



## Mediating Role of Employee Retention on the Relationship between Talent Management Practices and SMEs Performance in Yobe State

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### ABSTRACT

*This research explores the mediating influence of employee retention on the relationship between talent management practices and the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Yobe State. Data were obtained through the administration of structured questionnaires, with a total of 322 responses collected from SME owners and managers across the state. To analyze the data, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed. The findings revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between employee retention, talent development, and SME performance. However, while talent identification and talent culture also demonstrated a positive relationship with SME performance, these relationships were statistically insignificant. Additionally, the results indicated that employee retention mediates the relationship between talent identification, talent culture, and SME performance, but does not mediate the relationship between talent development and SME performance. In light of these findings, the study recommends that management and policymakers should intensify efforts to ensure the timely and effective implementation of talent development strategies to enhance SME performance in Yobe State. Such strategies may include employee induction programs, career development planning, provision of autonomy, regular performance appraisals and evaluations, and continuous feedback mechanisms aimed at promoting learning and professional growth.*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History

Received: October, 2024

Received in revised form: January, 2025

Accepted: May, 2025

Published online: June, 2025

### KEYWORDS

Talent identification, Talent development,  
Talent culture, SMEs Performance.

### INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are widely acknowledged in both developed and African nations as essential contributors to economic development and growth (Muriithi, 2017). Despite this recognition, the performance of SMEs in Nigeria as of 2020 lags behind that of other African countries (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). For instance, SMEs in Ghana account for approximately 70% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), those in South Africa contribute around 60%, in Kenya about 55%, and in Tanzania over 58% (Ussif & Salifu, 2020). Conversely, Nigerian SMEs contribute roughly 50% to national GDP (SMEDAN/NBS MSME Survey, 2020).

Beyond their roles in economic output, SMEs are instrumental in job creation and poverty alleviation. Nevertheless, the underperformance of this sector in Nigeria poses serious socioeconomic challenges, including rising unemployment, increasing social unrest, economic inefficiencies, supply deficits, and heightened rural-to-urban migration (Akeke et al., 2020). In response to these issues, Nigerian SMEs have begun to realign their strategic priorities. Rather than focusing solely on productivity gains and product or service differentiation, there is growing emphasis on optimizing internal intangible assets most notably, human capital. Employees are increasingly viewed as the organization's most critical asset,

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playing a pivotal role in driving sustainable business performance (Al Aina & Atan, 2020).

In contemporary business environments, SMEs are increasingly prioritizing talent identification practices, recognizing their significance in discovering and nurturing potential leaders essential for sustaining competitive advantage and long-term performance (McDonnell et al., 2017). Talent identification involves recognizing high-potential employees within the organization and creating an enabling environment that fosters their development and management, ultimately contributing to enhanced organizational effectiveness (Mhagama, 2019). Equally critical is talent development, which ensures the consistent availability of skilled personnel to meet both present and future organizational demands (Vaiman et al., 2018). This process involves equipping individuals with job-specific and career-oriented competencies through a range of strategies, including leadership training programs, mentoring initiatives, and collaborative team-building activities (Björkman et al., 2017).

A strong talent-oriented culture within SMEs emphasizes employee management values that prioritize talent as a strategic asset. This culture fosters employee loyalty, commitment, and retention by offering clear career progression pathways. Such practices not only motivate high-potential employees but also align their development with the organization's future talent requirements, thereby enhancing SME performance (Monteiro et al., 2020; Annakis et al., 2014).

Despite their acknowledged role in fostering economic growth and employment, SMEs across Nigeria and other African countries continue to face significant obstacles that impair their performance and sustainability. Notably, the failure rate among SMEs in Nigeria remains alarmingly high. According to Muriithi (2017), a large proportion of SMEs fail to survive beyond their early years. Specifically, approximately 85% of Nigerian SMEs cease operations within the first five years due to suboptimal performance (SMEDAN, 2017; Kaigama, 2018). Furthermore, statistics indicate that only two out of ten SMEs

manage to operate for more than a decade, with nearly half shutting down within the first year (Edwin, 2019). These trends reveal an alarming inability of SMEs to adapt to the challenges of a dynamic business environment (Adegbuyi et al., 2018). Among the most critical factors contributing to this trend is ineffective talent management. Many SMEs in Nigeria struggle to retain top-performing employees, largely due to a shortage of skilled labor, inadequate training and development opportunities, and a lack of employee engagement and commitment (PWC MSME Survey, 2020; Oyeyinka, 2020).

In a bid to address some of the identified problems mentioned earlier in the SMEs sector, many studies have been conducted to assess the effect of talent management on the performance of SMEs. Prior studies have shown that the connection between talent management and firm performance is positively significant (Kafetzopoulos & Gotzamani, 2022; Yuwono et al., 2021; Jahanmiri et al., 2021; Shafique, Zia-ur-Rehman, 2021; Muriuki, 2017; Aloo, & Moronge, 2018; Mohammed, 2020; Cizmici, & Ahmic, 2020; Mudjijah et al., 2022; Nurfadilah, 2022). Similarly, Ebrahim et al. (2021) carried out research on the effect of talent management on SMEs performance. The result reveals that there is a positive relationship between talent management and SMEs performance. Furthermore, the work of Monyei et al. (2021), as well as Okwakpam (2019), has shown that there is a positive relationship between talent management practices and SMEs performance. Ebrahim et al. (2021) also suggested that future researchers investigate the effects of other aspects of talent management dimensions (i.e., talent identification, talent development, and talent culture).

Numerous empirical studies have established a positive correlation between talent management practices and employee retention (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019; Rahadi et al., 2022; Narayanan et al., 2019; Kumar, 2022; Al Hammadi & Noor, 2020). Similarly, research examining the impact of employee retention on the performance of SMEs has revealed a significant positive relationship (Khan & Roy, 2020; Kurdi &



Al Shurideh, 2020). Furthermore, studies by Mudjijah et al. (2022), Mhagama (2019), and Kafetzopoulos and Gotzamani (2022) have investigated the direct effect of talent management on SME performance, with findings consistently indicating a positive association. The uniformity of these positive outcomes across the literature has led to the proposition of introducing a mediating variable to further explore and clarify the dynamics of the relationship between talent management and SME performance. In this regard, Yuwono et al. (2021) have recommended that future research incorporate employee retention as a mediating variable to enhance understanding of this relationship. Supporting this view, Onyango and Kweni (2017) argue that employee retention provides a more nuanced explanation of how talent management practices influence the performance of SMEs.

A review of existing literature reveals that the majority of empirical studies exploring the relationship between talent management practices and SME performance have been predominantly conducted in developed countries (Krishnan et al., 2020; Ebrahim et al., 2021; Harney, 2021; Aina & Atan, 2020; Mudjijah et al., 2022; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019). In contrast, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning such studies within developing economies, particularly in Nigeria. Several scholars (e.g., Li Qi & Jia Qi, 2021; Raoof et al., 2021) have emphasized the need for future research to investigate the applicability and effectiveness of talent management practices in SMEs operating in developing countries, in order to determine whether these practices yield similar positive outcomes.

In addition, Arabeche et al. (2022), in their study examining the mediating effect of organizational culture on the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SME performance, recommended that future research adopt larger sample sizes to improve the generalizability and robustness of findings. Similarly, Nurfadilah et al. (2022) echoed this recommendation, stressing the importance of sample size expansion for more accurate insights. Moreover, Sirinaga et al. (2020), in their research

on knowledge management and employee training in relation to SME performance, employed SPSS version 21 for data analysis and advised future researchers to consider alternative statistical tools to enrich the analytical perspective. Against this backdrop, the primary objective of the current study is to examine the relationship between talent management practices and the performance of SMEs, with a specific focus on the mediating role of employee retention. This research aims to explore how talent identification, talent development, and talent culture influence SME performance in Nigeria, while assessing the extent to which employee retention serves as a mediating variable in these relationships.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### SMEs Performance

The performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) can be conceptualized as the extent to which a firm delivers value to its stakeholders and customers, reflecting how effectively management utilizes organizational resources (Moullin, 2007). From an entrepreneurial standpoint, SME performance is often measured by the enterprise's capacity to survive, expand, generate employment, and contribute to poverty reduction (Sandberg, 2003). Performance evaluation remains a fundamental pillar of business success. As noted by Moullin (2002), performance assessment provides critical insights into the degree of value and quality a company delivers. Spillan and Parnell (2006) assert that SME success is often evaluated based on profitability, revenue growth, customer retention, brand credibility, employee retention, and innovation. Lau and Sholihin (2005) further categorize performance indicators into financial and non-financial metrics. Financial metrics include productivity, increased sales, and profitability, whereas non-financial indicators encompass customer loyalty, internal business processes, and knowledge acquisition. Accordingly, the present study adopts both financial and non-financial performance indicators to evaluate SME performance.

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### **Talent Management Practices**

In the face of growing competition and rapidly evolving business environments, firms increasingly aim to outperform their competitors by enhancing performance and securing a sustainable competitive advantage. This contemporary landscape is characterized by a strong emphasis on innovation driven by knowledge, employee creativity, and a commitment to continuous learning, research, and the development of new processes and ideas (Bartes, 2013). Talent is regarded as a strategic resource that can be cultivated, developed, and harnessed to drive organizational success (Hassan, 2016). To address the persistent challenge of underperformance among SMEs in the 21st century, the implementation of effective talent management practices has become critical. These practices encompassing talent identification, talent development, employee retention, and the cultivation of a talent-driven culture are considered essential strategic tools for improving SME performance.

#### **Talent Identification**

An effective strategy is foundational to the successful deployment of talent identification within global talent management systems (Golik & Blanco, 2021). As a core component of talent management, talent identification plays a vital role in crafting strong employee value propositions, securing competitive advantage, and positively influencing firm performance (Najm & Manasrah, 2017). According to Björkman et al. (2013), the identification of high-potential individuals contributes significantly to fostering positive employee attitudes and enhancing managerial and professional performance within firms. Identifying exceptional talent is considered the initial and most crucial step in the talent management process, as it lays the foundation for long-term talent retention and organizational growth (Davis & Frolova, 2017).

#### **Talent Development**

Talent development is a critical element in ensuring the availability of skilled employees to meet both present and future organizational needs

(Vaiman et al., 2018). It is designed to equip individuals with competencies related to their jobs and career growth. This involves implementing various practices such as leadership development programs, mentoring, and team-building initiatives (Bjorkman et al., 2017). For SMEs in particular, talent development plays a strategic role in preparing employees to assume key positions as the business scales (Heneman et al., 2000).

#### **Talent Culture**

Talent should not be viewed as a universally applicable concept; rather, it is context-specific and should be aligned with the unique goals, vision, and strategic direction of an organization (Alziari, 2017). What is considered talent in one environment may not be regarded as such in another. Therefore, the emphasis of talent management should be on effectively managing individuals who possess the precise skills and capabilities that are essential for fulfilling the organization's specific needs (Alziari, 2017).

#### **Employee Retention**

Employee retention refers to the deliberate strategies and initiatives implemented by organizations to motivate employees to remain within the organization for an extended period (Onyango & Kwena, 2017). It encompasses the creation of a supportive and engaging work environment that encourages employee loyalty. Lawler (2017) observes that many employees tend to exit organizations within their first year of employment, which underscores the need for effective retention mechanisms. Retention strategies are therefore vital for attracting and maintaining a committed, productive, and healthy workforce (Onyango & Kwena, 2017). According to Kibui, Gachunga, and Namusonge (2014), the primary aim of retention is to prevent the loss of talented personnel, as their departure can negatively impact productivity and service quality. Furthermore, understanding the root causes of employee turnover is essential in formulating effective retention strategies (Dhanpat et al., 2018).

## Resource-Based View Theory (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory provides a framework for understanding how firms achieve and sustain competitive advantage through the effective utilization of their internal resources. This perspective originates from early scholarly contributions that highlighted the pivotal role of resources in influencing firm performance (Penrose, 1959). According to Barney (1991), the RBV posits that a firm's competitive advantage is derived from its ability to acquire and deploy a unique combination of

valuable resources both tangible and intangible. For a resource to contribute to sustained competitive advantage, it must satisfy the VRIN criteria: it must be **valuable**, **rare**, **inimitable**, and **non-substitutable** (Barney, 1991). Penrose (1959) further emphasized that firms can be conceptualized as bundles of resources, and it is the distinctive combination and management of these resources that create competitive differentials in the marketplace.

## Conceptual Framework

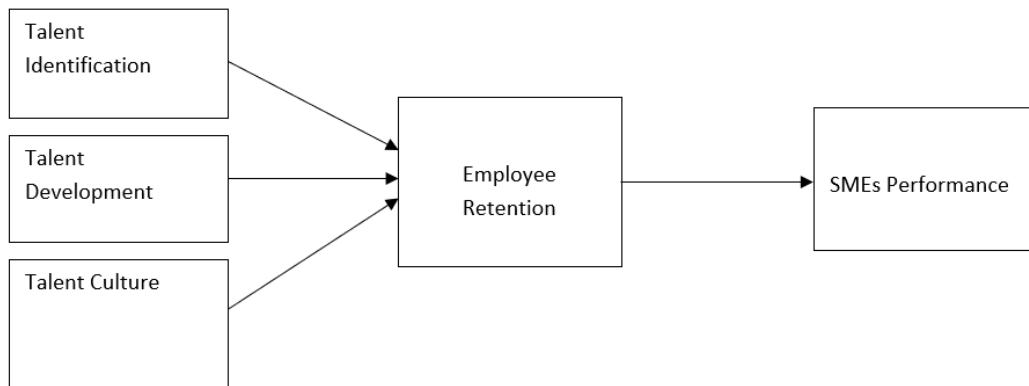


Figure 1: The Study's Conceptual Framework

## Empirical Review and Hypothesis Development

### Talent Identification and SMEs Performance

Mhagama (2019) conducted a study in the Tanzanian public sector to assess the impact of talent management on organizational performance. The findings demonstrated that talent attraction, talent identification, talent development, and retention all exerted a significant and positive effect on performance. The study further emphasized that talent identification, attraction, and retention are foundational components in effectively managing organizational talent. Similarly, Kwon and Jang (2022) investigated elements of talent management within the insurance sector in Kenya through a desktop literature review. Their findings indicated a positive relationship between talent

management practices and both organizational performance and competitive advantage.

**H1:** *There is a positive relationship between talent identification and SMEs performance.*

### Talent Development and SMEs Performance

Rahadi, Iskak, and Muslih (2022) examined the influence of talent development on SME performance in Bandung, Malaysia. The study established a significant and positive relationship between talent development initiatives and SME performance. In another study, Alleimoun, Othman, and Saadon (2022) investigated the effects of talent management strategies and entrepreneurial orientation on the performance of public universities in Jordan. Based on responses from 275 academic staff, data analysis using SPSS (version 20) and multiple regression confirmed a statistically significant impact of talent management



strategies—including talent development—on organizational performance.

Furthermore, a study by Nuruddeen and Salau (2022) evaluated the effect of talent management practices on the performance of SMEs in Lagos State, Nigeria. Using a sample of 185 respondents from the National Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, regression analysis revealed that all components of talent management including talent development had a significant and positive influence on SME performance.

**H2:** *There is a positive relationship between talent development and SMEs performance.*

#### **Talent Culture and SMEs Performance**

Aboramadan, Albashiti, Alharazin, and Zaidoune (2019) examined the relationship between organizational culture, innovation, and performance in the Palestinian banking sector. Data collected from 186 employees and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) revealed that both organizational culture and innovation had a positive impact on performance. Similarly, Munir and Arifin (2021) conducted a study to evaluate the influence of organizational culture on employee performance in a small e-commerce firm. Through a simple regression analysis of data collected from 17 employees, the study found a strong, positive association between a cohesive organizational culture and enhanced employee performance.

**H3:** *There is a positive relationship between talent culture and SMEs performance.*

#### **Employee Retention and SMEs Performance**

Sepahvand, Bagherzadeh, and Khodashahri (2021) confirmed that the identification, recruitment, development, and retention of skilled employees significantly contribute to improved organizational performance and help create a competitive advantage. In the Nigerian context, Bikefe and Daniel (2022) analyzed the impact of employee retention practices on SME performance using a

questionnaire survey of 430 respondents. The data were analyzed using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression and chi-square statistical techniques. Their findings indicated that employee retention practices had a meaningful and statistically significant effect on SME performance.

**H4:** *There is a positive relationship between employee retention and SMEs performance.*

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a survey research design to investigate the mediating role of employee retention in the relationship between talent management practices and the performance of SMEs. The target population comprised all registered SMEs located in Potiskum, Bade, and Damaturu three key local government areas in Yobe State, Nigeria. According to data obtained from the Yobe State Small and Medium Scale Industries Credit Board, Damaturu, there are a total of 651 registered SMEs in the state. A cluster sampling technique was employed to ensure proper representation of the three selected locations. The Yamane formula (as referenced in Israel, 2013) was used to determine an appropriate sample size, resulting in a calculated sample of 322 respondents. Accordingly, 322 questionnaires were proportionally distributed among SME owners and managers in the three locations.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which was designed to obtain relevant information pertaining to talent management practices, employee retention, and SME performance. To ensure face and content validity, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review by two academic professionals and one experienced entrepreneur. The reliability of the measurement instruments was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which evaluated the internal consistency of items under each variable. For data analysis, multiple regression analysis was employed to examine the predictive relationships between the independent (talent management practices) and dependent (SME performance) variables. In addition, the study hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural

Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for analyzing complex relationships among latent constructs.

## RESULTS

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of the Latent Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
SME Performance	1.6598	0.61651
Talent Identification	1.6883	0.61473
Talent development	1.7207	0.68651
Talent Culture	1.6200	0.54733
Employee Retention	1.6217	0.63252

Mean and standard deviation are essential descriptive statistics commonly used for data measured on ordinal, interval, and ratio scales. In this study, the measurement scale ranges from a minimum value of 1.00 to a maximum of 5.00, indicating the use of a five-point Likert scale. As presented in Table 1, the mean values for all measured constructs fall within a

narrow range of 1.6200 to 1.7207, while the standard deviation values range between 0.54733 and 0.68651, suggesting relatively consistent responses across participants. Among the constructs, Talent Development recorded the highest mean value of 1.7207, reflecting respondents' strong emphasis on its importance in enhancing small business performance.

Furthermore, Talent Culture has the lowest standard deviation of 0.54733, indicating a high level of agreement among respondents regarding the role of organizational culture in talent management. Talent Identification ranks second in terms of mean value (1.6883), showing that participants also recognize its significance in improving business outcomes. The associated standard deviation of 0.61473 further suggests a generally shared perspective among the respondents. Similarly, Employee Retention exhibits a mean value of 1.6217, indicating respondents' appreciation of its contribution to business performance. The relatively low standard deviation of 0.63252 implies that most respondents hold similar views on this construct.

## Measurement Model

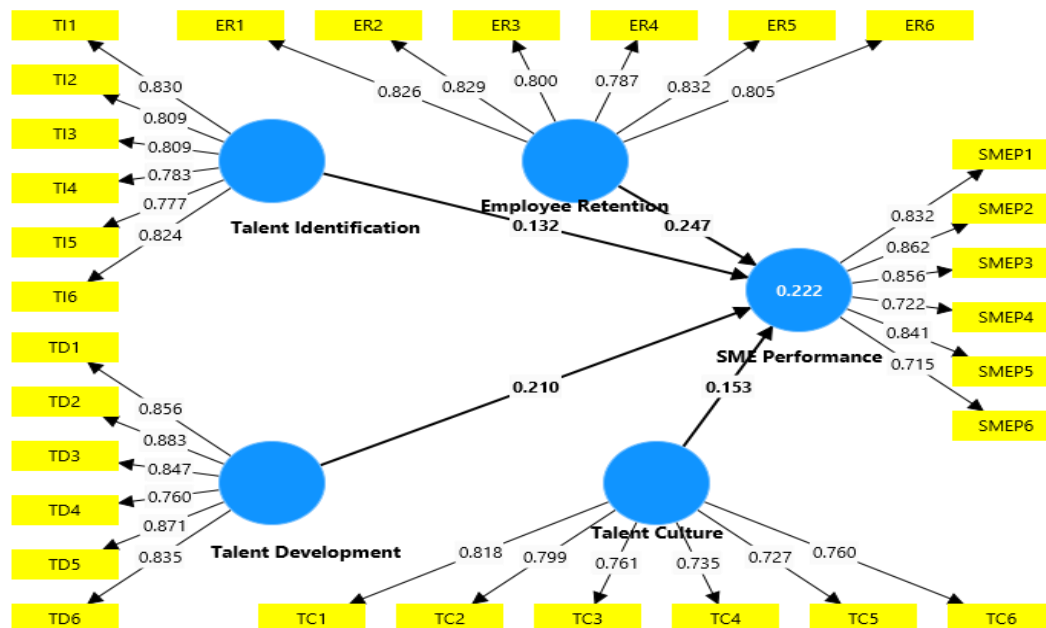


Figure 2: the Direct Effects

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The diagram has two numbers; the numbers in the circles represent how much the variance of the latent variable is being explained by the other latent variables while the numbers on the arrows (path coefficients) explain how strong the effect of one variable is on another. The weight of different path coefficients enables ranking of their relative statistical importance (Wong, 2013). The diagrams provide some information on which

to make preliminary observations: the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  is 0.222 for the SMEs performance endogenous latent variable, which means that, the three latent variables (talent identification, talent development, and talent culture and employee retention) moderately explain 22% of the variance in small business performance.

**Table 2:** Results of the Direct Effects

Variables	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Std. Dev.	T Stat.	P Values	Decision
ER => SMEP	0.245	0.247	0.079	3.117	0.002	Rejected
TC => SMEP	0.147	0.145	0.084	1.749	0.080	Failed to reject
TD => SMEP	0.212	0.221	0.089	2.395	0.017	Rejected
TI => SMEP	0.130	0.129	0.0109	1.195	0.232	Failed to reject

**Table 3:** Results of the Mediation Effects

Variables	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Std. Dev.	T Stat.	P- Values	Decision
TC => ER => SMEP	0.234	0.249	0.084	2.795	0.005	Rejected
TD => ER => SMEP	0.002	0.009	0.040	0.059	0.953	Failed to Reject
TI => ER => SMEP	0.184	0.193	0.056	3.270	0.001	Rejected

The results of the direct relationships which are presented on Table 2 reveal that Employee Retention (ER) show significant effect on SMEs performance, where ( $\beta=0.247$ ,  $t= 3.117$ ,  $p>0.002$ ). However, Talent Culture (TC) did not significantly affect SME performance (SMEP) where ( $\beta= 0.145$ ,  $t= 1.749$ ,  $p<0.080$ ). Talent Development (TD), significantly affects SME performance (SMEP) where ( $\beta=0.221$ ,  $t= 2.395$ ,  $p<0.017$ ). Finally, Talent Identification (TI), did not significantly affect SMEs performance (SMEP), where ( $\beta= 0.129$ ,  $t= 1.195$ ,  $p>0.232$ ).

However, the results of the mediation effects as derived as on Table 3 reveals that there is a significant mediation effects of Employee Retention (ER) on the influence of Talent Culture (TC) on SMEs performance (SMEP) where ( $\beta= -0.249$ ,  $t= 2.795$ ,  $p<0.005$ ). Similarly, the results also reveal a significant mediation effect of Employee Retention (ER) on influence of Talent Identification (TI) on small business performance

(SMEP) where, ( $\beta= 0.193$ ,  $t= 3.270$ ,  $p>0.001$ ) at .05 significant level. However, the result of mediation effect indicates Employee Retention did not mediate on the influence of Talent Development (TD) on small business performance (SMEP) where ( $\beta= -0.009$ ,  $t= 0.059$ ,  $p>0.953$ ).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The central aim of this study was to explore the mediating effect of employee retention on the relationship between talent identification (TI), talent development (TD), talent culture (TC), and the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on Yobe State. The research was conducted to address the ongoing challenges associated with the suboptimal performance of SMEs in the region. To realize this objective, the study employed a quantitative research methodology, utilizing a survey design to collect relevant data from SME owners and managers

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throughout Yobe State. The findings revealed that talent management practices specifically, talent development, talent culture, and employee retention significantly influence SME performance. Furthermore, the results indicated that employee retention serves as a mediating variable in the relationship between talent identification, talent culture, and SME performance.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the empirical findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance SME performance:

1. **Strengthen Talent Development Practices:**

It is recommended that both policymakers and business leaders intensify efforts to ensure the systematic and effective implementation of talent development initiatives. These may include induction programs, structured career planning, granting employees greater autonomy, conducting regular performance evaluations, and providing feedback aimed at fostering learning and professional growth.

2. **Promote a Supportive Talent Culture:**

Business stakeholders should advocate for the adoption of a strong and sustainable talent culture within SMEs. This involves implementing practices that support organizational values, employee engagement, and a high-performance work environment that aligns with long-term business goals.

3. **Adopt Effective Employee Retention Strategies:**

To minimize the turnover of key employees, SMEs should be encouraged to integrate retention strategies within their talent management framework. This includes aligning talent development and talent culture efforts to create a work environment that supports employee satisfaction and long-term commitment,

thereby positively impacting overall business performance.

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