


Chapter 7

A Conceptual Framework for Talent Management Practices in Emerging Markets: A Focus on Start-Ups and SMEs in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes a conceptual framework for talent management (TM) tailored to the unique conditions of African start-ups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) operating in resource-constrained emerging markets. Drawing on the Resource-Based View, Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, Institutional Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy, and African Relational Leadership Theory, the framework addresses the misalignment between mainstream TM models and the socio-economic and institutional realities faced by African SMEs. The study reviews empirical findings on adaptive TM practices across the continent and outlines key strategies for flexible talent acquisition, cost-effective development, community-driven retention, relational leadership, and institutional adaptation. The proposed model offers a culturally grounded, operationally feasible approach for enhancing talent outcomes in African enterprises and contributes to ongoing efforts to develop contextually relevant management theory in the Global South.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Talent management (TM) is increasingly recognised as a critical driver of organisational performance and competitiveness, particularly in environments that demand agility and innovation (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019). Traditionally, talent management has been applied extensively in large, established businesses where resource availability supports comprehensive recruitment, development, and retention initiatives. However, a growing body of literature highlights the need for talent management practices that meet the unique needs of small, agile businesses, such as start-ups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) that operate with resource constraints and organisational structures (Huselid & Becker, 2018). In developed markets, SMEs benefit from robust institutional support, better access to capital, and a relatively stable workforce environment, allowing for tailored yet resource-intensive talent management strategies. However, start-ups and SMEs in emerging markets face different realities, where limited access to skilled talent, economic volatility, and institutional voids challenge conventional talent management practices (Khavul, Bruton, & Wood, 2022). Africa exemplifies these emerging market conditions with significant challenges and opportunities in its start-up and SME ecosystem. The African Union's Agenda 2063 highlights entrepreneurship as a key driver for economic transformation, with a special emphasis on fostering innovative and adaptive talent management practices.

Despite these aspirations, a core challenge persists: there is a misalignment between mainstream talent management theories, often developed in resource-rich environments, and the structural realities of African SMEs. These enterprises contend with institutional voids, resource constraints, and informal operating norms that limit the applicability of conventional TM models. This chapter addresses this gap by proposing a contextually relevant framework that integrates Afrocentric philosophies with adapted global theories.

Emerging markets, particularly in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, present a compelling context for the study of talent management in start-ups and SMEs. The region is characterised by a young, rapidly growing population that is driving demand for job creation and economic growth (World Bank, 2021). Despite high potential, African start-ups and SMEs face significant hurdles, such as limited access to financial resources, weak regulatory systems, and shortages of skilled talent (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2020; Simba et al., 2023). These factors necessitate talent management practices that differ from those applied in more developed markets, where institutional support and established infrastructures facilitate talent acquisition and retention.

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