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Challenges and main reasons for employee departures from SMEs: a case study of a Moroccan SME

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Abstract:

In the field of HR Management, the employee turnover rate is widely recognized as a key performance indicator. The metric quantifies the number of employees who depart from and subsequently join a company within a given period. If the rate is high, the company is operating at a loss. Conversely, a relatively low rate can be indicative of low employee turnover, which can be beneficial for a company. The concept of employee retention, which is defined as the number of employees retained by a company during a given year, is generally opposed to the concept of employee turnover. While initially within the purview of human resources, the importance of employee retention has grown significantly for business leaders, particularly within the context of SMEs. The primary focus of this research is on internal company dysfunctions. One case study is presented, in a Moroccan context where small and medium-sized enterprises play a predominant role.

The SME studies have a problem of employee retention. We examine the employer-employee relationship to identify the deficiencies that result in frequent employee departures. Data is collected through observation and interviews. Our analysis indicates that the management style employed by the employer, particularly the social dynamics within the company, plays a pivotal role in employee retention. The proposal includes a focus on socio-economic approach to management as a potential solution.

Keywords: Morocco, socio-economic approach to management, employee turnover, SMEs, employee retention, deficiencies

JEL Classification: M12

Paper type: Empirical research

Résumé :

En GRH, il existe un indicateur des plus connus qui est le taux de rotation du personnel. Il évalue le nombre de départ et des arrivées des employés au sein d’une entreprise pendant une année. Si son niveau est élevé, l’entreprise est dans le rouge. En revanche, un niveau relativement bas indique une faible rotation du personnel, ce qui peut être bon pour une entreprise. Il est généralement en opposition avec le concept de fidélisation du personnel qui définit le nombre d’employés gardé par une entreprise pendant une année. Quoiqu’au départ cantonné à la RH, la rétention des salariés est devenue primordial pour les dirigeants d’entreprise surtout pour les PME. Cette recherche s’intéresse aux dysfonctionnements internes en entreprise. C’est un cas d’étude qui est mis de l’avant, dans un contexte marocain où la petite et moyenne entreprise a une place prépondérante.

La PME étudiée a un problème, celui de la rétention des salariés. Nous étudions ce problème en nous intéressant à la relation employeur - employés afin de déceler les manquements qui conduisent aux fréquents départs des salariés. Le recueil des données est fait par le moyen de l’observation et des entretiens. Nous sommes arrivés à la conclusion que la gestion des employés par l’employeur, notamment les relations sociales qu’ils entretiennent au sein de l’entreprise sont celles qui poussent les salariés à quitter l’entreprise étudiée. Le management socio-économique est proposé comme une piste de solutions.

Mots clés : Maroc, management socio-économique, rotation du personnel, rétention des salariés, PME, fidélisation du personnel, dysfonctionnements.

Classification JEL : M12

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1. Introduction

In Morocco, as in many countries (such as France), the number of companies in default is steadily increasing. By default, we mean the inability of a company to pay its operating expenses and loans (Meynet, 2021). The French government handles approximately 50,000 business failures per year (Meynet, 2021). According to the official figures from the *Observatoire marocain de la très petite, et moyenne entreprise* (OMTPME), this number in Morocco is approximately 11,000 (Observatoire marocain de la très petite, et moyenne entreprise, 2024). These failures, which are due to various problems within companies, could be resolved if a few essential principles were applied. These principles are, for the most part, ignored. In the current era, marked by the escalating challenges posed by environmental issues and the mounting emphasis on corporate social responsibility, the implementation of such principles is imperative. However, the gap between the business world and the world of academic research in several countries has not yet been bridged. Consequently, many companies are experiencing unprecedented levels of chaos, and several business leaders are declaring themselves insolvent.

Of these companies, large companies are the least represented. Their absence is justified by the fact that they have a better overview of the market (due to their years of experience) (Klimas, Czakon, Kraus, Kailer, & Maalaoui, 2021). In fact, they can easily detect external anomalies that are approaching, as well as internal ones.

In contrast to large corporations, SMEs are considered to be the most susceptible to bankruptcy. Due to their diminutive stature, they appear to encounter struggles in distinguishing themselves. In their pursuit of enhanced profitability, SME managers often prioritize the pursuit of profit over human relations. They neglect the subtle yet significant daily actions that define a manager or business leader as a mentor, leader, and visionary. The day-to-day operations of a business can be challenging, and managers must dedicate effort to fostering a positive work environment that motivates their teams to continue working with them.

We believe it is necessary to focus on business failure, and more specifically, that of SMEs. Firstly, because they represent more than 90% of Moroccan businesses and account for a significant portion of private investment (Bentaleb & Louitri, 2011). Secondly, because of the damage caused by business failure. The consequences of this phenomenon extend to various levels, including economic, psychological, personal, and human dimensions. From an economic perspective, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in driving national GDP and fostering job creation, which is a significant benefit for the economy. The failure of such a business inevitably leads to unemployment for several people. This failure also creates a psychological barrier for others who would like to start their own business (Varga, 2021; Nursini, 2020). On a personal and human level, the manager becomes stigmatized and may not take any new steps to start a business (Cardon, Stevens, & Potter, 2011; Heinze, 2013).

Research focusing on business failures initially considered financial ratios to be good predictors of a company's success or failure (Altman, 1968; Beaver, 1966; Wilcox, 1970). This observation persists in contemporary literature on the subject of business failure, with numerous studies referencing financial aspects such as loan refusals. They regard a company's financial health as a crucial factor in avoiding potential collapse (Cultrera & Brédart, 2016). However, it should be noted that these financial predictors have their limitations. The reasons for bankruptcy cannot be restricted to financial causes (Geulen, Greven, Fischer-Kreer, & Brettel, 2024). Additionally, the opaque nature of SMEs and the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about them has led researchers to turn to other types of predictors (Berger & Frame, 2007). It is essential to differentiate between the external factors that contribute to a company's failure and the internal causes.

External causes are defined as factors originating outside the company, including natural disasters or inaccessibility to credit (Bradley & Cowdery, 2004; Carter & Auken, 2006). Internal causes are those that originate within the company itself. These include, among others, organizational inertia, which prevents the company from embracing change; the personality of the leader; and a lack of organizational resources (Kücher, Mayr, Mitter, Duller, & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2020).

Research on business failures in Morocco has historically centered on the financial aspect, with limited attention paid to practical issues beyond the company's financial situation. In this regard, Arzou, Kobiyh, & Mkik (2025) examined the financial instability faced by Moroccan SMEs. They identify the key financial factors that lead to business failure, namely liquidity and profitability. Zizi, Oudgou, & El Moudden (2020) adopt a comparable approach but concentrate on a Moroccan bank and demonstrate a preference for the logistic regression approach.

In the continuation of our examination of Moroccan research literature on business failure, we acknowledge exploratory studies, such as that by El Manzani, Asli, & El Manzani (2018), which base their analysis on existing surveys. They assess public and private documents to identify the factors contributing to the entrepreneurial failure of Moroccan SMEs. Research employing a qualitative-quantitative approach, as exemplified by Yassine Sefiani's (2013) study, has also been conducted. This study focuses on the key factors influencing the success of SMEs. His research is currently focused on the city of Tangier. In his qualitative and quantitative approach, he primarily utilizes the quantitative approach in relation to internal factors and the mixed approach for external factors.

Additionally, there is research that focuses on internal causes. Zizi, Jamali-Alaoui, and El Goumi (2025) emphasize the importance of entrepreneurial behaviors and attitudes in understanding business failure. While their focus remains on Morocco, their approach is also quantitative.

Arzou, Kobiyh, & Mkik (2025) have drawn the attention of Moroccan researchers to the absence of this qualitative aspect of research, which explores causes beyond the financial aspect. To address this need, we concentrate on company management and the methods company leaders use to manage their employees. Instead of approaching the subject from an external vantage point, we advocate an internal perspective, leveraging a qualitative approach to investigate the antecedents to a company's bankruptcy. We propose to utilize Morocco as the context for our study. One case study is proposed to identify precursors that can help prevent company bankruptcies. To that end, we assess the company's management practices. As Gallucci, Santullli, Modina, and Formisano (2023) have noted, this is of the utmost importance, as the survival of the company depends on it.

This research therefore addresses a number of questions, including: To what extent can a manager's personality be a predictor of a company's dysfunction? What impact does it have on employee turnover? What role can a socio-economic approach play in helping managers adapt their management style to embrace a more social approach that is more open to sustainable development objectives?

2. Methodology

2.1. The case study

In the field of management sciences, researchers typically concentrate on either an organization, such as a firm, or a business leader when conducting a case study (Schoch, 2020). Our research aligns with this objective, as it focuses on one company led by one Moroccan leader.

We are conducting an explanatory case study, analyzing the personality or management style of the company by the executive. This study aims to identify warning signs of bankruptcy and

explore how company management can contribute to these signs. We are focusing our attention on employee management and the working environment.
The sample on which our study is based consists of one company located in the Northen region of Morocco. This is a purposive sample, as defined by Palinkas et al. (2015) and Patton (2002), and further elaborated by Schoch (2020). The company was selected for our case study because it permitted us to enter its premises to conduct our Investigation. Furthermore, the prevalent issue of employee retention that the company were facing was a matter of concern that garnered our attention and led us to select this entity, in order for us to analyze and illustrate this phenomenon.
It is important to note that, as this is a case study involving one or more companies, the researcher's presence is required within the organization being studied (Schoch, 2020). Consequently, this research was conducted as part of an apprenticeship contract, where we acquired a trade that enhanced our value to the company while continuing our investigations. This contract included confidentiality clauses to protect the proprietary information of the company being studied. This contract served as the basis for our involvement in the entity under study. We thus adopted a dual role, that of an apprentice who assists the company in achieving its objectives through their presence, and that of a researcher who diligently pursues their research objectives. Our approach aligns with the "researcher-practitioner" model (De Lavergne, 2007; Kohn, 2001).
For data collection, our primary framework was the research questions, by them we were able to constitute our interview guide, helping ourselves with our daily observation and consultation of confidential documents. This approach enabled us to diversify the sources or means of obtaining information (Yin, 2003). To that end, we employed a multifaceted research approach, encompassing document analysis, archival research, participant observation, and interviews, while adhering to the research question framework (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

2.2. Presentation of the case site

2.2.1. Study context: Morocco

Morocco is a country located in the north of the African continent. The country has a population of nearly 37 million (The World Bank Group, 2025). It shares a border with Algeria to the east and is distinguished by its notable advancements in industry, economics, and tourism (Brown, Barbour, Swearingen, Laroui, & Miller, 2025). Indeed, the various plans to diversify and industrialize the Moroccan economy, which have spanned several decades, have borne and continue to bear fruit (Ministère de l'Industrie et du Commerce, 2025). This is illustrated by the development of infrastructures, such as the inauguration of the high-speed rail line to facilitate the movement of people and tourists (increasing their number, Steenbruggen, 2014), as well as the creations of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). The establishment of export free zones is a strategy that aims to promote job creation and increased government revenue. These are merely a few examples that can be cited to briefly present the context of our study.
While foreign companies are indeed present in the country, Moroccan citizens are distinguishing themselves by creating Moroccan companies to develop the "*Made in Morocco*" brand. In this regard, our focus is on one Moroccan company.

2.2.2. Company A

The company studied (hereinafter referred to as "Company A") is located in the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region. It is a company that specializes in the buying and reselling of electronic and industrial components. The company has been in this business for approximately 15 to 20 years and faces various challenges in retaining employees. It boasts a solid customer portfolio. The company manager has cultivated his own corporate culture, the working environment seems first to be conducive to collaboration, and the premises are well-maintained. The company manager possesses the language and academic skills necessary for the role. His aspiration to own a business and be his own boss is not just a personal ambition; it is a dream that he has been working towards daily for nearly 15 to 20 years. The employees tend to be recent graduates with limited understanding of the corporate world and the responsibilities that come with their roles.

2.3. Data collection

In order to collect the data, we proceed with interviews. The interviews were done according to the interview guide we elaborated. With the interview guide in our mind, we were able to not deviate from our main goal, the research questions.
The theme related to our interview guide were specifically chosen in regard with the observations we make, and the consultation of confidential documents. All of this, in perspective with our research questions.
We elaborate three main themes for our interview guide. Firstly, we wanted to emphasize on the working environment, mainly the structure of the company (the case site in itself, the building, and the way things are arranged and organized inside the company). Secondly, we focused on the relationships between the manager and the employees, as we found it important to rely more on the management part of the organization (the style of management). Finally, we talk about employees' opinions of their boss, to find maybe better ways to improve the management style.
The interviews were held with seven people from the company and length at least 20 minutes. The seven employees were chosen because they faced the turnover issue, being engaged to replace the formers employees who just left. And some of them, when we were on the site leave the company in front of us.
In the table below you can find the description of each of them. The time notify in the table corresponds to the average time they spend inside the company before leaving the company. We made an emphasis on the gender as we consider woman and man can think differently on the same issue. But if they come to the same conclusion, we need to pay attention on this.

Table 1 - Characteristics of the employees

Employee number	Job title	Experience inside the company
E01	Salesman	09 months
E02	Saleswoman	03 months
E03	Salesman	1,5 years
E04	Saleswoman	1,5 years
E05	Logistics manager (a woman)	02 years
E06	Accountant (a woman)	02 years
E07	Accountant (a man)	02 years

Source: Authors

2.4. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is considered as a method which is at the foundation of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A method which is adaptable, because of its freedom from theories and epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This adaptability should not be regarded as a way of doing things without guidance or adherence to a set of procedures; more over it should be considered as a way of explaining better the process, and each step taken to arrive at a certain result. In this sense, our approach towards the thematic analysis is more related to this "[…] *essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants* […]" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

Thematic analysis helps us to find, examine, and give information about theme based on a specific set of data. In this sense, it searches for a theme within a data item (the individual part of a case study) by interviews…

A theme catches an essential idea in connection with the data related all of this to the research questions. It is up to the evaluation of the researcher to determine what count as a theme.

We use the data-driven thematic analysis approach where the discovered themes relate specifically to the data. It is called the inductive or bottom – up's way. Giving ourselves to a greater emphasis on the meaning of words and sentences, the so-called "*semantic approach*".

As we collected the data ourselves, we came to the analysis phase with prior knowledge of them, we chose to learn about them to have a better view on the data by reading their content. To conduct the thematic analysis, we have transcribed the data into written form. All the process from transcribing the data to coding the data have been done manually.

3. Results

After conducting a thorough observation, consulting confidential documents and conducting interviews, we arrived at several conclusions. In the case study, the manager has encountered difficulties in retaining employees. This prompted us to concentrate on the collaborative nature of the relationships between the manager and the employees, the working environment, and the employees' perceptions of the company's management. These points will be discussed in more detail below.

3.1. The working environment

It appears that company A has effective structure and work environment. Employees have expressed satisfaction with their working environment, with many highlighting its positive aspects. The working environment here refers to the physical structure of the company. Employees have indicated that they are satisfied with the organizational structure and the quality of the services provided by the company. Employees have noted that new hires are welcomed by management, given a tour of the facility, and introduced to their new colleagues. On this employee number 01 said: "*when I first visited the company's office, I was impressed by the manager of the company, and by the physical structure. The general manager introduced me to my future colleagues, and I was so amazed by this first opportunity after my graduation*".

A key strength of the entity studied is the opportunities it offers to young people. Many individuals capitalize on this opportunity, eager to gain insights into the corporate realm with ambitious expectations. One of the employees was feeling indebted to the general manager for the first opportunity in a company.

However, once they become part of the company's internal structure, where social relationships are formed within the workplace, reality quickly catches up with them.

3.2. The collaborative nature of relationships between the manager and the employees

These social relationships in the workplace (professional relationships), which are primarily due to interactions between employees, influence employees' decisions to stay or leave. There is a distinction between interactions between employees (co-workers) and interactions between employees and the company manager. Our focus is on the latter interaction, as it significantly impacts an employee's decision to remain with the company. Indeed, if an employee has a problem with another employee, they can choose to overlook it, provided they have a good professional relationship with their employer. However, if an employee experiences difficulties with their supervisor, their chances of being successful in the company may be limited, as the employer is likely to perceive their actions unfavorably.

In the present case, the employer recruits many new employees but do not follow up with them, leaving employees to fend for themselves. In this particular case, the employee nº02 was recruited: "*in a time where the company was facing challenges, a lot of workers had leaved. The manager was still asking for performance, but he did not train me for the job, I had no past experience, I was train by my colleague to perform the job*".
Also, there is a lack of recognition for quality work. Conversely, errors are often met with swift criticism from the employer. This behavior often results in the departure of valued employees. Those criticism often in front of all the other colleagues led the employee nº03 to leave the company although she was one of the best in the company at that time.
Additionally, because of the bad temper of the general manager, the woman accountant (Employee nº06) finds better to hide her mistakes. The man accountant (Employee nº07) who replaced her was saying on this subject: "*when I first arrived, she [the woman accountant] was telling me about all the things hidden because she did not want the boss to be mad at her and to start to yell at her*". So, during the time she spent in the company, she hides a lot of mistakes and issues which could have put the manager of the company angry towards her.
Sometimes, due to performance issues, the manager had to dismissed employees. The salesman (E03) has been dismissed by the general manager because he was not performing his job quite well. On this, the manager said: "*He was more trying to seduce the saleswoman instead of performing his job*". In the same perspective of performance, the employee nº1 had to leave the company, because he was pursuing two objectives, finishing his studies and performing his job. He himself was saying: "*I could not follow two objectives at the same time, so I had to renounce to the job*".
When the employer rewards the employees, the reward is financial for everyone. This is beneficial for those who are experiencing financial difficulties at the time, but for others who would like to receive words of encouragement and feel like full members of a new family, it poses a problem.

3.3. Employees' perception of the company's leader

Employees perceive the leader of the company studied as self-centered. The employer making promises to employees that he never keeps. Employee number 01 remembered that: "*the boss used to make a lot of promises to buy little gadget that would help us to better perform our job, but he always lacked to respect his words*". The employer prioritizes profit over people, exploiting the younger generation through unscrupulous means. Employee 05 remembered: "*some colleagues of us had to stay late at night to perform the job, because the boss was saying so. At the end he did not pay the extra-time they had to work*". These factors contribute to a significant degree of frustration and animosity. This phenomenon is particularly evident when the employer attribute the success of one employee's project to another employee, often influenced by managerial familiarity with the latter. This happened to employee 01, who saw the success of the job he was performing attributed to another employee.
These are the reasons that encourage employees to leave the company studied.

4. Discussion

The findings concerning frequent employee turnover and the integration of new employees highlight the financial implications for the company A. In the business world, companies often have significant interests at stake when it comes to employee turnover and the integration of new recruits. When employees depart from companies, they (the managers of these companies) forfeit the human and technical capital developed by their former colleagues. This has been further compounded by the loss of significant projects and customers. This is due to the fact that new employees require time to adjust to the corporate environment and time to transition from the academic world to the professional world, particularly if they are recent graduates. To

summarize this idea of financial implications, the concept of hidden costs developed by Henri Savall are a key factor in this matter. We refer to these costs as "*hidden*" because they are not readily apparent and cannot be found in the company's financial records (Savall & Domeur, 1988; Savall & Cappelletti, 2018; Cappelletti, Voyant, & Savall, 2018). In this sense, a hidden or invisible cost differs from a visible cost. A notable cost is employee salary. Invisible costs include employee turnover, which cannot be quantified, and absenteeism.
A company's internal issues often lead to its downfall, resulting in various hidden costs.
This concept of hidden costs is linked to that of socio-economic approach to management (SEAM), which views human beings as a factor in creating added value for the company (Savall & Zardet, 2020).
By bringing attention to hidden costs, company leaders are presented with a comprehensive view of the internal challenges their company is facing. This view is intended to encourage leaders to consider ways to overcome these issues (Savall, 1979).
Turning to our case, the company presented is experiencing frequent employee turnover, primarily due to the managerial conduct of the respective leader. It is therefore appropriate for the manager to review his actions, whether in terms of motivation, induction, or monitoring of new employees. Our research aligns with that of Ali & Wahabi (1995), who, through a quantitative study of managerial beliefs and values in Morocco, concluded that Moroccan managers exhibit egocentric and manipulative tendencies. At times, they prioritize their own interests and objectives, potentially at the expense of the well-being and professional development of the individuals under their supervision.
This egocentric nature of the manager of our case is not unique to him. Indeed, with the rise of capitalism and the exploitation of man by man, this behavior is becoming more widespread. Hobbes already emphasized in his time that "*man is a wolf to man*" to assert this egocentric nature of the human being (Patou-Mathis, 2013).
Conversely, when discussing employees' perceptions of their employer, the issue of fairness arises, which is linked to motivation (Adams, 1965; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). The notion that all employees should receive the same level of motivation is a problematic one, and it is one that should be revisited. This is particularly relevant given that motivation is a key factor in employee retention (Peretti, 2008; Mirallès, 2007). Additionally, the language used by the employer has been shown to influence employee attendance at work (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). It is important to note that language can be both verbal and nonverbal.
During the time we spent in the company, the manager of the entity studied was often engaged in various administrative tasks and customer/supplier meetings, which limits the time he could potentially dedicate to employee mentoring. This can result in a lack of communication and listening, leading to mistrust on both sides. Delegating certain tasks is a strategic approach to nurturing listening skills and fostering a cohesive team dynamic.
By reviewing his approach to employee management, the business leader will align himself with an important aspect of sustainable development goals (SDGs): the social pillar (social equity). Although these goals are set for nations (macroeconomic scale), they can be reflected in the microeconomic functioning of businesses. The social aspect referenced in the SDGs is applicable at the company level when managers prioritize treating employees with respect and recognize human capital as the primary source of competitive advantage for the organization. This source can be further enriched by incorporating additional elements, such as the use of machinery (Assoumou-Mve Ngonga, Benrrezzouq, & Chraibi, 2024).

5. Conclusion

At the end of our analysis, it should be noted that this study focuses on the challenges and reasons for leaving SMEs, with particular attention to one Moroccan SME. In our study, we focused on SMEs because they contribute significantly to the Moroccan economy. Furthermore, when it comes to business failures, SMEs account for the largest share of business failures.

There are warning signs that indicate when a company is heading for failure and bankruptcy. In our study, we focus on these signs in an intra-organizational context related to employee management.

With the aim of presenting special issue on this phenomenon, we focused on one company located in the Northen region of Morocco. We conducted this research as part of an apprenticeship contract (internship contract), where we learned a trade that helped to enhance our presence in the company while continuing our investigation.

This research addresses a significant gap in the literature on business failures in Morocco by employing a qualitative approach. Conversely, the research underscores the nexus between business failures and the latent costs they engender.

Finally, we highlight some limitations of our research. Indeed, as humans, it is not always easy to dissociate ourselves from the environment being studied. We have endeavored to refrain from expressing any judgmental opinions regarding the case presented, in order to maintain the utmost impartiality and factuality in our description of the facts, statements, or observations that we were able to collect or make. However, it should be noted that our analyses may be subject to bias due to our presence in this company and the relationships we have established with individuals. This prompts us to consider the validity of our results, as previously discussed by Johnson (1997) and Coleman (2022). However, we have endeavored to mitigate these biases by employing the triangulation method to diversify our sources of information (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Patton, 1999). The use of triangulation allows us to increase the validity of our research results (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011).

In order to ensure the long-term viability of this company, it would be advisable for the leader of this company and his employees to collaborate more closely. This collaboration is essential for preventing the company from entering a state of irreversible decline, which can lead to rapid bankruptcy.

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