Skills Management in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Representations and Practices

تمثيلات وممارسات إدارة الكفاءات في المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة

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Abstract	Article info
This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study that investigated the perceptions of efficiency among a group of small and medium enterprise (SME) heads and managers. The study aimed to analyze their understandings and representations of the concept of efficiency. The results revealed a lack of structured and systematic human resources management plans for competency development within SMEs. Furthermore, the prevalence of family relationships in the management practices of these organizations led to the emergence of trust as a significant factor and a blurred distinction between efficiency and performance.	
ملخص:	معلومات المقال
تعرض هذه الورقة نتائج دراسة نوعية أجريت مع مجموعة من رؤساء ومديري المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة حول تحليل تمثيلاتهم لمفهوم الكفاءة. أظهرت النتائج عدم وجود خطط منظمة وعقلانية لإدارة الموارد البشرية لتنمية الكفاءات داخل المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة. إضافة إلى ذلك فإن هيمنة العلاقات الأسرية على أساليب الإدارة التي تتبناها المؤسسات أدت إلى ظهور مفهوم الثقة والخلط بين الكفاءة والأداء.	

❖ **Introduction:**The Over the last few years, we have been experiencing a process of transformation of work in organisations, especially with regard to human resources management, including the adoption of the skills-based approach as one of the major aspects of these changes.

Small and medium-sized companies are the new economic network substituting for the large public companies that were shut down. They operate in an unstable, uncertain and by no means favourable socio-economic environment. SMEs are expected to accomplish an important mission with limited resources. Their survival, competitivity and performance are intimately tied to their ability and willingness to invest in the acquisition of new technologies, as well as in the adaptation, improvement and development of their employees' skills.

This article, which focuses on the reality of human resources management in SMEs, seeks to answer the following questions: How do managers and executives of small and medium-sized companies approach skills management? What are their representations of the notion of competence? Do SMEs meet the right conditions for the development and emergence of skills?

To do so, we believe it is wise to present how the shift from the qualification-based approach to the skill-based approach has taken place, the organisation of SMEs, the human resources management policies and the representations of company managers of the notion of skills.

❖ **The context of the shift from the qualification-based approach to the competency-based approach:** according Ourtau (2004) if the qualification approach finds favorable ground in the social model of production characterized by features, such as the demand for goods and services, that do not change much in the short term; production processes that do not fundamentally modify job content; the organization of work where clearly identified tasks are associated with positions that are the reference in terms of remuneration; the role of seniority in careers is essential; Zarifian (1999) explain that the knowledge acquired in training was sufficient for the occupation of positions and the guarantee of independent promotion of true professional success. Indeed, within the framework of the traditional and Taylorian model of production characterized by the dissociation of work and worker, Ourtau (2004) says that the qualification is associated with the idea of "a stock of knowledge necessary and sufficient to exercise a well-defined profession and gaining access to a classification in the hierarchical and salary scale". It, therefore, means according to Gilbert & Thionville (1990) "a method making it possible to determine and compare the demands that the normal performance of a certain job imposes on an ordinary worker" Furthermore, Donnadieu & Denimal(1994) shows that the collective qualification designates

"the recognition of capacities to work in a team, to act on the mechanisms of cooperation, to bring out group solidarity".

Ahouari (2012) explain that the Algerian managers have become familiar with the notion of qualification since the early 1970s, when they began to discover the training function in public companies. Training actions are implemented in order to meet the needs arising from the expanding labor market. Kadri - Messaid (2004) says that all the trainees had job opportunities, but were not necessarily assigned directly to the appropriate positions, given that the social function predominates the companies' strategy that evaluates their success by the number of jobs created. In this context, the notion of qualification was valued, for the company, it is at the service of the economy; for the individual, it is a condition of remuneration and socialization. In this model, Aubert, Gilbert & Pigeyre (2002) shows that the qualification "matches both collective agreements and their amendments, classifications which prioritize work stations, and vocational education which classifies diplomas around specific knowledge". Indeed, Erbes -Seguin (2004) explains that on the societal level "Qualification reflects the social and technical division of labor in society, power relations, adequacy or distortions in relation to developments in techniques and the organization of work."

But according to Gilbert & Thionville (1990) given that the content and organization of work change frequently in order "to meet the requirements of flexibility" and Donnadieu & Dnimal (1994) add that "it is accepted that the competence exercised in a given profession can vary according to people", the position is no longer able to be a favorable determinant for the management of human resources. From this observation, the notion of qualification has shown its limits as follows: the rigidity of the qualification, while the content and organization of work evolve in often radical ways; the explosion of the notion of position and the instability of work situations means that diplomas do not permanently meet new requirements; the increasing difficulty of the qualification to adapt to the evolutions of jobs, which no longer require only the knowledge and the technical know-how attested by the diplomas, but they require more capacity, initiative, adaptability and other elements relating more to socially acquired personal qualities than to academic knowledge. Aubert & all (2002) says that the notion of qualification recognizes only school knowledge, neglecting the importance of the experience factor, Levy – Leboyer (2004) explains that whereas "the awareness of the pedagogical role of field experience is obvious". From then on, Le Boterf (2001) clarifies that the employee is confronted with work situations in which he must take initiatives and deal with the complexity of systems and logics of action, he must know how to take initiatives and make decisions, negotiate, make choices, take risks, react to hazards, innovate on a daily basis and take responsibility.

Indeed, according to Zariian (1999) the competence is the taking of initiative and responsibility of the individual in professional situations in which he is confronted. The initiative can be carried out according to different degrees, from the choice of a rule within a repertoire of proposed procedures to the invention of an original response to successfully face the new; taking responsibility is of course the counterpart of autonomy. Lorino (2001) demonstrates that thus it "is the ability to mobilize, combine and coordinate resources within the framework of a determined action process, to achieve a result sufficiently predefined to be recognized and assessable". Le Boterf (2002) says that it is, therefore, a "Know how to act". Meignant (2000) considers that the competence is, hence, not a product of theoretical training, but is built on the technical and relational performance of the responsibilities and initiatives attached to the jobs he has held. The competent individual is not the one who masters only the tasks constituting his workstation, but the one who, beyond any prescription of his work, will know how to master a situation either unforeseen in his production, or new in its content and one who has proven himself and is recognized as competent by the judgment of others. And, "to be competent is fundamentally to bring value to a user".

Gilbert & Thionville (1990) indicate that the skills-based approach is not limited to the management of people according to the logic of the position, where all activities are determined by the prescriptions and requirements of the position. But, "it is part of a dynamic of adaptation to new environments". And "will consist... in setting up evaluation instruments, adapting the means of recruitment, career management and training accordingly", Meignant (2000) adds that where the company must organize the work in a way to offer the possibilities of mobility, learning through experience and versatility "it means making sure to have at the right time and in the right place the know-how that goes, better than the competitors do".

❖ **The methodology:** This study was conducted with a panel of ten heads and executives of small and medium-sized enterprises, operating in different sectors of activity, in the region of Bejaia. Given the nature of the theme and in order to collect applicable and reliable field data, we opted for a qualitative approach, favoring the technique of semi-structured interview as an investigative tool. To do this, an interview guide was designed around questions relating to the organization of work; the procedures and activities of personnel management and representations of the notions of competence and diploma.

In order to ensure that the questions in this guide are relevant and that they do not lead to confusion, three test interviews were carried out with three business leaders, excluding those concerned by the survey itself. The field survey by interview allowed the interviewees, met using the snowball technique, to recount, with abundant detail, their opinions and opinions. From this data

collection process, a corpus emerged that needs to be analyzed with nuance.

The analysis of this corpus is based on two grids, depending on the themes revealed. The first relates to HRM practices in SMEs; where themes corresponding to recruitment, selection and training will be at the heart of the analysis.

❖ Results:

▪ **The structuring of SMEs:** the companies whose managers we interviewed were either founded by their current owners or inherited from their ascendants. The family oriented aspect of these companies comes from the fact that all positions of responsibility are held by family members (brothers or sons). The latter almost all participate in the decision-making process and in the profits of the company. Activities, tasks and missions are organized and distributed among family members according to a hierarchical organization chart with a certain number of levels. When the entrepreneur is the main manager, Ahouari (2019) says that the financial supervisor, responsible for strategic decisions and external relations, the other members are responsible for the everyday operation of the production and/or execution activities. If the entrepreneur does not have the skills to handle administrative and financial management, a family member assists him, if there are any among them who have the required level of education and qualification. Otherwise, he will hire an experienced "trustworthy" agent from outside of the company, particularly to take care of the administrative tasks (accounting, management, clients, etc.). He will discuss and coordinates all his actions with that person. In the technical field, for construction and public works companies, if none of the family members has a diploma in the field of activity, the entrepreneur will hire a technician or an engineer (architect or civil engineer, etc). The latter is responsible for monitoring the execution of projects with the collaboration of the "site supervisors" who control the execution of work and ensure that discipline is respected on the site. The flour mills hire qualified millers to take care of the production and quality of the product, and workers (skilled workmen and labourers) for the production, handling and maintenance of the equipment. They are assigned to the various positions according to their specialisation, usually through on-the-job training.

▪**Work organisations in SMEs**: when the boss is "older", work in SMEs is organised vertically with a relationship of domination disguised as paternalism, which aims to build loyalty among workers. They work in unfavourable conditions with an unreliable management, relying on

common sense. Jobs are not evaluated. The tasks and missions are not defined. The responsibilities of each individual are not clarified. The requirements for filling the posts are not clear. "The assignment of workers to jobs is done by intuition", said a manager of a flour mill. This encourages employees to disregard pre-established instructions when carrying out their tasks. They act upon the directives and oral orders of the hierarchy. The employees' initiatives are restricted. One company manager told us: "Personally, I do not grant my employees any autonomy, they carry out my instructions to a T, because there is a blatant lack of qualified workers that I can trust". This control is justified much more by the search for reliability and not by the lack of mastery of the tasks by the workers.

However, young managers with a high educational background and experience in the field are trying to rationalise the way staff are managed and believe that the autonomy is necessary among employees, especially for the most qualified. "Because employees are confronted with various and new working situations, that require them to use their knowledge and skills". To find the right procedures and applications, they are expected to take initiatives. According to one entrepreneur, the autonomy of employees is a direct consequence of their stability, and he also sees "that when employees are brought into the company, a family-like climate must be established and more trust must be placed in their knowledge and abilities to carry out the work properly and to take responsibility for it".

But when it comes to execution, work is carried out in a climate of mutual aid between workers, because in construction for example, work is organised by a succession of tasks requiring teamwork and cooperation between employees without interference. At this level, skilled workers are sometimes consulted on work procedures, and their opinions are taken into account and respected as long as they do not interfere with the good functioning of the company. So when it is a question of opinions that meet the company's objectives, they are accepted without doubt. But when it comes to opinions that can improve the situation of these workers, they are not easily accepted, because they are considered "selfish".

In some cases, entrepreneurs use piecework where the group is assessed and paid according to the result, not the procedure. In such situations, employees have a certain amount of autonomy in scheduling, organising and distributing tasks among the group members. Each group takes responsibility for quality and deadlines.

▪ **Human resources management practices:** entrepreneurs usually adopt the paternalistic model when managing their staff, with all the concern and authority that it implies. There has been a lack of real human resource management with adequate systems, appropriate planning and effective procedures. However, personnel management practices based on their field experience have been developed. We will present the most important ones in the following.

✓ **Employee recruitment: Companies'** human resource requirements are established on the basis of staff shortages in the following situations: when the workload increases; when an unexpected departure occurs; and when the company acquires new equipment or launches new projects. To meet the requirements, entrepreneurs have difficulties in recruiting "good employees", despite the high unemployment rate, and despite the number of people coming forward every day asking for a job. Therefore, companies rely on social ties to find candidates who meet certain criteria, such as having performed the same tasks for a longer or shorter period of time. By promoting the oral route, word of mouth, as a means of informing people about vacancies.

The recruitment of workers follows a procedure that answers to the social satisfaction of the family environment, as well as the needs of the production process. The head of the company is obliged not to disappoint the expectations of his circle, because he is a representative of the social group of people who have succeeded in establishing themselves economically and who must fulfil their social role by helping their community by recruiting a number of unemployed people. As Madoui (2006) points out, the "successful entrepreneur must use his own success to help others, starting with his family members". However, "sometimes this kind of recruitment is conducted without an economical reasoning and only to help people close to or known to the company who are experiencing economic difficulties... in general, recruitment according to Gillet (2004) is most often based on skills and not on qualifications". However, this method of recruitment allows the entrepreneur to have control over the employees in two different ways: the first is technical in the formal framework of the job; the second is social. Hiring a relative is seen as a sign of trust, a gift, to which the latter must respond with another gift, respect the hierarchy, not make demands and make more effort to achieve the company's objectives.

✓ **The selection of candidates in SMEs:**Companies are prompt to resort to recruitment at set periods because of the non-existence in SMEs of selection systems using appropriate methods for establishing the abilities and aptitudes of candidates on the basis of the criteria defined in the job profiles, on the one hand, and the wish to recruit people who can produce an immediate output, on the other hand. This aims to allow the company to deepen and refine the competence actually held by the individual in relation to what the company expected, by exposing him or her to real work situations to see how well he or she can adapt. These observations will be used to decide whether or not to keep the individual on the job.

✓ **Employee training :**The majority of employees in SMEs are manual workers. They work in companies and are subject to a climate of uncertainty and competition, where customer demands are increasingly prominent. There is a blatant gap between the qualifications provided by training structures and the skills required by work situations. Entrepreneurs understand the challenge, but few see training as an essential investment to improve the skills of their employees.

Continuing education for employees in schools and training centres is viewed as a cost to be cut rather than an investment. Entrepreneurs no longer try to ensure the loyalty of their staff by providing training and promotions. However, employees who are able to adapt and give satisfaction (in their work) through their performance and behavior, that is, those who display a certain loyalty to the company on the one hand, and the ability and capacity to learn on the other hand, are offered the opportunity to be assisted in their learning, to improve and master the job on the spot. A manager of a construction company mentioned the lack of training opportunities for some specialities and jobs: "the rarity of machine operators is due to the lack of training centres for them, so we train them on the job". These companies also welcome young apprentices who have chosen the construction industry. They learn the job on the spot.

✓ **The evaluation of skills:**Heads of SMEs evaluate the performance and behavior of their employees with the aim of: fixing everyone's wage and justifying the difference from one individual to another; checking the extent to which workers follow the instructions and orders of the hierarchy; controlling the way tasks is carried out. When evaluating their staff, entrepreneurs

insist a lot on expertise, performance and speed of execution of the work.

The methods of human resources evaluation are report cards where productivity, assiduity, delays and overtime are noted. Informal observations during tasks are also taken into account in the evaluation of an employee. The use of individual interviews that enable the exchange of opinions and the identification of potential is minimal. So the employee is only evaluated on his or her performance.

✓ **Remuneration:**To be competitive, companies cut the wage bill by reducing hierarchical levels. This limits promotion opportunities and speeds up horizontal professional mobility, particularly among companies, thus reducing length of service in the same company. Companies use forms of implicit or explicit contractual commitments between each employee and the head of the company. The employee commits to being paid modestly, and in return the company commits to providing employment for a longer or shorter period. But employees, who are offered work for a very limited period of time, only accept high wages.

Employees in SMEs are the least paid, partly because of the lack of financial resources of these companies, the majority of which are newly established, and partly because of the lack of wage strategies for staff loyalty and motivation. The idea that employees are paid regularly at the end of each month is a method of control, as company managers are unable to enforce discipline when employees are not paid on time.

✓ **Professional mobility:**In fact, work in SMEs, most of which employ people on temporary contracts, is extremely mobile, particularly in the construction sector where the workforce changes according to the workload to be carried out. They replace almost all their staff each time they launch a new project. This leads employees to experience permanent "inter-company" and geographical mobility.

▪ **The representations of heads of companies regarding the notion of an employee's skills:**The entrepreneurs' conception of the skills of an employee is affected by sociological characteristics, which differentiate them from one another:

For the son of a former tradesman: to be skilled is "to be resourceful and able to do a good job quickly without wasting materials and without creating any

problems with colleagues or with the head". Skill here is linked to the employee's performance, who is able to increase productivity without raising costs, in a peaceful social climate.

For an experienced engineer, being competent means "being able and knowing how to find the right solutions at the right time and to recommend improvements to the process and the quality of work ; being able to take responsibility under all conditions (good or bad)". This means that a skilled employee is one who can adapt to all situations and has the ability to solve the problems he or she faces. This category of entrepreneurs stresses the role of employees taking initiative and responsibility in all problematic work situations.

For a former head of a company, the skilled employee is "the graduate who does not need me to teach him his job... he can do everything". He sees skills in the knowledge acquired through basic training.

For another boss, an ex-immigrant, a skilled employee is one who "thinks of the interests of the company that gives him a job, does his work properly and ensures the maintenance and care of the equipment he uses in his work, that is, one who likes what he does". According to another manager, a skilled employee is "one who can communicate with everyone". They attach more importance to the soft skills that an employee must possess in order to develop his or her employability.

A young heir-entrepreneur sees the skilled employee as "the one who works with the same rhythm whether his boss is around or not and produces a good finished work without any alterations, even a little slowly, but within the required timeframe... he is also the one who does not call me every time a problem occurs". This entrepreneur views skills as the ability to carry out tasks with performance, loyalty, and reliability.

▪ **Heads of companies' representations of the skills of an entrepreneur :**Regarding the skills that a head of a company must have, the participants agree and emphasise the skills relating to behavior and communication, whether with customers, who must be satisfied by the quality of the product or service, or with employees, who can provide solutions to many problems with their suggestions, who also need to be motivated to improve their performance. However, their views on the skills required of a business leader differ from one entrepreneur to another.

The elders place a great deal of importance on the ability to ensure that paternalistic authority is respected in the company and believe that "the head of the company must have the qualities of a leader who acts as a demanding father", that is, he must know how to use his authority and power; he needs

to be persuasive but rigorous in his relations, and he must know how to " enforce discipline and rigour, while at the same time being understanding " with employees. They emphasise personality traits relating to initiative and responsibility, as well as the role of social ties. According to one entrepreneur, "to be an entrepreneur, you need to have the guts to take risks...and to connect".

Heir-entrepreneurs view an entrepreneur's skills as the soft skill he or she has and the quality of the communication he or she provides. According to one heir, a skilled leader is one who "listens well to customers and workers and builds relationships with employees with respect rather than fear", that is, one who masters internal and external communication and can convince and adapt to the company's environment.

The former managers of public companies believe that one cannot join a given field and succeed without having worked and acquired experience in this activity. The head of the company must "know and master the mechanics of the administration" which hinder the good functioning and development of companies due to their bureaucratic burden, according to one of them. Experience has shown them that the head of the company "must know how to use others", that is to say, how to build a good team and how to draw ideas from each of its members, how to "respect deadlines" thanks to good organisation and planning and anticipate actions.

An ex-immigrant entrepreneur thinks that the head of the company must have a diploma and skills relating to creativity, innovation and adaptation to the demands of customers by "improving the services he offers", as well as "knowing how to negotiate and be diplomatic in his contacts, whether with the administration, the employees or customers". According to another entrepreneur, the head of a company must "have the ability to resolve crisis" that the company may encounter by using all the necessary means, and "know how to choose skilled professionals" who can be trusted. For the latter, skills consist in finding solutions to difficult work situations by trusting the employees' abilities.

▪**Entrepreneurs' representations of diplomas:**Regarding the importance given to on-the-job experience and/or diplomas for work execution, the entrepreneurs are unanimous and believe that diplomas delivered by training centres, following residential training, do not validate any operational expertise required in the field. "These diplomas are only access keys to employment... the real job is acquired in the field", said a former entrepreneur. This does not prevent these training courses from giving them the basic theoretical notions useful for doing the job, such as "knowing the measurements, quality and quantities of materials to be used",

as well as allowing them to "understand, by abstraction, the aims and functioning of production procedures", for a young heir.

The diploma prepares individuals to learn easily and quickly on the spot. However, on-the-job learning allows for the development of expertise in a repetitive manner, "through exposure to real situations", according to a former company manager. Apprenticeship also allows experienced people to adapt easily to different work situations, according to an ex-immigrant. "What matters the most for me is the performance and the quality of the work, I am not interested in diplomas", says a former entrepreneur.

Regarding management work, entrepreneurs agree that graduates are essential in the company. But preferably, they should have experience in the field. As during their training they do not get in touch with the professional world. According to one entrepreneur: "Graduates have trouble adapting. They are not acquainted with work techniques and are hesitant to take initiatives". According to some entrepreneurs, this leads to discrepancies between the qualifications acquired at universities and the practical and operational requirements required by companies. Furthermore, they observe, without questioning their training, the considerable gaps between graduates and the desired profiles. However, young graduates, who adapt more or less easily to the job, have the theoretical knowledge and abilities to acquire, after training, the necessary expertise to perform the tasks and missions given to them (Quoted by: 2022 ،أهواري).

❖ **Conclusion:** To conclude, we wish to draw attention to an observation regarding the existence of human resource management practices. These practices take into consideration the evolution of employees' aspirations and the economic developments that are making it necessary for companies to be more flexible. There is also a reconsideration of the diplomas delivered by universities and training centres that barely meet the real needs of companies, but are unable to understand the necessity of investing in training to develop the abilities of mobilised employees and to use the resources in their possession in order to act skilfully.

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