



# Sedentarization practices and employee skills development in small and Medium-Sized enterprises in Benin

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## Abstract

This research aimed to analyze sedentarization practices and their influence on employee skills development in small and medium-sized enterprises in Benin. The key concepts were identified through literature review and directive and semi-directive interviews were used. The quantitative data used in this study were collected from 1,321 employees and analyzed through descriptive statistics and correlation analyses in the SPSS software. The results revealed on the one hand that the sedentarization of employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in Benin can be explained by the games played by the actors involved. On the other hand, the results illustrated that the skill development of SME employees depended not only on the expectation of promotion gain but also on routine activities that negatively and significantly influenced the skill development of SME employees.

**Keywords:** Promotion, Sedentarization, development, Skills, Beni

## 1. Introduction

The business environment is subject to numerous changes due to various factors including the exacerbation of competition (Pluchart, 2023). Companies are, therefore, aware of the importance of customer satisfaction and make innovation their banner of competitiveness to preserve their competitive advantage. The key success factors of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are constantly evolving and can quickly be overtaken (Clist, 1990). To cope with this dynamism of the environment and control its contingencies, companies made their human resources management strategies flexible (Tchokponhoue, 2021). Among the human resources management tools, mobility is an essential practice for the mobilization, involvement, and development of staff skills. Sedentarization, a practice contrary to employee mobility, is a phenomenon whose different forms are based on very specific issues (Kutsal, 2021). It sometimes opposes the progression of employees in skills and responsibilities and extends to almost all categories of personnel (Tchokponhoue, 2010). In this vein, SMEs, due to their size, are unable to ensure differentiated mobilization of their staff who find themselves in the game of routine caused by sedentarization (Tchokponhoue, 2010). This

constitutes a brake on professional development and

then can influence the development of employees' skills.

Indeed, companies that develop mobility hope to update employees' skills and improve their employability at the same time so that they become more flexible (Noël and Schmidt, 2022). Today's companies ensure their performance and sustainability thanks to distinctive skills. To achieve this, they must train employees who can provide them with the resources necessary to achieve their objectives.

Given these objectives, it becomes imperative to assess, as far as possible, the effects of the sedentarization of employees on not only the development of skills but also on the performance and sustainability of SMEs. In this vein, a few questions deserve to be asked. What is the relationship between the games of the actors involved and the development of skills of employees of SMEs? Does the expectation of gaining promotion influence the development of skills of employees? Does the routine imposed by the intrinsic characteristics of SMEs ensure the development of skills of employees? It is to respond to these multiple concerns that this article devotes its second section to

the rigorous analysis of the literature. The third section allowed us to approach the methodology of the study while the fourth was devoted to the presentation and discussion of the results obtained.

## 2.Literature Review

Sedentarization is a concept much more related to breeders for whom it is the fact of going from the nomadic state to remaining in a fixed place. In human resources management, it is an absence of staff mobility. An employee is sedentary if he or she does not observe internal mobility or change of job (Guerrero, 2004). Despite the scarcity of writings on sedentarization, some studies have dealt with the development of skills in isolation or in relation to other concepts (Damon-Tao et al. 2023, Adonon and Glidja, 2024; Hrona, Vyshnyk, and Pinchuk 2023 and Delgoulet and Vidal-Gomel 2013).

### 2.1 Emergence of sedentarization

Skills are developed in different ways in companies through professional training, conferences attendance, coaching, job changes and formal or informal events (Adonon and Glidja 2024; Hrona, Vyshnyk and Pinchuk 2023 and Vidal-Gomel 2013). Thus, mobility being a guarantee of skills development, the worker who is used to working in different departments with varied hierarchical position levels acquires multiple knowledge and therefore skills during these movements. Employee mobility is a source of accumulation, capitalization, and transfer of skills to be valued. Sedentarization, for its part, has many aspects such as the absence of change of activity, profession, job which are not likely to produce the same effects as mobility (Tchokponhoue, 2010).

### 2.2 Power games of the actors involved

Stakeholders are made up of actors who interact with companies. These can be employees, suppliers, customers, and unions. Crozier (1964) studied the functioning of bureaucratic systems in a company whose organization was structured by power relations. He reported that these did not reproduce the organization chart, but were based on implicit patterns, including the control of areas of uncertainty. In his work, he concluded that power was always a

relationship between actors and not an attribute. The power relationship was only established if the two parties were integrated into an organized structure. According to Friedberg (1992), power is a relationship of dependence, reciprocal, unbalanced and non-transitive. Individuals are part of different groups of actors who pursue interests within the rules of the organization. Individual strategies varied from one actor to another, but their rationality can only be discovered once the rationality of the collective game is well established. Jobard et al. (2020) supported that the “zones of uncertainty” of groups of actors depended essentially on four sources, namely: specific skills, specific contacts with the outside, access to certain information with voluntary retention and mastery of organizational rules. Each group of actors, whatever its hierarchical level, always has a certain margin of freedom, with resources and behaviors that are sometimes uncontrollable by the company and other groups (Pirotton 2009). The control of these zones of uncertainty necessarily involved the possible games between actors. It is to reduce the zone of uncertainty of the actors that Mintzberg (1979) indicated that all organizations defined their structure through the means used for the distribution and coordination of tasks. The author then approached the analysis of the processes of distribution and management of the power of employees, from the strategic summit to unqualified personnel, based on authority, corporate culture, competence and their interweaving sometimes leading to situations of domination. After following the path of power, he finally focused on examining how the organization integrates multiple objectives, or conflicting pressures in the service of a collective project (Mullenbach-Servayre, 2007).

### 2.3 Expected promotion

The labor environment needs individuals who can apply their knowledge in diverse contexts and different technological conditions and to react autonomously. Professional mobility is now a challenge for the company because promoted a flexible workforce that can be dynamic across several jobs in order to adapt to the changes it faces, while retaining increasingly competent elements (Mignonac, 2001). The foundation of human resources management, mobility, in all its forms, increases employees' attachment to the organization

and, above all, that young recruits develop versatility to respond to changes in their careers. In other words, the mission of any human resource (HR) manager including different socio-professional categories is to obtain optimal productivity and quality from their employees.

Opportunities for professional development generally involved a salary increase; professional mobility, and this in different ways: opening up to the international market, changing companies, retraining (Bourgeois et al., 2009). In the professional context, promotion corresponds to the hierarchical elevation of an employee within a company. In most companies, this is materialized by the appointment of employees to another position with greater responsibilities and a better financial situation. Professional promotion, in the sense of intra-generational social promotion, has been a major sociological issue for current SMEs; it has then lost ground to a more global economic issue centered on internal and external mobility.

For about twenty years, mobility linked to unemployment has indeed increased considerably; however, internal mobility has not disappeared, and its share among all mobility has on the contrary remained stable. Recent publications mark a return of issues related to internal markets, and to social promotion within the same company. And to go further, Charest (2020) specified that some SMEs could not resort to mobility, in particular vertical, geographic and functional mobility. Tchokponhoue (2010) confirmed that, even if several forms of mobility can coexist in an organization, several factors determine the existence and predominance of one of the forms. Thus, the size of the SME, the sector of activity and the culture are quite detailed and exhaustive. Since employees have different characteristics, they are all affected differently by sedentarization. Thus, the status of each company defines its functional regime as an indicator of the hierarchical level of the job, of the position occupied by the employee. The level of remuneration corresponds to the situation of the agent in the functional group, as it results from the advancements by choice, pronounced after the opinion of the hierarchy for jobs or positions falling under the scales of managers, workers, and supervisors.

## 2.4 Routine activities

Tasks organization appears to be a very effective technique for increasing employee productivity (Mintzberg, 1982). When successful, it reduced stress and improved performance. It also promoted, at the same time, the reduction of burnout and leads employees to work adequately. For some workers, this is difficult to do because they must first be able to structure their days, organize them and then plan them. Work organization is therefore a way to save time, be more efficient and have more and more availability. It is therefore a question of adopting strategies that can facilitate behavior change at work (Tchokponhoue, 2023).

However, it is impossible to constantly promote employees in the absence of adequate criteria. Thus, as soon as routine sets in, it can be detrimental to the performance of the SME itself. Employee engagement and involvement will become difficult to negotiate over time. The notion of routine where tasks are a simple repetition for employees, no longer requiring reflection, is no longer likely to guarantee employee involvement. Routine, although difficult to define, resulted in weariness in carrying out daily work. It is only necessary in the short term (Noël and Schmidt, 2022). Employees then carry out tasks by respecting the habits and rules laid down, but by removing any questioning about ways to improve productivity, techniques to make these tasks more beneficial. If it sets in, it often produces immobility and a loss of motivation.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Sampling

Both quantitative and qualitative approach were combined to analyse the relationship between sedentarization and skills development. Primary data collection was carried out from September to November 2023 using directive, semi-directive, observational interviews, expert interviews, and the administration of a questionnaire to employees of targeted SMEs. The quantitative data used in this study were collected from 1,321 employees out of the 2,158 targeted. These respondents were selected using the non-probabilistic method, also known as the reasoned choice method, to allow the empirical exploration of the studied phenomenon. The main selection criterion of respondents involved in this

study was their belonging to an SME in the cities of Abomey, Parakou, Abomey-Calavi, Porto-Novo and Cotonou; given the concentration of SMEs in these cities where the phenomenon of sedentarization is observed.

### 3.2. Choice of variables and hypotheses

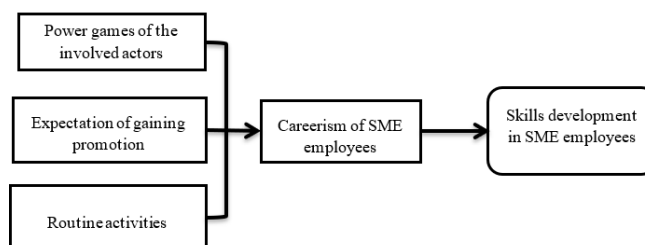
The explained variable of this research was the development of skills. The explanatory variables retained according to the conceptual model designed included the power games of the actors involved and the expectation of gaining promotion and routine activities. They constituted essential components of the model because of their empirical link with the development of skills.

However, the development of a company is based on the dynamism of its human resources function. It must be considered as a strategic function, which dealt with the supervision and management of talents through its various practices (Laouami and Faridi, 2019). The strategy of the actors in each system is the set of behaviours and attitudes adopted by them to preserve their interests (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). As a result, the structure of an SME presents a particular configuration which, sometimes, is a source of contradictory action logics. It is necessary to have a reference of the influence exerted by each actor during decisions of growth, possible mobility and even recruitment of personnel (Giddens, 1987). In such a context, the actor is a strategist who has room for maneuver in the life of the system. He developed and implemented strategic games within the framework of relationships to achieve his objectives. For the first hypothesis, we anticipated that the sedentarization of employees within small and medium-sized enterprises in Benin is explained by the power games of the actors involved.

The individual must be able to achieve and manage a professional situation by drawing on his own resources (LeBoterf, 2006). However, these resources improved over time thanks to the experiences acquired through different mobility. Mputu and Kabongo (2019) believed that one of the main difficulties linked to the success of SMEs was the implementation of an adapted human resources management policy that integrated employee motivation. Promotion therefore appeared as a

motivating factor within SMEs and is envisioned as a source of ardour and endurance for them. Our second hypothesis is as follows: the development of skills of SME employees is dependent on the hope of gaining promotion.

Skills development, since its emergence, has a multitude of definitions. Researchers from different specialties, sociologists, managers, lawyers, psychologists, etc. have given definitions and among the most famous, Zarifian (1988) suggested that the development of skills is accompanied by a crisis of classification systems (which are based on qualification) in that they are not very effective in controlling the anticipated conditions of employment and mobility. In addition, they crystallized rules that are out of step with individual skills mobilization policies and motivation objectives. The skills development system must meet the needs of the company, therefore be perfectly operational and correspond to the expectations of the staff (Eray, 1999). However, settling down does not rhyme with this system that is so much described. Skills management is a strategic issue that is not a matter of modernity for companies, but it is an intangible asset. The latter is the basis of the comparative advantage of firms and comes from several sources (Spender and Marr 2005). Chikh-Bouabghela (2022) confirmed that routines came from repetitive interactions with an individual or a usual environment. They are executed freely, in complete autonomy, because the employee has the execution pattern in memory. Tired of being in the same position, the employee becomes less and less profitable for the company. Under these conditions, routine activities must be perceived as representing an increased risk for SMEs due to the apparent absence of mobility and control. For the third hypothesis, we anticipated that routine activities negatively and significantly influence the development of employee skills within SMEs. Taken together, these three hypotheses gave rise to the conceptual model presented in Fig 1.





**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of the research

### 3.2. Data analysis

SPSS software was used for quantitative data and Alceste software for content analysis. To that a binary logistic regression model was used to test the hypotheses formulated. It allowed to link an event to a linear combination of explanatory variables. For this, the dependent variable chosen in this article was the development of skills. The analytical expression of the model is as follows: Logit:  $p = \exp(\beta X) / (1 + \exp(\beta X))$  where  $\beta X$  represents the linear combination of the independent variables (constant included).  $\beta$  parameters of the model (the coefficients of the linear function) were estimated by maximizing the likelihood function;  $p$  being the probability of occurrence of the development of skills and  $X$  being the explanatory variables.

The results obtained from the different treatments and the responses from HR managers and other respondents made it possible to analyse the relationship between the different variables studied.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Hypothesis tests

The value of the overall Chi-square significance test was 75.214 for the estimated model and was significant at the 1% threshold ( $p < 0.01$ ). This value allowed us to better understand the influence of sedentarization on the development of skills of SME employees. The results illustrated that the three (03) variables were all significant. The variables “*power games of the actors involved*” and “*expectation of gain of promotion*” were significant at the 1% threshold ( $p < 0.01$ ) with negative coefficients. As for the variable, “*routine activities*”, it is significant at the 5% threshold ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, two of the variables retained significantly and negatively influenced the development of skills. The results of the logistic regression reported in Table 1 gave a clear idea of the various influences that the endogenous variables exerted on the explained variable “skills development”.

**Table 1:** Result of the logistic regression

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Wald test	Significance
Power games of the actors involved (lack of control and respect for organizational rules, of certain information with voluntary retention, particular contacts with the outside and lack of particular skills)	-0,606	0,116	27,324	0,000
Expectation of promotion gain (Lack of accountability, empowerment, and less opportunity for continued career mobility)	-0,463	0,138	11,336	0,000
Routine activities (Lack of strategy to facilitate behaviour change, structuring and planning of work to be done, and apparent lack of mobility)	0,077	0,104	0,541	0,046
Constant	0,935	0,061	233,79	0,000

### 4.2. Interpretation of the Results

#### 4.2.1. Power games of actors and skills development within SMEs

The qualitative results confirmed that the games between actors in an SME depended on its size, its structure and even its degree of technology adoption. The constraints leading to a sedentarization of

employees are of several types: number of staff, size of the company, mismatch between available profiles and vacant positions. These parameters, being essentially linked to the actors involved in the operation of SMEs, restricted the possibilities of employee mobility. When employees stayed in a position without professional development, they lost all hope of promotion. Indeed, for most human

resources managers, the sedentarization of employees leads to a stagnation of skills due to the absence of a mobility policy. For some, the *"stability of employees is likely to lead to a deterioration in the clear desire to work"*. The link between skills development and the efficiency of small and medium-sized enterprises was therefore disrupted by the sedentarization of employees. The results showed that 88% of respondents were ready to seize an opportunity and leave their position or even the current company for reasons of sedentarization. Thus, the company would be deprived of its staff whose employability was high. The value of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was 0.74 and higher than the reference of 0.70 and the logistic regression presented a coefficient of -0.606 which is less than zero. This variable therefore significantly and negatively influenced the development of skills. Sedentarization should be the prerogative of employees whose profession does not require frequent mobility but, this phenomenon extends to all positions and is plaguing the development of SMEs.

#### 4.2.2. Expectation of gaining promotion and development of employee skills

The absence of promotion promoted the retention of employees in their position over a long period thus precluding the development of their skills, leading to demotivation that, in turn, slowed down their performance. *"Despite our efforts, there is never any promotion; besides, we no longer hope for anything and now we only intend to make a little effort"*. Skills development referred to management based on behaviours but is especially more focused on the possibilities of employee mobility following assignments *"all things considered, we are all aware that we will end up here"*. The quality of human resources management within SMEs was observed and analysed through the effects resulting from the decisions made by managers and departments in charge of career management policies for employees. Several elements explained why SMEs changed and evolved. They must therefore equip themselves with new tools that can lead to the search for appropriate means for the continued motivation of their employees. This was confirmed by 72% of respondents who wanted to have transfers to improve their skills and 74% wanted to end the routine. The results also illustrated that the absence of promotion significantly and negatively influenced

the skills development of SME employees.

#### 4.2.3. Routine activities and skills development in SMEs:

The search for profitability generally forced managers to limit versatility in favour of the specialization of certain employees. The respondents and managers interviewed recognized that the commitment of employees to the cause of the company was more remarkable from their first years of service *"the commitment to work of our employees and the improvement of their skills was more remarkable only in the first years since promotions were rare and were sometimes sources of conflict"*. Thus, managers believed that there was a relationship between employee mobility and the efficiency of organizations. The routine developed in the execution of their activities following the establishment of sedentarization practices represented reasons that did not allow employees to acquire new skills. Thus, some employees felt obliged to resign and embark on a dynamic of searching for a better professional opportunity. Following the analysis of the quantitative results, the routine activities variable presented a valid internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient equal to 0.73 greater than 0.70). It was significant and positively influenced the development of skills of employees of SMEs at the threshold of 5%.

## 5. Discussion

This study established the link between sedentarization and the development of skills of employees of SMEs in Benin. It should be noted that the development of skills in a company was based on the dynamism of its human resources function. It is considered a strategic function, which deals with the supervision and management of human potential through its various practices (Laouami and Faridi, 2019). However, skills development referred to the training and development of employees through a system providing the transition from one position to another, from one job to another with a view to accumulating and capitalizing on experiences.

However, the observation was that SMEs had trouble in implementing a mobility policy that ensured that employees achieve this objective to avoid routine in the execution of their tasks. The establishment of an adequate professional development framework to eradicate sedentary practices is what emerged from

the results and that corroborated those of Boyer (2004) for whom, it is appropriate to permanently place any reflection on the content of individual jobs in a retrospective and prospective dimension. Employees usually think that it is necessary to have a good relationship with the hierarchy before expecting any mobility. The absence of the latter in favour of sedentary work therefore negatively influenced the continuous development of skills (Vyshnyk and Pinchuk, 2023). Managers also block any possibilities for employees to change positions and prefer to keep their employees in the same position for a long time to avoid not only breaking the group dynamic but also sending them to retirement a little earlier. Thus, since the sedentary work of employees is not a source of capitalization of skills to be valued, it has many aspects such as the absence of change of activity, profession, job and does not ensure advancement in level. The relationship between skills development and the efficiency of SMEs is therefore disrupted by the sedentarization of employees. Our results confirmed that 88% of employees surveyed are ready to seize opportunities to leave their position in order to limit the often-harmful effects of sedentarization. Thus, the phenomenon is likely to deprive the company of its staff whose employability is quite high. The option for some companies may be to favour in these conditions the use of the Noria effect which is a measure that aims to save money for the company when replacing a former employee with new blood at low cost. These companies did so by directly or indirectly bearing the risk of the Noria effect which did not consider the differences in experience or productivity between incoming and outgoing employees. This decision coming from the company's stakeholders significantly and negatively influenced the development of skills. Sedentarization should therefore be the prerogative of employees whose profession does not require frequent mobility, but this phenomenon extends to all positions and is undermining the performance of SMEs due to the lack of a policy for developing employee skills.

Our results also revealed that even though companies today need individuals who are able to use their expertise in diverse contexts and different technological conditions and to react autonomously, SME managers preferred versatile employees to whom they can assign several tasks to minimize their salary costs. Sedentarization affected, through this game, the overall performance of the company. The

longer employees and management stay in their position, the more they lose all hope of promotion. This situation had multiple consequences: increased proximity between employees and management; increased lateness and absenteeism. Skills development therefore referred to management based on behaviours but is especially more focused on the possibilities of movement of employees. Thus, the observation is that the practice of sedentarization is now a challenge for companies because it does not promote a flexible workforce that can be mobilized across multiple jobs. These results confirm those of Tchokponhoué (2010) for whom professional mobility allowed employees to adapt to the developments and dynamism of their company. In other words, the mission of any HR manager including different socio-professional categories is to obtain optimal productivity from their employees in the service of the overall performance of the company. In addition, it is important to determine and put in place conditions to facilitate the promotion of employees. It is therefore necessary to advise and guide employees of SMEs in the choices to be made for the development of their career so that they have a very good knowledge of the organization and its functioning. This desperate hope of any promotion leads to the demotivation of employees (Amziane and Bouaissi, 2022). This causes a stagnation of skills due to sedentarization which ends up leading to a drop in their performance given the lack of involvement and rigor in control. In this diagnostic logic, Tchokponhoué (2021) reinforced the fact that the organization and management of mobility are particularly important issues for companies, since it helps to counteract the development of routine, which is a brake on the development of skills. However, it is impossible to constantly promote employees if the size and structure of the SME did not allow it. In this case, a routine will set in at a given moment and may seem detrimental to both the performance of the SME and the commitment and involvement of employees. The direct consequence of this phenomenon is inaction, loss of motivation and early retirement. Mobility therefore remains a powerful motivation and learning tool that banishes any routine from the company. Just like Frimousse and Peretti (2021); Tchokponhoué, (2021) believed that employee motivation must be a central concern in business management. Thus, in the event of an almost total absence of promotion, employees become bored due to the sedentary lifestyle and may

resign if their employability is high.

Finally, the increased search for profitability by company managers forced them to limit the budget allocated to salary costs, employee training and monitoring their career in the company. This result corroborated that of Delpech (2017) who reported that personnel costs generally represent a significant part of all the costs of the structures. The absence of very clear and binding texts on salary scales in line with the profiles of employees in SMEs reinforces each company in defining its own salary policy. Thus, this room for manoeuvre allowed some managers to opt for a deliberately unequal salary policy, which they consider fairer because they pay a relatively low fixed salary in line with the collective agreement and define a variable and individualized bonus system based on negotiable criteria (Trbelsi, and Fhima, 2023). It is therefore up to the human resources manager, beyond budgetary constraints, to define the policies which would allow the company to remain competitive while facilitating the development of employee skills through promotions and transfers.

## Conclusion

The objective of this article was to analyse the link between decentralization and the development of skills of employees of SMEs in Benin. The results of this research suggested that the sedentarization of employees in SMEs was explained by the three exogenous variables through respectively the endogenous variables which were: power games of the actors involved (absence of mastery and respect of organizational rules, of certain information with voluntary retention, particular contacts with the outside and the lack of particular skills); hope of gaining promotion (absence of accountability, empowerment and the least opportunity for continued professional mobility) and routine activities (absence of strategy facilitating behaviour change, structuring and planning of work to be done and the apparent absence of mobility).

To facilitate the development of employee skills and ensure company performance, managers must ensure the implementation of policies preventing the proliferation of sedentary practices which, in fact, constitute a brake on overall performance which is the purpose of any company. Human resources managers of SMEs must communicate more on the

virtues and the need for change and progression in scale which are necessary for the performance of the company to create the conditions for individual choice that is considered, appropriate and no longer just undergone.

It is important to emphasize that, on a theoretical level, this work adds to the various works already carried out in the field of human resources. More specifically, the managerial implication suggested that the absence of a strategy facilitating behaviour change, the structuring and planning of work to be done and the apparent absence of mobility promoted the practice of sedentarization. It is also motivated by the absence of mastery and respect for organizational rules, certain information with voluntary retention, particular contacts with the outside and the lack of specific skills. It consists of ensuring the evolution of an entrepreneurial configuration towards a mechanistic structure by facilitating the transition from arbitrary manager to an objectifying HRM model. Finally, this research showcased a clear disadvantage in employees' sedentarization as the practice is likely to drown out the employability capacities as well as the development at work of the latter

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