



## Talent Management and the Digital Journey: Case Studies on the Apparel SMEs in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Due to the disruptive technology in the 4th industrial revolutions, many changes have taken place in the apparel industry. The 4th industrial revolution has been described as the new modes of production, consumption patterns will transform all the major industrial systems. The technologies played important roles in the apparel industry include 3D designs, digital printings, RFID, automated manufacturing. With a massive transformation, many retail stores still use pre-internet business methods, due to a shortage of talent and relevant infrastructure. The objective of this study to understand the processes of how apparel SMEs successfully internationalize their businesses through the integration of talent and technological infrastructure. The studied firms have been using the omni-channel method in digital businesses including the merchandise team, digital marketing, and other managerial talents to ensure the success of the whole process. These include the design of the product, triangle manufacturing, and retail stores to the delivery of the products to consumers. Malaysian firms put the focus on Singapore due to purchasing power, cultural similarity, and geographical distance. Nevertheless, with the omni-channel of online business in Singapore, the performance in retail stores is still better than the online sales but the digital businesses are growing and it is necessary to embrace digital business.

**Disciplinary:** Management Science (SME Business Management, Digital Business Management, HRM, Technology in Business Management).

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The apparel industry consists of the produce or selling of clothing, footwear, and accessories. Businesses involved in this apparel industry can be the manufacturers who produce the apparel product, the whole-sellers, or retailers who sell the products through retail outlets or online store.

Traditionally, a designer's capability is embedded in the internal resources of the fashion apparel groups (Wang, 2016). Apart from that, knowledge development technology, human resources, fashion diffusion, and capital are all key factors in promoting the industry as a whole.

With the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution, the manufacturing of the apparel products experiences a convergence between the physical and digital environment by using artificial intelligence or robotic automation (Gilchrist, 2016; as cited by Bertola and Teuniseen, 2018). With this transformation, firms can gain unprecedented benefits from these technologies, such as leanness, speed in responding to changes, efficiencies, consistency, transparency, and so on (Bertola and Teuniseen, 2018). Further from that, 3D printing technologies are already established in sportswear products and other accessories, such as bags, shoes, and leather goods (Birtchnell and Urry, 2016).

However, Bertola and Teuniseen (2018) claim that many firms are yet to create an integration of digital infrastructure consists of the objects, machine, and human than can link to a form of communication via the Internet of Things. Many firms are still struggling with digital transformation.

According to McKinsey (2019), they are expecting 3D design, digital printing, RFID, automated manufacturing will come into play in the apparel industry. As for fabric materials, it is forecasted that more innovative materials will be used in the future.

Coming to the downstream of the industry, technologies have also changed the business model of retailers and the way consumers purchase their products. Among choices and platforms for apparel retailers to start their online business include: start an e-commerce store, using social media, etc.

Although there are changes in the consumers' purchasing pattern and various digital platforms are available for apparel retailers, yet not all retailers engage actively in digital businesses. Hunt (2019) comments that many changes under the internet age and the retail industry is undergoing a massive transformation. Many retail stores still using business methods that were developed "pre-internet" age. The common reasons are due to a shortage of talent and relevant infrastructure. In this context, it is obvious that the shortages of relevant talent and infrastructure are common in the apparel industry. If larger fashion firms are facing a shortage of talent, it is even more pressing among the smaller firms (Willdersdorf, 2014).

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Apparently, the issue of talent management does not get enough attention from the management in the apparel industry. Traci Wilk, the vice president of the HR department in Rag and Bone stresses that HR should not be an afterthought (Pike, 2015). Findings reveal that revenue growth among firms that excel in their recruitment is three and a half times faster, with a profit margin twice higher than their peers (Pike, 2015).

Based on the 2014 report by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and The Business of Fashion (Pike, 2015), the issue of talent gap continues to be one of the greatest challenges that firms would encounter in the next decade.

Nak (2012) comments that talent management enhances the capabilities of representatives, creating a profitable effect on the organizations in various aspects. Further from that, Koscianska (2013) views talented employees as the wellspring of the workplace who bring in positive outcomes to the organizations.

In the effort to bridge the talent gap, the Deloitte Swiss Watch Industry Report (2013) indicated that the majority of the firms prefer to fill their talent pools through in-house training (74%) and offer more apprenticeships (54%) to young talent (Finnigan, 2014).

In the context of technological development, Shopify (2019) points out some potential threats that need to be addressed by retailers; these include competitive landscape and the rejection rate of products. In this new age of e-commerce, competition among peers is intensified, retailers normally provide omni-channel to consumers, both online and offline platforms capture the online consumers market. More and more apparel SMEs are moving towards less complexity, streamline multi-channel selling and find ways to use technology to support the business. As this will be the trend for the future, SMEs need to pick up those skills and acquire the talents needed for these purposes in the future.

The conceptual framework used in this study is the dynamic capabilities theory, proposed by Teece et al. (1997). The theory of dynamic capability is to analyse the sources and methods of wealth creation by the private businesses which operate in an environment of rapid changes in technology. The theory aims to expose implicit assumptions and to identify competitive circumstances where each paradigm displays useful descriptive and normative theory of competitive advantage.

Teece (2018) argues that the design and operation of a business model rely on the capabilities of this firm. Dynamic capabilities are the firm's ability to integrate, build, configure internal competencies for the changes and improvement to a firm. The strength of the dynamic capabilities of a firm refers to its ability to maintain sustainable profits, design, and adjust its business model (Teece, 2018).

The abilities of a firm to change its future repertoire of capabilities are affected by its current assets. Teece and Pisano (1994) define assets as legacy resources, including knowledge, technical skills, competencies, etc.

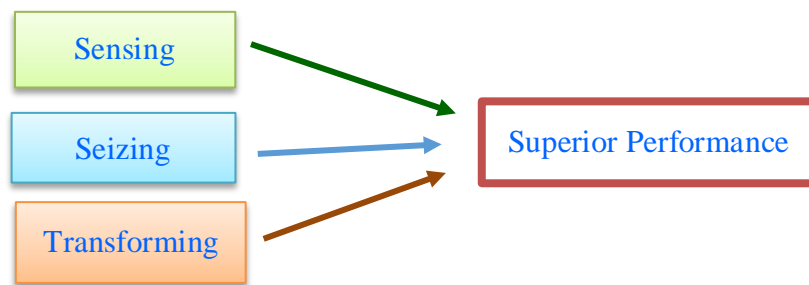
The other determinant of the capabilities is the processes. Firms can always reconfigure their assets positions through appropriate investment and other managerial improvements. It is the process and ability to reconfigure a firm's assets positions which Teece and Pisano (1994) highlight as 'dynamic capabilities'.

Teece et al. (1997) encourage firms that encounter rapid changes in disruptive technologies to reshape and reconfigure their competencies to address the changing technologies and market.

There are three types of managerial activities which create a dynamic capability, namely: sensing, seizing, and transforming (Kleiner, 2013). Teece (2007) states them as the micro-foundations of dynamic capabilities. Sensing referring to identification and assessment of an opportunity, these include the ability of employees to learn quickly and to build new strategic assets (Teece et al, 1997).

Seizing is to mobilize the resources to address an opportunity and to capture value, this covers the integration of new strategic assets; lastly, transforming is to have continuous renewal. Both sensing and seizing lead to new positions and paths, resulting in the transformation of firms that affect performance (Wang, 2016).

These managerial activities create dynamic capabilities and result in competitiveness (Shane et al, 2009; Teece, 2007) and superior performance (Kleiner, 2013). The conceptual framework as showed in Figure 1



**Figure 1: Dynamic Capabilities Theory**

Based on the qualitative conceptual framework of this study, having talents or employees who are capable is the first phase of sensing; mobilising and investing in talents and technology (resources) are aligned with the process of seizing. Whereas, the adoption of technology and continuous renewal referring to the transforming process.

The theory is aligned with the purpose of this study to understand the processes on how apparel SMEs go through sensing, seizing, and transforming; capturing opportunities and successfully utilize the integration of talent and technology for internationalization. Therefore, qualitative research only focuses on apparel SMEs that have succeeded in internationalization, with the implementation of talent management.

Firstly, in the phase of sensing, apparel SMEs need to identify and assess new opportunities. When talents invest and mobilize technologies to capture these new opportunities, they are in the phase of seizing. Lastly, with the adoption of appropriate technology, SMEs transform themselves with continuous renewal for long-term survival competitiveness, firms now enter into the phase of transforming.

When the superior performance is achieved, it allows SMEs to embark on internationalization and venture into the new sales region.

According to Bharadwaj (2000), there needs to be an integration of technological tools and IT experts (both technical and managerial IT skills) to foster competitive advantage. Technological infrastructure alone does not enhance competitiveness, but the synergy of these elements do. Only digital & managerial related skilled-workers enable firms to leverage benefits from technology and hence, able to enhance business growth via internationalization. Tetteh and Burn (2011); Barber and Esteve (2005); Vida (2000) agree that competencies encourage firms to promote internationalization.

Besides that, the adaptation of employees to organizational change is another determinant factor of a firm's ability to respond to changes. Sabherwal and King (1991) comment that SMEs' ability to respond to changes in the environment is determined by how the firm is implanted with its databases and other decision supporting system. Overall, strong digital expertise, a reusable digital-based; a flourishing partnership between IT and business management are some of the prerequisites for strong digital capability (Ross et al., 1996).

In the past, small firms often lag behind large firms in the aspects of innovation and technologies. However, Dutta and Evrard (1999) claim that this trend has changed and modern retailers can adopt news technologies quickly, particularly digital-related devices. Thus, the integration of talent with technological tools is essential for SMEs to position themselves in the foreign market effectively.

The objective of this study to understand the processes of how apparel SMEs successfully internationalize their businesses through the integration of talent and technological infrastructure.

### 3 RESEARCH METHOD

This is qualitative research using the case study method. A qualitative approach is for exploring and understanding the individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. It is also suitable when the study aims to answer the questions of 'how' and 'why' (Yin, 2004; 2008).

The multiple-case study will be carried out for the qualitative method via interview. By applying a case study method, the study will provide a rich understanding of the effort of apparel SMEs in internationalization through appropriate talent management.

In this interview, an in-depth, semi-structured interview will be applied. An in-depth interview refers to one-to-one interviews, allowing respondents to provide more information to the interviewers. A semi-structured interview is considered suitable in getting rich and deep understanding by integrating different perspectives of respondents (Birnik, 2007).

The sampling method is using judgmental sampling. This judgmental sampling method is a guideline to select SMEs which to fulfil the criteria of operating both online and offline, and they are successful in online businesses, with at least 15% of their sales are from overseas market for at least two years. The sample for this study will be two firms from the SMEs for the multiple case studies.

Patton (2002) argues that there is no rule in determining sample size, depending on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the study, what can be useful, what can be done within a certain time and resource. The quality of the analysis, how much time taken to analyse the interviews are much more crucial than the quantity.

In this research, process coding is selected to capture the action. Process coding describes how things change over time. This is very relevant to this study which intends to understand how SMEs can succeed in overseas markets through appropriate talent management.

### 4 FINDINGS

#### *Q1: How does your firm define talent and talent management?*

*Firm A:* Talents are the core workforce that is crucial in the organization. In this firm, those included in talents are the merchandise team, digital marketing, or other crucial management work task.

The merchandise team handles the design of clothing targeting young adults between the age of 18 to 25. Talent in design here covers creativity, knowing the preferences of young adults and the demographic factors that influence their purchasing patterns.

Next is the marketing team, particularly digital marketing, as young adults are receptive to online purchases, apart from that, retail staff in the frontline also plays a role.

*Firm B:* For talent management in the digital business, the planning team, analytical team, and the marketing team are both essential to kick start the whole process. The planning team handles the whole planning and delivery processes.

Talent management starts from the data analytics team to the marketing team, followed by the design development and the production team. The last part will be the supply chain division to the retail stores, consumer services, etc.

The firm consists of both offline and online businesses. The online business is using the



omni-channel retailing, therefore, a data-driven mindset is essential in business.

***Q2: How do talent/experts in your firms help in sensing new opportunities/changes in the market?***

*Firm A:* New opportunities in the market are sensed through their merchandise and marketing team by conducting marketing surveys from time to time. Their job is to identify the needs of customers and to collect new ideas for future designs. Their target young adults between the age of 18-25 as these are their main clients.

*Firm B:* At the initial stage, the data team will extract data from internal and external data to identify consumers' needs. From there, they analyse the trends, preferences, taste, price range, design, sizes, race, and gender of the consumers. The analysis is then passed to the marketing for brand building and designs. The survey can be conducted online, information available on e-commerce websites, other firms' websites, etc.

Occasionally, they visit other physical stores to gain more knowledge about how peers run their businesses. This produces a holistic view of the demand in the market.

***Q3: How does your firm align talent management and digital businesses to capture the benefits of digital business? Who are the workforces that are categorized as the "digital talent"?***

*Firm A:* The top management conducts business reviews from time to time, particularly the annual review to determine the direction and planning for the year to come. To achieve these goals, appropriate training will be given, including in-house training and outsource training.

Digital talents are those in digital marketing, those well versed with the digital devices; and the merchandise team, those who handle the design of products. The firm embarked on the digital business since 5 years ago. These include promoting the product using online platforms, selling products online, and the new initiative is to combine membership in both online and offline operations.

*Firm B:* The firm agrees that digital business will be more dominant in years to come. To align talent management with the digital business, it is accomplished through the transform of mind-set, particularly those in the key positions.

Digital talent is not merely those in the IT skills, but also those skills needed in the whole operations, etc. Digital-related skills are needed for the creation of websites, other in-house infrastructure, setting up and maintenance of software, hardware, inventory control using IT devices, etc. As for digital marketing, digital skills are related to managerial or marketing-related digital skills, such as managing the website and social media, software for logistics management, etc.

***Q4: How does talent utilises digital technology with a market plan for your business?***

*Firm A:* The firm uses the omni-channel method, digital platforms used by the firm include the company's website; e-commerce marketplace, mobile app; social media; and e-wallet.

The firm launched its app in September 2019 created by an external consultant. The use of social media and e-wallet are digital platforms with the least issue, which requires less specific skills. The firm normally applies the knowledge the staff gain from the e-commerce marketplace into social media platforms. As for e-wallet, the firm is the user of various e-wallet payments, such as Boost, Grab-pay, Alipay, etc.

Among all these digital devices, its website is most effective in sales, compared to the e-commerce marketplace. Even though there is a huge amount of viewer traffic on e-commerce

websites, they are not the most effective digital platforms for firm A.

*Firm B:* The talent deploys appropriate technology and matches this technology with employees of certain expertise. For example, instead of creating the company's website from scratch, the firm purchases a template that allows them to design and amend the materials from time to time. Similarly, they select a mobile app that enables amendments. For a smooth operational process, the firm selects the easy puzzle software that supports them in the digital business. This software connects them for the whole process of the supply chain. It provides collective information about charges of different logistic firms and their availability in different locations. Currently, the firm promises quick delivery of products across Klang Valley areas within 4 hours.

Overall, both firms use omni-channel strategies to capture the attention and awareness of shoppers about their products.

***Q5: How do you successfully integrate talent and deploy technology in expanding your business?***

*Firm A:* For successful integration of talent and deploy technology in the business, it covers the internal and external aspects of firms. Internal aspects consist of the effective training of staff, the use of cloud data, and the effective usage of digital platforms and digital devices in their operations. External aspects are related to the awareness of consumers in using online business so that more clients are comfortable using digital devices in their purchase. These include awareness of clients regarding the use of the online purchase, services given to online shoppers, etc.

In providing the online facilities to shoppers, it only achieves the purpose if there is online purchase. Otherwise, firms may receive poor responses although advanced technology has been deployed in the digital platform. As such, the readiness of online shoppers does matter.

*Firm B:* To achieve this purpose, the firm commits to providing continuous opportunities for employees to explore and to learn. Upskilling and reskilling will be an on-going thing for the firm. Any new ideas will be validated using actual data. If these ideas match with the current trend and needs, the firm proceeds with the design and production.

Findings from the data analytic allow the firm to find the 'sweet spots' for promotional items. In other words, the optimum prices for products during stock clearance or discount seasons. As such, the firm can make appropriate decisions for their business operations.

***Q6: What are the challenges and difficulties in talent management and technology adoption? How do you overcome them?***

*Firm A:* Challenges include retaining the workforce. Another challenge is the rapid changes in technology. In the past, the operations of both offline and online were carried out separately. With the new retail concept which is to combine both online and offline operations, the firm needs to upgrade its system for better operational connectivity. More investments need to be done to realise this new retail concept.

External challenges include the issue of logistics. Currently, the firm has difficulties in speedy delivery as there are very limited logistic firms that are available. It takes a longer period for them to deliver the products as they need to accumulate enough volume from firms to deliver products to different locations. Without more demand for online purchases, the logistics firm and online business cannot have fast progress.

*Firm B:* The most challenging thing will be the change of mindset from the conventional way to the data-driven mindset. Data sources are crucial in the process of decision making, from the designs of the products; branding; marketing tools and experiences; the quantity of the products; arrangement for the retail outlets and online business, logistic issues, etc. Hence, the knowledge and usage of data are crucial. This enables the firm to reduce risks and make effective predictions, and plan proper prescriptions.

As regarding the process of internationalization performance, these are the questions:

***Q7: How significant is digital technology in capturing the ASEAN market?***

In the context of these 2 firms, digital technology is relevant, however, there are other prominent factors, include cultural similarity; geographical distance; the prospect of profitability, and sustainability of the firm in overseas branches; governmental policies such as tariff, exchange rate, etc. All these factors will influence if the firm wants to expand its business overseas.

***Q8: The success factors of the firms in internationalizing the business to ASEAN.***

*Firm A:* To be successful, it has to meet the basic principle, which is the quality of the products. The firm offers quality products at affordable prices. The rest will be related to the designs of the products which are acceptable by the consumers. Hence, the preferences of consumers come into play.

*Firm B:* For the ASEAN market, the firm uses the e-commerce marketplace as the tool to reach out to consumers who do not come to the retail outlets. In fact, the volume of viewers' traffic on e-commerce websites serve as a way for branding and awareness. Another effective tool is the mobile app, consumers get access to the latest update about products and promotional items.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

No one can deny the significance of talent management in achieving organizational performance. Willdersdorf (2014) emphasizes the importance to cultivate strong a leadership pipeline. It is essential to integrate the business plans into HR applications, at the same time analyse the skills needed in the future.

In the context of these two firms, both use omni-channel retailing, which is encouraged by Bell et al. (2014) and Ye et al. (2018), as it is easier for firms to reach out to the consumers and information is accessible online. Apart from using omni-channel retailing, Shopify (2019) proposes ways for apparel retailers to strengthen their online sales volume, such as with the use of flexible payment gateways; synchronize the product information and inventory; end-to-end integration.

Likewise, the Deloitte Swiss Watch Report (2016) has highlighted some innovative processes which are undergone an evolution, including the growing importance of 3D printing. When this technology reaches the maturity stage, it might end the triangle manufacturing and local apparel retailers can even think of printing their materials. It allows firms to create prototypes in a short period without any need to order internal parts or use manufacturing tools.

Apart from that, retailers can engage influencers, bloggers, content writers to further communicate with their consumers. Besides, for apparel retailers who are reluctant to digitize their



businesses, they may consider drop-shipping as a way to go online. Drop-shipping is the corporation with pure-play online retailers, online retailers will handle digital marketing.

## 6 CONCLUSION

From this study, both firms use the omni-channel method in digital businesses. In firm A, the merchandise team, digital marketing, and other managerial talents are to ensure the success of the whole process. These include the design of the product, triangle manufacturing, retail stores to the delivery of the products to consumers.

As for firm B, they are one step ahead in data analytics. The data analytics team will validate the information and ideas using internal and external data to assess the marketability of certain ideas or designs. Followed by that, the marketing team will conduct a marketing survey to identify market trends. Also, firm B applies certain logistic software to keep track of the whole supply chain processes.

As for the internationalization of business. Both select Singapore due to purchasing power, cultural similarity, and geographical distance. Nevertheless, the two firms state that although they use the omni-channel of online business in Singapore, the performance in retail stores is still better than the online sales. Having said this, both recognize that digital business is growing and it is necessary to embrace digital business.

Currently, there are several digital marketing agencies available in the market, providing strategies in digital consultancies, digital business mapping, training of digital skills, and so on. The initiative of firms to be ready and embrace the digitization of businesses will be the key to success in moving towards this direction.

## 7 AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

The corresponding author will be liable to provide information regarding this paper.

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