

## **“Enhancing Competitive Advantage Through Strategic Talent Management and Total Quality Management: A Study of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Saudi Arabia”**

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## Abstract:

This study investigates how Strategic Talent Management (STM) and Total Quality Management (TQM) impact and lead to Competitive Advantage (CA) in the context of SMEs in Saudi Arabia as part of the Vision 2030 strategy. Using a quantitative approach, a structural equation modelling (SEM) technique for data analysis was applied to 381 valid survey responses for professionals among SMEs. The results show that STM has no direct and statistically significant effect on CA. Conversely, TQM shows a good, positive, and significant association with CA, implying that exercising extensive quality management approaches will enhance organizational competitiveness. From a managerial standpoint, this study provides helpful insights for those leading SMEs, highlighting that talent development initiatives must be aligned with the quality management frameworks to improve performance and competitiveness. In addition, the study adds to the existing theoretical dialogue on the indirect relationship of STM on CA through TQM, revealing that this interlink is particularly strong in emerging market scenarios. The implications of the study are particularly relevant to policymakers and practitioners working to realize organizational excellence and economic diversification goals from national development plans.

**Keywords:** Strategic Talent Management, Total Quality Management, Competitive Advantage, SMEs, Saudi Arabia.

## 1. Introduction

Competitiveness is vital to the success, growth, and sustainability of businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in the face of intense competition in an ever-evolving business environment. SMEs represent around 90% of businesses globally and play a crucial role in the gross domestic product (GDP) and job creation at the national level (World Bank, 2023). SMEs make up 99.5% of all enterprises in Saudi Arabia and contribute around 20% of the national GDP (Source: Saudi Vision 2030 Report, 2023). Their growth and sustainability are needed to realize the country's economic evolution vision. SMEs represent a pillar within the Vision 2030 economic transformation plan in Saudi Arabia — this plan is designed to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil, while also promoting an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Saudi Vision 2030, 2023). SME development, which leads to enhanced competitiveness, is central to achieving these national aspirations and ensuring their sustained viability. Despite such economic importance, however, small and medium-sized enterprises in Saudi Arabia encounter continuing challenges, such as limited access to capital, operational inefficiencies, skills gaps in the workforce, and fragmented quality management practices (Al-tayyar et al., 2021; Abdulghaffar & Akkad, 2021). Because of these restrictions, they cannot compete in local, native, and foreign country markets. To address these issues, SMEs need to implement strategic management practices to improve workforce abilities and organizational processes—STM and TQM are the two top factors that turn the wheel of transformation (Kaliannan et al., 2023; Fernández et al., 2022). Hence, the cost-effective Strategic management practices undertaken by the SMEs would enhance their employee efficiencies and process efficacies. STM and TQM are considered two notable approaches employed by organizations to achieve a competitive advantage (Kalogiannidis, 2021; Akhtar et al., 2024).

STM is a long-term, strategic driver that enables organizations to woo, captivate, and retain top talent that will drive innovation and appetite for business growth forward. Companies with successful STM frameworks show higher workforce engagement, innovation, and market position than those without efforts (Al Hammadi et al., 2019), according to research. This is even more so in the case of SMEs, where a proper STM strategy enables the firm to be more agile when aligning business with market preferences in order to remain competitive. Employers who possess good talent management strategies have higher employee engagement, better results, and marketplace positioning (Kaliannan et al., 2023). Effective STM means an effective and agile working culture for SMEs that can counter rapidly changing market trends in order to provide the best services or products. TQM is a continuous improvement philosophy based on a company-wide commitment to meeting the needs of a customer through leadership, customer satisfaction, internal processes, external processes, and overall quality improvement. For example, Raj et al. (2024) note that organizations that adopt TQM tend to experience increases in customer loyalty, as well as decreases in operational costs and overall efficiency. Through its practices, TQM cultivates organizational excellence and then develops organizational competitiveness and SME sustainability.

Although STM and TQM have been separately researched extensively, little attention has been given to the strategic implication of these two disciplines in conjunction, which represents an under-researched area of inquiry. There is a

relationship between talent optimization and quality excellence that serves as synergy leading to higher business agility, a performing workforce, and a better-quality product/service (Tawalbeh & Jaradat, 2020). This is not widely done at SMEs, where these strategies must be followed on their own and not as a complete competitive advantage. Comparing these two addresses an opportunity to discover alternative paths for SMEs to tap and thrive in the long run. Researchers have indicated that combining STM and TQM results in a synergistic effect such that business agility, employee engagement, and product or service quality improve (Tawalbeh & Jaradat, 2020). Nevertheless, SMEs do this in isolation and are unable to leverage their synergies (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021). Hence, the study seeks to bridge this gap by classifying the role of STM and TQM in enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs along with the effect of their integration for attaining a competitive advantage.

STM and TQM as practical tool strategies for competitiveness and performance are well-known and inspire many discussions related to SMEs; however, there is still poor understanding, acceptance, implementation, and/or application of STM and TQM practices in our developing economies and particularly in Saudi Arabia. Addressing these important issues can create a huge positive impact on the sustainability of the SME and the long-term success of the business. SMEs face several issues in Saudi Arabia, such as the absence of finance, proneness to development, poor management experience, and ineffective training programs (Al-Qahtani, 2023; Alghamdi et al., 2022). Both high employee turnover and skill gaps are common outcomes of unstructured talent management practices, and such factors ensure an unproductive workforce, making it necessary for SMEs to ensure optimal use of the talent pool to remain competitive (Pocztowski & Pauli, 2022). Similarly, in SMEs that do not adopt quality management practices, lower customer satisfaction, operational inefficiency, and defect rates adversely impact the sustainability of their businesses (Alghamdi et al., 2022; Niyi Anifowose et al., 2022).

Research shows that financial pressure is a significant hurdle that limits SMEs' effectiveness in adopting the TQM, leading to ineffectiveness and a decrease (Alghamdi et al., 2022). The resistance to change or the non-commitment of leaders towards STM further restricts the development of ST (Al-Qahtani, 2023). Top-down organizational structures and primitive management styles can impede the mainstream practice of TQM (Al-Khatib et al., 2022); therefore, cultural and organizational aspects are paramount. Also, the training programs and skills development initiatives are absent, resulting in an unqualified labor pool, which results in inadequacy in every area for SMEs to have operational performance and innovation (Pocztowski & Pauli, 2022).

These issues can be easily addressed when SMEs are invested in leadership training, financial planning, and change management strategies. Key barriers preventing SMEs' integration of STM and TQM must be overcome to foster long-term sustainability and competitiveness in the market through adopting these practices.

Additionally, STM and TQM are commonly applied independently of one another, leading to dissimilar development programs. STM could then impact this positive side of STM by using TQM. Likewise, TQM makes improvements on the quality of what a service or product is; however, without STM, it would be hard for the organization to retain engaged employees. So, it's important to explore:

1. How does Strategic Talent Management (STM) influence Total Quality Management (TQM) in SMEs in Saudi Arabia?
2. What is the impact of Total Quality Management (TQM) on achieving a Competitive Advantage for SMEs?
3. Does Total Quality Management (TQM) mediate the relationship between Strategic Talent Management (STM) and Competitive Advantage?

By answering these questions, this review gives practitioners an effective understanding of best practices that need to be followed by SMEs to achieve sustainable competitive advantage by integrating STM and TQM.

This review utilizes prominent theoretical framework to examine the effect of STM and TQM on the competitiveness of SMEs:

Resource-Based View (RBV) theory: Developed by Barney in 1991, the RBV theory states that a certain competitive advantage comes from internally unique resources of the firm, like human capital, intellectual property, and organizational

culture (Alfaraby & Sinambela, 2025). STM is in line with RBV because talent is perceived as a source of competitiveness among firms, which, when acquired, developed, and retained by firms, is increasingly scarce and allows them to gain a sustainable competitive advantage over time (Zada et al., 2024).

The main objectives of the present study are to investigate the role of Strategic Talent Management (STM) and Total Quality Management (TQM) in enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs in Saudi Arabia. By the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory principles, the study provides a comprehensive framework to examine how SMEs can leverage human capital and quality management practices to gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

The review will provide clear empirical support for business sustainability from talent management and quality management; this has extensive implications for several stakeholders. This study will benefit (a) SME owners and managers—by providing them with practical, evidence-based strategies for talent development and quality management that help SMEs improve productivity, reduce costs, and improve their market position. (b) Government and policymakers—through recommendations to inform targeted SME support programs such as financial incentives, talent development, and quality certification frameworks in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. (c) Academic and Researchers — With the extension of existing literature by probing the relationship between STM and TQM, providing a novel theoretical and empirical contribution to SME competitiveness.

Given the critical role of SMEs in economic development, this study aims to provide practical recommendations for strengthening SME sustainability through the integrated adoption of talent and quality management strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

However, it's no newsflash for anyone today that the business world is intensely competitive, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and as a result, companies need to utilize strategic management techniques to achieve and maintain ongoing success. Two significant models that have been a considerable focus in this context are Strategic Talent Management (STM) and Total Quality Management (TQM). STM addresses the morphological human behavior (attraction, development, and retention of competent employees) needed from a management point of view to be a part of any organizational goal, whereas this TQM management style focuses on consistency in perfection, customer satisfaction, and benefits of process excellence. While both frameworks have been individually researched, little research exists on how their interplay may lead to a synergistic effect that propels competitive advantage (CA). While research on STM and TQM has studied their influence on business performance (on an independent basis), this literature review explores the further potential for practices and philosophies of STM and TQM to be driven by competitive advantage in SMEs.

### Strategic Talent Management (STM) and Competitive Advantage

Strategic Talent Management (STM) is a holistic approach that emphasizes the necessity of recruiting, training, and retaining employees to ensure an organization's competitive advantage. Consequently, STM is pivotal to business sustainability and forms the foundation of strategic planning for organizations (Smith et al., 2020). The STM framework of the organization, where a proper critical aspect approach is designed from the research perspective of further developing a rigorous STM aspect for a company, it will show a positive growth of a higher productivity rate, innovative process, and market trends (Kaliannan et al., 2023). STM is not just about attracting top talent but also about retaining and developing them, ultimately improving employee engagement and reducing turnover.

Various research works suggest that STM is instrumental in improving workforce efficiency and firm performance. Tirrel et al. (2021), in the context of SMEs, emphasize that the relationship between talent retention and financial performance is positive with a more significant effect in dynamic and competitive industries. According to Gallardo & Collings (2021), organizational success is dependent on attracting qualified employees initially but ultimately relies on continuous talent development strategies that nurture professional development.

In addition, STM human resources practices like succession planning, performance management, and employee engagement programs foster a high-skilled and flexible workforce. Järvi & Khoreva (2020) note that talent management is a strategic priority for organizations seeking to enhance their performance and innovation capabilities, especially in competitive environments. In the context of SMEs, where competition for skilled labor can be fierce, talent management is critical to achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. This is a superior concept to SMEs, where managing human capital effectively makes the difference between business sustainability and business growth (Nguyen & Ngo, 2022). As a result, the inclusion of STM as part of any business strategy not only enriches employee performance but also acts as a perpetual source of competitive advantage.

### **Total Quality Management (TQM) and Competitive Advantage**

Total Quality Management (TQM) facilitates business transformation through a structured method to continuous process improvement, employee involvement, and customer satisfaction. TQM was first propagated in the world by Deming (1986) and Juran (1992). TQM has evolved into a commonly accepted management philosophy in both large corporations and SMEs (Abbas, 2019). By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, TQM ensures that organizations exceed or meet customer expectations (Raj et al., 2024). Zhang et al. (2023) proposed that TQM is a quality management technique that consists of multiple quality methods. for instance, information communication, suggestion activities and quality culture.

Empirical studies demonstrate that SMEs implementing TQM experience tangible benefits, including increased customer satisfaction, cost reductions, and improved operational efficiency and companies that adopt TQM principles generally see quantitative gains in efficiency and competitiveness (Stacho et al, 2021). According to Potjanajaruwit (2021) noted that SMEs should support TQM knowledge management activities throughout the organization, focusing on process management activities such as the organization's implementation of quality control systems and procedures.

In addition, studies indicate that TQM facilitates a closer rapport between employees and management, promoting greater collaboration and creativity in the workplace (Yasa et al., 2021). The involvement of all employees and continuous improvement being the core principles of TQM can result in the enhanced performance of employees (Boulahlib, 2024).

TQM also represents the management philosophy that focuses on continuously improving product quality and procedures in order to satisfy customers (Bahia et al., 2023). In SMEs, where limited resources can hinder the implementation of process improvements, TQM can be a low-cost means of maintaining growth. Lepistö (2024) also adds evidence to this statement, noting firms with well-executed TQM systems are also more adaptable to market transitions, most likely due to higher customer retention. Organizations that adopt TQM principles into their strategy build a culture focused on excellence and continuous improvement that goes well above just quality and so represents a strategic advantage (Robina et al., 2023).

### **Integrating STM and TQM for Enhanced Competitive Advantage**

Nonetheless, even though STM and TQM were correlated with competitive advantage individually, their integrated implementation leads to a synergistic effect and generates organizational responsiveness, quality-focused innovation, and increased employee engagement. STM explains how human potential could be developed among employees; TQM highlights how human potential could be preserved through commitment towards quality improvements (Tawalbeh & Jaradat, 2020).

Research has shown that organizations that incorporate TQM philosophies into business practices and HRM strategies are better positioned in the market, stemming from the fact that both philosophies are mutually reinforcing (Alam et al., 2024). As an example, empowered employees are more likely to engage in voluntary participation in quality improvement programs if they have the support of talent development programs (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021). Resulting in improved efficiency, increased customer satisfaction, and enhanced competitive advantage.

An empirical study indicated that the growing importance of integrating talent and quality management to enhance organizational performance in today's competitive environment. It highlights that modern businesses must invest in employee development and quality systems to remain successful. Effective talent and quality management not only boost internal confidence but also create a sustainable competitive advantage (Mishra, 2022).

These insights indicate that STM and TQM work in synergy, creating a positive feedback loop where one practice catalyzes the other and ultimately contributes to a holistic approach to management (Alam et al., 2024). The interaction strengthens the position of human capital as the basis for achieving quality excellence and sustainable competitive advantage.

Also, the organizations that combine STM with TQM tend to be better positioned to deal with challenges caused because of employee attrition, market fluctuations, and technology disruptions (Almazrouei & Dahalan, 2022). Adopting this idea will ensure that employees are not only skilled but also quality-conscious, which helps businesses maintain their stability or competitive advantage over their competitors and create a culture of continuous improvement.

Several studies have shown a positive and significant association between STM, TQM, and competitive advantage in SMEs. Based on the literature reviewed, the present study proposes the next research hypotheses:

**H1:** Strategic Talent Management has a positive effect on SMEs' competitive advantage.

**H2:** Total Quality Management has a positive effect on SMEs' competitive advantage.

**H3:** Total Quality Management mediates the relationship between Strategic Talent Management and competitive advantage.

The conceptual framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1, depicting the hypothesized relationships between STM, TQM, and competitive advantage.

#### Study Variables:

- Independent Variable (IV): Strategic Talent Management (STM)
- Mediating Variable (MV): Total Quality Management (TQM)
- Dependent Variable (DV): Competitive Advantage (CA)

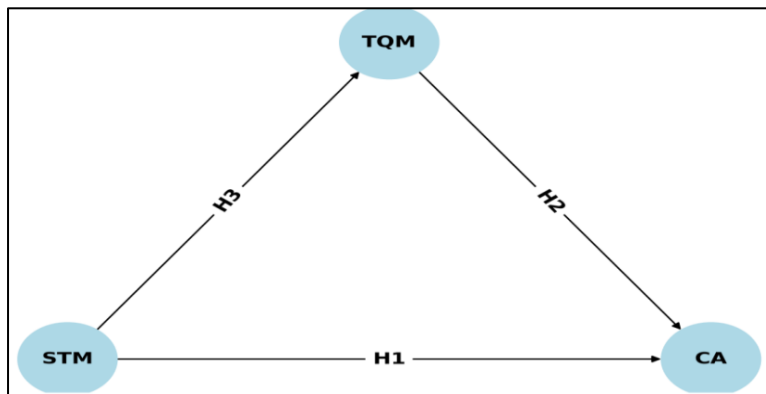


Figure 1. Research model for this study.

### 3. Methodology and Analysis

However, there is a limited understanding of the relationship between STM, TQM, and CA, especially in the context of SMEs, which this research study seeks to address by exploring the links between these three constructs. A quantitative research method was used with a structured questionnaire as the main data collection instrument.

The questionnaire was constructed on an intuitive scientific basis to confirm clarity, reliability, and validity. Its structure has four main parts. The initial section gathered demographic information such as age, sex, industry sector, years of experience,



and organizational level. Strategic talent management (STM) was measured in the second section using items adapted from (Fegley, 2006), related to talent retention, development, attraction, and utilization, in alignment with present and future business requirements. The TQM was measured in the third part of the study, according to the framework suggested by (Obeidat et al. 2018), assessing aspects such as leadership commitment, continuous improvement, strategic planning, and customer focus. The last section assessed CA, which derived from the literature review, and included the following aspects based on the review of SME performance: cost and differentiation level. All constructs used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to facilitate consistent response options and facilitate interpretation of respondents' answers.

The measurement tools were selected with attention, ensuring their reliability and validity through extensive literature review and consensus building. Content and face validity were established following expert review, and the final version was validated in a pilot study with 30 respondents, which resulted in minor wording adjustments for clarity. Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs were above the 0.70 threshold, confirming internal consistency concerning reliability. Likewise, Composite Reliability (CR) values were above the threshold (i.e., 0.70), which also indicates reliability. We also established convergent and discriminant validity. Factor loadings  $> 0.70$  and average variance extracted (AVE)  $> 0.50$  also supported convergent validity, and the Fornell-Larcker Criterion was employed to validate discriminant validity to confirm that each construct differed from others (Rasoolimanesh, 2022).

Stratified random sampling method to ensure representation from a diverse set of sectors. In total, 450 questionnaires were sent, and 381 valid questionnaires came back, resulting in a high response rate of 85%. Data is limited to those who completed the survey and removed outliers through cleaning, using z-scores.

Data were analyzed using structural equation modelling (SEM) using AMOS 24 and SPSS 20 for descriptive statistics. Descriptive analysis involves the calculation of mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for demographic variables. The measurement model was then evaluated in AMOS 24 using SEM to assess reliability and validity. Both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) demonstrated that the internal consistency was acceptable as scores were greater than 0.70. Factor loadings  $> 0.70$  and average variance extracted (AVE)  $> 0.50$  established the convergent validity, while the Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed the discriminant validity by confirming a statistical difference between all constructs.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) using AMOS 24 was used to test the structural model, where path coefficients ( $\beta$ -values), t-values, and p-values ( $p < 0.05$ ) were generated to test the hypotheses of the study. The coefficient of determination,  $R^2$ , was also calculated to evaluate the explanatory power of the model.

In this study, we adopt a rigorous quantitative approach to analyze the relation between STM, TQM, and CA in Saudi SMEs. Descriptive statistics were performed in SPSS 20 while AMOS 24 (SEM) was performed to test measurement (preliminary) and structural models to ensure comprehensive and reliable statistics as shown in the structural model in Figure 2.

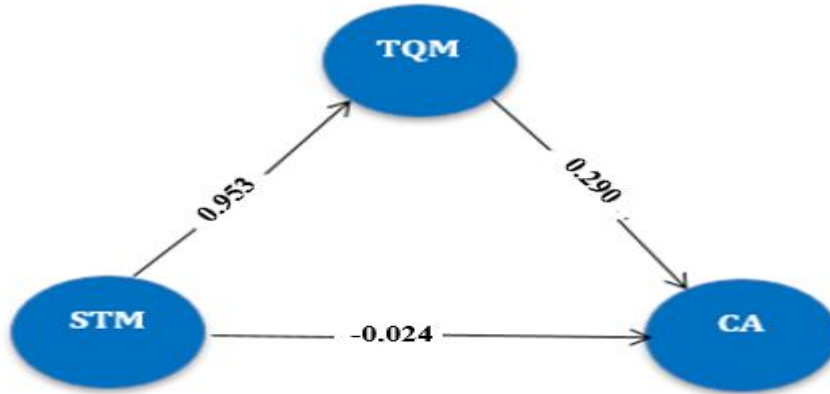


Figure 2. Structural model for this study.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The sample consists of 381 valid responses from a total of 450 distributed questionnaires on different SMEs located in Saudi Arabia after data screening, and the response rate is 85%. This means a high degree of involvement by the participating members, providing a strong, representative sample for valuable insight. Data cleansing processes were performed to eliminate incomplete or inconsistent results, thus maintaining the coherence of the dataset. Data adequacy for the structural equation modelling (SEM) techniques proposed was confirmed during the verification of the final dataset for suitability in structural analysis. These conditions align with the "10 times rule" for sample size conditions in SEM (Sarstedt et al., 2021), promoting the analysis's validity.

As summarized in Table 1, the demographic characteristics of the respondents show that most of them were male (86.6%) and belonged to the 18–29 age group (53.0%). The majority of the participants (63.8%) had a bachelor's degree as their highest educational level, and most of them (89.0%) were Saudi nationals; 35.7% were owners, and 64.3% were supervisors.

Regarding business size, 28.6% of SMEs had fewer than six employees, 43.0% employed between 6 and 49 workers, and 1.6% had between 50 and 249 employees. The respondents were distributed across various sectors, with 41.2% engaged in trade, 22.6% in services, and 36.2% in hospitality. The sample reflects the diversity of Saudi SMEs, ensuring its representativeness for the study.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 381)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	331	86.6%
	Female	51	13.4%
Age Group	18–29 years	202	53.0%
	30–50 years	162	42.5%
	Over 50 years	17	4.5%
Education Level	High school	58	15.2%
	Diploma	33	8.7%
	Bachelor's degree	243	63.8%
	Master's degree	47	12.3%
Nationality	Saudi	339	89.0%



Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Years of Experience	Non-Saudi	42	11.0%
	Less than 3 years	105	27.6%
	3–10 years	137	35.9%
	More than 10 years	139	36.5%
Business Sector	Trade	157	41.2%
	Services	86	22.6%
	Hospitality	138	36.2%
Position in the Organization	Owner	136	35.7%
	Supervisor	245	64.3%
Number of Employees	Fewer than 6 employees	109	28.6%
	6 to 49 employees	164	43.0%
	50 to 249 employees	6	1.6%
Business Profitability	Profitable	161	70.9%
	Breakeven	16	7.0%
	Not profitable	50	22.0%
	Other	4	1.0%

The descriptive statistical analysis of the main constructs—Strategic Talent Management (STM), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Competitive Advantage (CA)—is presented in Table 2. The results indicate that respondents provided positive evaluations of all constructs, with mean values ranging from 3.33 to 3.79 on a five-point Likert scale. This reflects a generally favorable perception of strategic and quality management practices among the surveyed SMEs.

For STM, the construct recorded a mean score of 3.53 with a standard deviation of 0.78, suggesting that participants moderately agreed on the presence and effectiveness of talent management strategies in their organizations. Within TQM, leader management (LM) received the highest mean rating at 3.76 (SD = 0.86), while continuous improvement (CI) was rated lower at 3.36 (SD = 0.86). Customer focus (CF) and strategic planning (SP) had mean scores of 3.79 and 3.33 respectively, showing a balanced distribution of perceptions across quality-related variables.

In terms of competitive advantage, the differentiation level (DL) and cost level (CL) were both rated positively, with mean scores of 3.78 (SD = 0.84) and 3.74 (SD = 0.85), indicating that respondents believed their organizations held a favorable strategic position in terms of market differentiation and cost competitiveness.

The positive perceptions of Saudi SME respondents regarding their organizations' talent management, quality management, and competitive strategies may also contribute to the overall business success, signaling a strong foundation in both human and process-oriented capabilities.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Studied Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Strategic Talent Management (STM)	3.53	0.78
Leader Management (LM)	3.76	0.86
Continuous Improvement (CI)	3.36	0.86
Customer Focus (CF)	3.79	0.87
Strategic Planning (SP)	3.33	0.86
Differentiation Level (DL)	3.78	0.84
Cost Level (CL)	3.74	0.85

**Variable** **Mean** **Standard Deviation** Reliability of the measurement model were established, with good internal consistency for all constructs. Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable were above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, which indicates strong internal consistency (Shrestha et al., 2021; Marcial & Launer, 2021), as shown in Table 3. In particular, Strategic Talent Management (STM) had a Cronbach Alpha of 0.879, which established its measurement consistency.

Among the components of Total Quality Management (TQM), Leader Management exhibited the highest reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.940, followed by Customer Focus at 0.926, Strategic Planning at 0.916, and Continuous Improvement at 0.885, all indicating excellent internal consistency.

Regarding Competitive Advantage (CA), Differentiation Level yielded a particularly high reliability score of 0.956, and Cost Level also demonstrated acceptable reliability at 0.803.

In addition to reliability, convergent validity was established, as all factor loadings exceeded 0.70, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.50, aligning with the criteria set by Hair et al. (2020). Furthermore, the Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed the discriminant validity of all constructs, thereby validating the measurement model's integrity.

These findings collectively affirm the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments used for the constructs of STM, TQM, and CA, establishing a solid foundation for further structural analysis in the study.

Table 3. Reliability Analysis of Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Strategic Talent Management (STM)	5	,879
Leader Management (LM)	4	,940
Continuous Improvement (CI)	5	,885
Customer Focus (CF)	4	,926
Strategic Planning (SP)	4	,916
Differentiation Level (DL)	5	,956
Cost Level (CL)	4	,803

The structural relationships among Strategic Talent Management (STM), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Competitive Advantage (CA) were evaluated using SEM with AMOS 24. The model fit indices indicated a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2/df = 2.04$ , RMSEA = 0.051, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.948, and SRMR = 0.045. These values are within acceptable ranges, confirming the robustness and accuracy of the hypothesized model.

- H1: The Direct Relationship Between STM and CA

The first hypothesis proposed that STM would have a direct positive effect on competitive advantage. However, the results revealed that the direct relationship between STM and CA was not statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.024$ ,  $p = 0.763$ ). This negative, non-significant path suggests that STM alone does not have a direct influence on CA in Saudi SMEs. This unexpected result indicates that talent management practices, while important, may need additional organizational factors or enabling mechanisms—such as quality management practices or alignment with internal processes—to yield competitive outcomes.

• H2: The Direct Relationship Between TQM and CA

The second hypothesis, which proposed a positive relationship between TQM and CA, was strongly supported. The standardized path coefficient was highly significant ( $\beta = 0.953$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that quality management practices, particularly leadership commitment, customer orientation, continuous improvement, and process discipline, play a critical role in enhancing competitive advantage. This result supports prior research, reinforcing the central role of TQM in driving operational efficiency, innovation, and market competitiveness in SMEs.

• H3: The Mediating Role of TQM Between STM and CA

The third hypothesis proposed that TQM mediates the relationship between STM and CA. This hypothesis was also supported, as the indirect effect of STM on CA through TQM was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.290$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). This result highlights the importance of TQM as a mediating factor: while STM does not directly enhance competitive advantage, it does so indirectly by fostering a culture of quality within the organization. This suggests that human capital strategies, when integrated with TQM practices, contribute meaningfully to competitive outcomes in SMEs.

The results of hypothesis testing are summarized in (Table 4).

Table 4. Results of Hypotheses Testing

	Relationship	Unstandardized Estimate		Standardized Estimate	C.R.	P-values	Hypotheses results	0.05, 0.01, 0.001"
		S.E.	Estimate	Beta ( $\beta$ )				
The	STM $\rightarrow$ CA	0.065	-0.02	-0.024	-0.301	0.763	(H1) Rejected	
	TQM $\rightarrow$ CA	0.094	0.917	0.953	9.766	0.001	(H2) Supported	
	STM $\rightarrow$ TQM	0.078	0.290	0.290	3.850	0.001	(H3) Supported	
	$\rightarrow$ CA (Indirect)							

structural model assessment, as illustrated in Figure 2 and summarized in Table 4, reveals critical insights into the relationships among Strategic Talent Management (STM), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Competitive Advantage (CA). The results indicate that STM does not have a significant direct impact on CA ( $\beta = -0.024$ ,  $p = 0.763$ ), leading to the rejection of H1. This suggests that STM alone does not directly contribute to competitive advantage within Saudi SMEs.

However, the relationship between TQM and CA (H2) is strongly supported, with a highly significant standardized path coefficient of  $\beta = 0.953$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). This confirms that quality management practices, including leadership commitment, customer orientation, and process discipline, play a central role in enhancing competitive advantage.

Furthermore, the mediating role of TQM in the relationship between STM and CA (H3) is confirmed. Although STM does not directly impact CA, its indirect effect through TQM is significant ( $\beta = 0.290$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). This finding suggests that STM enhances CA by fostering a quality-oriented organizational culture, which in turn drives competitive performance.

These findings highlight and demonstrate the importance of incorporating talent management strategies into quality management frameworks for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

The results of the current study are in line with the literature reviewed, indicating the graphical relationships and associations between Strategic Talent Management (STM), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Competitive Advantage (CA). STM's impact on Total Quality Management (TQM) is most evident in its focus on attracting, developing, and retaining talented employees, supporting research that indicates STM has a major effect on work productivity, innovation, and market responsiveness (Kaliannan et al., 2023; Gallardo & Collings, 2021). This indicates that quality management practices are better practiced in organizations that value their human capital. Additionally, researchers have found that organizations that invest in STM obtain a highly skilled and adaptable workforce, which is necessary to sustain their continuous quality improvement efforts (Järvi & Khoreva, 2020; Nguyen & Ngo, 2022). Thus, the augmentation of TQM and STM will generate a synergy effect in which empowered and well-trained employees proactively contribute to quality-oriented innovation and

organizational reactivity ((Tawalbeh & Jaradat, 2020; Alam et al., 2024). Therefore, the study highlights that competent talent is key to the successful implementation of TQM and a catalyst for sustainable competitive advantage in SMEs.

In addition, the finding in the study that TQM has a positive relationship with CA is in line with the findings of Raj et al. (2024) explaining the significance of sustainable improvement and customer focus as part of an organization's competitive advantage. As illustrated in the current study, several SMEs showing consistent application of TQM fundamentals like process standardization, customer feedback loop establishment, and continuous improvement of the quality of goods and/or services gain better on the market and enjoy higher customer satisfaction. This upholds the larger argument that TQM, as a fund of internally committed integrity, serves not only as a machinery of internal efficiency but also as a potential strategic asset fostering sustainable competitive advantage.

The study's findings are especially relevant in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. With the government pushing to diversify the economy and reduce reliance on oil revenues, the importance of strengthening the SME sector through improved human resource and quality management practices is vital. This study's finding provides empirical evidence that can guide policymakers and SME owners in taking an integrated approach that enhances overall competitiveness and delivers sustainable growth.

Additionally, the research also adds to the existing literature by considering some major hindrances in adopting STM and TQM, which include economic workloads, lack of management know-how, and unwillingness to amend. Al-Qahtani et al. (2023) highlighted these challenges as common barriers in SMEs, especially in emerging economies. This awareness of the limits of previous research offers a fuller picture of the influences enabling or hindering the adoption of STM and TQM by a small organization—all previous SO management studies and tools being developed in the context of large organizations.

## 5. Practical Implications

The current study provides vital insights for SME managers, policymakers, and HR practitioners in Saudi Arabia. These findings highlight the importance of TQM as a key contributor to sustaining competitive advantage. As a result, they question whether SME managers are urged to prioritize investment in leadership development, employee empowerment, customer-centric practices, and continuous improvement initiatives to improve organizational performance and responsiveness.

Furthermore, even though STM does not have a direct role in achieving competitive advantage, its positive and significant relationship with TQM practices points to its strategic importance. It indicates that effective alignment of human resource strategies with quality management goals can help boost sustainable competitiveness. It thus becomes imperative for organizations to embed the talent development process into an integrated strategic framework where talent development becomes an enabler of quality enhancement initiatives. Sustainable business growth is no longer a pressing slogan, but a challenge to be embraced.

From a policy perspective, these results demonstrate the need for targeted support mechanisms. For example, one of the biggest constraints that SMEs face is students graduating from their various training programs leaving for larger enterprises. Therefore, policymakers need to look toward capacity-building initiatives like talent retention, succession planning, and quality management systems, all designed specifically with the need for SMEs in mind. In addition, government-backed incentives and training initiatives complementary to the Vision 2030 framework could facilitate further diffusion and integration of these best practices across the SME sector, driving continued economic diversification and enabling economic resilience.

## 6. Conclusion

This current study investigated the effect of the relationships between strategic talent management and total quality management on competitive advantage in Saudi Arabian SMEs. Although STM itself was not directly found to influence competitive advantage, STM's positive and significant impact on TQM highlights its critical indirect contribution to achieving competitiveness through quality management improvements.

The results emphasize the need for SMEs to develop quality-oriented organizational cultures backed by strategic human resource cultivation. The emerging role of TQM is one of the vital tools that demonstrate how internal assets, specifically human capital, can be suitably utilized to gain enhanced organizational performance.

This work contributes to empirical evidence within the Saudi context and extends the existing literature by underscoring the significance of an integrated HR-quality strategy as a key element to achieving competitive advantage in SMEs. Implying any further mediating or moderating variables (for instance, innovation capacity or digital transformation), future studies may explore additional mediators or moderators. Additionally, longitudinal or comparative studies across various sectors or geographical contexts may provide further insights into the dynamic nature of these relationships over time.

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## "تعزيز الميزة التنافسية من خلال إدارة المواهب الاستراتيجية وإدارة الجودة الشاملة: دراسة على المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة في المملكة العربية السعودية"

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### الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تأثير إدارة المواهب الاستراتيجية (STM) وإدارة الجودة الشاملة (TQM) على تحقيق الميزة التنافسية (CA) في سياق المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة في المملكة العربية السعودية كجزء من استراتيجية رؤية 2030. باستخدام منهج كمي، تم تطبيق تقنية نمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية (SEM) لتحليل بيانات 381 استبياناً صالحاً من محترفين بين المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة. أظهرت النتائج أن إدارة المواهب الاستراتيجية ليس لها تأثير مباشر وذو دلالة إحصائية على الميزة التنافسية. وعلى العكس، تظهر إدارة الجودة الشاملة علاقة إيجابية وجيدة ودالة إحصائية مع الميزة التنافسية، مما يشير إلى أن تطبيق منهجيات إدارة الجودة الشاملة يعزز من تنافسية المنظمة. من وجهة نظر إدارية، توفر هذه الدراسة رؤى قيمة للقائمين على المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة، مع التأكيد على ضرورة مواءمة مبادرات تطوير المواهب مع أطر إدارة الجودة لتحسين الأداء والتنافسية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تسهم الدراسة في الحوار النظري القائم حول العلاقة غير المباشرة لإدارة المواهب الاستراتيجية على الميزة التنافسية من خلال إدارة الجودة الشاملة، موضحة أن هذا الارتباط قوي خصوصاً في سيناريوهات الأسواق الناشئة. وتعتبر تداعيات هذه الدراسة ذات أهمية بالغة لواضعي السياسات والممارسين الذين يعملون على تحقيق التميز التنظيمي وأهداف التنويع الاقتصادي ضمن خطط التنمية الوطنية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إدارة المواهب الاستراتيجية، إدارة الجودة الشاملة، الميزة التنافسية، المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة، المملكة العربية السعودية.