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DOI:

[10.1111/1748-8583.12416](https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12416)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Ram, M, McCarthy, I, Green, A & Scully, J 2021, 'Towards a more inclusive human resource community: engaging ethnic minority microbusinesses in human resource development programmes targeted at more productive methods of operating', *Human Resource Management Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12416>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Towards a more inclusive human resource community: Engaging ethnic minority microbusinesses in human resource development programmes targeted at more productive methods of operating

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Abstract

The economic and social importance of ethnic minority microbusinesses ('EMMBs' with 1–9 employees) is neglected in human resource (HR) academic and policy discourse on productive ways of working. This article presents an action research approach to show how academics and intermediaries (local trusted industry representatives) can collaborate to promote HR development programmes targeted at more productive methods of operating in EMMBs. Our research collaboration involves academics, EMMBs (from the catering and creative sectors) and intermediaries. We develop perspectives on HR in small firms by showing how EMMBs can be engaged in initiatives of learning and development targeted at organisational change. The study contributes to recent calls for a more inclusive approach to HR theorising and practice.

KEYWORDS

action research, ethnic minority, microbusinesses, HR practices, productive work

Abbreviations: BEIS, Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; EMMB, ethnic minority microbusiness; FG, focus group; HR, human resource.

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Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Ethnic minority microbusinesses (EMMBs) are important; yet they are under-researched and largely ignored by business support and human resource (HR) specialists.
- They are distinctive because of: pervasive informality and the absence of formal HR and management practices; the dominant role of personal preferences of owner managers family members; and detachment from 'mainstream' business support and HR networks.
- Extant small firms' research suggests that EMMBs are largely uninterested in HR development practices focused on more productive methods of operating.
- Yet recent evidence from research and practice indicates EMMBs are interested in programmes that have implications for business support providers.
- There is considerable scope for more collaborative HR-focused initiatives that are sensitive to the context of EMMBs.

What this paper adds?

- A focus on EMMBs and local trusted industry representatives (intermediaries) who are collaborating with academics on HR development programmes focused on more productive methods of operating.
- A novel action research study that has the potential to develop into a new ecosystem of support for EMMBs.
- HR professionals can work with intermediaries to help improve the management practices of EMMBs through HR developmental programmes that can lead to more productive methods of operating.
- Insights from intermediaries can add important perspectives into what more productive methods of operating means in different contexts.

The implications for practitioners

- Sustained commitment from intermediaries and academics is required if EMMB owners are to be engaged in effective programmes of business and HR support.
- A more inclusive 'ecosystem' of traditional and non-traditional partners helps to engage EMMBs in development programmes focused on more productive methods of operating.
- Development programmes will require political decisions on the choice of partners and the approach to be taken.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Growing human resource (HR) interest in supporting the development of more productive workplaces (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2015) appears not to extend to an important segment of the small firm population: ethnic minority microbusinesses (EMMBs) with between one and nine employees. This omission is surprising given their numerical significance: Roberts et al. (2020) found 250,000 EMMBs, contributing £25 billion Gross Value Added to the UK economy. The contribution is amplified by EMMBs' social role in providing employment and social inclusion for ethnic minority communities (Villares-Varela et al., 2018). An opportunity is being missed to engage an important segment of the economy. This is to the detriment of a more inclusive theoretical HR agenda (Vincent et al., 2020) and an HR profession that seeks to embrace communities and business practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021; Cross & Swart, 2021; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018).

This paper examines how intermediaries (local trusted industry representatives) and academics can collaborate on HR development programmes in EMMBs focused on more productive methods of operating. For present purposes, we view 'more productive methods of operating' as explicit or structured attempts by employers to link their HR

practices with business strategy. HR practices are the controls used to deal with the functional requirements of firms (Kroon & Paauwe, 2021). They are of two kinds: employment practices (practices used to recruit, deploy, motivate, and retain workers) and work practices (comprising work organisation, training, leadership and change management processes). The former – employment practices – have usually been analysed in studies of EMMBs (Ram et al., 2020; Villares-Varela et al., 2018). Our concern is with work practices. Little attention has been accorded to practical ways in which academics and intermediaries can support EMMBs to deploy such HR practices.

Such an undertaking is challenging for conceptual and practical reasons. Conceptually, 'integrative' (Kroon & Paauwe, 2021) models of HR and employment in small firms (Edwards et al., 2006; Harney & Dundon, 2006; Mayson & Barrett, 2017) suggest the contextual conditions of many EMMBs – comprising tough market competition and a restricted labour market, limited resources and a preoccupation with survival – limit the scope for HR development. Practically, EMMBs and microbusinesses per se, are often portrayed as lacking in HR capabilities and uninterested in external support (Gherhes et al., 2016) – this suggests there is a limited role for academics, HR and business support intermediaries to engage such firms in programmes to reassess their approaches to HR.

We address the conceptual challenge by combining insights from integrative HR approaches to small firms (particularly, Edwards et al., 2006) with recent theorising on 'transaction economies' (notably, Hall, 2020); the latter outlines how intermediaries and firms like those in our study collaborate to provide mutual support, space for learning and opportunities for growth. We show that such networks have the potential to create a space that encourages dialogue on how to deploy more productive methods of operating, for example, in relation to how business owners can develop their leadership skills. A richer understanding of the dynamics of transaction economies can strengthen integrative approaches by providing a fuller understanding of the range of actors that influence HR practices in small firms.

We tackle the practical challenge by adopting an action research approach comprising academics and intermediaries who have trusted relationships with EMMBs in two neglected sectors: catering and creatives (representing the traditional and new economy respectively). We focus on findings from an action research project and consider EMMB owner perspectives (based on focus groups [FGs] and interviews) and embryonic initiatives focused on more productive deployment of human resources developed collaboratively between EMMBs, intermediaries and academics. We address three questions: (1) How can academics and intermediaries nurture EMMB interest in development programmes focused on more productive methods of operating? (2) What do productive methods of operating mean for EMMBs? (3) What lessons can be drawn from an action research approach for HR professional intermediaries (e.g., the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD]) wishing to engage with EMMBs to promote more productive HR practices?

Our contribution is both theoretical and practical. By complementing insights from integrative approaches with the (hitherto unacknowledged) role of meso-level actors and institutions in 'transaction economies' (Hall, 2020), we open up a conceptual space for academics and intermediaries to engage with a part of the economy that is largely absent from mainstream HR discourse. This is the 'kaleidoscope imagination' in action; that is, the combination of different theories required to produce a multi-layered analysis of HR (Vincent et al., 2020). We therefore extend integrative analyses of HR in small firms' research. Our approach resonates with calls in mainstream HR debates for greater attention to the wider relationships of firms (Burton et al., 2019; Cross & Swart, 2021; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020), reinforced in a recent entreaty 'to think about the broader ecosystem of people working in collaboration' (Snell & Morris, 2019: 12).

Practically, whilst much is known about how HR in small firms is 'different' compared to large ones (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020) – for example, the tensions around formal/informal approaches – we go further, showing how EMMBs welcome engagement, *and* how to engage. The vital first step of establishing *how* to engage is crucial to establishing the scope for HR change in very small firms (Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). The study is therefore a 'critical case' because EMMBs fit within the broader neglected category of 1.1 million 'microbusinesses', accounting for 82% of all firms in the UK (BEIS, 2017). If a programme of HR change can be initiated in the challenging circumstances of EMMBs, it should be feasible with other microbusinesses too. Our study demonstrates how collaborative HR research on mi-

crobusinesses operates (Guerci et al., 2019) and shows how HR bodies like the CIPD might engage with a neglected segment of the economy.

2 | ENGAGING EMMBS: THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The action research approach adopted here starts with practice rather than the 'gap in the literature' redolent of conventional studies. Nonetheless, contextualising interventions is important to 'preunderstanding' (Eden & Ackermann, 2018). Here, we develop a conceptual account of EMMBs and its implications for engaging such firms on programmes to develop more productive methods of operating. We draw selectively on key elements of Edwards et al.'s (2006) integrative approach – notably sector, work organisation and business networks – because it is largely derived from the experiences of work in EMMBs, and its focus on explaining how and why small businesses vary is helpful to practitioners since firms will respond to external advice in light of their own situations. We outline ways in which Edwards et al.'s (2006) integrative approach could be strengthened by closer engagement with Hall's (2020) detailed exploration of the dynamics of 'transaction economies' in which many EMMBs operate. A key insight of Hall's work is the influence of informal network level actors and institutions on the practices of EMMBs. Acknowledging these influences can widen the scope of HR in small firms to be more inclusive of EMMBs.

Sector, product and labour markets combine to shape the scope and character of HR practices of EMMBs and their openness to business support and HR interventions (Edwards & Ram, 2019). Structural forces drive immigrant and other ethnic minority firms to poorly rewarded market niches (Kloosterman, 2010). Catering (here our focus is on Bangladeshi catering) is a classic 'ethnic niche' in which entrepreneurs survive by working long hours and stringent cost-cutting (Ram et al., 2020). This is also evident in the creative sector (Ram et al., 2011), where migrant and ethnic minority communities make an important contribution. A recent review of the creative sector found much of the work is often low-paid and precarious, and there are significant concerns about how improvements are hampered by management and leadership capability (Carey et al., 2019).

Too narrow a focus on the market context, however, runs the risk of perpetuating a 'deficit narrative' (Hall, 2020), and underplays the importance of the diffuse networks EMMBs rely on to survive and grow. High levels of resourcefulness and interdependence are as much a feature of the transaction economies in which EMMBs operate as the constraints identified in extant HR models of small firm behaviour (Hall, 2020; Villares-Varela et al., 2018). EMMBs require a 'multitude of energies, side steps, scrimping, and know-how required to occupy the marginal spaces of unequal cities' (Hall, 2020: 8). They are implicated in a web of interactions with other proprietors, accountants, lawyers and trusted intermediaries which disrupt the 'all-too singular ascriptions of "the" economy as well as "the" entrepreneur' (Hall, 2020: 8). The extent to which HR advice and support could be a part of the interactions with actors from these informal institutions has yet to be explored.

Work organisation in EMMBs will influence receptiveness to HR and business support (Edwards et al., 2006). Several factors are relevant. First, it is difficult to disentangle the meaning and significance of HR practices without an appreciation of the wider system in which they are embedded. For example, practices like 'training' and 'teamwork' are likely to be practised in EMMBs even though they may not be the formalised entities they tend to be in large firms (Edwards & Ram, 2019). They tend to be informal, directed at critical business needs and priorities, and embedded in everyday routines and working practices (Nolan et al., 2020). Second, HR comprises an interrelated flow of activities rather than single practices (Kroon & Paauwe, 2021). Informality runs through many parts of the operation of EMMBs. For example, who works in EMMBs is often difficult to discern – studies have, for instance, highlighted the blurred boundaries between 'employees', 'helpers' and family members (Ram et al., 2020). Hall (2020) notes that 'reciprocal labour' involving firms and social institutions outside the enterprise is also relevant in transaction economies. HR practices depend on owners' social capital embedded in relational networks inside and outside the firm (Cross & Swart, 2021). Job descriptions or even formal contracts of employment are therefore rare (Edwards et al., 2016).

Finally, management processes will be strongly shaped by the preferences and assumptions of the EMMB owner. Personal preferences, which are not necessarily right or wrong, will play a larger role than in large firms (Edwards & Ram, 2019). In transaction economies, the commitment to the wider community can, on occasions, override the instrumental interests of individual firms (Hall, 2020). Such personal and collective ambitions, and their implications for HR practices, rarely attract the importance they merit in standard accounts of HR in small firms (Edwards & Ram, 2019). This is despite the fact that small business goals are diverse, with attendant implications for HR practices (Kroon & Paauwe, 2021).

Practices in EMMBs can also be influenced by their embeddedness in external institutions, including those with interests in HR: firms that are integrated into **business networks** are more likely to be receptive to new ideas (Edwards & Ram, 2019). In normal circumstances EMMBs often eschew formal sources of business support (Ram et al., 2015) because they are often resource constrained, lacking in business capabilities and regard business support as irrelevant (Ram et al., 2017). Edwards et al. (2006) are therefore downbeat about the prospects for HR change in EMMBs. Such firms operate in competitive market niches and use a restricted pool of co-ethnic labour; owners are intent on survival rather than growth; and they rarely utilise external networks that promote the uptake of HR practices or competitiveness (Bacon & Hoque, 2005). But this assessment might be too pessimistic.

Many EMMBs are enmeshed in interdependent and mutually supportive networks, which are often opaque to academics and policy makers (Hall, 2020). Hall's study found a 'migrant infrastructure of care' comprising established mutual support and assistance between employers, professionals, local institutions, and communities. The potential for such ties and community connections between EMMBs to encourage firms to engage with more productive methods of operating is largely unexplored, though the potential to promote greater awareness of leadership development has been noted in studies of EMMBs (Woldesenbet & Worthington, 2019). The extent to which economic crises or shocks – our study coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic – might precipitate changes in HR practice is also unexplored (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020).

In summary, combining insights from Edwards et al. (2006) with Hall (2020) advances the contextual understanding of HR in EMMBs in three ways. First, it reinforces the ways in which formal and informal institutions influence EMMBs. For example, sector, product and labour markets shape HR practices; as do the informal institutions and affiliations in which EMMBs are implicated. It is important for HR to focus on 'collaborations that will work and the ways in which these can be mobilised' (Cross & Swart, 2021: 9).

Second, understanding owners' preferences, their personal goals, and commitments to wider groups and interests is critical to the task of engaging EMMBs. Reflections on these topics are likely to be important to critical conversations on organisational and HR change (Edwards, 2018). Ulvenblad and Barth (2021) draw on innovation literature to identify the 'fuzzy front end' of interactions with small business owners as fundamental to establishing the scope of HR change. Early stage discussions on owners' goals and the dynamics of the business, 'determine the level of engagement and also the boundaries for potential HR practices' (Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021: 8).

Third, the resilient, agile and interdependent nature of EMMBs – often in a context of precarity – suggests that they are more open to change than often portrayed. The role of informal institutions operating at the network level is key. Understanding the influence of informal institutions – and engaging them in more structured programmes of change – offers a potential pathway for HR programmes.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an 'action research' approach. 'Action research' encompasses several processes that aim to bring about practical change and develop wider knowledge. It includes approaches ranging from positivistic experimentation in organisational settings to participative practices committed to emancipation rather than knowledge generation (Cassell & Johnson, 2006). We pursue 'research-oriented action research' (Huxham & Vangen, 2003), which is a powerful research method when the objective is to explore theory in relation to practice because of its emphasis on

knowledge production in the context of application (Eden & Ackermann, 2018). We chose this because the researchers have relevant academic and practical 'pre-understanding' comprising: longstanding academic interest in HR issues in EMMBs (Edwards & Ram, 2019); experience of research-based interventions with EMMBs; and an active network of intermediaries (including the collaborators in the present study).

In this paper we focus on the processes involved in nurturing interest in the idea of adopting more productive use of human resources with the support of intermediaries, examining what this means for EMMBs, and the practical outcomes from doing so over a two-year period from spring 2019. Of key importance is the research relationship with intermediaries, who were selected for both theoretical and practical reasons. The intermediaries were important actors in the densely connected networks in which EMMBs were embedded. They are also part of the often-hidden ecosystem and relational networks that many EMMBs rely on to function, learn, survive and grow (Hall, 2020). The two intermediaries are: BangCo, a network of four groups with local (and national) reach into the Bangladeshi catering sector; and MusiCo, a music business with a strong social mission to promote artists from diverse backgrounds. Both intermediaries co-designed the study with the researchers and are integral to its delivery. They are influential in the networks of microbusinesses in the two sectors focused on here: catering and creatives. Caterers are 'traditional owner-managed firms' described by Kroon and Paauwe (2021), with highly informal and personalised work relationships. Creatives are more like 'alliances' between very small firms or self-employed professionals. Work is often expedited by informal mutual agreements, though there is little recognition of this kind of employment in extant small firm models (Cross & Swart, 2021; Kroon & Paauwe, 2021).

Data collection design, delivery and analysis within action research is negotiated between all parties during the project (Eden & Ackermann, 2018). There were three overlapping phases that were designed to gain deeper insights into the context of application, elicit EMMB views on productive methods of operating, and facilitate action agreed with intermediaries. We discuss each in turn.

First, we conducted 11 meetings with different stakeholders. Eight were convened between the academics and intermediaries separately. Two involved the academic research team and three intermediaries together. One meeting involved attendees from formal business organisations, including the CIPD and local Chambers of Commerce.

The purpose of the meetings was three-fold. First, they provided a source of data (and were therefore recorded and transcribed). We gathered detailed information on: the niches EMMBs occupy in each sector; their links to formal and informal business support networks; and the challenges they face. Second, the meetings served as episodes of 'critical reflection', which is a process of mutual learning involving researchers and other stakeholders (Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001: 54). Participants discussed the activities to date, and researchers shared their conceptualisation of EMMBs and emerging findings from engagement. Finally, participants negotiated changes to priorities in response to emerging insights and external developments.

It is crucial to note here that the Covid-19 pandemic struck approximately 1 year into the study. This seismic occurrence led to a marked change in economic circumstances, challenged the practicalities of previous business operations and triggered changes in the business support landscape. Being responsive to important changes to participants' circumstances *during* the research process has long been recognised as an important strength of action research (Eden & Huxham, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2003). The openness of action research allows for features to emerge from the experience in and of the situation (Ollila & Yström, 2020).

The second phase – aimed at exploring more productive methods of operating – comprised 3 FGs and 16 interviews with EMMB owners. Understanding EMMB owners' conceptualisations is a necessary precursor to co-designing programmes of HR support. Each FG lasted approximately 2 hours and involved 8–13 participants in the two sectors. The FGs were co-convened, co-designed and co-facilitated by academics and intermediaries, differentiating them from standard FGs managed by academic facilitators (Kitzinger, 2005). Their main purpose was to assure participants about the ethics of the research (which followed University guidelines), and second, to elicit their perspectives on what more productive methods of operating might look like to enable us to explore a role for HR practices in supporting such improved operations. The discussions covered the competitive context of the firm, internal processes, perspectives on productive methods of operating, and links with wider networks. The composition of each group was:

- FG 1: participants from the creative sector, comprising those involved in music, performing and visual arts (eight men and five women).
- FG 2: including entrepreneurs from the creative sector (four women and three men).
- FG 3: 10 participants (all male), representing microbusiness owners from the Bangladeshi catering sector.

The interviews with EMMBs investigated the context of the firm, current operating practices and scope for more productive methods of operating and links with business support networks providing HR and other support. The caterers provided dine-in and/or take away services; they employed between three and nine staff. The creatives were a mix of firms with between one and six workers employed on a permanent or freelance basis. Semi-structured topic guides for the FGs and the interviews were developed in consultation with the intermediaries.

Observation was the primary method for the third phase of the project, and comprised documenting and facilitating two practical support initiatives arising from interactions between academics and intermediaries (discussed in the findings).

The variety of methods used, complemented by the formal and informal processes of reflection, facilitates triangulation, which is another strength of action research (Eden & Huxham, 1996). The inclusive, iterative and ongoing nature of engagement allowed researchers and intermediaries to share and interrogate each other's accounts. This reflexivity enables research outcomes to be justified 'as representative of the situation in which they were generated and have claims to generality' (Huxham & Vangen, 2003: 399).

Thematic analysis was used given the exploratory nature of the research and our aim to understand the meanings many participants attach to a theme (Joffe et al., 2004). A two-stage thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2018) was conducted using inductive analysis to generate initial codes and themes to feed into the development of an a priori coding framework, informed by the theoretical literature. Data were examined across and between participants and compared to identify patterns and any disconfirming evidence. The themes were discussed with participants during the regular episodes of critical reflection with intermediaries, which is an important means of enhancing the rigour of action research (Elden & Chisholm, 1993). Consistent with research-oriented action research (Eden & Ackermann, 2018; Eden & Huxham, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2003) the research team were ultimately responsible for the conceptualisation of the findings.

We ensured the trustworthiness of our findings by using several 'Mode 1' methods of quality control (Guerci et al., 2019). First, the researchers carefully reviewed transcripts and notes from the three phases of the study. Secondly, the authors met regularly to discuss emerging patterns in the data and to explore developing themes. Finally, we used an experienced researcher as a 'critical friend' to examine our procedures and approach to data analysis to assess the plausibility of our conclusions. This step of eliciting an independent perspective is also a feature of research-oriented action research (Eden & Ackermann, 2018; Huxham & Vangen, 2003).

4 | FINDINGS

This section shows how academics and intermediaries: (1) collaborated to influence and nurture EMMB owners' interest in programmes of HR development targeted at more productive methods of operating; (2) took action to understand what productive methods of operating mean for EMMBs; and (3) facilitated implementation of programmes on more productive methods of operating amongst EMMBs.

Two contrasting pathways to change are presented on the catering (BangCo) and creative sector (MusiCo). Each is based on interactions with intermediaries and FGs and interviews with EMMB owners.

4.1 | Case study 1: BangCo – Facilitating digital transformation in the catering sector

4.1.1 | Nurturing caterers' interest in productive methods of operating

The devastating impact of Covid-19 on hospitality – with national lockdowns in England meaning premises were required to close except for takeaway and delivery services from 20 March to early July 2020, in November 2020 and from January to mid-April/May 2021 (outdoor opening from mid-April and indoor opening [with restrictions] from mid-May) – compounded difficulties in an already struggling Bangladeshi catering sector facing recruitment challenges as the second generation increasingly turned their back on the sector and competition from a growing variety of alternative cuisines (as outlined below). Focus group participants reflected upon the factors that influenced their working practices, namely: resistance to change due to financial constraints, paucity of resources, time, rigid thinking and a lack of information: 'There is no industry body to give us a push, to say "this is what we need to move forward"' (Take-away owner 1).

Likewise, training and skills are acquired largely 'on the job' rather than formalised and certified routes. Formal training tends to be reactive rather than proactive, oriented towards mandatory training (e.g., health and safety) rather than professional development. Most gained their skills through informal training, passed on through generations with little focus on continuous development. Furthermore, some are reluctant to modernise with a preference towards manual methods of operation: 'Let's be honest, technology is something that is not in our industry' (Restaurateur 1); 'Technology is neglected because it's all done manually.' (Caterer 1).

Digital literacy, particularly the role of social media, was widely recognised as an important factor in a restaurant's reputation, and in due course became essential if operating a takeaway and delivery service during the Covid-19 pandemic:

You can't pull the wool over customers' eyes anymore. You've got to be totally focused ... or else that customer goes somewhere else or posts negative comments on social media. (Fast food 1)

Participants identified several competitive pressures, including supermarkets, the popularity of cuisine from other countries, and also changes in food culture, as customers have access to more choice within their locality and through online food delivery Apps (potentially another driver for improving digital literacy). This illustrates how closely HR is linked to the nature of tasks within these firms, customer expectations and the agency of owner-managers as they respond to multiple challenges (Nolan et al., 2020).

4.1.2 | More productive methods of operating

Eight interviews with caterers were convened to explore the meaning of more productive methods of operating. For many, operating more productively was about volume and efficiency, driven by competition and low profit margins:

You've got a hundred people waiting to be served. It's a matter of three hours and everything needs to go out. We are making, but we are making less than what we should [due to low profit margins]. [Therefore] we focus on getting [customer] numbers ... If we don't get the numbers, we don't make anything. Other restaurants are probably looking at 90 people a week. We [need] 300 ... to make money. (Restaurateur 2)

The influence of social media and digital marketing emerged again, with digital skills acknowledged as lacking. The digitally savvy hailed this trend as a positive marketing tool to draw customers:

TripAdvisor [a website where customers post reviews] has helped me. If you go onto our TripAdvisor page you'll see the last 50 reviews have all been 5 star. That's how I'm getting new customers. (Caterer 2)

4.1.3 | The development programme targeted at more productive methods of operating

Part way through the data collection, Covid-19 restrictions meant many catering venues had to close or move to take-away-only, which prompted interest in digitalisation amongst some firms.

BangCo observed that the restaurants who were doing well used social media to promote takeaways. This prompted BangCo to request 'LocalUni's (the University leading the project) assistance in addressing this development need. Accessing support through public programmes proved difficult, so LocalUni used its in-house expertise and assembled a team of business and marketing graduates (Grads) to develop a solution.

Utilising findings from the FG and interviews, LocalUni, BangCo and Grads designed and delivered an online training course. The course included three components: theory, application, and evaluation. Theory offered an overview of social media platforms and their relevance to the catering sector. This preparatory element sought to explain the value of using social media as an effective marketing tool. Application focused on providing participants with skills to set up and populate their own social media platforms. Equipped with the knowledge to implement their learning, participants were then given time to set up their own social media platforms before attending the evaluation session which focused on showcasing and troubleshooting.

The intervention was most restaurateurs' first experience of working with the University sector. Participants expressed interest in developing their social media skills further and also appealed for more accessible support. The process of engaging caterers demonstrates the importance of eliciting 'buy in' from owner managers and shows how by addressing an explicit and pressing business need (having great impetus because of Covid-19) is a pre-cursor to further HR intervention (see Ulvenblad & Barth, 2021). The digital skills intervention is a step in the direction of more productive HR practices. As one restaurateur explained:

I benefited from the training with [LocalUni's Grads]. Knowing what time to post, so that it corresponds with the time people are making plans for their evening meal, and knowing what content customers are going to engage with is important. I am now exploring things further with a digital marketing consultant but not everyone can afford to go to an external consultancy, especially now finances are tight ... If this [type of training] was something local authorities could provide it would be a great help because then we could do the digital marketing ourselves. It would also generate income for the local area.

4.2 | Case study 2: MusiCo – Pathway to a programme of leadership development for creatives

4.2.1 | Nurturing creatives' interest in productive methods of operating

Members of the research team and MusiCo met to discuss arrangements for a FG and interviews. MusiCo's owner said the EMMB participants' motivation for engaging in the research was the opportunity to be part of a cohort/network: '*That's the value for them*'. This sentiment was apparent from the outset as MusiCo's introduction to the FG revealed the importance of working together to share experiences and learn from one another to enable more productive methods of operating. Learning to operate effectively at a network level was therefore important to the HR development for these creatives:

We need to look at what you guys actually need in terms of supporting your businesses. Some of that is about networks and connecting as a group together, so we are going to develop our own ecosystem.

Focus group participants were asked how they could operate more productively. In response, a lack of business skills was identified as a key challenge since many creatives enter the sector out of a love for their craft rather than money – yet the latter ensures business sustainability. Many recognised their lack of commercial knowledge as a HR deficit but were hesitant about developing this capability: ‘I need support with the commercial side of things but I don't want to lose authenticity’ (Visual artist), to which MusiCo's owner responded, ‘Commercial is not a dirty word’. This exchange prompted others in the group to share similar concerns: ‘Most artists when you're talking about the commercial side of things, like money or trying to get more views, think it's a dirty word and I feel like it shouldn't be perceived like that’ (Film maker).

Participants proceeded to discuss their business needs, highlighting the need to develop management and leadership skills, including: forging links with reputable organisations who could provide support; accessing knowledge from industry experts; peer support in the form of collaboration with other artists; expanding one's network; and developing leadership skills to manage people and projects. Strengthening social relationships in a formalised way is a key HR practice for professionals who form creative alliances (Cross & Swart, 2021).

The FG concluded with MusiCo's owner summarising the conversation and next steps:

We are going to have a WhatsApp group all about opportunities: business training courses, tips around how to grow and share learning. This is going to feed into a nine-month programme with ‘LocalUni’.

4.2.2 | More productive methods of operating

The FG was followed by individual interviews on more productive methods of operating, with a view to developing an appropriate HR programme. Many equated being more productive with increasing sales, in addition to achieving a satisfactory return for one's efforts. One participant explained:

If I'm putting x amount of hours into a project, and ... the outcome is ... nobody's there, and I don't make any money, then that's not value for me. But if I'm going to sing ... and there's a [new] audience ... that has a value because those people are potential customers. (Musician)

The notion of customer satisfaction is central:

If you have people involved in a project, productivity is about whether they feel fulfilled in what they are getting. (Musician)

‘Brand’ played an important role in operating productively, since customers' purchases are often motivated by familiarity as well as emotional connection to a brand.

It's how the brand resonates with the audience. Brand authenticity. Once you have a brand you can attach it to any of your products, and the audience know what they are getting. (Singer)

Creatives were frustrated at having to compromise their art in order to secure support from potential funders:

If you want to be bankable you need to be able to present yourself ... I respect that. But what I don't like is having to sell my soul and my identity for someone to understand and respect what I'm trying to do. (Writer)

4.2.3 | The development programme targeted at more productive methods of operating

A nine-month programme of leadership development for creative entrepreneurs was developed by MusiCo, Local-Uni and creatives as an outcome of the consultation exercise and in response to the economic shock of Covid-19. It targeted professional and practical barriers to commerciality by focusing on career development, entrepreneurial fundamentals, finances and funding, digital marketing, branding (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Programme content of MusiCo leadership development programme

Session number	Session type	Title	Details
1	Launch	Induction	Opportunity for programme participants to meet each other, the teaching team, and learn more about the programme content.
2	Insights	Careers (part 1)	Insights from the career of a world class major events producer and their journey within the creative sector.
3	Core	Entrepreneurial fundamentals (part 1)	Defining your vision: What the business will become, look like, be driven by, value, and consider as its culture and norms. Achieving results: How to create new business opportunities and sales. Dealing with competition: How to contend with others competing for the same objectives or markets.
4	Core	Financial acumen	Understanding the drivers of growth, profitability, cash flow, budgets and key performance measures. How to maximise business profits and wealth.
5	Core	Entrepreneurial fundamentals (part 2)	Networking: How to build and maintain business contacts, relationships and partnerships.
6	Core	Digital marketing	Social media: How to work smarter with social media to market a company's products and services; engage with new and existing customers; promote a business' culture, mission and tone.
7	Core	Branding	Brand amplification: How to create a business identity that identifies and differentiates a product or service from others, and generates leads and sales.
8	Core	Entrepreneurial fundamentals (part 3)	Business plan: Defining a business' objectives and strategies for achievement in the short and long term.
9	Insights	Funding (part 1)	Seeking funding: Finding efficient and effective ways to identify relevant funding opportunities.
10	Insights	Funding (part 2)	Accessing funding: Guidance on understanding and practical skills needed to successfully apply for funding.
11	Insights	Careers (part 2)	Insights from a world-renowned creative entrepreneur's career path in the creative sector.
12	Closing	Showcase	Participants to showcase learning and impacts resulting from the programme.

4.2.4 | Early impacts

Programme participants valued the opportunity to interact with others 'from similar backgrounds' who had experienced 'the same kind of [business] struggles', which prompted feelings of reduced isolation and increased motivation 'to keep on pushing' and move forward with their business. Some participants were even prompted to work together outside of the programme on real life business projects.

Hearing others' stories and 'being around people who are winning' boosted participants' belief in the possibility of their own success, as well as their receptiveness to support rather than struggling alone (as is often the case).

Participants reported greater financial awareness in terms of: valuing their worth, 'we cannot be creative just for creativity's sake, it's also important to be bankable'; creating multiple income streams; and better financial management, 'Being clear on how much I need to take out of the business in order to survive versus what I need to retain to keep the business running... is something I have implemented ... because of the programme (Writer).'

From immediate benefits, such as securing funding, to providing a more long-term strategic focus, the programme will continue into a second year. For the next iteration participants called for greater monitoring of learning outcomes for example through mentorship, and also a more competitive element to increase learning engagement: 'If between the 12 of us, we could have all pitched for investment. I think that would have put more competitive fire underneath us in a healthy way' (Musician).

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Academic and policy commentary on productive ways of working has largely bypassed EMMBs. Consequently, research-based insights on how EMMBs might be supported to develop and implement more productive methods of operating are rare.

Our action research study of overlooked firms advances calls for a more inclusive HR community – made in this journal (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021; Cross & Swart, 2021; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Vincent et al., 2020) – in three inter-related ways. First, we demonstrate the value of 'meta-theoretical bricolage' (Vincent et al., 2020:462) – the considered combination of theories – to HR: complementing Edwards et al.'s (2006) insights on the contextual conditions of EMMBs with Hall's (2020) greater sensitivity to how these conditions are constructed by key actors and institutions invites a reappraisal of firms' openness to HR change. Second, by engaging with groups outside conventional HR discourse – by means of social capital and the mobilisation of social resources (Cross & Swart, 2021; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018) – we extend integrative approaches to HR in small firms and enact the 'relational' and 'ecosystem' approach called for in wider HR debates (Burton et al., 2019; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2020; Snell & Morris, 2019; Soltis et al., 2018). Finally, following the problems with people management exposed by the pandemic – particularly for marginalised groups – we respond to calls for wide-ranging conversations and 'collective' attempts (encompassing us *all*) to improve the HR field (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021:6). We begin this task in a modest way in our methodological approach to the study.

Our interactions as academics with intermediaries – which relate to the first research question on nurturing EMMB interest in development programmes focused on more productive methods of operating – shows the value of engaged research that takes situational knowledge seriously. The intermediaries had key features of the 'relational form' noted in HR (Gittell & Douglass, 2012; Soltis et al., 2018); but they were not part of formal HR or enterprise support networks that usually serve as the conduits for officially recognised engagement with small firms and EMMBs. Yet their position in the informal ecosystem of microbusinesses – Hall's (2020) 'transaction economies' – gave them detailed knowledge of the context of application for a potential HR intervention.

The intermediaries and EMMBs engaged in a dialogue on the meaning of more productive methods of operating (our second research question). This was noteworthy for two reasons. First, the findings show that conventional economic definitions foregrounding labour productivity are an inappropriate starting point for research and policy

interventions for EMMBs. However, as the HR development programmes outlined above attest, this does not mean that EMMBs have turned their backs on the essential tenets of productive ways of working and are uninterested in improving. The caterers were primarily exercised by volume of customers and efficiency, driven by competition and low profit margins, while the creatives were concerned about sales and customer satisfaction to help ensure continuation of income.

Secondly, as the concerns outlined above indicate, our results show that contexts of the EMMBs had a marked impact on the organisation of work and owners' preferences and receptiveness to development programmes which might lead to more productive methods of operating. Covid-19 and the critical conversations facilitated by our study shifted owners' outlooks. For caterers, being productive now involved the embrace of digital tools as employers sought to find ways to survive the pandemic. This demonstrates the inter-relationship between customer expectations and HR practices, as well as employer agency in light of the multiple pressures they face (Nolan et al., 2020). The programme of support for the creatives can be seen as an attempt to connect business strategy and HR practice.

The implications of the study for HR practitioners – the third research question – are threefold. First, trusted intermediaries can act as 'HR sense-givers' (Nishii & Paluch, 2018). Nishii and Paluch (2018) use the term to describe how owners/CEOs convey their philosophy and delegate responsibilities (particularly in the absence of a dedicated HR specialist). Intermediaries enjoy legitimacy amongst businesses which derives from their local embeddedness and expertise. Resource constrained EMMBs are unlikely to modernise and implement more productive methods of operating without the support of trusted intermediaries. Hence the latter are potentially useful conduits to facilitate the critical conversations (Edwards & Ram, 2019) needed to promote more productive methods of operating.

Second, we show how socially embedded relationships between EMMBs can be infused with expertise to support changes to HR practices. Intermediaries – via the collaboration with the academic research team in this instance – can fulfil a crucial 'bridging mechanism' role in links with more formal HR and business support organisations. Such bridging mechanisms, which are commonplace in the HR field and larger firms (Guerci et al., 2019) – e.g., internships, placements and conferences – rarely feature in microbusiness networks. Intermediaries' support of EMMBs in our study offers an opportunity for HR practitioners to collaborate on customised development programmes co-produced between business owners, trusted networks and intermediaries and more formal HR and business support institutions. EMMBs, and small firms per se, are likely to find value in local and sector-specific learning networks and tools which may enable them to assess their own particular requirements.

Third, the onset of a severe economic shock induced by the Covid-19 pandemic nearly a year into the study has enabled us to explore in real time how EMMBs' priorities were impacted. This presents an opportunity for HR professionals to fulfil the role of 'people advocates' focusing on 'an ethos of a positive human relationship, regardless of employment status' (Cross & Swart: 2021:12). For EMMBs in the catering sector the closure of restaurants for on-site dining in successive lockdowns, and for the creative sector the halt to live performances, necessitated a 'reset' of business models in order to survive. This was reflected in the changing nature of the conversations and the design of collaborative interventions, which became more focused on survival during the pandemic. The shock of Covid-19 bringing business survival to the fore – with unparalleled business support made available through grants and loans – may act as a precursor and trigger for greater formalisation of HR structures and business practices in order to qualify for such support (since lack of formalisation – e.g., in terms of clarity over 'employees' and 'pay' – hinders qualification for financial support). The links made with the more formal business support infrastructure and HR intermediaries during the Covid-19 pandemic may provide a platform for future developments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/S012788/1). We are grateful to Profs. Dora Scholarios and Paul Edwards, and Drs. Brian Harney, Robert Wapshott, Igor Pryko and Ed Houghton for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We are also grateful to the Editor, Prof Amanda Pyman, and the reviewers for their guidance. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Ram, M., McCarthy, I., Green, A., & Scully, J. (2021). Towards a more inclusive human resource community: Engaging ethnic minority microbusinesses in human resource development programmes targeted at more productive methods of operating. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12416>