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Career development and employee loyalty affect company commitment and performance in small and medium-sized enterprises in the northeast region of Vietnam

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Abstract: In the northeast region, Vietnam, career development and employee loyalty affect organisational commitment and performance productivity in SMEs. The study uses social exchange theory (*SET*) to examine how career development possibilities build loyalty and commitment and how organisational support affects employee behaviour. Five hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (*SEM*) on 437 SMEs employees. The results show that career development and employee loyalty boost organisational commitment and performance productivity. Organisational commitment also mediates career development and employee loyalty effects on performance productivity. These findings show that a supportive workplace boosts employee loyalty and dedication, boosting SMEs success. Also discussed are ways SMEs managers and policymakers can boost employee engagement and organisational performance.

Keywords: career development opportunities; employee loyalty; organisational commitment; performance productivity; small and medium-sized enterprises; SMEs.

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Biographical notes: Trinh Quynh Le is a dedicated Lecturer at the Finance and Banking Faculty with over five years of experience in teaching and research. Specialising in finance management, she has developed a strong foundation in the field while also exploring broader topics such as management and human resource management (HRM). Her research interests extend beyond finance, encompassing the integration of management practices and HRM strategies in

organisational settings. Her work aims to bridge the gap between financial theory and practical management applications, contributing to both academic and professional communities.

Pham Hoang Hien is an accomplished HRM professional, coordinator of the HRM concentration and currently serving as the Director of Business Strategy Subject at Becamex Business School, Eastern International University. With 18 years of experience in teaching and research, he has made significant contributions to the field. His expertise in talent acquisition, employee development, performance management, and organisational behaviour is reflected in his engaging teaching and training methods as well as his research interests.

1 Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (*SMEs*) are vital for economic growth and development in the northeast region of Vietnam, the high economic development region, due to the quickly changing business environment. Nevertheless, these businesses have distinct obstacles in cultivating an atmosphere that optimises staff dedication and efficiency (Hien, 2018). Previous studies have emphasised the substantial influence of favourable career development chances on improving both organisational commitment and productivity (Hanaysha, 2016). The objective of this study is to further investigate these links, offering significant insights for leaders of *SMEs* and policymakers to develop more efficient management practices.

Despite the extensive body of literature on organisational behaviour, there remains a notable gap concerning the integrated effects of career development opportunities and employee loyalty on both organisational commitment and performance productivity within *SMEs* in the northeast region (Hien, 2018). Previous studies have often examined these variables in isolation, failing to capture the comprehensive impact of their interplay (Osa and Amos, 2014). By addressing this gap, this research seeks to offer a more holistic understanding of how these factors contribute to the overall success and sustainability of *SMEs*. This approach not only enriches academic discourse but also provides practical implications for enhancing employee satisfaction and organisational performance.

This study is conducted to fill this critical research gap and to respond to the pressing needs of *SMEs* in the northeast region. With the increasing competition and the need for *SMEs* to retain talented employees, understanding the factors that drive organisational commitment and performance productivity is imperative. By focusing on the specific context of the northeast region, this research offers targeted recommendations that consider the unique cultural and economic conditions of the region. The findings will help *SME* managers develop better strategies to cultivate supportive career development opportunities and foster employee loyalty, ultimately leading to improved organisational outcomes and a more robust *SME* sector (Hien, 2023; Savitri et al., 2024).

2 Literature review

Career development and employee loyalty are critical factors influencing company commitment and performance, particularly within SMEs in the northeast region of Vietnam. The interplay between these elements' shapes not only the internal dynamics of organisations but also their overall effectiveness and sustainability in a competitive market. This paper synthesises existing literature to elucidate the relationships among career development, employee loyalty, organisational commitment, and performance in the context of SMEs.

The concept of career development is pivotal in fostering employee loyalty. Research indicates that when organisations provide clear career paths and opportunities for advancement, employees are more likely to exhibit loyalty towards their employers. For instance, Fadhila and Sulistiyani (2022) found that career development significantly influences employee loyalty, suggesting that organisations that invest in their employees' growth can expect a reciprocal commitment from their workforce. Similarly, Ichdan (2023) emphasises that a well-structured career development program enhances organisational commitment, particularly when employees are aware of their career trajectories. This is further supported by Khuong et al. (2020), who argue that effective human resource management practices, including career development, are essential for cultivating employee loyalty in Vietnamese SMEs.

Moreover, the relationship between career development and employee loyalty is mediated by job satisfaction and engagement. Niranjan and Thomas (2018) highlight that employee engagement plays a crucial role in linking job satisfaction to loyalty, indicating that satisfied employees are more likely to remain loyal to their organisations. This is corroborated by Mubin et al. (2022), who assert that job involvement positively influences both employee performance and loyalty, suggesting that engaged employees are more committed to their organisations. Thus, organisations that prioritise career development initiatives not only enhance job satisfaction but also foster a culture of loyalty among employees.

In addition to career development, the organisational environment significantly impacts employee loyalty and commitment. A conducive working environment, characterised by supportive leadership and a positive organisational culture, can enhance employee satisfaction and loyalty. For instance, Agba et al. (2010) found a strong correlation between career opportunities and employee commitment, emphasising that employees seek more than just financial compensation; they desire a supportive environment that nurtures their professional growth. This aligns with the findings of Tschopp et al. (2012), who argue that organisational support and a positive work culture are vital for fostering employee loyalty and enhancing overall performance.

Furthermore, the role of leadership in shaping employee loyalty cannot be overstated. Effective leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership, have been shown to positively influence employee engagement and loyalty. Zanabazar's (2023) research indicates that transactional leadership can enhance employee loyalty, although its impact is less pronounced than that of transformational leadership. This suggests that leaders who inspire and motivate their teams are more likely to cultivate a loyal workforce, which in turn contributes to improved organisational performance.

The implications of employee loyalty extend beyond individual commitment; they significantly affect organisational performance. Studies have consistently shown that

loyal employees are more productive and contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction, which is crucial for the success of SMEs. Ateeq and Alzoraiki (2023) highlight that employee loyalty positively impacts job performance, suggesting that organisations that nurture loyalty can expect enhanced performance outcomes. This is echoed by Brown et al. (2011), who argue that employee commitment and loyalty are central to achieving high performance in the workplace. Therefore, fostering loyalty through career development and supportive organisational practices is essential for SMEs aiming to enhance their performance.

Moreover, the integration of career development initiatives with performance management systems can further reinforce employee loyalty. Organisations that align career development with performance expectations create a sense of purpose and direction for employees. This alignment not only enhances job satisfaction but also strengthens the emotional attachment employees have towards their organisations. As noted by Purnamasari and Sintaasih (2019), a robust career development system correlates with increased employee loyalty, indicating that employees are more likely to remain committed when they see a clear link between their career growth and organisational success.

In the context of SMEs in Vietnam, the unique challenges faced by these enterprises necessitate a tailored approach to career development and employee loyalty. The competitive landscape, coupled with limited resources, requires SMEs to adopt innovative strategies that prioritise employee engagement and satisfaction. As highlighted by Hien (2020), effective human resource management practices can significantly enhance the competitive advantages and business performance of SMEs in Vietnam. This underscores the importance of investing in employee development as a strategic imperative for organisational success.

Furthermore, the socio-economic context of the northeast region of Vietnam presents both challenges and opportunities for SMEs. The region's economic development is closely tied to the performance of local enterprises, making employee loyalty and commitment critical for sustaining growth. As noted by Prayitno et al. (2022), organisations that focus on enhancing employee satisfaction and loyalty are better positioned to navigate the complexities of the market. This is particularly relevant in the current economic climate, where employee retention and engagement are paramount for organisational resilience.

To sum up, the interplay between career development, employee loyalty, and organisational commitment is a multifaceted phenomenon that significantly impacts the performance of SMEs in the northeast region of Vietnam. Organisations that prioritise career development initiatives and foster a supportive work environment are likely to cultivate a loyal workforce, which in turn enhances overall performance. As the competitive landscape continues to evolve, SMEs must recognise the value of investing in their employees as a critical strategy for achieving sustainable growth and success.

3 Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

3.1 Theoretical framework

Social exchange theory (*SET*) posits that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process to maximise benefits and minimise costs. Introduced by George Homans in 1958

and further developed by Peter Blau in 1964, SET emphasises that relationships are maintained through a cost-benefit analysis by the parties involved (Hien, 2024). In organisational settings, this theory suggests that employees develop loyalty and commitment based on their perceptions of reciprocity in their relationship with the organisation. When employees feel that the organisation values their contributions, supports their well-being, and provides a positive career development opportunity, they are likely to respond with increased loyalty and commitment. This reciprocal relationship is crucial in understanding employee behaviour and organisational outcomes. In the context of this study on SMEs in the northeast region, SET is particularly relevant as it helps explain how a supportive career development opportunity can foster employee loyalty, which in turn enhances organisational commitment and performance productivity. By leveraging the principles of SET, the study investigates how perceived organisational support, and the quality of career development opportunities influence the psychological and performance-related outcomes of employees, thereby providing insights into improving management practices in SMEs.

3.2 Performance productivity

Performance productivity refers to the efficiency and effectiveness with which employees accomplish their tasks and contribute to organisational goals. It encompasses both the quantity and the quality of work output, as well as the ability to meet or exceed performance standards. The concept is rooted in various theories of motivation, job satisfaction, and organisational behaviour, which suggest that an employee's productivity is influenced by their career development opportunities, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the degree of alignment with organisational objectives (Osa and Amos, 2014; Hien, 2024). In the context of SMEs in the northeast region, understanding performance productivity is critical as these enterprises rely heavily on the optimal performance of their workforce to remain competitive and achieve growth. This study examines how supportive career development opportunities and strong employee loyalty enhance organisational commitment, which in turn boosts performance productivity. By exploring these relationships, the study aims to provide actionable insights into how SMEs can create conditions that foster higher productivity levels, thereby driving organisational success and sustainability.

3.3 Career development opportunities

A positive career development opportunity, characterised by supportive management, adequate resources, and a healthy work-life balance, has been found to significantly enhance employees' attachment to their organisation. This is because a conducive career development opportunity fosters a sense of belonging and motivates employees to align their personal goals with organisational objectives (Hanaysha, 2016). Similarly, a supportive career development opportunity is essential for improving performance productivity as it reduces stress and distractions, enabling employees to focus better on their tasks and deliver higher quality work. Previous studies have shown that employees who perceive their career development opportunities as positive are more likely to exhibit higher productivity levels (Savitri et al., 2024). As a result, the following two pair-hypotheses are proposed:

- H1o Career development opportunities do not have a positive impact on organisational commitment at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H1a Career development opportunities have a positive impact on organisational commitment at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H2o Career development opportunities do not have a positive impact on performance productivity at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H2a Career development opportunities have a positive impact on performance productivity at SMEs in the northeast region.

3.4 *Employee loyalty*

Loyalty reflects the degree to which employees feel dedicated to their organisation and are willing to go above and beyond their job responsibilities. When employees are loyal, they are more likely to develop a stronger emotional attachment to their organisation, thereby increasing their commitment to its goals and values (Osa and Amos, 2014; Saputra and Mahaputra, 2022). Furthermore, loyal employees tend to exhibit higher levels of productivity because they are more motivated, satisfied, and aligned with the organisation's objectives. Studies have shown that employee loyalty is positively correlated with enhanced job performance, reduced turnover rates, and increased efficiency (Hafiyyan et al., 2023). Consequently, the following pair-hypotheses are proposed:

- H3o Employee loyalty does not have a positive impact on organisational commitment at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H3a Employee loyalty has a positive impact on organisational commitment at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H4o Employee loyalty does not have a positive impact on performance productivity at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H4a Employee loyalty has a positive impact on performance productivity at SMEs in the northeast region.

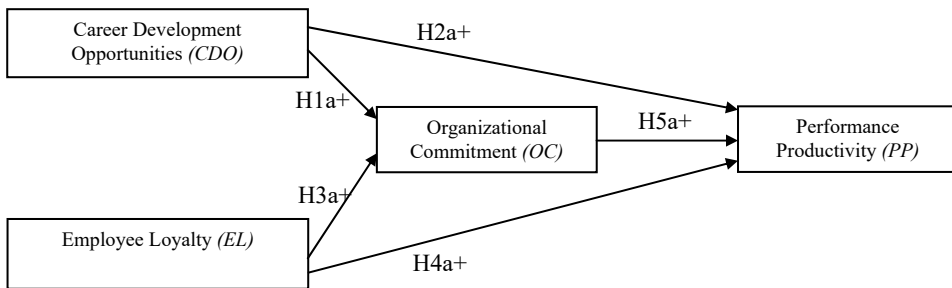
3.5 *Organisational commitment*

Employees who exhibit high levels of organisational commitment are deeply engaged with their organisation's goals and values, resulting in greater motivation and effort in their job roles. This intrinsic dedication often translates into enhanced performance productivity, as committed employees are more likely to invest the necessary time and energy to complete tasks efficiently and effectively (Osa and Amos, 2014). Moreover, organisational commitment reduces absenteeism and turnover, ensuring a stable and experienced workforce that can maintain high productivity levels (Hanaysha, 2016). This leads to Hypothesis H5a that organisational commitment positively impacts performance productivity in SMEs in the northeast region. The findings will provide valuable insights for SME managers and policymakers on the significance of cultivating a committed workforce to enhance overall organisational performance.

- H5o Organisational commitment does not have a positive impact on performance productivity at SMEs in the northeast region.
- H5a Organisational commitment has a positive impact on performance productivity at SMEs in the northeast region.

From the above discussions, the research model is developed as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Research model



4 Data and research methods

4.1 Data collection and sampling

This study employed a self-administered questionnaire to gather data on the variables of interest, including career development opportunities, employee loyalty, organisational commitment, and performance productivity. The questionnaire was distributed to employees working in SMEs in the northeast region through various online platforms such as Zalo, Viber, Facebook, and email, ensuring broad reach and convenience for respondents. Convenience sampling was utilised due to its efficiency in collecting data quickly from a diverse sample (Hair et al., 2020). To ensure the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire, a pre-test was conducted with eight respondents, leading to minor adjustments for better comprehension. A total of 437 valid responses were collected between May and June, providing a robust dataset for subsequent analysis using structural equation modelling (SEM) techniques.

4.2 Data analysis

This study's respondents CDOre 52.2% male and 47.8% female. The majority of responders are 26–35 (30.7%), folloCDOd by 36–45 (27.7%), 46–55 (22.9%), 18–25 (15.8%), and a minor percentage over 55 (3.0%). The bulk of respondents (60.6%) have 1–3 years of work experience, 26.8% have 4–5 years, and 12.6% have less than 1 year. No one reported more than 5 years of experience. This demographic data gives SMEs in the northeast region a complete picture of their personnel, which is essential for assessing career development opportunities, employee loyalty, organisational commitment, and performance productivity.

Table 1 Demographic information of the respondents

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Gender	Male	228	52.2
	Female	209	47.8
Age	18–25	69	15.8
	26–35	134	30.7
	36–45	121	27.7
	46–55	100	22.9
	Over 55	13	3.0
Experience	<1 year	55	12.6
	1–3 years	265	60.6
	4–5 years	117	26.8
	Over 5 years	0	0.0
TOTAL		437	100.0

Source: From the authors' data analysis results

Table 2 Reliability and discriminant validity tests (HTMT)

	α	<i>CR (rho_a)</i>	<i>CR (rho_c)</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>EL</i>	<i>OC</i>	<i>PP</i>	<i>CDO</i>
EL	0.935	0.942	0.950	0.792				
OC	0.918	0.920	0.939	0.754	0.453			
PP	0.925	0.927	0.943	0.770	0.596	0.691		
CDO	0.940	0.941	0.954	0.807	0.425	0.484	0.686	

Source: From the authors' data analysis results

Table 2 shows the reliability and discriminant validity results for this study's constructs. High Cronbach's alpha (α) values, beyond the recommended threshold of 0.70, attest to the dependability and internal consistency of each construct. Employee loyalty (*EL*), organisational commitment (*OC*), performance productivity (*PP*) and career development opportunities (*CDO*) have Cronbach's alpha values of 0.935, 0.918, 0.925, and 0.940. All composite reliability (*CR*) scores above 0.90 indicate significant measurement consistency, confirming construct reliability. Convergent validity is confirmed by each construct's AVE values above 0.50. AVE scores of 0.792 for *EL*, 0.754 for *OC*, 0.770 for *PP*, and 0.807 for *CDO* indicate that structures capture a lot of variances rather than error. These results confirm the measurement model's reliability and discriminant validity, ensuring constructs are distinct and reliably measured.

4.3 Structural equation modelling

Table 3 shows the route coefficients for the study's postulated associations, indicating their strength and relevance. The data supports all five hypotheses (H1a–H5a) with significant p-values ($p < 0.001$) and t-statistics. The path from career development opportunities (*CDO*) to organisational commitment (*OC*) (H4a) has a coefficient of 0.333, indicating a substantial positive effect. With a correlation of 0.375, career development opportunities and performance productivity (*PP*) (H5a) have an even

stronger positive link. Employee loyalty (*EL*) strongly affects organisational commitment (*H1a*) and performance productivity (*H2a*) with correlations of 0.293 and 0.256. Finally, the organisational commitment increases performance productivity (*H3a*) by 0.359. These findings demonstrate that career development opportunities and employee loyalty are important predictors of organisational commitment and performance productivity in the northeast region SMEs, providing insights for improving these outcomes.

Table 3 Path coefficients

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Original sample</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>STDEV</i>	<i>T statistics</i>	<i>P values</i>	<i>Result</i>
H1a	EL → OC	0.293	0.293	0.036	8.183	0.000	Accepted
H2a	EL → PP	0.256	0.255	0.037	6.860	0.000	Accepted
H3a	OC → PP	0.359	0.360	0.039	9.118	0.000	Accepted
H4a	CDO → OC	0.333	0.335	0.045	7.360	0.000	Accepted
H5a	CDO → PP	0.375	0.374	0.040	9.446	0.000	Accepted

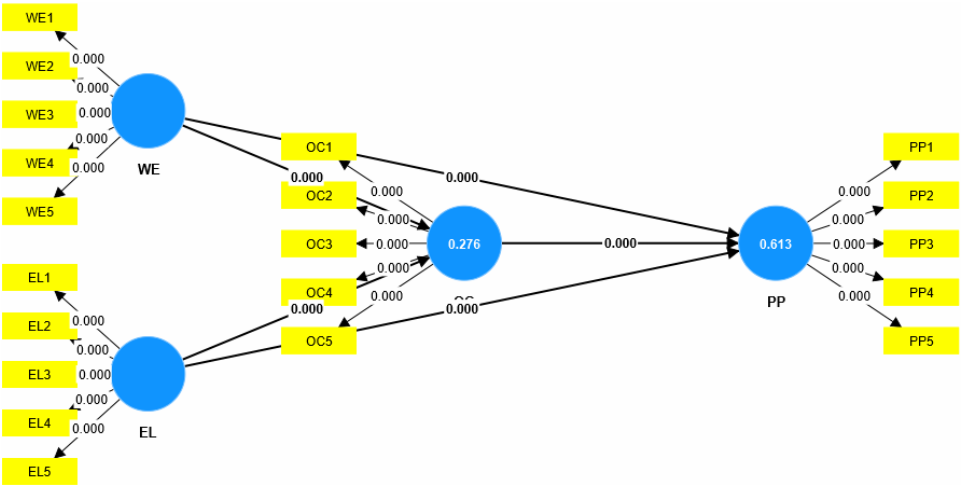
Source: From the authors' data analysis results

Table 4 Specific indirect effects

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Original sample</i>	<i>Sample mean</i>	<i>STDEV</i>	<i>T statistics</i>	<i>P values</i>	<i>Result</i>
EL → OC → PP	0.105	0.106	0.018	5.696	0.000	Supported
CDO → OC → PP	0.120	0.121	0.023	5.260	0.000	Supported

Source: From the authors' data analysis results

Figure 2 Result of PLS-SEM structural model path coefficient (see online version for colours)



Source: From the author's data analysis results

Table 4 shows the indirect effects in the structural equation model that organisational commitment (*OC*) mediates the associations between employee loyalty (*EL*), career development opportunities (*CDO*), and performance productivity. Positive and significant indirect effect of employee loyalty on performance productivity via organisational commitment (original sample value: 0.105, t-statistic: 5.696, $p < 0.001$) supports this mediation pathway. A positive and significant indirect influence of career development opportunities on performance productivity is shown through organisational commitment, with a sample value of 0.120 and a t-statistic of 5.260 ($p < 0.001$). These findings show that employee loyalty and supportive career development opportunities boost productivity by improving organisational commitment. This shows that the northeast region SMEs need positive career development opportunities and employee loyalty to succeed well.

5 Findings discussion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of positive career development opportunities in enhancing both organisational commitment and performance productivity within SMEs in the northeast region. The analysis revealed that supportive and conducive career development opportunities positively influence employees' attachment to their organisation, leading to increased organisational commitment. This is consistent with prior research which suggests that employees who perceive their career development opportunities as supportive are more likely to develop a strong emotional bond with their organisation (Hanaysha, 2016). Moreover, the study demonstrated that positive career development opportunities directly boost performance productivity by reducing workplace stress and distractions, enabling employees to perform their tasks more efficiently and effectively (Savitri et al., 2024).

Employee loyalty emerged as another critical factor positively impacting both organisational commitment and performance productivity. Loyal employees, who feel dedicated to their organisation and are willing to go above and beyond their job responsibilities, are more likely to develop a stronger emotional attachment to the organisation, thus enhancing organisational commitment (Osa and Amos, 2014). The study also found that loyal employees tend to be more productive, as their motivation and alignment with organisational goals drive them to achieve higher performance standards (Hafiyyan et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of fostering employee loyalty as a strategic approach to improving organisational outcomes in SMEs.

Furthermore, the mediating role of organisational commitment in the relationship between career development opportunities, employee loyalty, and performance productivity was clearly established. The data showed that both career development opportunities and employee loyalty indirectly influence performance productivity through their impact on organisational commitment. This underscores the pivotal role of organisational commitment in driving productivity, as employees who are committed to their organisation are more likely to invest the necessary time and effort to perform their tasks effectively (Osa and Amos, 2014; Hanaysha, 2016). By fostering a positive career development opportunity and cultivating employee loyalty, SMEs can enhance organisational commitment, which in turn leads to higher performance productivity. These insights provide valuable guidance for SME managers and policymakers aiming to

create conditions that support employee well-being and optimise organisational performance.

6 Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for managers and policymakers in SMEs in the northeast region of Vietnam.

6.1 Managerial strategies to enhance career development opportunities

The findings of this study highlight the critical role that career development opportunities play in boosting organisational commitment and performance productivity within SMEs. Managers must prioritise the creation of supportive environments that offer clear and accessible career development paths. This can be achieved by implementing professional development programs, mentorship initiatives, and structured career progression frameworks. Such initiatives not only enhance employees' skill sets but also foster a sense of belonging and purpose, which translates into higher organisational commitment. Moreover, SMEs should ensure that these opportunities are tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of their employees, helping them to retain talent and reduce turnover.

6.2 Fostering employee loyalty through organisational culture

Employee loyalty emerged as a significant factor positively influencing both organisational commitment and performance productivity. To foster loyalty, SME managers should focus on building a strong organisational culture that emphasises trust, recognition, and employee well-being. This can be accomplished through open communication, transparent decision-making processes, and the provision of competitive compensation packages. Additionally, recognising employee contributions and offering flexible work arrangements can further enhance loyalty. A loyal workforce not only improves productivity but also contributes to long-term organisational stability, as loyal employees are more likely to stay with the company and align their goals with those of the organisation.

6.3 The role of organisational commitment in driving productivity

Organisational commitment serves as a crucial mediator between career development opportunities, employee loyalty, and performance productivity. SMEs must understand that committed employees are more engaged, motivated, and willing to invest extra effort in their tasks, leading to higher productivity. To cultivate this level of commitment, managers should focus on aligning organisational goals with employees' personal values and aspirations. This can be facilitated by involving employees in goal-setting processes, providing opportunities for growth, and fostering a positive work environment where employees feel valued and supported. By strengthening organisational commitment, SMEs can achieve a more productive and efficient workforce.

6.4 Addressing the unique challenges of SMEs in the northeast region

The study's findings provide important insights for SMEs in the northeast region, particularly in addressing the region's unique cultural and economic challenges. With increasing competition and a need to retain skilled workers, SMEs must adopt management practices that are not only globally informed but also locally relevant. This means considering the specific characteristics of the northeast region's labour market, such as the high mobility of young workers and the growing demand for work-life balance. By integrating localised career development programs and loyalty-building initiatives, SMEs can better attract and retain talent, thereby enhancing organisational performance and sustainability in the long term.

6.5 Policy implications for SME growth and development

The implications of this study extend beyond individual organisations to the broader policy environment. Policymakers should support SMEs by creating policies that encourage employee development and retention. This could include tax incentives for SMEs that invest in training and career development programs or funding schemes to help smaller enterprises implement effective human resource practices. Additionally, initiatives aimed at promoting work-life balance, improving working conditions, and enhancing job security could further contribute to the overall productivity and sustainability of SMEs in the northeast region. By fostering an environment that supports career growth and employee loyalty, policymakers can help SMEs thrive, contributing to economic growth and employment in the wider regions.

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