

An Investigation into the Prevalence of HRM Practices in SMEs: Sierra Leone an Example

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Abstract

Purpose- The purpose of the study is to investigate the human resource management practices of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs hereafter) in Sierra Leone. In particular, the author looks at the relationship between the human resource management practices and SMEs performance including wages, employment and sales. **Methodology-** The study adopted triangulation method in collecting and analysing the data. The qualitative data was collected using 31 in-depth interviews and the quantitative data was collected using 323 questionnaires. The data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). **Findings-** It is found that there is a significant positive relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance including sales and employment. This implies that the more SMEs engage in formal HRM practices, the more they observe higher sales and generate more employment. Furthermore, HRM practices showed no significant statistical relationship with wages. In addition, the descriptive survey analysis pointed out that almost all of the respondents did not have an HRM department. Finally, the statistical description of the survey data revealed that most of the SMEs owner/managers in Sierra Leone make sure that employees are aware of formalized rules. **Originality-** This study contributes to knowledge by providing insights on the impact of HRM practices on SMEs performance in Sierra Leone. To the best of the author's knowledge, the study is the first of its kind ever done in the country. The findings also confirm the findings of previous researches in other countries that the overwhelming majority of SMEs do not engage in formal HRM practices.

Keywords- Human Resource Management (HRM), Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Resource-Based Theory, Sierra Leone.

1.0 Introduction

Human resource management practice does take place in an environment with one individual. The practice begins at household level, where household members assume diverse roles and duties in order to achieve the objectives of the household. Undeniably, the specialization of cooperating household members is contingent on the beliefs, tenets and hopes of household members which are imbedded in the world at large whether it is a society, a tribe or religion (Itika, 2011). By definition, Human Resource Management is "a strategic and coherent approach to the management of an organisation's most valued assets-the people working there, who individually and collectively contribute to the achievement of its objectives for sustainable competitive advantage"(Armstrong, 2006, p. 3)

The mounting attention on HRM in SMEs is a reasonably recent phenomenon regardless of the fact that they could be an important area for empirical investigation (Andersen, 2003). Specifying the task of HRM in SMEs is problematic for theory, research, and practice due to the limited research findings (Price, 2007; Michael, 2000). SMEs are very important to the Sierra Leonean economy. For example, they account for over 95% of employment with 98% of the enterprises employing less than 5 employees, 0.7% employing 5 to 9 employees and 0.3% employing 10 to 49 employees (Liedholm & Chuta, 1976). They contributed 54.8% of the country's gross domestic product, in addition to contributing to knowledge enrichment and enterprise development. Notwithstanding the size effect, a number of researches pointed out that the nature of people management varies in SMEs (Price, 2007; De Kok & Uhlaner, 2001). These enterprises are at disadvantage as regards recruiting, selecting and retaining staff when compared to their larger counterparts (Cameron & Miller, 2008). Nevertheless, it is vital for SMEs to engage in HRM practices in order to sustain competitive advantage (Kamoche, 1996).

The paper attempts to enhance knowledge about HRM practices among SMEs in Sierra Leone. HRM practices among 323 SMEs were examined. The paper uses mixed method approach to explain how HRM practices affect the performance of SMEs.

The paper is structured as follows: In the following section, the researcher discusses the theoretical framework. Section 3 examines the conceptual framework and hypotheses that are tested in the study. Section 4 examines the research methods employed. Section 5 looks at the statistical description of the data. Section 6 gives an insight into the analysis and discussion of the research findings. Finally, the paper ends with conclusions, contributions, limitations and recommendations for future research.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance (employment, sales and wages) in Sierra Leone.

1.2 Research Questions

Research questions are important because they provide a thorough comprehension of the subject the research attempts to answer. In order to achieve the objectives stated above, one main research questions is investigated.

What is the relationship between HRM and SMEs performance in Sierra Leone?

1.3 Specific Questions

In order to address the aforementioned question, the following specific questions are investigated.

- (i) To what extent is there a relationship between human resource management and employment?
- (ii) To what extent is there a relationship between human resource management and wages?
- (iii) To what extent is there a relationship between human resource management and Sales?

2.0 Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, a framework methodology is being used, so as to direct the research (Porter, *Towards A Dynamic Theory of Strategy*, 1991). The Theoretical framework was built based on the resource-based theory, whereby the performance of the organization depends on the internal resources and SMEs performance. The framework has been used to provide an understanding of the independent variables (HRM practices) associated with the performance of SMEs. Performance here is being measured by employment, wages and sales.

2.1 Resource-Based Theory of the Firm (RBT)

The theory was first formulated by Wernerfelt (1984). It examines the causes of firms' successes and failures (Dicksen, 1996) cited in (Srivastava, Fahey, & Christensen, 2001). The competitive advantage of an enterprise rests on its resources and capabilities that distinguish it from its competitors (Penrose, 1995). These resources as well as the capabilities are unique, valuable and hard to replicate and not substitutable (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Porter, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). In summary, RBT relates to how owner/managers develop their enterprises based on the resources and capabilities they have at hand (Dollinger, 2003).

The reason for arguing the use of the RBT in this study is that it provides an insight of how the internal resources and capabilities of SMEs permit them to improve performance. One of the main resources of SMEs is the human resource which means that if owner/managers can manage human resources properly, then their enterprises are more likely to sustain competitive advantage over their competitors. In line with this, the resource based theory sees enterprises as creators of value-added capabilities and resources (Collis & Montgomery, 1995; Penrose, 1995). In addition, the RBT proffers a strong foundation to understand how HRM practices make outstanding contributions to the performance of SMEs in Sierra Leone. It further explains why the SMEs in the country has been sustaining their competitive advantage several years back. Also important is the fact that researchers have been using RBT exclusively on large enterprises discriminating against SMEs. This study, therefore, use RBT in an attempt to add to increasing evidence that the resources and capabilities of the firm are important source of competitive advantage. Moreover, this study seeks to use RBT due to the fact that other studies have been using the theory in SMEs. For instance, Caldeira and Ward (2003) used the theory to construe the successful adoption and use of information systems and technology in manufacturing small and medium-sized enterprises.

2.3 Previous Researches on Human Resource Management Practices among SMEs

A plethora of researches have shown that the varied HRM practices among SMEs are a primary factor in determining their implementation (Marlow, 1998; Cassel, Nadin, Gray, & Clegg, 2002; Hornsby & Kuratko, 1990; Deshpande & Golhar, 1994). Studies have also shown that the inability of SMEs to identify, attract and choose suitable staff, loss of key employees, low productivity and insufficient training and development of employees are problems affecting their continued existence (Brink, Cant, & Ligthelm, 2003), South Africa being an example of this. This is agreement with Brand and Bax (2002) in Bhatti et al. (2012) who maintained that several small firms face severe human resource problems. Researches on HRM within the SME landscape is a new phenomenon and much emphasis on HRM is a major concern to SMEs, as several studies have shown a positive relationship between HRM and business performance (Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler, 1997). HRM practices are very important for the development and sustainability of SMEs. For example, Hess (1987) stated that the owners of small businesses rank HRM practices as the second most important management activity next

to general management. According to Wright et al. (1994), Kamoche (1996), Brand

and Bax (2002), human resource is an important source of sustained competitive advantage. Hornsby and Kurato (2003) studied 262 smaller ventures in the US and found that the availability of quality workers carried greatest importance. Similarly, a recent study conducted by Heneman et al. (2000), revealed that human resource was seen to have a positive relationship to the success of an organisation. Having said this, the liabilities of smallness and resource limitations make it challenging for most SMEs to attract and keep qualified employees and follow formal HRM practices (Songini & Gnan, 2013; Cardon & Stevens, 2004; De Kok & Uhlaner, 2001). In addition, the deliberate failure of SMEs owner/managers to recognise the benefits of formal HRM practices is another primary reason for them not to adopt these practices (De Kok, Ulhaner, & Thurik, 2006).

However, it is important to note that HRM practices differ globally. With this difference, there is a need to question the universal tendencies of HRM practices (Rowley & Benson, 2003). This brings about the question: are HRM practices applicable globally and to what extent are HRM practices relevant to developing countries SMEs? To answer this question, it is assumed that most researches in the domain of SMEs human resource practices have been conducted in the developed economies, where laws and cultural differences prevent generalization to developing countries with Sierra Leone no exception. For example, Cunningham and Rowley (2007) in their study of HRM in Chinese SMEs noted that Chinese human resource practices are different from western practices. Regarding recruitment and selection in the western world, job interview is an essential step for filling a major position, while in Chinese practice with regards to recruitment and selection; interviews are not common as they see personal networks as important in the selection process. Arguably, human resource practices in the developed economies may be totally different from those practices in developing countries like Sierra Leone.

In spite of the importance of HRM to the development and sustainability of SMEs, few HRM studies have been carried out in this sector; rather, recent researches on HRM practices are being focused largely on large enterprises (Storey, 1992; Reid & Adams, 2001; Heneman, Tansky, & Camp, 2000; Chandler & McEvoy, 2000; Katz, Aldrich, Welbourne, & Williams, 2000; Gamage, 2014; Hornsby & Kuratko, 1990). This view is also supported by Hendry et al. (1995). They maintained that management theory continues to put emphasis on large enterprises in spite of the fact that their economic importance has declined recently.

3.0: Conceptual Framework and hypotheses

The conceptual framework (Fig. 1) explains the prevalence of HRM practices in SMEs following the resource-based theory of the firm. The framework attempts to explain the relationship between HRM department, recruitment and selection techniques, qualification, training, recruitment through friends and relatives, recruiting family members without looking for qualifications, appraising performance of employees, rules and rewards and SMEs performance (employment, wages and sales). It is believed that these variables have a direct impact on SMEs performance. Following the resource-based theory, it is argued that resources limitation among SMEs may hinder the adoption of formal HRM practices. The presented conceptual framework is utilized to identify independent variables presumed to be associated with HRM practices potential to improve sales, employment and wages (Kanu, 2009). While the mechanism of the framework is still hypothetical, it is assumed that the role of SMEs in providing employments, increase sales and wages depend of effective HRM practices. The variables presented in the framework have been chosen on the premise of theoretical and empirical importance. This discussion yields the following hypotheses:

- (i) There is a positive and significant relationship between human resource management and employment.
- (ii) There is a positive and significant relationship between human resource management and sales.
- (iii) There is a positive and significant relationship between human resource management and wages.

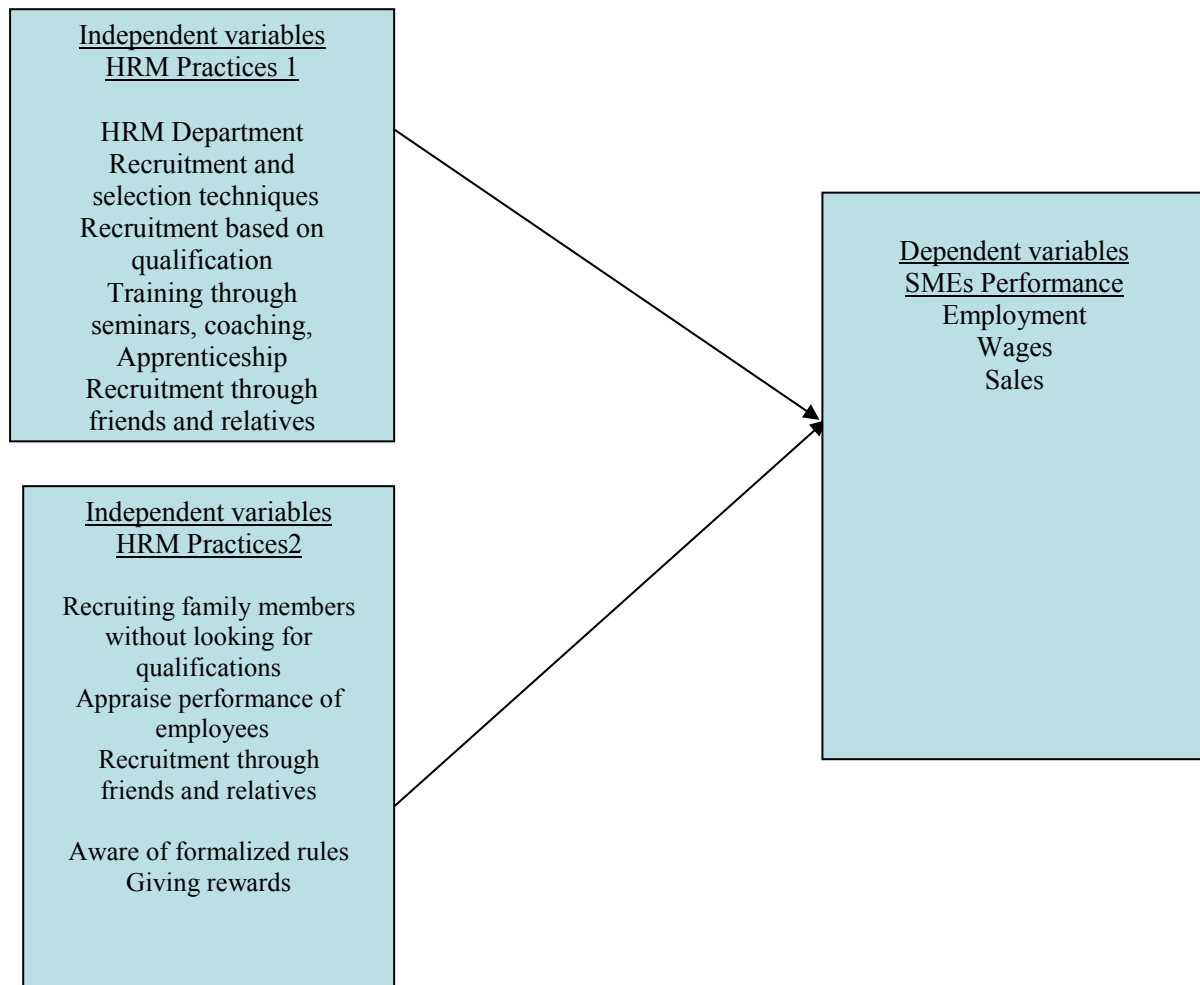


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework
Source: Author's construct

4.0 Methodology

The data collection process was cross sectional. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining factual data on performance of SMEs, much of the information for the study relied on self-reporting. The majority of the data was collected using both primary and secondary data techniques. Primary data was collected using questionnaires as the principal survey method and direct interviews because this is a frequently used technique in the field of small business research (Curran and Blackburn, 2001) in Osathanunkul (2006). Generally SMEs in the four provinces were taken as representative of formal SMEs in the country. Consequently, SMEs in the four provinces were defined as the target population from where the sample was drawn for this research. This study used both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. The sample size (n) of SMEs obtained for the survey was 525. However, only 323 were completed. This resulted to a response rate of 61.5%. Face to face interviews were later conducted. A total of 31 SMEs owner/managers were interviewed. Quantitative data was analysed using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Analysis and equally presented in frequencies and percentage tables. Based on Creswell's (Creswell, 2007) qualitative data analysis strategy, the semi-structured interview data for this study includes quotations extracted from the respondents' statements.

5.0 Statistical Description of Data

SMEs cannot function effectively when they are devoid of suitable human resource management practices (Oduro-Nyarko, 2013). Contrary to the foregoing statement, recent researches on HRM practices are being focused largely on large enterprises that hire full-time HR specialists (Hornsby & Kuratko, 1990; Storey, 1992; Heneman, Tansky, & Camp, 2000; Reid, Morrow, Kelly, & McCartan, 2002; Muogbo, 2013). This is because studies have shown that SMEs make less use of formal HRM practices when compared to their larger counterparts. De Kok and Uhlaner (2001) for example established in their study of Organizational Context and Human Resource Management in Small Firms that SMEs make less use of formalized recruitment practices,

adopt less formalized performance appraisals and provide less training for their employees. Hence, this study sought to investigate HRM practices among SMEs in Sierra Leone.

5.1 HRM Department

The study sought to investigate if SMEs under investigation have an HRM department. In this token, the results in Table 1 indicates that when owner/managers were asked if they have an HRM department, as few as 11.5% reported to have an HRM department and as many as 88.5% did not have an HRM department. These findings are in tandem with those of Hornsby and Kuratko (1990), Bhatti et al (2012) who stated that SMEs are poor human resource management organizations. This study could, therefore, argue that lack of finance prevents SMEs owner/managers from setting up HR departments within their enterprises. Another possible explanation could be related to the size of the enterprise in terms of the number of employees. For instance, some SMEs could only engage in formal HRM practices when they have up to one hundred employees (Baron, Hannan, & Burton, 1999).

Table 1: HRM Department

HRM department	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	37	11.5
No	286	88.5
Total	323	100

5.1 Human Resource Management Practices

In this section, the study sought to find out the HRM practices among SMEs in the country. As pointed out by Rowden and Ahmad (2000), the development of human resources within a company, be it micro, small, medium or large, seems to be vital to increasing production and closing the gap between the level of workers' skills and present and future needs. In this regard, as Table 2 reveals, when owner/managers were asked for their views on how HRM practices contribute to the success of their enterprises, 51.4% disagree with the statement that recruitment and selection techniques help them to identify, attract and choose suitable personnel to meet their human resource requirements. The foregoing response appears to be in contrast with the findings of Cassel et al. (2002); (Ongori, 2010). They intimated that recruitment and selection are the most widely used HRM practice amongst SMEs and contribute greatly to the success and sustainability of SMEs. Regarding recruiting employees based on qualification, a total of 34.4% disagree with this statement. This is confirmed in a semi-structured interview where one respondent indicated as follows: *"I do not recruit employees based on academic qualification rather I look at the employee's physical ability to do the work"*. Contrary to this finding, Oduro-Nyarko (2013), study showed that 95% of SMEs recruit based on qualifications. The table also shows that 38.2% of the owner/managers use seminars, coaching, apprenticeship and on the job training to update the knowledge and skills of the employees.

However, fieldwork observations revealed that most of the training within the SME sector in Sierra Leone is informal probably due to financial constraints to train employees externally. This is in line with Loan-Clarke et al. (1999), Kotey and Folker, (2007), Storey (1994), (MacMahon & Murphy, 1999) and Hill and Stewart (2000) whose findings showed that training within the SME sector is informal, on the job training and little provision if any is made for management development. On recruitment, the study revealed that a fairly large number of owner/managers recruit informally. This was confirmed with 44.5% of the SMEs indicating that they recruit employees through friends and relatives. This finding is line with those of Cassel et al. (2002); Carroll et al. (1999); Asiedu-Appiah et al (2013); Oduro-Nyarko (2013) whose findings showed that word of mouth seems to be the appropriate channel for employing the right person(s). Alternatively, 44.4% disagreed with the statement that they recruit family members without taking into consideration their qualifications and contributions to the enterprise(s).

On performance appraisal, 57% agreed with the statement. This is in line with the findings of Asiedu-Appiah et al. (2013). They found that 73.3% of owner/ managers carry out performance appraisal. Some of the owner/managers (60.3%) made sure that employees are aware of formalized rules. For instance, in a semi-structured interview, one respondent stated that *"As a lay down rule, an employee should not enter the operation room; the charging cards should not be lost. If a charging card is lost the employee will pay \$2 for that"*. When the respondent was asked further to indicate how this HRM practice affects his enterprise performance, he indicated as follows: *"With this rule, customers' mobile phones are now safe and I do not pay for lost mobile phones any longer"*. As far as giving rewards is concerned, 56.1% of the SMEs offer rewards such as cash bonuses, free food, free transport or Christmas gifts to their employees so as to enable them to increase productivity. For example, in a semi-structured interview one respondent stated that *"I provide breakfast, lunch,*

cash bonus and pay employees between the 1st and 6th of every month”.

Table 2: Human Resource Management Practices

Independent Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Strongly agree
Recruitment and selection techniques	2.214	1.293	49.2%	2.2%	30.3%	14.6%	3.7%
Recruitment based on qualification	2.681	1.254	30.7%	3.7%	36.2%	25.7%	3.7%
Training through seminars, coaching, apprenticeship	2.807	1.370	31.6%	2.3%	27.9%	30.2%	8.0%
Recruiting employees through friends and relatives	2.485	1.300	37.9%	6.6%	27.6%	24.9%	3.0%
Recruiting family members without looking for qualification	2.857	3.536	32.1%	12.3%	22.5%	30.4%	2.7%
Appraise performance of employees	3.232	1.324	21.81%	1.7%	19.5%	45.6%	11.4%
Aware of formalized rules	3.29	1.306	20.7%	1.3%	17.7%	49.0%	11.3%
Giving reward	3.22	1.333	22.1%	1.3%	20.5%	44.0%	12.1%

N=323

6.0 Analysis and Discussion of the Research Findings

In Table 3, the results of the Pearson Product-moment correlation Analysis are shown. HRM practices among SMEs are vital for their success and growth. As argued by Audretsch and Thurik (2001), HRM is abundantly important in the knowledge based economy with companies facing the double challenge of the urgency for more exceptionally trained employees compounded with a shortage of qualified labour. Adequate and efficient HRM practices among SMEs might likely result in high productivity. Therefore, one sought to look at the relationship between HRM and SMEs performance (employment, wages and sales). It was, therefore, hypothesize that there could be a positive relationship between HRM and SMEs performance (employment, wages and sales). Congruent with this statement, according to Table 3 there is a significant positive relationship between HRM and SMEs performance (Sales with $r=0.150$, $p<0.01$ and employment with $r=0.137$, $p<0.01$). This is complementary to the findings of Wright et al. (1994) ; Barney (1991); Gamage (2014).They stated that HRM practices have a meaningful impact on a firm’s human and organizational resources which can be used to gain competitive advantage over competitors and improve performance. On the other hand, the relationship between HRM and wage satisfaction is not statistically significant($r=0.121$). This finding is in agreement with those of Clark and Oswald (1996) who stated that employee well-being is weakly correlated with their wages. The implication here is that the welfare of employees in Sierra Leone SMEs does not correspond to their wages. Contrary to this result, Petrescu & Simmons (2008) found a significant relationship between HRM practices and wage satisfaction.

6.1 Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data, a positive and significant relationship between HRM and SMEs performance including employment and sales was found. This highlights the fact that the extensive use of HRM practices increases employment and sales; which leads to the presumption that SMEs do follow HRM practices in spite of the fact that these practices are informal and exceptionally diverse (Abdullah, Wahab, & Shamsuddin, 2010; Julien, 1998). In this regard, the adoption of HRM practices profoundly enhances the desired changes in employment and sales. The implication here is that, the respondents perceived a relationship between efficient HRM practice and their ability to generate jobs and increase sales. Therefore, one could assume that the stronger the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance including sales and employment, the greater the influence on both variables. This implies that the use of HRM practices is likely to be well adopted by owner/managers. On the other hand, it is anticipated that SMEs with formal HRM practices are likely to observe higher sales and create more employment than those SMEs that do not engage in formal HRM practices. In relation to that, the more SMEs engage in formal HRM practices, the more likely they will impact employment and sales. In addition, SMEs that engage in formal HRM practices perceived employees as a source of

competitive advantage that is difficult to replace (Guthrie, 2001). This could also suggest that HRM practices are of significance to owner/managers in Sierra Leone that do practice them. Nonetheless, other studies have also established the same findings (Hornsby & Kuratko, 1990).

However, the finding showed a non statistically significant relationship between HRM practices and wages, which could be blamed on several factors affecting SMEs such as lack of finance, unfavourable government policies such as high taxes, corruption and so on. Another interesting reason could be that the wages in the sector are so low that employees could not meet their daily needs including food, shelter and clothing. This is confirmed by Lopez-Sintas and Martinez-Ros (1999). The authors found that in Spanish manufacturing enterprises, small enterprises pay low wages. The finding is also in consonance with those of Collings & Geoffrey (2009) who maintained that SMEs employees are paid low wages. This result too makes one to assume that low wages in the SME sector will give a competitive edge to large enterprises, thereby attracting qualified personnel to the sector, possibly leaving a qualified personnel or skilled workers desert in the SME sector.

Table 3 Pearson product-moment correlation Analysis

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables		
	SALES	EMPLOYMENT	WAGES
Human Resource Management	R=0.150(**) P=0.007	R=0.137(**) P=0.014	R=0.121 P=0.077

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

7.0 Conclusion, Contributions, Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the impact of HRM practices on SMEs performance. Following the literature review, a conceptual framework was proposed based on the resource-based theory, which looked at the HRM practices of SMEs.

In this study, there is a statistically significant relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance including sales and employment. This means that SMEs that engage in formal HRM practices are more likely to influence employment and sales. On the contrary, there is no statistical relationship between HRM practices and wage satisfaction.

This study contributes to knowledge by providing insights on the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance. It is one of the few studies ever done in Sierra Leone. It has, therefore, filled a research gap as regards HRM practices contribution to SMEs performance. Furthermore, most of the HRM studies have been limited to large enterprises with little attention to HRM practices among SMEs. This study, therefore, contributed to knowledge by researching HRM practices among SMEs in Sierra Leone.

There is no study without limitations. Hence this study is constrained by a number of limitations, both financial and non-financial. The lack of time and money and the nature of the study necessitated the study to focus on a limited number of research questions and hypotheses. Furthermore, the research was also limited by the lack of adequate sampling frames in Sierra Leone. Consequently, only one sample frame was used to identify SMEs owner/managers in the country. In addition, another weakness of the study is self-reporting, individual reporting of the survey.

In view of the aforementioned limitations of the study, several suggestions for future research are put forward. First, future research should draw randomly larger samples of SMEs in Sierra Leone to investigate the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance. Second, future research should investigate more HRM practices influencing SMEs performance. Over and above, the study has provided insight into the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance at cross sectional level. This study, therefore, suggests a longitudinal study in order to complement the findings of this research which could add a new insight on the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs performance. Also future research should determine the extent to which findings of this study could be generalised to SMEs in other countries. Referencing the literature review, it can be seen that little research has been conducted on the HRM practices among SMEs. This study, therefore, recommends further research in this area to complement the findings of this study. Finally, further research should be done using more sampling frames in order to increase the degree of representation of the sampled SMEs.

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