lost in terms of work missed. Saini (2008) states that SMEs in India are just conducting humanly possible training projects for their employees and they need to realize the required change in role in order to realize the full potential of the SMEs towards production and growth. SMEs are driven by manpower hence recruiting the right people & adequately training them is very important. As per survey conducted by CII around 80 percent of SSI and 20 percent of medium scale enterprises indicated having no formal HR department.

Trends in Training and Development Practices

The significant economic contribution of SMEs is well understood but the organizational practices have not been extensively studied for any meaningful contribution. While individually SMEs may not influence the socio-economic and environmental pattern of an economy they as a whole can bring balanced development and reduce income inequalities in nations at large. Literature when analyzed revealed the following trends:

Growing Role of HR Strategic human resource management practices are those practices specifically developed and implemented based on deliberate linkage to a company's strategy. It implies that human capital is a strategic resource that must be managed and leveraged in executing and achieving organizational goals. Little evidence is found to support the acceptance of this view point in SMEs. HR function still moves on as a personnel function in most SMEs. People development initiatives build up organizations must be understood and implemented by small firms. Training has been reported as a regular feature of the firms which focuses mainly on the technical aspects of the processes involved. A formal HR department is established in most organizations though the size mostly ranges between four to six people. In terms of amount spent on training it ranges between 0.2 - 0.5 percent of the annual sales turnover wherein large firms the minimum expenditure is about 2 percent. Training has a direct impact on firm productivity and individual performance. In order to gain this advantage it must be adequately planned. Training need identification is a process which brings out the gaps in performance to be addressed. Research supports trainings which are delivered as per the need generated as and when during work.

Training Design Training may be classified as formal, informal, external and internal. Likewise it may be on the job or off the job and technical versus generic training. Competencies are developed in employees when a balance is made in the training arrangement as all types of trainings focus on developing different aspects of the resource.

SMEs have shown inclination for on the job training practices where the employee works and learns the job to perfection. Most firms prefer this as the most commonly used mode of training. Off the job training requires more systematic and planned initiative by the firms. It entails a higher cost to the firm and opportunity cost in form of mandays lost. Training provided by external training provider who charges for the curriculum and delivery is called external training. Firms prefer internal training practices a method where the training does not conform to any external accreditation process but is delivered by enterprise's own staff who have with experience specialized to meet enterprise and employee need.

Further the training process may be formal or informal in nature. Formal or structured training have a pre determined content followed by an instructor who officially monitors the work of the training provider. It is planned in advance with the help of a training calendar created by the firm. Informal or unstructured trainings are designed as Just in Time (JIT) needs which arise based on circumstances at work or in the market. As firms have been found to operate with limited inclination towards HR and employee building

activities a planned annual calendar is a rare achievement as most of the firms engage in resolving issues as and when they arise. This process limits their cost towards training and resolves issues in the short run.

Training is the modern method of delivery used by large size firms as it facilitates learning to a wider population and assessment is easy. Firms have not preferred to use this mode of learning and teaching due to the lack of infrastructure, resources, education and inclination as well. The delivery of training must coincide with the need and type of training delivered, but irrespective of the expected return the firms tend to follow the simple task of learning by doing. Monotonous work patterns also reduce the return on investment planned.

Types of Training Offered Firms offer technical and generic skills to its employees. The former relates to learning technical aspects associated directly to work process. Generic skills refer to those skills which can apply to work generally. They are transferable to different jobs and industry. It is essential to focus on these skills as they improve the KSAs (Key Success Areas) of the human factor and makes them more productive and satisfied employees of the society.

As observed, the employers/owners prefer an informal in-house method of learning resulting in saving money and time both. Production supervisors express the desire of shop floor workers who prefer to learn from their own people in the existing known work zone. Senior employees are offered formal trainings when required. Attrition rate is high and there is fluctuation in demand and supply of labour due to which trainings are approached as just in time services.

Both technical and generic skills are required by industry and its employees to perform at their expected efficiency levels. The key skills focused at work by SMEs to a certain extent relate to workplace communication, common health and safety measures and team work. There is a growing trend for supervisors and managers to require more generic skills like presentation, strategic planning, conflict resolution, interpersonal skills training to improve the motivational skills of mentors and leaders, but the pace is not well appreciated.

Contribution of Stakeholders SMEs assist the economy through greater entrepreneurial activity, employment generation, regional development and reduced inequalities of income. They are largely considered as the backbone of an economy. The contributions reviewed express that the government and other bodies are indeed having good plans for delivering training and encouraging skill development with huge budgets but somewhere the trickle down effect is not very evident. The types of training planned do not hit the bull's eye and most firms are not able to utilize them fully.

Many SMEs have supported that the government procedures and trainings do not coincide with the immediate needs of the firms. They need to be tuned with the present day gaps existing in the industry to bring about the desired effect.

Key Drivers Affecting Training Need

Businesses today face international competition where they are committed to excellence and quality standards and where creativity and innovation are essential to moving the business forward. Employee commitment and a positive 'psychological contract' between employer and employee are fundamental for improving performance and facing the volatile challenge each day. A probe into the existing literature revealed the following:

Workplace Change The global market calls for immediate change and upgradation in management practices to meet survival needs. Therefore, it is imperative for enterprises to meet changing requirements at workplace. Localization of units and outsourcing are common practices of large firms who generate opportunities for SMEs.

Quality Assurance The need to continuously improve quality at workplace surfaces as a major driver for generating training needs. However, this need has been observed in limited areas as some industries have been performing a similar task for long durations due to which they foresee no changes in near future and therefore, no need of repeated training interventions. SMEs in their second stage of evolution who have established themselves and look for diversification in work processes look up to meeting quality needs in order to establish well in the market competition.

New Technology New products demand changes in technologies which generate an ongoing need of training for employees to be able to meet global market needs.

Some other indicators identified which assist in defining the training needs of firms are as follows:

- Size of the firm
- Prevailing traditions of training in the industry
- Management attitude
- Government's training and skill development policy

Barriers

Study of the training practices in SMEs and its impact on performance and output brings forwards the following challenges due to which the required training interventions are not observed widely:-

- The lack of separation between ownership and control

in SMEs suggests that business owners are greatly responsible for the direction and development of the firm. The perceptions of training needs by SMEs incline more towards marketing and finance followed by quality assurance. These firms to a great extent are family owned units where acceptance to the changing role of HR practices towards improved performance attracts least priority. HRM as a vertical to facilitate organizational excellence and achievements of targets is still underestimated by firms.

- Short term survival issues and competition from bigger firms takes priority over training in small firms. Globalization has opened doors for strong competition and innovation wherein due to financial limitations SMEs lag behind. Research must be conducted for beginning with individual versus cluster training practices to reduce cost and increase competition. Poaching of previously trained employee from other sources also serves the immediate need thereby reducing the focus on planned human resource development. Attrition is another major concern faced by organizations due to which firms do not prefer to develop their employees.
- Unstructured on the job trainings to meet immediate needs at workplace are preferred by employers. Formal training requires an established set up and often result in lost mandays (as perceived by employer) which appear as an unacceptable cost to them (employers/owners).
- Training delivers result which can be effectively measured in the long run but due to market fluctuations employers of small and medium enterprises have a myopic vision for the investment. Their focus is more on meeting immediate output and targets. Small firms are mostly suppliers of products to larger firms as a result their work is dependent on bigger firms. There are chances of change in work or product demand due to which these firms invest less in their employees.
- There is little evidence of fool proof training need assessment being practiced due to which it is evident that the duration and type of training delivered is discretion of employer and may not be based on actual employee needs. The process of training and re-training to keep up the learning process is less evident.
- The training programs delivered by the government also require changes and are not in line with the present emerging needs of the firms. The government for long has focused on supporting firms in relation to extrinsic factors like finance, loans, locating market etc.. The focus on building internal capabilities and quality output is minimal. The skill development programs

have to be revamped to meet the present needs of the firms. Academic Institutions have also exhibited a limited role in contributing towards education and training of firms. The government bodies and educational institutions are major stakeholders in the market to assist the growth pattern of these firms.

- External barriers like political instability, energy crisis, taxation problems, lack of updated information and focused government support towards development are other factors which contribute to limited efficiency.

Training Prospects

There is certainly an evident increase in the emphasis to training and HR practices in firms but the true impact will be visible once they are designed, developed and implemented in the right perspective. It is the need of the hour to act responsibly and frame a cohesive framework of development in line with other stakeholders. The commonly observed factors which must be worked upon in the future to improve training implementation and outcome are as follows:

- Adequate training must be organized for entrepreneurs as well. The training delivered as of now relates to entrepreneurship, finance, borrowings and exports. It is important that with technical training we focus on behavioral and culture training for them. Change in perception of employers is essential to bring the desired impact of training. The need of uplifting the human capital to a resource to reckon with must be inculcated. Conducive internal environment meeting global standards would result in visible change in productivity, reduced error rate, improved quality and satisfied workforce.
- Financial stringency is a common feature with most SMEs due to which it is observed that they avoid training. Government must devise suitable credit plans to facilitate their training expenses. The long run benefit of training would encourage the employers to take support of such initiative.
- Limited trainees is another factor due to which many times training cannot be organized by small firms. We can approach the idea of group training via clusters, regional groupings based on area or type of industry to facilitate the training process. Reduced costs, greater participation and peer pressure from other industry competitors' may contribute to the outcome expected out of training. Effective change is brought when a trainer works on both the technical and behavioral aspects of the human factor. Human attitudes and perceptions control their actions and activities therefore, it cannot be ignored that reasonable transition

in performance is possible when the KSA's i.e. knowledge level, skill level and aptitude is harnessed to meet business and social needs. Focus is to be increased for self development initiatives be it employees on the shop floor, middle management or senior management.

- Role of Government and other private institutions including educational institutions must be revamped. Educational institutions practice Management Development Programs as a part of their curriculum design. With all the resources at hand they should take charge as per their area or specialization to contribute towards the growth of the industry. Simultaneously the government should align with the industry to design trainings which fit into their needs with perfection to achieve desired outcome. Small firms cannot spare employees for a week long training as they lack alternative resource, small capsule trainings may be designed to meet their needs.
- e-Training has its own series of advantages in the present context of learning. The concept is not popular in the industry for small firms. It is a cost saving and time saving method with possibility of reasonable evaluation strategy. The future should see more e-savvy employees who suffice to meet all global needs at work, have increased job satisfaction levels and greater productivity. The HR best practices followed by SMEs should be adequately monitored and rewarded by organizations to add flavor to the firm activities and motivate them to grow.

Summary

There is existence of reasonable training in SMEs, however the majority of workplace training is conducted through informal or unstructured trainings. Employers/Owners and to a certain extent employees also do not perceive the advantages and change training can deliver. It is essential to build up the trust in training and learning activities which is evident from the success of large firms and MNC's. The SMEs work little on cultural development which is by far essential to provide an environment to employees that speaks of similar values. Training provided at times is irrelevant as it fails to complement appropriate work design. Need assessment is the basis without which effective practices cannot be designed. Firms should identify measurable outcomes based on the key drivers to training and interpret results in the long run to achieve desired changes. Limited fund in SMEs poses a serious threat to well planned and executed actions, the government may think of extending loans specifically for the purpose of training to encourage learning and change in small and medium firms. Large scale firms, Government and Educational Institutions are the identified stakeholders who need to assist and devise

better strategies of training and development in SMEs. Productivity, performance, output, quality assurance, reduced attrition, enhanced job satisfaction, better growth, improved socio economic development and work life balance are synonym for developed SMEs. This may be derived and envisaged that training which was previously viewed as a “*day out from office*” can be a day that returns efficiency and financial gain to the organization and future expertise and job satisfaction to employees.

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