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The prospective applicability of the strengths-based approach to managing and developing employees in small businesses

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The prospective applicability of the strengths-based approach to managing and developing employees in small businesses

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The prospective applicability of the strengths-based approach to managing and developing employees in small businesses

Abstract

Purpose: The strength-based approach is promulgated as a management practice that improves individual productivity and performance. This study's purpose was to explore the prospective applicability of the strengths-based approach to managing and developing employees in small businesses. The study focuses on four domains of practice: selection, training, performance evaluation, and task assignment.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employed semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to obtain data. The units of analysis were managers and employees of small businesses. Eleven managers and 19 employees were interviewed. Data analysis involved thematic analysis with the Nvivo 12® software program.

Findings: First, the small businesses used a strengths-based approach for employee selection during employees' temporary status of employment and in employee task assignment. However, managers did not employ a strengths-based approach to employee selection during selection interviews, training, or performance evaluations. Second, the managers perceived strengths identification as a difficult task. Based on personal observations, they perceived employees' positive character traits, job-related skills, and work-related efficiency as employee strengths.

Practical implications: This study informs managers about a potential alternative to the traditional weakness-based management practice. The findings and conceptual arguments suggest that a strengths-based approach can provide a cost-effective alternative to the resource-intensive approaches commonly employed to enhance employee productivity and performance.

Originality/value: The study provides the first empirical evidence on the prospective applicability of the strengths-based approach to small businesses and explores conceptually the suitability of the said approach to this context.

Keywords: Strengths-based approach, small businesses, small business management

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Effective executives build on strengths – their own strengths, the strengths of their superiors, colleagues, and subordinates; and on the strength in the situation, that is on what they can do (Drucker, 1988, p. 20).

While there is global recognition that small businesses make an important economic contribution (Muller *et al.*, 2017; SBA Office of Advocacy, 2018), they have higher failure rates compared with medium and large businesses (Baidoun *et al.*, 2018; Ropega, 2011). For example, although ‘survival rate’ is not synonymous with ‘success rate’, Australian small businesses reported a 77% survival rate during the period 2011–2015 whereas medium and large businesses respectively reported 82% and 83% survival rates (Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, 2019). In the United States only about 50% of small businesses survive five years or longer (Small Business Administration, 2019). The European Commission also reported that about 50% of new small businesses in their member states and regions failed during the first five years (European Commission, 2013).

Researchers have examined small business failures and identified several causes (e.g., Nikolic *et al.*, 2019). Poor management practices, such as lack of employee involvement in decisions and ‘firefighting’ operational problems, are frequently cited (Bushe, 2019; Mutandwa *et al.*, 2015). Hence, research designed to understand current management practices and recommend better practices are of timely importance (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020).

A strengths-based approach (SBA) to management is a person-centred approach and represents a paradigm shift from conventional deficit-focused management approaches (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2014). While traditional human resources management (HRM) and development activities focus mostly on repairing employees’ job-related deficits (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016), an SBA emphasises the strengths of employees and development of those strengths (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001). Several large businesses such

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2
3 as Acromas Group, Starbucks UK, Gap Inc. and Standard Chartered Bank have adopted an
4
5 SBA, and their senior leaders have reported associated benefits (Bibb, 2016; Garcea *et al.*,
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7 2014).
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9

10 It has been empirically demonstrated that the SBA has the potential to improve
11
12 employees' wellbeing, motivate them to pursue goals and drive them to achieve those goals
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14 (e.g., Littman-ovadia *et al.*, 2017). However, the studies conducted on an SBA under
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16 occupational settings have been limited to large businesses (van Woerkom and Meyers, 2015).
17
18 Our analysis of literature on small business characteristics (e.g., Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020;
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20 Yew Wong and Aspinwall, 2004; Yusof and Aspinwall, 2000) and conceptual papers on the
21
22 SBA (Coetzer *et al.*, 2014) suggest that adopting an SBA in small businesses has good
23
24 prospects. However, a paucity of literature provides empirical evidence on the use and
25
26 implementation of the SBA in small businesses. Consequently, we designed this study to begin
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28 addressing this limitation of the literature.
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33 The empirical gap aside, we contend that this research trajectory is also intriguing and
34
35 of practical importance. The topic is interesting because it integrates the strengths-based
36
37 literature grounded in positive psychology (Miglianico *et al.*, 2020) with literature on HRM
38
39 practices in small businesses. The research has practical importance because an SBA to
40
41 management is a potentially well-suited and cost-effective developmental approach for
42
43 resource-constrained small businesses (Coetzer *et al.*, 2014). Small business employees
44
45 typically have broadly defined roles that are free of tight, documented job descriptions
46
47 (Anderson and Ullah, 2014; Wallace and Kay, 2009); consequently, managers have substantial
48
49 flexibility when utilising employees' knowledge and skills and can therefore leverage
50
51 employees' strengths (Coetzer *et al.*, 2014).
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56 This study contributes to the literature on the SBA in the small business context by
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58 addressing the research question: Do small businesses use an SBA to manage and develop their
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1
2
3 employees and, if so, how do they implement this approach? To provide sufficient breadth and
4
5 depth of coverage we focused on four domains of human resources (HR) practice: selection,
6
7 training, performance evaluation and task assignment. These practices dominate the strengths
8
9 literature because each practice can be infused with an SBA (Bibb, 2016; van Woerkom *et al.*,
10
11 2020).
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14

15 16 **2. Literature review**

17 18 *2.1 Positive psychology and the strengths perspective*

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20
21 Positive psychology is a domain of knowledge where well-established literature related to the
22
23 strengths perspective can be traced. Proponents of positive psychology emphasise the necessity
24
25 of identifying and fostering the talents of people, as opposed to curing their mental illnesses or
26
27 remedying weaknesses or faults (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 1999a,
28
29 1999b). Linley and Harrington define positive psychology as:
30
31

32
33
34 ... the scientific study of optimal functioning, focusing on aspects of the human
35
36 condition that lead to happiness, fulfilment and flourishing, with core positive
37
38 psychology research topics including happiness, wisdom, creativity, and human
39
40 strengths. (2005, p. 13)

41
42 Martin Seligman is considered the leader of the contemporary movement of positive
43
44 psychology (Linley and Harrington, 2005; Luthans and Youssef, 2007). Seligman's emphasis
45
46 on the positive aspects of human nature led to the emergence of different strengths-based
47
48 practices in both applied and academic domains (Ghielen *et al.*, 2018; Linley *et al.*, 2007) such
49
50 as organisational management (e.g. Brim, 2007; Engelbrecht, 2010), leadership (e.g. He and
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52 Yu, 2020; Welch *et al.*, 2014), service delivery (e.g. Green *et al.*, 2004; Ibrahim *et al.*, 2014),
53
54 policy (e.g. Lewis *et al.*, 2020), coaching (e.g. Madden, 2020), training (e.g. Visser *et al.*, 2017),
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56 education (e.g. McCarthy *et al.*, 2020) and research (e.g. Robinson *et al.*, 2012).
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2.2 Individual strength and strengths-based approach to management

Research in the field of positive psychology has focused on both individual strengths and strengths interventions (Ghielen *et al.*, 2018). In general terms, a ‘strength’ is described as something that a person is innately good at, passionate about and motivated by doing (Bibb, 2016). However, in scholarly literature ‘strengths’ has many definitions. For example, Park *et al.* (2004) described strengths as positive traits reflected in one’s thoughts, perceptions and behaviours, while Linley and Harrington (2006a) defined a strength as “a natural capacity for behaving, thinking, or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes” (p. 39). According to strengths literature ‘strengths-based management’ means the practice of management which involves developing organisational forms that build on employees’ strengths and motivation (Engelbrecht, 2010). Strengths-based employee selection (Bibb, 2016; Garcea *et al.*, 2014), strengths-based employee development activities (Asplund and Blacksmith, 2012, p. 356), strengths-based performance evaluation and strengths-based task assignment (van Woerkom and Meyers, 2015) are examples for commonly used strengths interventions in the field of HRM.

It has been empirically established that strengths deployment can contribute to many positive outcomes for organisations (Ghielen *et al.*, 2018). For example, research in positive psychology conducted in non-work contexts have reported that strengths use positively relates to one’s self-esteem (Wood *et al.*, 2011), psychological well-being (Govindji and Linley, 2007), quality of life (Proctor *et al.*, 2011), life satisfaction (Allan and Duffy, 2014; Douglass and Duffy, 2015) and helps individuals better achieve their goals (Snyder *et al.*, 2002). Research conducted in work contexts has found positive associations between employees’ strengths use and outcomes such as work engagement (Botha and Mostert, 2014), self-rated and manager-rated job performance (van Woerkom, 2016) and work performance (Dubreuil *et al.*, 2014). Recent positive psychology research reported that strengths use positively associates

1
2
3 with employees' authenticity at work (Matsuo, 2020) and both organisational citizenship
4
5 behaviour and proactive behaviour (Belleville *et al.*, 2020). Research conducted on strength-
6
7 based interventions in organisations has found that participating in a strengths intervention
8
9 creates short-term increases in employee positive affect and short- and long-term increases in
10
11 psychological capital (Meyers and van Woerkom, 2016). Such research has also established
12
13 that strength-based interventions help organisations to improve work-related positive
14
15 outcomes, such as employee satisfaction with career opportunities and overall job satisfaction,
16
17 and reduces negative outcomes, such as work stress and turnover intentions (Heintz and Ruch,
18
19 2020).
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23 24 25 *2.3 HRM in small business*

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27
28 It is well-established that HRM in small businesses is characterised by informality (Agarwal
29
30 and Jha, 2015; Krishnan and Scullion, 2017). Informality means that small businesses tend to
31
32 adopt a narrow range of unsophisticated and undocumented HR practices (Cardon and Stevens,
33
34 2004), which may lead to coercive supervision, lack of concern for workplace laws and
35
36 preferential treatment of some employees (Rainnie, 1989). However, studies demonstrate that
37
38 small business employees tend to report more positive work-related attitudes than do their
39
40 larger business counterparts (Forth *et al.*, 2006; Tsai *et al.*, 2007), which have been attributed
41
42 to personal and frequent interaction between employer and employee, a focus on team spirit
43
44 and substantial scope for autonomous working (Bryson and White, 2019).
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50 Selection is typically described as the process of choosing from a group of applicants
51
52 the best qualified person after assessment against job-related selection criteria such as
53
54 qualifications and experience (Adjei-Bamfo *et al.*, 2019; Gamage, 2014). However, an SBA to
55
56 selection explores what applicants naturally excel at, enjoy doing and are energised by (Bibb,
57
58 2016). The employee selection decision is one of the most crucial decisions small business
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1
2
3 managers make because hiring the ‘right’ employees who fit the job is fundamental for the
4
5 success of any small business (Yu-Ting, 2016). The most common selection tool used in small
6
7 businesses is the unstructured interview conducted by managers (Wyatt *et al.*, 2010). Small
8
9 business managers tend to have limited interview skills (Barber *et al.*, 1999) and they use
10
11 intuition to determine whether a potential employee would suit the organisation’s culture
12
13 (Carroll *et al.*, 1999).
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16
17 Training refers to “a planned effort to facilitate employees’ learning of job-related
18
19 competencies” (Noe, 2017, p. 525) and encompasses an array of developmental interventions,
20
21 including classroom-based training and structured on-the-job training. An SBA approach to
22
23 training focuses on developing an individuals’ innate strengths rather than employing training
24
25 mainly to address individuals’ weaknesses (Asplund and Blacksmith, 2012). Overall, small
26
27 business employees receive less formal training than do employees in large businesses (Urban,
28
29 2020). This is because barriers to formal training generally do not occur in large businesses
30
31 (Bai *et al.*, 2017). Such barriers often relate to resource constraints, such as lack of finances to
32
33 fund participation in training and lack of personnel to provide cover for employees who attend
34
35 training (Billett *et al.*, 2015). When employees do attend formal training, it is typically provided
36
37 at no or low cost by suppliers, trade associations and the like (Cardon and Valentin, 2017).
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42
43 Giving performance feedback is a critical component of performance appraisals, and
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45 an SBA to performance feedback focuses on employee affirmation and encouragement as
46
47 opposed to commentary on employees’ deficiencies (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; Bouskila-Yam and
48
49 Kluger, 2011). The use of formal performance appraisal systems is uncommon in small
50
51 businesses (Lai *et al.*, 2017). The owner often works alongside their employees, thereby
52
53 affording frequent opportunities for employer–employee interaction. Therefore, performance
54
55 appraisal in small businesses is likely to be informal and ongoing (Bryson and White, 2019).
56
57 Consequently, employee performance can be easily observed, and timely feedback provided.
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Moreover, physical proximity while working provides opportunities for owners to closely observe employee performance.

Task assignment refers to a manager assigning to employees tasks that fall within their official duties or responsibilities (Sias and Duncan, 2019). Managers that employ an SBA consider employees' strengths when making task assignments (van Woerkom and Meyers, 2015). In many small businesses, employees are expected to be multiskilled, because the manager is reliant upon just a few personnel to complete multiple work activities (Wallace and Kay, 2009). Therefore, employees usually have broad, flexible work roles, which may also stem from small businesses being informal workplaces with few documented work practices (e.g., job descriptions). Further, small business employees generally report higher levels of job autonomy than do their counterparts in large businesses (Forth *et al.*, 2006).

Ideally, any proposed initiative to enhance these four HR practices should not be resource intensive, nor impinge upon the informality valued within small businesses (Bryson and White, 2019). In this regard, it seems logical to consider how the SBA might enhance the practices by leveraging employees' strengths and encouraging them to focus on areas of work in which they excel. However, to our knowledge, no empirical studies have explored the prospective applicability of an SBA in the four domains of practice outlined above. Accordingly, a study of an exploratory, descriptive nature was considered appropriate to develop a provisional theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of interest and build a foundation for future research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

2.4 Suitability of the strengths-based approach for small businesses

To improve understanding as to the suitability of the SBA for managing and developing employees in small businesses, we reviewed literature and found nine small business characteristics that might affect the adoption of an SBA. We categorised these characteristics

1
2
3 into five main groups: 1) ownership and management; 2) structure; 3) culture, social proximity,
4 and nature of jobs; 4) resources; and 5) predominance of informality. Table I presents these
5 characteristics and their possible effects on the adoption of an SBA.
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Insert Table I Here

Most characteristics are likely to facilitate the adoption of an SBA. However, having critically analysed the literature, we noted that some characteristics could have negative effects on the adoption of an SBA. For example, although the centralised decision-making authority of owner-managers enables them to provide leadership for change initiatives, if they underestimate the potential benefits of employing an SBA, this might obstruct change. Similarly, other factors such as limited HR and limited financial resources could also hinder the adoption of an SBA.

Drawing on ability, motivation and opportunity (AMO) theory, we also contend that an SBA to managing and developing small business employees is likely to have positive effects on three key variables of employee performance. According to AMO theory, an employee's performance is a function of his or her ability (A), motivation (M) and opportunity to perform (O) in each context (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000). An SBA should positively influence employee *ability* and performance. From a strengths perspective, the best opportunity for individual development is to invest in individuals' strengths rather than seek to minimise their weaknesses (Miglianico *et al.*, 2020). The approach should also positively influence employee *motivation* because a strength is "a distinctive characteristic that energises and motivates people to develop and function optimally" (Forest *et al.*, 2012, p. 1,234). Further, when jobs are redesigned

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2
3 around employees' strengths, this creates *opportunities* for them to perform by improving
4 person–job fit (Coetzer *et al.*, 2014).
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7
8 AMO theory guides managers to adopt practices that positively influence each variable
9 of performance (Boxall and Purcell, 2016). In AMO theory-based HRM research, practices
10 such as selection (Fabi *et al.*, 2014; Mostafa and Gould-Williams, 2014) and training and
11 development (Garmendia *et al.*, 2020; Mostafa and Gould-Williams, 2014) have been regarded
12 as ability-enhancing practices. Practices such as performance appraisal (Fabi *et al.*, 2014),
13 performance-related pay (Mostafa and Gould-Williams, 2014) and work methods autonomy
14 (Garmendia *et al.*, 2020) have been considered as motivation-enhancing practices.
15 Participation in decision making (Garmendia *et al.*, 2020), self-managed teams, flexible job
16 design (Jiang *et al.*, 2012) and empowerment (Gahlawat and Kundu, 2018) are examples of
17 practices that have been examined as opportunity-enhancing practices.
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31 Based on prior conceptual arguments concerning the SBA's suitability for small
32 businesses (Coetzer *et al.*, 2014) and our review of small business characteristics, we concluded
33 that the SBA was suitable for managing employees. We then developed a conceptual
34 framework that also incorporates AMO theory to guide our study (Figure 1).
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Insert Figure 1 Here

3. Method

3.1 Research participants

The target population was people working in small businesses in Western Australia. To delimit the sample, we adopted the Australian Bureau of Statistics' definition of small business: an actively trading business with 0–19 employees, for which the business has an Australian Business Number and remits in respect of Goods and Services Tax (Clark *et al.*, 2011).

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2
3 However, we excluded micro businesses (0–4 employees) because of their high rate of business
4 exits (ASBFEO, 2019). Hence, managers and employees from businesses with 5–19 employees
5
6 were the target population.
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8
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10 The sample was selected using a combination of purposive, convenience and snowball
11 sampling (Kumar, 2019). Using purposive sampling, we selected businesses in the West
12 Australian motor vehicle industry as the sampling frame. This selection was based on our
13 knowledge and understanding of the propensity of the SBA to be used by these businesses in
14 their daily management practices (Berg and Lune, 2012). It is assumed that the companies that
15 sell higher value products and operate at the higher end of the market such as the motor vehicle
16 industry are more concerned about employee skills utilisation (Skills Australia, 2012). Hence,
17 the participants were selected from different business categories of the motor vehicle industry.
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28 Using convenience sampling, we recruited participants via personal networks and
29 extended this using the snowball technique. We asked participating managers and employees
30 to recommend other potential participants. Thirty participants from 17 businesses participated
31 in the study. Table II and Table III provide profiles of manager and employee participants. The
32 data relating to ‘period of involvement in current business’ (see Table II) indicate that the
33 manager participants were highly experienced in managing small businesses.
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52 *3.2 Data collection*

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55 Data collection was approved by the university Human Research Ethics Committee. Primary
56 data comprised the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of managers and employees (Kumar,
57 2019), which were collected during semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Potential
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3 participants were informed that participation was voluntary, entailing no negative
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5 consequences if they decided to withdraw. The interviews were conducted over a two-week
6
7 period, with manager and employee interviews intermixed to suit the interviewees. Some
8
9 interviews were conducted outside working hours and workplaces. Two separate sets of
10
11 interview questions were developed, one for managers and one for employees. The questions
12
13 were developed deductively based on the conceptual framework. A sample question used in
14
15 interviews with managers is: *How do you select new employees for your organisation and what*
16
17 *are the factors that you focus on during selection?* A sample question used in interviews with
18
19 employees is: *What were the factors that the manager focused on when he/she selected you*
20
21 *for this organisation?* A template assisted in the collection of demographic information. Each
22
23 interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Apart from the set questions, other questions
24
25 arising from the dialogue were asked to obtain the maximum range of data (Qu and Dumay,
26
27 2011). The interviews were audio recorded with permission from each interviewee (Flick,
28
29 2017) and were then transcribed for data analysis. The names of participants were removed
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31 from the transcripts to ensure anonymity. Throughout the study we ensured that the process
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33 aligned with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.
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41 *3.3 Data analysis*

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43 Data collected using the demographic information sheet were summarised using Microsoft
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45 Excel. The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is
46
47 defined as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”
48
49 (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79) and provides a flexible method to interpret data. The ‘six
50
51 phases of thematic analyses’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017) was employed,
52
53 using NVivo 12® software (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011). The six phases were structured
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55 on an initial coding of the data through to a progressive identification and refinement of themes.
56
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60 The initial codes were generated deductively based on the conceptual framework, relevant

1
2
3 literature, and the research question. Data analysis involved a constant moving back and forth
4
5 between the phases, including identifying initial codes, searching for themes, and refining
6
7 themes. Interview data of the two categories of participants were separately analysed. We then
8
9 drew on the relevant literature and the research question to form our interpretation based on
10
11 the data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).
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15 16 **4. Findings**

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18 To enhance the trustworthiness of the research and to offer a balanced interpretation of the
19
20 phenomenon, we generated findings with respect to both managers' and employees'
21
22 perspectives. In the subsections that follow we present our findings from both employees' and
23
24 managers' perspectives, organised according to the elements of AMO theory. The themes are
25
26 illustrated using quotations from the participants; some quotations are integrated into the text
27
28 and some are in Table IV and Table V.
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33 34 *4.1 Ability-enhancing practices*

35
36 To understand whether the small businesses employed an SBA to employee selection, the
37
38 employees were asked to describe their views on the selection criteria that managers
39
40 emphasised in employee selection. Their responses revealed that managers did not seek to
41
42 identify prospective employees' strengths during interviews but tended to focus on more easily
43
44 discernible selection criteria. The analysis of transcripts revealed that these selection criteria
45
46 clustered around three themes: (1) job-related experience and qualifications, (2) appearance
47
48 and behaviours, and (3) the attitudes of candidates. For example, BE1 said, "*Qualifications and*
49
50 *experience helped me to get employed*" and FE1 commented, "*Managers look at appearance*
51
52 *and behaviour, things like neatness, social behaviour and personality*".
53
54
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57
58 During the manager interviews, we asked if they considered candidates' strengths in
59
60 employee selection interviews. Nine of the 11 managers stated they considered candidates'

1
2
3 strengths at the time of employee selection. Then we invited the managers to elaborate their
4
5 views on the criteria that they used. Although the managers stated that they considered
6
7 candidates' strengths during the selection interviews, our analysis of transcripts found that the
8
9 managers tended to focus on more observable criteria, and the criteria that they considered
10
11 were similar to those mentioned by the employees: (1) job-related experience and
12
13 qualifications, (2) appearance and behaviours, and (3) the attitudes of candidates. The
14
15 managers' responses further revealed that they perceived strengths identification to be difficult
16
17 and regarded the brevity of the interview as a key reason for this difficulty: "*Looking at a*
18
19 *person, talking to him, you can make some judgement on things he would be able to do, but it's*
20
21 *difficult to identify any strength during that short time*" (CM). Managers cited lack of reliable
22
23 information obtained during interviews as another reason they regarded strengths identification
24
25 a difficult task. For example, CM added,
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31
32 *It's easy to ask, 'What strengths do you have?'. You'll get 25 strengths. Ask about*
33
34 *weaknesses, you will get only two. People tend to highlight their positive things, they*
35
36 *even will overstate. But, they won't reveal what they are weak at. So how can we*
37
38 *make decisions based on what they say?*

39
40 According to Linley and Harrington (2006a, 2006b), people are typically unaware of their own
41
42 strengths, and managers viewed this as another factor hindering strengths identification:

43
44 *Some people have a hard time expressing what they are and aren't capable of doing.*
45
46 *They themselves don't know their positive and negative qualities. So, it takes a little*
47
48 *while for us to identify what they can and can't do. Sometimes it takes weeks or*
49
50 *months (CM).*

51
52 Consequently, offering a period of temporary employment status was the approach some
53
54 managers used to identify prospective employees' strengths for employee selection. The
55
56 managers offered temporary employment to selected candidates before their job offers were
57
58 confirmed because they believed that the interviews were inadequate for proper strengths
59
60 identification. To illustrate, HM said, "*I can identify their strengths once they get on with the*
job. There's only one way to do that. I give them three months to try, then I identify the strengths

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2
3 *looking at the way they work” and GM commented, “I might feel that they fit into my team at*
4
5 *the initial interview. But I take two months to decide on their ability, to decide whether they*
6
7 *can fit into the team or whether they can move on”.*
8
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10
11 Therefore, analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that although managers did not
12
13 employ an SBA to employee selection during the selection interviews, the practices managers
14
15 used to select employees during the employees’ period of temporary employment did embody
16
17 elements of an SBA to management.
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20
21 To explore whether a strengths-based approach was being used in employee training,
22
23 the employees were asked to elaborate their views on the approaches that were used for training
24
25 and whether employees’ strengths were being considered in such training. Analysis of the
26
27 interviews found that employees’ views on the different training methods used clustered around
28
29 three themes: (1) manager-conducted personalised coaching, (2) manager-encouraged peer
30
31 coaching and (3) employee access to technical update training. The analysis further revealed
32
33 that, in the opinion of employees, none of the managers employed an SBA; instead they focused
34
35 on ‘fixing’ employee weaknesses through training. To illustrate, OE2 said, *“The manager spots*
36
37 *our weaknesses as we work. Whenever he finds any weakness, he tries to correct us. We learn*
38
39 *from him”.*
40
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42

43
44 The analysis of manager interviews suggests that none of the managers employed an
45
46 SBA to employee training. Responses from all managers indicated that managerial attention
47
48 was more often focused on employees’ weaknesses and that training was used to ‘fix’ those
49
50 weaknesses. The findings related to the approaches managers used to rectify employees’
51
52 weaknesses were consistent with the findings of the employee interviews, and clustered around
53
54 three themes: (1) manager-conducted personalised coaching, (2) manager-encouraged peer
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56 coaching and (3) employee access to technical update training. As illustrations of these
57
58 approaches, GM said, *“Being a small workshop, I can’t afford to have the guys take a long time*
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3 *to do jobs. If I see him struggling or lacking skill, I straight away teach him to do that job” and*
4
5 BM commented, *“I try to mix employees around so that everyone gets a chance to learn about*
6
7 *different things from each other”.*
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10 11 *4.2 Motivation-enhancing practices* 12

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14 We invited employees to elaborate on the performance appraisal methods, formal or informal,
15
16 that managers used. In response, all employees declared there were no formal methods
17
18 employed for performance evaluation. Moreover, 12 of 19 employees stated that managers
19
20 used informal methods to assess employee performance. To understand whether the managers
21
22 employed an SBA to evaluate employee performance, the 12 employee participants were then
23
24 asked to elaborate their views on the criteria that the managers used for employee evaluation
25
26 purposes. Analysis of their responses generated two themes: managers focus on (1) quantity
27
28 and quality of work, and (2) employee weaknesses. To illustrate, NE1 said, *“The manager*
29
30 *evaluates us on our speed and quality of work, and that determines the hourly rate we get. I*
31
32 *believe that he looks at our speed more than anything”* and DE1 commented, *“They don’t work*
33
34 *on any strength. There’s not anything about our strengths in that evaluation. It’s more on our*
35
36 *negatives”.*
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41 To understand whether employees’ strengths were considered in informal employee
42
43 performance evaluations, managers were asked to elaborate on their practice and evaluation
44
45 criteria. Our analysis of the transcripts revealed that the aspects the managers cited related to
46
47 quantity and quality aspects of work-related performance, rather than to employees’ strengths.
48
49 To illustrate, KM said, *“I work with employees. So, I know how capable they are and what*
50
51 *weaknesses they have. Depending on their speed and the quantity of work, I make decisions*
52
53 *when I give them a pay rise, or a bonus”* and HM commented, *“The evaluation is generally an*
54
55 *average over the whole year. How they have performed in the workshop, concerns on work*
56
57 *quality and all that sort of stuff are taken into account”.*
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3 Overall, our findings revealed that managers were more likely to recognise the quantity
4 and quality aspects of employees' work-related performance than their strengths, suggesting
5 that the actual practice of employee evaluation was more like that of conventional management.
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10 11 4.3 Opportunity-enhancing practices 12

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14 The employees were asked to elaborate their views on the factors that managers considered
15 when they assigned tasks to employees. From the employees' perspectives, managers tended
16 to consider factors that clustered around three themes during task assignment: (1) managers'
17 focus on certain positive character traits, (2) managers' focus on employees' skills and (3)
18 managers' need to balance workload. To illustrate the focus on certain positive character traits
19 such as courtesy, honesty and reliability, EE1 said, *"For some jobs, we must talk with*
20 *customers; we should have a certain tone for that. I have noticed that the manager restricts*
21 *those jobs to certain people, based on his knowledge about how some people talk to customers"*.
22
23 BE1 commented on the skills focus as follows, *"If I can do a certain job very well and if the*
24 *manager knows that I have the skills and I can do that job well, then he is most likely to give*
25 *that job to me"*.
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40 During the manager interviews we found the majority of managers had similar views
41 to the employees in this regard. Nine of the 11 managers asserted that they considered
42 employees' strengths and cited several factors that were considered before assigning a task.
43
44 Our analysis of transcripts revealed that the factors the managers cited were related to two of
45 the three themes mentioned above: (1) positive character traits and (2) employees' skills. To
46 illustrate the focus on positive character traits of employees, KM said, *"I have one employee*
47 *who works well, even when I am not here. Whenever I want to rest, or go purchasing or perform*
48 *other work, I hand over responsibilities to him. I have recognised his special qualities; honesty*
49 *and reliability"*. We also found that the managers tended to make purposive selections among
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3 employees at the times of task assigning during periods of excessive workload. Overall, the
4
5 findings revealed that managers' practice in assigning tasks to employees embodied
6
7 characteristics of an SBA outlined in strengths literature (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2004, 2006).
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12 **Insert Table IV Here**
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18 **Insert Table V Here**
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21

22 23 24 25 **5. Discussion**

26
27 Regarding ability-enhancing practices, most managers believed that they used an SBA for
28
29 employee selection through interviews. However, analysis of the data revealed that managers
30
31 tended to focus on more observable criteria, similar to competency-based selection interviews
32
33 outlined in conventional management literature (Boyatzis, 2008). We found that managers
34
35 tended to offer temporary status of employment (casual or probationary) to candidates prior to
36
37 offering them permanent employment. According to our findings, this tendency was due to
38
39 managers' perception of the selection interviews' inadequacy to properly identify and assess
40
41 candidates' strengths. The strengths literature further suggests the necessity of employees' role
42
43 performance and managers' deliberate observations of employee performance to identify
44
45 strengths (Clifton *et al.*, 2016; Clifton and Harter, 2003). The period of temporary employment
46
47 offered to prospective employees likely provides managers with extended time to observe
48
49 employee performance (Clifton *et al.*, 2016; Garcea *et al.*, 2011). Thus, it gives managers an
50
51 opportunity to choose a suitable method for strengths assessment (Bibb, 2016; Garcea *et al.*,
52
53 2011) and enables them to incorporate an SBA to employee selection. Consequently, our
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55 findings suggest that managers used an SBA for employee selection during the period of
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3 temporary employment of prospective employees. Overall, our findings regarding selection are
4
5 consistent with findings of prior studies which indicate that small business managers tend to
6
7 use selection methods such as informal interviews, work samples, and work trials (Barrett and
8
9 Mayson, 2005).
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14 Our intention of exploring different types of training available in small businesses was
15
16 to understand whether managers employed an SBA to training, which begins with identifying
17
18 employees' talents, making employees aware of those talents and providing them with
19
20 opportunities to use those talents and develop them into strengths as advocated in positive
21
22 psychology literature (e.g. Clifton and Harter, 2003; van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016). We found
23
24 that, from both managers' and employees' perspectives, personalised coaching and peer
25
26 coaching started with 'weakness identification' as opposed to strengths identification.
27
28 Moreover, in an SBA, having identified employees' strengths, managers should complement
29
30 those strengths with additional knowledge and skills through learning activities, such as
31
32 teaching, training, mentoring and coaching (Asplund and Blacksmith, 2012). In contrast, the
33
34 businesses in this study employed personalised coaching and peer coaching, as described in
35
36 conventional management literature (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016). The
37
38 remaining type – technical update training – also did not reflect the characteristics of an SBA:
39
40 training needs were governed by product and market forces external to the organisation rather
41
42 than by the strengths of employees, and access to such training was equal for all employees.
43
44 Moreover, no selections were made on the availability of strengths. Hence, our analysis found
45
46 no evidence to claim that managers employed an SBA to employee training. However, our
47
48 findings are consistent with previous research which shows that due to their limited financial
49
50 and personnel resources small businesses tend to rely on informal on-the-job training and
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52 formal training provided by vendors (Nolan and Garavan, 2016).
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3 Concerning motivation-enhancing practices, this study found that none of the
4
5 businesses adopted an SBA to performance evaluation. Moreover, consistent with previous
6
7 studies (e.g. Psychogios *et al.*, 2016), we found that the small businesses did not employ formal
8
9 methods for employee performance evaluation. Managers tended to base their evaluations on
10
11 their calculations of employees' speed, efficiency and productivity, and the process involved
12
13 informal documentation methods, such as simple display approaches and managers' logbooks.
14
15 However, we found that the employees were largely unaware of the criteria and processes used
16
17 in evaluations. In the opinion of employees, performance feedback often involved negative
18
19 commentary on employees' deficiencies rather than employee affirmation and encouragement
20
21 as advocated by the SBA to performance feedback (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; Bouskila-Yam and
22
23 Kluger, 2011). Hence, our analysis found no evidence to claim that managers employed an
24
25 SBA to employee performance evaluation.
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32 Regarding opportunity-enhancing practices, we found that most managers based their
33
34 task assignment decisions on whether an employee had positive character traits and job-related
35
36 skills. To assign certain tasks (e.g., responding to customers and handling business
37
38 transactions), managers identified traits such as honesty, reliability, and courtesy as desirable
39
40 employee qualities. Managers' concerns about identified character traits are consistent with
41
42 positive psychology literature that describes character strengths and the necessity of identifying
43
44 and fostering strengths (Park *et al.*, 2004, 2006). When assigning tasks, the managers also
45
46 considered employees' behavioural skills, such as communication and negotiation (Belisle *et*
47
48 *al.*, 2016), and their technical skills (Petridou and Spathis, 2001), such as diagnostic skills.
49
50 According to the management literature, the behavioural and technical skills of people are
51
52 considered competencies rather than strengths (Bibb, 2016). Nevertheless, the Gallup
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54 Organisation's definition of strengths holds that acquiring pertinent skills for a job is key to
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56 developing strengths (Rath, 2007). Hence, managers' concerns about the availability of job-
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3 related skills in task assignment can be attributed to their concern regarding employee strengths
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5 required for better role performance. Consequently, our findings suggest that managers used
6
7 an SBA for task assignment. Moreover, the findings are consistent with small business
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9 literature that suggests managers often oversee all aspects of their businesses from the point of
10
11 operation to the point of delivery to the customer and can closely observe employees'
12
13 behaviour and performance (De Winne and Sels, 2013, p.187; Gelinas and Bigras, 2004; Yew
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15 Wong and Aspinwall, 2004).
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21 Employees' perspectives of factors considered by managers in task assignment were
22
23 consistent with those of managers. From the employees' perspectives, workload balance was
24
25 another concern of managers at the time of task assignment. When the workload was heavy,
26
27 managers made purposive selections among employees. This way, managers could assign tasks
28
29 to the employees who required minimal time and supervision to complete those tasks.
30
31 According to positive psychology and strengths literature, employees who are efficient and
32
33 self-driven are likely to be those with the required strengths and therefore a good fit for that
34
35 task (Bibb, 2016; Forest *et al.*, 2012). Further, assigning a task to an employee who is
36
37 considered a good fit should lead to optimal performance, resulting in favourable outcomes for
38
39 the organisation (Linley and Harrington, 2006a; van Woerkom and Meyers, 2015). Hence, the
40
41 tendency of managers to make purposive selections based on employees' work-related
42
43 efficiency when assigning tasks at critical times reflects the characteristics of an SBA. The
44
45 necessity for managers to make such purposive selections of employees can also be attributed
46
47 to the small business characteristic of limited HR (Yusof and Aspinwall, 2000). Other
48
49 characteristics such as flat organisational hierarchy, close relationships between managers and
50
51 employees, blurred division of activities and responsibilities among employees (De Winne and
52
53 Sels, 2013, p.187; Supyuenyong *et al.*, 2009; Yew Wong and Aspinwall, 2004) and managers'
54
55 ability to oversee all aspects of the organisation from the point of operation to that of delivery
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3 to the customer (De Winne and Sels, 2013, p.187; Yew Wong and Aspinwall, 2004) enable
4
5 managers to make purposive selections among employees in assigning tasks when necessary.
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8 9 *Study's contributions*

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11
12 The present study makes several contributions to the strengths and small business
13
14 literatures through addressing the focal research question: Do small businesses use an SBA to
15
16 manage and develop their employees and, if so, how do they implement this approach? First,
17
18 this study contributes to a theoretical understanding as to the suitability of the SBA for small
19
20 businesses by classifying small business characteristics as enablers and barriers to the adoption
21
22 of the SBA (see Table 1). This extends previous work that has also sought to develop a
23
24 theoretical understanding of the suitability of the SBA for small businesses (e.g., Coetzer *et al.*,
25
26 2014). Second, the findings of this study contribute to the strengths and small business
27
28 literatures through empirical examination of the prospective applicability of the strengths-
29
30 based approach to managing and developing employees in small businesses. Since the
31
32 emphasis of Martin Seligman on the positive aspects of human nature in the late 1990s (1999a,
33
34 1999b), the SBA has been researched in different contexts, but, to date, no research has reported
35
36 the use of an SBA in small businesses. Hence, the current study provides the first empirical
37
38 evidence on the use and implementation of the SBA in a small business context. Third, the
39
40 study shows how AMO theory can be applied to studies that investigate the SBA in small
41
42 businesses. Previously, AMO theory has been predominantly used in studies that investigate
43
44 the HRM-performance link (Gahlawat and Kundu, 2018; Garmendia *et al.*, 2020). Finally,
45
46 consistent with the goal of exploratory research, this study's focus, research approach and
47
48 findings lead to suggestions for future research on the SBA in small businesses (Eisenhardt and
49
50 Graebner, 2007).
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Implications for management practice

First, the findings suggest a low level of awareness of the SBA by management among the businesses. This is not surprising given the widely held view that traditional deficit-based thinking tends to characterise many organisations (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020). Therefore, managers who are contemplating adopting an SBA may need practical advice and behavioural guidelines from small business advisers. As Bibb (2016) has noted, a good starting point on this long-term transformation would be to encourage managers to undertake their own strengths assessment. This type of experiential learning activity should help managers develop a practical understanding of the contrast between the SBA philosophy and the mindset involving a focus on fixing weaknesses.

Second, managers reported that they had difficulty in identifying employees' strengths and were largely reliant upon personal observation for strengths identification. Managers who wish to adopt an SBA can benefit from using strengths identification tools to identify employees' strengths effectively. However, given how critical accurate strengths identification is for the successful application of a strengths framework to a firm's HR practices, managers may need help sourcing suitable strengths identification tools, such as the Clifton StrengthsFinder™ (see Buckingham, 2010), the Inspirational Leadership Tool (see Linley *et al.*, 2009) and Strengthscope® (<https://www.strengthscope.com/>).

Finally, the findings revealed that some small business characteristics could facilitate the adoption of this new management approach. For example, frequent opportunities for face-to-face interaction between manager and employees and the physical proximity of managers to their employees create opportunities for managers to identify employees' strengths and provide timely strength-based feedback on performance. Further, the undocumented broadly defined work roles in small businesses facilitates the adoption of strengths-based task assignments. An

1
2
3 important implication of these revelations for managers is that they should leverage such
4
5 distinctive characteristics of small businesses when implementing an SBA.
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8 *Limitations and future research*

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11 Because snowball sampling was used to extend the initial sample, the representativeness of our
12
13 sample, and thereby the degree of transferability of the findings to other contexts and
14
15 populations, is likely to be compromised (Cohen and Arieli, 2011; Kaplan *et al.*, 1987).
16
17 However, we used purposeful sampling to set the sampling frame and interviewed multiple
18
19 participants from different organisations to improve the degree of transferability. We have
20
21 provided the profiles of manager and employee participants (Table II and Table III) to facilitate
22
23 an assessment of the transferability of the findings (Carpenter and Suto, 2008; Sinkovics *et al.*,
24
25 2008). Moreover, managers' responses to certain questions might have been affected by social
26
27 desirability bias (Larson, 2019). For example, when managers were asked whether they
28
29 considered employees' strengths in their selection decisions, they tended to express positive
30
31 and favourable responses; yet, the detailed answers they provided in response to subsequent
32
33 questions revealed otherwise. However, this bias was counteracted, to a degree, by our probing
34
35 questions and by gathering employees' responses to the same question. Future studies should
36
37 seek to mitigate the potential effects of social desirability bias by employing case study
38
39 research that uses multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, direct observation, and
40
41 documents (Yin and Campbell, 2018).
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49 A further limitation relates to the variability of respondents' understanding of the
50
51 concepts being researched. Although the semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity
52
53 to clearly articulate concepts relating to the SBA, it was often evident that some respondents
54
55 had misconceptions about people's strengths. Although it is difficult to ascertain precisely how
56
57 the respondents' level of understanding of the strengths concepts may have skewed their
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3 responses, misconceptions about the principal concepts of the phenomenon studied are likely
4
5 to have influenced the findings. In future research, the interviewer should invest sufficient time
6
7 before the interview to ensure that the interviewee understands the strengths philosophy and
8
9 associated management practices.
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13 The study's focus, findings and research approach provide directions for further
14
15 research. First, the research was limited to Western Australian businesses in the motor vehicle
16
17 industry because companies that sell higher value products and operate at the higher end of the
18
19 market are more concerned about employee skills utilisation (Skills Australia, 2012). A
20
21 replicated study using a similar methodology should be conducted in other contexts, such as
22
23 high-end retail and consulting services, to increase the findings' accuracy of representation.
24
25 Such research would ascertain whether factors related to the state's economy or the motor
26
27 vehicle industry may affect the nature of HR practices adopted by managers.
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32 Second, future research using AMO theory as the lens could examine the effects of
33
34 individual strengths-based HR activities on employees. The findings of such research would
35
36 have the plausibility to generate an in-depth understanding of the criticality of each strengths-
37
38 based HR activity regarding employee and organisational performance in small businesses.
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42 Third, this study found that managers did not employ an SBA in employee selection
43
44 during the interviews and relied on their personal observations to identify employees' strengths.
45
46 Given the criticality of the strengths identification stage in adopting an SBA and the potential
47
48 effectiveness of strengths identification tools to identify strengths, future researchers could
49
50 study organisations that use one or more recognised tools for strengths identification. Such
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52 research would generate more precise knowledge and in-depth understanding of the use of the
53
54 SBA and its suitability to small businesses.
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3 Finally, future research that employs quantitative approaches to ascertain effects on
4 small business performance in response to the adoption of an SBA would further benefit the
5 existing strengths literature. Such research would help researchers to ascend from this initial
6 level of exploratory study to a more advanced level of general theoretical model development.
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13 **6. Conclusion**

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16 This study provides empirical evidence regarding the prospective applicability of the SBA to
17 managing employees in small businesses. We found that managers used an SBA to employee
18 selection during temporary employment status and to employee task assignment. According to
19 our findings, managers did not employ an SBA to employee selection during selection
20 interviews, employee training or performance evaluations. This study provides managers with
21 information about a potential management improvement practice. The findings of this study
22 have generated new knowledge and understanding of the applicability of the SBA to small
23 businesses and provide a foundation for future research.
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Table I. Small business characteristics and their possible effects on the adoption of an SBA

Category	Characteristic of small businesses	Possible effects on the adoption of SBA
Ownership and management	Centralised decision-making power	Managers have the authority to trigger changes within the organisation—enables the adoption of an SBA.
	Many issues compete for the managers limited attentional resources	Constraints on managerial attention can hinder adoption of innovative practices such as an SBA.
Structure	Simple/flat and less complex structure	Higher vertical and horizontal integration facilitates communication and change—enables the adoption of an SBA.
Culture, social proximity, and nature of jobs	Organic and fluid culture	Widens opportunity for changes—enables the adoption of an SBA.
	Close relationships and limited/less clear division of responsibilities	Facilitates employee strengths-based task assigning by managers.
Resources	Limited human resources	Emphasises the importance of optimal use of available resources—suggests the necessity of adopting an SBA.
	Limited financial resources	Emphasises the importance of optimal use of employee strengths—suggests the necessity of adopting an SBA.
		Limits access to suitable strengths identification tools — likely to hinder the adoption of an SBA.
Predominance of informality	Informal labour management	Fosters managers' personalised approaches to manage and develop employees—enables adoption of an SBA.
	Considerable reliance on informal channels for recruitment	Facilitates employee strengths identification by managers during selection because managers are likely to receive personal recommendations for employees or to have had personal contacts with the prospective employees prior to hiring.

Source: Adapted from Harney and Alkhalaf (2020); Yusof and Aspinwall (2000); and Yew Wong and Aspinwall (2004).

Table II. Manager profiles

Participant	Job Title	Age Category (years)	Type of Ownership	Period of Involvement in Current Business	Number of Employees in the Business	Highest Educational Level Achieved
AM*	Owner-manager	51-60	Family business	6-10	7	Postgraduate
BM*	Owner-manager	31-40	Sole proprietorship	≥ 21	5	High School
CM*	Manager	31-40	Sole proprietorship	16-20	10	Certificate
DM*	Owner-manager	41-50	Limited liability company	16-20	5	Certificate
EM*	Manager	41-50	Sole proprietorship	11-15	7	Other
FM*	Owner-manager	41-50	Sole proprietorship	≤ 5	6	Diploma
GM**	Director	51-60	Limited liability company	≥ 21	5	Certificate
HM**	Owner-manager	51-40	Family business	≥ 21	8	Certificate
IM**	Owner-manager	31-40	Family business	16-20	5	Diploma
JM*	Owner-manager	31-40	Partnership	≤ 5	5	High School
KM*	Owner-manager	31-40	Sole proprietorship	6-10	5	Diploma

* Both managers and employees participated

** Only managers participated

Table III. Employee profiles

Participant	Job Title	Age Category (years)	Number of Similar Type Businesses He/She Has Worked	Number of Years Worked in the Current Business	Highest Educational Level Achieved
AE1*	Customer service manager	21-30	0	2-4	University graduate
BE1*	Technician	21-30	0	2-4	Certificate
BE2*	Technician	21-30	3	2-4	Certificate
CE1*	Mechanic	21-30	2	≤ 1	Certificate
CE2*	Mechanic	51-60	2	8-10	Diploma
DE1*	Mechanic	41-60	0	2-4	Certificate
DE2*	Workshop manager	31-40	0	≥ 11	Certificate
EE1*	Tyre fitter/wheel aligner	21-30	1	≤ 1	High School
FE1*	Detailer	31-40	0	2-4	High School
KE1*	Mechanic	≤ 20	0	2-4	High School
KE2*	Mechanic	21-30	1	≤ 1	Certificate
LE1***	Mechanic	31-40	2	2-4	Certificate
LE2***	Detailer	41-50	0	2-4	Certificate
ME1***	Technician	31-40	1	8-10	Certificate
NE1***	Technician	41-50	1	≤ 1	Diploma
OE1***	Mechanic	31-40	0	≤ 1	Certificate
OE2***	Mechanic	≤ 20	2	2-4	Certificate
PE1***	Mechanic	21-30	1	≤ 1	High School
QE1***	Mechanic	21-30	0	5-7	Certificate

* Both managers and employees participated

*** Only employees participated

Table IV. Findings related to employees' perspectives

Employee selection (Ability)	<i>Theme 1: Job-related experience and qualifications</i>	<i>At the interview, the manager asked me for my certificates and checked my documents to make sure that I have required qualifications and asked a few questions about my experience. (AE1)</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Appearance and behaviours</i>	<i>If we look lethargic and careless, the manager will not select us. They are concerned about whether we look tidy and neat, and whether we are punctual. (LE2)</i>
	<i>Theme 3: Attitudes of candidates</i>	<i>At the interview, they counted my willingness to be here and to learn. The manager wanted to make sure that I had come with the desire to learn. (PE1)</i>
Training (Ability)	<i>Theme 1: Manager-conducted personalised coaching</i>	<i>I learn things from the manager. Whenever I come across difficulties, he supports me to complete my work... and helps me to get it solved and then to learn it. (AE1)</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Manager-encouraged peer coaching</i>	<i>Whenever an employee finds it difficult to perform a task, the manager assigns a second person. Then both of us together can solve and finish it. They don't push us hard to do it alone if we don't know how to do it.. (FE1)</i>
	<i>Theme 3: Employee access to technical update training</i>	<i>We have formal training. For instance, if they have introduced any new systems or released a new model of a car, the manager sends a few mechanics for off-the-job training on that. (BE2)</i>
Performance evaluation (Motivation)	<i>Theme 1: Managers focus on quantity and quality of work</i>	<i>What the manager considers in their assessment is speed and quality. They assess employees to see whether they complete the task up to the requirement and how quickly he [sic] can do it. (LE2)</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Managers focus on employee weaknesses</i>	<i>We have monthly meetings where the manager tells us about our targets, efficiency, and productivity. If we're not doing well, we'll definitely hear about it from the manager at the meeting...and be made aware of the common mistakes we make, and any problem related to our performance. (CE2)</i>
Task assignment (Opportunity)	<i>Theme 1: Managers' focus on certain positive character traits</i>	<i>I was first employed as an office assistant, but later I was given the responsibility to handle customers ...I think the manager understood that I am a soft person with good telephone etiquette. (AE1)</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Managers' focus on employees' skills</i>	<i>The manager considers our level of skills when he offers work. For example, I take 2.5 hours for an injector recall, but some people need only 1.5 hours because they have that skill. The manager knows who can do it well and quickly. (OE1)</i>
	<i>Theme 3: Managers' need to balance workload</i>	<i>Work assigning depends on the workload and employees' experience. For example, when an employee is good at repairing brake pads, when we have a heavy workload, such employees get more of that kind to work on. When the other one is good at something else, they get more of that task. (NE1)</i>

Table V. Findings related to managers' perspectives

Employee selection (Ability)	<i>Theme 1: Job-related experience and qualifications</i>	<i>Experience comes first; qualification second. ...He might be very good at the theory side, but might not be practically good as much as that. So, experience is the most important criteria (HM).</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Appearance and behaviours</i>	<i>I look at them to get whether they look healthy. That's a key thing for me. They should look healthy and active. ..., then they will do the job pretty well (BM).</i>
	<i>Theme 3: Attitudes of candidates</i>	<i>I don't necessarily look for qualified people... The biggest contributing factor to my decision to employ them is their attitude. The people who have good, positive attitudes towards their job learn quickly (DM).</i>
	<i>Theme 4: Offering temporary status of employment</i>	<i>.. Within the first three days I judge the person. Seeing him working, I can decide whether he has the strengths to pick up or not. Then I will tell him whether we employ him or not. (AM)</i>
Training (Ability)	<i>Theme 1: Manager-conducted personalised coaching</i>	<i>If I notice someone struggling with a job, I call him [sic] and say 'if you're struggling with that., I can go through it with you, to teach you about it' and I help him to learn it.. (BM)</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Manager-encouraged peer coaching</i>	<i>I put a tradesman and a young apprentice together. Then the tradesman can teach the apprentice as they work through and do the jobs until he gets to a point where he can do it on his own (IM).</i>
	<i>Theme 3: Employee access to technical update training</i>	<i>We get some training from outside to refine employees...Everybody can go on this training to polish themselves up (EM).</i>
Performance evaluation (Motivation)	<i>Theme 1: Quantity and quality aspects of work-related performance</i>	<i>I can understand when someone does well in his job. When I see what he's doing, and how fast he is in doing that, I can give him a pay rise or somehow reward him. (FM)</i>
Task assignment (Opportunity)	<i>Theme 1: Managers focus on positive character traits</i>	<i>I let the employees who can express themselves to customers, who have nice attitudes, soft, well-presented and are not rude work on the counter. Other guys I'll say 'no, you still stay in the workshop,..'. but they are very good on the tools even if they are not good to speak to customers. (IM)</i>
	<i>Theme 2: Managers focus on employees' skills.</i>	<i>Some guys are good at certain aspects. For example, some employees can do better polishing when compared with others. Recognising that, we assign them tasks related to polishing. (FM).</i>

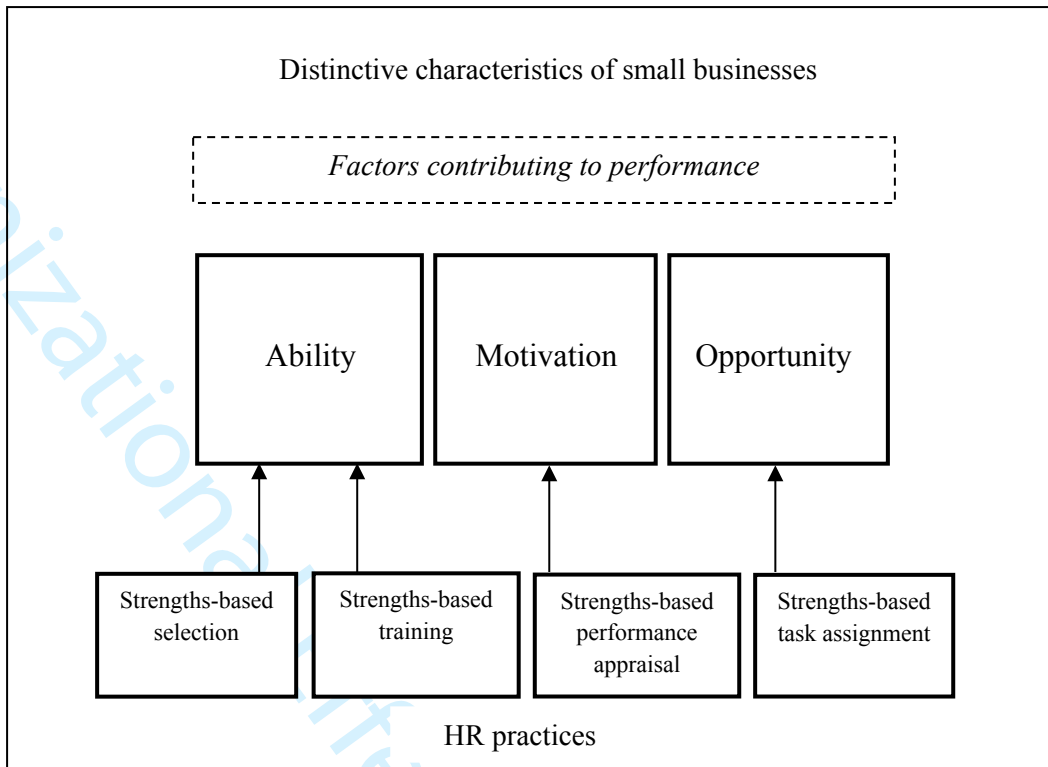


Figure 1. Conceptual framework