

Workforce Development in SMEs: A Case from the Kingdom of Bahrain

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Abstract

Workforce development assumes a pivotal position in augmenting an organization's strategic framework, leadership dynamics, human resource reservoir, cultural milieu, and systemic competencies. It harnesses the potential of human capital to elevate the performance of the organization. Consequently, enterprises are compelled to embark on a thorough and methodical planning process geared towards the cultivation of their workforce, encompassing the fulfilment of imminent personnel necessities as well as the anticipation of prospective talent requisites. This study explores the ramifications of workforce development on both organizational entities and external stakeholders, shedding light on the advantages it brings. The research primarily concentrates on small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Kingdom of Bahrain, examining how workforce development influences these specific organizational structures.

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2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Impact of workforce development on organizations

Organizations must engage in comprehensive and structured workforce planning to effectively cultivate their workforce, addressing both present workforce requirements and future talent demands. Workforce development encompasses more than just individual professional training and development; it also involves the implementation of a wider philosophy that emphasizes skills ecosystems and personal growth (Hall & Lansbury, 2006). A broad, adaptable, and universal focus

is necessary ([Manning, 2010](#)). This enhances organizational capacity to adopt and adapt technologies and processes, thereby enabling employees to cultivate their potential and values. Strong organizations have a significant impact on economic growth, as it is through competition and competitiveness that organizations expand and contribute to economic growth. Sustaining competitiveness and competition necessitates a workforce with diverse skills capable of effectively addressing market challenges and meeting customer demands ([Nasirian et al., 2022](#)).

Upon reflecting on my experience at Nestle, it becomes apparent that the company is highly sought after by individuals due to its commitment to workforce development. Nestle Middle East's human resource development department has a comprehensive plan for individual and organizational development, starting from the moment an individual joins the company. Nestle's developed workforce has enabled the organization to prepare for future needs and adapt to unpredictable market changes. Furthermore, Nestle's development programmes have contributed to its ability to maintain effective organizational performance and establish itself as a leading employer of choice. Nestle's workforce development has equipped its human resources with knowledge, skills, and abilities, giving the company a competitive advantage over its rivals. After exploring the influence of workforce development on organizations, it is important to analyse its effects on the external stakeholders of the organization.

2.2 Impact of workforce development on an organization's external stakeholders

The examination of external stakeholders in an organization reveals that workforce development has multiple effects on these stakeholders. External stakeholders encompass customers, government entities, suppliers, investors, and the wider community. A well-trained workforce can effectively address customer requirements and cultivate an experience that is appealing to customers. A developed workforce facilitates the analysis of business opportunities and growth for key players, context-setters, and stakeholders with power and interest. Furthermore, as the workforce is cultivated, organizations can assess their level of interdependence with stakeholders, determining whether they hold a position of power or are subject to the power of stakeholders ([Maurice-Takerei, 2017](#)).

In the context of the Kingdom of Bahrain, it is important to analyze the government bodies and investors. Government bodies provide support for workforce development by implementing training levies. These levies aim to assist organizations in enhancing their workforce and ultimately strengthening their businesses. Government support enhances the economic and market position of businesses, thereby contributing to the overall strengthening of Bahrain's economy. The government's support for enterprises through workforce development programs and schemes is driven by the belief that these businesses contribute to the economic growth and diversification outlined in the 2030 Bahraini strategic vision.

Additionally, investors are more inclined to invest in businesses that possess skilled and capable workforces, as this enhances the likelihood of higher returns on their investments. This ensures that investments are managed by capable personnel. Small and medium enterprises in Bahrain encounter economic challenges, leading business owners to seek investors. Investors tend to favour businesses that possess a skilled workforce or demonstrate a commitment to enhancing their business through competent human resources. The provision of funding to investors through the "BEBAAN" programme exemplifies this type of support. Suppliers, distributors, and retailers are more likely to engage in business deals and transactions with organizations that possess skilled workforces.

This preference is driven by the desire to streamline business procedures and foster business growth. Organizations that have cultivated a skilled workforce are more likely to attract collaborations and business partnerships, leading to enhanced growth and competitiveness. Workforce development plays a crucial role in the growth and success of individuals and teams. Exploring the benefits of workforce development highlights its inevitable impact.

2.3 Benefits of Workforce Development for Individuals and Teams:

Workforce development offers numerous advantages for individuals and teams. Firstly, training aids in enhancing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies of individuals and teams, thereby increasing productivity. The training programme enhances employees' skill sets and technological competencies, while also fostering synergy within the team dynamics. Secondly, workforce development initiatives have been shown to enhance employee engagement, productivity, and collaboration, while also fostering a robust learning culture within an organization. Organizations that prioritize workforce development cultivate committed and loyal employees, thereby enhancing the company's reputation as the preferred employer. People appreciate organizations that invest in their personal and professional development by offering training, development opportunities, and the potential for career advancement ([Pahi et al., 2021](#)). Thirdly, the formation of the development culture makes the organization a "learning organization," which makes it "an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*).

As a human resource development specialist at Gulf Petrochemical Industrial Company, I have observed that the company's emphasis on workforce development has resulted in the cultivation of a skilled, motivated, and contented employee base. The presence of workforce development at GPIC has facilitated the attraction of highly skilled individuals, enhanced employee performance, mitigated resistance to change, and bolstered flexibility and adaptability. In my role as a Performance and Development Executive at Saudi Telecom Company, I observed that their workforce development programs effectively cultivate preparedness for unforeseen changes in

the business and market. This enables the company to establish a proactive and agile workforce, giving it a competitive edge over telecom rivals such as Zain and Batelco. The preceding discourse highlights the significance of workforce development in relation to its advantages for individuals, teams, and organizations. Workforce development plays a crucial role in influencing stakeholder engagement with businesses, thereby enhancing productivity, efficiency, and overall success.

2.4 Factor Influencing Work Development

Workforce development is influenced by various factors, including political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors, which impact the efficiency and effectiveness of development. This section will discuss two factors that can affect and shape workforce development. The term "legal" refers to matters or actions that are in accordance with the law. The second factor is organizational. Legal and organizational factors play a critical role in the planning and implementation of workforce development. Examining legal factors, including government laws, regulations, training levies, government financial aid, and support, presents both advantages and disadvantages for organizations. On one hand, organizations benefit from pointed legal factors as they are relieved from financial costs and the burden of planning workforce training and development, as they are required to comply with enforced regulations. However, organizations compelled to engage in workforce development face constraints in terms of the time and workforce hours required for such initiatives ([Ropes, 2015](#)).

Organizations may prioritize strategic objectives other than development, which they perceive as more important, to establish or expand their business. In the Kingdom of Bahrain, private sectors are required to pay a training levy equivalent to approximately 3% of their employees' total salaries. Organizations are required to utilize the training levy to develop their employees, with a particular emphasis on enhancing the skills and capabilities of Bahraini nationals. This policy promotes and incentivizes private sector employers to invest in the professional development of their employees through both local and international training opportunities. As a training officer at Golden Trust Institute, I encountered difficulties in allowing employees to attend training sessions due to the prioritization of deadlines and objectives that are deemed more crucial by the business owner in terms of generating revenue and profits.

Legal factors can either positively or negatively affect an organisation, depending on its specific context. The presence of an adequate budget and resources is essential for supporting workforce development within organizations. Top management support is crucial for the successful implementation and promotion of workforce development, thereby facilitating the desired outcomes. Therefore, these two organizational factors have an impact on the development of the workforce. The provision of financial resources and strategic management assistance for human

resource development. Nestle had a significant impact on workforce development by implementing a systematic tool to evaluate training needs and gaps in competencies. This involved establishing a strong foundation of performance appraisal linked to training and development, resulting in a comprehensive programme for employee development.

Developing a workforce development programme necessitates the involvement of experts capable of aligning an organisation's present and future requirements to cultivate a robust workforce (Billiot, 2020; Wollard, 2013). While working at Nestle, I was involved with the multinational company headquarters, which had specific training standards. The branch in Bahrain played a vital role as a strategic partner, collaborating with department heads to develop and train employees. This was achieved by integrating it with the systematic cycle of the appraisal system. This prompts a compelling discourse on the role of managers in developing the workforce. Managers play a significant role in workforce development. The following discussion highlights the importance of a learning culture in creating value for an organisation.

2.5 The Role of Manager in Workforce Development

The line manager is essential for supporting and implementing workforce development. Top management is responsible for planning and allocating the budget for training, while line managers are responsible for facilitating the execution of workforce development plans. Line managers are responsible for identifying gaps or areas for development in employees and making recommendations regarding the appropriate form or type of training or development (Billiot, 2020). Furthermore, it is crucial to provide employees with sufficient time to acquire and transfer knowledge to the workplace to support their professional development.

Additionally, it is the responsibility of the line manager to effectively communicate to the employee the significance and advantages of their professional development, such as its impact on career progression, personal growth, promotional opportunities, and overall benefits for the employee. Line managers can fulfil the roles of coaches or mentors for employees, playing a crucial role in employee development and fostering a culture of organisational learning. The line manager is responsible for shaping the learning culture in the organisation by establishing its values, norms, and style. At Nestle, it is emphasized to line managers that their promotions or transfers to other career growth opportunities within the company will depend on the progress of their successor's development. This fosters the ongoing transfer of learning and development within the organisation. Workforce development encounters obstacles and limitations that impede the implementation of programmes.

2.6 Challenges and Barriers to Workforce Development

Workforce development encounters numerous challenges and barriers. Constraints in organisational development can arise from various factors such as limited budgets, insufficient resources, a lack of management support, inadequate development programmes, and evaluation systems that are not aligned with development policies and procedures ([Rosendale & Wilkie, 2021](#)). Workforce development faces challenges related to the organisational infrastructure, specifically policies and regulations that shape the organisational culture. Furthermore, it has been previously emphasized that a comprehensive and integrated systematic system is crucial for facilitating continuous development in multiple aspects, particularly in relation to performance.

This includes the implementation of a performance management system. Upon examining the policies, rules, and procedures of an organisation, it becomes apparent that certain regulations may impose restrictions on the provision of training or the completion of a development programme. These restrictions may pertain to the duration of service required after the completion of training. Restrictions may lead individuals to resist participating in training or development activities if they perceive a sense of obligation to serve the organisation following the programme. Integrating a performance appraisal tool to monitor development and foster a culture of accountability is a complex undertaking that requires the involvement of all employees, line managers, and top managers, posing significant challenges.

During my consultancy role at Albayan Educational Services in Bahrain, I encountered the challenge of implementing a performance management system within the organisation. Resistance was encountered at all levels due to the lack of emphasis on resistance in the company's current efforts to establish a market niche among competitors. Therefore, it took nearly three years for the implementation of the system and for management to fully comprehend its effects on the workforce. Workforce development barriers reside within the individual employee. The employee's education or skills are not a prerequisite for participating in the development programme.

Additionally, failing to consider the employee's individual circumstances The suitability of the development programme for certain employees may be compromised if their circumstances are not adequately understood. At Golden Trust Institute, we encountered the challenge of female employees being involved in childcare or elderly care responsibilities outside of working hours. Line manager support is crucial when experiencing work pressure, peer pressure, or the fear of failure during working hours. This instills a fear of failure, leading to resistance towards personal growth and change. A lack of clear direction and management support can hinder workforce development when employees are unsure of the benefits of training and development for their career growth ([Billiot, 2020](#); [Wollard, 2013](#)).

2.7 Overcoming Challenges and Barriers to Workforce Development

Various strategies can be employed to address the obstacles and difficulties associated with workforce development.

This section discusses two methods utilised by Nestle: the implementation of a "learning organisation" through a performance management system, as well as the use of coaching. Creating a "learning organisation" culture can be achieved by implementing a performance management system that is integrated with development initiatives. This system will provide a comprehensive solution to the challenges in evaluating competency gaps, receiving support from line managers, and reaching consensus on development initiatives. Performance management is a systematic approach that focuses on the productivity and contributions of employees to enhance organisational performance. The models of good practise presented by [Armstrong and Taylor \(2020\)](#), [McCourt and Eldridge \(2003\)](#) and [Latham and Wexley \(1994\)](#).

[Fletcher \(1997\)](#), and [Neale \(1991\)](#) demonstrate a common approach to performance management in relation to workforce development. Nestle's performance management system enables employees to engage in self-reflection, learn from their experiences, and enhance their skills to effectively adapt to new situations and foster ongoing personal and professional development. The integration of performance management and training significantly influences employee development. Employees can receive training on effectively receiving feedback, which involves treating it as a learning opportunity and distinguishing between objective information and personal emotions. [Scott and Sloman \(2004\)](#) mention that "the way to unlock individuals' potential lies not in teaching them the things the organization believes they should know, but in enabling them to direct their affairs in a supportive learning environment."

This approach allows individuals to take responsibility for their learning needs and find suitable solutions, which promotes motivation and commitment ([Megginson, Banfield, & Joy-Matthews, 1999](#)). The integration of self-learning and manager's coaching creates an optimal learning environment within an organization. Secondly, the provision of coaching and managerial support facilitated increased employee awareness of their areas for development at Nestle. Managers who facilitate experiential opportunities for employees contribute to the development of self-directed learning. According to [Ahmed, Mozammel, and Ahmed \(2018\)](#), employees acquire knowledge through opportunistic strategies and unplanned experiences, which serve as valuable learning opportunities.

Employees should be trained to seize opportunities and remain attentive to the skills needed for job performance. This can be achieved by taking advantage of the numerous opportunities available within and outside of the job. Creating a coaching

culture is a demanding task, as noted by [Clutterbuck and Megginson \(2005\)](#) comment, "Creating a coaching culture is demanding. Living in a coaching culture may make it increasingly difficult to find people with the mental resilience and goodwill to populate it". The human resources department at Nestle facilitates the implementation of a coaching culture, while line managers assume responsibility for its execution. The human resources department facilitated coaching through training programmes, promoting the application of coaching skills in the workplace, and evaluating the implementation of coaching within the organisation. The training programme for managers aimed to cultivate a self-interest in coaching and instill the belief that coaching others would enhance their job performance.

The training programme should incorporate coaching skills and provide managers with opportunities to engage in role plays for the purpose of practising the acquired skills. The sharing of knowledge and insights between coaches and coachees in peer coaching accelerates the development of coaching skills and improves the overall performance of the organisation. [Clutterbuck and Megginson \(2005\)](#) suggest several strategies to promote a coaching culture within an organisation. These include establishing a connection between the performance of coaches and the overall performance of the organisation, engaging in informal conversations to identify development needs, sharing examples of effective coaching practises and outcomes in company publications, incorporating bonuses as part of coachee feedback, and discussing the success of coaches.

2.8 The Scope of Learning and Development Towards Workforce Development Strategy

The Workforce Development strategy should encompass learning and development comprehensively. Learning and development encompasses the thorough analysis and evaluation of individuals, as well as the establishment of a comprehensive and integrated systematic process. This process aims to provide top management with reports on return on investments. It is important to consider the factors influencing learning and developmental activities.

2.9 Factors Influencing the Selection of Learning and Development Activities

Numerous factors can impact learning and developmental activities. This discussion will address three factors based on my experience at Gulf Petrochemical Industrial Company (GPIC). Management consistently prioritised the relevance of learning motivation, development alignment with job tasks, career growth potential, and delivery methods. In the context of GPIC, certain employees may exhibit a preference for online learning as it allows them to simultaneously engage in work-related activities while enhancing their personal development. Some employees may prefer on-the-job training or receiving guidance from coaches.

The training department at GPIC recognises the importance of comprehending and assessing individual competencies, needs, motives, values, aptitude, and ability to achieve specific objectives within the development programme. Furthermore, it provides a distinct guidance on how a specific development programme can generate mutual benefits for both the individual and the organisation. The quality of training and development programmes is a significant factor in motivating employees to engage in learning and development activities. GPIC consistently prioritised the accreditation and partnership of its programmes with reputable workforce development and training providers, thereby investing in the professional growth of both its employees and the organisation.

The learning and development scope aims to address gaps in individual competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities. This entails comprehending the company's strategic plan and objectives, the line manager's requirements, and expectations, and fulfilling the individual's needs. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a robust learning and development strategy that evaluates the workforce's capabilities, skills, and competencies in relation to the organisation's current and future requirements in order to maintain the organisation's performance ([Billiot, 2020](#)). Establishing a systematic development and learning cycle is essential for enhancing employee performance. This process begins with identifying training needs and ensuring the effective transfer of learning. It is crucial for building the scope of learning and development activities. Evaluating the effectiveness of learning and development activities is contingent upon meeting the business needs within the cycle.

According to [McCall, Lombardo, and Eichinger \(2018\)](#), the 70/20/10 model highlights that the majority of learning, specifically 70%, occurs through experiential learning and feedback provided by managers and peers. Most learning outcomes, specifically 20%, are derived from social learning, peer feedback, and peer coaching, with only a small portion, approximately 10%, attributed to traditional coursework and formal educational settings. Therefore, to effectively establish the parameters of training and development initiatives for workforce enhancement, it is imperative to thoroughly assess the competency gap, identify the specific needs of individuals and managers, and carefully select an appropriate combination of workforce development programmes.

In contrast, [Loewenstein and Spletzer \(1998\)](#) argue that formal and informal training are mutually beneficial, with formal training potentially yielding a greater return on investment. Therefore, in order to effectively design and structure learning experiences, it is necessary to redefine the roles of line managers, employees, and workforce development vendors ([Clardy, 2018](#)). The integration of technology in various sectors and the shift towards a digital economy have implications for workforce development, specifically in the delivery of workforce development programmes and initiatives.

2.10 Use of Technology in Delivering Workforce Development

Workforce development technology encompasses software, digital tools, applications, and systems that facilitate strategic thinking within organisations (Gutu, Agheorghiesei, & Tugui, 2023). The system facilitates the automated monitoring of performance management, training and development programmes, and the assessment of skills gaps. It generates reports and statistics that allow top management to evaluate the return on investments in development. Technology facilitates strategic workforce development within organisations by enabling the tracking of progress and generating talent reports. This allows organisations to identify and leverage their talent pool as an asset. Technology streamlines operational processes by reducing the time, effort, and paperwork involved. Technology can be extensively utilised and applied in diverse ways to facilitate training and development. This promotes productivity, enhances communication, improves cost management, and fosters collaborative learning and development. Technology has enhanced distance learning, enabling it to cater to the needs of individuals facing limitations or circumstances that impede their educational progress (Gutu et al., 2023).

Technology can facilitate the creation of centralised platforms where job seekers can find learning opportunities and choose their desired career paths. Technology is employed to enhance the efficiency of career path selection and assessment, surpassing the capabilities of manual methods. The utilisation of diverse technological methods enables individuals in a workforce development programme to have greater customization and personalization in their pursuit of job opportunities and career growth. Technology empowers individuals to create customised career paths and access programmes that align with their personal and organisational skill requirements. This, in turn, enhances job satisfaction and retention within organisations. Furthermore, the individual's comprehension of their mobility within the organisation or industry can be enhanced through the utilisation of technology that connects workforce development needs with job requirements (Gutu et al., 2023).

2.11 Measuring the Impact of Workforce Development

Workforce development programme evaluation involves the reconciliation of various stakeholders' objectives (Simmonds, 2003). Workforce development evaluation seeks to assess the effectiveness of training, development, and career advancement initiatives in terms of their cost, impact on organisational objectives, and improvement in job performance and behaviour (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Workforce development evaluation involves assessing the value of collecting and analysing the information upon which the assessment is based (Hamblin, 1974). At Nestle, strategic workforce development is a key focus for human resource development executives across all branches in the Middle East. They are required to

submit an annual report to the management and board. Two widely recognised methods for measuring the impact of workforce development have been extensively praised in various literature reviews. These methods are outlined below.

The training needs analysis is connected to the performance management system. The performance management system assesses the development of competencies, allowing management to evaluate the impact of learning on the organisation's value in economic and financial terms. This can be measured using cost-benefit analysis and return on investment measures ([Simmonds, 2003](#)) Evaluation of training can result in either payback, which is a measurable financial return on investment, or payforward, which is a non-financial benefit derived from training investment ([Simmonds, 2003](#)).

The training needs analysis derived from Nestle's performance management system to inform the evaluation of the training. The information regarding the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for effective job performance should also be used to determine the level of training success. Multiple evaluation methods are necessary to assess the effectiveness of instructional programmes. These methods are used to establish criteria for evaluating the diverse objectives of training programmes. The relevance of criteria, knowledge, skills, abilities, and organisational goals identified in the needs assessment is assessed by comparing them to the operational measures of knowledge, skills, abilities, and organisational goals. The level of overlap between the two sets will determine the relevance, deficiency, or contamination of the criteria ([Goldstein & Ford, 2002](#)). The Kirkpatrick framework ([Bramley, 1996](#)) is an additional evaluation model that assesses trainers' reactions, learning, behaviour, and results following training. To conduct an evaluation, it is necessary to collect pre-training measures, which are derived from a training needs analysis.

Theoretical models can be applied to organisational evaluation tools to assess workforce development. This can be achieved through a comprehensive training needs analysis system that is connected to a performance management system. The workforce development programmes derived from these tools can then be aligned with the organisation's strategic vision. Therefore, this connection directly associates the investments made in Nestle's development programme with the performance indicators in the performance management system. Cost information is derived from training needs analysis during the establishment of training material budgets, while benefits are quantified in financial terms post-training. This finding demonstrates that the evaluation process relies on input from the training needs analysis or skills gap stage. Whether we are assessing training returns in terms of monetary value or the return on knowledge, skills, and abilities ([Simmonds, 2003](#)).

Quarterly reporting, which includes both qualitative and quantitative metrics, is used to evaluate workforce development. This evaluation is conducted by HR

executives who gather feedback from line managers, peers, and individuals, and provide it to top management. This encompasses various methods such as on-the-job observation, focus groups, establishment of performance indicators, and utilisation of evaluation tools. Informal feedback can also facilitate programme evaluation. However, as previously mentioned, these components will be incorporated into a performance management system that will include feedback from all relevant stakeholders ([Gutu et al., 2023](#)) The evaluations of workforce development at Nestle were unable to confirm the achievement of objectives, provide learners with knowledge of results, assess competence, certify competencies for qualification purposes, offer evidence of learning for further learning, identify the need for remedial training, determine the learning gained, provide evidence for revising training design, justify the use of resources (money, people, space, time, equipment), demonstrate the benefits of investing in training, compare costs and benefits of different training and learning methods, and enhance the credibility and profile of the training function. Sustained utilisation of workforce development tools is crucial to maximising strategic benefits.

2.12 Sustaining the Impact of Workforce Development

To ensure the long-term effectiveness of workforce development, it is crucial to establish a systematic cycle of a well-integrated performance management system, like Nestle, that allows for ongoing monitoring of employee development. This involves identifying training and development needs for career growth and implementing a cycle that includes mutual feedback between line managers and employees. This process ultimately leads to the creation of a career planning plan. Implementing a top-down approach to workforce development management is crucial.

Moreover, the utilisation of advanced technology, including Artificial Intelligence and other digital applications, can facilitate workforce access to opportunities by allowing them to assess their skills in relation to the current and future needs of an organisation or the market. The incorporation of contemporary methods such as seamless training, virtual platforms, and peer knowledge transfer provides a comprehensive learning experience, as opposed to perceiving a development programme as a tedious task ([Karakhan et al., 2020](#)).

Conclusion

The study provided a comprehensive analysis of my work experience, allowing me to apply the theoretical framework in a practical manner. The assignment strongly reflected my experience in human resource development, specifically in developing the workforce of various local and multinational companies. Upon reflection, I have considered how I might approach workforce development differently if given the opportunity to revisit the situation. The assignment has highlighted the fact that

there is no universally applicable solution for all organisations. Every organisation possesses strengths and areas for development in the realm of workforce development. The assignment prompted me to explore the significance of workforce development for entrepreneurial activities in Bahrain. This research aims to enhance the success and sustainability of entrepreneurship projects, thereby contributing to the growth of a diversified economy through a well-trained workforce.

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