EMPLOYEE TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SCALE ENTERPRISES (SMEs) IN PORT HARCOURT



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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between employee talent development and sustainable performance of small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Specifically, it evaluated the effects of learning development, career growth, and leadership development on sustainable economic outcomes. A descriptive survey design was adopted, with a sample of 250 respondents drawn from a population of 697 employees using Taro Yamane's formula. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using linear regression in SPSS version 22.0. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between learning development and sustainable economic performance. Career growth also showed a significant positive association, suggesting that clearly defined career paths enhance employee retention, stability, and organizational effectiveness. In addition, leadership development demonstrated a strong positive influence, highlighting the role of effective leadership in fostering innovation and aligning employees with

long-term goals. The study concludes that investment in employee talent development is essential for sustaining the growth and competitiveness of SMEs.

***Keywords**: Learning Development, Career growth, Leadership Development, Sustainable performance*

1.1 Introduction

In contemporary economies, enhancing employee skills has emerged as a crucial strategy for firms seeking to remain competitive and for nations aiming to achieve sustained economic growth. Employee talent development encompasses organized initiatives such as training, career progression, mentorship, and leadership development, all directed toward improving workers' skills, knowledge, and competencies for both current and future roles (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012). In Nigeria, this has become particularly important due to the dynamic nature of the business environment, the growing number of job seekers, and the increasing demand for a workforce that is both skilled and adaptable. Drawing from human capital theory, investment in employee development is expected to yield long-term gains in productivity, innovation, and organizational resilience (Becker, 1993). Thus, talent development extends beyond a human resource function to a strategic tool for strengthening the country's human capital base.

Sustainable economic development, on the other hand, goes beyond short-term economic gains to include equitable growth, employment generation, and responsible resource utilization that meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Todaro & Smith, 2015). Within the context of small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, sustainable performance reflects the ability of firms to maintain consistent growth while ensuring that business operations remain socially responsible and employees continue to develop relevant skills over time. Employee talent development is closely linked to these outcomes, as it equips workers with the capabilities required to enhance productivity, drive innovation, and support inclusive economic growth (Olayemi, 2012).

However, despite the recognized importance of talent development, many SMEs in Nigeria continue to face challenges in translating employee development initiatives into sustained economic performance. In practice, talent development efforts are

often irregular, inadequately structured, or poorly aligned with organizational goals. This disconnects raises concerns about whether investments in training, career growth, and leadership development are effectively contributing to long-term sustainability and competitiveness of SMEs. Furthermore, existing studies have largely emphasized large organizations, with limited empirical attention given to SMEs, particularly in Port Harcourt where economic activities are highly dynamic and resource constraints are prevalent.

It is against this backdrop that this study examines the relationship between employee talent development and sustainable performance of SMEs in Port Harcourt. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the extent to which learning development, career growth, and leadership development influence sustainable performance. To guide the empirical investigation, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

H01: There is no significant relationship between learning development and sustainable performance in selected small and medium-scale enterprises in Port Harcourt.

H02: There is no significant relationship between career growth and sustainable performance in selected small and medium-scale enterprises in Port Harcourt.

H03: There is no significant relationship between leadership development and sustainable performance in selected small and medium-scale enterprises in Port Harcourt.

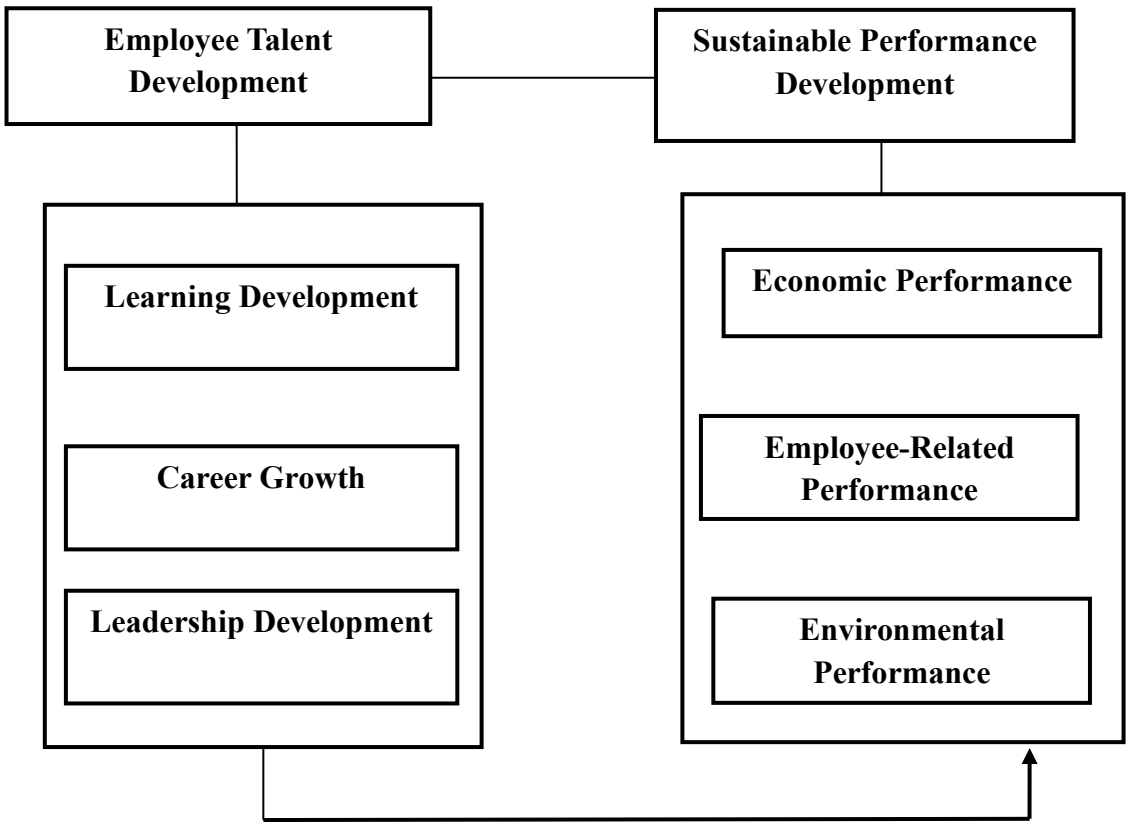
By testing these hypotheses, the study provides empirical insight into how structured talent development practices can enhance the long-term performance and sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria.

1.1 Author Contributions

The study was collaboratively conducted by three researchers, each contributing distinct but complementary roles to ensure the rigor and quality of the research. The first author was primarily responsible for the conceptualization of the study, development of the research framework, literature review, and drafting of the manuscript. The second author contributed to the research design, instrument development, data collection, and statistical analysis, including the application of multiple regression techniques and interpretation of results. The third author

focused on critical revision of the manuscript, ensuring intellectual depth, coherence, and alignment with academic standards, as well as overseeing the discussion, conclusions, and policy implications. All authors jointly reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

2.0 Review of Related Literature



Source: Researcher's Desk, 2026

Figure 1: Conceptual framework showing relationship between Employee Talent Development and Sustainable Performance

2.1 Employee Talent Development and its Dimensions

Talent development for employees has become more and more important for the long-term success and competitiveness of businesses in both developed and developing economies. It includes a variety of activities, such as training, career development, coaching, mentoring, and leadership preparation that are meant to improve employees' skills and make sure they are in line with the goals of the organization (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012). Human capital theory posits that investing in employee development produces enduring advantages, including enhanced productivity, innovation, and adaptability (Becker, 1993). Recent studies underscore that organizations prioritizing talent development cultivate a motivated workforce capable of fostering growth and maintaining performance in volatile business contexts (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019). In Nigeria, where there are big problems with skill gaps, youth unemployment, and the movement of talented people to other countries, talent development is not only a part of human resource management but also a way to make the country more competitive and help the economy grow in a way that lasts (Olayemi, 2012). So, developing employees' skills is a complex process that connects the performance of an organization with the broader progress of the economy. The dimensions of employee talent development include:

Learning Development: Learning development is an important part of developing employee talent. It focuses on constantly gaining new skills, improving knowledge, and being able to adapt to changing needs in the workplace and the environment. It encompasses both formal and informal methodologies, including structured training programs, e-learning platforms, mentoring, coaching, and experiential learning initiatives that promote employee development (Noe, Clarke, & Klein, 2014). Scholars assert that learning development not only imparts the technical and interpersonal skills necessary for current positions but also equips employees for future challenges, thereby augmenting organizational resilience and fostering innovation (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012). According to human capital theory, companies that spend money on learning and development get more productivity, creativity, and a competitive edge (Becker, 1993). In developing countries like Nigeria, where technological change and skills gaps are still big problems, learning development has been shown to greatly boost employee performance and help the country build its human capital (Olayemi, 2012). Consequently, learning

development is an important way for businesses to find and keep good employees while making sure that their skills are in line with long-term economic growth.
Career Growth: Career growth is a key part of developing employee talent. It looks at ways for employees to move up in the company, learn new skills, and feel fulfilled in their work. It includes concepts like mentoring, succession planning, internal mobility, and clear promotion systems that make sure that employees' goals are in line with the goals of the organization (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). Studies indicate that when employees recognize distinct prospects for career advancement, they exhibit elevated levels of engagement, commitment, and retention, consequently enhancing organizational performance (Weng & McElroy, 2012). From the standpoint of human capital, career growth serves as both a motivational element and a strategic tool for organizations to optimize the returns on their investments in personnel (Becker, 1993). In Nigeria, where job security is low and opportunities for advancement are few, structured career growth programs have been shown to make employees happier and help businesses stay competitive and productive in the long run (Olayemi, 2012). So, career growth is an important part of talent development that helps both individuals and organizations stay strong.

Leadership Development: Leadership development is an important part of developing employees' skills because it gives them the skills they need to affect, guide, and keep an organization successful in complex situations. It includes planned activities like mentoring, coaching, executive training, and succession planning that is meant to create a pool of skilled leaders (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Scholars contend that leadership development improves decision-making, strategic thinking, and interpersonal effectiveness, thereby promoting organizational adaptability and long-term performance (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). From a talent management standpoint, investing in leadership development guarantees the perpetuation of vision and culture while equipping organizations for forthcoming challenges (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012). In Nigeria, where leadership gaps often hold back organizational performance, structured leadership development programs have been shown to be necessary for creating strong institutions and helping the economy grow in a way that lasts (Olayemi, 2012). Based on this fact, leadership development is an important part of developing employee talent because it connects individual potential with the long-term success of the organization.

2.2 Sustainable Performance and Its Measures

Sustainable performance refers to an organization's ability to achieve continuous growth while balancing economic success, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. It reflects a long-term orientation in which firms not only pursue profitability but also ensure that their operations contribute positively to employees, communities, and the broader environment. In the context of small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), sustainable performance is particularly important, as these firms operate under resource constraints yet play a critical role in employment generation and economic development. Recent literature emphasizes that sustainable performance integrates financial outcomes with social and environmental considerations, making it a multidimensional construct rather than a purely economic one (Kraus et al., 2020; Schaltegger et al., 2019).

For this study, sustainable performance is operationalized using three measures: economic performance, employee-related performance, and environmental performance.

Economic Performance: Economic performance represents the financial health and operational efficiency of an organization. It reflects the firm's ability to generate revenue, maintain profitability, and sustain growth over time. In SMEs, economic performance is often measured through indicators such as sales growth, profit margins, cost efficiency, and market expansion. Studies have shown that firms that invest in employee capabilities and strategic management practices tend to experience improved financial outcomes and long-term competitiveness (Kraus et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2021). As a measure of sustainable performance, economic performance captures the extent to which SMEs can remain viable and competitive in dynamic business environments.

Employee-Related Performance: Employee-related performance focuses on workforce outcomes that contribute to organizational sustainability. It includes indicators such as employee retention, job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. Sustainable organizations recognize that their employees are critical assets, and maintaining a motivated and stable workforce is essential for long-term success. Empirical evidence suggests that firms with strong talent development practices experience higher levels of employee commitment and reduced turnover, which in turn enhance organizational performance (Nishii & Mayer, 2020; Roberson, 2019). This dimension is particularly relevant in SMEs, where the loss of skilled employees can significantly disrupt operations.

Environmental Performance: Environmental performance refers to the extent to which an organization minimizes its negative impact on the natural environment while promoting sustainable resource use. It includes practices such as waste reduction, energy efficiency, compliance with environmental regulations, and adoption of eco-friendly processes. In recent years, environmental responsibility has become an essential component of sustainable performance, even for SMEs, as stakeholders increasingly demand environmentally conscious business practices (Schaltegger et al., 2019; UNDP, 2022). Organizations that integrate environmental considerations into their operations not only reduce risks but also enhance their reputation and long-term viability.

Collectively, these three measures—economic performance, employee-related performance, and environmental performance—provide a comprehensive framework for assessing sustainable performance in SMEs. They capture the financial, social, and environmental dimensions of organizational sustainability, making them suitable for empirical investigation in the context of employee talent development and SME performance in Nigeria.

2.3 Nexus between Employee Talent Development and Sustainable Performance in SMEs in Nigeria

The relationship between employee talent development and sustainable performance in SMEs in Nigeria is increasingly recognized as both strategic and necessary for long-term organizational success. Empirical evidence shows that talent development practices—such as training, skill acquisition, and leadership development—enhance employee competencies, which directly translate into improved productivity, innovation, and overall firm performance. For instance, studies on Nigerian SMEs indicate that structured talent management and skill development significantly improve workforce capabilities and retention, thereby strengthening the sustainability of business operations (Adewole et al., 2025). Similarly, research has demonstrated that talent development positively influences SME performance, with employee retention playing a crucial role in sustaining these outcomes over time (Isah et al., 2023) . These findings suggest that when SMEs invest in developing their employees, they are better positioned to maintain consistent growth and withstand environmental uncertainties.

Furthermore, the nexus is reinforced by evidence linking specific dimensions of talent development—such as training and career development—to improved

organizational sustainability. Studies in Nigeria have shown that training and development significantly enhance employee productivity and operational efficiency, which are critical drivers of sustainable performance in SMEs (Uyiekpen et al., 2024). In addition, broader talent management practices, including career development and leadership competencies, have been found to influence profitability, competitive advantage, and long-term business survival (Ameen et al., 2024; Olubiyi, 2024). Collectively, these studies confirm that employee talent development is not merely a human resource function but a strategic mechanism through which SMEs in Nigeria can achieve sustainable performance by enhancing human capital, improving operational outcomes, and ensuring long-term organizational resilience.

2.4 Theoretical Review

The Human Capital Theory is a good way to describe how developing employee skills may help small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) to long-term success. This theory posits that investments in employee education, training, and skill enhancement result in heightened individual productivity, thereby fostering enhancements in organizational performance and long-term sustainability. In the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, talent development strategies, including learning initiatives, career advancement opportunities, and leadership development, serve as mechanisms to cultivate a workforce that is both more skilled and adaptable. Adewole et al. (2025) discovered that empirical evidence from Nigerian small and medium-sized organizations (SMEs) indicates that firms prioritizing skill development and talent management experience increased employee retention, improved competencies, and better workforce stability. All of these are very important for the company to keep doing well. Moreover, investment in human capital has been associated with enhancements in both innovation and efficiency, indicating that companies that strive to continuously develop their workforce are better equipped to respond to environmental changes and achieve enduring success (Aman-Ullah et al., 2022; Bhandari *et al.,* 2020).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) sees employee talent as a strategic resource that may provide a company a long-term edge over its competitors. This is another way to look at this idea. The Resource-Based View (RBV) asserts that firms may attain superior performance when they own resources that are valued, limited, distinctive, and non-substitutable. One of the most significant resources that businesses have

is skilled human capital (Barney, 1991). Small and medium-sized firms (SMEs), particularly those in developing nations like Nigeria, has the ability to nurture and retain great talent, therefore enabling them to develop unique competences that are difficult for competitors to replicate. Olaleye et al. (2024) found that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that use their own internal resources, like employee skills, the ability to innovate, and the ability to learn as an organization, are more likely to be able to stay in business and bounce back from setbacks. There is also evidence that effective people retention and development strategies enhance organizational resilience. This helps small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) stay on top of their game as the market changes (Ebisinkemefa & Emehi, 2024). The integration of Resource-Based View (RBV) and Human Capital Theory provides a robust theoretical framework for comprehending how the cultivation of employee potential fosters sustainable performance in small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. This is done by making the workers more skilled and giving the business a strategic edge.

2.5 Empirical Review

Recent empirical research in Nigeria indicates that the cultivation of employee talent significantly influences the sustainable success of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A research in North-Central Nigeria found that people management strategies, especially talent acquisition and development, had a favorable and substantial impact on the performance of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs). This study indicates that companies that put money into improving their workers' skills are more likely to have greater operational results and long-term stability (Agada & Ogaji, 2024). Isah *et al*. (2023) discovered that a research conducted among small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in Yobe State indicated that talent development methods were positively correlated with organizational performance. Moreover, staff retention served as a mediating factor in enhancing this relationship. These findings indicate that ongoing investment in employee skills enhances productivity and fosters worker stability, which is crucial for sustaining small and medium-sized firm operations in Nigeria's volatile economic environment.

More real-world evidence backs up the idea that certain parts of talent development, including training, moving forward in your profession, and developing leadership skills, are important for getting long-lasting benefits. Adewole et al. (2025) did a study on small and medium-sized companies (SMEs)

within the technology sector in Nigeria. The study's results showed that activities that help people learn new talents greatly improve their skills and the long-term health of the business. This is especially true since it lowers staff turnover and gives the company a competitive edge. Talent development and training significantly enhance employee productivity in manufacturing firms, which subsequently contributes to sustained organizational performance (Uyiekpen et al., 2024). This was shown in a study related to the previously described one. Also, career support systems have been shown to improve employee performance in Nigeria, suggesting that structured career advancement is important for keeping a company's performance up (Okolie *et al.,* 2024). This data also shows how important it is to have chances to go forward in your job. These studies together indicate small and medium-sized organizations (SMEs), even if some smaller businesses still face challenges, the cultivation of employee talent is a significant factor in achieving sustained success in fully institutionalizing these practices.

3.0 Methodology

For the purpose of examining the connection between the development of employee talent and the sustainable performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, this study used a descriptive survey research design. A total of 669 workers were included in the population, all of whom were taken from various small and medium-sized businesses located within the ensure proper representation and generalizability of the results by using the method for determining research region. It was determined that a sample size of 250 respondents would be sufficient to a sample size that was developed by Taro Yamane in 1967. We used a straightforward random sample method to ensure that every individual in the population had an equal opportunity to be selected, hence reducing the likelihood of any bias in the sampling process. A structured questionnaire that was constructed on a five-point Likert scale was used to gather data. This questionnaire was meant to capture metrics of learning development, career progression, leadership development, and sustainable performance within the organization. According to Hair et al. (2019), the validity of the instrument was validated via the use of expert review, and the reliability of the instrument was determined by the use of Cronbach's alpha coefficient with acceptable criteria above 0.70. With the assistance of SPSS, the data that were gathered were categorized and analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. This was done in order to assess the strength of links among the research variables as well as the direction of such relationships.

4.0 Result, Findings, Conclusion and Recommendation

The source of data for this study was questionnaire data which were sourced through the questionnaires administered to selected banks in the sample size. Twenty five (25) questionnaires were designed and administered. One questionnaire was administered in each of the commercial banks. Cumulatively 21 out of the 25 questionnaire were successfully filled and retrieved by the researchers, this represent 84% of the total questionnaire while 4 which represent 16% where not.

Table 1: ***Multiple Regression Analysis of Employee Talent Development on Sustainable Performance***

Predictor Variable	B	SE	B	t	p
Constant	1.245	0.312	—	3.991	.000
Learning Development	0.318	0.074	0.312	4.297	.000
Career Growth	0.287	0.069	0.285	4.159	.000
Leadership Development	0.352	0.081	0.341	4.346	.000

Model Summary

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	SE of Estimate	F	p
0.781	0.610	0.602	0.421	68.214	.000

Note. Dependent variable = Sustainable Performance. N = 250. B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard error; β = Standardized coefficient. All predictors are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

4.1 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that employee talent development significantly influences sustainable performance in SMEs in Port Harcourt. The positive effect of learning development supports the argument that continuous training enhances employee competencies, leading to improved productivity and organizational effectiveness. This aligns with prior studies which found that skill development contributes to innovation and long-term performance sustainability (Hossain et al., 2021; Adewole *et al.,* 2025).

The significant relationship between career growth and sustainable performance suggests that employees are more committed and productive when clear advancement opportunities exist. This finding is consistent with Nishii and Mayer (2020), who emphasized that career progression enhances employee engagement and reduces turnover, thereby supporting organizational sustainability. Furthermore, the strong effect of leadership development underscores the role of effective leadership in driving strategic direction and fostering a culture of innovation. This supports the view that leadership capability is critical in translating employee potential into organizational outcomes (Aman-Ullah et al., 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce Human Capital Theory, which posits that investments in employee development yield improved productivity and performance (Becker, 1993). They also align with the Resource-Based View, which identifies skilled employees as valuable organizational assets that contribute to sustained competitive advantage (Barney *et al.,* 2021).
Based on the analysis, the study revealed the following:

1. Learning development has a significant positive effect on sustainable performance of SMEs.
2. Career growth significantly enhances sustainable performance by improving employee retention and organizational stability.
3. Leadership development exerts the strongest influence on sustainable performance, emphasizing the importance of leadership capacity.

4. Employee talent development collectively explains a substantial proportion of variations in sustainable performance.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that employee talent development is a critical determinant of sustainable performance in SMEs in Port Harcourt. The findings demonstrate that investments in learning development, career growth, and leadership development significantly enhance organizational productivity, employee stability, and long-term competitiveness. Talent development, therefore, is not merely a human resource function but a strategic tool for achieving sustainable business performance. SMEs that prioritize structured talent development practices are better positioned to adapt to environmental changes, foster innovation, and sustain growth over time.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. SMEs should invest in continuous training and skill development initiatives to enhance employee competencies and productivity.
2. Organizations should establish clear career paths and promotion systems to improve employee motivation, retention, and long-term performance.
3. SMEs should prioritize leadership training programs to build managerial capacity for effective decision-making and innovation.
4. Employee development initiatives should be aligned with organizational goals to ensure they contribute directly to sustainable performance.
5. Government and industry stakeholders should support SMEs through policies and incentives that encourage workforce development and capacity building.

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