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Human Resource Management Practices for Sustainability of Ghanaian Small and Medium Enterprises

Charles Bandari
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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Charles Bandari

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Human Resource Management Practices for Sustainability of Ghanaian Small and
Medium Enterprises

by

Charles Bandari

MBA, University of Cape Coast, 2012

BS, Central University, 2009

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

June 2020

Abstract

In 2018, the failure rate of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Ghana was approximately 75%. SME owners and managers who refuse to recognize HRM strategies as a way for business sustainability risk closure. Grounded in Blau's social exchange theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore human resource strategies leaders of SMEs use to sustain their businesses. Participants were 4 SME leaders in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana who successfully used human resource management strategies to promote the sustainability of their businesses. Data were collected from semistructured face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and company documents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Six themes emerged: human resources as critical assets, training and development, compensation and benefits, recruitment and selection, involvement in decision making, and the God factor. Business leaders should critically consider employees as the most important asset of the organization and provide appropriate compensation and training strategies for the sustainability of their business. The implications for positive social change are the potential for SME leaders to create more jobs, to reduce unemployment, and contribute to the local economy.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my twin boys and their sister, Wemoyeh, Deyeh Bandari, and Perrah Bandari. The encouragement and support from Perrah, the night vigil with Wemoyeh and Deyeh gave me the necessary boost to aspire to the end of the DBA journey to inspire them to obtain higher heights in education, make more positive social change than me. To Rev. Dr. Mensah Otabil, you might not know how you inspired me through your motivational speeches which awakened my academic consciousness to pursue a master's degree which then paved the way for the successful completion of my doctoral program; your motivational speeches survive on. To all successful SME leaders in Tamale and Ghana in general, who recognize human resource as a critical asset for business sustainability and who work to create jobs and improve the quality of life of their employees, I dedicate this study to you as well.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
Section 1: Foundation of the Study.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Problem Statement.....	2
Purpose Statement.....	2
Nature of the Study.....	3
Research Question	4
Interview Questions	4
Conceptual Framework.....	5
Operational Definitions.....	6
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations.....	7
Assumptions.....	7
Limitations	7
Delimitations.....	8
Significance of the Study	8
Contribution to Business Practice.....	8
Implications for Social Change.....	9
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	9
Organization of the Literature Review	10

Application to the Applied Business Problem	10
The Theoretical Concept of HRM Practices and Sustainability	11
Small and Medium Enterprises	14
Relevant HRM Practices	18
Sustainability.....	30
HRM Activities in Sustainability.....	37
Communication in Sustainability.....	39
Training and Development in Sustainability	40
Employee Engagement in sustainability.....	41
Employee reward plans in sustainability	42
Recruitment and retention in sustainability	43
Transition	43
Section 2: The Project.....	45
Purpose Statement.....	45
Role of the Researcher	46
Participants.....	47
Research Method and Design	49
Research Method	49
Research Design.....	51
Population and Sampling	52

Ethical Research.....	54
Data Collection Instruments	57
Data Collection Technique	59
Data Organization Technique	62
Data Analysis	62
Reliability and Validity.....	65
Reliability.....	65
Validity	66
Transition and Summary.....	69
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change	70
Introduction.....	70
Presentation of the Findings.....	71
Theme 1: Human Resource as Critical Asset	72
Theme 2: Training and Development	74
HR Challenge in Training and Development.....	76
Theme 3: Compensation and Benefits	78
Theme 4: Recruitment and Selection	80
Theme 5: Involvement in Decision Making	82
Theme 6: God Factor	85
Applications to Professional Practice	88

Implications for Social Change.....	89
Recommendations for Action	90
Recommendations for Further Study	93
Reflections	94
Conclusion	95
References.....	97
Appendix A: Interview Protocol.....	118
Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Protocol	120

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Key Themes	71
Table 2. Theme 1: Human Resource as Critical Asset	73
Table 3. Theme 2: Training and Development	77
Table 4. Theme 3: Compensation and Benefits	80
Table 5. Theme 4: Recruitment and Selection.....	82
Table 6. Theme 5: Involvement in Decision Making	85
Table 7. Theme 6: God Factor in SME Sustainability.....	87

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a significant source of employment and economic growth in emerging and advanced economies. In Ghana, SMEs account for about 92% of all businesses (Mensah & Nyadu-Ado, 2012). Economists and researchers see SMEs as the engines of growth, development, and poverty mitigation (Neagu, 2016). Because SMEs are a significant source of employment, equally significant is that managers and owners recognize human resource management (HRM) practices as vital to SME survival and sustainability. HRM practices are well established in larger organizations. Therefore, the application of human resources (HR) practices could also apply in SMEs to ensure the element of *fit* is not abandoned but rather a necessity for SMEs to stay competitive for their survival and sustainability (Abraham, Kaliannan, Mohan, & Thomas, 2015). My objective for this qualitative study is to provide SME managers and owners insight into HRM practices for sustainability in a competitive business environment.

Background of the Problem

SMEs are the backbones of economic development in both developed and underdeveloped economies. For example, according to Fox (2013), 99% of the businesses in the United States were classified as small businesses. Similarly, in Ghana, SMEs account for 92% of all businesses (Mensah & Nyadu-Ado, 2012). SMEs have increased in importance because macroeconomic policies involving public sector initiatives have failed to resolve or reduce the spread of poverty in Africa (International Monetary Fund,

2001). This failure has prompted most international development agencies to redirect some of their attention to the micro level (e.g., individual, group, and small businesses).

In the context of the competitive business environment, SME entrepreneurs can create a competitive advantage when they possess or develop valuable, rare, inimitable, and organized resources (Boohene & Asuinura, 2011). Recognition of the importance of people within an organization underpins the HRM function. Researchers must assess the actual perception of SME entrepreneurs on the practices of HRM and the influence these practices have on the performance of SMEs.

Problem Statement

The inefficient use of HRM practices by managers of SMEs contributes to the high failure rate of SMEs in Ghana (Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016). In 2018, the failure rate of SMEs in Ghana was approximately 75% (Awal, 2018). The general business problem is the inefficient use of HRM practices by managers of SMEs leads to business liquidation. The specific business problem is some SME managers lack HRM strategies for business sustainability beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore HRM strategies SME managers use for business sustainability beyond 5 years. The target population is four managers and owners of two organizations in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana who have implemented HRM strategies to maintain business sustainability beyond 5 years. The social change implications are (a) the potential increase of employment opportunities in the Tamale metropolitan area and (b) improvement in the working

conditions of employees leading to poverty reduction in the study area. The findings of the study may be useful to the HRM department of the metropolitan district, HRM professionals, and the SME sector of the Ghanaian economy.

Nature of the Study

The three methods of research available to researchers are (a) qualitative method, (b) quantitative method, and (c) mixed method (Hesse-Biber, 2016). The qualitative research method is suitable for understanding human behavior from the perspective of the informant's lived experience (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). The appropriate method for this study was the qualitative approach because the aim was to understand the experiences of the owner/managers of SMEs on the use of HRM practices and explore how these HRM practices are developed and linked to the thriving business world. The use of the quantitative method entails the collection of data to examine relationships between variables (Yin, 2014). A researcher would find it difficult to obtain data needed for a study of the lived experience of the owner/manager of SMEs using a quantitative method. A mixed method study entails the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Yardley and Bishop (2016) described a mixed method research investigation as the amalgamation of a qualitative and quantitative method that requires extensive research and gives robust results compared to the potential weakness in the individual methodologies. The mixed method also requires considerable time and resources (Swartz et al., 2016). Neither the quantitative nor mixed method was appropriate for this study because my study did not require data collection to examine the relationship between variables.

Onwuegbuzie and Byers (2014) suggested three basic types of qualitative method designs: (a) case study design, (b) phenomenology design, and (c) ethnographic design. Researchers use a case study to illuminate a holistic real world perspective, such as in studying enterprise and management processes (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) stated that a case study design within a qualitative method gives a vivid view of the experiences of people. A qualitative case study can delve deeply into the activities, programs, or processes of an enterprise or individual. The multiple case study design was appropriate for this study in which I explored participant perspectives that accurately reflected the HRM practices and strategies used to sustain participants' businesses beyond 5 years. Corby, Taggart, and Cousins (2015) posited that a phenomenological design is used for studying a unique situation, exploring human experiences over an extended period, and discovering what meaning participants give to such experiences. The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because my study is not of a unique situation. The ethnographic design involves the researcher collecting data while exploring cultural beliefs, feelings, and other relationships of the study participants (Corby et al., 2015). The ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study because I did not plan to involve myself in the cultural beliefs of people to collect data to answer my research question.

Research Question

The central research question is, What HRM practices do SME managers use for business sustainability beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. What HRM practices have you used to sustain your business?

2. What recruitment and selection strategies have you used to attract potential employees?
3. What training and development strategies have you used to retain quality talent in your business beyond 5 years?
4. How did you use these strategies to ensure the sustainability of the business beyond 5 years?
5. What HRM challenges have you experienced?
6. What HRM strategies did you use to address the challenges?
7. What other information do you think is relevant to this study, but not covered in these questions?

Conceptual Framework

I chose the concept of social exchange theory to underlie this doctoral study. According to Blau (1964), social exchange is the voluntary actions of individuals motivated by the expected returns for their engagement. Based on Blau's social exchange concept, Cosmides (1987) posited the successful engagement of individuals for mutual benefit involves social exchange cooperation by which humans can solve problems and do so with efficiency.

HRM is the most valuable resource of the organization in the concept of social exchange (Armstrong, 2009). Organizational performance largely depends on the people of the organization and their ability to adapt to changes and gain a competitive advantage for firm sustainability. If an appropriate range of human resource policies, innovation, and processes are developed and implemented efficiently, HR practices will make a

substantial impact on firm performance and sustainability. Dembek, Singh, and Bhakoo, (2016) stated that the case for an association between employees and organizational performance is based on the efficient deployment of HRM practices.

The efficient deployment of human resource benefits depends on the application of a distinctive combination of practices, innovative recruitment, and selection procedures, or the use of a consistent set of human resource practices (Dembek et al., 2016). Concepts from HRM literature complement the social exchange theory, which includes the tenets of social exchange and a resource based view embedded in the elements of HRM practices, such as recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation, motivation, and employee retention for better firm performance and sustainability (Vui-Yee, 2015).

Operational Definitions

Balanced market mix: A balanced market mix is the combination of internal capabilities and stakeholders' preference and customer behavior, as well as current trends in the operational business industry to gain competitive advantage (Shields & Shelleman, 2015).

High performance work system (HPWS): HPWS is a working system wherein employees' voices enhance organizational creativity and innovation, leading to sustained competitive advantage (Rasheed, Shahzad, Conroy, Nadeem, & Siddique, 2017).

Northern Ghana: Northern Ghana refers to the northern territory of Ghana broadly from the Brong-Ahafo region to the three northern regions, but specifically refers

to the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions, considered the poorest regions of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of a study offer a framework for readers' understanding. Each of the components frames independent dynamics relevant to the study. The collaboration of assumptions, limitations, and delimitations increases the transparency of a researcher's intent in a study (Singh, 2015). In the following subsections, I identified issues relevant to this study.

Assumptions

Assumptions are compelling factors researchers trust to be accurate but cannot verify (Grant, 2014). The appropriate procedures of the research method and design can mitigate the impact of assumptions and minimize the potential challenges. My first assumption for this study was the selected SME managers and owners would give their maximum cooperation and freely honestly share their experiences during the interview process. My second assumption was that the selected managers and owners of SMEs in the Tamale metropolitan area had used HRM practices to sustain enterprises beyond 5 years. In addition to the above assumptions, I assumed the findings of this study would link SME sustainability to HRM practices in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana.

Limitations

According to Yin (2014), limitations are actions out of the investigator's control. Limitations represent the potential weakness in the study, which could affect the accuracy of the findings. The first limitation of this study was the small number of participants

eligible for purposeful selection. The second limitation was whether the study participants could remember events with accuracy and be honest in their responses. Last, a limitation could be the short time limit of the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations in a qualitative study are limitations the researcher imposes on the study (Svensson, 2016). The first delimitation was the purposeful selection of two (or more for saturation) SME owners and managers for my research. The second delimitation of my study was the exclusion of managers and owners of SMEs who did not sustain their businesses for more than 5 years.

Significance of the Study

HRM is critical to the sustainability of SMEs because HRM will ensure the effective implementation of the objectives of the business to ensure the survival of the business. SMEs are, therefore, central and contribute significantly to the economies of both developed and developing countries (Maksimov, Wang, & Lou, 2017).

Contribution to Business Practice

The significance of the study is the potential application of the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations on SME HRM management and development strategies. The research findings could significantly help managers of SMEs to retain a better workforce, increase profits, and be competitive through the implementation of best practices of HRM for sustainability. The research conclusions and findings could contribute to the body of knowledge in SME management and development. The recommendations of the study could also give insight into future research by students and

practitioners, as well as managers of SMEs, about the state of human resource practices in SMEs within the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana.

Implications for Social Change

The study implications for positive social change include the potential for SME sustainability through better performance and the creation of jobs that could contribute to poverty reduction in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana. By increasing the short- to long-term sustainability rate of SMEs using motivated, loyal employees and customers, the potential is increased to attract credit for the growth of the business (Amoah & Amoah, 2018). The possible social change includes an increase in the long-term sustainability of SMEs, which can contribute to employment creation and reduce social vices that result from unemployment.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This review of professional and academic literature of this qualitative multiple case study focused on issues of HRM practices contributing to SMEs sustainability. In this literature review, I reviewed the conceptual framework, and with scholarly analysis, examined the areas that related to the study, which included (a) discussion theory of the conceptual framework, (b) SMEs, (c) relevant HRM practices, (d) performance and sustainability. Wolcott (2014) posited that the review of the literature is organized for researchers to link the research to the conceptual framework and method that complement and magnify the study.

Organization of the Literature Review

The professional and academic literature review was organized using a significant amount of literature from scholarly and peer-reviewed journal articles. Books and dissertations also helped to answer the research question, what HRM practices managers of SMEs used to sustain business beyond 5 years? I organized the literature in a manner that provides a review of some popular theories and relevant topics to examine the determinants of HRM practices in SMEs. To locate articles, books, and dissertations for this literature review, I consulted the Walden University online library, which contains several databases (e.g., ProQuest, ScienceDirect Sage publications, Emerald management journals, and EBSCOhost), and Google Scholar.

My search criteria included the following keywords and phrases: *HRM practices, small and medium enterprises, strategic management practices, important assets, recruitment, training, talent management, the competitive advantage of SMEs, performance, competitive environment, and human capital*. Also included in the literature review process were books, dissertations, websites, government, and corporate publications.

This study included 137 references. Following the DBA doctoral study requirement, 120 represent 89% of the sources are peer-reviewed, and 11, representing 8.15%, are from other (books, corporate government, and websites) sources.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the HRM strategies that managers and owners of SMEs have implemented to sustain their business

5 years or more. Managers and owners of SMEs can use the findings of this study to increase their awareness and understanding of the relevant HRM practices that could enhance and sustain their businesses. HRM practices may guide managers and owners of SMEs in resolving many of the human resource challenges faced in their enterprises. Sustained application of the findings of this study might also help managers and owners choose the specific HRM practices strategic to their operation.

The Theoretical Concept of HRM Practices and Sustainability

Researchers have developed several theories and models to examine the determinants of HRM practices in organizations, including SMEs. The concept underlying this investigation is the social exchange theory propounded by Blau (1964) and the current theories of HRM that are proposed to better understand the value of theories in examining HRM practices in SMEs. Some of these models include the resource-based theory, the behavioral perspective, and the open systems theory.

The social exchange theory

The successful engagement of individuals for mutual benefit involves social exchange cooperation by which humans can solve problems and do so with efficiency. According to Blau (1964), social exchange is the actions of individuals voluntarily taken and motivated by the expected returns they may obtain. The concept of social exchange theory is further corroborated by Armstrong (2009), who posited that the assumption underpinning the practice of HRM is that the most valuable resource of the organization is the people. Organizational performance and sustainability goals depend on the people of the organization and their ability to adapt to changes, with appropriate HRM practices,

to gain a competitive advantage for firm sustainability. If a proper range of human resource policies, innovation, and processes are developed and implemented, HRM will make a substantial impact on firm sustainability. In line with Blau's social exchange theory, several other theories have emerged to collaborate with the social exchange theory.

Additional research has been done that expounds upon and even contradicts, Blau's (1964) social exchange theory. Karen (1977) posited that in the generality of the organic world view, several organizational relationships (enterprise and corporate) depend and interpenetrate one another, thereby creating a network of vital social exchange in the organization for the mutual benefit of both the employer and the employee. Karen argued that Blau's work limited the application of the social exchange concept to only actions that are based on rewarding reactions from others. For example, an employee gets paid only when work is done. However, mutual benefit is contingent on a social exchange that is interactive and caring. Relations between two parties should be on mutual reinforcement based on a series of transactions within an exchange relationship, which consist of voluntary transactions involving the transfer or exchange of resources (Karen, 1977). Extending the social exchange framework to sustainable high performance organizations, Tremblay and Simard (2005) stated that successful organizations had established positive relationships with their employees who, by reciprocating, manage to create an organizational climate of mutual, social, and economic exchanges for the long-term sustainability of the organization.

Resource-based theory. The entry into the theoretical discussions of strategic HRM comes from the organizational economics and strategic management literature, which is termed the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991). Because the emergence of strategy is a well-accepted area in the field of management, industrial organization strategists have relied on a single framework (i.e., strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats) to structure their research (Barney, 1991). Significant contributions to the strategy literature have centered on the externally focused portions of competitive advantage. Because of the unsatisfactory nature of the static equilibrium model of industrial organization economics that has dominated the strategic field, researchers are revisiting old theories of profit and competition and firm sustainability (Grant, 1991).

For a firm's resource to provide sustained competitive advantages, four criteria must be attributable to the resource: (a) the resource must add positive value to the firm; (b) the resource must be unique and rare among current and potential competitors; (c) the resource must be imperfectly imitable, and (d) the resource cannot be substituted with another resource by competing firms. Campbell and Park (2016) suggested that the resource-based theory helps to determine small business performance across several industries. Considering resources such as social capital, entrepreneurship, orientation, and intellectual capital, along with selected HRM practices, contribute significantly to small business sustained competitive advantage.

Small and Medium Enterprises

The contribution of SMEs to the economic development and growth of Ghana cannot be underestimated. In Africa, SMEs comprise more than 90% of businesses providing more than 50% of employment (Kamunge, Njeru, & Tirimba, 2014), yet about 40% of SMEs are unsustainable beyond 5 years of their formation (Amoako, 2013). In the United States of America, SMEs represent 99.9% of employer firms and provide 48% of the private sector employees; however, 50% of new SMEs are not sustainable within the first 5 years of operation (Turner & Endres, 2017).

The growing attention regarding HRM practices by entrepreneurs of SMEs is an emerging trend and an important area for empirical study. Stewart and Hoell (2016) produced evidence for the link between people management, firm performance, and sustainability. Stewart and Hoell argued that the effectiveness of human resource practices, particularly employee selection procedures, performance appraisals, rewards and benefits management, and employee training and development, often have a direct bearing on organizational productivity and performance. Galea (2012) stated that the conceptual framework provided a lens to understand the context of the doctoral study better. The social exchange theory is based on a central premise that the exchange of social, material, and economic resources is a fundamental form of human interaction in the organization resulting in positive performance and sustainability.

SME performance is measured as growth in sales and profit, meeting budget goals, low staff turnover, staff commitment, and punctuality (Yazdanfar & Öhman, 2015). Performance, among other factors, may lead to SMEs' sustainability, the positive

interaction and appropriate exchanges between owners and managers of SMEs, and employee enhancement of the economic growth of both parties leading to creativity, innovation, competitive advantage, and sustainability.

The dynamic role of SMEs in developing countries as engines through which developing countries can achieve their growth objectives has long been recognized (Masarira & Msweli, 2013). Irrespective of the significant role that SMEs play in most economies, about 40% to 75% of SMEs suffer failure because of low or poor performance in profit and dissolve business in the first 5 years of existence (Amoako, 2013). Extensive research regarding HRM practices in big organizations has been conducted. However, inadequate attention has been given to SMEs, especially in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana. Some past research suggested the need for further validation of HRM practices in small firms (Heneman & Berkley, 1999). The success of any organization, small, medium, or large, is highly influenced by the caliber of its human resource (HR), which, in turn, is affected by the organization's HRM practices.

SMEs as defined in Ghana. Definitions of SMEs vary among countries and continents. In Ghana, various definitions have been given for SMEs by different bodies: The National Board for Small Scale Industries (NBSSI) defined SMEs as enterprises with a business turnover of USD200,000 and above and not more than five million USD (Brantie, 2017). The Venture Capital Trust Fund Act 2004, Act 680 defined SME as an activity, industry, or project undertaking, or any economic activity that employs more than 100 persons and whose total asset base, excluding land and building, does not exceed one million USD (Daily Graphic, 2006).

In the countries of the European Union (EU), SME is defined based on the number of employees. Firms with 0-9 employees are considered microenterprises; those with 10-99 employees are small enterprises, and firms with 100-499 employees are medium enterprises (Kisseh, 2017). The EU definition seems to emphasize the number of employees instead of several criteria. The U.S. Small Business Administration (2016) defined SMEs as a small business firm with fewer than 500 employees that is independently owned and operated, organized for profit, and not dominant in its field.

The definition of SME in Ghana also varies from one agency to the other. However, the most commonly used definition in Ghana is the number of employees in the enterprise (Kayanula & Quartey, 2000). The value of fixed assets owned by the firm is also used as an alternative criterion for defining SMEs. A definition given by the Regional Project on Enterprise Development Ghana manufacturing survey paper in 2002, classified firms into (a) micro-enterprise, less than five employees; (b) small enterprise, 5–29 employees; (c) medium enterprise, 30–99 employees (Teal, 2002). From the discussion on the various definition of SMEs, the common principle that runs through the descriptions is the number of employees for micro, small, and medium enterprises. For this study, the definition of SMEs contained in the Regional Project on Enterprise Development Ghana manufacturing survey paper is the most appropriate.

Human resource management in small and medium enterprises. The most valuable asset of an organization that needs constant maintenance for competitive advantage and sustainability is the human resource function of the organization, which is often overlooked by SMEs. Nolan and Garavan (2016) reviewed existing literature on

managing people in small firms. They provided a useful summary of HRM practices relating to recruitment and selections, training and development, compensation and benefits, and other human resource development practices. Nolan and Garavan emphasized in their review that staffing in SMEs is vital for the sustainability of the firm but also problematic for managers and owners of SMEs. SMEs have focused more on transactional rewards systems than the training of employees. Additionally, formal appraisals are usually not done in SMEs.

Organizations use a wide range of HRM practices, and yet others use a limited range of HRM practices. According to Martin, Mckelvie, and Lumpkin (2016), HRM practices in SMEs of all sizes have stagnated for more than a decade. The authors' examination of US SMEs demonstrated that HRM practices related to recruitment, selection, training, and development are common in more than 70% of SMEs. However, HRM practices related to the incentive plan, performance appraisal, and job analysis are less implemented in SMEs employing 1-50 employees.

Langwell and Heaton (2016) disclosed that recruitment and selection procedures are primarily used by 60% of SMEs, followed by performance appraisal systems, which are used to an average of 58% of SMEs. The least used HRM practices by SMEs were those related to employee rewards, such as incentive schemes, which were used by an average of 40% of SMEs (Langwell & Heaton, 2016). In Ghana, the unsustainable nature of some small business validates the posit by Langwell and Heaton, that employee rewards and other incentives are often least considered as a critical part of running the business. The ingredients for SME performance and sustainability can, therefore, be rooted in

HRM practices of decentralized decision-making, overall employee development, appropriate rewards, and incentive systems as practiced in the larger firms.

Small and medium enterprise performance. Just as in the case of SME definition, Anderson (2010) stated that there is no universal definition of performance, and there is no agreement on the suitability indicators for small firm performance. From a process perspective, performance involves the process of transformation from inputs to outputs to accomplish a specific task, whereas, from an economic perspective, performance focuses on the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization in managing their cost and outcome. Shafeek (2016) described performance as a leadership ability to achieve organizational goals by using resources efficiently and effectively to sustain the organization in a competitive manner resulting in the firm's performance concerns of effectiveness, productivity, efficiency, and factors of the firm that measure against the intended output or performance.

In summary, SME performance can be measured at several levels (individuals, service units, organizations, and partners), and these can be linked to various dimensions, both internal (innovation, growth, and profitability) and external (impact on the community or the environment). Measuring performance in SMEs may also require some indicators related to the strategic and sustainable objectives of the enterprise.

Relevant HRM Practices

Some of the HRM practices applicable to organizations are recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and benefits, performance appraisal, involvement in decision marketing, and more. Delery and Gupta (2016) stated HRM

practices had witnessed a significant improvement from 1990. These HRM practices are well established in larger organizations where the appropriate combination of HRM strategies contributes significantly to firm performance and sustainability. The statement may be accurate; however, the empirical proof has no evidence to keep pace with the theoretical evolution of HRM practices by SMEs as compared to the more prominent organizations (Delery & Gupta, 2016). The implementation of strategic HRM practices with the combination of other strategic factors such as appropriate financial management and innovative services by managers of SMEs will ensure better performance of their businesses and sustainability for competitive advantage (Rao & Mohan, 2017).

Recruitment and selection. Recruitment and selection involve attracting candidates to fill the positions in an organizational structure (Wehrich & Koontz, 1994). Recruitment and selection are best based on a transparent and impartial process, subject to open competition among potential applicants, and without regard to gender, race, color, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation, nor to the ethnic or social origin or nationality. Rao and Mohan (2017) agreed with Wehrich and Koontz (1994) on recruitment and selection, who stated that managers of SMEs must adhere to the recruitment regulations of the country of operations. For example, managers and owners of SMEs should be careful not to recruit an employee without a working permit. According to Ekwoaba, Ikeije, and Ufoma (2015), recruitment and selection are the most important tasks a company can do to ensure the right types of people by hiring the right kinds of individuals performing the right task at the right place. Florea and Mihai (2014) elaborated on the human factor as the key to success in an organization. The authors

believed that attracting, recruiting, and maintaining the right personnel with proper skills, knowledge, and competence may increase the performance and, subsequently, the sustainability of the organization. Florea and Mihai used the Kalman filter on a new area of human resource recruitment and selection, which is the well-known model used in engineering or finance. There are two major methods of recruitment and selection: (a) internal recruitment and (b) external recruitment (Ekwoaba, Ikeije, & Ufoma, 2015). Akuamoah, Amedagbui, Buabasah, Yao, and Letsa-Agbozoseph (2016) posited internal recruitment and selection include job posting on the organization's notice boards, to inform all employees and to allow for open competition.

The importance of the recruitment and selection process in an organization is to analyze all applicants to assess their skills that best fit the vacancy aimed at the success and sustainability of the organization. Also, a good selection process will bring those people trained with better capabilities and different innovations. However, the attempt to attract, compensate, and motivate employees is an expensive venture for some SMEs (Abraham et al., 2015). The Kalman filter, a series of measurements observed over some time, can be used to estimate dynamic interaction of internal and external factors, the level of qualification, competence, and skills, knowledge, business strategy, technological change, social, and economic situations. These factors are necessary for a better social exchange within the organization and an organization's competitive advantage.

The recruitment and selection manager or the manager and owner of SMEs must be aware of their organization's sustainability goals to attract candidates interested in sustainable issues, and they must communicate how the goals differentiate the

organization from other companies. Langwell and Heaton (2016) noted that human resource has a significant impact on sustainability implementation by identifying key attributes new employees should have and hiring workers that exhibit those qualifications. When managers and owners can position their enterprises on sustainability initiatives, they can attract the best applicants, ensuring a culture that promotes sustainability. The secret review of the records of employees and giving the jobs to chosen employees and finally, an announcement to employees and employee associations (unions) about vacancies is an appropriate practice to avoid conflict and promote transparency in the recruitment and selection process.

Employees and unions can inform friends, relations, and colleagues about employment vacancy availability. Akuamoah et al. (2016) suggested these methods of recruitment could work well for filling low-paid positions in the organization. Further, a policy of internal recruitment is superior to a policy that looks outside the boundaries of the organization because it allows individual development. In this process, employees have the right to advance in their jobs and should have first consideration when job openings occur. Filling a job opening from within the firm has the advantages of stimulating preparation for possible transfer or promotion, increasing the general level of morale, and providing more information about job candidates through analyses of work histories within the organization. Florea and Mihai (2014) emphasized that external recruitment injects fresh ideas and perhaps creativity and innovation from the outside into the organization. Harris and McMahan (2015) supported Florea and Mihai and stated that organizations are duty bound to recruit and retain the most valuable, resourceful,

efficient, and productive workforce for optimal benefits. Based on the findings of Florea and Mihai and Harris and McMahan, the quality of staff in an organization has a direct influence on organizational effectiveness and sustainability.

Training and development. Training and development are defined as activities planned to assist the learning related to job knowledge, skills, and employees' behaviors (Khan et al., 2016). Mpofu and Hlatywayo (2015) posited training as the use of systematic and planned instruction activities to promote learning. Training involves the use of formal processes to impart knowledge and help people acquire the skills necessary to perform their jobs satisfactorily. Well-trained employees can share their knowledge and use their creativity to produce or serve a product to customers and understand the system development of product or service in the organization.

For institutional memory, organizations need to be creative in seeking to manage and maintain the tacit knowledge gained by employees for the growth of the organization. Grant (1996) explored the knowledge-based theory and the coordination mechanisms through which firms integrate the unique knowledge of their employees, focusing on the opinions of the members of an organization and the contribution to the success of the organization. Human resource managers should have an open door policy with employees to allow them to contribute positively to achieve the goals of the organization. The primary role of an organization is knowledge application rather than knowledge creation (Grant, 1996). Knowledge resides within an individual; the knowledge-based approach increases organizational innovation and HRM practices, which will assist the

organization for success and solid grounds for a competitive advantage when knowledge is shared.

Training and development are an important HRM strategy in small firms, but providing formal training is still overlooked by some managers and owners of SMEs in Africa and some other parts of the world (Rabie, Cant, & Wiid, 2016). The argument may be valid because most employers often underestimate the benefit and cost of training to small firms, and some managers and owners consider training not worthwhile. Rabie et al. (2016) stated in most developing countries, the government provides platforms of training to assist SMEs development in managerial, financial, and technical training. Given the importance of training and development in small firms, SMEs must grab such opportunities and take the initiative to improve as well as update their employees' knowledge and skills to produce superior output. It is not surprising to state that training and development would strategically improve SMEs performance leading to SME competitive advantage and long-term sustainability (Mann, 2016).

Training, when successful, will reflect in productivity: productivity would increase, there would be a reduction in accidents on the job, and the end profits of the organization would be maximized. Profit is the goal of every employer. Dessler (2003) summed up how training and development influences corporate performance by arguing that developing human capital through continuing training may increase the productive output from each employee either through improvement in skill level or improvement in morale and job satisfaction.

The focus of training is on practical skills and is concerned with applying and implementing techniques and processes. Training is investing in people to enable them to perform well and empower them to make the best use of their natural abilities. The objectives of training are to develop the skills and competencies of employees to improve their performance, to help people grow within the organization, for the organization to meet its future human resource needs, to reduce the learning time for employees on appointment, transfer or promotion, and ensure that employees become fully competent (Armstrong, 2009).

The concept of development has to do with learning not necessarily related to the employee's current job but increasing the trainee's portfolio of knowledge (Rao & Mohan, 2017). Development prepares employees for other positions in the organization and increases their ability to move into jobs that may not exist. Development may also help employees prepare for changes in their current jobs, such as changes resulting from new technology, work designs, or customers' taste and preferences. Development is about preparing for a change in the form of new jobs, new responsibilities, or new requirements. Polat, Bal, Paul, and Jansen (2017) observed that not all-embracing concept brings together the processes of education, learning, training, and development. However, these factors are inextricably linked and share many common principles, for example, learning theories, assessment and evaluation, and design of programs, and so there is the need for synthesis.

Importance of training and development. For SMEs to succeed in an increasingly competitive business environment, SME managers and owners must note

that human resource plays an integral role in the whole enterprise system to gain competitive advantage. Rao and Mohan (2017) stated that aside from materials, money, and machines, the success of an organization depends on the quality of the HR employed. In the wake of the acceptable concept and understanding of global village (Rao & Mohan, 2017), employees have become the center of success and sustainability for organizations and SMEs cannot ignore this essential factor of success. Both the profit-making and not-for-profit making organizations need a dynamic workforce to contribute to the objectives of the organization. To recruit, manage, and maintain this workforce requires skilled, knowledgeable, and competent executives and employees. Their efforts need to focus on the achievement of the goals and objectives of the organization (Mann, 2016).

Talent management in training and development. Talent management is an issue for leaders in global organizations and a component of the HRM function of employee development. According to Krishnan and Scullion (2017), large organizations have focused very much on talent management, while most SMEs do not deem it necessary. Krishnan and Scullion (2017) investigated the gap in the literature of talent management in SMEs. The authors addressed the gap between large and small-scale enterprises in their talent management and human resource practices, exploring talent applicability, and proposed a framework that aids in identifying the characteristics of talent in SMEs. Krishnan and Scullion further argued that the perception of talent management is likely different in SMEs because of the distinct institutional, structural, resource availability factors compared to large firms. In the highly competitive global market, HR managers,

managers, and owners of SMEs should highly consider talent management in their organizations to expose various characteristics from the employee, which can help the organization to be more competitive and achieve its goal. An ingredient in developing the employee is to give them a voice on the decisions affecting their development and the job.

The decisions made by managers of the organization that affect their employees must involve the employees in the decision-making process to avoid disagreement between the management and the employees. Rasheed et al. (2017) investigated the role of the voice of the employee in an organization and its positive contribution to the achievement of the mission and goals of the organization. Using a cross-sectional survey method to collect data among SMEs operating in Pakistan, the authors examined how HPWS can enhance organizational innovation of SMEs through voice behaviors, and how it empowers the relationship between HPWS and organizational innovation leading to the sustainment of the organization. Rasheed et al. (2017) revealed how efficient employee voice behavior has a strategic effect on organizational innovation and a critical factor in the high-performance work system.

Employee participation in decisions that affect their job and performance constitutes a significant benefit to the employee and the organization (Harris & McMahan, 2015). The freedom to voice out brings out an employee's skills and talents, which is self-motivating. SME manager/owners must strategically give enough room for employees to raise their voice and participate more in the organization to bring about better innovation and positive outcome for a sustainable competitive advantage

Training and development after employment enhance the ability of the employee to contribute positively to the performance of the organization. Zhang, Yu, and Yuanhua (2017) indicated that employee training, both external and internal, is an essential HRM practice for the achievement of employee professionalism on the job and enhancing firm productivity. Some SME owners and managers do not see training and development as a necessity to improve job performance. Owners and managers of SMEs need to view employee training and development as a critical factor in achieving competitive advantage and the sustainability of their enterprises over a long period for the perpetuity of the enterprise.

Compensation. Compensation is an incentive of pay or reward that is planned to stimulate individuals to join a firm, retain their loyalty, and perform well over time. According to Iswan (2017), a compensation management plan formulates the objectives and requirements that are to arrange employees, motivate performance, improve prosperity, spur and improve productivity and quality in providing services to the community, and improve the orderly administration of local finance. Compensation based on the social exchange theory represents an exchange between the employee and the employer (Reddy, 2017).

Nasurdin, Ahmad, and Tan (2015), in their study of hotel compensation, asserted that compensation could be categorized into direct and indirect compensation. Direct compensation reflects base compensation, such as salary and pay incentives like bonuses and profit sharing. Indirect compensation comprises benefits given to employees such as health insurance and unemployment insurance. When compensation is aligned correctly

with employees' effort and output, the expertise of the employee will go a long way to help sustain the business citation.

The views of researchers regarding compensation and other rewards systems have been the subject of argument or disagreement (Harris & McMahan, 2015). Francoeur, Melis, Gaia, and Aresu (2017) disagreed that a common set of high-performance HRM policies (i.e., performance appraisal, feedback, the method of rewards) that can be considered as compensation tools for all circumstances including the environment when considering compensation management. According to Harris and McMahan (2015), leader compensation is treated as a motivational tool to create organizational performances leading to organizational sustainability. While Harris and McMahan's statement is a possibility in larger organizations, the same cannot hold true in some SMEs. Michiels (2017) analyzed a survey of 124 small- and medium-sized Belgian family businesses to explore formal compensation in family SMEs. Family firms with a family CEO adopt significantly less formal compensation practices than their counterparts led by a non-family CEO. In the family SMEs, the head or manager spends more time on the business but less on compensation though this cannot be generalized to all family SMEs.

The objective of compensation is to motivate employees to perform their job effectively to facilitate the accomplishment of organizational goals. Harris and McMahan (2015) advanced the argument that the human capital of the firm is a resource that meets the requirement of the resource-based view and could create a competitive advantage for the business. Gaining a competitive advantage over time will lead to better firm

performance and sustainability of the firm. Compensation is a strategy for managers and owners of SMEs to decide on employee's pay and other rewards to attract talented employees to contribute to the objectives of the firm. Lai, Sarisdakis, and Johnstone (2017) supported the statement that with other HRM practices, small firms tend to practice an informal system of compensation or reward such as recognition and reinforcement, pay increment, job security which is considered as a form of motivation and constitute part of the indirect compensation package.

The attraction of quality, talented applicants, and to sustain employees requires managers and owners of SMEs to design an effective formal system of compensation. A formal system of compensation is a potential source of achieving a competitive advantage, which sequentially results in enhancing organizational performance. (Ambrosius, 2016). Managers and owners of SMEs need to offer equitable compensation policy so that they can attract, retain, and motivate employees to apply their proficiency in their work-related activities efficiently and effectively. If these can be accomplished, then the SME will witness a positive relationship between its compensation system and its performance and the sustainment of their businesses.

Reward and benefits management, according to Sarah (2015), is concerned with the formulation and implementation of strategies and policies, the purposes of which are to reward people fairly, equitably, and consistently by their value to the organization and help to achieve its strategic goals. Compensation deals with systems (reward processes, practices, and procedures) that aim to meet the needs of both the organization and its stakeholders. The philosophy of reward management recognizes that if HRM is about

investing in human capital from which a reasonable return is required, as indicated by Michiels (2017), rewarding people differently, according to their contribution (the return on investment they generate) is more appropriate. An appropriate reward system addresses longer-term issues relating to how people should be valued for what they do and achieve as a contribution of their human capital for the sustains of the organization.

An employee's ability to see the connection between his or her work and the organization's strategic objective is a driver of positive behavior (Sarah, 2015). By formulating and using personal objectives derived from strategy, this clarity is achieved. Uncertainty about the assessment criteria used for review and reward purposes also diminishes because employees know beforehand which measures may apply. The identification of functional objectives and competencies helps improve the quality of the development of function descriptions and competency profiles (Rao & Mohan, 2017). The identification of functional goals and competencies will eventually result in better qualified and skilled personnel in the right positions. The commitment of employees to achieve the goals of the organization increases. Standards of what is good and what is wrong also become clear and consistent with each other.

Sustainability

Sustainability is the development that supports the needs of the organization without compromising the ability to meet the demands of customers, suppliers, the environment, and other stakeholders of the enterprise (Shields & Shelleman, 2015). One such category of stakeholders is the employees (internal stakeholders) of the organization, considered the most important asset in contemporary HRM practices

(Boohene & Asuinura, 2011). Managers and owners of SMEs must view HR practices as a necessity for ensuring long-term sustainability in a competitive business environment.

SMEs in a competitive environment. SME leaders seeking to maintain success in sustainable growth to gain a competitive advantage in the business environment must consider the high positive performance of the enterprise (Mazagatos, Puente, & Garcia, 2018). Competitive advantage is possible through the dependency of the caliber of employees selected, and the selected HRM policies based on the social and economic exchange of the internal stakeholders to ensure the success of the enterprise's strategies, objectives, and goals (Schwind et al., 2007). SME performance will be considered and measured in sales output, profits, or growth in this study. When considering performance as output and profit, the assumption is that these factors of performance, including innovation and quality leadership, can lead to SME sustainability. Whereas the strategic marketing plan is one factor in enhancing SME performance, Scheers and Makhitha (2016) argued that most SME owners do not draw up a plan for their businesses. As a result, they are losing the benefit of strategic marketing planning that leads to increased SME performance for sustainable competitive advantage. Scheers and Makhitha (2016) suggested that marketing principles, to some extent, contribute to the successful performance of SMEs. Managers and owners of SMEs must ensure and compete with value-added products and good buyer-seller relationships for higher performance and sustainability of their enterprises.

HRM practices cannot be effective without the tenets of social exchange theory, the conceptual framework of this study, Mazagatos et al. (2018), in support of Langwell

and Heaton (2015), stated higher SMEs performance would depend on some factors especially the leader of the organization. Langwell and Heaton (2015) noted that good leadership with the combination of the other factors such as strong stakeholder relationships, appropriate training and development, and well-planned reward systems as indicated by Michiels (2017) might lead to higher performance which will reflect in a sustainable SME

SME leadership role in sustainability. According to Mazagatos et al. (2018), leadership is the critical human capital needed for the direction and success of the enterprise, primarily when no governance structures exist in most SMEs in Ghana in general and, more specifically, in the Tamale metropolis of northern Ghana. Harris and McMahan's (2015) research focused on the significance of employee retention in both private and public organizations. Harris and McMahan stated that the success of any organization depends on the quality and efficiency of its human capital. The implementation of HR policy is a function of leadership style in an organization.

HRM practices are associated with the leadership of the top management about employee retention (Harris & McMahan, 2015). The success of an organization largely depends on the leadership approach. One pillar or foundation needed for the future direction of an organization is leadership; leadership is significant to the survival and continued existence of SMEs. Kim and Yoon (2015) revealed that several leadership styles have some promising influence on organizational performance. A sustainable SME leader is to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in people management through the various HRM policies and practices. According to Michiels (2017), for a leader without strong

interpersonal skills and strong human relations, employees are likely not to implement successful sustainable strategies. The leadership style should have a positive effect on the employee regarding the sustainability strategies or policies of the organization.

Transformational and transactional leadership styles argued to be two of the most influential and common leadership styles of organizational performance (Kim & Yoon, 2015). Managers and owners must see it worthy of using these two leadership styles strategically for a sustainable enterprise. In a similar vein, Garavan, Watson, and Carbery (2016) explored leadership development in SMEs and the strategic fit in SMEs management. Leadership expertise and the existence of gaps in leadership capability to influence both the presence and intensity related to both measures of adoption of leadership development practices (Garavan, Watson, & Carbery, 2016). Leadership is one factor in the management and sustainment of SMEs. Managers, owners, and human resource managers will have to develop HRM strategy fit-adoption relationship. Garavan, Watson, and Carbery's research highlighted some insights on leadership skills and how leaders can affect an organization to build the relationship within to obtain success and sustainable competitive advantage.

Small and medium enterprise sustainability. SMEs sustainability cannot succeed without a transformational and transactional leader complemented by the necessary selected and well-trained employees (Saka, Namusonge, & Iravo, 2017). Managers and owners of SMEs must ensure that employees are guided by policies, practices, and strategies of HRM. Kim and Yoon (2015) stated that managers and owners

of SMEs need to involve all levels of employees in defining what sustainability means for the enterprise.

Langwell and Heaton (2015) noted that without a standard definition and understanding of sustainability, manager/owners could not begin a discussion with the internal stakeholders (employees) to reach consensus on the meaning of the term sustainability as per the long-term objectives of the enterprise sustainability strategy. SME managers/owners (SME M/Os) must communicate the sustainability strategy to the stakeholders clearly and effectively (Jansson et al., 2017). This process of communication is considered a form of benefit or motivation to the employee for taking part to decide how the enterprise can achieve sustainability with their input.

To facilitate this process, SME M/Os could delegate the task to an internal committee made up of employees representing the most significant number possible. Frese, Hass, and Friedrich (2016) suggested members of this composite group ensure a diversity of opinions is represented in the discussion and then spread the message internally. Jansson et al. (2017) suggested that SME M/Os instead of thinking about sustainability in technical terms, generalizations of the term may be more useful and should treat sustainability as a business discipline to create a culture of sustainable performance

A visionary SME leader, thinking of business sustainability, will require employees with varied skills to collaborate (Langwell & Heaton, 2015). SME viable paths can develop through cooperation, beneficial to the enterprise by creating a team of critical thinkers whom leaders can place in the appropriate business positions (Nguyen,

2017). Researchers can identify good ideas and acceptable practices by observing what happens outside of an organization (Frese et al., 2016).

Powers, Cassel, and Jain (2014) stated sustainable enterprises often have employees who are knowledgeable, skillful, and self-motivated. If managers and owners of SMEs should consider recruiting from outside, there may be a new perspective in the enterprise that facilitates the flow of ideas. Managers and owners of SMEs need to encourage employees to relate to and learn with the help of counterparts in other small businesses (Frese et al., 2016). The managers and owners of SMEs should allow their enterprises to be part of industry associations and professional networks to tap into good ideas and current trends in their industries. Shields and Shelleman (2015) investigated what strategies are best for managers of SMEs to sustain their businesses for global competitive advantage. Shields and Shelleman mentioned many SMEs lack a structured approach to facilitate strategy formulation to deal with a significant change in their external environment and to integrate sustainability into business decisions.

Enterprise competitive advantage, adaptation, and long-term sustainability need careful analysis. Shields and Shelleman (2015) suggested SWOT (strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis as the starting point of gaining enterprise sustainability. When managers of SMEs find new opportunities, these opportunities must be adopted into practice to gain a competitive advantage. According to Shields and Shelleman, when weaknesses are many in the presence of opportunities and threats, strategic action is necessary to mitigate the weaknesses and threats. Managers and owners need to develop internal capabilities and search for information that can help understand

stakeholder's preferences, customer behavior, current trends in the industry and plan a balanced market mix (Shields & Shelleman, 2015). SMEs need to focus on building a strong buyer and seller relationship to gain competitive advantage.

Juma, James, and Kwesiga (2017) explored the dimensions involved in establishing a business venture with an entrepreneurial focus within the business community. While the entrepreneur is the hub of several activities, there remains a critical need for interdependence for the successful and sustainable operations of the enterprises. Juma et al. (2017) observed that the path to sustainability is the ability of the entrepreneur to collaborate externally with the entities surrounding the operational environment. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is one factor that could promote enterprise sustainability. SME leaders should consider CSR in the annual calendar as a sustainability strategy and for competitive advantage. Entrepreneurs will gain knowledge of the business environment through adequate environmental scanning (Fatoki, 2016). The sources of environmental scanning may include both IE sources. The external sources include contact with customers, suppliers, trade publications, workshops, outside consulting, fairs, and exhibitions, to mention few. The internal source of information comprises output from management information systems (MIS), employees of the organization, executives of the organization, and other internal relationship building as well as the coordination of procedures and processes. Fatoki (2016) revealed that enterprises use both internal and external sources of information for environmental scanning and that environmental scanning has a positive effect on firm performance and sustainability.

HRM activities in sustainability. HRM can be described as the process of managing a workforce in a structured and transparent manner in the form of a cooperative relationship between the employer and employee, the master and the servant, to achieve the set objectives of the organization (Bailey, Mankin, Kelliher, & Garavan, 2018). The description of HRM correlates with the conceptual framework of social exchange because the voluntary actions of individuals motivated by the expected returns from their engagement stem from the employer and employees' collective agreement. Also, the need to align organizational goals with that of HR strategy is to ensure the appropriate alignment of employee policies with that of management goals and objectives (Emeagwal & Ogbonmwan, 2018). The alignment of employee policies and management objectives considered as the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm coined from strategic management, makes it possible for the strategic alignment of employee policies and management goals, and objectives of the firm may lead to a sustainable competitive advantage of the firm (Emeagwal & Ogbonmwan, 2018).

To advance the argument further and address the gap of HRM system and synergy effects for SMEs sustainability, Gueci, Radaeli, Battisti, and Silett (2016) research tested the existence and the nature of synergies in HRM systems targeted at improving employee perception of principled and ethical work climate that leads to firm sustainability. HRM theories argue the unsegregated, aligned, and consistent HRM policies generate positive combined effects on targeted outcomes more remarkable than the sum of separate effects (Gueci et al., 2016). These HRM policies are to develop organizational ethics to increase employees' perception of accurate and principled ethical

climates in the organization. Gueci tested whether the Ability, Motivation, and Opportunities (AMO) that are HRM policy domains have synergistic or independent effects on firm performance, and contributes to the current debate in HRM research regarding the nature and extent of synergies among AMO policies. This existence of synergies, often assumed in theory but practice rarely, in which managers and owners of SMEs must take advantage.

Sustainability in SMEs and any organization cannot be successful without involving the internal stakeholders who are the employees of the organization. Garg (2014) posited human resource managers constitute an important factor, to implement sustainability in an organization because of different contemporary HR tools or practices. HR options such as off days, provision of bus services to work, variable pay, bonuses, subsidized meal, and other aspects of HR practices available for HR managers help drive sustainability into the culture of the organization. Langwell and Heaton (2016) stated the HR section of the organization has the responsibility and the ability to inform all stakeholders of the business goal of the organization. The role of the HR department is primarily the reason why HR must be involved to help implement change within the organization. Langwell and Heaton (2016) suggested that activities associated with HRM are common to achieve sustainability in large organizations. These businesses are considered leaders in sustainability because larger successful organizations do not view HR as only an administrative function, but as a strategic function to help achieve the goals of the sustainable competition. Ahmad (2015) indicated that environmentally conscious HR departments could benefit from using human resource activities to

implement enterprise sustainability. However, some SMEs lack the capacity to have HR department support. Still, managers and owners can use some HR activities that help to implement the sustainability of the enterprise (Langwell & Heaton, 2016). The human resource activities that can help embed sustainability into an organization's culture include communication, training and development, employee engagement, recruitment and selection, and reward systems (Langwell & Heaton, 2015).

Communication in sustainability. Implementing an open door policy in the organization helps to open communication channels. According to Toppinen, Hänninen, and Lähtinen (2015), top management of SMEs can interact or give information to all the departments and all the employees to support sustainability initiatives. The role of the HRM is to use the tools of communication such as workshops, departmental meetings, email, and other social media networks as well as other written and spoken tools to communicate the sustainability goals and objectives of the organization (Toppinen et al., 2015). Langwell and Heaton (2016) suggested that communication should also give details on how the organizational goals are related to every employee at every level of the organization. Ahmad (2015) explained that the in-depth knowledge and information exchange within the organization, the more likely the chance of gathering support for enterprise sustainability. Ahmad (2015) re-enforced the World Business Council for Sustainability Development (2011) explanation that every position in the organization, from the CEO to the lowest level, like the janitor, should have the ability and capacity to explain the sustainability goals of the organization. Managers and owners of SMEs must ensure that using a common language for social exchange in a peaceful work

environment to explain sustainability initiatives will ensure employees understanding of the processes and goals for achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

Training and development in sustainability. In organizations that need to implement sustainability, the employees need to understand how they can quickly adapt to inevitable changes in their work processes to aid the organization in reaching sustainability and the role their jobs play in achieving that goal. According to Ahmad (2015), training and development play a significant role in getting a successful sustainability program in an organization implemented. Also important is to allow employees to gain practical experience in the implementation of new jobs to benefit from job enrichment and gain practical experience in the job processes for the update of skills, knowledge, and ability (SKAs), and commitment to the organization's sustainable effort (Gauche, de Beer, & Brink, 2017). Some organizations, particularly SMEs, do not take advantage of training and development because of the financial investment involved (Mayanja & Perks, 2017). On top of the financial investment, trained employees may also leave the organization with the new knowledge to work for a competitor (Padachi & Lukea Bhiwajee, 2016). Ahmad (2015) stated that focusing on social and environmental matters, and training should start from orientation and through all levels of the organization. Adding to the suggestion of Ahmad (2015), training, and development programs have to support relevant knowledge related directly to the sustainable job activities of the employee.

Employee engagement in sustainability. Engaging employees in the sustainable goals of the organization can create a situation wherein the employee's attitude can change positively toward effective environmental programs that can be implemented successfully. Langwell and Heaton (2016) stated that employee participation in environmental programs could result in the employee becoming emotionally attached through meaningful work by allowing employees to connect with the natural environment. When employee engagement is active, the employee becomes better prepared to adopt attitudes for new work processes beneficial to both the employee and the organization's sustainability agenda. Benn, Teo, and Martin (2015) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2011) suggested five features that support employee engagement: (a) employees' involvement in developing sustainability strategies, (b) top management involvement, (c) motivation to participate in the sustainability goals, (d) education and training, and (e) opportunity for employees to communicate concerns and suggestions.

Benn et al. (2015) suggested that when employees are more involved and actively participate in the organization's sustainability drive, the employees are more motivated, which leads to a maximum level of work engagement. SME managers and owners should endeavor to invest in their employees to create employee buy-in to ensure changes toward sustainability. Employee involvement and participation are both examples of high involvement HRM practices, and these practices have shown to enhance employee motivation and commitment toward their organization (Langwell & Heaton, 2016).

Employee involvement and participation are also aspects of Green HRM, as these were associated with positive environmental performance.

Employee reward plans in sustainability. Motivation toward the achievement of a particular goal in an organization is critically fundamental to achieve that goal.

Langwell and Heaton (2016) indicated that sustainability behaviors are positive when linked with incentive plans based on measurable outcomes. Some researchers argued that reward systems are not just financial benefits (Benn et al., 2015; Langwell & Heaton, 2016). Some SMEs cannot afford a reward system solely based on financial benefits as opined by (Benn et al., 2015). Challenges faced by SMEs is finances to fully implement a successful HRM department or practices to ensure a complete people's factor in their sustainability goals.

According to Langwell and Heaton (2016), managers and owners of SMEs can design an incentive plan that encompasses more than financial compensation. Some non-financial benefits such as recognition, paid time off and vacations, physical presence at funerals in some parts of Africa, and other social issues, as well as venue choice for employee recognition, are all factors that boost the morale of employees. Langwell and Heaton (2016) posited the link of rewards to behavior depends on the achievable goals of the organization and the motivational factors that will effectively engage the employee. Leaders must note that, to some extent, incentives and rewards are the catalysts to escalate motivational factors to connect organizational interest to that of the employee interest to achieve a common goal (Lasrado, 2015). Another excellent reward system is the suggestion scheme linked to rewards for employees involving in sustainable decision-

making. Lasrado (2015) stated that a suggestion scheme allows the employee to contribute constructive ideas to improve their jobs and the goal of the organization. When the suggestion is adopted, the particular employee or a group of employees receive a reward for making the selected suggestion (Lasrado, 2015). Suggestion scheme rewards can challenge employees to come out with sustainable environmental ideas. The implementation of an employee's idea helps the employee feel like a valued part of the organization.

Recruitment and retention in sustainability. The HRM department or the individual (in the case where there is no HRM department) is in a better position to support the recruitment of people who can contribute to the sustainability goal of the organization. Gauche, de Beer, and Brink (2017) insisted that HR officers are in the position to change the culture of the work environment by employing new employees who are likely to bring on board some sustainable knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. HRM should not be looked at as an administrative function, but as a strategic function because of the strategic function of identifying and attracting potential candidates interested in environmental and sustainable goals of the organization (Langwell & Heaton, 2016). When the leaders of an organization can position its sustainability initiative strategically, the organization can attract potential candidates ensuring knowledge, culture, attitudes, and behaviors that promote organizational sustainability.

Transition

The objective of Section 1 was to provide the specifics of the study and to establish credence to delve into HRM strategies that managers and owners of SMEs use

to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Introduction of the study, the background of the problem, problem statement, purpose statement, and the nature of the study were presented in Section 1. Also, the conceptual framework of the study, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were elaborated on in Section 1. A statement of the significance of the study, the impact of the study on SMEs, and the implication for positive social change were also outlined in Section 1. In the academic and professional literature review, the theory of the conceptual framework, the social exchange theory, and the resource-based view were discussed. I examined scholarly articles related to the area of study, which includes possible HRM strategies that can help managers and owners of SMEs sustain their businesses, were addressed. Also, the SME leadership role in sustainability and other sustainability issues relating to SMEs were elaborated. Leaders of SMEs may benefit from this research to improve HRM practices that ensure the sustainability of their operations because their employees are the most valuable assets to their enterprises.

In Section 2 of the study, I provide a plan and elaborated on the functional components of the research on HRM strategies managers and owners of SMEs used to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years. Additionally, in Section 2, I provide information on the role of myself as the researcher in this study, the details of the purposeful selection of participants, and the appropriate methods and design. Also, I identify ethical considerations as well as data collection tools, data organization, and techniques proper to this study. Included in Section 2 are data analysis, data reliability, and validity.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I discuss the research required to support the selection of the methodology and purpose for this qualitative multiple case study. I explored HRM strategies managers and owners of SMEs in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. A qualitative method and multiple case study design are the appropriate means to obtain data to answer the central research question. Section 2 includes the method and research procedures necessary to conduct a qualitative multiple case study. Purposive selection within the population of managers and owners of SMEs who have sustained their businesses for at least 5 years was used to select the target sample. Triangulation and member checking of data from semistructured face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and company documentation on HRM practices ensured data reliability and validity. Section 3 contains the results of the research study, recommendations for professional practice and social change, and future research suggestions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore HRM strategies some SME managers use for business sustainability beyond 5 years. The target population was four managers or owners of two organizations in the Tamale metropolis of Ghana, who have implemented HRM strategies to maintain business sustainability beyond 5 years. The implication for positive social change included the potential for managers of SMEs to adopt and implement efficient HRM practices to enhance

profitability, achieve economic growth, and maintain business sustainability beyond 5 years.

Role of the Researcher

According to Yin (2014), in a qualitative study, the researcher serves as the fundamental data collection instrument. The researcher's role is to gather and interpret participants' experiences (Sanjari et al., 2014). The human tool in research depends on the ability of the researcher to understand the cause and effects of the phenomenon, as indicated by Raheim et al. (2016). Yin (2014) emphasized that in a case study, a researcher must lessen the constant interaction between a theoretical lens and the data that is collected. My role as the researcher in this study was to solicit, analyze, and make available my findings based on participant-held perceptions about the relationship between HRM practices and SME sustainability that ensured the credibility of the sources cited in my investigation. I interviewed managers and owners of SMEs to collect, organize, and translate the data to explore the HRM practices used to ensure SME sustainability beyond 5 years in the Tamale metropolitan area.

Collins and Copper (2014) stated that significant self-awareness of the researcher would translate into understanding and acceptance of the findings by the audience. Supporting attributes of self-awareness include (a) asking practical questions, (b) being an active listener, (c) being adaptable, (d) having a sound basis of local knowledge, and (e) avoiding bias (Yin, 2014). Personal biases can be reduced through self-awareness and conscious identification of ethical concerns. It is essential that the researcher select an instrument for data analysis that conforms to the features of a robust qualitative study.

These conforming features, as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To establish validity and reliability in a qualitative study, Yin (2014) stated that member checking is a necessity. Member checking ensures reliability, as elaborated by Pandey and Patnik (2014), where participants comment on the interview summary and note whether the information truly reflects their views. In this study, I conducted member checking following the face-to-face interview after transcription within 7 days.

Participants

Participants in this qualitative case study were managers and owners of two SMEs. According to Yin (2014), participants in a qualitative case study should echo the business environment under study. Based on the principles of data saturation, Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) recommended three interviewees as a minimum for a qualitative case study. Yin (2014) also suggested that there must be at least one member in a purposeful sample. Researchers must select participants who understand and can provide an in-depth and realistic opinion of the study topic in a purposeful sampling (Yin, 2014). A purposeful sample of small business managers and owners was selected for the study because of their knowledge of strategies for sustaining their businesses using HRM practices. Martin, McNeill, and Warren-Smith (2013) used a purposeful sample of eight small farmers to explore the growth of the business through innovation. The purposeful sample for this study was two leaders, each from two SMEs, who have been operating for more than 5 years, for a total of four participants. These SMEs fell within the definition

of SMEs in Ghana by the NBSSI and have used HRM practices as a strategy to sustain their businesses in the Tamale metropolitan area.

I used multiple sources such as the Ghana Employers' Association, Ghana Statistical Survey Report, and Northern Ghana Business Network for the identification and selection of the SMEs that were within my purposeful sample criteria. Once identified, telephone communication was used to establish rapport with the potential participants, including some explanation of the study. I sent the necessary information in the form of a letter, which I delivered by hand myself, including an introduction of the project, the research question, an indication of consent to participate, and how the data will be managed for confidentiality purposes. The use of managers and owners or leaders of SMEs who have used HRM strategies to sustain their businesses as participants in this qualitative case study aligns with the central research question. When qualitative researchers notice how the participants classify and justify the actions taken, awareness is created in the understanding of the guidelines and addition of value to the research (Barnham, 2015). An awareness of the realities of the participant's construct and the effort of a researcher is required in qualitative research. Katz (2015) stated that qualitative research and the ensuing understanding is attainable through infusion into the participant's vantage point. Managers and owners of SMEs who have used HRM strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years are the ideal participants because they are in a position to offer relevant answers to the main research question.

Research Method and Design

The research method refers to a set of procedures and techniques used for choosing the participants and objects to gather the needed data to process and analyze a problem (Aguinis, Edwards, & Bradley, 2016). Observation, interviews, surveys, field study, and laboratory experiments are some research techniques used to understand the human phenomenon (Aguinis et al., 2016). Distinctive practices and procedures, as well as different values, norms, and beliefs, are conducive to qualitative and quantitative studies (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). To investigate a situation or a phenomenon, researchers use three principal research methodologies: (a) qualitative, (b) quantitative, and (c) mixed methods; each of these methods has its merits and demerits, as such rendering it difficult to credit one method as superior to the others (Yin, 2014).

Each of the research methodologies involves distinct types of activities, which vary considerably from one research design to the other (Braguglia & Jacson, 2012). The most appropriate method for a study is the one that fits the objectives of the research and facilitates answering the research question (Yin 2014). The choice of a particular research method is influenced by the logical assumptions, the objective of the study, and the nature of the research question.

Research Method

Hesse-Biber (2016) posited that the qualitative research approach is intended to give subjective meanings and multiple viewpoints. This approach assumes a dynamic and negotiated reality, interpretation, and analysis of transcribed speech (Yin, 2014). The qualitative research method is suitable for understanding human behavior from the

perspective of the informant (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). To understand the experiences of managers and owners of SMEs of HRM practices and how these practices were developed and linked to the business world of social exchange for the sustainability of their businesses, I chose the qualitative approach. The focus of the research is not the collection of statistical data and the use of variables with generalization and confirmation of hypotheses, as in the case of a quantitative approach. When using the quantitative approach, a researcher is concerned with the discovery of facts about a social phenomenon and assumes a fixed and measurable reality. The quantitative approach is not suitable for the determination of the HRM strategies used by managers of SMEs for sustainability.

A mixed method study is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Yardley and Bishop (2016) described a mixed method investigation as the combination of a qualitative and quantitative method that requires extensive research and gives robust results compared to the potential weakness of using a single method. According to Swartz, Amatucci, and Coleman (2016), a mixed method research design is an extensive research inquiry that provides reliable results that compensate for the limitations and potential shortcomings in the individual methodologies. Because I did not consider the quantitative method as a process to enhance my study finding, I also did not consider a mixed method for my study. Swartz et al. elaborated that mixed method requires considerable time and resources. The time and resources available for my research were limited compared to the time and resources needed to use a mixed method, further supporting why I did not use the mixed method to answer my research question.

Therefore, the mixed method was not suitable to determine the HRM strategies for SME sustainability.

The qualitative method helps to understand the importance of a problem through a formal and an informal means from the account of first-person interactions or interviews, rather than through the lens of objects and measurements can explain, as in quantitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2016). The qualitative method involves (a) an open-ended interview, (b) content analysis, (c) quality document analysis, and (d) literature synthesis that makes it possible to understand the human phenomenon (Alimo, 2015). My objective for my doctoral study was to explore HRM strategies Northern Ghana SME owners need to sustain their businesses through the qualitative method lens.

Research Design

Three basic types of qualitative method designs exist: (a) case study design, (b) phenomenology design, and (c) ethnographic design (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). A case study illuminates a decision or set of decisions, why people make decisions, how the decisions are implemented, and what results came out of such decisions (Yin, 2014). The tools to explore and interpret the reasons people attach to their beliefs and their experience is integral to a qualitative case study design. Yin (2014) suggested that the case study design within a qualitative method gives a vivid view of the experiences of people in its real-world context. A case study design involves the analysis of a single unit case or multiple unit cases, bound by time and activity (Solis, 2016). A multiunit case study design is appropriate to explore HRM strategies that managers of SMEs use for sustainability.

This study is not about the exploration of the daily life of people and their culture as in ethnographic design. An ethnographic research design would have been ideal if the topic under investigation was to research HRM practices related to their culture or the ways of life of the owner/managers of SMEs. A phenomenological design is used to study a unique situation to explore human experiences over an extended period relating to specific events and what meaning the participants give to such experiences (Corby et al., 2015). A researcher using phenomenological design requires a fundamental belief in participants' interpretation of their experiences (Corby et al., 2015). The reliance on perceptual data, as in the phenomenological design, will be insufficient to give direct meaning to HRM strategies for business sustainability beyond 5 years used by SME leaders. I opted for the qualitative case study design over ethnographic and phenomenological designs to explore the HRM strategies managers of SMEs use to gain a competitive advantage for business sustainability beyond 5 years.

Population and Sampling

The target population for the study was two SMEs in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana. I sampled SMEs using a purposeful sampling technique to select the SMEs and leader participants for the study. Gentles, Charles, Ploegg, and McKibbin (2015), Yin (2014), Robinson (2014) stated that purposeful sampling is the selection of participants based on the expertise the participants possess and ensures the inclusion of participants who align best with the central research question. The expertise of the participants is significant for the researcher to understand the research problem, questions, and some specific issues linked to the study. Yin (2014) suggested the use of a

sample size of two or three cases is significant to acquire the data needed to develop an understanding of the phenomenon.

Identification of the primary persons at the two SMEs is based on the understanding that they have used human resource practices as a strategy to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Expected participants from the target population came from the SME Northern Ghana Business Network (NGBN), who met the eligibility criteria. The primary point of contact was to provide the researcher with the contact information of the expected participants. Jones (2017) mentioned it is essential for a researcher to have a detailed plan in mind when applying a purposeful sample. An exclusionary criterion could be the size and geographical location of the organization. The NBSSI defined SMEs as those organizations that employ less than 99 employees. Selection criteria included managers and owners of SMEs in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana, who have managed their enterprises successfully using HRM practices for at least 5 years.

Participants have the willingness to participate in the face-to-face interview process for approximately 45 to 60 minutes, as indicated by Samujh and El-Kafafi, (2010). The face-to-face interview location took place at the convenience of the participants and in a comfortable environment that enabled participants to respond with an open mind and honest personal experiences, as indicated by (Javalgi, Granot, & Alejandro, 2011). Participants were asked to select interview settings that minimized interruptions for interviews lasting for a period of 45 to 60 minutes. The establishment of a rich interpersonal relationship with participants is necessary to lay a foundation for

member checking, and future follow up purposes (Yates & Leggett, 2016). A rich interpersonal relationship established through face-to-face exchanges is ideal for creating and developing trust, rapport, and allowing people to be more inclined to provide the necessary information needed to enhance the credibility and validity of the study (Robinson, 2014).

Mason (2010) stated other factors which could affect the sample size in a qualitative research study, for example, withdrawal of participant from the interview. However, the guiding principle that researchers use in a qualitative study is data saturation, and the use of an adequate sample size linked to the concept of data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when no new data or new information emerges, and there is a repetition of the information already gathered (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample size of this study was justifiable with the concept of data saturation, as indicated by Fusch and Ness (2015). Following the concept of saturation in a qualitative study, I interviewed four participants from two SMEs to achieve the expected data saturation by the fourth interview. The four SME leaders satisfied the assumption of qualitative methodologist's recommendation that two to three cases could be an adequate sample size to reach the point where the in-depth data collected can result in no additional insight in the responses from the participants (data saturation).

Ethical Research

The ethical researcher has the responsibility to ensure that participants do not face potential ethical issues that would harm the participants and potential consumers of the findings of the study. According to Petrova, Dewing, and Camilleri (2016), informed

consent is an essential concept of moral and lawful requirements that protect human subjects in a study. A researcher must ensure that the four ethical principles are followed, suggested by Yin (2014): (a) respect participant's rights, (b) research should be of social good, (c) doing no harm, and (d) justice. I informed participants about the purpose of the study and ensured they agreed to or understood the potential risk, if any, they were likely to face as participants in the study. Sometimes asking people to discuss uncomfortable issues may bring anxiety; therefore, obtaining participants' informed consent gives the participants confidentiality, trust, and the assurance they are protected from harm. Where necessary, to ensure understanding of the research process by participants in the study for illiteracy reasons, verbal explanations regarding the research is appropriate to facilitate the participants' understanding. Tindana et al. (2012) used a verbal explanation regarding research to enhance participants' understanding of the process.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University is responsible for reviewing a doctoral student's proposed research in an institution of choice. The IRB committee has the sole responsibility to review research proposals to satisfy their understanding of the process as doing no harm and to ensure the protection of participant's rights and the observance of the rules and regulations set by Walden University regarding research. Before contacting the participants through an invitation letter, I obtained approval from the IRB of Walden University to carry on with the study. The IRB approval number for this study is IRB 01-02-20-0584238. The expiration date of the IRB approval is January 1, 2021. When the managers and owners of the SMEs agreed to take part in the interview regarding HRM practice sustainability, a consent letter

containing the information of the study, the consent procedure, and a statement about the voluntary manner of the study was delivered by hand to them. To verify the participants received the consent letter, an acknowledgment of receipt of the consent letter by email was appropriate, because of the distance and geographical location of the study area. However, the signed informed consent letter was collected at the beginning of the interview visits, and a copy was provided to the participants. The consent letter contained information about the study, procedures, and the potential risk and benefits of the study.

The informed consent letter ensured that participants for the study volunteered to take part in the study without coercion or any compensation. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any given time by informing me through phone, WhatsApp, or email. WhatsApp is one of the fastest and easiest communication applications on smartphones. For confidentiality, the participant's identity was not available in the data analysis following Warren and Szostek's (2017) example to help illustrate a coding system that did not reference the participant's business, but through a numbering system.

The research information provided by the participants was not intended for any other purpose other than the study project, as guided by the Belmont report (USNC, 1979). Participants were informed that the outcome of the study would be absent of any identifying marks except for a participant who might like their name or business identified. I ensured that a copy of the final report was given to the participants. All information, including interview transcripts, notes, and audio recordings, was stored under password protection for computer files and under lock and key in a safe for hard copy data, for 5 years, to protect the rights and identities of participants. Beyond the 5

years and for absolute confidentiality, I will destroy the data by permanent deletion and by fire for the hard copies.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments are tools that facilitate the collection of data from participants and secondary sources. According to McCusker and Gunaydin (2015), data collection instruments are critical in the qualitative research process, which serve as the fundamental tools to collect data from the participants. In this study, I served as the primary data collection instrument to interview and collect data from the participants (Yin, 2014). The interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee in qualitative research can enrich data in respect of life experiences (Bailey, 2014; Hurst et al., 2015). According to Pacho (2015) and Hurst et al. (2015), the variety of tools available for a researcher to use could be interviews, direct observation, participant observations, questionnaires, focus groups on-site visitation, in-depth interviews, documentation, a review of archival records, government reports, and news clippings. Semistructured interviews standardize questions within an interview protocol consistency (Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, & Peng, 2014). In the same manner, to generate responses relevant to research problems, data is collected using in-depth face-to-face semistructured interviews guided by open-ended questions and a review of company documents such as the human resource policy document.

The data collection instruments in this study included a Sony audio digital recorder, a Samsung note 8-smartphone VRA to serve as back up, and notepads. Interviewing participants was the primary method of data collection for this study to

answer the research question, what HRM practices do SME managers use for business sustainability beyond 5 years? I collected the data from four participants of two SMEs by asking eight semistructured open-ended questions, obtained and analyzed the HRM policy document as a secondary source to compare with the primary data for triangulation purposes. The interview protocol for the study is listed in Appendix B.

In this study, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted at a convenient place acceptable to each participant for their accounts of HRM strategies and practices. According to Mojtabeh et al. (2014) and Yin (2014), qualitative in-depth interviewing is a valuable resource for obtaining qualitative case study data; a case study design assists the researcher in understanding life from the participant's viewpoint. Pacho (2015) stated that an in-depth interview is an informal event in which a conversation takes place between a researcher and the participants to explore questions that will reveal the participants' views.

Researchers should consider the reliability and validity of data collection instruments. According to Yin (2014), Joslin and Muller (2016), and Fusch, Fusch, and Ness (2018), methodological triangulation helps to produce valid and reliable data and assists in proving the accuracy of the claim. The use of methodological triangulation reduces bias when a researcher can check various data sets with other data sets (Moustakas, 1994). If researchers can verify different data with each other, the understanding and conclusions drawn tend to be accurate and trustworthy. I used member checking after I transcribed, interpreted, and summarized the interviews to ensure the precise meaning intended from the participant responses following the example of Awad

(2014). Othman and Abdul Rahman (2014) used member checking to validate the themes in their study of ethical governance in Malaysian businesses. Munn et al. (2014) contended that member checking is a participant confirmation procedure used to enhance the credibility, dependability, and integrity of a qualitative research study.

Data Collection Technique

This study of HRM practices for SME sustainability involves the collection of data on the lived experiences of the participants chosen to explore the business problem. According to Yin (2014), data collection is the gathering of unadulterated primary information for analysis within qualitative research conducted in the conducive environment of the participant. Morse (2015) argued that successful data collection could be hit and miss during the initial process. Researchers need to establish rapport with study participants to build trust, so they can openly provide and describe their true feelings, thoughts, and intentions. Trevelyan, Crath, and Chambon (2014) conducted personal face-to-face interviews reflecting the individual experiences and perceptions of the participants to retrieve relevant data. Jamshed (2014) stated that the familiar sources of data collection in qualitative research include interviews, observations, focus group discussion, and review of organization documents.

I employed a face-to-face conversation interview technique to collect data in the respective locations of the manager and owners of SMEs and one focus group of six members within the Tamale metropolitan area. I collected secondary data from the organization's HR policy document and administrative manual to contribute to methodological triangulation. I posed eight open-ended semistructured interview

questions to a minimum of two managers and owners of SMEs who have employed HRM practices to sustain their enterprises beyond 5 years in operation. For methodological triangulation, focus group discussion helped to gain an additional in-depth understanding of the experiences of managers and owners of SMEs about their HRM practices (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018). I posed five interview questions for the focus group discussion to support the validity and credibility of this qualitative study and follow the focus group interview protocol (see Appendix B). Focus group discussion involves a group of participants moderated by the researcher, who asks the questions, investigates for more insight, and keeps the participants on track as the interaction takes place at a preferred location of the participants. Selection of focus group members who are managers of SMEs within the Tamale metropolitan area started after the completion of the one-on-one interviews and lasted for approximately one hour. The time selected for the focus group meeting did not interfere with their work processes. I used a separate Sony digital recorder and Samsung note 8-voice record application (VRA) to serve as back up for the interviews, as well as taking notes to ensure data back up during the interview process. Two weeks before the agreed interview date, the eight interview questions, the informed consent letter, and the interview protocol (see Appendix A) were sent to the participants to help them prepare for the interview. Kerstetter, Green, and Phillips (2014) outline a similar process to confirm the confidentiality, legitimacy, and the parameters of the relationship in the data collection process and analysis.

The interview protocol served as a guide to maintain the focus topic. In this study, following the example of Pretrova et al. (2016), instructions from the interview protocol

were read out loud to the participants, and the participants had the opportunity to ask questions. The conversations were recorded, and salient points were noted during each of the 45- to 60-minute interviews. The data collection method was consistent with a case study design.

As in any research, researchers will have advantages and disadvantages in the process of using a qualitative case study and conducting semistructured face-to-face interviews. Among the advantages, open-ended questions within the conducive atmosphere of the participants, build a relationship that helps the researcher easily identify the participants' attitudes, habits, and beliefs. Also, the participants should feel at ease in their choice of the interview location and time, thereby facilitating detailed answers to the interview questions (Kornbluh, 2015). The disadvantages include the interviews may require the participants' time and location of their choice that comes with possible research cost, which might be expensive if the location involves travel and accommodation costs to conduct the interview. Sorsa, Kiikkala, and Astedt-Kurki (2015) and Yin (2014) stated participant deficiencies in recollecting and constructively conveying their perspective about the identified phenomenon might be a disadvantage. The data quality depends on the researcher's ability and skills to avoid any biases he or she may have.

In this study, member checking significantly minimized the incidence of incorrect data and interpretation, which provided innovative findings of the study. According to Yin (2014), an accurate assessment of the participant's intent is possible through the process of member checking. Member checking is appropriate to allow participants to

review, reflect, and validate the results of their responses. For qualitative research, member checking enables participants to critically examine and correct possible errors in the data collected so that data adequacy and accuracy are present (Kornbluh, 2015; Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is a tool to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability in a multiple case study to illustrate specific research strategies (Kornbluh, 2015).

Data Organization Technique

I used a reflective journal during the study to record and document the time, date, and location of each of the interviews. Researchers use reflective journals to record their experiences and to reflect upon participant responses to the interview questions, and to gain insights and to learn (Davies, Reitmaier, Smith, & Mangan-Danckwart, 2013). According to Davis et al. (2013), reflective journals are valid methods of accessing rich qualitative data, which researchers use as a method of data collection. Reflective journals are valuable as critical interpretive tools for conducting analysis (Davies et al., 2013). I transferred the voice recordings to my laptop; I created a folder for the emerging themes of each participant, along with the transcription of the audio record for member checking to enhance the validity of the findings of the study, as proposed by Nguyen (2017). Once the study was complete, the audio files and related transcript data (soft and hard copy data) will be destroyed after 5 years of safekeeping as prescribed by Yin (2014).

Data Analysis

Yin (2014) posited the qualitative research method is appropriate for data analysis because researchers want to analyze real-world experiences of people. Various methods

for analyzing data are available. Triangulation is the process of using multiple sources of data to bring about confidence in the findings of a study. According to Fusch et al. (2018), triangulation in analyzing data minimizes bias, enhances data saturation, and adds depth to the data collected. Triangulation includes four different forms: (a) theoretical, (b) data, (c) investigative, and (d) methodological triangulation (Yin, 2014).

Methodological triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources (Fusch et al., 2018). Following the example of Fusch et al. (2018), who applied methodological triangulation for confirmation of the reliability and validity in their study to determine small business strategies for sustainability, the appropriate data analysis process for this multiple case study is methodological triangulation. The various sources of data collection in methodological triangulation are critical to understand and interpret an unclear situation and to enhance the confidentiality and reliability of the results of the study (Cope, 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Researchers use interviews and the internal and external (IE) documents of the organization for methodological triangulation in a qualitative case study design. Internal documents of an organization may include but are not limited to HR policy documents, administration, and operations manuals, as well as annual reports (financial and technical). External documents may include but are not limited to websites, published news, and announcements.

In the initial phase of the data analysis, I applied Yin's (2017) approach by noting, observing, and recording the person-to-person interviews and developing a transcription of each. To ensure a valid member checking, after transcribing the interviews into a Word

document, I contacted the participants to confirm their responses so that I could complete the member checking process. As demonstrated by Pandey and Patnaik (2014), editing of the transcripts was done, followed by identification of particular codes, and a list of comprehensive codes was created by repetitive reading and making comparisons of the interviews and the transcripts. Coding data is fundamental to the identification of themes and patterns; coding is the procedure of tagging data segments with categorical labels or descriptive terms (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The processes of editing facilitated the removal of repetitive words, repetitive phrases, unrelated discussions, and to facilitate the refinement of the codes by collapsing and removing codes. Following the strategy of Charach, Yeung, Volpe, Goodale, and dosReis (2014), to achieve data saturation, I will continue to generate and refine codes until no new unique codes emerge and to identify themes as outlined by Stuckey (2014).

NVivo is a software program that assists in data analysis and expedites thematic coding, including the categorization of the collected data during the analysis stage. Yin (2014) noted that a researcher could not solely depend on the computer-assisted program; the researcher is the principal analyst and not the software. Warren and Szostek (2017) said NVivo software could assist researchers with coding and sorting data into themes for analysis. Also, NVivo facilitates the organization of the data for coding, data linking, content analysis, and the confirmation of findings. NVivo software is an ideal program that can help improve the quality of the research, reduce manual tasks, and gives a researcher more time to discover tendencies, recognize themes, and drive conclusions. (Zamawe, 2015). The disadvantage is that the researcher may have to procure the

software and learn how to use the software tool. The NVivo software assists qualitative researchers in confirming the manual analysis of the data and is also appropriate for this study in assisting in the coding, referencing, counting, sorting, and displaying of the data gathered from the participants.

Reliability and Validity

Quantitative studies establish reliability and validity through the use of statistical data (Mandal, 2018). Because of the lack of statistical data, qualitative researchers often have the challenge of demonstrating the reliability and validity of their work by taking further steps (de Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018). The qualitative researcher must be able to demonstrate credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of their work (de Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018). For qualitative researchers, member checking and methodological triangulation establish reliability (Yin, 2017).

Reliability

Achieving reliability in qualitative research is to demonstrate consistency in the research components, meaning that another person should scrutinize the work and draw similar conclusions about the findings. Yin (2014) posited that reliability in qualitative research is the trustworthiness of the actions taken in a case study. Achieving reliability in qualitative research is obtained through the ability to replicate the components of the study, the consistency of data collection, and the accuracy of the data recording processes (Warren & Szostek, 2017). Careful documentation and reporting will allow any reader to examine how the researcher collected, produced, and interpreted the data. Data triangulation, member checking, and the use of NVivo will help to address the issue of

the dependability of the research conclusions. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources to collect data and the assurance of the legitimacy of the research by capturing different dimensions of the same information needed during data collection (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Joslin, 2016). Triangulation enhances the richness and soundness of the research findings. In addition to triangulation, member checking is considered a reflective pathway in which participants confirm, subtract, or add to the initial data captured, thereby increasing the dependability of the study (Birt et al., 2016). The use of NVivo, a computer-assisted program for qualitative data analysis, adds dependability, making it possible for data availability for member checking (Yin, 2014). Data triangulation emerging from member checking interview transcription, interpretation, and summary with documentation increases the soundness and richness of the data gathered about HRM practice, SME managers and owners use for business sustainability.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to address the significance of the phenomenon. Researchers determine validity by measuring the accuracy and credibility of the research (Morse, 2015; Yin, 2014). Also, researchers use validity to demonstrate the findings of the study are accurate (Yin, 2014). The components of validity in qualitative research are (a) credibility, (b) transferability, and (c) conformability. According to Morse (2015), the establishment of credibility is the level of rigor displayed by the researcher in qualitative research that will support the findings of the study as credible. Rigor is the assessment of the value of the findings of

the research by external evaluators (Morse, 2015). The use of member checking and triangulation will ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings of this study.

Yin (2014) said the use of triangulation assures credibility with multiple sources of data to demonstrate the evidence. Birt et al. (2016) and Tarmann (2017) stated that member checking gives credence to accuracy and confirms the credibility of the data collected. The amalgamation of the primary data gathered from the interviews, the review of the data analysis by the participants (member checking), focus group discussion, as well as HR policy documents of the enterprise, ensure the effort of rigor. The expectations of external evaluators regarding the identification of HRM strategies implemented by managers/owners of SMEs for sustainability may be acceptable with the three data sets.

The identification of transferability in qualitative research goes beyond the necessity of replication. Morse (2015) stated that in a qualitative study, replication is not necessary, and transferability is an external validation of the study. According to Yin (2014), transferability and external validation both refer to the application of qualitative research finding to a situation not posed in the original study. A reader and future researchers can determine the transferability of this study by considering how I addressed triangulation and member checking. Because while triangulation widens the different sources of data sets, as indicated by Morse (2015), member checking is critical to demonstrate and establish trust and support the transference of the findings of the study against disapprovals (Kornbluh, 2015). Multiple sources of data and participants crosschecking their responses from semistructured interviews conducted in a multiple

case study widen the application by readers to identify the successful HRM practices that managers and owners of SMEs use for sustainability.

Conformability in a qualitative study gives assurance of data saturation. While similar to credibility, conformability requires that researchers undertaking qualitative studies demonstrate the link between the findings and the results of the study (Moon et al., 2016). According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data saturation has an impact on the quality of the study if the researcher fails to reach saturation. Researchers must use the appropriate concepts for the identification of a phenomenon (Yin, 2014). According to Moon et al. (2016), conformability ensues when a research approach shows the researcher's position. The primary point of conformability is to ensure expected plans align strategically with specific event measures, as Yin indicated. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated the design of qualitative research is not universal; therefore, data saturation for someone may not necessarily be the same for another, so there is no one-size-fits-all method. However, it is important that the gathering of data from multiple sources can be a measure to confirm qualitative research findings. For a rich source of information to draw my research conclusions, the use of the multiple case study design is the appropriate method.

As indicated by Fusch and Ness (2015), the use of exploratory questions will help readers appreciate how the researcher obtained data saturation. The idea to use semistructured interview questions for managers/owners of SMEs is to ensure the different participants answered similar and comparable questions. Data saturation can connect the triangulation of information from various sources, as indicated by (Fusch &

Ness, 2015). While semistructured interviews with the leaders of SMEs on HRM practices for sustainability addresses the issues of conformability, triangulation of data from the interviews, review of the HR policy documents, as well as focus group discussion, ensure data saturation.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included the effort to establish credence to the method, design, and purpose of this multiple qualitative case study to explore the HRM strategies managers and owners of SMEs in the Tamale metropolis use to sustain their businesses in a competitive business environment beyond 5 years. A qualitative method and multiple case study design are the appropriate means to obtain data to answer the central research question. Section 2 included the method and research procedures necessary to conduct a qualitative multiple case study. Purposive selection within the population of managers and owners of SMEs who have sustained their businesses for at least 5 years is the desired sample. Triangulation and member checking of data from semistructured face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and company documentation on HRM practices will ensure data reliability and validity. Section 3 includes the results of the research study, recommendations for professional practice and social change, and future research suggestions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the HRM practices that leaders of SMEs used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The targeted population consisted of four leaders from two SMEs from the Tamale metropolitan area who have successfully implemented some HRM practices. The data were collected using semistructured face-to-face interviews and member checking with seven questions, a focus group of six employees, three from each of the SMEs, and a review of related documents. After each of the interviews, I conducted member checking to ensure data integrity and accuracy. I employed a manual analysis of the data collected, including data analysis of the four interviews and member checking, focus group discussion, and the review of company documents. The study findings revealed HRM practices leaders of SME's use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years successfully.

From my research, six key themes emerged from the individual interviews, focus group meetings, and a review of company documentation: (a) human resource as critical asset, (b) training and development, (c) compensation and benefits, (d) recruitment and selection, (e) involvement in decision making, and (e) God factor. In Section 3, I discuss the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, and further research. I conclude Section 3 with my reflection on the DBA doctoral study journey and the conclusion.

Presentation of the Findings

With the application of Yin's (2017) five-step manual analysis, my study revealed six key themes related to the success of SME's beyond 5 years. Table 1 contains a summary of the six key themes that resulted from my analysis.

Table 1

Summary of Key Themes

Key Themes	Frequency
Human resource as Critical Assets	17
Training and Development	15
Compensation and Benefits	14
Recruitment and Selection	9
Involvement in Decision Making	6
The God Factor	5

The central research question for this study was, What HRM strategies do SME leaders use to sustain their business beyond 5 years? Using individual interviews, a focus group, and a review of company records, key themes were identified. Between my findings and the conceptual framework of Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, I established alignment. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of common themes discovered through the interview process, focus group discussion, review of the administrative manual, literature reviews. Denzin and Giardina (2016) posited that data saturation is necessary for comprehensive qualitative case study research.

Theme 1: Human Resource as Critical Asset

An organization cannot function sustainably without the appropriate HR base. Human capital, as the most critical asset of the organization, was the first theme to emerge from the individual face-to-face interviews. Supported by previous research, Nolan and Garavan (2016) noted that human resource staffing in SMEs is essential for business sustainability. All participants (PS1, PS2, PSG3, and PSG4) in their first responses noted that without considering the employees as the most critical asset of the organization, they would not have survived to this date. PS2 emphasized, “We have always maintained that the employee is the most important asset.” PS1 stated that “We recognize the employees as critical assets to the organization.” PSG3 and PSG4 also admitted that the employees are essential for the business. “Though the business is mine, I make them feel belonging to the business,” emphasized PSG4.

Responses of focus group participants’ (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4, FG5, and FG6) validated the statement that HR is the most critical asset of the company. Four out of six focus group participants felt that the way the leaders related to them indicated they are essential, and that made them give their best to their jobs. The conceptual framework of this study, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), aligns with the focus group participants’ statements in the sense that building a conducive work environment thrives on the social exchange between the employer and the employee. The exchange of leadership respect and employee work devotion demonstrates Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory through a transaction that is mutually beneficial for both parties.

Two focus group participants also mentioned their involvement in planning and making certain critical decisions, even in the absence of their bosses, made them feel great. The responses provided by the participants in this qualitative multiple case study were also concurrent with the findings in the literature. As revealed by Chakraborty and Biswas (2019), the employee stands critical as an integral part of the organization because they are the precious assets of the organization.

Based on the findings above, leaders of SMEs must maintain their employees, just like any other asset of the organization, because the role of the employee has become more pronounced and significant in the sustainability of an organization in creating a healthy work environment for competitive business advantage. Table 2 represents some comments from the four SME leaders who participated in the face-to-face interviews, specifically on the question regarding what HRM practices they have used to sustain their businesses.

Table 2

Theme 1: Human Resource as Critical Asset

Participant	Participant comments
PS1	We recognize the employees as critical assets to the organization
PS2	We have always maintained that the employee is the most important asset
PSG3	They are very important for our business though the business is mine.
PSG4	This makes the workers happy, and they feel like they have another family who cares for them

Theme 2: Training and Development

Training and development emerged as the second theme. All participants spoke about the need to invest in training and the need for continuously updating the SKAs of the employees to be relevant to the dynamics of the work environment and be motivated to support business competition. Cosmides (1987) posited that the successful engagement of individuals for mutual benefit involves social exchange cooperation by which humans can solve problems through training and other opportunities for advancement within the organization. Organizations that do not invest in their employees or provide a conducive atmosphere to train and develop their employees risk being irrelevant and unsustainable (Giblin & Galli, 2017).

PS1 noted that once the employee is hired, there is the need for orientation to prepare the employee to fit into the culture and tradition of the organization, which PS1 said forms part of the initial training on the job. Findings in the literature are consistent with this theme; for example, Ahmad (2015) stated that training should start from orientation and continue through all levels of the organization. PS1 commented that orientation is essential to let the employee understand the culture and tradition of the organization.

PSG3 said, “We take them through what they are supposed to be doing and doing it the best way.” Gauche, de Beer, and Brink (2017) stated the importance of giving opportunities to employees to gain practical experience in the implementation of new jobs so they can benefit from job enrichment in the job processes and commit to the organization’s sustainable effort. PS2 mentioned, “We ensure that the staff builds the

capacity on the job and outside the premises of the organization.” In the same manner, training and development can be accomplished internally or externally, as indicated by PS1. PS2 commented, “internal training is where our supervisors are trained, and they become the trainer of trainees for quality sustainability of our standards in addition to external training where employees are sent out on short or long-term courses.”

Chakraborty and Biswas (2019) posited that training and development is a strategy for talent management to augment the efficient performance of the organization to gain competitive advantage substantially and sustainably. PSG4 commented, “the training, especially on the job training for customer care, is a continuous thing to ensure business continuity and sustainability.”

All four participants’ comments validated Khan et al.’s (2016) work by stating that training and development are activities planned to assist the learning related to job knowledge, skills, and employees. All six focus group participants validated the positions of all the four individual participants’ views on training and development. For example, FG1 said, “For that one, I will say a lot, I have been able to advance myself through training to develop myself over the years, it is not every organization that you get the opportunity to go back to school.” FG2 said, “I have also learned a lot, especially teamwork and encouragement.” FG3 also said, “I have also improved in my education during the period I have been here, I used to be a shy person, but now I am not, I can stand in public and talk.” The other three FG participants generally agreed that without training, two things could likely happen, (a) no new skills, no job satisfaction, and (b) no self-development to help you when you leave the organization. Comments by PS1, PS2,

PSG3, and PSG4 were consistent with the literature review, which revealed that training is the acquisition of skills and knowledge to perform a present task and contribute to the organization's success in the employee's current state. At the same time, development is the acquisition of skills and knowledge that may be used in the present or in the future geared towards the preparation of the individual to enrich the organization.

HR Challenge in Training and Development

Although participants were unanimous in the view that training and development are essential investments, two of the participants noted that training and development come with an organizational cost and, therefore, an HRM challenge. When an employee receives training, and that employee decides to quit without any prior notice, it creates an HR challenge. PSG4 said, "One of the challenges is the unannounced departure of some workers, there are some, once you update their skills and they know how to do something small then they just run away." PSG3 lamented an HRM challenge related to training and development as follows: "Except that when you give training to a worker over a period, and the person decides to leave the work without any prior notice, is a challenge and additional cost that we have experience as an organization." FG1 supported the lamentations of the two leaders' training and development challenges. FG1 noted, "The other challenge which has not happened here is when you give people training, then they just go for further study and will not come and contribute their new knowledge to the employers. This has happened in some organizations." The above challenge is validated by Mayanja and Perks (2017), who stated that some leaders of SMEs do not take advantage of training and development because of the financial investment involved.

Also, trained employees may leave the organization with new knowledge and sign on with another competitor.

However, this HRM challenge may be addressed through proper motivation once the employee is successfully trained. SME leaders should not see the training of the employee as a privilege. Viewing training as a privilege may lead to the employee leaving for another competitor with the new skills and knowledge acquired. But Ahmad (2015) indicated that appropriate orientation and induction of the employee into the core values, culture, tradition of the organization, and proper compensation, benefits, and welfare systems would help minimize such challenges. Ahmad's statement validated PS2's comments of, Well, so then you become a family member and, by extension, a team player to bring to bear the new set of skills, knowledge, and abilities the employee has acquired onto their jobs to help move the business on a competitive advantage path. Also, there is appropriate rewards and adjustment to motivate the person to stay. Otherwise, you may lose the loyalty of the person to another competitor organization. PS2 went on to say that, "It is this kind of experienced that has retained more than 20 staff to be with the organization since the inception (21yrs) in business." Table 3 represents some comments from the four SME leaders who participated in the face-to-face interview regarding Theme 2, training and development as a strategy for SME sustainability.

Table 3

Theme 2: Training and Development

Participant	Participant comments
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PS1	We prepare employees to take up potential positions to be able to adapt to new things in the industry
PS2	Another strategy is to bring an expert from outside to come and give specific or specified training for a department
PSG3	Training on the job to meet customers changing dynamics
PSG4	I monitored and realized that was the cause of some of the bread not being well baked, so I was there myself to give on the job training on timing

Theme 3: Compensation and Benefits

Compensation and benefits emerged as the third theme through all the four interview participants and focus group discussions. The conceptual framework, the social exchange theory which underlines this study, stated social exchange is the voluntary actions of individuals motivated by the expected returns for their engagement (Blau, 1964). In any type of engagement, there is an expected return both ways. Supported by Reddy (2017), compensation based on the social exchange theory represents an exchange between the employee and the employer. The actions of the employee to positively impact the performance of the organization is based on the motivation of the social exchange agreement. The third theme of compensation and benefits as an integral part of motivating workers appears in the interview responses below. PS1, PS2, PS3, and PS4 all said that besides the monthly salaries or weekly wages, other benefits for motivation are a crucial factor in attracting, retaining, and maintaining employees for building a sustainable organization. Benstead (2019) posited that one way to be sure that your business will succeed is to take care of your employees. Fair treatment, strong employee

management, in addition to providing opportunities, constitute a vital strategy to help you achieve your business objectives. PS2 said, "in addition to salaries and wages that we pay, we also have the policy to assist staff four years on the job to buy landed property at their place of choice, we also give them 13th-month benefit which some other enterprises do not do." Both PS1 and PS2 stated that some of the HRM strategies they have adopted under Theme 3 have helped them retain some of the staff since the inception of their organization spanning over 18 years. PSG4 said, "Alhaji has been with us since his employment about 18yrs ago." Two focus group participants collaborated on what PS1, PS2, and PSG4 said. One of the focus group participants said he could not stay longer in an organization where there are no "side issues," meaning he cannot stay longer with an employer where there are no additional benefits or motivation.

The importance of compensation and benefits in enterprise sustainability was validated by Iswan (2017), who posited that compensation and benefits management plan requires arrangements for employees to be motivated for performance, improve prosperity, spur and improve productivity for competitive advantage for firm sustainability. All focus group participants validated the consistent management dynamic of compensation and benefits as a necessary exchange for firm continuity. Table 4 represents comments from the four SME leaders who participated in the face-to-face interview regarding salary and benefits as an essential strategy for SME sustainability.

Table 4

Theme 3: Compensation and Benefits

Participant	Participant comments
PS1	I think that staff welfare is one of the strategies we have constantly maintained over the years in addition to the salaries and wages we pay
PS2	We have the policy to assist staff four years in the job to buy landed property at their place of choice. Also, there is the 13 th -month salary
PSG3	Also, once you are good at what you are doing, there is recognition and rewards which are used to retain some workers
PSG4	We also pay their social security, which is very important for them, and when profit is made, we share the profit by way of salary increase

Theme 4: Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and selection, as HRM practices, are a well-documented strategy used by organizations. Attracting, recruiting, and maintaining the right people with the appropriate SKA's may increase the performance and, subsequently, the sustainability of the organization (Florea & Mihai, 2014). The people make up the organization, and the human factor is the key to success in an organization.

All participants were unanimous about the use of radio advertisements, referrals, and recommendations for recruitment and selection of potential candidates. Schlachter and Pieper (2019) posited that referrals, recommendations, and walk-in recruitment could leverage cost savings to the organization. None of the participants used recruitment agencies to fill vacancies as they become available. PS2 inferred that in their organization, the recruitment and selection of new employees are conducted on a case by

case basis. For higher-level positions, it is mainly by recommendation and referral, both internal and external. A radio advertisement is used for lower-level staff recruitment.

PS1 preferred filling positions in the organization through internship and national service personnel by observation of the attitude of the intern or service personnel for the right job, after which if there is no fit for the position, then external recruitment is considered. PS1 said, “The right people for the right positions. Our strategy is to observe the intern’s attitude before consideration to retain.” PSG3 and PS4 were unanimous that they have a lot of walk-ins, including disabled people they consider. “As we speak, I am about to interview a deaf and dumb applicant,” PSG4 commented.

Some FG participants stated they came into their employment through referrals, and recommendations after which a simple interview was held to test the abilities for the positions. FG participant's comments were consistent with the recruitment and selection processes outlined by the leaders. FG participant1 said, “I was retained after my national service.” The cost of recruitment and selection can be expensive for SMEs. Withiel, Dpsych, Man, Physio, & Juj (2020) posited that these costs encompass direct costs associated with recruitment, as well as indirect costs related to lost productivity and training. Because of the limited nature of resources, recommendations, referrals, and retaining of interns and national service personnel minimizes the cost involved in the recruitment and selection in SMEs (Withiel et al., 2020).

Participant's experiences were in alignment with the extension of the social exchange framework by Tremblay and Simard (2005). They stated that successful organizations had established favorable relationships leading to external referrals and

recommendations for people with the right skills to be recruited to fit in the right positions or retain talented employees in their jobs or new positions. Table 5 documents comments from SME leaders on their experiences with the fourth theme, recruitment, and selection.

Table 5

Theme 4: Recruitment and Selection

Participant	Participant comments
PS1	We observe the potential employee's attitude to get the selected employee's fit into the culture and tradition of the company
PS2	Our recruitment and selection strategy is done case by case, for the higher level we pray about it, we ask for a recommendation from people, both externally and internally
PSG3	Our strategy for recruitment and selection is radio advertisement and sometimes walk in and recommendations
PSG4	Normally you see them they will just walk in that they want work to do, we also sometimes do radio announcements. Also, I speak with people for referrals When we meet them, we look at their ability, and we select them for the different sections where we need workers. Well during the interview some will fail, and they will come crying

Theme 5: Involvement in Decision Making

Involving employees in the decision-making process emerged as the fifth theme. SME leaders and other business leaders should recognize the strategy of involving employees in some of the decision-making processes, especially decisions affecting their

jobs to give them some sense of recognition, which is a benefit to a large extent. PSG1 noted, to build employee loyalty, there is the need to create an atmosphere of mutual respect by including or asking employees to provide suggestions on some critical issues about their jobs. PS1's view on Theme 5 is in line with previous research which highlighted a whole-system approach for sustainability and the importance of involving both the internal and external stakeholders at different organizational levels as well as collaborating to promote the implementation of company strategies effectively (Hellman, Molin, Eriksson, & Svartengren, 2019).

PSG3 and PSG4 were both consistent in their view about involving their workers in the decision-making process. "Every two weeks meeting for planning with the workers," commented PSG3. PSG4 also supported and said, "We also involve them in decision making because they manage the machines and the production process as well as distribution." For PS2, "if the boss is the only decision-maker in the organization, then you can be sure you will not have that necessary work environment for progress." PS2 noted they have a periodic business-like forum, where all employees and management meet to discuss strategies in general and on specific departments. According to PS2, the forum offers the opportunity for every internal stakeholder to contribute their ideas to assist with the optimal operations of the company. SME leaders should well note that Theme 5, in conjunction with Theme 1, as critically important for firm performance, profitability, and sustainability. An ingredient for the employee's development, trust, and loyalty is to give that kind of space needed for their voices on the decisions affecting their

job. Rasheed et al. (2017) posited that the voice of the employee is a positive contribution to the realization of the mission, vision, and objectives of the organization.

The focus group participants added their views on Theme 5, and to some extent, agreed it is essential for their leaders to involve them in some decisions, but not all. Two focus group participants said that some employees cannot keep secrets and may sell some strategic plans to other competitors. FG2 said, "I think managers should know that it is the HR which is making their business do well so treating and allowing us to make some suggestions is good for the workers and important for operations." FG1 commented as follows, "sometimes when you are too open, especially to the staff, they take advantage and doing their own thing and go and sell your ideas to friends" All four of the SME leaders emphasized that for employee's retention there is the need for them to take part in some decision-making process especially those decisions that affect their jobs and welfare. Table six outlines comments by the four SME leaders on Theme 5, involvement in decision making.

Table 6

Theme 5: Involvement in Decision Making

Participant	Participant comments
PS1	These strategies have led to employee loyalty including asking them to provide some suggestions about issues on their jobs
PS2	So, it is like a business forum that we have periodically to ensure the strategy of adaptation of new happenings in the industry
PSG3	do not have any tricks as you put it, but we are working as a team and ask every to contribute their ideas
PSG4	We also involve them in decision making by asking for their views on some matters

Theme 6: God Factor

The God factor (GF) was a theme discovered during the data gathering process, which was not discussed or considered as one of the HRM practices. However, the GF element repeatedly appeared in all the four face-to-face interviews and the focus group discussions. Phoenix and Orrb (2017) suggested that the discovery of data should be incorporated into the analyses because the discovery could subsequently advance knowledge. Arowolo (2020) noted that there is increasing awareness of the GF in life and business, which the business schools will not teach you. PS1, PS2, PSG3, PSG4, and two focus group members cited the GF is a factor in the sustainability of their business operations. They all emphasized what the GF is all about. PS1 said, “by way of inspiration, we have an annual thanksgiving where we all meet and sing praises to God for seeing us through all these years.” PS2 indicated that during the recruitment and selection process, they pray and ask God to help select the right fit for their positions.

PSG3, in agreement with PSG4, noted that they recognized God in everything they do and believe that it is God who has sustained the business for the 18 years of existence and expansion. One may argue that all the participants are Christians. Ironically, one FG said he had been the longest-serving employee and, as a benefit, was sponsored to travel for the annual religious rituals in Saudi Arabia.

PSG3 stated they have Muslims as employees. On Fridays, they allow the Muslims to close and go for prayers in addition to playing Muslim music or turn on the radio on a channel that broadcasts Islam before them leaving for prayers and subsequently closing for the day. In alignment with PSG3's statement, FG 6 commented their leaders give them that respect by allowing them to leave for prayers on Fridays. For that reason, they also offer their best to the job to the extent of working deep into the night or reporting for work early in the morning to meet customer demands.

PS2 revealed an interesting description of the GF and demonstrated the GF is essential to maintaining the sustainability of the business. "I don't know, but because I am a Christian businessman, I pick some of my experiences from the Bible. For instance, one of the key things we do is what I call the *quadruple bottom-line*". The quadruple bottom-line somewhat aligns with HRM and business strategies: (a) SME leaders and staff must be economical in whatever they do. Leaders must be economical, minimize cost, and maximize profit. If you are not economical, you cannot make a profit. Therefore, there is no continuity for sustainability, (b) *Social bottom-line*, the staff is crucial, and the customer as well. We should see people not as machines but as human beings. If there is any social need of the staff, and the community then we should carry

these needs out as our social responsibility, (c) the *Environmental bottom-line*, business leaders should not just do business for the sake of business and profits only. We must make sure that we do not do anything as a business concern that will put the environment at risk because our business operations depend on the environment. The environment is God's creation, not a business creation. Anything that will disturb the environment, we should not do, and (d) As business leaders, whatever we do should be missional. Hence, we have a *Missional bottom-line*. God should be the reason we are doing what we do. If God is not the reason, then we should stop, and there is no sustainability. PS2 believes that anything you do in business that will not honor God should not occur. PS2 also emphasizes that all business leaders should be mindful that these four quadruple bottom lines are essential for business sustainability. Table 7 contains some of the comments on the God factor as Theme 6.

Table 7

Theme 6: God Factor in SME Sustainability

Participant	Participant comments
PS1	By way of inspiration, we have an annual thanksgiving where we all meet and sing praises to God for seeing us through all these years
PS2	Anything that you do that will not honor God, then do not do it.
PSG3	We recognize the God factor in whatever we are doing here
PSG4	We do not leave the religious aspect out of our business, apart from the other benefits, what has kept us moving is the God factor first we need to pray in everything we do

Applications to Professional Practice

The focus of this study was HRM strategies four SME leaders used to sustain their business more than 5 years in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana. SME leaders could find value in the outcome of this study to improve the use of HRM practices for competitive advantage for the sustainability of their businesses for the benefit of all stakeholders.

By raising the awareness level of leaders of SMEs about the six emergent themes resulting from this study, SME leaders could realize and value the HR function as an indispensable critical asset for the sustainability of the business. If business leaders recognize and maintain this significant asset well, then the long-term viability of the organization can be achieved for the realization of the higher purpose of the organization. The importance of the ability to recognize and maintain the HR function is consistent with the literature of Chakraborty and Biswas (2019) who stated the people make up the organization and the human factor is the key to success in an organization. All resources of the organization must go through a maintenance schedule to ensure maximum performance for competitive advantage, profits, growth, and to successfully continue the operations for the long-term sustainability of the enterprise. Additionally, business leaders need to view the maintenance of their human resource base as critical for the survival of their businesses. Business leaders must realize one of the vital challenges of HRM; the crucial part their people play in the success or failure of the company.

SME leaders, looking to expand and adapt to innovations through creative thinking, must incorporate the HRM strategies emerging from this study. The identified

strategies of HR as a critical asset, training and development, compensation and benefits, recruitment and selection, involvement in decision making, and religious factor as necessary tools for business sustainability. In alignment with the social exchange theory, SME leaders could capitalize on the study findings as a tool to engage and build employer and employee relationship. Stronger relational bonds can result in a long-term outcome of mutual respect, conducive work environments, and appropriate reciprocal returns for the realization of organizational objectives. Literature has established that positively investing in HRM practices could lead to increase productivity and overall performance of the organization for competitive advantage (Gablin & Galli, 2017; Shake & Craft, 2019).

The additional gains of the study findings could inform SME leaders about best practices by evaluating their current HRM practices and consider the implementation of added strategies to improve their business performance for sustainability. Finally, it is essential to note that I have not revealed the business fields of the subjects involved in this study. These HRM practices may apply to other businesses but may not necessarily be the panacea for SME sustainability. Similarly, the region of the study should not influence the generalization of the responses from the four SME leaders. Also worth mentioning is that all the subjects in this study live and operate their businesses in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana.

Implications for Social Change

The HRM strategies found in this study may help contribute to the improvement of organizational performance to sustain SMEs beyond 5 years. Implementing an

effective and appropriate range of HRM practices will potentially increase the sustainability rate of SMEs, leading to the expansion of organizations and the creation of jobs that could contribute to poverty reduction in the Tamale metropolitan area of Ghana. In a related study, Iles et al. (2017) posit that business sustainability could lead to an improvement in the quality of life for employees, their families, and the community at large. Increasing the short to long-term sustainability rate of SMEs using motivated, loyal employees and customers is a potential opportunity to attract credit for the growth of the business. Also, sustaining SMEs may trigger a positive effect on the local economy, which will contribute to promoting progressive social change. If the youth are engaged in meaningful employment, chances are there will be a reduction in crime and other social vices. Meaningful work could also result in an improvement in meaningful living and healthy marital relationships. Hopefully, the outcome of this study could also apply to other business concerns that are lacking HRM strategies for business sustainability.

Recommendations for Action

The research findings presented in this study could help SME leaders implement strategic and appropriate HRM practices to sustain their businesses more than 5 years after establishment effectively. I recommend some actions for managers, owners, and leaders of SMEs to take to increase their chances of sustaining the business with the implementation of some HRM strategies. It is vital that the SME leaders in the Tamale metro area recognize and understand the emergent themes that linked the sustainability of SMEs beyond 5 years: (a) HR as a critical asset, (b) Training and development, (c) Compensation and benefits, (d) Recruitment and selection, (e) Involvement in decision

making, and (f) Religious factor. SME leaders may also consider Theme 6, the religious element, in their quest to sustain their businesses. As an ongoing concern, because the creator created his likeness to maximize the resources created for the benefit of humankind, which is the reason why companies exist. Without human beings, there exists no business.

My first recommendation, therefore, is that SME leaders should rethink their positions on HR as the most critical asset of the organization. Some SME leaders tend to downplay the crucial function of HR. It is essential for business leaders to understand that without the people, the other resources of the organization cannot function, leading to business instability, and eventually to business demise. HR maintenance is vital. My second recommendation for action is that using compensation and benefits as a sure HRM maintenance strategy should not be compromised by SME leaders. This recommendation aligns with the conceptual framework of this study; people engage for expected returns. If these expectations are not forthcoming, chances are high labor turnover of essential talents. SMEs are perceived not to take compensation and benefits seriously. The ability of SME leaders to provide appropriate and consistent salaries plus other strategic added benefits, including motivation, should be a spot-on strategy to recruit, maintain, and retain the critical HR assets of the organization.

In addition to the above, business leaders should make a conscious effort to involve their employees in the decision-making process. In alignment with Theme 1, HR as a critical asset, a positive outcome in the form of an improved employee understanding of the objectives of the organization and how they as individuals precisely fit in the plan

to deliver these objectives could be realized. Consequently, business leaders could see an improvement in overall job performance and company metrics. Often, decisions come from the owner, manager, or leader without necessarily seeking the views of the people implementing the decisions. The effort of SME leaders to involve their employees in the decision-making process is highly recommended. Engaging employees in the decision-making process comes with enormous benefits. Business leaders could see an increase in many aspects by supporting a work environment of mutual respect. An increased sense of belongingness, creativity, loyalty, hard work, and eventually, the existence of a long-lasting relationship could contribute to the organizational competitive advantage and sustainability. Razza (2017) reiterated that empowering employees in their jobs as strategic partners of the organization following recruitment and selection, appropriate orientation, appropriate training, and development will minimize small business failures.

These recommendations for action are drivers towards using the recommended HRM practices by business leaders in their respective industries for organizational sustainability. Ghanaian SME growth and sustainability could boost the local Tamale region and contribute to the local economy through the provision of employment in the Government's effort to reduce the unemployment numbers in their country.

My goal is to share the study summary of my research finding to all participants and their organizations to foster the use of these recommended HRM strategies. I will also make available copies of the findings of the study to local HRM professional bodies. Additionally, I will submit my study findings for review in scholarly journals and welcome the opportunity to present my study findings during business seminars, SME

meetings, and conferences. I am passionate about HRM practices in small businesses. I have committed to further my research in the field of the maintenance of HR as the most critical asset of any organization, both for-profit to not-for-profit entities.

Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the HRM strategies some SME leaders used to sustain their business beyond 5 years. SME leaders need to recognize HRM practices as building a healthy work relationship. Blau's (1964) social exchange theory exemplifies the successful engagement of individuals for mutual benefit involves social exchange cooperation by which humans can solve problems with efficiency in an atmosphere of mutual respect and expected returns as a way for competitive business advantage, growth, and sustainability. The findings of my study align with the social exchange theory because the majority of us are either employed or have employed people for some type of business exchange. When these exchanges are conducted properly, they could result in growth for the business. Conversely, poorly handled transactions and disregard for the other parties could lead to challenges.

The findings of my study validated both previous and current literature. Other researchers conducting investigations related to effective HRM strategies and how they link to business sustainability may discover new or additional recommendations. Because my study focused on a limited geographical region, I recommend further research to encompass other areas within the country of Ghana and the world. I would also support additional research that explores specific business sectors. Quite possibly, successful HRM practices may vary from industry to industry.

Reflections

Before commencing this doctoral journey, I was genuinely unaware of the detail requirement and the rigorous nature of the journey, especially as a family man, an employee, an employer, and as a volunteer worker. Initially, a doctoral degree was never on my table; however, by chance, I happened to inquire after listening and watching a motivational speaker, Dr. Mensah Otabil. Walden University pursued me, and finally, I applied and gained admission.

I enrolled and later realized along the way that a business study at the doctoral level was more exhaustive, expensive, and methodologically aligned than I expected. These challenges resulted in many backs and forths during my journey, primarily at the IRB level. Many times, it was so frustrating that I thought I was being asked to operate upon a living being. But I later understood the IRB process, because I was becoming a doctor to operate and find solutions for SMEs. The research alignment and the level of integrity in the doctoral study templates along with the dedicated support from faculty, and the Walden library were all helpful in modifying my thinking and for conducting a higher academic study interacting with four subjects of person-to-person interviews and six-member focus group discussions for my doctoral study. Though I anticipated some of the themes that came up, I also discovered a wonderful strong theme, the religious factor, for consideration as an HRM strategy by business leaders.

Findings from my study have improved my understanding and knowledge of SME sustainability through HRM strategies, and the HR function as the critical asset of any business endeavor. The themes identified are informative for SME leaders who are

seeking business sustainability to make good use of the study findings. It is worth mentioning that through my doctoral journey, but for the support and motivation of my Chair and Team Synergy (TS), as well as encouragement from a special friendship known as the "Dynamic Duo, the Batman & Robin" getting this far would have been a mirage.

Conclusion

Many SME leaders face challenges in sustaining their operations beyond 5 years for several reasons. One of the reasons is the lack of appropriate HRM strategies to complement the sustainability of SMEs. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the HRM strategies SME leaders used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of existence within the Tamale metropolitan area. The data for this study were collected from four individual face-to-face interviews with SME leaders, a focus group of six participants (in their jobs between 7 to 20 years), and a review of organizational manuals. Methodological triangulation was achieved using these multiple data sources. After a tedious and careful manual analysis of the data using Yin's (2017) five-step model in conjunction with Hanson and Klimo's (1998) data analysis flow chart, six themes emerged. The six emergent themes were: (a) HR as a critical asset, (b) training and development, (c) compensation and benefits, (d) recruitment and selection, (e) involvement in decision-making, and (f) religious factor.

The findings of this study contribute to the body of scholarly work on HRM related to SME sustainability beyond 5 years. Additionally, the work provides SME leaders with a people-oriented mindset, a belief in HRM strategies, and additional

resources to engage the appropriate HRM strategies for organizational competitive advantage. Other areas of potential benefit could emerge through SME growth, profitability, business sustainability, and ultimately contribution to the local economy and positive social change.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Preinterview:

1. Salutations and introductions, researcher, and participant
2. Verify eligibility through the administration of purposeful sampling questions.
3. Go through the consent form, researcher and participant, explain the content, and answer any questions from participants.
4. A copy of the consent form is given to the participant
5. Central research question: what HRM practices do SME managers use for business sustainability beyond five years?
6. Conduct audio test on recording equipment
7. Ask if the participant is ready

Interview:

1. Turn on the recorder (mobile application on Samsung note eight and digital recorder)
2. Conduct verbal stamp (Date, time, and case study number)
3. Proceed with eight core interview questions
4. Conduct follow-up questions when necessary
5. Record any observations via written notations on a notepad
6. Conduct closing verbal stamp (time)

Postinterview:

1. Conduct post-interview recording quality test
2. Confirm availability and contact information for participants for possible follow up and member checking
3. Reiterate consent, ability to withdraw, the purpose of member checking, and availability of a summary of findings upon approval of the study by Walden University
4. Appreciation and closing remarks, researcher and participant

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Protocol

Interview Title: Human Resource Management Practice: SME Sustainability**Interviewer:** Charles Bandari; DBA Candidate, Walden University

- I. The focus group discussion will begin with the exchange of introductions.
- II. The focus group process explained, along with the title and objective of the study.
- III. Present the Informed Consent Form, answer any questions, and obtain the interviewee's or individual focus group member's signature on both forms. I will retain one copy, and the other copy will be given to each participant of the focus group.
- IV. Confirm the necessity of confidential, uninterrupted conversation, respect for all members of the group, and the length of time allotted for the process with the focus group.
- V. Explain the transcript review and member checking process that will follow the discussion.
- VI. Confirm participant permission for the use of an audio recording device to ensure accuracy in transcription. Assure focus group participants of confidentiality and the destruction of data at the end of the study. Begin recorded discussion by noting the date, time, and location.

- VII. Inform the focus group participants that their participation is voluntary, and they have the choice to stop or withdraw from the focus group discussion at any time.
- VIII. Begin the focus group discussion with introductory questions on gathering additional background information on each participant.
- IX. Introductory questions will include but not limited to:
 - a. How long have you been with/operating the company?
 - b. What do you think is the greatest benefit of working for or establishing this company?
 - c. How will you describe your human resource base of the company?
- X. My focus group questions will be:
 - 1. What factors do you consider for SME sustainability?
 - a. A potential follow-up question: What about HRM practices?
 - 2. What makes HRM practices important for SME sustainability?
 - a. A potential follow-up question: what are the HRM practices or strategies used in your company?
 - 3. How should SMEs adopt HRM strategies for competitive advantage and sustainability of their companies?
 - 4. What are the HRM challenges in your organization?
 - a. A follow-up question: How can you overcome these challenges to the advantage of your organization?
 - 5. What is(are) the most strategic practice(s) of HRM that contributed to your organization's survival for more than 5 years?

6. Any additional information you would like to add regarding HRM practices, SME sustainability?