

## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF SMEs: A HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Dewi Puspaningtyas Faeni<sup>1\*</sup>, Ramdhan Wibisana<sup>2</sup>.

Faculty of Economics and Business Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya<sup>1</sup>,

Student of Economics and Business Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya<sup>2</sup>.

[dewi.puspaningtyas@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id](mailto:dewi.puspaningtyas@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id).<sup>1\*</sup> [ramdhanwibisana11@gmail.com](mailto:ramdhanwibisana11@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>.

\*coresponden author

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges and solutions related to the digital transformation of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) from a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective. SMEs often face hurdles such as limited digital skills among employees, resistance to change, and financial constraints. To overcome these challenges, effective HRD strategies are essential, including investments in upskilling, change management initiatives, and strategic partnerships. By enhancing employees' technical capabilities and fostering a culture of adaptability, SMEs can successfully integrate digital technologies into their operations. Collaborations with external stakeholders further enable SMEs to access resources needed for digital transformation, enhancing their competitiveness and sustainability in today's digital economy.

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### INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a primary agenda for many companies around the world, including Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). This process involves not only the adoption of new technologies but also fundamental changes in work methods and human resource management (HRM). In the context of digital transformation, companies must navigate the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and data analytics into their daily operations. This requires a rethinking of traditional business models and workflows, demanding a high level of flexibility and adaptability. For SMEs, the challenge is compounded by their relatively smaller size and limited

resources, which can make it more difficult to adopt and integrate these technologies effectively.

SMEs which often have limited resources, face unique challenges in implementing effective digital transformation. These challenges include financial constraints, limited access to skilled labor, and a lack of infrastructure to support new technologies. Unlike larger corporations, SMEs may not have the same level of access to capital and may struggle to invest in the necessary tools and training.

Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological advancement means that SMEs must continuously update their systems and processes to remain competitive, adding to the complexity of their digital transformation efforts. Therefore, understanding the challenges and solutions from an HR development perspective is crucial to ensure the success of this transformation. This includes investing in employee training and development to build the necessary skills and competencies, fostering a culture of innovation and change, and leveraging external partnerships and resources to support the transformation journey.

One of the main challenges faced by SMEs in digital transformation is the lack of knowledge and skills in technology. Many SMEs do not have access to adequate training or the technical expertise needed to leverage new technologies. This knowledge gap can be particularly acute in areas such as cybersecurity, data analytics, and software development, which are critical for modern business operations. As a result, SMEs may find themselves unable to fully exploit the benefits of digital tools, such as automation and cloud computing, which can significantly enhance operational efficiency and reduce costs. This limitation not only impacts their ability to adopt new technologies but also hinders their capacity to innovate and respond to market changes, thereby putting them at a competitive disadvantage compared to larger firms with more resources and expertise.

In this context HR development focusing on enhancing digital skills becomes key to bridging this gap. SMEs need to prioritize investments in continuous learning and professional development to ensure that their workforce is equipped with the necessary competencies to navigate the digital landscape. This could involve providing access to online courses, workshops, and certifications that cover a broad range of digital skills, from basic IT literacy to advanced technical proficiencies.

SMEs can benefit from fostering a culture of learning and adaptability, encouraging employees to take an active role in their own skill development and to stay abreast of technological trends. By doing so, SMEs not only enhance their internal capabilities but also create a more agile and innovative workforce that can drive digital transformation forward. Partnerships with educational institutions

and industry organizations can also provide valuable resources and support, helping SMEs to access the latest training programs and best practices in technology adoption.

In addition to skill limitations, resistance to change is also a significant challenge in the digital transformation of SMEs. Many employees may feel uncomfortable with major changes in their work processes, especially if they are not familiar with new technologies. This discomfort can stem from a fear of the unknown, concerns about job security, or simply a preference for the status quo. For instance, employees who have been accustomed to traditional methods of data entry and communication might find the shift to digital platforms overwhelming.

This resistance can manifest as passive or active pushback against digital initiatives, which can slow down or even derail the transformation process. Consequently, the overall effectiveness of the transformation is compromised as employees are less likely to engage with and adopt new technologies. An HR development approach that includes change management and continuous training is essential to overcoming this resistance. Change management involves preparing, supporting, and helping individuals, teams, and organizations in making organizational change. For SMEs, this could mean implementing structured programs that educate employees on the benefits of digital transformation and provide them with the necessary support to adapt.

Continuous training is also crucial as it ensures that employees are consistently updated with the latest skills and knowledge required to thrive in a digitally-driven environment. Regular workshops, seminars, and e-learning modules can help build confidence and competence among employees, making them more receptive to change. Additionally, creating an inclusive culture that encourages feedback and participation in decision-making processes can help mitigate resistance by giving employees a sense of ownership and involvement in the transformation journey.

Another challenge is the limited financial resources that can restrict SMEs' ability to invest in new technologies and HR development programs. Digital transformation often requires significant investment in areas such as software acquisition, infrastructure upgrades, and employee training. However, SMEs typically operate with tight budgets and may struggle to allocate the necessary funds for these initiatives. This financial constraint can limit their ability to access state-of-the-art technologies and high-quality training programs, thereby hindering their ability to compete effectively in the market. Moreover, the initial costs associated with digital transformation can be daunting for SMEs, especially when the return on investment is not immediately apparent.

In this situation potential solutions include partnerships with educational institutions or technology providers to gain access to larger and more affordable resources. Collaborating with universities, for instance, can provide SMEs with opportunities to engage in research and development projects, access to cutting-edge technologies, and workforce training programs at a reduced cost. Technology providers may offer SMEs customized solutions and flexible payment options that can help alleviate the financial burden.

Additionally government grants and subsidies specifically aimed at supporting digital transformation initiatives can provide much-needed financial support. SMEs can also explore forming consortiums or networks with other small businesses to share resources and expertise, thus reducing the overall cost of technology adoption and training. These collaborative approaches not only help in overcoming financial constraints but also foster a community of practice that supports ongoing learning and innovation.

To address these various challenges, it is important for SMEs to adopt a holistic and sustainable HR development approach. This approach should encompass both the technical and soft skills necessary to navigate the complexities of digital transformation. Technical skills training is critical as it equips employees with the knowledge and competencies needed to effectively use new technologies and systems. This could include training in areas such as cybersecurity, data analytics, software development, and cloud computing. However, focusing solely on technical skills is not sufficient. The rapidly changing digital landscape also requires employees to be agile and adaptable, capable of quickly learning and integrating new tools and processes.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **Digital Transformation**

Digital transformation refers to the process of integrating digital technologies into all aspects of a business or organization, fundamentally changing how it operates and delivers value to its customers. This transformation involves more than just the implementation of new technology; it requires a rethinking of business models, processes, and culture to leverage digital capabilities fully. The goal of digital transformation is to enhance operational efficiency, improve customer experiences, and drive innovation. By adopting technologies such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics, organizations can gain deeper insights, streamline operations, and create new business opportunities. This shift is crucial in today's digital age, where technology is rapidly evolving and disrupting traditional industries.

One of the key aspects of digital transformation is the focus on customer-centricity. By leveraging digital tools, businesses can better understand customer needs and preferences, allowing for more personalized and responsive services. For example, data analytics can help companies analyze customer behavior to predict trends and tailor their offerings accordingly. Additionally, digital platforms enable businesses to engage with customers through multiple channels, such as social media, mobile apps, and websites, providing a seamless and integrated customer experience. This enhanced connectivity and responsiveness can lead to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, which are critical for maintaining a competitive edge in the market.

Digital transformation is not without its challenges. It often requires significant investment in technology and infrastructure, as well as a cultural shift within the organization. Employees need to be equipped with new skills and mindsets to effectively use digital tools and adapt to new ways of working. Resistance to change can also be a major hurdle, as individuals and teams may be hesitant to move away from established practices. Moreover, the rapid pace of technological change means that organizations must continually evolve and innovate to stay relevant. Despite these challenges, the benefits of digital transformation are substantial, including increased efficiency, enhanced customer experiences, and the ability to quickly respond to market changes. As such, it has become a strategic imperative for organizations across all sectors seeking to thrive in the digital era.

## **SMEs**

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are businesses that maintain revenues, assets, or a number of employees below a certain threshold. These thresholds vary by country and industry, but SMEs typically include businesses that are smaller in scale compared to large corporations. Despite their size, SMEs play a crucial role in the economy. They are often more flexible and innovative than larger firms, enabling them to respond quickly to changing market conditions and customer needs. SMEs are also significant drivers of employment and economic growth, contributing to job creation, poverty reduction, and the overall economic development of a region.

SMEs are characterized by their diverse business models and operational structures, which can range from sole proprietorships and family-owned businesses to more complex partnerships and corporations. This diversity allows SMEs to operate in a wide variety of sectors, including manufacturing, retail, services, and technology. One of the key advantages of SMEs is their ability to establish strong connections with local communities and customers, often leading to a high level of customer loyalty. Furthermore, their smaller size enables them to

be more agile and adaptive, allowing for rapid decision-making and the ability to pivot in response to market opportunities or challenges.

SMEs also face unique challenges, such as limited access to finance, resources, and market opportunities. They may struggle with acquiring the necessary funding to expand or invest in new technologies due to stricter lending criteria and limited collateral. Additionally, SMEs often lack the scale advantages of larger corporations, which can make it more difficult for them to compete on price or secure favorable terms from suppliers. Despite these challenges, SMEs remain a vital component of the global economy.

Governments and organizations worldwide recognize their importance and often implement policies and programs aimed at supporting SME growth and development, such as providing access to financing, business development services, and market access initiatives. Here are four classifications of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):

1. **Micro Enterprises:** These are the smallest category of SMEs, typically characterized by a very small number of employees (often fewer than 10) and low turnover or asset value. Micro enterprises are often sole proprietorships or family-run businesses operating in sectors such as retail, services, and small-scale manufacturing.
2. **Small Enterprises:** Small enterprises are slightly larger than micro enterprises but still considered small-scale businesses. They generally employ between 10 to 50 employees and may have higher turnover or asset values compared to micro enterprises. Small enterprises often have a more structured organizational setup and may operate across multiple locations or regions.
3. **Medium Enterprises:** Medium enterprises represent the middle tier of SMEs, with a larger scale of operations compared to micro and small enterprises. They typically employ between 50 to 250 employees and have higher turnover or asset values. Medium enterprises are more likely to have formal management structures, specialized departments, and may engage in international trade or partnerships.
4. **Emerging Enterprises:** This category includes SMEs that are in the early stages of growth and expansion, often characterized by innovative business models, high growth potential, and scalability. Emerging enterprises may still operate with relatively small teams but demonstrate rapid growth and a focus on capturing market opportunities through technological innovation or niche market strategies. They play a vital role in driving economic dynamism and competitiveness within their respective industries.

Characteristics of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):

1. **Size and Scale:** SMEs are characterized by their relatively small size in terms of turnover, assets, or number of employees compared to larger corporations. This allows them to be more flexible and agile in responding to market changes.

2. Independently Owned: Most SMEs are independently owned and operated, often by entrepreneurs or families, rather than being subsidiaries of larger corporations.
3. Localized Operations: SMEs typically operate on a local or regional scale, serving local markets or communities. They may have limited geographic reach compared to multinational corporations.
4. Adaptability and Innovation: SMEs are known for their ability to innovate and adapt quickly to changing market conditions. This agility enables them to introduce new products or services and respond swiftly to customer feedback.
5. Labour Intensity: SMEs often have a higher ratio of employees to output compared to larger firms. This can foster a strong sense of community and personal relationships within the workforce.

### **Human Resource Development**

Human Resource Development (HRD) is a strategic and systematic approach to enhancing the capabilities and competencies of an organization's workforce. It encompasses a broad range of activities designed to improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees to achieve both individual and organizational goals. HRD focuses on fostering continuous learning and development within the organization, thereby ensuring that employees are well-equipped to meet the challenges of their roles and contribute to the company's success. Key components of HRD include training and development, career development, organizational development, and performance management, all aimed at promoting personal growth, job satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness.

Training and development are central aspects of HRD, involving the design and implementation of programs that build specific skills and knowledge required for employees to perform their jobs effectively. This can include on-the-job training, workshops, seminars, e-learning, and certification programs. Beyond immediate job requirements, HRD also emphasizes long-term career development, helping employees to identify career paths, set goals, and acquire the competencies needed for future roles and responsibilities. Career development initiatives often involve mentoring, coaching, and succession planning to ensure that employees have opportunities for advancement and that the organization has a robust pipeline of talent.

Organizational development, another critical element of HRD, focuses on improving the overall health and effectiveness of the organization through interventions that enhance its culture, processes, and structures. This can involve change management initiatives, team-building activities, and leadership development programs aimed at fostering a collaborative and innovative work environment. Performance management, on the other hand, involves setting

performance standards, evaluating employee performance, and providing feedback and support to help employees achieve their potential.

By aligning individual performance with organizational goals, HRD helps to ensure that employees are motivated, engaged, and capable of driving the organization forward. Overall, HRD is essential for creating a dynamic and resilient workforce that can adapt to changing market conditions and contribute to sustained organizational growth. Human Resource Development (HRD) serves several important functions within organizations, focusing on the growth and development of employees to enhance both individual and organizational effectiveness. Here are key functions of HRD:

1. **Training and Development:** Human Resource Development (HRD) programs are integral to ensuring that employees continually acquire and refine the skills essential for effective job performance. Technical skills are directly related to job tasks and responsibilities, encompassing proficiency in specialized tools, software, and industry-specific knowledge. These skills are cultivated through structured training sessions, workshops, and hands-on experiences tailored to the organization's operational needs. Moreover, HRD places equal emphasis on nurturing soft skills critical for interpersonal effectiveness and team dynamics. Skills such as communication enable employees to articulate ideas clearly, fostering collaboration and client relationships.
2. **Career Development:** Within organizations, HRD plays a pivotal role in facilitating career growth and progression for employees through comprehensive career development initiatives. These programs are designed to empower individuals in mapping out their career trajectories, identifying professional goals, and acquiring the necessary competencies for advancement. Mentoring programs pair employees with seasoned mentors who provide invaluable guidance, share industry insights, and offer personalized advice on navigating career challenges. Coaching sessions provide tailored support in setting and achieving career objectives, enhancing performance, and addressing developmental areas. Additionally, HRD fosters career path planning through structured frameworks that align individual aspirations with organizational needs. Succession planning initiatives ensure a continuous talent pipeline by identifying and grooming future leaders within the organization.
3. **Organizational Development:** HRD contributes to the overall health and effectiveness of the organization by implementing strategies to improve workplace culture, enhance employee engagement, and foster innovation. This may involve initiatives such as change management, team building, and organizational restructuring.
4. **Talent Management:** HRD is responsible for attracting, retaining, and developing talent within the organization. This includes recruitment and



selection processes, employee retention strategies, and creating a positive work environment that encourages employee loyalty and commitment.

5. Learning and Knowledge Management: HRD promotes a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing within the organization. This involves facilitating learning opportunities, creating learning resources, and establishing knowledge management systems to capture and disseminate information.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research is a study using a qualitative literature study approach where the data used is sourced from information taken from books, journals, research results and internet information sources which are then arranged based on the author's assumptions to draw conclusions from the research results.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Challenges And Solutions For Digital Transformation Of Smes: A Human Resource Development Perspective**

Digital transformation presents a unique set of challenges for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), especially from a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of digital literacy and technical skills among employees. Many SMEs operate with limited budgets for training and development, resulting in a workforce that may not be adequately prepared to adopt and integrate new technologies. This skill gap can impede the adoption of advanced digital tools and systems, which are crucial for improving efficiency and staying competitive. Moreover, the rapid pace of technological change exacerbates this issue, as employees need to continuously update their skills to keep up with the latest advancements. Addressing this challenge requires a strategic focus on upskilling and reskilling initiatives to ensure that employees have the necessary competencies to support digital transformation efforts.

Another significant challenge is the resistance to change that often accompanies digital transformation. Employees in SMEs may be accustomed to traditional ways of working and may perceive the shift to digital technologies as a threat to their job security or an overwhelming change. This resistance can manifest as reluctance to adopt new systems, a lack of engagement with digital initiatives, and even active pushback against transformation efforts. To overcome this resistance, SMEs must prioritize change management strategies that include clear communication, continuous training, and involving employees in the decision-making process. By fostering a culture of openness and adaptability, SMEs can help their workforce embrace change and recognize the benefits of

digital transformation, thereby reducing resistance and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the transformation process.

Financial constraints pose another hurdle for SMEs in their digital transformation journey. Unlike larger enterprises, SMEs often operate with limited financial resources, making it challenging to invest in the necessary technologies, infrastructure, and HR development programs. The costs associated with purchasing new software, upgrading systems, and providing comprehensive training can be substantial, and SMEs may struggle to secure the funding required for these initiatives. To address this issue, SMEs can explore alternative funding options such as government grants, subsidies, and partnerships with technology providers or educational institutions. These collaborations can provide access to cost-effective resources and training programs, enabling SMEs to leverage external expertise and support to drive their digital transformation efforts.

To effectively address the challenges of digital transformation, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) must embrace a comprehensive HR development approach that encompasses both technical skills training and the cultivation of soft skills. Technical skills training is essential for equipping employees with the specific competencies needed to utilize new digital tools and technologies effectively. This includes training in areas such as data analytics, digital marketing, cybersecurity, and cloud computing, which are crucial for enhancing operational efficiency and competitiveness in today's digital landscape.

Technical skills alone are not sufficient. SMEs also need to focus on developing soft skills among their workforce. Soft skills such as adaptability, problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration are increasingly valued in a digital environment where rapid changes and complex challenges are common. Employees who possess strong soft skills are better equipped to navigate uncertainties, innovate solutions, and work effectively in diverse teams, thereby contributing to organizational resilience and success in digital transformation initiatives.

Investing in ongoing professional development is key to maintaining a skilled and adaptable workforce. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and development, SMEs can ensure that employees stay abreast of industry trends, emerging technologies, and best practices. This proactive approach not only enhances employee engagement and retention but also builds a talent pool capable of driving innovation and sustaining growth over the long term.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) stand to gain significantly by leveraging external partnerships and resources to enhance their Human Resource Development (HRD) efforts. Collaborating with educational institutions allows SMEs to access specialized training programs tailored to their industry needs,

equipping their workforce with up-to-date skills and knowledge crucial for navigating digital transformation. These partnerships also provide opportunities for continuous learning and professional development, fostering a workforce that remains agile and adaptable in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Forming alliances with industry associations and technology providers offers SMEs access to expert guidance and shared resources. Industry associations often serve as valuable platforms for networking, knowledge exchange, and staying informed about industry trends and regulatory changes. Technology providers, on the other hand, can offer SMEs access to innovative solutions and tools that enhance operational efficiency and customer engagement. By leveraging these external networks, SMEs can overcome financial constraints associated with investing in new technologies. This support enables them to adopt cutting-edge digital solutions, streamline processes, and improve service delivery, ultimately enhancing their competitiveness in the market.

Harnessing external partnerships allows SMEs to accelerate their digital capabilities and position themselves as leaders in their respective industries. By embracing collaborative initiatives, SMEs not only strengthen their HRD strategies but also ensure sustainable growth and resilience in an increasingly digitalized global economy. These partnerships play a pivotal role in empowering SMEs to innovate, adapt to market changes, and seize opportunities for long-term success and profitability.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing the challenges of digital transformation in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) through a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective is crucial for their long-term success and competitiveness. SMEs face significant hurdles such as limited digital literacy among employees, resistance to change, and financial constraints. These obstacles can hinder their ability to adopt and integrate new technologies effectively, potentially limiting their growth and innovation potential in a digital economy.

By prioritizing Human Resource Development (HRD) strategies centered on upskilling, change management, and strategic partnerships, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) can effectively address the challenges posed by digital transformation. Continuous investment in training and development programs plays a crucial role in enhancing employees' technical competencies, ensuring they possess the necessary skills to leverage new technologies proficiently. This not only boosts operational efficiency but also fosters a culture of adaptability and innovation within the organization. Employees who are adept at utilizing digital tools and are open to embracing change can contribute more effectively to the organization's growth and competitiveness in the digital era.

Forging alliances with educational institutions, technology providers, and government agencies offers SMEs access to valuable resources and expertise. Collaborating with these external partners enables SMEs to stay abreast of industry trends, receive specialized training, and gain insights into best practices for digital adoption. Such partnerships also facilitate access to funding opportunities, grants, and incentives aimed at supporting SMEs in their digital transformation journeys. By leveraging these collaborative efforts, SMEs can accelerate their digital capabilities, improve customer experiences through enhanced service delivery and engagement, and position themselves for sustainable growth in a rapidly evolving business environment. This proactive approach not only mitigates the challenges associated with digital transformation but also positions SMEs to capitalize on emerging opportunities and maintain competitiveness in their respective markets.

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