

Developing scalable HR analytics platforms for SMEs with data-driven strategies to empower smaller businesses

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Abstract

Human resource management in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) faces significant technological challenges in today's data-driven business environment. This study examines HR analytics adoption in U.S. SMEs, by identifying barriers such as limited capital, skills gaps, and inconsistent data practices. Despite these challenges, 50% of U.S. SMEs, approximately 3.2 million businesses, have adopted HR management software, which highlights a growing shift toward digital HR solutions. Through a systematic literature review and market analysis, the study evaluates scalable, cloud-based HR analytics solutions, which include performance tracking systems, employee engagement platforms, and predictive retention tools that enhance workforce management. The research analyzes various HR analytics tools, evaluates their effectiveness for SMEs, and explores how modular, cloud-based solutions enhance workforce management. Utilizing systematic literature review and market analysis, the study explores the impact of data-driven approaches on SME performance. Findings indicate that SMEs that utilize HR analytics experience up to 75% increase in employee engagement and 31% reduction in voluntary turnover. The study emphasizes the need for cost-effective analytics tools, robust information systems, effective change management initiatives, targeted upskilling programs, and strategic data governance frameworks to drive adoption. This research contributes valuable insights to help SMEs harness HR analytics and data-driven approaches, to enhance human resource management and organizational competitiveness in an increasingly technology-driven marketplace.

Keywords: HR Analytics; Small and Medium Enterprises (SMS); Data-Driven Decision Making; Cloud-Based HR Solutions; Human Resource Management

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly recognizing the transformative potential of data-driven approaches, particularly within human resource management (1). HR analytics, which leverages data to inform and enhance decision-making regarding workforce strategies, has emerged as a critical tool for organizations which aim to achieve operational excellence and competitive advantage. SMEs are dynamic business entities with fewer than 500 employees, limited resources, and a focus on driving substantial economic growth and innovation through agility, personalized customer service, a local market focus, and a

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flexible structure. For these organizations, the effective use of HR analytics can provide substantial benefits that allow for improved talent acquisition, employee retention, and overall productivity (2). SMEs play a vital role in the global economy and contribute significantly to job creation and innovation (3). However, they frequently encounter unique barriers that hinder their growth, such as insufficient financial and human resources, a lack of access to sophisticated technologies, and limited expertise in data analysis (4). Addressing these challenges is crucial, as empowering SMEs with advanced HR analytics can drive economic growth and innovation, enhance the competitiveness of smaller businesses, improve workforce development and retention strategies, and align with the increasing adoption of AI and data-driven technologies in the HR domain.

1.1. Problem Statement

SMEs are the backbone of the American economy that accounts for 99.9% of all U.S. businesses, employ nearly half of the private workforce and represent 43.5% of America's GDP (3). However, these smaller organizations often lack the resources and expertise to implement sophisticated HR analytics solutions (4). This gap results in missed opportunities for data-driven decision-making that leads to suboptimal workforce management and hinders the ability of SMEs to compete effectively (5).

Table 1 Key Statistics on SMEs and HR Analytics in the USA

Metric	USA
Total SMEs	34.8 million (99.9%) (6)
Employment in SMEs	61.7 million (46.4%) (7)
HR Software Adoption	50% (8)
Employee Engagement Increase	75% (with HR analytics usage) (9)
Turnover Reduction (Voluntary)	31% (with HR analytics usage) (9)

As shown in Table 1, HR software adoption among SMEs in the United States stands at 50%, with organizations implementing HR analytics reporting a 75% increase in employee engagement and 31% reduction in voluntary turnover, which stresses the workforce benefits of data-driven HR strategies. This research aims to bridge these gaps by providing actionable insights and strategies specifically tailored for SMEs to enhance their operational efficiency and competitiveness. A joint research study revealed that many SMEs use Microsoft Excel as their primary and often only tool for everyday analytics tasks, with 55% not collecting website, social media, or search engine data, and 48% not mining data for patterns, correlations, or anomalies (10). This underutilization of advanced analytical tools further highlights the technology gap faced by SMEs in their HR operations.

1.2. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to develop a scalable framework for HR analytics implementation in SMEs. The specific objectives include

- Analyze the current state of HR analytics adoption among SMEs in the United States to identify key trends, barriers, and success factors that influence integration and utilization.
- Examine the relationship between organizational characteristics of SMEs (size, industry, resources) and their capacity to implement and benefit from HR analytics.
- Develop a comprehensive, adaptable framework for HR analytics implementation that accounts for the unique constraints and opportunities within SMEs.
- Evaluate the potential impact of scaled HR analytics solutions on key performance metrics that include employee engagement, retention, and overall organizational productivity.

2. Literature review

A systematic literature review was conducted to examine existing research on the implementation of HR analytics in SMEs. The review critically engages with scholarly works to identify contradictions, debates, and gaps in current understanding of HR analytics adoption in smaller organizations. Several key themes emerged from this analysis, which include barriers to adoption, the effectiveness of various analytics tools, and the impact of these tools on employee engagement and productivity. Studies indicate that SMEs are often underutilizing HR data analytics due to a lack of

awareness, technical skills, and integration capabilities with existing systems; for instance, a study by The HR Director revealed that only 26% of HR leaders say data, technology, and AI influence their people strategy, and just 2% believe external tech developments impact business and people needs, highlighting poor data capabilities and limited tech awareness as major barriers (11). Organizations that have successfully integrated HR analytics into their processes have reported substantial improvements in recruitment efficiency, employee satisfaction, and workforce productivity (12,13). Empirical evidence suggests a strong correlation between data-driven decision-making and positive organizational outcomes, which emphasizes the critical need for SMEs to embrace HR analytics for long-term sustainability and growth (14).

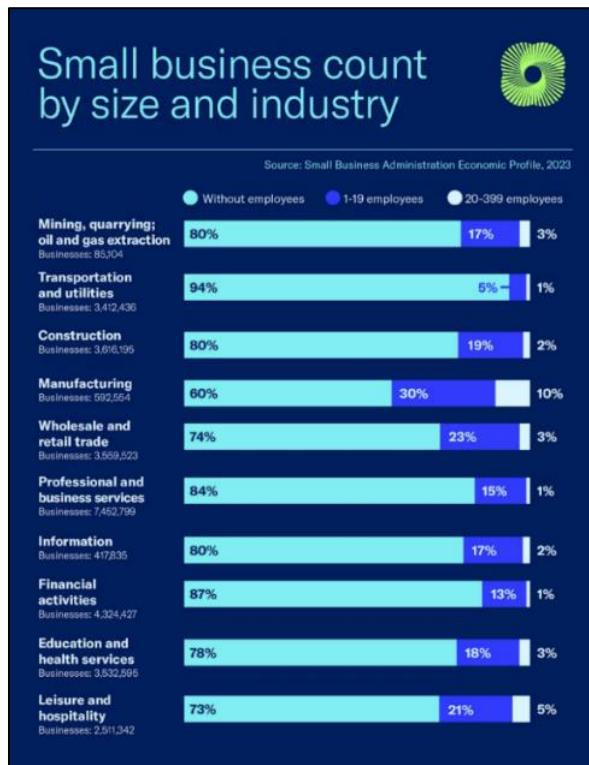


Figure 1 Small Business Count by Size and Industry

The current state of HR analytics adoption among SMEs reveals distinct patterns across industries and organization sizes. As illustrated in Figure 1, industries with higher percentages of businesses with employees (such as Manufacturing with 40% having employees) demonstrate greater potential for HR analytics implementation compared to industries with fewer employees (such as Transportation with only 6% having employees) (3). This industry variance necessitates tailored approaches to HR analytics that account for sector-specific workforce management needs.

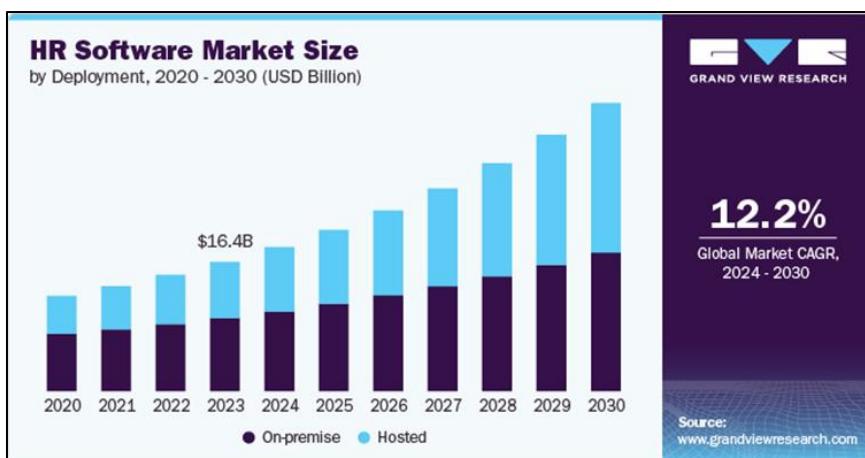


Figure 2 HR Software Market Size by Deployment, 2020-2030

The HR software market demonstrates clear adoption trends relevant for SME implementation strategies. As illustrated in Figure 2, the market is experiencing consistent growth with a projected CAGR of 12.2% from 2024 to 2030, indicating increasing recognition of HR analytics value. A significant trend is the accelerating shift from on-premises to hosted solutions, with hosted options showing proportionally faster growth. This trend is particularly advantageous for SMEs, as cloud-based solutions typically offer lower initial investment costs, reduced IT maintenance requirements, and greater scalability (15).

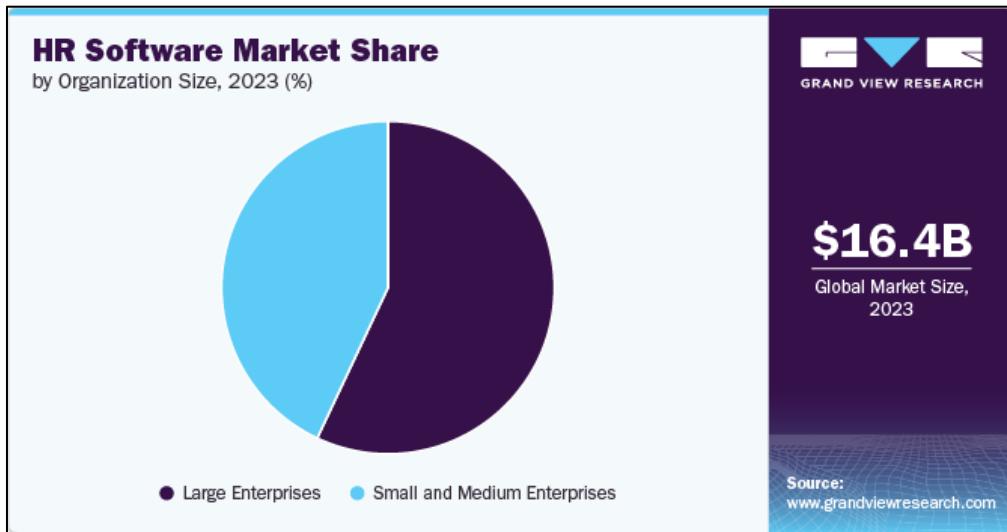


Figure 3 HR Software Market Share by Organization Size, 2023

The relationship between organizational characteristics of SMEs and their capacity to implement HR analytics is evident in both market trends and implementation requirements. Figure 3 reveals that SMEs collectively represent a significant portion of the HR software market, despite individual SMEs having smaller implementation budgets than large enterprises. This substantial market presence has driven the development of more SME-focused HR analytics solutions designed to address their specific constraints and needs, including simplified interfaces, pre-configured metrics, and modular implementation options (15).

The review also identifies specific challenges faced by SMEs in implementing HR analytics. These include limited access to capital, particularly among minority business owners who predominantly rely on personal savings rather than financial institutions (16); a notable skills gap in HR teams, with many HR professionals lacking adequate training to analyze complex data effectively (17); inconsistent data collection practices leading to inaccuracies (18,19); and employee resistance to change when new systems are introduced without sufficient training and communication (20). The literature review also reveals a significant theoretical gap regarding how traditional HR analytics frameworks, primarily designed for large enterprises, can be effectively scaled and adapted for SMEs (21). This gap presents an important opportunity for practical contribution by developing frameworks that specifically address the resource constraints and operational realities of smaller organizations.

3. Methodology

This research employs systematic literature review methodology to synthesize and analyze existing knowledge on HR analytics implementation in SMEs. The review process follows a structured protocol with defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with focus on empirical studies published within the last decade that specifically address HR analytics in smaller organizations.

A total of 127 titles and abstracts were initially screened from databases, which include Business Source Complete, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, Google Scholar, and HR-specific journals. After applying the inclusion criteria, 42 articles were selected for full-text review. Of these, 28 articles met all criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

Search terms combined "HR analytics," "workforce analytics," "people analytics," "talent analytics" with "SME," "small business," "medium enterprise," and related variations. Inclusion criteria required articles to address HR analytics implementation specifically in organizations with fewer than 500 employees, be published in peer-reviewed sources

between 2014-2024, and be available in English. Exclusion criteria removed articles focused solely on large enterprises, theoretical papers without practical implementation insights, and those addressing only general business analytics without HR focus.

The study incorporates market analysis through examination of current HR analytics adoption trends specific to SMEs. This includes evaluation of industry surveys, academic journals, research papers and market research publications to identify implementation patterns relevant to resource-constrained organizations.

Statistical data analysis of SME workforce information from credible sources such as U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Bureau of Labor Statistics provides quantitative foundations for the research findings. This analysis helps identify patterns in HR practice adoption across different sizes and types of SMEs.

A multi-layered analytical approach that employs comparative analysis and gap analysis is used to identify current limitations in SME HR analytics adoption and develop practical implementation guidelines. This approach triangulates multiple data sources to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings.

3.1. Ethical Considerations

This research acknowledges the ethical implications of HR analytics in SMEs with focus on data privacy, consent, and responsible use of employee information. While this study relies on secondary data and does not directly involve human participants, it recognizes the ethical responsibilities of organizations implementing the recommended HR analytics approaches. Key considerations include ensuring data privacy and security through compliance with regulations like GDPR and CCPA, which address algorithmic bias by identifying and mitigating unfair outcomes, maintaining transparency in data collection and usage, and obtaining employee consent for personal data utilization. These ethical measures support responsible HR analytics adoption while safeguarding employee rights and organizational interests.

4. Case Study

This section explores case studies across various industries and SME size categories to provide thorough insights into real-world HR analytics implementation. SMEs adopting AI-driven Human Resource Management Systems (HRMS) have significantly improved HR operations, particularly in streamlining recruitment through automated candidate screening, which has resulted in faster hiring and enhanced candidate experiences. Additionally, these systems have facilitated real-time performance feedback, which has fostered continuous employee development and engagement. Furthermore, the automation of administrative tasks such as payroll and compliance management has led to reduced HR overheads and improved operational efficiency (22). Table 2 provides examples of companies that have experienced tangible benefits from implementing HR analytics across various industries.

Table 2 Case Studies of Companies Utilizing HR Analytics

Aspect	Actor	Metcalfe's Market	People Spheres
Pre-implementation Situation	Actor, a financial services firm, faced challenges with employee engagement and retention.	Metcalfe's Market, a family-owned grocery store, faced challenges in attracting new talent and improving employee engagement. The recruitment process was slow, and employee turnover was high.	People Spheres, an HR software company, faced issues with employee satisfaction and retention.
Implementation Approach	Implemented HR analytics to track employee engagement and identify areas for improvement.	Implemented AI-driven HRMS to streamline their recruitment processes through automated candidate screening. They also introduced real-time performance feedback systems to foster continuous employee development and engagement.	Implemented HR analytics to boost employee satisfaction and retention while linking HR practices to business performance.
Challenges Encountered	Integrating HR analytics with existing systems	Resistance to change from employees and the need for training in new systems.	Ensuring data accuracy and integrating HR analytics with existing systems.

	and ensuring data accuracy.		
Solutions Applied	Investment in data integration tools and conducting regular audits to ensure data accuracy.	Conducted training sessions and provided continuous support to employees. They also communicated the benefits of the new systems to gain employee buy-in.	Investment in data integration tools and conducting regular audits to ensure data accuracy.
Measurable Outcomes	Significant improvement in employee engagement and retention (12).	This resulted in faster hiring, enhanced candidate experience, and a 20% increase in employee engagement. Employee turnover reduced by 15% (23).	Improved employee satisfaction, reduced turnover, and better business performance (24).

4.1. Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and recommendations. The research is limited by the availability, quality, and comprehensiveness of existing literature and data sources on HR analytics in SMEs. The field of HR analytics is rapidly evolving, which means that some of the most recent developments may not be fully represented in the available literature. Moreover, the study's focus on U.S. based SMEs may limit the generalizability of findings to other geographical contexts with different regulatory environments, labor market conditions, and technological infrastructures. The diversity among SMEs in terms of size, industry, and organizational culture also presents challenges in developing universally applicable recommendations. Likewise, the absence of primary data collection means that the study cannot directly capture the lived experiences and perspectives of HR professionals and decision-makers in SMEs who are considering or implementing analytics solutions. This limitation is partially addressed through the analysis of case studies and industry reports but represents an area for future research using primary data collection methods.

4.2. Analytics Implementation Framework for SMEs

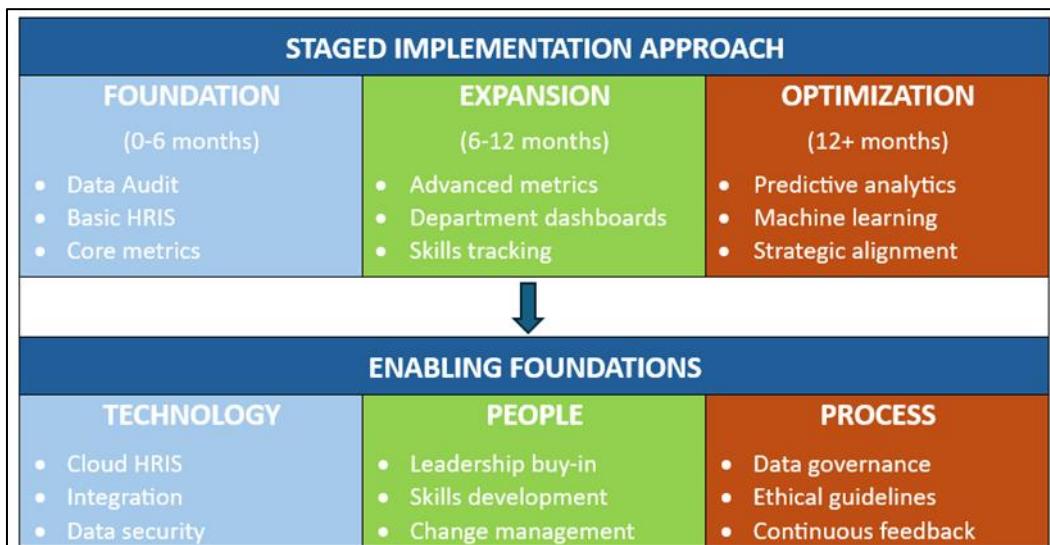


Figure 4 Proposed Scalable HR Analytics Implementation Framework for SMEs

Based on Figure 4, the framework outlines a staged approach to implement HR analytics in SMEs, divided into three phases: Foundation, Expansion, and Optimization. Each phase includes specific actions and tools to be implemented over time, supported by enabling foundations in technology, people, and processes. The Foundation phase focuses on establishing essential HR data infrastructure through implementing a basic HRIS system, standardizing data collection processes, and developing foundational reporting capabilities. Critical enablers at this stage include securing leadership buy-in, conducting skills assessment, and establishing data governance policies. SMEs should prioritize this phase based on their industry-specific needs, with service-oriented businesses focusing first on employee engagement metrics, while manufacturing or retail enterprises might prioritize attendance and productivity tracking.

The Expansion phase builds on these foundations by introducing more advanced analytics capabilities, such as talent acquisition metrics, performance analytics, and basic predictive models for retention that have been shown in prior studies to reach up to 85% accuracy in forecasting workforce trends in similar organizational contexts (25). This phase requires developing analytical skills within the HR team, integrating HR data with other business systems, and implementing visualization tools to make insights accessible to decision-makers. For organizations with under 100 employees, this phase should emphasize lightweight, cloud-based solutions with minimal IT overhead, while medium enterprises (100-500 employees) can explore more comprehensive integrated platforms.

The Optimization phase leverages sophisticated analytics to drive strategic workforce decisions through advanced predictive modeling, scenario planning, and AI-driven insights. Success at this stage depends on embedding analytics into decision-making processes, developing specialized analytics skills, and establishing continuous improvement mechanisms. The framework implementation timeline should be adjusted based on organizational size and resource availability, with micro-businesses (under 20 employees) potentially spending 6-9 months in each phase, while larger SMEs might accelerate this timeline with dedicated resources.

This structured approach ensures a gradual and manageable adoption of HR analytics, tailored to the unique constraints and opportunities within SMEs. The framework emphasizes the importance of leadership buy-in, skills development, and data governance to achieve sustainable and impactful HR analytics implementation.

4.3. Cost-Benefit Analysis for HR Analytics in SMEs with Industry-Specific Considerations

Table 3 Cost-Benefit Analysis Framework for SME HR Analytics Implementation

Investment Category	Typical Cost Range (USD)	Potential Benefits	Payback Period	Industry-Specific Considerations
Basic Cloud HRIS	\$5-15 per employee/month	Administrative efficiency (15-25% time savings)	6-12 months	Service industries: Focus on employee scheduling and engagement metrics Manufacturing: Prioritize attendance tracking and shift management
Recruitment Analytics	\$2,000-8,000 initial setup + monthly subscription	Reduced time-to-hire (30-40%), improved quality of hire	3-9 months	High-turnover sectors (retail, hospitality): Higher ROI potential Professional services: Focus on quality-of-hire metrics
Performance Analytics	\$1,500-6,000 initial + subscription	10-15% productivity improvement, better talent development	6-12 months	Knowledge-based businesses: Critical for productivity tracking Production environments: Align with existing KPI systems
Engagement Solutions	\$3-10 per employee/month	20-30% reduction in turnover costs, improved retention	9-18 months	Highest ROI in industries with specialized talent needs Less critical for seasonal or high-turnover business models
Analytics Training	\$500-2,500 per HR staff member	Enhanced decision-making, better ROI on HR initiatives	12-24 months	Most critical for organizations with 100+ employees Smaller organizations (<50 employees) can utilize vendor training resources

In Table 3, cost ranges vary significantly based on organization size, existing infrastructure, and implementation approach. SMEs should prioritize investments based on their most critical HR challenges and expected ROI. Organizations should begin with the highest-impact, lowest-cost solutions appropriate for their specific industry and growth stage, while incorporating transparent and explainable AI methods such as SHAP and LIME to enhance auditability, strengthen employee trust, and reduce legal and reputational risks, which can improve the overall return on investment (26). This table serves as a guide for SMEs to assess the potential return on investment from HR analytics and highlights the importance of targeted strategies and phased implementation to achieve operational excellence and competitive advantage.

Recommendations and Future Directions

While this research provides valuable insights into HR analytics implementation for SMEs, several important recommendations emerge for organizations seeking to enhance their data-driven HR practices. SMEs with limited resources should prioritize cost-effective, high-impact initiatives to establish a strong HR analytics foundation before advancing to more complex capabilities. Immediate implementation should focus on deploying basic cloud-based HRIS with built-in analytics, assessing HR team skills, and developing targeted training plans. Establishing data governance policies is also essential to ensure compliance and data quality. Within 6 to 12 months, SMEs should integrate HR data with existing business systems using API connections, implement visualization tools to enhance decision-making, and develop predictive models for key metrics such as turnover and engagement. For long-term strategic adoption, organizations should build advanced analytics capabilities for workforce optimization, leverage AI-driven insights for talent management, and establish continuous improvement mechanisms to refine their analytics approach.

A phased adoption roadmap aligned with organizational maturity, technological readiness, and strategic priorities ensures sustainable HR analytics implementation. Rather than adopting robust solutions immediately, SMEs benefit from gradual capability building, allowing for incremental value delivery at each stage. Industry associations and professional organizations should create collaborative platforms for SMEs to share knowledge, resources, and best practices in HR analytics to foster collective learning and reduce implementation costs. Educational institutions should develop specialized HR analytics curricula and micro-credentialing programs tailored to SME professionals to address their unique challenges instead of focusing solely on enterprise-scale applications rather than focusing exclusively on enterprise-scale analytics applications. These targeted programs help bridge the skills gap identified in research.

Technology vendors that serve the SME market should design HR analytics solutions with interoperability and modularity to enable gradual integration with existing systems rather than requiring costly platform migrations. This reduces financial and technical barriers to adoption. Organizations must also implement policies that ensure the ethical and compliant use of HR analytics tools to safeguard employee trust and regulatory adherence. Future research should explore innovative financing models for HR analytics implementation in resource-constrained SMEs, such as shared services arrangements, analytics-as-a-service offerings, and public-private partnerships. These alternative approaches could significantly reduce the capital barriers identified in this study. Looking toward future directions, researchers should focus on ensuring HR analytics platforms remain scalable as SMEs grow by adopting flexible and modular architectures that allow adaptation without extensive reconfigurations. Future studies should also examine the effectiveness of cloud-based infrastructure in providing SMEs with on-demand analytics resources and explore how robust data management techniques, such as data partitioning and sharding, can enhance system performance. As artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies advance, research should identify ways to integrate these innovations into SME-focused HR platforms to automate data analysis and generate predictive insights without requiring specialized data science expertise. In addition, studies should explore how continuous feedback mechanisms can keep HR analytics platforms relevant and valuable as organizations evolve.

5. Conclusion

HR analytics adoption presents a significant opportunity for SMEs to enhance employee engagement, retention, and organizational performance. This research demonstrates that through a staged implementation approach, building from foundation to optimization, SMEs can overcome resource constraints and technology barriers. Key success factors include leadership commitment, appropriate technology selection, and skills development. The framework proposed offers a scalable pathway adaptable to various industries and organizational sizes. Given that SMEs constitute a significant portion of the U.S. GDP, they can leverage workforce insights and HR analytics to drive strategic decision-making by democratizing access to data-driven HR solutions. This approach ultimately strengthens their competitive positioning, enhances productivity, and contributes to broader economic growth.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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