

The Effect of Managerial Skills on the Growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Masvingo City, Zimbabwe

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<https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.2024.pjt.45616>

Abstract – This manuscript examines the impact of managerial skills on the growth of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Masvingo City, Zimbabwe. The research highlights the critical role that effective management plays in fostering business development and economic growth. Through quantitative analysis, the study assesses various managerial competencies, including leadership, communication, interpersonal relations, decision-making, and delegation, and their influence on the performance of SMEs. The main aim was to investigate the relationship between the managerial skills of business owners or managers and the performance or growth of these SMEs. The main study finding is that leadership effectiveness is closely tied to a leader's proficiency across all these areas, and that mastery of these competencies leads to better team dynamics, more thoughtful decision-making, and ultimately, higher organizational performance. The main recommendation is to develop and integrate strong communication, interpersonal, and decision-making skills to enhance leadership effectiveness and foster better team dynamics. The study concludes that the ability to balance and strengthen analytical skills, decision-making, delegation, communication, interpersonal relations, and leadership is essential for effective leadership and organizational success.

Keywords – SME, Managerial Skills, SME Growth, Masvingo City, Business Development, Economic Growth

Submitted: 2024-11-10. Revised: 2024-11-18. Accepted: 2024-11-20.

1 Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are critical role players in stimulating economic growth and stability of every country (Abdul-Azeez et al., 2024). They contribute significantly to job creation, economic diversity, and the supply of goods and services, which is especially important in emerging economies. Avlijaš (2022) believes that SMEs are more labour-intensive than larger corporations, offering a broader range of employment opportunities and supporting local economies by encouraging growth and development at the grassroots level. These businesses are often hubs of innovation. They provide new ideas and entrepreneurial skills that contribute to a dynamic market environment (Pulka et al., 2021).

Handayati et al. (2024) also inform that SMEs promote competition by steering improvements in product design, pricing, and operational efficiency. Their smaller size allows them to be more flexible and adaptable. It allows them to respond quickly to market changes and consumer demands. However, access to finance remains critical to their continued success, as securing funding is essential for their growth and sustainability (Dzomonda, 2022). Moreover, according to Arjang et al. (2023), SMEs that leverage information technology internally can enhance their competitiveness, streamline operations, and improve efficiency. A thriving SME sector, therefore, is fundamental to the overall health and competitiveness of the economy.

SMEs can be more beneficial for developing countries that seek every element of economic growth, as they are mostly poor and desperate (Thorsteinsdóttir & Bandyopadhyay, 2024). Ekechi et al. (2024) concur that the African continent needs SMEs. Even for Zimbabwe, particularly in regions such as Masvingo Province, SMEs are vital for economic development (Nyagope & Nyagope, 2023). They contribute significantly to job creation and poverty alleviation. However, despite the critical role SMEs in contributing to the economic development of Masvingo District and Zimbabwe as a whole, many SMEs experience limited growth and struggle to achieve long-term sustainability.

It is unclear whether inadequate or insufficient managerial skills among business owners or managers contribute to these challenges, thereby hindering the growth and success of SMEs in the region. It seems that many SMEs struggle to achieve sustainable growth due to inadequate managerial skills. This study aims to explore how managerial skills affect the growth of SMEs in Masvingo City, focusing on specific competencies that enhance business performance.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of managerial skills on the growth of SMEs in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study aims to identify key managerial skills that contribute to the success of SMEs, assess how these skills influence business growth, and explore the challenges that SME managers face in applying effective management practices. The study seeks to improve managerial capacity by investigating the relationship between managerial skills and business performance, thereby supporting the sustainable growth and development of SMEs in the region.

2 Literature Review

Research indicates that managerial skills are vital for the success of SMEs (Anoke et al., 2022; Ramadan et al., 2024; Shukla et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2020). According to Al-Kahtani et al. (2024), effective management drives operational efficiency and influences strategic decision-making and resource allocation. Identified several key managerial competencies essential for SME growth, according to research (Popescu et al., 2020; Muzzi & Albertini, 2015; Pratikto et al., 2023; Velu & Manxhari, 2017), include analytical, decision making, delegation, communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills.

2.1 Analytical skills

According to Cottrell (2023), analytical skills refer to the ability to gather and assess information critically, which is foundational for making sound decisions. They are important management competencies for SMEs, as they enable leaders to effectively interpret data, identify trends, and make informed decisions that drive business success. Analytical thinkers evaluate facts, identify patterns, and interpret data to arrive at logical conclusions (Ng'ora et al., 2017). These skills encompass the ability to gather relevant information, evaluate complex situations, and devise strategic solutions, which are particularly important in the dynamic and resource-constrained environments typical of SMEs. Research indicates that SME managers who excel in analytical thinking can better navigate challenges such as market fluctuations and operational inefficiencies, ultimately enhancing their firms' performance and sustainability.

2.2 Decision-making skills

Decision-making skills are the skills necessary to make an informed, rational decision (Sheldrick et al., 2021; Uzonwanne, 2023). Someone with good decision-making skills at work can assess all the facts, understand the company's current state and goal state, and choose the best course of action. Decision making skills are vital proficiencies to enable making informed and rational choices in various contexts, particularly in the workplace (Cokely et al., 2018). They include analytical skills, collaboration, creativity, emotional intelligence, and leadership abilities. These skills comprise a blend of analytical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and leadership abilities, and leadership skills, which simultaneously enable effective problem-solving. Data driven decision making is implied because sound decisions that are based on data analysis can lead to better business outcomes for SMEs. According to Sarioguz and Miser (2024), use of data analytics to inform decisions is progressively important in the modern business landscape. Managers who can interpret data effectively are better positioned to make informed choices that lead to improved performance.

2.3 Delegation skills

Delegation is a critical management skill for SMEs, enabling leaders to optimise their time and enhance organisational efficiency (Rees & Porter, 2017). Effective delegation is an opportunity for managers to shift responsibilities to capable team members, fostering employee development and accountability while freeing up the manager to focus on strategic planning and higher-level tasks. It therefore allows managers to focus on strategic tasks while empowering employees. By understanding their employees' strengths and weaknesses, managers can assign tasks that align with individual competencies, thereby improving overall performance and responsiveness within the organization. This process not only empowers employees but also cultivates a collaborative environment where knowledge sharing and skill development are prioritized, ultimately contributing to the long-term success of the SME.

2.4 Communication skills

Effective communication is widely recognized as a critical managerial competency in fostering the growth and sustainability of SMEs. According to Veliu and Manxhari (2017), communication skills not only facilitate clear and efficient information sharing within teams but also promote understanding and collaboration, which are essential in dynamic business environments. Pratikto et al. (2023) further emphasize that communication enhances managerial abilities to delegate tasks effectively, encouraging a culture of trust and accountability that supports organizational objectives. Robust communication skills are integral to aligning strategic goals across organizational levels, ensuring coherence in decision-making and execution (Popescu et al., 2020). Furthermore, Al-Kahtani et al. (2024) argue that communication competence significantly impacts resource allocation and operational efficiency, particularly in SMEs where streamlined processes are essential for competing in markets. Consequently, communication is not only a fundamental managerial skill but also a driver of broader organizational cohesion and performance (Muzzi & Albertini, 2015).

2.5 Interpersonal skills

According to Mashavira et al. (2021), interpersonal skills, which are effective communication, networking, and relationship-building abilities, are critical for SME growth. These skills enable managers to influence others, foster collaboration, and build a supportive organisational culture, which is essential for driving growth. Thus, both communication and interpersonal relations are essential for SME development (Okoli & Nwosu, 2021). According to Zerfass and Winkler (2016), communication skills entail clear communication that facilitates better teamwork and customer relations. Coffey (2021) states that interpersonal relations involves when robust relationships within teams increase collaboration and morale.

2.6 Leadership skills

Effective leaders inspire teams and drive organisational vision (Chin, 2024). Effective leadership skills are crucial management competencies for SMEs, directly influencing their success and sustainability. coincidentally, even though some aspects of management have been discussed, they are components of leadership, which is also discussed (Li et al., 2024; Northouse, 2022). Joel and Oguanobi (2024) suggest that leaders in SMEs need to excel in communication, as it will enable them to articulate vision and goals clearly. Through communication, these leaders can promote team alignment and motivation. Additionally, decision-making is vital. Saah et al. (2024) state that SME leaders need to analyse data and make timely choices that balance immediate needs with long-term objectives. The ability to build and manage teams is equally important (Owoade & Oladimeji, 2024), because high-performing teams drive productivity and innovation. Deep (2023) adds that adaptability allows leaders to navigate the rapidly changing business landscape, while Thahrim et al. (2024) explain that strategic thinking helps them identify opportunities and threats. Emotional intelligence plays a significant role as well, allowing leaders to connect with their teams and manage interpersonal dynamics effectively (Singh et al., 2024). Given that many SMEs struggle with leadership and management skills, investing in training and development is essential for enhancing these capabilities, ultimately leading to improved performance and growth.

3 Methods and Data

This study employed a semi-structured questionnaire with closed-ended Likert-scaled questions to examine managerial skills on SME growth and sustainability in Masvingo City of Zimbabwe. A total of 233 participants responded. It used primary data collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed using google forms, as described by Hirose and Creswell (2023) and Ngulube and Ngulube (2022). SME owners and managers were the respondents. Pilot testing, conducted three months before the main survey, led to refinements based on feedback from five SMME owners, including removing redundant questions and adding new sections, thereby improving instrument clarity and consistency. Data analysis involved cleaning to ensure accuracy. Data were organised using tables, bar graphs and pie charts followed by statistical analysis using SPSS software, including descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests were used to examine relationships at a 5% significance level.

4 Results

4.1 Managerial skills assessment

Table 1: An assessment of various managerial skills among SMEs

Skills	SA	A	N	D	SD
Analytical	77(33.06)	97(41.64)	36(15.45)	12(5.15)	11(4.72)
Decision making	99(42.49)	85(36.48)	33(14.16)	11(4.72)	5(2.15)
Delegation	102(43.78)	84(36.05)	31(13.3)	11(4.72)	5(2.15)
Communication	101(43.49)	86(36.91)	41(17.6)	4(1.72)	3(1.29)
Interpersonal	103(44.21)	86(36.91)	33(14.16)	7(3)	4(1.72)
Leadership	84(36.06)	104(44.64)	36(15.45)	5(2.15)	4(1.72)

Key: SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SA=Strongly disagree

Table 1 presents an assessment of various managerial skills among the represented SMEs. In assessing the suggestion that, "SME managers demonstrate expertise in analytical skills", the table shows that 77 (33.1%) respondents strongly agreed, 97 (41.6%) agreed, 12 (5.2%) agreed, 11 (4.7%) strongly disagreed. On "Managers portray sound decision-making skills", the table shows that 99 (42.5%) strongly agreed, 85 (36.5%) agreed, 11 (4.7%) agreed, 5 (2.2%) strongly disagreed. In assessing delegation skills of SME managers, the respondents addressed "Managers delegate work effectively". The table shows 102 (43.8%) strongly agreed, 84 (36.1%) agreed, 11 (4.7%) agreed, 5 (2.2%) strongly disagreed. In determining if SME "managers exhibit good communication skills", 101 (43.5%) respondents strongly agreed, 86 (36.9%) agreed, 4 (1.7%) agreed, 3 (1.3%) strongly disagreed. For assessing interpersonal skills, the respondents addressed the theme, "Managers maintain good interpersonal relations". Then, 103 (44.2%) strongly agreed, 86 (36.9%) agreed, 7 (3%) agreed, 4 (1.7%) strongly disagreed. For leadership skills, participants addressed "Managers demonstrate excellent leadership". The table shows that 84 (36.1%) participants strongly agreed, 104 (44.6%) agreed, 5 (2.2%) agreed, 4 (1.7%) strongly disagreed.

4.2 Managerial skills' impact on SME growth

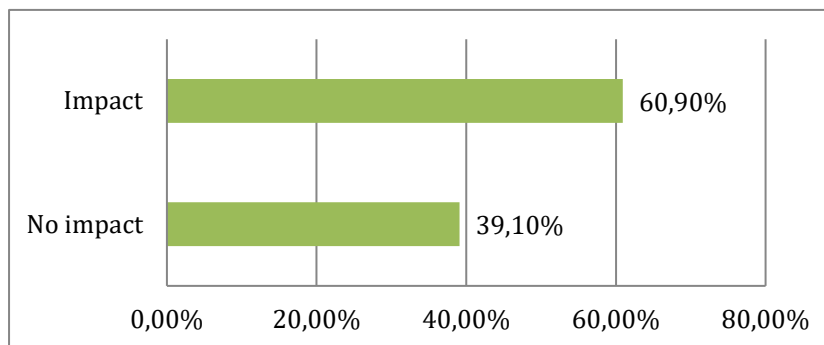


Figure 1: Assessment of the impact of managerial skills on SME growth

Figure 1 shows most respondents (61%) having experienced managerial skills impacting positively for the growth on SMEs of Masvingo. Apart from the observations, especially from Table 1, the observed data seem to show bias regarding the responses received, as if the participants' responses depend on the kind of skills under scrutiny. We therefore test the level of agreeing or disagreeing depending on the skill type.

H_0 : The Likert scale responses are not biased towards certain skill types.

H_a : The Likert scale responses are biased towards certain skill types.

The observed frequencies are in Table 1. It is recalled below as observed frequencies and joined with the expected frequencies and given a new label Table 2.

Table 2: Chi-square test of independence testing the level of agreeing or disagreeing depending on the skill type

'o'	SA	A	N	D	SD	'e'	SA	A	N	D	SD
Analytical	77	97	36	12	11	Analytical	94.2	90.2	34.95	8.32	5.33
Decision making	99	85	33	11	5	Decision making	94.2	90.2	34.95	8.32	5.33
Delegation	102	84	31	11	5	Delegation	94.2	90.2	34.95	8.32	5.33
Communication	101	86	41	4	3	Communication	94.2	90.2	34.95	8.32	5.33
Interpersonal	103	86	33	7	4	Interpersonal	94.2	90.2	34.95	8.32	5.33
Leadership	84	104	36	5	4	Leadership	94.2	90.2	34.95	8.32	5.33

Denote the number of rows in the table 'o' by r and the number of columns by c. The value of the test statistic and the corresponding degrees of freedom (d.f.) $d.f. = (r - 1)(c - 1)$, according to Chhikara and Folks (2024) are:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^r \sum_{j=1}^c \frac{(e_{ij} - o_{ij})^2}{e_{ij}}$$

$$= 27.$$

The value of the d.f. = $(6 - 1)(5 - 1) = 20$. Therefore, from Chhikara and Folks (2024), the critical value at 5% level of significance with d.f. is $\chi_{0.05;20}^2 = 31.41$. The test statistic does not exceed the critical value, and hence, the hypothesis of independence cannot be rejected, Thus, there are no grounds to suspect bias of responses towards certain skills.

5 Discussion

When analysing analytical skills, decision-making, delegation, communication, interpersonal relations, and leadership, one can break down each competency in terms of its impact, strengths, weaknesses, and potential for development in a professional or personal context. Here's a detailed explanation of each:

5.1 Analytical Skills

The analysis reveals that about 75% of participants believe that the SMEs managers in Masvingo have analytical skills. This is a positive outlook because according to Sharma et al. (2024), strong analytical skills indicate the ability to think critically, assess complex problems, and make well-informed decisions based on data or observations. This skill is essential for breaking down problems, identifying patterns, and devising effective solutions (Anthonysamy et al., 2024). The ability to analyse situations thoroughly also often leads to better decision-making and forecasting. On the other hand, Aldrup et al. (2024), counsel that absence of analytical skills might result in poor problem-solving, oversight of important details, and a reliance on assumptions rather than data. Decision makers may struggle with situations that require deep thought or complex evaluation. Developing opportunities requires giving focus to enhancement of analytical thinking skill (Sternberg et al., 2021). Alternative ways could be using structured training, exposure to diverse challenges, using of instruments such as SWOT analysis, or data modelling to help strengthen this area.

5.2 Decision-Making

About 77% believe the SME managers have sound decision making skills. This is a positive sign, as sound decision-making skills involve the ability to choose the best course of action from a variety of alternatives (Lent & Brown, 2020). This indicates that managers of Masvingo SMEs can evaluate advantages and disadvantages, reflect on long-term effects, and act firmly. Proficiency of decision-makers often implies possession of a balanced combination of insight and rationality and taking responsibility for their choices. Chavan (2024) points at weaknesses emerging when there is no skill to

make good decisions. According to Guillamot (2024), ineffective decision-making could manifest in indecision, analysis paralysis, or rash choices without adequate consideration of risks. Moreover, relying extensively on intuition or external pressure has potential to lead to suboptimal results. There are opportunities to develop this skill. Kotorov et al. (2024) proposes giving training on decision-making frameworks (e.g., cost-benefit analysis, risk assessment), and increasing experience in making decisions under pressure to advance improved judgement. The managers could also be encouraged to learn to embrace failure and to learn from mistakes.

5.3 Delegation

Close to 80% of participants consider the Masvingo SME managers to be effective in delegating tasks to subordinates. This is a strength because effective delegation is the ability to trust others with tasks, leveraging the strengths of their team members and allowing for better resource management (Husainah & Ahmad, 2024). Effective delegation signals leadership maturity. Jin and Uchida (2024) consider effectiveness in delegating as acceptance that one person cannot do everything, and that others' skills need to be used. These authors view inability to delegate as a weakness. In concurrence are Ikputu et al. (2024), who describe poor delegation as usually arising from lacking trust, fearing to lose control, or micromanagement tendencies. Jusdienar et al. (2024) warn against poor or no delegation, as it can have adverse effects such as burnout, inefficiency, and resentment among team members who consider being exhausted or underutilised. As a result, it is a mistake not to ever delegate. This suggests that opportunities for being effective in this aspect should be considered. According to Nkeobuna and Ugoani (2020), improving delegation skills can be based on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of team members, setting clear expectations, and offering proper support while empowering others to take ownership.

5.4 Communication

Over 80% participants consider managers of these SMES to be good communicators. Great leaders and managers are famous for strong communication skills (Sear, 2024), covering verbal and non-verbal modes. These skills are important for sharing ideas effectively, listening actively, and promoting alliances. Effective communicators can convey complex information in a logical way and adapt style to diverse audiences. Deficiency in communication is a weakness in management, as breakdown in communication can occur (Brandt et al., 2024). There can be unclear messages, poor listening, or poor or no adjust communication audience styles. Lack of communication skills can cause confusion, disengagement or misunderstandings.

5.5 Interpersonal Relations

Over 81% of participants regarded Masvingo's SME managers to possess good interpersonal relationship skills. These skills suggest being capable of building positive relationships, managing social dynamics, and steering conflicts beneficially (Aggrawal & Magana, 2024). These skills promote partnership, trust-building, and the ability to influence others to advance teamwork and harmony. Zhang et al. (2024) warn that inadequate interpersonal skills may cause difficulties in building rapport with colleagues, isolation from the team, or failing to manage conflicts. Inflexible interactions with different personality types can also be a problem. Supriatna et al. (2024) enlighten that to improve interpersonal relations requires increasing emotional intelligence, learning conflict management strategies, and adopt an inclusive, respectful approach to several working styles.

5.6 Leadership

The study reveals that over 80% of the respondents believed that managers of Masvingo SMEs show proficiency in leadership skills, with the breakdowns of over 44% agreeing and 36.1% strongly agreeing that the managers demonstrate excellent leadership skills. This is good because strong leadership skills indicate an individual's ability to motivate, inspire, and guide a team toward achieving goals (Udin, 2024). Kuokkanen (2024) explains that effective leaders can set a clear vision, make strategic decisions, influence others, and maintain team morale even in challenging times. Moreover, Allam and Raj (2024) explain that leadership is also about modeling integrity, accountability, and resilience. Odda and Nkirina (2024) caution that a lack of leadership may manifest as poor direction, failure to inspire others, or an inability to make decisions that align with the organisation's objectives. A further warning by Aheruddin et al. (2024) is against micromanaging, inconsistency, or poor delegation can also undermine effective leadership. In the event of a lack, Owen (2024) enlightens that development opportunities to acquire leadership skills exist plentifully. Modise (2024) hints that leadership skills can be developed through mentoring, feedback, leadership training, and exposure to real-world leadership situations. Kohn (2024) highlights the value of reflecting and being self-aware in such development, and identifies emotional intelligence, adaptability, and ethical decision-making as fundamental to becoming a well-rounded leader. He thus proposes their inclusion in developing leadership skills.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Results summary

The study underlines the critical role of managerial skills in encouraging business growth, based on six essential competencies: analytical skills, decision-making, delegation, communication, interpersonal relations, and lead-

ership. These competencies are interrelated and fundamental for both personal and SME success. Investing in the development of these managerial competencies is necessary for enhancing business performance and contributing to broad economic development goals. The study indicates that while some individuals may excel in certain areas, they often need to improve additional skills to be more effective in leadership roles or teamwork. A deficiency in these competencies can impede personal performance and disrupt team dynamics. Therefore, recognizing these gaps and actively working on improvement is essential for achieving better outcomes. The findings highlight the strong correlation between managerial competencies and SME performance. They also reveal that deficiencies in management skills significantly contribute to the challenges experienced by SMEs of Masvingo. This adversely affects their growth and sustainability. Stakeholders such as government agencies and educational institutions can play a more effective role in empowering SME owners and managers by focusing on enhancing these skills through targeted training and development programs. The study concludes by advocating for a structured approach to competency development among SMEs in Masvingo City. It is anticipated that if they do so, they will improve their operational effectiveness and contribute positively to the local economy.

6.2 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of managerial skills on the growth of SMEs in Masvingo District, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size, although adequate for preliminary findings, may not fully represent the diverse landscape of SMEs in the region. The reliance on self-reported data can also introduce bias, as respondents may overstate their managerial competencies or the growth of their businesses due to social desirability. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences regarding the relationship between managerial skills and SME growth. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to track changes over time and assess the long-term impact of managerial skills on business performance. Furthermore, external factors such as economic conditions, market competition, and regulatory changes were not extensively considered in this research, which could also influence the growth of SMEs.

6.3 Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the existing literature on managerial skills and SME growth by highlighting the specific competencies that are most influential in the Masvingo context. The findings support the notion that effective management is multifaceted, encompassing various skills that collectively enhance organizational performance. The study reinforces the importance of integrating managerial skills training into educational curricula and professional development programs for entrepreneurs. Additionally, it suggests that future research could explore the interplay between different managerial

competencies and their combined effect on business outcomes, as well as investigate the potential moderating factors that may influence this relationship. By expanding the theoretical framework to include these elements, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics between management practices and SME success.

6.4 Practical implications

The findings of this study hold significant practical implications for SMEs and their stakeholders. Firstly, SMEs should prioritize the development of managerial competencies through targeted training programs that focus on analytical skills, decision-making, delegation, communication, interpersonal relations, and leadership. By investing in these areas, SMEs can enhance their operational effectiveness and overall performance. Secondly, policy-makers and educational institutions are encouraged to collaborate in creating accessible training resources and workshops tailored to the needs of SME owners and managers. This could help bridge the skills gap and foster a more supportive environment for business growth. Lastly, SMEs should adopt a culture of continuous learning and improvement, encouraging managers to seek feedback and engage in professional development opportunities. This proactive approach can lead to better decision-making and stronger team dynamics, ultimately contributing to the sustainability and growth of SMEs in Masvingo District.

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