

Strategic HRM as a Microfoundation of SME Resilience: A Conceptual Framework for Organizational Adaptability Under Turbulence

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Abstract: *Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) increasingly operate under persistent environmental turbulence, making resilience and adaptability essential for survival. Yet the organizational mechanisms through which SMEs cultivate these capacities, particularly the role of strategic human resource management (SHRM), remain conceptually fragmented. Drawing on strategic human resource management and dynamic capabilities perspectives, this paper develops a conceptual framework positioning SHRM as a microfoundation of SME resilience. It argues that integrated HR practices—training and development, high-involvement work, flexibility, and technology-oriented learning—foster employee-level capabilities such as resilience, learning orientation, and engagement. These capabilities, in turn, strengthen organizational mechanisms including strategic flexibility, knowledge sharing, and adaptive responsiveness, enabling SMEs to both recover from and adapt to disruption. The framework further proposes that resilience enhances organizational adaptability. Six propositions are advanced. As a conceptual contribution, the framework extends resilience and SHRM scholarship beyond performance-oriented views and requires future empirical validation*

Keywords: HRM, SME, Resilience, Adaptability, Turbulence

1. Introduction

SMALL and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operate in environments increasingly characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and recurrent disruption. Economic instability, technological shifts, supply chain interruptions, labor shortages, geopolitical turbulence, and institutional uncertainty have transformed organizational resilience from a desirable capability into a condition of survival [1], [2]. Although SMEs are widely recognized as critical drivers of employment, innovation, and regional development, they remain disproportionately vulnerable to environmental turbulence because of limited financial slack, constrained managerial resources, and dependence on a relatively small workforce [3], [4]. Unlike large organizations that often possess redundancy mechanisms and formalized crisis management systems, SMEs frequently rely on the adaptability, commitment, and multifunctionality of employees to navigate disruption.

Within this context, organizational resilience has emerged as a prominent concept for understanding how firms withstand adversity and sustain functioning under disruption. Existing research conceptualizes resilience as an organization's capacity to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and recover from disruptive events while maintaining continuity and enabling renewal [1], [5]. However, resilience should not merely be understood as an organization's ability to “bounce back.” Increasingly, scholars emphasize resilience as a dynamic process involving adaptation, learning, and transformation—a “bounce-forward” orientation in which organizations reconfigure capabilities to respond to changing environmental conditions [6], [2]. For SMEs, resilience is

therefore closely intertwined with organizational adaptability, namely the ability to adjust structures, behaviors, and strategic responses in uncertain environments.

Despite growing scholarly attention to resilience, an important gap remains in understanding the organizational mechanisms through which SMEs cultivate resilient and adaptive capacities. Prior studies have largely emphasized financial preparedness, digital transformation, business continuity planning, or strategic flexibility as antecedents of resilience [3], [4]. Although the human dimension of resilience is frequently acknowledged, the role of strategic human resource management (SHRM) in enabling resilience and adaptability remains conceptually fragmented, particularly in SME contexts [7]. Existing research often examines HRM practices primarily through performance outcomes such as productivity, innovation, or competitive advantage, while paying comparatively less attention to their contribution to organizational resilience under turbulence [8].

This omission is surprising because SMEs depend heavily on human resources as a central organizational asset. In resource-constrained firms, employees frequently occupy multiple roles, respond flexibly to operational changes, and facilitate organizational learning during crises. Strategic HRM practices—including training and development, employee involvement, flexible work systems, participative decision-making, performance management, and capability development—may therefore function as organizational microfoundations that strengthen resilience and adaptive responsiveness [7], [8]. Through enhancing workforce flexibility, learning orientation, employee resilience, and knowledge integration, SHRM practices may enable SMEs not only to absorb disruption but also to adapt strategically to changing environments.

Drawing on strategic human resource management and dynamic capabilities perspectives, this paper develops a conceptual framework explaining how strategic HRM practices contribute to organizational resilience and adaptability in SMEs. Specifically, the paper argues that SHRM practices create employee-level and organizational-level capacities that support sensing, responding to, and reconfiguring organizational activities under turbulence. In doing so, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it advances resilience scholarship by conceptualizing SHRM as a microfoundation of SME resilience. Second, it bridges fragmented discussions between SHRM and organizational resilience research. Third, it extends understanding of adaptability in SMEs by proposing a process-oriented explanation linking HR practices to organizational resilience under turbulent conditions.

2. SMEs, Turbulence, And Organizational Resilience

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operate under conditions of heightened environmental turbulence, making resilience and adaptability central to organizational survival and continuity. Environmental turbulence refers to the degree of instability, unpredictability, and rapid change affecting organizational environments, including economic volatility, technological disruption, regulatory shifts, labor market uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and crisis events [9], [10]. Compared with larger firms, SMEs are particularly exposed to such disruptions because of their limited resource buffers, lower formalization, narrower managerial specialization, and greater dependence on human capabilities [3], [4]. Consequently, SMEs often experience environmental turbulence not as episodic shocks but as persistent operating conditions requiring continuous adjustment.

Although SMEs are frequently described as vulnerable organizations, their structural characteristics also provide potential adaptive advantages. Smaller size, informal communication structures, reduced bureaucratic rigidity, and closer interpersonal relationships may facilitate faster decision-making and greater responsiveness to environmental change [4]. However, such advantages do not automatically translate into resilience. Without appropriate organizational systems and capabilities, SMEs may struggle to absorb disruption, reorganize activities, and sustain performance during uncertainty. This raises an important question concerning the mechanisms through which SMEs cultivate resilience and adaptive responsiveness.

Organizational resilience has emerged as a useful construct for understanding how organizations respond to adversity. Resilience is broadly conceptualized as the capability of organizations to anticipate, absorb, cope with,

recover from, and adapt to disruptions while maintaining organizational functioning [1], [6]. Earlier resilience research often emphasized recovery and continuity, portraying resilience as an organization's capacity to return to equilibrium following disturbance—a “bounce-back” perspective [2]. While valuable, this understanding is increasingly viewed as insufficient in highly turbulent contexts where returning to prior routines may no longer be feasible or desirable.

More recent scholarship conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic and developmental process involving organizational learning, reconfiguration, and renewal [1], [5]. From this perspective, resilience includes not only resistance to disruption but also the ability to transform in response to environmental shifts. Scholars therefore distinguish between bounce-back resilience, which emphasizes recovery and continuity, and bounce-forward resilience, which refers to the organization's capacity to evolve, innovate, and emerge stronger from disruption [6], [8]. For SMEs operating under persistent turbulence, the latter may be especially important because resilience increasingly depends on adaptive change rather than restoration of previous organizational states.

This distinction highlights the close relationship between resilience and organizational adaptability. Although frequently discussed together, the two constructs represent different organizational capacities. Resilience refers to the ability to withstand and recover from adversity, whereas adaptability concerns the ability to modify structures, routines, and behaviors in response to environmental changes [11]. Adaptability therefore reflects organizational responsiveness and strategic flexibility, enabling firms to recognize emerging conditions and adjust operations accordingly. In SMEs, resilience without adaptability may merely prolong survival under deteriorating conditions, whereas adaptability without resilience may weaken organizational continuity during crises.

Taken together, SMEs require both resilience and adaptability to sustain organizational functioning in turbulent environments. This suggests the importance of organizational mechanisms that simultaneously strengthen employee responsiveness, learning, flexibility, and strategic adjustment. As argued in this paper, strategic human resource management may constitute one such mechanism by enabling the development of workforce and organizational capacities that support resilient and adaptive organizational responses.

3. Strategic Human Resource Management in SMEs

Strategic human resource management (SHRM) refers to the systematic alignment of human resource practices with organizational objectives to enhance organizational effectiveness and long-term competitiveness [12], [7]. Unlike traditional personnel management, which emphasizes administrative functions, SHRM focuses on the strategic deployment of human resources to strengthen organizational capabilities, improve responsiveness, and sustain performance under changing conditions [13]. In SMEs, where human capital often represents one of the most limited yet strategically important resources, SHRM assumes heightened importance because organizational survival frequently depends on employees' flexibility, engagement, and problem-solving capacity.

SMEs differ substantially from large firms in the implementation of HRM systems. Limited financial resources, lower managerial specialization, and informal organizational structures often reduce the extent of formalized HR practices [14]. Nevertheless, SMEs may benefit disproportionately from strategically aligned HR systems because employees frequently occupy multifunctional roles and operate close to decision-making processes. Consequently, HR practices in SMEs are not merely supportive mechanisms but may constitute essential organizational systems through which resilience and adaptability emerge.

A central dimension of SHRM in SMEs concerns human capital development through training, learning, and skill enhancement. Strategic investments in employee development increase workforce capability, improve knowledge acquisition, and strengthen problem-solving capacity under uncertainty [7]. Continuous learning practices may be particularly important in turbulent environments characterized by technological shifts, market instability, and changing operational demands. Employees who possess broader competencies and adaptive skills are more capable of responding to disruption, performing cross-functional activities, and facilitating

organizational adjustment. Empirical evidence further suggests that training-oriented HR systems contribute to innovation, resilience, and organizational responsiveness in SMEs [15], [8].

A second important dimension concerns high-involvement work practices, including employee participation, empowerment, engagement, and decentralized decision-making. Strategic HR systems that encourage employee voice and participation improve organizational responsiveness by facilitating information sharing and collective problem solving [7]. Because SMEs often possess flatter organizational structures and shorter communication channels, employee involvement may accelerate organizational reactions to environmental change. High-performance work systems (HPWSs), characterized by participatory practices, capability development, and performance alignment, have been shown to strengthen organizational resilience by increasing human capital value and workforce responsiveness [8].

Third, SHRM in SMEs increasingly emphasizes workforce flexibility and adaptive employment systems. Flexible role arrangements, multitasking, task rotation, and adaptive work structures may enhance organizational responsiveness during turbulence by enabling rapid redeployment of human resources [2]. Unlike rigid organizational systems, SMEs frequently require employees to shift responsibilities in response to operational disruptions, labor shortages, or market shifts. Strategic HR practices that encourage flexibility therefore reduce organizational rigidity and strengthen the organization's capacity to maintain continuity under changing conditions.

Finally, SHRM contributes to resilience through the cultivation of psychological and technological adaptability among employees. Employee resilience—the ability to cope with uncertainty, stress, and disruption—can be strengthened through supportive leadership, learning opportunities, communication systems, and developmental HR practices [16]. Similarly, strategic HR systems that facilitate digital competence and technology adaptation improve organizational readiness to respond to evolving environmental demands [17]. In increasingly uncertain environments, organizational adaptability depends not only on strategic intent but also on employees' willingness and capability to adjust behaviors and routines.

Taken together, SHRM practices in SMEs extend beyond workforce administration and performance management. Through investments in capability development, participation, flexibility, and adaptive learning, SHRM may create the organizational conditions necessary for resilience and adaptability under turbulence. This suggests that strategic HRM should be conceptualized not simply as an operational function but as a foundational organizational mechanism that enables SMEs to absorb disruption, reorganize activities, and sustain continuity in uncertain environments

4. Theoretical Framework: Why Strategic HRM Builds Organizational Resilience in SMEs

Understanding why strategic human resource management (SHRM) contributes to organizational resilience in SMEs requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of HR practices toward a capability-based explanation of organizational adaptation. Although prior research demonstrates positive associations between HR systems and organizational performance, the mechanisms through which SHRM enables firms to withstand and adapt to turbulence remain underdeveloped [7]. This paper argues that SHRM strengthens resilience by cultivating workforce and organizational capabilities that enable SMEs to sense change, respond to disruption, and reconfigure resources under uncertainty.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory provides an appropriate theoretical lens for explaining this relationship. Dynamic capabilities refer to an organization's ability to integrate, mobilize, and reconfigure resources to address rapidly changing environments [18], [19]. Unlike ordinary capabilities aimed at operational efficiency, dynamic capabilities support adaptation, renewal, and transformation under turbulence. For SMEs, adaptation depends less on resource abundance and more on effectively mobilizing human capabilities.

Dynamic capabilities operate through three interrelated processes: sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring [19]. Sensing involves identifying threats and opportunities, seizing concerns coordinated organizational responses, and reconfiguring refers to modifying routines and reallocating resources to sustain adaptation. Because SMEs

rely heavily on informal coordination and multifunctional employees, these capabilities are strongly shaped by workforce capacity [4].

SHRM facilitates sensing by enhancing employee competence, learning orientation, and environmental responsiveness through training, developmental practices, and participatory communication [7]. It strengthens seizing through engagement, empowerment, and high-involvement work systems that improve responsiveness and coordinated action during disruption [2], [8]. Finally, SHRM supports reconfiguring by fostering workforce flexibility, multiskilling, and adaptive learning, enabling SMEs to modify routines and redeploy human resources under changing conditions [14].

This perspective also clarifies how SHRM contributes to organizational resilience. Resilience increasingly reflects a dynamic process of anticipation, coping, recovery, and renewal rather than simple resistance to disruption [1]. By strengthening employee resilience, knowledge sharing, and adaptive responsiveness, SHRM enables SMEs not only to recover from shocks (“bounce back”) but also to adapt and reposition under uncertainty (“bounce forward”) [6], [8].

Taken together, SHRM may be understood as a microfoundation of organizational resilience because it develops the human and organizational capabilities necessary for sensing, responding to, and adapting under turbulence. This capability-based perspective provides the theoretical basis for the conceptual framework developed in the following section.

5. Proposed Conceptual Framework and Propositions

The preceding discussion suggests that the relationship between strategic human resource management (SHRM) and SME resilience is neither direct nor purely operational. Rather, SHRM influences organizational outcomes through a series of employee-level and organizational-level mechanisms that collectively enhance adaptive capacity under turbulence. Building on the dynamic capabilities’ perspective, this paper proposes a conceptual framework in which SHRM practices function as organizational microfoundations that cultivate resilience and adaptability by strengthening workforce responsiveness, learning, flexibility, and strategic adjustment.

The proposed framework conceptualizes SHRM as a multidimensional system comprising training and development, high-involvement work practices, participatory decision-making, flexible work arrangements, performance management, and technology-oriented learning systems. Rather than treating these practices as isolated interventions, the framework assumes complementarities among HR activities, whereby mutually reinforcing HR systems enhance employees’ capability and willingness to respond to environmental uncertainty [12], [7]. In SMEs, where organizational effectiveness is highly dependent on human capital and informal coordination mechanisms, such integrated HR systems may be particularly consequential.

The framework proposes that SHRM influences organizational resilience primarily through employee-level capabilities. Specifically, strategic HR practices foster employee resilience, learning orientation, technological adaptability, engagement, and role flexibility. Employee resilience reflects the capacity to cope with stress, uncertainty, and operational disruption while sustaining functioning under adversity [16]. Learning orientation concerns employees’ willingness and ability to acquire new knowledge and adapt to emerging organizational requirements. Similarly, technology adaptation reflects employees’ capability to adjust to digital tools and changing operational systems, an increasingly important requirement under technological turbulence [17]. Through training, participation, and developmental support, SHRM may therefore create a workforce more capable of recognizing and responding to changing organizational demands.

However, employee-level capabilities alone may be insufficient to explain resilience at the organizational level. Accordingly, the framework proposes a second layer of organizational mechanisms through which employee competencies are translated into collective organizational outcomes. Specifically, SHRM-supported employee capabilities strengthen strategic flexibility, knowledge sharing, and adaptive responsiveness. Strategic flexibility refers to an organization’s ability to adjust decisions, redeploy resources, and revise actions in response to environmental changes [20]. Knowledge sharing enables organizational learning by facilitating communication and problem solving across employees, while adaptive responsiveness reflects the organization’s capacity to react rapidly and effectively to disruption. In SMEs, these mechanisms are particularly important

because flatter organizational structures often depend on rapid interpersonal coordination rather than formalized routines [4].

The framework further proposes that these organizational mechanisms collectively contribute to organizational resilience. As discussed earlier, resilience encompasses not only the capacity to absorb and recover from disruption but also the ability to adapt and renew organizational functioning under uncertainty [1], [6]. Consequently, SHRM may support both bounce-back resilience, reflected in continuity and recovery, and bounce-forward resilience, reflected in transformation and strategic repositioning [8]. By cultivating employee adaptability and organizational flexibility, strategic HR systems may allow SMEs to sustain functioning while simultaneously responding proactively to environmental turbulence.

Finally, the framework proposes that organizational resilience strengthens organizational adaptability. While resilience concerns maintaining organizational continuity during adversity, adaptability refers to the organization's ability to revise routines, structures, and strategies in response to environmental change [11]. Resilient SMEs may therefore possess stronger adaptive capacity because repeated exposure to turbulence fosters learning, responsiveness, and capability renewal. Organizational adaptability, in turn, supports long-term sustainability and competitiveness by enabling SMEs to evolve rather than merely surviving under changing conditions.

The proposed relationships are summarized in Figure 1.

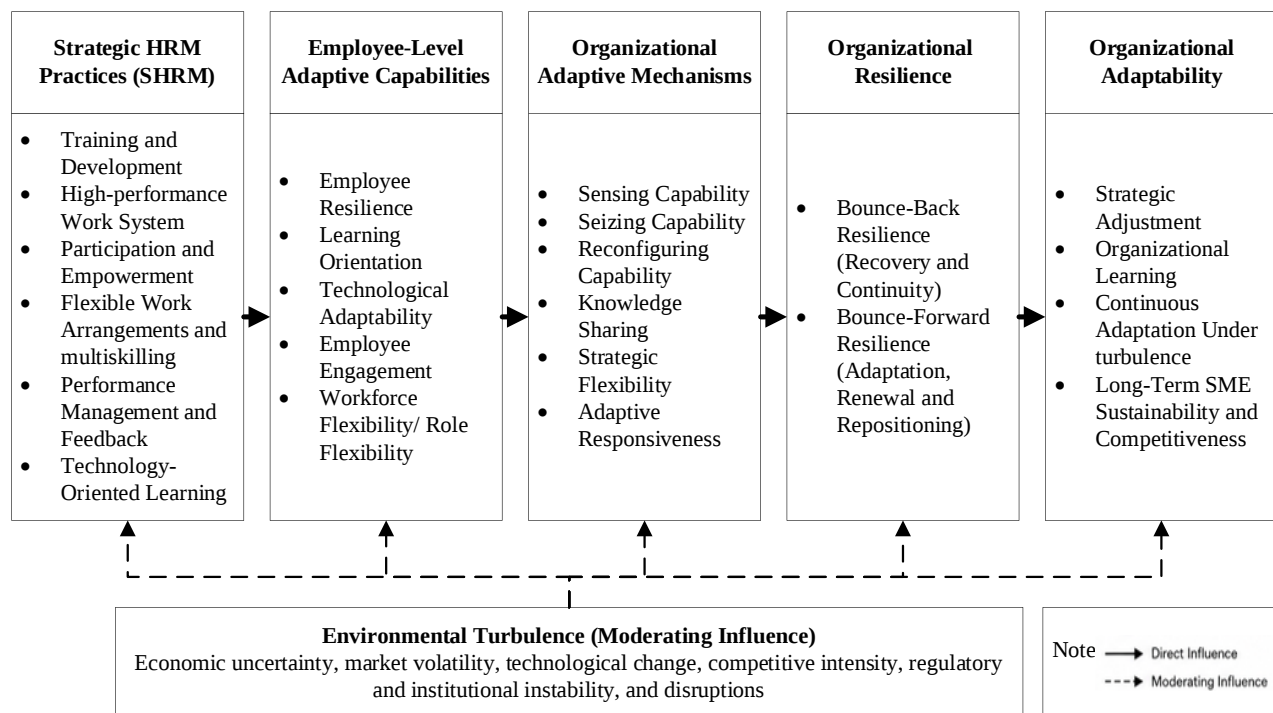


Fig. 1 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the conceptual arguments developed in this study, the following propositions are advanced:

Proposition 1. Strategic human resource management practices positively influence employee-level adaptive capabilities, including employee resilience, learning orientation, technological adaptability, engagement, and role flexibility in SMEs.

Proposition 2. Employee-level adaptive capabilities positively contribute to organizational mechanisms of resilience, including strategic flexibility, knowledge sharing, and adaptive responsiveness.

Proposition 3. Strategic human resource management practices positively influence organizational resilience in SMEs through employee-level adaptive capabilities.

Proposition 4. Organizational mechanisms, particularly strategic flexibility and adaptive responsiveness, mediate the relationship between employee-level capabilities and organizational resilience.

Proposition 5. Organizational resilience positively influences organizational adaptability in SMEs.

Proposition 6. *Strategic human resource management practices indirectly enhance organizational adaptability through organizational resilience.*

Collectively, these propositions position SHRM not as an isolated organizational function but as a foundational mechanism through which SMEs develop resilient and adaptive capabilities under turbulent conditions. The framework further highlights resilience as an emergent organizational outcome generated through interconnected human, organizational, and strategic processes rather than a static organizational trait

6. Discussion and Contributions

This paper develops a conceptual framework explaining how strategic human resource management (SHRM) practices contribute to organizational resilience and adaptability in SMEs under environmental turbulence. Moving beyond performance-oriented views of HRM, the study argues that SHRM functions as an organizational microfoundation through which SMEs cultivate adaptive capacity, workforce flexibility, and resilience. Specifically, SHRM practices enhance employee-level capabilities—including resilience, learning orientation, engagement, and technological adaptability—which strengthen organizational mechanisms such as strategic flexibility, knowledge sharing, and adaptive responsiveness, ultimately supporting resilience and adaptability.

The first contribution concerns organizational resilience literature. Existing studies frequently conceptualize resilience as a capability enabling firms to recover from disruption [1], [6], while paying less attention to the human mechanisms through which resilience emerges, particularly in SMEs. This paper addresses this gap by positioning SHRM as a microfoundational driver of resilience. Rather than viewing resilience as a static attribute, the framework conceptualizes it as an emergent process reinforced through employee capability development, organizational flexibility, and adaptive learning.

Second, this paper extends SHRM literature beyond traditional performance outcomes such as productivity and competitive advantage [7]. In turbulent environments, firms must prioritize responsiveness and continuity alongside performance. The proposed framework therefore suggests that SHRM not only improves efficiency but also enables organizations to sustain functioning and reorganize under uncertainty, reinforcing its role as a strategic organizational capability [2].

Third, the study contributes to SME research by offering a capability-based explanation for resilience under turbulence. Although SMEs are often characterized by resource limitations and operational fragility [3], strategically aligned HR systems may compensate for such constraints by strengthening workforce adaptability and organizational responsiveness. This perspective shifts attention from structural deficiencies toward capability development as a mechanism of SME survival and renewal.

The paper also contributes theoretically by integrating SHRM with Dynamic Capabilities Theory. By linking HR practices to sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring processes [19], the framework clarifies how adaptive organizational capabilities emerge in SMEs facing turbulence.

Finally, as a conceptual paper, the proposed relationships require empirical validation. Future studies may examine the framework across different SME contexts and levels of environmental turbulence to assess the contingencies shaping the SHRM–resilience relationship

7. Practical Implications and Conclusion

The conceptual framework developed in this paper offers important practical implications for SME managers operating under turbulent conditions. In many SMEs, resilience-building efforts are often constrained by limited financial resources, managerial capacity, and formal strategic systems. Consequently, managers may prioritize short-term operational survival over investments in workforce development. However, this paper argues that strategic human resource management (SHRM) should be viewed not as an administrative expense but as a strategic mechanism for organizational continuity and adaptability.

First, SME managers should invest in continuous employee development and multitasking. Training initiatives that enhance problem-solving, digital competence, and adaptive learning can strengthen employees' ability to respond effectively to changing environmental conditions. In uncertain environments, workforce

flexibility becomes particularly valuable because employees are frequently required to perform multiple roles and adapt rapidly to operational disruptions [2].

Second, SMEs may benefit from high-involvement HR practices that encourage employee participation, communication, and decentralized decision-making. Because SMEs often rely on informal coordination and rapid responsiveness, involving employees in problem-solving processes may improve organizational sensing and responsiveness during disruption. HR systems that promote employee voice, empowerment, and engagement can therefore strengthen adaptive organizational behavior and reduce rigidity [7].

Third, managers should cultivate psychological and technological adaptability among employees. Supportive organizational climates, developmental feedback, and investments in digital learning can improve employees' resilience to uncertainty while strengthening organizational readiness for technological and market changes. Rather than relying exclusively on financial or structural buffers, SMEs may build resilience through workforce capability and organizational learning.

In conclusion, this paper conceptualizes SHRM as a microfoundation of organizational resilience and adaptability in SMEs. Drawing on Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the study argues that strategic HR practices contribute to resilience by strengthening employee capabilities and organizational mechanisms that support sensing, responding to, and reconfiguring activities under turbulence. By linking SHRM with resilience and adaptability, the proposed framework extends existing scholarships beyond performance-oriented views of HRM and highlights the strategic importance of people-centered capabilities in SME survival and renewal. Future empirical research is needed to test the proposed relationships across different organizational and institutional contexts.

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