

HR Strategic Partnership in Small and Medium Enterprises

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i5/25551> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i5/25551

Published Date: 27 May 2025

Abstract

Establishing a competitive SME does not require only a competitive idea but also the right set of skills through the right team. Employees must be healthy and engaged to meet goals in the right positions and time. HR in SMEs is as important as in large firms, but is not approached as a strategic partner as in large organizations. The paper explores the strategic role of HR in SMEs in the Kingdom of Bahrain by reviewing the literature in other contexts. The study analyzes the implications of the lack of strategic HR partnership. The analysis focuses on the pillars of HR, which range from recruitment, training, and development, employee experience, retention strategies, employee relations, and Compliance. The factors are embedded in a framework to explore the implications of HR practices in SMEs in Bahrain.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, SMEs, Developing Contexts

Introduction

HR practices are critical even in SMEs as they positively and directly impact organizational performance (Chhinzer, 2022; Carroll & Wagar, 2011; Walker et al., 2007; Fabi et al., 2009; Greenidge et al., 2012). Without HR being a strategic partner with business owners in SMEs, they will be trapped with the complexity of managing human resources with low retention rates and high turnover rates. As indicated in several studies, HR management does not operate in a vacuum in SMEs (Islam et al., 2020; Verma, 2022; Viltard, 2020; Chhinzer, 2022). SME managers and owners have limited HR competencies, experience, or qualifications in HR. According to Walker et al. (2007), 2% of SME managers are competent in the field of HR. HR functions include the pillars of any HR which are which range from recruitment, training and development, employee experience, retention strategies, employee relations, and Compliance. HR functions and practices alleviate the pressures of employee management in SMEs.

Recruitment involves hiring the right fit with knowledge, competencies, and skills, attracting and retaining employees to improve performance. Performance management involves the HR role in improving performance and development for SMEs. Culture enables the maintenance

of a lively SME culture. The training and development improve the SME's knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Research Aim

SMEs have an informal approach to HR with weak HR systems for effective management of employees (Ahmad and Memoona 2023, Abdul-Kahar and Manu 2021, Dessler and Chhiner 2019). Only 15% of SMEs give priority to training, compensation, and recruitment processes with a strategic plan (Nita 2022). Business owners do not prioritize human resource management as they may have limited experience or be diverted towards investments for their business (Carroll and Wagar 2010, Walker et al 2007, Fabi et al 2009). The literature review reveals the importance of HR as a strategic partner, which deserves a study to be mapped within SMEs as well. The literature review indicates that HR in SMEs operates in a vacuum. The paper aims to reveal the importance of HR as a strategic partner in supporting SMEs. The research addresses the following research objectives:

RO1- To identify factors that are crucial for HR strategic partnership in SMEs

RO2- To propose a model of the determinants of HR that necessitate HR strategic partnership in SMEs

Literature Review

Referring to several studies by (Sheehan 2014, Messersmith and Guthrie 2010, Vitala et al 2020, Psychogios 2015), it is strongly evident that there is a positive relationship between HRM and firm performance. Institutional theory presented by (Schuler and Jackson 1999:11) indicates that the larger the organization, the more likely it will adopt "sophisticated and socially responsive HRM activities because these more visible organizations are under more pressure to gain legitimacy." However, HR is required as a strategic partner in small to medium organizations or large organizations (Harney, 2015; Dessler & Chhiner, 2019). The literature review examines how HR can influence and be influenced by internal and external factors in a company's business environment and how HR practices fit into a context that will maximize return for a company. The essay gives an overall picture of most factors that prove how "HRM does not operate in a vacuum".

HRM integration for competitive advantage

Organizational strategies influence HRM as many businesses are integrating HRM strategies congruently with organizational strategy, forming a vertical fit with organizational strategy (Walker 1992 in Armstrong 2000) and a strategic perspective for HR (Harvard framework by Beer 1984 in Armstrong 2000). People management is one of the key links generating a competitive advantage (Madhvkumar 2023, Mekonnen and Azaj 2020, Abdul-Kahar and Manu 2021, Armstrong 2000). Competitive advantage is the means by which companies differentiate themselves from competitors. Porter's model (1985) in (Armstrong 2000) indicates that competitive advantage is achieved through differentiation, innovation, quality, and cost leadership (Hafeez et al., 2022). HR practices in SMEs should be designed to reinforce the behavioral implications of the various 'generic strategies' defined by Porter. Different competitive strategies imply different kinds or blends of employee behavior. For example, a differentiation strategy will need high levels of creative, risk-oriented, and cooperative behavior, which will require HR practices to select skilled individuals to reflect the strategy (Schuler and Jackson 1987 in Boxall and Purcell 2003). When HR policies and practices are

aligned to achieve competitive advantage through its people, it is forming (Shah et al., 2021; Schuler, 1995:10), "Potent weapons because it is often difficult for competitors to formulate an effective response quickly." Competitive advantage is achieved by developing core competencies in the workforce through recruitment, reward, career planning, employee development, and by dealing with macro concerns such as corporate culture, management development, and organizational structure (Armstrong 2000). HRM can be regarded as holistic as it is intertwined with all other strategies, even in SMEs, enabling to achievement of corporate strategic objectives at the strategic, managerial, and operational levels. (Armstrong 2000). It is also integrated within its practices. As HR is aligned to the business strategy as explained above, the influence of HR exists at each stage of the life cycle of business, even in SMEs (Ahmad and Memoona 2023, Madhavkumar 2023, Newman 2014, Verma 2022, Viltard 2020, Chhinzer 2022, Storey and Sission 1993, Armstrong 2000). HR practices vary as the life cycle changes from start-up, maturity, decline, degeneration, regeneration, or transformation in every type of organization. Hence, the fact that HR practices are not crucial in SMEs cannot be ignored (Newman 2014).

Therefore, the hypothesis developed is :

H1: HRM integration significantly influences the competitive advantage in SMEs.

Organizational Structure

Organizations are moving towards decentralized, flatter, or loose organization structures to encourage innovation and change by employee flexible involvement (Best and Yalezo 2023, Daft 1995). For example, (Daft 1995:66) "McDonald's structure has no exceptions to the core values of quality, service, cleanliness, and value, but in other areas employees are free to experiment, to be flexible, and to take risks in ways that can help the company reach its goals." Another organizational structure can be a team structure, as Hallmark Company (Daft 1995:199). Hallmark Cards lives or dies on new products, producing some forty thousand new cards and other items a year. The company has been reorganized into teams to cut the cycle time required for new product development and to be more responsive to changing consumer tastes." Organization structure designates formal reporting relationships, the number of levels in the hierarchy, and the span of control of managers and supervisors. HR has the role to fulfill the organization chart requirements, which reflect the organization structure by grouping job roles of individuals into departments and departments into the total organization, which can be challenging in SMEs. Departmental grouping by activity, output, users, customers, functional, product structure, geographical structure, hybrid or matrix structure affects the HR selection process for recruitment, compensation, development, and career planning. Organizational structure triggers recruitment needs, the type of people employed, positions, and the ranking of jobs. (Kapur 2021, Best and Yalezo 2023, Fletcher 1993) Explain that the structure and culture of organizations are dynamically interrelated and need to be considered when drawing up plans for an appraisal scheme. Nestlé is a company that moved from a hierarchical to a flat and flexible structure to enable employees to develop themselves through communication, flexibility, less command, and self learning. This caused performance management, job analysis, recruitment, and training aspects to be modified by HR expertise to embed competencies that assist the flat and flexible structure. In SMEs, flatter structures are more evident owing to the smaller number of employees and the need for prompt and proactive initiatives.

Therefore, the hypothesis developed is :

H2: Organizational structure significantly influences SMEs.

Culture

Schuler and Briscoe (2004:129) comment that companies "Take great pride in their "enterprise cultures" which reflect the values of their founders and evolve to create corporate personalities that give employees a template for how to behave, including areas like the making of decisions, the acceptance of continual improvement, and treatment of customers." HR enforces the culture of an organization through induction, facilitating the transition of persons into new social roles, forming activities that enhance social identities and encourage common feelings that bind and commit members together (Kapur 2021, Hinteregger, Baldegger, & Durst, S. 2022, Daft 1995). (Armstrong 2000) adds that training courses can enforce culture as part of a continuous development process. In addition, HR strengthens culture during the selection and socialization of new employees. Examples by Daft (1995), Procter and Gamble new employees are given minor tasks and allowed to question their prior behaviors, beliefs, and values which allow them to assimilate the beliefs and values of P&G. New employees during induction are also informed about the company transcendent values and overarching purposes, about events, heroes. Building a culture within SMEs is crucial, which requires hiring employees who work hard, have fun, and who feel that joining the company is joining an extended family. Building such a culture cannot be done by the business owner himself, strengthening the implementation of HR functions in SMEs. By managing people issues, HR can recruit the best talent, improve retention rates, improve employee relations, enhance public image, increase creativity, promote the best are promoted, and harness the potential within each employee is harnessed (Hinteregger, Baldegger, & Durst, S. 2022, Kandola and Fullerton 1998). HR expertise is needed to base objective and relevant criteria in recruitment, selection, promotion, induction, training, and career development to maximize potential from differences even in SMEs (Delattre and Bousquet 2018, Doherty and Norton 2014).

Cultures vary among countries as they have different cultural dimensions (Hofstede 1997), which affect HR functions. The effect of culture on HR is explained further by giving examples. (Budhwar et. al 2001:79) explain the effect of culture in HR in India, "54 per cent of the Indian managers believe that social relations play an important role in managing human resources." The present HRM system in India is a mixture of social, economic, religious, and political factors that have prevailed in India for many years. Indians are socialized in an environment that values strong family ties, caste groups, age, seniority, hierarchy, and status consciousness. This causes interpersonal relations to influence job-related decisions. Hence, there is a high power distance, paternalistic management style, preference for personalized relationships, low individualism, which causes a soft work culture in job, promotion, and job-related decisions from their own caste, communities, and families. Another example is presented by (Melhai and Wood et. al 2001) about Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, the type of work, sector employment, and social interactions at work determine an individual's social status. Despite the problem of unemployment in the country, Saudis insist on working in the government sector for social recognition, as jobs in the private sector are manual jobs which Saudi society holds in low esteem. Bedouin traditions that are socio-centric, male-dominated, authoritarian, and value family and tribe are reflected in work practices. Such traditions make the Saudis highly collectivist within the group and highly individualistic. Job provisions and promotions are given to a maximum number of people from the tribe or group of relatives, even though they do not work hard. HR in Saudi Arabia is characterized by the dualistic nature of the labor market, one for Saudis and one for foreign workers. Administrative functions deal

with foreigners with work permits and salaries, while Saudis are viewed as assets to be developed through training and development. The same case applies in Bahrain and the struggle to work with cultural values in the private sector, as nationals continue to prefer the government sector to avoid the hospitality and entertainment sector for cultural restrictions (Al-Aali 2019). Other examples of effects of culture on HRM practices can be seen in Nigeria as presented by (Ovadge and Ankomah et. al. 2001). 'Generosity' is one of the traits in Nigerian culture and is reflected in compensation systems. Showing you care is very important for employee commitment. It has to be shown to employees at good and bad times by providing allowances such as a burial allowance, money for marriage as a contribution to wedding expenses. Appraisal systems cannot be regarded as reliable in the Nigerian culture, as one cannot be critical of a person in his or her presence. Giving negative feedback is hard for managers as they believe in 'You must be your brother's keeper.'

Researching the different factors and looking at the dimensions of influences reflected the lack of presence of resources that indicate "HR operates in a vacuum." At least one, if not all of the factors above, will influence HR in a company, proving "HR does not operate in a vacuum." In some scenarios, it can be seen that HR is driven by factors to generate potential in human resources to accomplish organizational goals. The factors revealed the importance of HR as a strategic partner in organizations. Hence, the research was conducted to explore the factors.

Therefore, the hypothesis developed is :

H3: Cultural practice by HR significantly influences SMEs.

Bundling

HR strategies are integrated into the development of HR practices in a way that complements one another (horizontal integration). Bundling or horizontal integration indicates that HR practices do not operate in a vacuum (Bhardwaj and Jain 2022, Zheng 2009). Examples of bundling in HR practices can be seen in job analysis and performance management. Without job analysis, it will be hard to recruit and evaluate employees' performance within an organization (Armstrong, Cummins, Hastings, and Wood 2003). In large organizations or SMEs, it is strongly evident that HR practices are applied in all organizations if they aim to achieve competitive advantage through HRM practices that will increase productivity. For example, the information collected from job analysis is used during recruitment, pay structuring, promotions, and training to ensure candidates meet job demands. Performance management is a prerequisite for establishing staffing, performance appraisal, training, and motivation principles (Latham and Wexley 1994). Performance management is (Armstrong 2000:214) "Integrated in four senses: vertical integration – linking or aligning business, team and individual objectives, functional integration- linking functional strategies in different parts of the business, HR integration- linking different aspects of human resource management, especially organizational development, human resource development and reward, to achieve a coherent approach to the management and development of people." It is noteworthy to mention that HR strategies are affected by strategies in the economic or social environment. For example, reward strategies are influenced by restructuring, globalization, culture, type of people, management practices, type of people employed, market considerations, government regulations, taxation (Armstrong 2000). Training is affected by recent trends of learning, such as learning organization (Megginson et al, 1999), blended learning (Trasler, 2002), and coaching (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005).

The strategic model of HR has given rise to line managers' devolved roles in managing people and aligned HR more with strategic business needs planning (Kapur, 2021; Csillag, 2019). (Storey 1995:7) "Line managers are seen as crucial to the effective delivery of HRM policies: conducting team briefings, holding performance appraisal interviews, target-setting, encouraging quality circles, managing performance-related pay." Such practices are crucial even in SMEs (Chhinzer 2022). Line manager involvement has changed the role of the traditional HRM to focus more on HR strategic planning in developing and implementing HR strategies aligned with business strategies in any form of organization, large organizations, or SMEs. For example, HR is seen as a facilitator for development, while the line manager supports development, delivers training, acts as a mentor or coach and is a central link by giving feedback to HR for development and appraisal activities (Walton 1999).

Therefore, the hypothesis developed is :

H4: HR practice is based on bundling which significantly influences SMEs.

Legal Compliance with Labor Market

Organizations are affected by labor by unemployment rates, labor market diversity, and structure.

(Lichy and McLeay 2021, Schuler and Jackson 1999). Such factors call upon HR to maintain the labor conditions in the economy. For example, in Saudi Arabia, economic disparity and population growth pushed the issue of unemployment, which caused HR to form schemes to create new jobs for Saudi nationals (Melhai and Wood et. al 2001). Similarly, in the Kingdom of Bahrain, Bahrainization percentages are enforced (Al-Aali 2021). In Bahrain, diverse expatriate employment and a high number of educated unemployed Bahrainis forced changes in recruitment practices in many companies to limit expatriate quota and regulate the market by increasing Bahrainization.

Maintaining current laws and regulations can cause costly lawsuits and large fines if HR fails to meet them (Schuler 1995). In a multinational function, HR is affected by politics, local laws, and national laws outside a country's national borders. Issues such as taxes, civil, civil laws, and expatriate quotas affect HR practices in SMEs and are monitored and regulated by authorities. When HR is confronted with issues such as corruption, cheap foreign labor, sweatshops, codes of conduct for managers and employees, HR must avoid ethical imperialism and maintain ethical absolutism (Briscoe and Schuler 2004). Examples of legal Compliance are the Civil Rights Act of 1991 and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act in the United States (Daft 1995). Examples of International labor standards are the International Labor Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Briscoe and Schuler 2004).

Health and Safety issues in many countries have specifications for working conditions and acts that protect an organization's workforce's physical and psychological conditions. Failure to abide by health and safety issues for employees can cause liabilities even in SMEs. HR has to respond to health and safety hazards according to the harm exposed at work and the laws of the country, as action has to be taken from a human as well as a legal point of view. Compensation and benefits, work settings, and psychological aspects have to embed health and safety factors.

Therefore, the hypothesis developed is :

H5: Legal Compliance forms a moderating effect for HR practice in SMEs.

Research Framework

The framework for the study derived from the literature review is illustrated in Figure 1. Referring to the figure, the three determinants are mapped through the H1-H3, which fall as the factors that indicate HR presence in SME. Legal Compliance is a moderating variable that can vary within contexts. H4 bundling remains as a dependent variable.

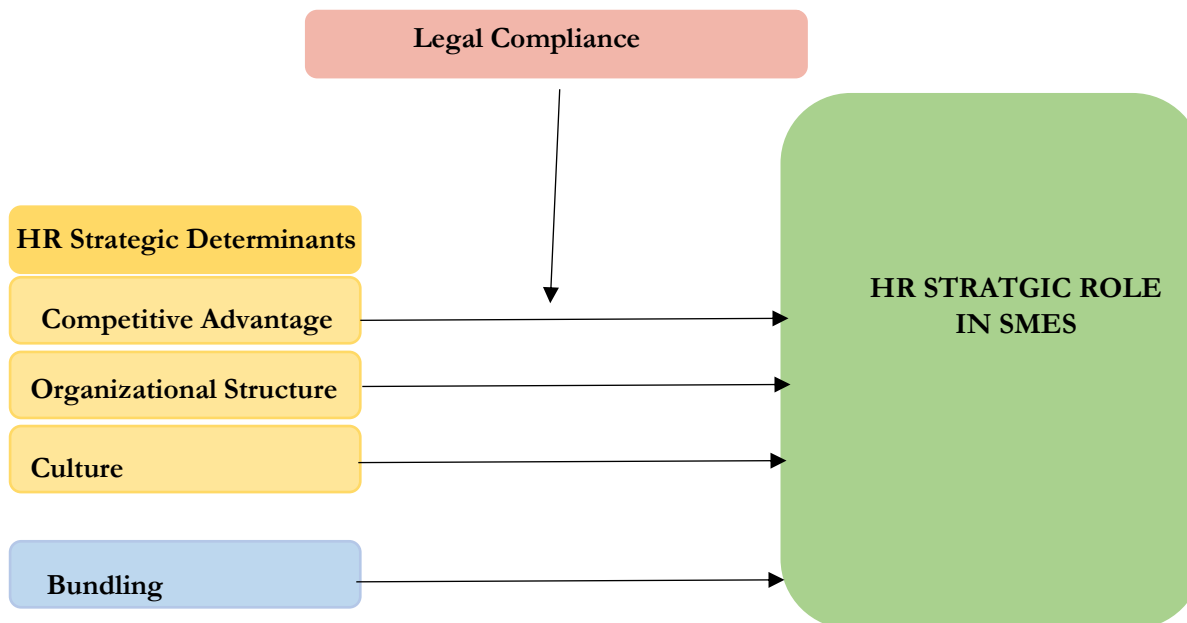


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Research

Context of Study – Kingdom of Bahrain

Small and Medium Enterprises in Bahrain account for 30% of the economy, with up to 6335 enterprises. Eighty-one percent are owned by Bahrainis, with 39% owned by women and 29% by youth. Unfortunately, many SMEs do not have a chance to succeed before they get into the stage of growth and maturity. Funding is one of the main reasons for SME failure (Tamkeen 2024). There are various forms beyond traditional bank loans to thrive in a competitive environment, such as convertible notes, crowdfunding, angel investors, and trade credit. In addition, analyzing and exploring the SME businesses in Bahrain shows that many businesses do not have occupational licensing (Al-Aali 2014).

Furthermore, the main challenge in the Bahrain context is the mimetic business ideas that are repeated in the market, which hence causes the business not to reach a growth stage (Trade Arabia 2014, Arabian Business 2015). Analyzing the above three main challenges in the Bahrain market, the researcher strongly believes that reflecting on the literature review on the importance of managing the human resources that operate the SMEs. Hence, the research focuses on the implications of HR practices in SMEs in Bahrain.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is a quantitative method. The data was collected through an online questionnaire sent to SMEs in Bahrain. It has been sent to 550 SMEs in Bahrain, with a total response of 250 questionnaires. The research was filled by HR positions, administrators performing HR responsibilities, or the business owners themselves.

Results and Discussion

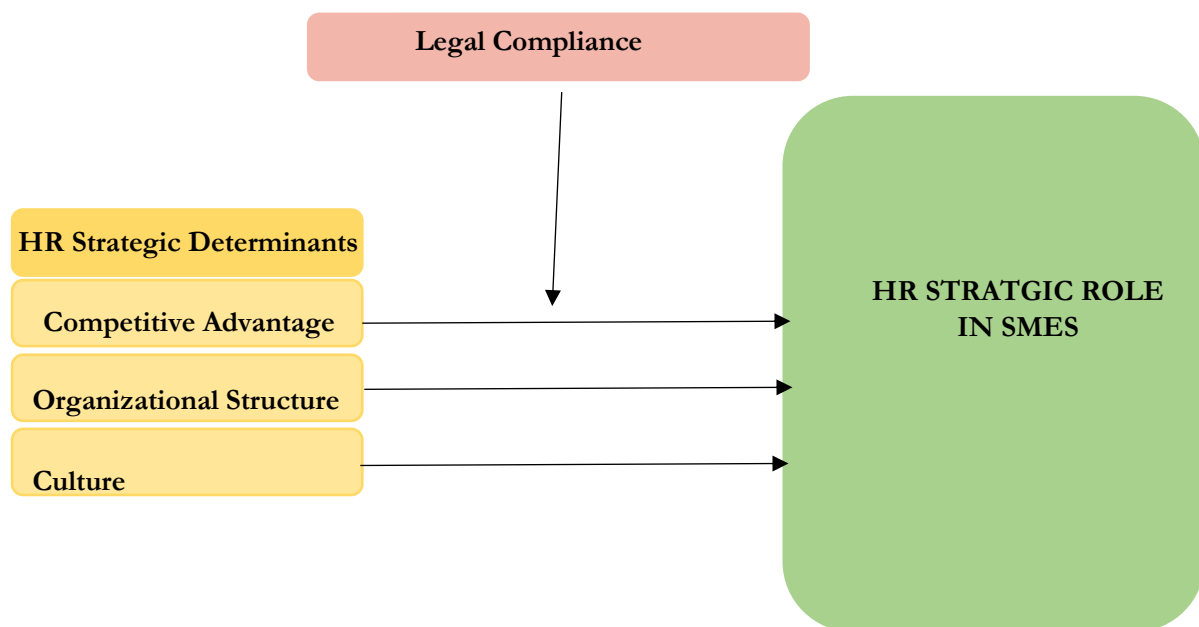
Analyzing the study results for Hypotheses 1-5 provides the analysis as per the Bahrain context. Referring to Hypothesis 1, it is evident that there is a positive relationship between competitive advantage and HR strategic role in SMEs, which is supported using the PSL output with a significant relationship ($\beta=0.391$, $t=11.381$, $p \text{ value}=0.000$) found between the two variables. Hypothesis 2 indicates a positive relationship between organizational structure and HR strategic role in SMEs, which is supported with a positive beta β value and t value ($\beta=0.101$, $t=3.539$, $p \text{ value}=0.000$). Hypothesis 3, which indicates a positive relationship between culture and HR strategic role in SMEs, is supported with positive and significant results ($\beta=0.089$, $t=3.189$, $p \text{ value}=0.002$). Hypothesis 4, which indicates a positive relationship between bundling and HR strategic role in SMEs, is supported ($\beta=0.113$, $t=4.403$, $p \text{ value}=0.000$).

The moderating influence of legal Compliance between competitive advantage and HR strategic role in SMEs is positively significant ($\beta=0.196$, $t=5.858$, $p \text{ value}=0.000$). However, the influence of legal Compliance on organizational structure and HR strategic role in SMEs is negative ($\beta=-0.069$, $t=3.037$, $p \text{ value}=0.002$). Similarly, the influence of legal Compliance between culture and HR strategic role in SMEs is negative ($\beta=-0.032$, $t=1.334$, $p \text{ value}=0.002$).

Legal Compliance does not influence the relationship between bundling and HR strategic role in SMEs ($\beta=-0.113$, $t=4.403$, $p \text{ value}=0.182$). Therefore, H5 is supported except for including the bundling as an organizational factor.

The research objective (RO1) to identify factors crucial for HR strategic partnership in SMEs is achieved as the study was able to review the literature, analyze the factors that determine HR strategic necessity in SMEs, and examine the factors in the Bahrain context. The study indicated that HR is necessary in SME for competitive advantage, culture building, and organizational structure. These factors significantly positively affect strategic HR partnerships, indicating that HR in SMEs does not operate in a vacuum. Though the literature review indicated the importance of bundling HR practices in SMEs, the results did not show the significance of bundling practices as essential for HR practice in Bahrain. The study indicated the significance of legal compliance in playing a crucial role in forming HR strategic practice in SMEs, assuring that HR does not operate in a vacuum in SMEs. Competitive advantage is the most significant factor proving that HR is necessary for SMEs. The remaining factors are considered moderately critical.

The second research objective (RO2) was achieved as the research proposed a model of the determinants of HR that indicated the necessity of HR strategic partnership in SMEs. One factor, "bundling," indicated that it is unnecessary for strategic HR practice within Bahrain. Legal compliance significantly affects the enforcement of the HR strategic determinants for the HR strategic role in SMEs.



Bundling

Figure 2: Modified Conceptual Framework

Conclusion

The study indicated through theoretical and practical implications that strategic HR partnerships are necessary for SMEs in Bahrain. The study is the first to indicate the importance of HR practice in SMEs. Running a search engine for "HR practice in SMEs Bahrain" on 3rd January 2024 generates zero results. The study has significance for SME practices in Bahrain, calling upon government policies and funding for SMEs to be focused on HR practices for competitive advantage towards building a diversified economy in a developing economy such as Bahrain. The study can enable labour fund authorities like TAMKEEN in Bahrain to shape SMEs strategic HR practices for sustaining their presence in the market and to achieve long term competitive advantage that benefits the Bahrain economy in the long run.

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