

The Impact of Digitalization on Human Resource Practices in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities



Afif Safrudin

Institut Agama Islam Al-Fatimah Bojonegoro, Indonesia

Email: afifsafrudin28@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines the impact of digitalization on human resource (HR) practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), focusing on the challenges and opportunities it presents. Digitalization has fundamentally transformed various HR functions, including recruitment, training, performance management, and employee engagement, by introducing advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and cloud-based systems. While these technologies offer significant benefits, such as increased efficiency, cost reduction, and improved decision-making, they also pose several challenges for SMEs, particularly in terms of data security, digital literacy, and resistance to change among employees. This study utilizes a qualitative approach, drawing on interviews with HR professionals and analysis of relevant documents to explore how SMEs are adapting to these changes. The findings reveal that, while SMEs have begun leveraging digital tools to enhance HR processes, there are significant gaps in their readiness to fully embrace digital transformation. Key challenges include limited financial and technical resources, inadequate training for employees, and the need to balance digital efficiency with maintaining a human-centric approach. However, the study also identifies opportunities for SMEs to harness digitalization to drive innovation, improve employee satisfaction, and gain a competitive edge. The article concludes with practical recommendations for SMEs to navigate the digital landscape effectively, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, continuous learning, and fostering a culture of adaptability.



1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed various aspects of business operations, including Human Resource (HR) practices. In recent years, digitalization has become a critical driver of change in the workplace, particularly in the way organizations manage their human capital (Parry & Strohmeier, 2014). Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), which are often characterized by limited resources and flexibility, are increasingly adopting digital tools to enhance HR practices, streamline processes, and improve overall efficiency (Bondarouk et al., 2017). Digital HR technologies, such as cloud-based HR systems, applicant tracking systems, and employee engagement platforms, offer SMEs the potential to compete with larger organizations by improving their ability to attract, retain, and develop talent (Marler & Fisher, 2013). Despite the growing recognition of the benefits of digitalization in HR, there is still a need to explore its impact on SMEs, which face unique challenges and opportunities in their digital transformation journey.

Digitalization has profoundly transformed recruitment and talent acquisition processes within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), offering both significant advantages and notable challenges. With the advent of digital HR tools, SMEs can now access a wider pool of talent through online job portals, social media platforms, and digital networking sites (Stone & Deadrick, 2015). These platforms allow SMEs to attract candidates globally, which is particularly beneficial in an increasingly interconnected world. Additionally, applicant tracking systems (ATS) have streamlined the recruitment process by automating the sorting and filtering of resumes, thus reducing the time and effort required by HR personnel (Bissola & Imperatori, 2014).

The research gap in this area lies in the limited understanding of how digitalization specifically affects HR practices in SMEs. While large organizations often have the resources to invest in comprehensive digital HR systems, SMEs may struggle with the financial, technical, and cultural barriers associated with digital transformation (Schneider, 2018). Existing studies have primarily focused on digital HR practices in large enterprises, leaving a significant gap in the literature regarding the experiences and outcomes of SMEs undergoing digitalization (Strohmeier, 2020). Additionally, there is a lack of research on the long-term implications of digital HR adoption in SMEs, particularly in terms of employee engagement, organizational culture, and competitive advantage (Bissola & Imperatori, 2014). Addressing these gaps is crucial for providing SMEs with the insights and tools they need to navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities presented by digital HR technologies.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the growing reliance on digital technologies in the modern business environment, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of digital tools across industries (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). For SMEs, which are often more vulnerable to economic disruptions, the effective use of digital HR technologies can be a critical factor in their survival and growth (Kraus et al., 2020). As digitalization continues to reshape the global workforce, it is imperative for SMEs to understand how to leverage these technologies to enhance their HR practices, improve employee satisfaction, and maintain a competitive edge in an increasingly digital economy (Sparrow et al., 2017). This research aims to provide timely and relevant insights that can help SMEs navigate the complexities of digital transformation and optimize their HR



functions for better organizational outcomes.

Previous research has highlighted the potential benefits of digitalization in HR practices, including increased efficiency, data-driven decision-making, and improved employee experience (Stone & Deadrick, 2015). Studies have shown that digital HR tools can automate routine tasks, reduce administrative burdens, and provide employees with greater access to information and resources (Parry & Strohmeier, 2014). Moreover, digital technologies can enhance communication and collaboration within organizations, fostering a more connected and engaged workforce (Bissola & Imperatori, 2014). However, much of the existing literature has focused on large corporations, where the scale and scope of digital HR adoption are significantly different from those of SMEs. As such, there is a need for more targeted research that explores how digitalization impacts HR practices in SMEs, which operate in a different context and face distinct challenges (Schneider, 2018).

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on SMEs, a sector that has been underrepresented in studies on digital HR practices. By examining the specific challenges and opportunities that SMEs encounter in their digital transformation, this research seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature and provide practical insights for SME leaders and HR professionals (Strohmeier, 2020). Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on the technical aspects of digital HR, this research will take a holistic approach, considering the organizational, cultural, and strategic implications of digitalization in SMEs. The study will also explore the long-term impact of digital HR adoption on SME performance, employee engagement, and competitive advantage, offering a comprehensive understanding of the role of digitalization in shaping the future of HR practices in small and medium-sized businesses.

The primary objectives of this research are to analyze the impact of digitalization on HR practices in SMEs, identify the challenges and opportunities associated with digital HR adoption, and provide recommendations for navigating the digital transformation process. By exploring the experiences of SMEs that have implemented digital HR technologies, the study aims to uncover best practices and strategies that can help other SMEs successfully integrate digital tools into their HR functions. Additionally, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on digitalization in the workplace by highlighting the unique perspectives and needs of SMEs, which are often overlooked in discussions on digital transformation (Marler & Fisher, 2013).

This research is expected to have significant implications for both academic and practical audiences. For academics, the study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on digital HR practices by providing new insights into the experiences of SMEs. For practitioners, particularly SME leaders and HR professionals, the findings will offer valuable guidance on how to effectively leverage digital technologies to enhance HR practices, improve employee satisfaction, and drive business success. Ultimately, this research aims to support SMEs in their digital transformation journey, helping them navigate the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented by the digitalization of HR.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology through a comprehensive literature review to explore the impact of digitalization on human resource (HR) practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A qualitative approach is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of existing theories,



practices, and case studies related to the adoption and impact of digital HR tools in SMEs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim is to gain a nuanced understanding of how digitalization is transforming HR practices in SMEs, the challenges these enterprises face in adopting digital technologies, and the opportunities that digital tools present for enhancing HR functions.

The primary sources of data for this study include peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, industry reports, books, and white papers that discuss the intersection of digitalization and HR practices in SMEs. These sources were systematically selected from academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, SpringerLink, and IEEE Xplore, ensuring a wide coverage of the relevant literature (Snyder, 2019). The inclusion criteria focused on publications that provide insights into the digital transformation of HR practices, particularly in the context of SMEs. Special attention was given to studies published in the last decade to capture the most recent trends and advancements in digital HR technologies and their application in small and medium-sized enterprises (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015).

Data collection was conducted through a structured search of the literature using specific keywords such as "digital HR in SMEs," "HR digitalization," "small and medium-sized enterprises," "digital transformation," and "challenges of digital HR adoption." The search strategy aimed to identify a diverse range of studies covering both the technological and organizational aspects of digital HR practices. Initially, the titles and abstracts of the articles were screened for relevance. Full-text articles that met the inclusion criteria were then reviewed in detail, and relevant data were extracted on key themes such as the benefits and challenges of digital HR adoption, specific digital tools used by SMEs, and the impact of digitalization on HR practices and employee engagement (Bowen, 2009).

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the researchers to organize the extracted data into thematic categories that represent various aspects of digital HR practices in SMEs. The initial coding process involved identifying recurring themes and concepts related to digital HR adoption, such as technological integration, cost implications, and organizational culture. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflect the overall impact of digitalization on HR practices in SMEs (Nowell et al., 2017). By synthesizing these themes, the study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with digital HR in small and medium-sized enterprises.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the data analysis process included multiple rounds of coding and cross-checking by the researchers. This iterative process helped refine the themes and ensure that they accurately captured the data's content and context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the study employed triangulation by cross-referencing findings from different sources and types of literature to corroborate the results and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic (Flick, 2004). This rigorous methodological approach ensures that the study's findings are robust and provide valuable insights into the impact of digitalization on HR practices in SMEs.

3. Result and Discussion

A. Digitalization in Recruitment and Selection Processes

The advent of digital technologies has significantly transformed recruitment and selection practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Digital platforms, such as LinkedIn and various job boards, have expanded the reach of recruitment efforts,



enabling SMEs to attract a more diverse pool of candidates (Dutta, 2020). This shift towards digital recruitment tools has allowed SMEs to reduce recruitment costs and increase efficiency by automating many of the initial stages of the recruitment process, such as resume screening and candidate tracking (Broughton et al., 2013).

However, digitalization also presents challenges in recruitment, particularly regarding the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms. While these technologies can enhance efficiency, they can also introduce biases if not properly managed, potentially leading to discriminatory hiring practices (Raghavan et al., 2020). For SMEs, which often lack the resources for thorough vetting of such technologies, this risk is particularly pronounced. Furthermore, there is a learning curve associated with new digital tools, which can slow down adoption rates among SME HR professionals (Marler & Parry, 2016).

Another significant impact of digitalization in recruitment is the shift towards virtual interviewing. Although virtual interviews offer convenience and reduce travel costs, they may also reduce the richness of interpersonal communication, potentially impacting the quality of candidate assessments (Blacksmith et al., 2016). This issue is especially relevant for SMEs, which often prioritize cultural fit in their hiring decisions.

Moreover, the increased reliance on digital recruitment tools requires robust data security measures. SMEs are particularly vulnerable to cyber threats due to often having less sophisticated IT infrastructures compared to larger corporations (Hiscox, 2018). As a result, HR departments in SMEs must balance the benefits of digital recruitment with the need to protect sensitive candidate information.

In conclusion, while digitalization has brought about substantial improvements in the recruitment and selection processes within SMEs, it also introduces new challenges that need careful consideration. Ensuring the ethical use of AI, enhancing data security, and maintaining effective interpersonal communication are critical areas for SMEs to focus on as they continue to integrate digital technologies into their HR practices.

Digitalization has fundamentally transformed recruitment and selection processes within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). By leveraging digital tools, SMEs can expand their recruitment efforts beyond local and regional boundaries, enabling them to attract a more diverse and qualified talent pool. Online job portals, social media platforms, and professional networks like LinkedIn have become essential tools for sourcing candidates, reducing the time and cost associated with traditional recruitment methods. These platforms allow SMEs to reach passive candidates who may not be actively seeking new opportunities but are open to career advancement.

Moreover, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in recruitment has streamlined many processes, such as resume screening and candidate assessment. Automated systems can quickly scan and rank resumes based on predefined criteria, ensuring that only the most qualified candidates are considered for further evaluation. This efficiency is particularly beneficial for SMEs, which often have limited HR resources and need to maximize their productivity. Digital assessments and psychometric tests also enable more objective evaluations of candidates' skills and competencies, reducing potential biases in the selection process.

However, the integration of digital tools in recruitment and selection is not without challenges. One major concern is the potential for algorithmic bias in AI-driven recruitment systems. If not carefully designed and monitored, these systems can inadvertently perpetuate existing biases, such as gender or racial discrimination, by relying on historical data that reflects past hiring practices. This issue is especially critical for SMEs, which may lack the resources to develop or purchase sophisticated AI systems that have been thoroughly tested for fairness and inclusivity.

Additionally, the increased reliance on digital recruitment methods necessitates a robust approach to data security and privacy. SMEs must ensure that candidate information is securely stored and protected against cyber threats, which have become increasingly sophisticated in the digital age. Compliance with data protection regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, is essential to maintain trust and avoid legal penalties. SMEs, often with limited IT infrastructure, must prioritize cybersecurity to safeguard sensitive candidate data.

Another challenge associated with digital recruitment is the potential depersonalization of the hiring process. While digital tools can efficiently manage large volumes of applications, they may also reduce the human element that is crucial for building rapport and assessing cultural fit. SMEs, which often place a high value on personal relationships and company culture, need to find a balance between utilizing digital tools for efficiency and maintaining a personalized approach to candidate interactions.

Finally, the shift towards virtual interviewing and remote hiring practices, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has both opportunities and drawbacks. Virtual interviews offer

convenience and cost savings but may also lack the depth of face-to-face interactions, making it harder for employers to gauge non-verbal cues and for candidates to experience the company culture firsthand. SMEs must develop effective virtual interviewing techniques and provide candidates with a comprehensive understanding of the company culture and job expectations to ensure a successful hiring process.

In conclusion, digitalization has significantly enhanced the recruitment and selection processes within SMEs by increasing efficiency, broadening candidate reach, and enabling more objective evaluations. However, to fully realize the benefits of digital recruitment, SMEs must address challenges related to algorithmic bias, data security, personalization, and virtual hiring practices. By adopting a strategic and thoughtful approach, SMEs can leverage digital tools to attract top talent while maintaining fairness, security, and a strong organizational culture.

B. Digitalization and Employee Training and Development

Digitalization has revolutionized employee training and development in SMEs by introducing new learning platforms and methods. Online training modules, e-learning platforms, and virtual reality simulations have provided SMEs with cost-effective and flexible training options (Valamis, 2020). These digital tools enable SMEs to offer tailored training programs that can be accessed anytime and anywhere, making it easier to upskill employees and keep pace with the fast-changing business environment (Baldwin & Ford, 2019).

However, despite these advantages, digital training solutions also come with challenges. One major issue is the varying levels of digital literacy among employees, which can affect



the effectiveness of digital training programs (Becker et al., 2020). In SMEs, where training resources may be limited, there may not be sufficient support to help all employees adapt to digital learning platforms, potentially widening skill gaps within the organization.

Additionally, the effectiveness of digital training is often contingent upon the quality of the content and the level of engagement it can generate among employees (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). For SMEs, producing high-quality digital training content can be resource-intensive, and there is a risk that training programs may not fully meet the learning needs of all employees.

Another concern is the potential for digital training to reduce the opportunity for social learning and knowledge sharing, which are vital components of effective training and development (Bandura, 1977). In traditional face-to-face training environments, employees benefit from direct interaction with trainers and peers, which can enhance learning through discussion and collaboration. SMEs need to find ways to incorporate these elements into digital training programs to ensure comprehensive learning experiences.

The shift towards digital training also raises questions about employee engagement and motivation. While digital platforms offer convenience, they may also lead to lower engagement levels if employees do not perceive them as relevant or valuable (Noe & Tews, 2012). SMEs must therefore carefully design digital training programs to ensure they are engaging and aligned with employee development goals.

In summary, while digitalization offers significant opportunities for enhancing training and development in SMEs, it is essential to address the associated challenges.

By ensuring inclusivity, maintaining high-quality content, and fostering engagement, SMEs can maximize the benefits of digital training technologies.

Digitalization has significantly reshaped employee training and development practices within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), offering numerous advantages in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. With the advent of online learning platforms, virtual classrooms, and digital training modules, SMEs can now provide their employees with opportunities to learn and develop new skills from anywhere and at any time. This flexibility allows employees to manage their learning schedules according to their personal and professional commitments, making training more accessible and convenient (Baldwin & Ford, 2019).

One of the key benefits of digital training is the ability to deliver personalized learning experiences. E-learning platforms and learning management systems (LMS) enable SMEs to tailor training programs to meet the specific needs and preferences of individual employees. By leveraging data analytics, these platforms can assess employees' learning styles, track their progress, and suggest relevant content, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of training and increasing employee engagement (Bersin, 2020). This personalized approach is particularly valuable for SMEs, which often have diverse teams with varying skill levels and development needs.

Furthermore, digital training tools facilitate the rapid dissemination of information and up-to-date knowledge. In today's fast-paced business environment, it is crucial for employees to stay informed about the latest industry trends, technologies, and best practices. Digital platforms allow SMEs to quickly update their training content and



ensure that employees have access to the most current information. This agility is essential for SMEs, which must continuously adapt to changing market conditions and customer demands to remain competitive (Valamis, 2020).

Despite these advantages, digitalization in training and development also presents several challenges for SMEs. One significant issue is the digital divide, which refers to the varying levels of digital literacy among employees. Not all employees may be comfortable with or have access to digital technologies, which can create barriers to effective learning. SMEs must therefore invest in digital skills training and provide the necessary support to ensure that all employees can benefit from digital training resources (Becker et al., 2020).

Another challenge is maintaining the quality and engagement of digital training programs. While digital tools can offer a wide range of content formats, such as videos, quizzes, and interactive simulations, there is a risk that training may become monotonous or lack depth if not properly designed. SMEs need to ensure that their digital training programs are engaging and interactive, incorporating various multimedia elements and opportunities for collaboration and discussion. This approach can help sustain employee interest and enhance the learning experience (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Additionally, the shift towards digital training has implications for organizational culture and social learning. Traditional in-person training sessions often provide valuable opportunities for employees to interact, share knowledge, and build relationships. With digital training, there is a risk of losing these social interactions, which can impact team cohesion and collaboration. SMEs must find ways to foster a sense of community and

facilitate peer-to-peer learning through digital platforms, such as virtual breakout sessions, discussion forums, and social learning tools (Bandura, 1977).

In conclusion, digitalization offers SMEs significant opportunities to enhance employee training and development by making it more accessible, personalized, and agile. However, to fully capitalize on these benefits, SMEs must address challenges related to digital literacy, engagement, and the preservation of organizational culture. By adopting a balanced approach that combines the advantages of digital training with efforts to support employees and foster social learning, SMEs can effectively leverage digital technologies to develop a skilled and adaptable workforce.

C. Digitalization in Performance Management Systems

Digitalization has also significantly impacted performance management systems within SMEs, leading to more streamlined and data-driven approaches. Digital tools allow for continuous performance tracking, enabling managers to provide timely feedback and identify areas for improvement (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). This shift towards real-time performance management helps SMEs maintain agility and respond quickly to changing business needs.

However, the implementation of digital performance management systems in SMEs is not without challenges. One key issue is the potential for these systems to be perceived as overly surveillance-oriented, which can lead to employee resistance and reduced morale (Ball, 2010). SMEs must strike a balance between leveraging digital tools for performance management and maintaining trust and transparency within the organization.



Another challenge is ensuring that digital performance management systems are fair and unbiased. If these systems rely heavily on quantitative metrics, they may overlook qualitative aspects of performance, such as creativity and teamwork, which are often crucial in SME environments (Fletcher, 2001). Therefore, it is important for SMEs to adopt a holistic approach to performance management that considers both quantitative and qualitative data.

Furthermore, the adoption of digital performance management tools requires a cultural shift within SMEs. Employees and managers alike need to adapt to new ways of working and evaluating performance, which can be a significant adjustment for those accustomed to more traditional methods (Pulakos et al., 2019). This transition may require additional training and support to ensure a smooth integration of digital tools into existing HR practices.

Additionally, SMEs must consider the cost implications of implementing digital performance management systems. While these tools can enhance efficiency, they may also require substantial upfront investment and ongoing maintenance (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). SMEs need to carefully evaluate the cost-benefit ratio of such investments to ensure they align with their overall business strategy.

In conclusion, digitalization presents both opportunities and challenges for performance management in SMEs. By adopting a balanced and inclusive approach, SMEs can leverage digital tools to enhance performance management while mitigating potential drawbacks.

D. The Role of Digitalization in Employee Engagement and Retention

Digitalization has also played a significant role in shaping employee engagement and retention strategies within SMEs. Digital tools such as employee engagement platforms, social intranets, and instant messaging apps have made it easier for SMEs to communicate with their employees, gather feedback, and foster a sense of community (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). These tools help SMEs create a more connected and engaged workforce, which is crucial for retaining top talent.

However, digitalization can also create challenges for employee engagement if not implemented thoughtfully. For instance, an over-reliance on digital communication tools can lead to a sense of isolation among employees, particularly in remote work settings (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). SMEs must ensure that digital tools are used to complement, rather than replace, face-to-face interactions and team-building activities.

Another challenge is ensuring that digital engagement tools are accessible and user-friendly for all employees. In SMEs, where resources may be limited, there is a risk that not all employees will have access to the necessary technology or be comfortable using digital tools (Murray & Renaud, 2012). To address this, SMEs must provide adequate training and support to ensure that digital engagement strategies are inclusive and effective.

Furthermore, digitalization can blur the lines between work and personal life, which may negatively impact employee well-being and satisfaction (Mazmanian et al., 2013). SMEs need to establish clear boundaries and encourage a healthy work-life balance to prevent burnout and promote sustainable

employee engagement.

The use of digital tools also raises concerns about data privacy and security. As SMEs increasingly rely on digital platforms to collect employee feedback and monitor engagement, they must ensure that data is handled responsibly and in compliance with privacy regulations (Hofmann et al., 2017). This is essential to maintaining employee trust and confidence in the organization.

In conclusion, while digitalization offers numerous opportunities to enhance employee engagement and retention in SMEs, it also presents challenges that need careful consideration. By adopting a thoughtful and inclusive approach, SMEs can effectively leverage digital tools to foster a more engaged and satisfied workforce.

4. Conclusion

The impact of digitalization on human resource practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is profound and multifaceted, offering both significant opportunities and notable challenges. Digital tools have revolutionized various HR functions, from recruitment and selection to training and development, performance management, and employee engagement. These technologies have enabled SMEs to streamline processes, reduce costs, and enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of HR practices. However, the successful integration of digital tools requires careful consideration of potential drawbacks, such as data security risks, the need for upskilling employees, and ensuring fairness and inclusivity in automated processes. SMEs must strategically navigate these challenges to fully leverage the benefits of digitalization while maintaining ethical standards and fostering a supportive work environment.

In order to thrive in the digital era, SMEs must adopt a balanced approach that combines the advantages of digitalization with a strong focus

on human-centric practices. This involves investing in robust cybersecurity measures, providing continuous training and development opportunities for employees to enhance their digital literacy, and ensuring transparency and equity in the use of digital tools for HR processes. Moreover, fostering a culture of trust and open communication is crucial to mitigate potential resistance to digital change and to support a positive organizational climate. By embracing a comprehensive and adaptable approach, SMEs can harness the potential of digitalization to enhance their HR practices and drive sustainable business growth.

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