

# Unveiling The Employee's Role In French Micro-Firms

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## Abstract

While research recognizes the innovative and agile nature of very small enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, little attention is paid to training and strategic implementation in this sector. The global pandemic has exacerbated the challenges for VSEs and SMEs, making the development and implementation of effective strategies more crucial than ever. Based on 5 research-interventions, we demonstrate that the concrete involvement of employees in strategic implementation sustainably enhances the socio-economic performance of French micro-firms.

**Key words:** SEAM, very small enterprises, medium-sized enterprises, training, strategic implementation

Strategy encompasses a broad range of concepts in both academic and practical realms, including various forms such as offensive, defensive, sustainable, and marketing strategies, among others. Despite the rich literature, applying these strategies effectively in organizations remains challenging. The French business landscape is predominantly made up of very small enterprises (VSEs) and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Micro-firms, characterized by less than 10 employees and under two million euros in turnover and balance sheet, constitute nearly 4 million businesses in France, accounting for 43% of added value and employing over 6.3 million people. According to INSEE (2019), over 96% of French companies are micro-firms, and in the EU, 9 out of 10 companies have fewer than 10 employees.

Research in entrepreneurship and strategic and human resources management recognizes the innovative and agile nature of these firms, but there's limited focus on the formation and implementation of strategic thinking in this sector. The global pandemic has exacerbated the challenges for VSEs and SMEs, making the need for effective strategy development and implementation more critical than ever. Observations in over 60 research-interventions between 2014 and 2020 within VSEs and SMEs revealed that while strategies often exist in managers' minds, they are not adequately formalized or communicated, leading to poor implementation and lost opportunities. This leads to our research question: How can strategic implementation in VSEs be improved to enhance their medium and long-term performance?

We hypothesize that formalizing strategy and its implementation among employees can significantly boost strategic execution and performance in VSEs. Our research methodology, data collection and utilization will be detailed in the first part, followed by a discussion of our findings, both in terms of identified problems and potential improvements,

in the second part. We conclude with a discussion on the limitations and future perspectives of our research.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative case study research method, aiming to deepen understanding of the impact of human potential on strategic multiplication and implementation, as highlighted by Sekaran (2003) and others. This clinical qualitative approach involves long-term observation to track natural or business environment-induced changes, following Yin's (1989, 2009) methodology. We applied this in a 10 to 12-month research-intervention approach with five structures, as recommended by David (2000), Plane (2000), and Savall and Zardet (2004) for complex social situations. Qualitative methods in management sciences, described by Huberman and Miles (1991) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994), focus on interpreting phenomena in-depth.

We chose a contrasting cases method, which is effective in explaining phenomena in their natural settings and identifying commonalities among cases. Research-intervention, as described by Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996) and Louart (1995), involves the researcher actively interacting with the field to effect transformation. This method, supported by Cappelletti (2007), combines qualitative, quantitative, and financial data analysis and requires the researcher to alternate between field immersion and analytical retreat, as suggested by Burrell and Morgan (1985) and Mckelvey (2006). This approach produces empirical data, interpreted via abduction, leading to hypothesis formulation and validation through further immersion.

Our methodology's intensive organizational monitoring, transformative aim, and strong interaction with co-creating actors enable an in-depth study of strategic and relational phenomena in MSEs, offering insights for better management and beneficial recommendations for both theory and practice. However, accessing VSEs poses challenges, as noted by Cullière (2003) and Belet (1993), due to managers' reluctance to seek external advice. Bayad et al. (2010) highlight that the small size of regulated liberal enterprises often impedes performance improvement initiatives. To address this, a French training program for employers in the regulated liberal sector, covering highly skilled professionals lacking formal management training, has been established (Petit & Zardet, 2023). This multi-structured support system spans 10 to 12 months and includes both collective and individual phases.

### **Data collection**

As part of this research-intervention, we interviewed the entire staff of 5 micro-firms. We conducted group interviews of 3 to 4 people for the employees, with 1 to 3 sessions depending on the number of employees, and individual interviews with the managers and directors. The same interview guide was used for all participants. The researcher noted the dysfunctions faced by participants in their work, using exhaustive note-taking and verbatim comments to highlight the organization's problems. Clear guidelines are vital, especially in smaller organizations where collective training and non-specialized content are uncommon. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, based on socio-economic analysis

(SEAM, Savall & Zardet, 2014), literature review, and prior observations on strategic multiplication in various sectors. The aim was to understand practices within these organizations and how participative tools in strategic implementation might boost performance. Individual interviews, averaging one hour, are ideal for delving into complex issues, reflecting the interviewees' mental universes (Baumard et al., 2014). Pettigrew (1987) noted that interviews effectively capture individuals' perceptions and experiences. In smaller organizations, all stakeholders were included (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Case studies - research-intervention within 5 micro-firms – 2016-2019*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Size</b>
MF1	Landscape architect	5 persons
MF2	Surveyor experts	9 persons
MF3	Architectural agency	7 persons
MF4	Architecture and Urban Planning Agency	3 persons
MF5	Architecture and project management agency	14 persons
<b>Total</b>		<b>38 persons</b>

Participants discussed observed dysfunctions in their daily work. Semi-structured interviews cover themes like Work Organization, Conditions, Communication, Time Management, Training, and Strategic Implementation, with thorough notetaking and transcription. Additional materials (notes, minutes, evaluations) are analyzed for intersubjective consistency (Savall & Zardet, 2004; Bousquet, 2018), ensuring data usability and limiting bias. This research included primary data from sessions and company-provided materials, supplemented by researchers' observations.

Post-interview, transcripts were analyzed using ©SEGESE software for automated processing. The software, with a database of over 4,700 organizational dysfunctions, helps categorize verbatim comments into the six main themes and sub-themes. Each comment is unique to an actor to ensure fairness and highlight shared dysfunctions. For this study on strategic implementation in VSEs, 31 comments under "Strategic Implementation" were reprocessed. Additionally, 78 comments from 38 interviews were selected for their relevance to strategic failures. These were grouped into sub-themes by lexical analysis, identifying two primary issues: insufficient strategic definition and formalization in micro-firms, and minimal employee involvement in strategic initiatives. These themes are explored in the results section.

## **Results**

Often described as 'human-sized,' VSEs (Very Small Enterprises) are recognized for their 'proximity,' influencing their strategic and organizational behaviors (Gervais, 1978; Jaouen & Tessier, 2006; Bousquet & al., 2023). This proximity aspect does not diminish the relevance of examining the effectiveness and efficiency of MSEs (Micro and Small

Enterprises), which are rich subjects for research (Torrès, 2015). Seneca's philosophy highlights the importance of direction: “there is no favorable wind for one who does not know where he is going!”

The strategic considerations for any organization are crucial, including how strategies are implemented for survival and growth, which is a key societal role for researchers. In small organizations, the focus on proximity leads to discussions on models fluctuating between entrepreneurial emphasis (driven by management) and methods to enhance organizational integration among employees. These include process management, tool introduction, and managerial and HR initiatives. Approaches specific to small structures often lean towards 'One Best Way' models and implicitly normative frameworks (Perroux, 1970). However, applying large corporation strategies to small and very small businesses can be ineffective or questionable. The findings are divided into two sections: the first analyzes strategic pitfalls and dysfunctions leading to performance loss due to inadequate strategic formalization, and the second examines dysfunctions from insufficient decentralization and employee involvement in each organization.

### **A lack of strategic definition and formalization in micro-firms**

Our research in micro-firms across various sectors revealed a commonality in challenges hindering strategic implementation, yet also opportunities for development through effective actor engagement. These firms faced a dual dilemma: an abundance of ideas and projects yet ineffective execution due to limited time for strategic planning and insufficiently managed human resources. *"Today, we do not have a defined strategy because it is linked to the economic situation"(MF1)* or *"We don't have an established strategy. We don't really know how to exploit our price"(MF3)*

There is a longstanding belief that excellent professionals make great leaders. This has led to a situation where small business managers handled all external relations – from client interactions to supplier and partner selections – often on their own. Consequently, they tended to favor a reactive over a proactive strategy, as the absence of pre-set objectives allows day-to-day operations to inadvertently shape strategy. *"You don't question [the agency's] project anymore, you don't project yourself anymore"(MF4)*.

The strategy of an organization encompassed both external and internal elements, forming a continuous spectrum. By identifying key breaking points, we can interpret the organization's objectives through the observed discrepancies between the current state and the frustrations arising from unspoken intentions. *"We sometimes feel a lack of relay from employees on innovation approaches." (MF2)*

Resentment appeared to stem from a sense of disbelief at the discrepancy between professional expectations and the organization's inability to collectively achieve what seems obvious. The quality of services offered hinged on the staff's level of engagement, highlighting the critical importance of employee well-being in executing the organization's strategy. Unfortunately, this strategy often lacked clarity, with team members overwhelmed by daily demands. *"We do very few agency meetings. When we do, we don't do strategy, we talk*

*about problems but not about solving them." (MF1). Managers, consumed by daily tasks, struggled to take a step back, anticipate, or effectively communicate long-term objectives, leaving them reactive and anxious, rather than proactive in guiding the organization's activities.*

Time allocated to operational tasks often detracted from strategic development. *"We move at the last minute in an emergency, because we don't anticipate the workload." (MF3). Unlike goods production, services provision lacked the luxury of intermediate storage, demanding a seamless process. Employees had to align customer requirements with operational constraints, which was particularly evident during subcontracting phases like technical studies. Administrative leadership encompassed forecasting, organizing, ordering, coordinating, and controlling. "My partner and I slip up, we don't meet deadlines and by the end of the study we may have lost a year to a year and a half"(MF4). Managers or partners heavily involved in day-to-day operations often found themselves consumed by immediate tasks rather than proactively shaping the organization's strategy. "We are always readjusting the schedule to the current state of affairs, to the unpredictable and the imponderable"(MF5)*

Production capacities often suffered from inadequate evaluation, primarily because workload assessment tends to focus solely on technical aspects, assessed file by file. Each instance seemed to rediscover the organizational dimension, neglecting interactions, inquiries, and feedback crucial for proactive management. This reactive approach prioritized activity performance over methodical assessment. Planning, once a tool for anticipation and regulation, now fostered chaos, reflecting a lack of appreciation for time management. The issue was not merely time scarcity, but rather a failure to recognize its value when shared effectively. Time, a shared resource, reflected how individuals interact with their environment, manage projects, and cultivate professional relationships. Yet, confusion often arose from unmet expectations and a lack of mechanisms for mutual information exchange, hindering coordinated implementation. The absence of consultation and evaluation further impeded resource mobilization towards desired outcomes. *"Sometimes we go to the clash with certain principals. But it's hard to tell if the problem is theirs or the firms." (MF2)*

The size effect was often put forward as an explanation for the lack of performance of small structures. *"Our admin seems to be drowning in work; there is an urgent need for another person to be put in place." (MF5). This size effect was used to justify the lack of access to certain resources, particularly human and financial resources. "We don't have any training, but it would be good if we did. A partner is retiring, he's the one who does the "watering". The day he's gone, we won't even know who to call" (MF1). Small structures were frequently likened to larger ones, accounting for many of their challenges.*

Additionally, the scarcity of financial resources often contributed to uncertainty. While financial management is crucial, other resource considerations may have been overlooked. Profitability discussions often reflected retrospective assessments rather than considerations for sustainable value creation. The dominance of technical approaches over economic dimensions underscored the need for a balanced perspective in managing activities. *"We are in a segment that is probably one of the worst: heavy and demanding files, a plethora*

*of project owners who are not necessarily responsible, a lot of accountabilities and insufficiently remunerated". (MF4)*

The absence of activity guidance mirrored the absence of a pertinent strategy, compounded by the absence of directional indicators for both ongoing operations and future endeavors. *"We don't make any forecasts on sales revenues and we lack this to steer our profitability"(MF3) or "On small cases, I am not vigilant enough. Perhaps it would be better to say at the start, "we won't manage to come up with that kind of budget", even if we manage to tinker with the project to make it fit in". (MF5)*

### **Insufficient involvement of employees in strategic leveraging**

A diagnostic assessment allows for a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, acknowledged collectively, albeit not yet fully shared. Interface dysfunctions, notably in customer relations, were recognized as unsatisfactory due to inadequate intensity (commercial development), subpar added value, or a lack of economic realism. *"For cases from 17, 24 municipalities, if we don't work together [with other agencies], we'll never be able to work on this. But one of the partners is sometimes a bit cold." (MF4)*. While dissatisfaction with external stakeholder relations was acknowledged, internal continuity cannot be overlooked. *"Given the economic context, it is sometimes felt that there is a complete mismatch between what staff and associates perceive"(MF2)*. From an organizational standpoint, entities like architectural agencies or expert surveyor firms operated within highly territorialized organizational frameworks. Each role, from architects to assistants, asserted a distinct professional identity, often lacking collective cohesion in activities and information exchange. Deteriorating expectations undermined the meaning of actions, as decision-making contexts diverged from the logic that informed their conception. *"We lack information [from management] on the progress of projects, which makes us lose our peace of mind"(MF3)*. There was a rupture in the communication between management and staff regarding the strategy and operation of the organization.

### **Questioning the Quality of Dialogue**

Moreover, while it may seem that communication within small structures is straightforward due to physical proximity and the absence of hierarchical layers, challenges with communication, coordination, and consultation persist, mirrored those found in larger organizations. *"We don't have a collective meeting. "Where are we at? What are we doing? What emergencies? What deadlines? When do we bill?" (MF4)*

*"We don't, or hardly, take stock of issues with our management. When issues are problematic, it's hard to get support before it's too late." (MF2)*. Exploring subsidiarity seems promising for making decisions at appropriate levels. *"Sometimes I ask myself on a file 'what am I doing?', 'what am I moving forward on?'. I must take the initiative but there is also a lack of delegation"(S4)*.

## Discussion

The compact size of organizations might suggest increased accessibility to leaders, diverse roles, and easier integration into collective endeavors (Sommer et al., 2018; Battistelli, 2019). Nonetheless, these small entities often coincide with significant decision centralization around the leader and a sense of "relative solitude" concerning strategic matters (Torrès & Plane, 2003). This centralized power dynamic, and the pervasive segmentation of knowledge and practices can stifle internal capacities, inhibiting both innovative ideation and implementation. Cooperation among specialists from various disciplinary fields is often required upstream, leading to compartmentalization and even balkanization of activities, fostering a sense of anomie (Durkheim, 1893). This fragmented approach engenders conflict, circumvention, and withdrawal.

Encouraging team collaboration through structured consultations between leaders and staff could foster strategic development. Hence, it becomes imperative to supplement technical supervisory methods (processes) with team leadership strategies and an innovative, tailored human resources management policy (Krohmer & Retour, 2006; Cappelletti et al., 2012). Moreover, delegation challenges often accompany business expansion: the entrepreneur, initially adept at handling multiple roles ("Man of the Orchestra"), may encounter difficulties transitioning to orchestrating teams effectively. Within this context, tool creation could serve to organize and streamline team dynamics. Consequently, the manager's utilization of these tools may be influenced by their transparency effects and expectations regarding quality, costs, and deadlines. Alternatively, managers may perceive these tools as discreet means to manifest their original intentions and aspirations.

To address the diverse challenges within their structures, managers of very small businesses in the liberal professions have undergone training in various tools, including time management, skills management, organizational charts, and a comprehensive strategy development tool. Among these, the Internal and External Strategic Action Plan (IESAP) (Savall & Zardet, 1987, 2020) has emerged as particularly valued and pertinent by practitioners. The IESAP serves to translate the company's medium-term strategy into actionable steps, providing a vision of the desired strategic landscape over a 3-to-5-year horizon. The IESAP comprises two main components: one focused on reducing strategic barriers (hidden costs) and the other on initiating necessary or desired development actions. It orchestrates concurrent efforts within the company's internal and external environments. Subsequently, this strategic action plan is segmented into Priority Action Plans (PAPs), which are updated every six months. While the PAP facilitates the execution of strategic actions, the IESAP primarily guides strategy development.

The synergy between these two tools, being complementary and interdependent, lies in their ability to bridge the gap between intention and execution. The IESAP enables measured planning over a three-year period, while the PAP facilitates the sequential implementation of strategic actions over six-month intervals. This sequential approach involves setting objectives tailored to the actors' capacities, identifying potential collaborations, and enhancing coordination through advanced scheduling negotiations.

The formalization of these two tools evolves through successive iterations driven by trial and error, reflecting the progressive structuring of management. Crafting a company strategy involves a heuristic process, where managers often grapple with the fear of adverse outcomes stemming from poor decisions. The research-intervention process promotes a more participatory approach to strategic deliberation, recognizing that an organization's strategy is shaped by the collective aspirations of its members. Implementing an intervention and support protocol serves as both a catalyst and facilitator for strategic initiatives. Addressing existing dysfunctions (the brakes) and implementing improvement actions (the levers) through collaborative projects involving field actors, managers, and employees contributes to the refinement and formalization of strategic action plans. This process encourages pragmatic anticipation of implementation challenges.

These strategic tools prioritize employee involvement in proposing and executing strategic actions. Following diagnosis and intra-structure project groups, employees actively contribute by suggesting priority actions aligned with improvement objectives. While managers retain final decision-making authority over strategic directions, objectives, and actions, involving employees helps mitigate managerial isolation, assess action feasibility, and enhance implementation across the organization. Collective mobilization not only fosters synergy but also boosts performance, enabling managers to realign with their teams. Furthermore, employees may lead strategic actions, ensuring their effective execution. At the end of each semester, the entire organization reviews the Priority Action Plan, adjusting the IESAP to reflect changes in both internal and external environments.

## **Conclusion**

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are frequently depicted through distinctive traits such as the lack of activity projections or established organizational standards. Proximity, regarded as a prioritization mechanism, enables the establishment of conditions conducive to action within a centralized organization, characterized by limited specialization and intuitive and minimally formalized strategies. This study revealed that micro-firms are susceptible to strategic dysfunctions similar to larger companies, despite receiving less attention in the literature due to limited access to research. While the compact size of VSEs offers agility, they often become ensnared in day-to-day operations, neglecting strategic planning and implementation. Additionally, there persists a notion that strategy falls solely within the realm of managers, overlooking the valuable resource of employee input for organizational improvement. While size differences can offer insights, viewing small enterprises as transitional states justifies using tools and solutions that may be inherently limited in their applicability. Issues such as aligning training with employment needs, ensuring vigilant recruitment, and enhancing employee skills are critical in small structure management. Two tools introduced in these structures include the Internal/External Strategic Action Plan, projecting a three-year strategy, and the Priority Action Plan, segmenting it over six months and translating it into actionable steps driven by managers with employee support.



Our focus lay not in comparing personnel needs, but in recognizing the specificities necessitating an adapted HR policy. In small organizations, engaging employees in strategic initiatives can ensure effective implementation. Across the five studied structures, stakeholders expressed a desire for enhanced organizational well-being through improved communication and active participation in corporate strategy. Furthermore, it's essential to acknowledge the placebo effect of researchers and the benefits of external support, even for very small structures. Researchers motivate managers to formalize strategies and offer valuable insights without interfering in decision-making processes. This external assistance provides dedicated time for strategic deliberations and offers reassurance through critical questioning.

This study lays the foundations for future research to explore actions taken within VSEs and to emphasize employee involvement for improved strategic implementation and overall company performance.

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