

# Strengthening Labor Skills and Human Talent Management in SMES. Perspective of a Case Study of the Flower Sector in the Latacunga Canton of Ecuador

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## ABSTRACT

In the contemporary landscape of rapid technological advancements, globalization and evolving market demands, effective human talent development and professional skills management has become a critical imperative for organizations seeking sustained success. The general objective of the study presented was: Analyze the management of human talent in a group of SMEs strengthening in the flower sector of the Latacunga canton of Ecuador to make existing labor skills visible. The methodology was a mixed approach, explanatory-descriptive type, documentary design with field support. A stratified random sample of 37 workers from a group of SMEs in the flower sector of the canton of Latacunga was used to whom a Likert scale survey was applied, which had a reliability of 0.853, a very high level. The result was that human talent management has weaknesses in the interaction between talent development, the strengthening of work skills, and the changing demands of the contemporary work landscape, which has allowed

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employees to have a less favorable perspective of development organizational.

**Keywords:** Human Talent Management; Development; Competencies

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## Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of the global economy, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a fundamental role, particularly in the services sector, as they serve as engines of growth and employment generation. However, despite its importance, SMEs often face an infinite number of challenges regarding Human Talent Management (HTM), especially in the Latin American region.

In this sense, they face significant challenges that, in some way, hinder growth and competitiveness. A major problem is the persistent struggle to attract and retain qualified employees, exacerbated by limited financial resources and inherent capacity constraints; in this regard, Dini & Stumpo (2020) state that “SMEs often find it difficult to offer salaries and competitive benefits, making it difficult to attract and retain top talent.”

This challenge is further aggravated by high turnover rates, as pointed out by (Latin American Association of Micros, Small and Medium Entrepreneurs AC, [MSMEsLAA], 2019), which result in higher hiring costs and often interrupt the continuity of the business organization. In addition, SMEs also face skills shortages and mismatches in the labor market (World Bank, 2022), making it difficult to find employees with the necessary skills.

Likewise, the lack of investment in digital literacy and training opportunities hinders the ability of SMEs to adapt to technological advances (Inter-American Development Bank [IDB], 2023), limiting their potential for innovation and productivity. The disproportionate impact of external events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, causing closures and financial instability (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2020).

This increased challenges within the GTH and job competencies development, which required specific interventions and support mechanisms to foster resilience and sustainable growth in an increasingly competitive global economy. According to the (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2021), SMEs often struggle with limited resources and capacity constraints, making it difficult to attract, retain, and develop qualified employees.

Likewise, the survey conducted by the Latin American Association of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEsLAA) in 2018 identified employee turnover as one of the main concerns of SMEs throughout the region. Consequently, addressing employee retention and engagement emerges as a critical priority for SMEs seeking to build a stable and skilled workforce.

On the other hand, the study conducted by ECLAC (2020) highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic, particularly on those operating in the services sector, due to lockdown measures and reduced consumer demand. This crisis highlighted the importance of resilience and adaptability in navigating uncertain and volatile business environments, further emphasizing the need for robust talent management strategies that can withstand external disruptions and threats.

In this order of ideas, the study by (World Bank, 2022) highlighted the widespread problem of skills shortages and mismatches in the labor market, particularly in emerging economies such as Ecuador. These shortages affected productivity and competitiveness also perpetuated unemployment and underemployment, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities.

By 2020, Ecuador managed a registry of 846,265 companies, of which 7.6% were classified as SMEs and were responsible for 26.6% of national sales, with medium-sized companies contributing the

most. This indicates the importance level that these organizations have for the country (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean [CAF], 2023).

It is also important to highlight that among the challenges posed by their sustainability in Ecuador it was directly related to the educational and training level of the human talent of these organizations. More than 50% of the owners did not complete their higher education, both university and technical (Table 1). For the IDB, these non-financial factors affect the economic performance of SMEs, generating low levels of productivity and growth (CAF, 2023).

**Table 1**

*Summary of the challenges of SMEs regarding GTH in Ecuador*

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Study</b>
Limited financial resources and capacity constraints	SMEs face challenges due to limited funds and capacity, hampering their ability to invest in talent management and skills development.	(INEC, 2020)
High turnover rates	Turnover rates are notably high, resulting in higher hiring and training costs.	(ALAMPYME, 2018)
Skill shortages and labor market mismatches	SMEs struggle to find qualified workers; there is often a mismatch between the skills required and those available in the labor market.	(World Bank, 2022)
Difficulty competing for the best talents	Limited resources make it difficult to compete with larger companies to attract and retain top talent, impacting growth.	(INEC, 2021)
Lack of digital literacy and training opportunities	They face difficulties in adopting new technologies due to a lack of digital literacy among employees and insufficient training opportunities.	(IDB, 2017)
Challenges in adapting to technological advances	They struggle to keep pace with rapid technological advances, hampering their ability to remain competitive and innovate in the market.	(IDB, 2023)

*Note:* Authors (2024) based on documentary analysis

In this sense, the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses of Ecuador (INEC, 2020) revealed that SMEs struggle to compete with larger companies when attracting and retaining the best talent due to limited financial resources and less attractive benefit packages. The high turnover rates prevailing in the service sector further exacerbate this challenge, resulting in higher hiring and training costs.

Considering the above, this study sought to contribute by providing information on the main talent management challenges faced by SMEs in the flower sector of the canton of Latacunga, located in the province of Cotopaxi, in the Sierra–Central Region of Ecuador. This economy sector constitutes one of the commercial agricultural export products of Ecuador, with the flower trade they have been in second place in recent years and the third exporter of flowers worldwide (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock of Ecuador [MAG], 2019), generator of job sources in the Sierra-Center and Coast Region.

In this dynamic panorama of SMEs, GTH requires a focus on strengthening work or professional skills, which becomes a fundamental force that shapes the companies' success and resilience (Intriago, 2018). Therefore, its role extends beyond traditional personnel management

functions to encompass a strategic and holistic approach that aligns individual growth with organizational objectives (Chiavenato, 2016).

It is relevant to propose viable recommendations to improve their resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability in the long term through a nuanced understanding of the local context, and a synthesis of best practices and the strengthening of workplace competencies.

### **Theoretical approaches**

It is necessary to consider the theory of human capital, proposed by Gary Becker, which constituted a fundamental framework to understand the role of education, training and strengthening skills in improving human talent. Becker's (1964) work emphasized investment in knowledge and skills as crucial contributors to individual productivity and, by extension, organizational success. Contemporary scholar Heckman (2011) expanded on this theory, exploring the dynamic nature of human capital and the importance of lifelong learning (Quintero, 2020).

Likewise, Guest & Nehles (2013) expanded the theory of the Resource-Based View (RBV), highlighting the importance of the postulate that the unique skills and knowledge that individuals possess within an organization contribute significantly to its ability to innovate and adapt. This perspective positioned talent as a valuable resource that requires careful cultivation and management, emphasizing the critical interaction between human capital and organizational success. Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization influenced the configuration of the understanding of learning and organizational development, proposing the construction of organizations more coherent with human aspirations beyond basic needs.

In the last decade, scholars such as Garvin, Edmondson & Gino (2008) expanded on this concept, emphasizing the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning. It is particularly relevant to talent management as organizations strive to create environments that facilitate continuous skill improvement and adaptation to change.

In this sense, the concept of job competencies began to be used derived from David McClelland's research in the 1970s, which focused on identifying the variables that explained performance at work. McClelland managed to put together a framework of characteristics that differentiated the different levels of worker performance based on a series of interviews and observations (Dolan et al., 2015).

For contemporary authors such as Alles (2017), competencies are personality characteristics derived from behaviors that result in successful performance. People may know certain areas and be efficient in that specific aspect but, if they do not have the appropriate skills such as negotiation, teamwork, stress management, and self-motivation, they can hardly complete tasks or perform their duties well.

For Cejas (2015), addressing labor competition involves multiple approaches, as it varies by country. This term emerged in the eighties in certain industrialized regions, mainly in those that had difficulties relating the educational system to the productive system, which motivated the establishment of a term that would promote the training and development of the required workforce.

The response, then, was oriented towards the conception of Labor Competence, intended to be a comprehensive training approach, that from its very design, connects the world of work and society in general with the world of education and training (p.06).

In this order of ideas, a methodology is currently used to identify job competencies. Considering in first place that a worker is identified as competent is when he can demonstrate to a qualified third party that he has the basic behavioral, technical, and management skills of his responsibilities, and tasks of the assigned position and necessary for the performance of productive functions (López, 2016).

All competencies are observed from three points of view to verify the degree of knowledge (implies knowing), skills (implies knowing how to do), and attitudes (implies knowing how to be) (López, 2016). There are three methodologies to identify job competencies: behavioral, constructivist, and functional analysis (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Methodologies to identify job skills*

Methodologies	Description
Behavioral Analysis	It is the study of performance to establish the factors that allow people to perform superiorly. It is concerned with discovering what characteristics of the individual favor superior performance.
Constructivist Analysis	It seeks to discover all the dysfunctions and problems existing in the organization to solve them. It is interested in identifying what the worker should do to resolve these dysfunctions and problems.
Functional analysis	It seeks to detect the essential elements that contributing significantly to achieving a superior result. It is concerned with investigating which are the essential functions in which the individual must prove his or her ability to perform.

A frequently used classification of competencies is the one proposed by Mertens (1997), which considered three types: generic, basic, and specific. Generic competencies are related to work behaviors and attitudes typical of different production areas, such as teamwork, negotiation, and planning (Galdeano & Valiente, 2010).

The basic ones are those acquired in basic training and allow entry to work, such as reading and writing, oral communication, and calculation. The specific competencies are those referring to the technical aspects directly related to the occupation and they are not as easily transferable to other work contexts, such as the operation of specialized machinery and the formulation of projects (Galdeano & Valiente, 2010).

Particularly in the context of Ecuador in recent years, there has been notable interest in labor skills development given that is constituted as a strategic option to guarantee the preparation of people within organizations and/or institutions. This includes a necessary reorganization of the GTH of the productive paradigms in the different sectors of the economy, giving entry or space to practices that guarantee the development of personnel and their productive integration with standards that lead to a better quality of work life.

### Methodology

In this regard, by examining the multifaceted dimensions of human talent development, the presented study attempts to delve deeper into the essential theories and frameworks that underpin GTH, exploring recent research to offer a contemporary perspective on human talent management and empowerment of job skills.

This exploration is not simply an academic exercise; it is a quest to distill practical knowledge that can inform organizational practices in Ecuador, ensuring that talent development strategies are not only aligned with current research but also forward-looking in the face of an SME business landscape in constant evolution.



To achieve this, the general objective was established: Analyze the management of human talent in the strengthening of a group of SMEs in the flower sector of the Latacunga canton of Ecuador to make existing labor skills visible. A mixed approach was used to comprehensively investigate the intricate dynamics surrounding GTH based on skills, education, and the strengthening of work skills. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative through this paradigm, this mixed approach allowed a holistic understanding of the factors that influence GTH within the context of SMEs in Ecuador.

Likewise, the research design incorporated the descriptive-explanatory type of research to illuminate the current state of GTH practices and job skills in the country. Based on the works of contemporary authors and researchers of the last decade, the inductive and deductive method was applied to systematically analyze and interpret the collected data (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018).

This allowed for the derivation of ideas and patterns from specific observations and experiences towards generalizations and vice versa, about people, as well as the identification of emerging themes and patterns within the data and information, providing a nuanced understanding of job competencies and human talent management (Arias, 2021).

To analyze and synthesize the various data sources, the synthetic analytical method was also used. This involved systematically integrating quantitative data in response to surveys and statistical indicators, with qualitative knowledge from documentary analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships and interactions that influenced the GTH. This method allowed for a robust examination of the factors that shape talent development for job skills.

In addition to primary data collection, the research incorporated the documentary technique as a means to collect information and relevant theoretical aspects (Hernández et al., 2014). The documentary technique involved a systematic review and analysis of organizational documents and records. This documentary analysis was essential to understanding the theory and latest practices of GTH, providing a temporal perspective that enriched the general study.

The population included a random convenience sampling of 37 workers from a group of SMEs in the flower sector located in the Latacunga canton of the Cotopaxi province of the Sierra Centro Region of Ecuador, to which a questionnaire of 29 Likert scale questions was applied with five response options *1-Always, 2-Almost Always, 3-Sometimes, 4-Almost never, 5-Never*. To know the levels of existing competencies in SMEs and the management actions in the human development area to strengthen or generate them, based on Mertens' (1997) classification of competencies.

It was necessary to measure the reliability of the instrument after being applied, it was estimated with the support of descriptive statistics under the internal consistency model Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (Arias, 2021), based on the average of the correlations between the items, resulting in a Reliability of 0.853 under the very high-level reliability scale.

In this order of ideas, the research design incorporated content analysis for the documentary technique, systematically coding and categorizing relevant information from documents, investigations, and organizational reports.

## **Results and discussion**

The last decade has seen a more significant emphasis on the social, ethical, and competency development dimensions of GTH. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2020) highlighted the importance of generating skills in the educational field for the business context (Table 3).

Table 3

Comparison of ten competencies identified in the business context

	Skill within the educational context	
	COMPETENCE	ABILITY
Learning capacity	Cognitive	Learning
Adaptability and frustration management	Socio-emotional	Autonomy
Collaboration	Socio-emotional	Collaboration
Verbal and written communication	Socio-emotional	Communication
Creativity and innovation	Cognitive	Learning
Problem solving and decision making	Cognitive	Learning
Critical thinking		Learning
Information and data management	Cognitive	Digital literacy
Leadership	Socio-emotional	Collaboration
Technology and computational thinking		Digital literacy

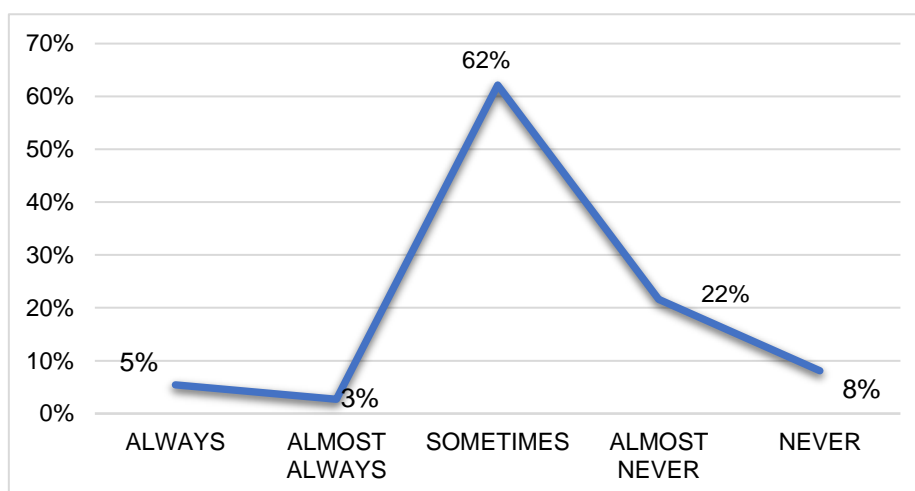
Note: Adapted from ECLAC (2020)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2018) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020) agree on the type of competencies, skills, and implementation strategies, emphasizing the knowledge, values, and attitudes required for a productive life, for decision making and problem-solving.

Particularly, the OECD (2020) identifies three types of competencies with their respective skills: cognitive and metacognitive, social and emotional, practical and physical. While, the *Framework for 21st Century Learning and the ATC21s – Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills* group the competencies with their respective areas of development to consider to be successful in work and life, in: ways of thinking, tools to work, ways of working and ways of life (UNESCO, 2016).

In these terms, a survey of information and findings was conducted through processed data collected directly from the field, where a questionnaire was applied to the 37 selected workers. In terms of generic competencies (See Figure 1), the competencies proposed by ECLAC (2020) and described in Table 3 were taken into consideration.

Figure 1  
Generic skills



62% of workers affirm that sometimes the company's human talent management involves them in development plans that allow them to strengthen and learn generic skills, such as adaptability and frustration management, collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making and leadership.

This result suggests a significant gap regarding employee participation in development initiatives despite their recognized importance. The result is partially inconsistent with the resource-based view (RBV) of talent management, which emphasizes that employees, like organizational resources, must be developed strategically to achieve sustained competitive advantage.

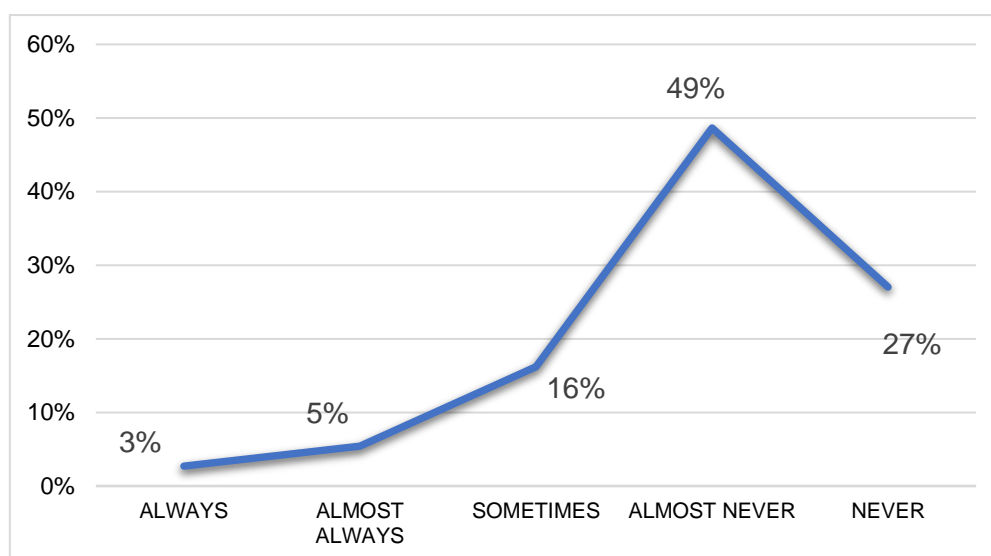
The need for SMEs to adopt a more inclusive approach to talent development is highlighted, drawing insights from the theory of learning organizations, as expressed by Peter Senge. This approach emphasizes continuous learning and knowledge sharing, fostering an environment where employees actively participate in honing generic skills such as adaptability, collaboration, problem-solving, and leadership.

Currently, in competitive organizations, jobs, regardless of their nature (even when they are inclined to more operational occupations), are aligned to the terms of the learning organization, proposed by Peter Senge, where a substantial part of the workforce perceives that their organization actively integrates these competencies into talent development initiatives, fostering a culture of continuous learning. Likewise, with the Resource Based View (RBV) of talent management, where organizations strategically leverage their human resources to obtain a competitive advantage.

On the other hand, basic competencies were measured with aspects contained in the competencies proposed by ECLAC (2020).

**Figure 2**

*Basic skills*



49% of the workers surveyed affirm that aspects such as learning techniques, verbal and written communication, creativity and innovation, critical thinking, information and data management, technology, and computational thinking are rarely present in the supervision of human talent, only as a requirement for staff entry in some areas. 27% affirm that never, which shows an inclination towards positions or occupations that do not consider participatory aspects of the staff in the work organization processes.

Of the 37 workers surveyed, 75% work in the operational part of the flower growers; this suggests that the tasks performed in the jobs continue to be manual and artisanal. However, this is not an obstacle to skills development that allows improved production processes and the quality of people's



working conditions. On the contrary, it has been shown that human talent that has a perception of development in the company is more likely to have a sense of belonging and loyalty towards it without considering the motivation and satisfaction that are relevant ingredients for productivity (Dolan et al. al., 2015); (Chiavenato, 2016); (Quintero, 2020).

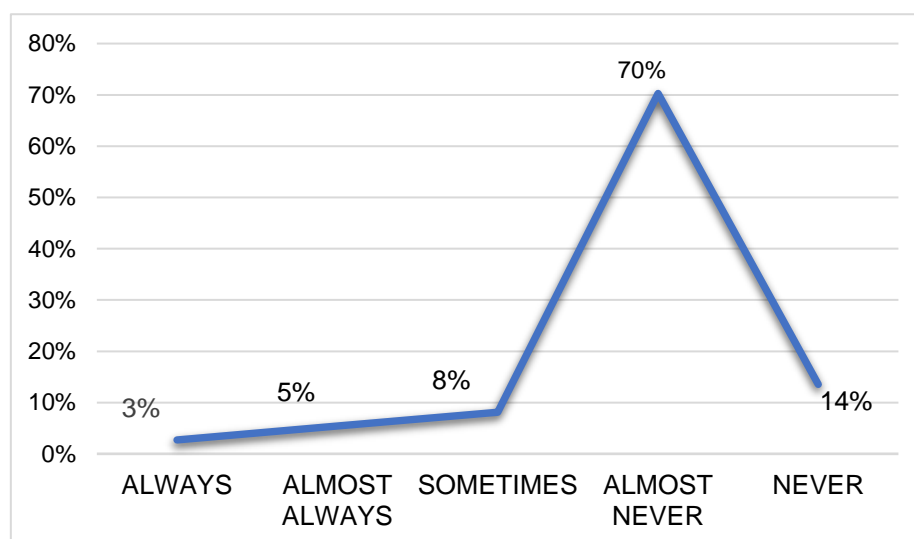
In this sense, it is necessary to consider that human talent management contributes significantly to the competitiveness, sustainability, and global market growth. Floricultural SMEs are vital components of Ecuador's economy, with the floral industry being one of the country's leading sectors. Effective GTH practices are essential to optimize the utilization of human resources and strengthen the competencies necessary to maintain high-quality production standards and meet the strict requirements of international markets.

As Pacheco & Santamaría (2019) highlight, “human talent is the main driver of innovation and competitiveness in flower SMEs since qualified workers are essential to guarantee product quality and satisfy customer demands.” Additionally, talent management initiatives such as recruitment, training, and development programs are critical to addressing skills shortages and labor market mismatches, ensuring that SMEs in the floriculture sector have access to a qualified workforce capable of boosting innovation and productivity.

The job competencies development within an organization fosters employee engagement, job satisfaction, and retention, as pointed out, (Intriago, 2018), thereby reducing turnover rates and associated hiring costs, while promoting stability and continuity within the SMEs.

Regarding specific competencies, questions were asked directly related to the work area and preparation, both at the time of entry and during the performance of duties, as well as the management of the development of human talent, emphasizing the training of skills regarding the technical functions of the position.

**Figure 3**  
*Specific competencies*

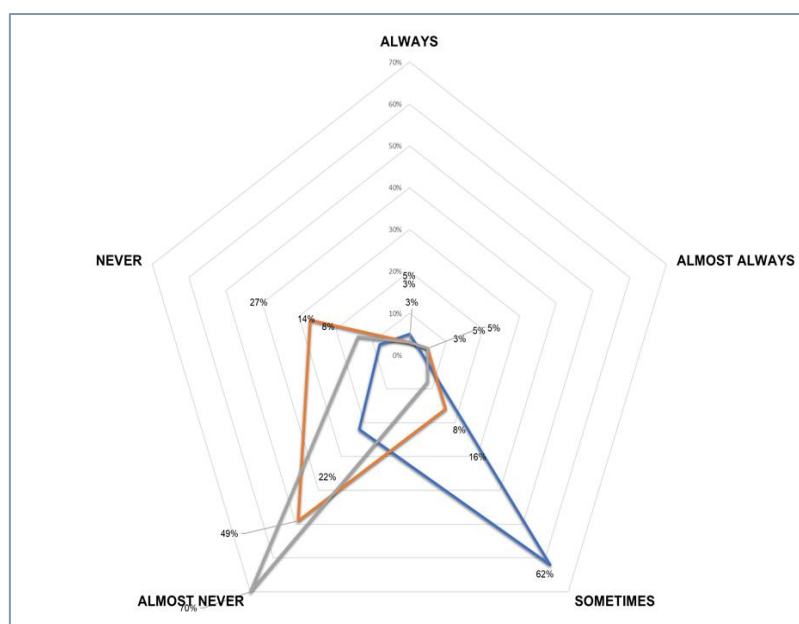


The result indicated that 70% of the employees surveyed express that they rarely receive complete instruction or training for the position; this suggests that SMEs in the flower sector maintain an artisanal vision of work, where the focus is on the distribution of operational work and staff learn

from the experience of other colleagues or by doing the activity with little instruction and strengthening of the competencies inherent to the position. It implies a work culture that does not incorporate adaptability, innovation, and the acquisition of new skills into its productive activities.

**Figure 4**

*Summary of strengthening visible competencies*



The respondents made visible that the group of SMEs for which they work has notable deficiencies in terms of strengthening competencies in the GTH. This may be a sign that these organizations, even though they have an importance in the export of the product, flower companies have very particular characteristics, which implies an organization of work in the process of consolidation of the same, which leans towards a Taylorist paradigm, characterized by yield control, and personnel reduction per hectare, with a combination of rationalization with attempts to improve production, focusing on workforce control. The workers majority are young people who adapt to the demands of overtime, performance, high productivity, and demanding rhythms with low levels of peasant and/or union organization (Al Ibrahim, 2018), and these characteristics have been maintained over time.

In this sense, it is noteworthy to consider that technological advances are increasingly shaping production processes and market dynamics; GTH plays a fundamental role in facilitating the adoption and integration of new technologies. By investing in digital literacy and providing training opportunities, SMEs can improve the adaptability and agility of their workforce, allowing them to leverage technology effectively to improve efficiency and competitiveness.

It is relevant to highlight that talent management practices that prioritize the well-being and professional development of employees contribute to creating a positive organizational culture and fostering a sense of loyalty and commitment among workers. This, in turn, improves teamwork, collaboration, and creativity within floriculture SMEs, ultimately driving innovation and sustainable growth.

## Conclusions

SMEs struggle to provide adequate training and development opportunities due to resource limitations and a lack of benefits awareness of upskilling their workforce. This highlights the need for specific interventions and support mechanisms to help these organizations adopt practices that raise the quality of work life and consequently strengthen competencies.

In light of these challenges, it is evident that SMEs, in addressing issues such as skills shortages, employee turnover, technological adaptation, and the impact of external crises, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and business owners can foster an environment conducive to growth and development.

The analysis of human talent management in a group of SMEs strengthening in the flower sector of the Latacunga canton of Ecuador to make existing labor skills visible, pointed to a dynamic and strategic approach to talent management is aligned with multiple theoretical perspectives. For this, the prevalence of competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and technological skills is essential, echoing the demands of the contemporary workforce, as described by influential authors in human talent management who emphasize the importance of a creative and technologically savvy crew in today's knowledge economy.

Finally, the symbiotic relationship between talent development and organizational success is highlighted. The theoretical perspectives of human capital theory, social exchange theory, and learning organization theory provide insights into how a company's commitment to talent development contributes to a positive and mutually beneficial work environment, improving individual competencies and organizational capabilities.

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