



Re-Engineering Human Resource Practices for Entrepreneurial Agility in Manufacturing SMEs

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Abstract

Manufacturing firms operate in increasingly unstable markets marked by supply-chain shocks, changing customer demand, technology shifts, cost pressure, foreign-exchange volatility, regulatory uncertainty and intense competition. For small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises, the challenge is more severe because they often lack the financial buffer, formal systems and surplus manpower available to large firms. This conceptual paper analyses how re-engineering human resource practices can enhance entrepreneurial agility among manufacturing SMEs, with emphasis on human, structural, technical and technological HR dimensions. The paper argues that entrepreneurial agility is not produced by flexibility slogans alone; it is built through people who can learn quickly, structures that allow fast redeployment, technical routines that improve operational responsiveness, and technology-enabled HR systems that support timely decisions. Drawing on strategic human resource management, the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities theory and the ability-motivation-opportunity model, the paper develops an HR Re-Engineering for Entrepreneurial Agility Framework. The framework shows how performance management and reward systems can be redesigned to suit resource-constrained SMEs by focusing on adaptive goals, skill versatility, team-based problem solving, innovation contribution, productivity discipline and low-cost recognition. The paper concludes that manufacturing SMEs can respond better to disruptions when HR practices are re-engineered from administrative routines into entrepreneurial capability systems that align workforce behaviour with responsiveness, flexibility, innovation and performance.

Keywords: HR Re-Engineering, Entrepreneurial Agility, Manufacturing SMEs, Performance Management, Reward Systems

Introduction

Manufacturing firms are increasingly required to compete in markets where disruptions are no longer occasional interruptions but regular features of business life. Raw material shortages, exchange-rate volatility, energy cost increases, changing consumer preferences, import competition, technology shifts and logistics problems can quickly weaken production plans and customer commitments. In this environment, a manufacturing firm must be able to sense changes, redeploy resources, adjust processes and motivate employees to solve problems quickly. This capability is commonly described as agility, and it has become a major concern in strategic management and human resource management literature (Ahammad et al., 2020; Sherehiy et al., 2007). For small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises, agility is both necessary and difficult. SMEs are often close to customers and can make quick decisions, but they also face resource constraints, limited formal systems, weak training budgets, owner-dependence, low technological adoption, and informal performance management. These constraints mean that SMEs cannot simply copy large-firm HR models. They need lean, practical and entrepreneurial HR systems that help employees learn

multiple roles, respond to urgent market demands, reduce waste, improve quality and support innovation without creating heavy bureaucracy (Brand & Bax, 2002; Eniola et al., 2023). Human resource practices have long been linked to firm performance.

Huselid (1995) showed that high-performance work practices are associated with lower turnover, higher productivity, and stronger corporate financial performance. Jiang et al. (2012), using the ability-motivation-opportunity framework, further explained that HR systems influence outcomes through employee skills, motivation and opportunities to contribute. For manufacturing SMEs, this means HR practices should not merely record attendance, process salaries or discipline workers; they should build the workforce capability required to respond to market disruptions. The idea of re-engineering is important because many HR practices in SMEs are inherited, informal or reactive. Recruitment may be based on family ties rather than skill fit; training may occur only after mistakes; performance appraisal may be subjective; rewards may be disconnected from productivity; and technology may be absent from employee records, scheduling and skill tracking. Re-engineering HR practices means redesigning these routines so that they directly support agility, productivity and entrepreneurial responsiveness. This aligns with strategic human resource management, which views HR as a planned pattern of human resource deployment and activities intended to help the firm achieve its goals (Wright & McMahan, 1992). This paper focuses on four HR re-engineering dimensions: human, structural, technical and technological. The human dimension concerns skills, mindset, learning, teamwork and employee adaptability. The structural dimension concerns role design, reporting lines, decision rights, communication flow and workforce redeployment. The technical dimension concerns job standards, production knowledge, process discipline, problem-solving routines and performance metrics. The technological dimension concerns digital tools, HR information systems, attendance records, skill databases, communication platforms and data-supported HR decisions. Together, these dimensions can convert HR from a support function into a strategic agility mechanism (Ahammad et al., 2020; Lepak & Snell, 1999).

HR re-engineering refers to the deliberate redesign of human resource policies, processes, roles and systems so that they contribute directly to strategic and operational goals. In this paper, it does not mean introducing expensive corporate HR bureaucracy. Rather, it means simplifying and redesigning HR practices to improve workforce responsiveness, skill versatility, accountability, innovation and performance. This interpretation is consistent with strategic HRM, which emphasises the alignment of HR deployments and activities with firm objectives (Wright & McMahan, 1992). Entrepreneurial agility is the capacity of a firm to identify market changes, make quick decisions, mobilise limited resources, experiment with solutions and capture opportunities under uncertainty. It combines opportunity-seeking behaviour with operational flexibility. Strategic agility literature emphasises the ability to review strategy and renew business models in changing environments, while enterprise agility literature highlights responsiveness, flexibility, speed and adaptability (Ahammad et al., 2020; Doz & Kosonen, 2010; Sherehiy et al., 2007). Manufacturing SMEs are small and medium-sized firms engaged in transforming raw materials, components or inputs into finished or semi-finished goods. In Nigeria, these may include food processing firms, furniture makers, garment producers, plastic manufacturers, metal fabricators, printing firms, soap and cosmetics producers, packaging firms and small agro-processing enterprises. Their agility depends not only on machines and materials but also on how people are trained, deployed, measured and rewarded. Performance management is the process of setting expectations, monitoring results, providing feedback and improving employee contribution. Reward systems refer to financial and non-financial mechanisms used to recognise, reinforce and sustain desired behaviour. In resource-constrained SMEs, performance management and rewards must be lean, transparent and strongly linked to productivity, quality, adaptability, learning and innovation rather than only attendance or seniority (Jiang et al., 2012).

The resource-based view explains how human resources can become a source of competitive advantage. In this paper, re-engineered HR practices are viewed as mechanisms for organising valuable human capabilities into agile manufacturing performance. A skilled, adaptable and motivated workforce can help SMEs respond to disruptions faster than competitors, especially when the firm's routines are difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Dynamic capabilities theory explains how firms sense opportunities and threats, seize them, and reconfigure resources. Manufacturing SMEs need dynamic capabilities because market disruptions require rapid adjustment of people, machines, schedules, products and channels. HR re-engineering supports dynamic capabilities by enabling workforce redeployment, learning, performance feedback, and reward alignment during disruption (Teece, 2007). The ability-motivation-opportunity model provides a direct explanation of how HR practices shape employee contribution. Employees must have the ability to perform agile tasks, the motivation to engage in them, and the opportunity to

contribute ideas and effort. Performance management and reward systems are central because they clarify expected behaviour and reinforce adaptive contribution (Jiang et al., 2012). Taken together, these theories explain HR re-engineering as a strategic capability-building process. The resource-based view explains why adaptable human capability can become a source of advantage. Dynamic capabilities theory explains why SMEs must reconfigure people, routines and skills under disruption. The AMO model explains how HR practices produce performance through employee ability, motivation and opportunity. This integrated position supports the argument that entrepreneurial agility is created when HR systems make employees capable, willing and enabled to respond to changing manufacturing conditions.

Strategic human resource management literature argues that HR practices can become a source of performance when they are aligned with business strategy. Wright and McMahan (1992) provided an early theoretical foundation for SHRM by showing how HR practices can be understood through behavioural, resource-based and institutional perspectives. Huselid (1995) later provided empirical support for the link between high-performance work practices and firm outcomes. These contributions are important because they move HR beyond administrative support toward strategic value creation. The resource-based view explains why people and HR systems matter. Barney (1991) argues that firms achieve sustained competitive advantage when they possess valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and well-organised resources. In manufacturing SMEs, machinery may be copied, and products may be imitated, but a workforce that can solve problems, learn quickly, improve processes and respond to customers can become a more defensible resource. Re-engineered HR practices help organise this human capability into a performance system. The ability-motivation-opportunity model is also relevant. Jiang et al. (2012) explain that HR systems influence organisational outcomes by improving employee ability, motivation and opportunity to contribute. For manufacturing SMEs, ability may be improved through cross-training and technical learning; motivation through fair rewards and recognition; and opportunity through team problem-solving, suggestion systems and flexible job design. Agility therefore depends on whether employees are capable, willing and allowed to respond. Agility literature emphasises the need for speed, responsiveness and adaptation in turbulent environments. Sherehiy et al. (2007) reviewed enterprise agility and highlighted attributes such as flexibility, responsiveness, speed, competence and adaptability. Doz and Kosonen (2010) framed strategic agility as a leadership agenda for business model renewal, while Ahammad et al. (2020) explicitly linked strategic agility with HRM. These studies support the argument that agility is not only a production or technology issue; it is also a human resource issue. Manufacturing research also shows that HR systems matter for production performance. MacDuffie (1995) demonstrated that human resource bundles can influence manufacturing performance in flexible production systems. This is highly relevant to SMEs because manufacturing agility depends on the interaction between people, process knowledge, work organisation and incentives. A machine operator who can identify defects early, a supervisor who can redeploy workers quickly, and a team that can reduce wastage collectively contribute to agility. Nigerian evidence provides contextual support. Mekuri-Ndimele (2025) found a significant relationship between human resource planning and organisational agility among manufacturing companies in Rivers State, with HR planning positively associated with responsiveness and flexibility. This is especially relevant to South-South Nigeria, where manufacturing firms must cope with infrastructure problems, logistics challenges and market volatility. The study suggests that workforce forecasting, skills assessment and targeted training can improve agility in manufacturing firms. Other Nigerian SME studies reinforce the importance of HR systems. Eniola et al. (2023) found that high-performance work systems influence sustainable organisational performance in Nigerian SMEs through innovative work behaviour. Joseph et al. (2024) also reported that recruitment and selection, training and development, motivation and remuneration significantly affect SME growth in Kaduna State. These findings support the view that HR practices can influence growth, innovation and performance even in resource-constrained environments. The literature therefore supports three conclusions. First, HR practices can influence firm performance when aligned with strategy. Second, agility requires human capability, not only technology. Third, SMEs need HR practices that are formal enough to guide behaviour but flexible enough to avoid bureaucratic burden. This paper contributes by integrating these arguments into a practical HR re-engineering framework for entrepreneurial agility in manufacturing SMEs.

Many manufacturing SMEs face market disruptions with outdated HR practices. Employees may be hardworking but not multi-skilled. Supervisors may monitor attendance but not adaptive performance. Owners may reward loyalty but ignore innovation, waste reduction, or quality improvement. Technical employees may have tacit knowledge, but the knowledge is not documented or transferred. In such circumstances, the firm becomes vulnerable whenever a key worker leaves, a machine fails, demand changes, or a customer requests urgent modification. The second problem is

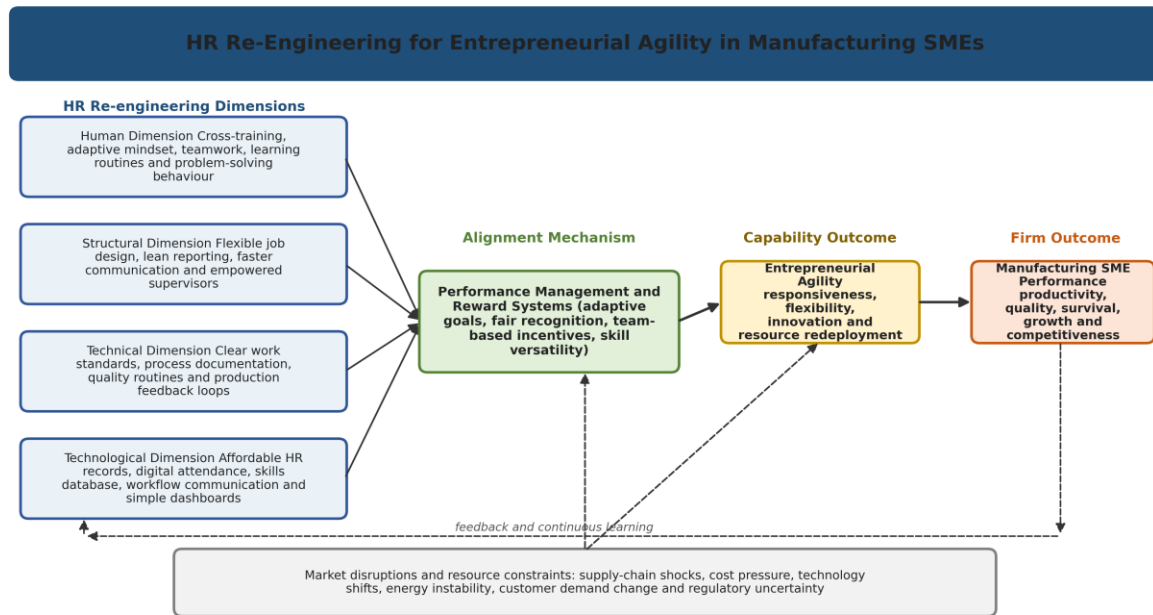
that performance management in SMEs is often either too informal or too punitive. Rather than serving as a system for aligning individual effort with business goals, it becomes a tool for blame, salary decisions, or owner preference. This weakens agility because employees do not clearly understand what responsive performance means. If production workers are assessed only by presence and obedience, they may not be motivated to suggest process improvements, learn new tasks, or respond creatively to customer changes (Jiang et al., 2012; Huselid, 1995). The third problem concerns reward systems. Resource-constrained SMEs cannot always offer large salaries, bonuses, or formal benefit packages. However, this does not mean that reward systems should be absent or arbitrary. Many SMEs fail to use low-cost rewards such as recognition, skill-based pay increments, team bonuses, flexible scheduling, learning opportunities, problem-solving awards, and promotion pathways. Without a reward system that encourages agility, employees may resist change, hide knowledge, or focus only on routine tasks. Evidence from Nigeria suggests that HRM practices, including motivation and remuneration, influence SME growth, while high-performance work systems can support sustainable performance through innovative work behaviour (Eniola et al., 2023; Joseph et al., 2024). This paper aims to examine how re-engineering human resource practices enhances entrepreneurial agility among manufacturing SMEs, with particular attention to performance management and reward systems suitable for resource-constrained firms.

The specific objectives are to:

1. clarify the concepts of HR re-engineering, entrepreneurial agility and manufacturing SME performance;
2. analyse the human, structural, technical and technological dimensions of HR re-engineering;
3. explain how performance management and reward systems can be redesigned for entrepreneurial agility;
4. develop a conceptual framework linking HR re-engineering to agility and manufacturing performance

Analysis

This paper adopts a conceptual and analytical methodology. It does not report primary data collected by the author. Instead, it synthesises strategic HRM literature, agility literature, Nigerian SME evidence and manufacturing-focused HR research to develop a framework for re-engineering HR practices in manufacturing SMEs. A conceptual approach is suitable because the paper seeks to clarify relationships among HR re-engineering, entrepreneurial agility, performance management, reward systems and manufacturing performance. The analysis draws on four categories of literature. The first category includes foundational strategic HRM and high-performance work system studies. The second category includes agility and dynamic capability literature. The third category includes Nigerian and SME-focused studies on HRM, agility and performance. The fourth category includes manufacturing-oriented work on flexible production and HR bundles. The synthesis is used to build an applied conceptual framework that can guide future empirical testing. The proposed framework explains how four HR re-engineering dimensions contribute to entrepreneurial agility in manufacturing SMEs. The human dimension builds adaptable employees. The structural dimension creates flexible roles and faster decision flow. The technical dimension strengthens process discipline and operational learning. The technological dimension uses affordable digital tools to improve workforce information, communication and decision-making. These dimensions influence entrepreneurial agility through responsiveness, flexibility, innovation and resource redeployment. Performance management and reward systems sit at the centre of the framework because they translate agility into daily behaviour. If employees are measured only by attendance, they will focus on presence. If they are measured by quality, speed, learning, teamwork, waste reduction and customer responsiveness, they are more likely to contribute to agility. Similarly, if rewards recognise only seniority or personal closeness to the owner, employees may not support innovation. If rewards recognise adaptive performance, problem solving and skill versatility, employees receive clearer signals about what the firm values (Jiang et al., 2012; Huselid, 1995).



Source: Authors' conceptualisation based on Ahammad et al. (2020), Barney (1991), Jiang et al. (2012), Mekuri-Ndimele (2025), Sherehiy et al. (2007), and Teece (2007).

Figure 1: HR Re-Engineering for Entrepreneurial Agility Framework

Table 1: HR Re-Engineering Framework for Entrepreneurial Agility in Manufacturing SMEs

HR dimension	Re-engineered practice	Agility contribution	Performance and reward implication
Human	Cross-training, adaptive mindset, teamwork, learning routines and problem-solving behaviour	Employees can shift roles, learn faster and respond to production or customer changes	Appraise skill versatility, learning speed, quality contribution and team problem solving
Structural	Flexible job design, lean reporting, faster communication and empowered supervisors	Decisions and redeployment happen faster during disruptions	Reward accountable initiative, responsible autonomy and team responsiveness
Technical	Clear work standards, process documentation, quality routines and production feedback loops	Operational errors reduce and process adjustment becomes easier	Link rewards to waste reduction, defect reduction, uptime and productivity improvement
Technological	Affordable HR records, digital attendance, skills database, WhatsApp/workflow communication and simple dashboards	Managers know available skills, absences, bottlenecks and redeployment options quickly	Use data for fair appraisal, transparent incentives and timely recognition

Source: Authors' conceptualisation based on Ahammad et al. (2020), Barney (1991), Jiang et al. (2012), Mekuri-Ndimele (2025), Sherehiy et al. (2007), and Teece (2007).

The framework is deliberately practical. A resource-constrained manufacturing SME may not afford a sophisticated enterprise resource planning system, but it can maintain a simple skills matrix, use a shared production board, document critical tasks, hold weekly performance conversations, and recognise workers who solve production problems. These small HR redesigns can produce agility when they are consistent and tied to performance expectations. The framework can also guide empirical research. HR re-engineering may be treated as the independent variable, entrepreneurial agility as the mediating or outcome capability, and manufacturing performance as the dependent variable. Performance management and reward systems may be tested as moderating mechanisms because they can strengthen or weaken the effect of HR re-engineering on agility.

Discussion

The main problem is that small and medium-sized manufacturing firms need people who are capable of carrying out a variety of tasks rather than just one narrowly defined one. In markets that are experiencing disruption, demand can change, machinery can break down, suppliers can delay sending the materials, and customers can ask for altered products. If workers are stuck in fixed roles, the company ends up being slow. Human resources re-engineering must therefore involve cross-training, hands-on learning, and foster a culture in which employees are encouraged to solve problems instead of simply waiting for instructions. This is in line with the ability aspect of the AMO model (Jiang et al., 2012).

The second issue is concerned with structure. Although many SMEs seem to be flexible because the owner can make quick decisions, owner-driven flexibility can turn into a bottleneck. When every decision has to wait for the owner, supervisors and teams are unable to react swiftly. Structural human resources re-engineering should involve making decision authorities clear, giving power to line supervisors, cutting down on unnecessary levels of reporting, and setting up communication routines for urgent production and customer matters. Strategic agility demands not only quick thinking by leaders but also organisational structures that enable rapid action (Ahammad et al., 2020; Doz & Kosonen, 2010).

The third issue is technical capability. Manufacturing agility cannot take place when work standards are vague, when process knowledge is held only by a small number of workers, and when quality problems are repeated without any learning taking place. Technical human resources re-engineering requires the use of job guides, standard operating procedures, quality checkpoints, maintenance routines, and production feedback. Although these measures may seem to be purely operational, they are also human resources issues since employees must be trained, evaluated, and rewarded according to their ability to follow, improve, and pass on technical knowledge (MacDuffie, 1995).

The fourth issue is technology. At the initial stage, technological human resources re-engineering does not have to rely on expensive systems. Many SMEs can start with simple tools such as digital records of attendance, spreadsheets for mapping skills, WhatsApp groups for communicating during shifts, shared folders for process documents, and low-cost dashboards for tracking production targets. The value of technology is not in how sophisticated it is but in its ability to make information visible and to speed up decision-making. When managers know which workers can operate which machine, who is absent, which team has quality problems, and which workers need training, redeployment becomes much easier.

The fifth issue is performance management. SMEs frequently complain about poor employee attitudes, but many of them have not specified the behaviours they expect. A re-engineered performance management system should include agility indicators such as response time, defect reduction, teamwork, learning new tasks, resolving customer complaints, reducing waste, and making innovation suggestions. Feedback should be given regularly and in a developmental way rather than only once a year or in a punitive manner. This helps employees to realise that agility is part of their job, not something that is only expected in times of crisis. The sixth issue is reward design. SMEs that have limited resources should not think that reward means only a high salary. Reward can include skill-based pay rises, bonuses for team productivity, public recognition, extra rest time, opportunities for training, opportunities for leadership, transport support, meal support, incentives for punctuality, and small innovation awards. What is important is fairness and alignment. Rewards should promote the behaviours that contribute to the firm's agility: learning, collaboration, quality, speed, initiative, and responsible cost saving (Joseph et al., 2024). The situation in Nigeria makes these issues particularly pressing. Manufacturing firms in Rivers State and other areas of Nigeria frequently encounter power shortages, logistics difficulties, constraints due to the importation of inputs, and fluctuating customer demand. Mekuri-Ndimele (2025) found that effective HR planning has a positive impact on organisational agility in manufacturing companies in Rivers State, especially in terms of responsiveness and flexibility. This supports the view

that HR re-engineering is not just a theoretical concept; it is a practical necessity for firms operating in unstable environments. The entrepreneurial aspect is also important. Entrepreneurial agility is different from ordinary flexibility in that it is driven by opportunities. A manufacturing SME should not only survive disruption but also use it as a chance to identify new customer segments, redesign products, reduce waste, create smaller packages, change delivery channels, or introduce faster production methods. Human resources practices must therefore encourage employees to think and act in an entrepreneurial way within the company. Performance management and reward systems should acknowledge employees who help the business find value under constraints.

For small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises, the key point is that human resources should be seen as a performance system rather than merely as a matter of paying salaries and handling discipline. Business owners ought to determine the skills required in order to respond to disruption, set up simple training procedures, establish agile performance indicators, and give incentives to employees who enhance productivity, quality, and innovation. All of this can be achieved without the need to set up a large human resources department. For HR professionals and consultants, the message is that HR solutions for SMEs must be simple and tailored to the specific situation. A manufacturing SME might need a skills matrix more quickly than a detailed appraisal form. It might find it more urgent to have regular shift communications than to have a lengthy HR manual. It might need clear team rewards more urgently than a formal corporate pay structure. HR re-engineering should start by taking into account the firm's actual limitations and the patterns of disruption it faces. Entrepreneurs' educators are advised that HR should be included as part of entrepreneurial ability. Students and trainees should be taught how to design simple performance measures, organise team rewards, manage skills, record work routines, and motivate employees in small firms. This is significant since many entrepreneurs do not fail because they lack ideas but rather because they are unable to get people to carry out their ideas under pressure. For policymakers and organisations that provide support to SMEs, the conclusion is that support for manufacturing should involve the development of HR capabilities.

Training programmes should not concentrate solely on finance, marketing and equipment; they should also cover workforce planning, shop-floor leadership, rewards based on productivity, occupational learning, digital HR records and employee motivation systems. Such measures can help SMEs to increase their resilience and improve the quality of employment. There are several difficulties that could impact HR re-engineering in manufacturing SMEs. The first of these is financial constraint. Many SMEs work with tight cash flow and may therefore delay training or rewards. The second is the informal nature of operations. Owners may oppose documentation because they are used to having personal control. The third is resistance from employees. Workers may be concerned that multi-skilling will lead to a greater workload without any fair reward. These difficulties demonstrate the need for HR re-engineering to combine clear performance expectations with fairness and good communication. Another issue is technological readiness. Some SMEs may not have computers, a stable internet connection, or employees with digital skills. Nevertheless, technological HR re-engineering can start off on a small scale using mobile tools, spreadsheets and basic records. There is also the question of trust. If employees think that performance data will be used only as a means of punishment, they may refuse to have it measured. It is therefore essential that performance management be transparent, developmental and connected to fair rewards (Jiang et al., 2012). The paper is limited by its conceptual approach. It does not include any new field data from manufacturing SMEs. Its contribution lies in the development of an applied framework which can help direct future empirical studies. Future research could test the framework using survey, case study or mixed-method designs among manufacturing SMEs in Rivers State, Lagos, Ogun, Aba, Kano, Kaduna and other industrial areas.

Conclusion

If the HR practices of small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises remain merely administrative, informal, or reactive, then they will be unable to deal effectively with market disruptions. The ability to act entrepreneurially demands that employees be able to learn, that there be structures in place to enable rapid action, that there be technical routines to support quality and continuous process improvement, and that technological tools be used to make information about the workforce visible. It is therefore not a luxury for large companies to re-engineer their HR practices; for small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises with limited resources it is a necessity if they are to survive and grow. This paper has stated that performance management and reward systems are at the heart of HR re-engineering since they turn agility into everyday behaviour. Employees react to the things that the company measures, talks about and rewards. If small and medium-sized enterprises measure only attendance and obedience, they will find it difficult to develop entrepreneurial agility. But if they measure and reward learning, responsiveness, innovation, quality and teamwork, they will create a workforce better able to respond to disruptions. The future competitiveness

of small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises in Nigeria and in other developing economies will depend not only on machines and capital, but also on the degree to which people are organised, motivated and redeployed.

Suggestions

1. Small and medium-sized enterprises involved in manufacturing should carry out frequent skills audits in order to find out which of their employees are capable of carrying out key tasks in the areas of production, quality and customer response.
2. Performance management systems should have as part of them indicators relating to agility such as skill versatility, response time, quality improvement, waste reduction and innovation contribution.
3. Reward systems should include both financial incentives that are affordable and non-financial rewards such as recognition, opportunities for learning, and rewards that are based on team performance.
4. Small and medium-sized enterprises ought to record their key technical procedures so that production knowledge is not confined to one or two employees.

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