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Philosophy of Management: The competitive advantages of small and medium-sized enterprises and the overall governance of the company

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Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) rarely enjoy the resource depth of large corporations, yet many of them prosper in turbulent industries through distinctive forms of governance. Building on mixed methods—comparative case studies of forty-seven European and Asian SMEs, a panel of financial indicators between 2018 and 2023, and one hundred twenty-eight semi-structured interviews—this paper explores how management philosophy can be translated into concrete governance routines that release competitive advantages without eroding organisational cohesion. Three advantages recur across the highest-performing firms: decision cycles that run 68 % faster than industry means, cultures that convert into 41 % higher employee-engagement scores, and stakeholder-integration practices that lift satisfaction levels by 23.7 % relative to large rivals. Across the sample, a strong correlation ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$) links transparent governance with sustained market performance. Enterprises that operate participatory frameworks generate 34 % more innovation events and weather crises 28.5 % better than peers shaped by classical hierarchy. These findings lead to an integrative framework that reconciles the need for agility with the safeguards of sound oversight. Practical contributions include a scale-calibrated governance-assessment tool that helps leaders weigh formalisation against adaptability. Future work should reassess these mechanisms across economic cycles and test for cultural variation.

For citation

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Keywords

Management philosophy, SME governance, competitive advantage, organisational agility, stakeholder integration, decision transparency, participatory frameworks.

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute more than 90 % of the world's firms and generate roughly half of global value added, yet the theoretical vocabulary with which management scholars describe strategy, structure and governance is still dominated by observations drawn from large, vertically integrated corporations. This size bias obscures the fact that SMEs do not merely operate at a different scale; they compete through distinctive combinations of agility, proximity to stakeholders and owner-manager imprint that fundamentally reshape how advantage is created and sustained [Achtenhagen, Melin, Naldi, 2013]. Cloud technologies, digital marketplaces and pay-as-you-go analytics have lowered entry barriers so dramatically that the traditional resource-based rationale for bigness—economies of scope, purchasing leverage, data hoarding—no longer guarantees superior returns [Audretsch, Belitski, 2021]. In many turbulent niches, it is the fast rather than the big that eat the slow.

Yet “going fast” is an outcome, not a policy. What remains under-specified in both academic debate and practitioner toolkits is *how* SMEs design governance systems that allow speed without dissolving into chaos, foster creativity without sacrificing accountability and integrate stakeholders without bloating administrative overheads. The current literature offers partial answers. Resource orchestration studies argue that relational and knowledge-based resources substitute for financial depth [Darcy et al., 2014]. Dynamic-capability scholars show that sensing, seizing and reconfiguring cycles can be compressed when decision teams are small and co-located [Ferreira, Coelho, Moutinho, 2020]. Entrepreneurship research highlights effectual reasoning and opportunity enactment as pragmatically superior in uncertain environments [Karami, Wooliscroft, McNeill, 2020]. However, three inter-related gaps persist.

First, the balance dilemma. SMEs oscillate between the Scylla of premature bureaucracy and the Charybdis of improvisational overload [Ferreira, Coelho, Moutinho, 2020]. While informal routines energise early growth, they can throttle scale when decision bottlenecks accumulate around founders. Conversely, codifying every process in a handbook modelled on conglomerates may neutralise the very flexibility that underwrites small-firm success [Garavan et al., 2016]. A theoretically anchored middle ground is largely missing.

Second, governance as active advantage. Studies routinely document correlations between flat structures and innovation, or between participation and engagement, but seldom trace the causal plumbing that converts “how we decide” into hard differentials in resilience, speed or customer lock-in [Hervas-Oliver, Ripoll-Sempere, Moll, 2016]. As a result, prescriptions devolve into platitudes about “empowerment” that ignore contingencies such as regulatory load or knowledge codifiability.

Third, the ethical-cultural substrate. Reputation is existentially important for SMEs that lack the capital to absorb brand damage, yet value-driven governance has been treated as soft garnish rather than as a strategic asset class [Huang et al., 2021]. Empirical work on family-business stewardship hints that shared ideals can mobilise discretionary effort and fortify stakeholder loyalty, but the boundary conditions remain fuzzy [Calabrò et al., 2019].

The present study answers the call for a richer, scale-attuned theory of SME governance. Building on comparative case analysis of forty-seven European and Asian SMEs, a five-year panel of performance indicators and 128 semi-structured interviews, we advance four propositions.

- Governance philosophy as design code. We demonstrate that a firm's espoused view of authority—hierarchical-traditional, collaborative-democratic, entrepreneurial-adaptive or

- hybrid-professional—acts as a design code that channels choices about structure, process and culture. Each code produces a reproducible pattern of decision autonomy, formalisation and stakeholder integration (Table 1).
- Structural-processual complementarity. Competitive advantages arise not from structural levers (centralisation, formalisation) *per se*, but from their fit with processual routines (decision velocity, transparency) and with environmental cues (technological turbulence, market dynamism) [Garavan et al., 2016]. Using longitudinal clustering, we map five evolutionary pathways—formalisation intensification, collaborative transformation, adaptive specialisation, stability maintenance and entrepreneurial reversion—and link them to differential trajectories of growth and resilience (Table 3).
 - Values as performance technology. Transparent enactment of core values—rather than slogans—correlates most strongly with stakeholder alignment, a composite metric that predicts both customer retention and talent stickiness. The mechanism is trust transfer: when employees observe governance consistency, they project reliability onto the brand, lowering transaction costs in external relationships [Hervas-Oliver, Ripoll-Sempere, Moll, 2016].
 - Adaptive specialisation as high-yield equilibrium. Firms that maintain a stable philosophical compass while tactically tweaking governance levers outperform one-dimensional peers on every dynamic metric—CAGR, innovation count, crisis recovery—without incurring significant efficiency penalties.

By integrating insights from the resource-based view, dynamic-capability theory and stewardship perspectives, we offer an integrative framework that calibrates governance formality to environmental turbulence and organisational lifecycle. Practically, we introduce a scale-calibrated *Governance Fitness Index* that enables SME leaders to diagnose mismatches between philosophy, structure and context, thereby avoiding pathologies of both under- and over-governance.

Four substantial knowledge gaps motivate this investigation.

- Balance between rigour and freedom. SMEs often swing between the Scylla of excessive bureaucracy and the Charybdis of unchecked informality, yet empirical guidance on the optimal midpoint is scant [Ferreira, Coelho, Moutinho, 2020].
- Governance as a mechanism of advantage. While agility and cohesion are widely cited benefits of smallness, we know little about the causal pathways linking specific governance philosophies to those outcomes [Garavan et al., 2016].
- Ethical and cultural dimensions. In the rush to model efficiency, research has sidelined questions of how values and culture shape stakeholder trust—a factor that may be decisive for brand loyalty and talent attraction [Hervas-Oliver, Ripoll-Sempere, Moll, 2016].
- Measurement tools. Without metrics attuned to scale, SMEs are forced to adopt frameworks designed for conglomerates, resulting in audit checklists that obscure more than they reveal [Huang et al., 2021].

Our study addresses these voids through a four-phase mixed-methods design. By threading together qualitative depth and quantitative breadth, we illuminate how ideas about authority, participation, and ethics travel from the boardroom to everyday routines—and, ultimately, to bottom-line performance. Because today's markets are simultaneously globalised and hyper-niche, the ability of SMEs to tilt structural levers quickly is likely to determine their survival. Understanding the philosophical undercurrents of those levers, therefore, is not an academic luxury but a strategic imperative [Karami, Wooliscroft, McNeill, 2020].

Materials

The inquiry unfolded in a stepwise sequence. At each stage, insights from earlier phases sharpened the instruments deployed in later phases.

- **Phase 1: Case exploration.** Forty-seven SMEs were selected via stratified purposive sampling to ensure variation in sector (manufacturing 31 %, services 42 %, technology 27 %), age (five to thirty-two years), and geography (Europe 58 %, Asia 32 %, North America 10 %). Each case involved document analysis of governance artefacts—by-laws, meeting minutes, policy manuals—and mapping of organisational charts.
- **Phase 2: Performance panel.** Financial and operational data were compiled for the 2018–2023 window. Key indicators included compound annual revenue growth (CAGR), return on assets (ROA), labour productivity (gross value added per employee), innovation outputs (patent filings and new product launches), and relative market share.
- **Phase 3: Stakeholder voices.** One hundred twenty-eight interviews captured the lived reality behind the spreadsheets. Respondents spanned top executives (32 %), middle managers (41 %), staff (18 %), and board members (9 %). A semi-structured guide probed their understanding of governance philosophy, everyday decision dynamics, and perceived competitive consequences.
- **Phase 4: Expert validation.** A panel of eight scholars and six industry veterans reviewed preliminary findings, stress-testing the coherence of arguments and the plausibility of causal links.

Qualitative coding followed a three-tier system—open, axial, and selective—executed in NVivo 14. Inter-coder agreement reached $\kappa = 0.84$. Quantitative analysis employed SPSS 28 for descriptive and inferential statistics and AMOS 28 for structural-equation modelling (SEM). The final SEM achieved satisfactory fit (CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.046). Ethical clearance was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #2023-0412). All corporate information was anonymised, and participants reviewed transcript extracts for accuracy.

Results

Mapping the Philosophical Landscape

Early open coding demolished the folk dichotomy that pits “flat” SMEs against “traditional” counterparts. Instead, four coherent archetypes crystallised (Table 1). *Hierarchical-traditional* firms retain explicit chains of command, dense policy manuals and single-signature authority on strategic bets. Surprisingly, their median head-count (105) is only marginally higher than *entrepreneurial-adaptive* peers (93), underscoring that hierarchy is not a mere by-product of size but an ideological choice. *Collaborative-democratic* organisations exhibit two-layer structures and rely on cross-functional councils and rotating chairpersons to arbitrate priorities. They post the highest decision-autonomy and stakeholder-integration scores, aligning with the participatory ideals documented in SME stewardship literature [Hervas-Oliver, Ripoll-Sempere, Moll, 2016]. *Hybrid-professional* models splice domain expertise with modest bureaucracy, often after venture-capital infusion imposes reporting discipline.

Collaborative-democratic firms posted the highest autonomy and integration scores, whereas hierarchical-traditional enterprises scored high on formalisation but low on inclusiveness. The differences were statistically significant across all attributes (ANOVA, $p < 0.001$). Interestingly,

entrepreneurial-adaptive outfits exhibited modest autonomy but the *lowest* formalisation, suggesting that sheer informality does not automatically create empowerment; autonomy still requires scaffolding.

Table 1 - Four governance archetypes materialised:

Governance philosophy	Core principles	Structural manifestations	Prevalence (%)	Decision autonomy index	Formalisation level	Stakeholder integration
Hierarchical-traditional	Centralised authority; cascading targets; rigid accountability	Tall reporting lines; dense policy manual; lone signature for strategic moves	27.6	3.21 ± 0.42	4.67 ± 0.31	2.34 ± 0.53
Collaborative-democratic	Shared sensemaking; participative decisions; consensus norms	Two-layer hierarchy; cross-functional councils; rotating chairpersons	31.9	4.78 ± 0.29	2.35 ± 0.46	4.56 ± 0.38
Entrepreneurial-adaptive	Founder vision; opportunity scanning; minimal bureaucracy	Project teams spun up ad hoc; rapid rollback of failed bets	23.4	3.89 ± 0.51	1.87 ± 0.35	3.12 ± 0.47
Hybrid-professional	Balance between autonomy and oversight; domain expertise	Matrix of business units and functional experts; policies with opt-out clauses	17.1	3.95 ± 0.38	3.42 ± 0.42	3.87 ± 0.41

Governance and the Scoreboard

Correlational matrices (Table 2) reveal a clear pattern: attributes that widen decision bandwidth—velocity, transparency, stakeholder involvement, flexibility—are positively associated with dynamism metrics (growth, innovation, market responsiveness) but either neutral or mildly negative for static efficiency. Conversely, centralisation and formalisation boost labour-productivity proxies while depressing agility scores. These trade-offs vindicate contingency theory yet refine it by quantifying slope magnitudes (e.g., decision velocity's correlation with CAGR at $r = 0.58$ vs. formalisation's with efficiency at $r = 0.46$). fsQCA uncovers equifinal paths: high performance surfaces when *either* (a) high decision velocity *and* strong value integration combine *regardless* of formalisation level, *or* (b) moderate velocity couples with low centralisation and high stakeholder involvement. Thus, SMEs need not mimic Silicon-Valley flatness; governance cocktails can be tailored without forfeiting advantage.

Two patterns leap out. First, decision velocity and strategic flexibility correlate positively with every dynamic metric—growth, innovation, market responsiveness—yet they correlate negatively with efficiency. Second, formalisation props up efficiency but depresses adaptability. These findings echo—but also nuance—classic contingency theory: performance pay-offs depend not on governance attributes *per se* but on the outcome dimension a firm prioritises.

Table 2 - To assess financial consequences, we correlated eight governance attributes with six performance metrics across five fiscal years

Governance attribute	CAGR	Efficiency	Innovation	Market responsiveness	Engagement	Customer retention
Centralisation	-0.43 **	0.29 *	-0.51 **	-0.48 **	-0.37 **	-0.24 *
Formalisation	-0.26 *	0.46 **	-0.34 **	-0.49 **	-0.28 *	0.18
Decision velocity	0.58 **	-0.15	0.62 **	0.71 **	0.39 **	0.47 **
Stakeholder involvement	0.47 **	-0.12	0.56 **	0.43 **	0.64 **	0.52 **
Information transparency	0.39 **	0.23 *	0.41 **	0.37 **	0.58 **	0.45 **
Strategic flexibility	0.66 **	-0.27 *	0.59 **	0.68 **	0.32 **	0.41 **
Rule formality	-0.31 **	0.42 **	-0.38 **	-0.46 **	-0.35 **	-0.13
Value integration	0.53 **	0.16	0.48 **	0.42 **	0.69 **	0.56 **

(*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01)

Evolutionary Pathways

Tracking firms over five fiscal years allows us to observe governance drift. Five trajectories emerge (Table 3). *Collaborative transformation*—flattening hierarchies and institutionalising deliberative forums—delivers the steepest CAGR lift (+13.6 %) and innovation delta (+0.47 patents per 100 employees). *Adaptive specialisation*—retaining philosophical core while tweaking processes—edges it out on resilience, measured as revenue rebounds after shocks. *Formalisation intensification* boosts efficiency but sacrifices dynamism; profitability inches up, yet market share stagnates. Most sobering is *entrepreneurial reversion*: when founders recentralise power after early setbacks, both profitability and share slide, and resilience plunges into negative territory.

Digital-trace audits corroborate survey self-reports. In collaborative-democratic firms, average path length in email/Slack networks collapses from 4.7 to 2.6 hops post-transformation, and betweenness centralisation drops by one-third—strong behavioural evidence that information no longer funnels through managerial choke points. Simulation workshops place a stopwatch on decision cycles: teams operating under adaptive-specialisation codes resolve regulatory-breach scenarios in 41 % less time than their hierarchical-traditional counterparts, with fewer escalation loops.

Table 3 - A five-year window allowed us to track governance drift. Cluster analysis produced five trajectories

Evolution pattern	Characteristic changes	Frequency (%)	CAGR	Profitability delta	Market-share delta	Innovation delta	Resilience score
Formalisation intensification	More rules, more reports, tighter gates	21.3	7.4 ± 2.3	0.23 ± 0.11	0.9 ± 1.7	-0.32 ± 0.14	0.27 ± 0.16
Collaborative transformation	Flatter structure, deliberative forums	29.8	13.6 ± 2.8	0.41 ± 0.13	3.7 ± 1.4	0.47 ± 0.18	0.68 ± 0.21

Evolution pattern	Characteristic changes	Frequency (%)	CAGR	Profitability delta	Market-share delta	Innovation delta	Resilience score
Adaptive specialisation	Philosophical continuity, context-specific tweaks	23.4	16.2 ± 3.1	0.52 ± 0.15	4.1 ± 1.5	0.53 ± 0.17	0.72 ± 0.19
Stability maintenance	Minor tweaks, no re-philosophising	17.0	5.8 ± 2.1	0.18 ± 0.12	-0.7 ± 1.3	-0.12 ± 0.11	0.14 ± 0.13
Entrepreneurial reversion	Strip rules, recentralise under founder	8.5	4.3 ± 4.2	-0.21 ± 0.19	-1.8 ± 2.1	0.29 ± 0.22	-0.31 ± 0.25

Adaptive specialisation outperformed all others, blending a stable philosophical core with situational governance engineering. The poorest showing came from *entrepreneurial reversion*: when founders yanked back control and dissolved structures, profits sagged and resilience eroded.

Mechanisms of Advantage

Table 4 - Regression models clarified which governance levers feed particular competitive muscles.

Competitive advantage	Top governance predictors	β	t	p
Market responsiveness	Decision velocity	0.436	5.87	<0.001
	Strategic flexibility	0.389	4.93	<0.001
Resource optimisation	Policy coherence	0.398	5.14	<0.001
	Process integration	0.343	4.22	<0.001
Innovation capacity	Collaboration mechanisms	0.412	5.64	<0.001
	Experimental tolerance	0.376	4.89	<0.001
Stakeholder alignment	Value integration	0.489	6.32	<0.001
	Transparency	0.367	4.75	<0.001
Organisational resilience	Structural adaptability	0.425	5.65	<0.001
	Resource flexibility	0.341	4.33	<0.001

Each advantage drew on a discrete governance cocktail. For innovation, permission to experiment outranked formal R&D budgets. For resilience, adaptability outshone efficiency. The overall R^2 for these models ranged from 0.58 to 0.69.

Context Matters

Finally, we tested whether context tilts the scales. Six environmental and organisational moderators came under scrutiny. The table below collapses the detailed statistics into headline insights.

Table 5 - Below collapses the detailed statistics into headline insights

Context	Governance approach	Effective when...	Ineffective when...
High dynamism	Collaborative	Market turbulence > +1 SD	Market turbulence < -1 SD
	Hierarchical	Market turbulence < -1 SD	Market turbulence > +1 SD
Intense competition	Strategic flexibility	Industry rivalry high	Industry rivalry low

Context	Governance approach	Effective when...	Ineffective when...
Technological turbulence	Collaborative decision-making	Tech clockspeed high	Tech clockspeed low
Low organisational complexity	Centralisation for efficiency	< 50 employees	> 150 employees
Expansion phase	Adaptive governance	Rapid head-count growth	Plateau phase

All interaction terms were significant ($p < 0.05$), reinforcing the contingency view. A rule-heavy playbook might juice margins in placid niches but strangle innovation in high-tech races.

Discussion

Our findings complicate simplistic prescriptions. Governing an SME is less about choosing “flat” over “tall” and more about synchronising philosophical stance, structural levers, and situational demands.

First, autonomy requires scaffolding. Entrepreneurial-adaptive firms taught us that dismantling policies without erecting replacement routines breeds confusion rather than creativity. Decision rights must be explicit even when spread broadly; otherwise, accountability diffuses into the ether.

Second, values are not window dressing. The strongest statistical driver of stakeholder alignment was the day-to-day enactment of espoused values. Employees and customers are quick to spot dissonance between marketing slogans and boardroom behaviour; congruence breeds trust, and trust underpins retention.

Third, one advantage can cannibalise another. Formalisation boosts efficiency but dampens speed. Leaders must articulate which dimension matters in which season, then tune governance accordingly.

Fourth, philosophical stability plus tactical agility—our adaptive-specialisation cluster—yields the best of both worlds. Like a spine that anchors flexible limbs, a clear philosophy allows ad hoc process tweaks without identity drift.

Finally, the data hint at plateau risks. Firms that revert to founder-centric rule when growth stalls may slide into decline. Governance renewal, not regression, appears safer.

Conclusion

Competitive advantage in SMEs is not a happy accident of smallness; it is the organised expression of governing ideas that fit the firm’s scale and context. By comparing forty-seven companies across five years, we have shown that collaborative-democratic and adaptively specialised philosophies pay the richest dividends in volatile arenas. We have mapped which governance levers move which performance needles and demonstrated the moderating power of environment and lifecycle.

For practitioners, three guidelines follow:

- Diagnose context before codifying rules. A static policy manual that made sense yesterday may stifle tomorrow’s pivot.
- Invest in value articulation. Clarify principles, then translate them into everyday micro-routines—from hiring scripts to budget gates.
- Evolve structure, not philosophy. Keep the compass steady while iterating the map.

For scholars, the next frontier is longitudinal: tracking firms as they cross economic cycles will reveal whether today’s winning philosophies sustain, mutate, or succumb to new pressures.

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Философия управления: конкурентные преимущества малых и средних предприятий и общее управление компаниями

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Стажер

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Аннотация

Малые и средние предприятия, функционируя в условиях ресурсных ограничений, демонстрируют устойчивость в турбулентных отраслях через специфические модели корпоративного управления. Исследование основано на комплексной методологии, включающей сравнительный анализ 47 МСП европейского и азиатского регионов, оценку панельных финансовых показателей за 2018-2023 годы и проведение 128 полуструктурированных интервью. В работе анализируется трансформация управленческих подходов в конкретные механизмы корпоративного управления, обеспечивающие конкурентные преимущества без ущерба для организационной целостности. Установлено, что высокоэффективные предприятия систематически демонстрируют три ключевых преимущества: скорость принятия решений на 68% выше среднеотраслевой, уровень вовлеченности персонала, превышающий стандартные показатели на 41%, и практики работы со стейкхолдерами, повышающие удовлетворенность на 23,7% относительно крупных конкурентов. Выявлена устойчивая корреляционная связь ($r = 0,76$, $p < 0,001$) между прозрачностью управления и долгосрочной рыночной эффективностью. Предприятия с партисипативными системами управления демонстрируют на 34% более высокие показатели инновационной активности и на 28,5% лучшие результаты преодоления кризисов по сравнению с организациями, использующими традиционные иерархические структуры. Разработана интегральная модель, балансирующая потребность в организационной гибкости и требования контроля. Практическая значимость исследования включает создание диагностического инструментария для оценки систем управления, позволяющего оптимизировать соотношение формализации и адаптивности. Перспективные направления дальнейших исследований связаны с верификацией полученных результатов на различных фазах экономического цикла и учетом кросс-культурных различий.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Управленческая философия, корпоративное управление в МСП, конкурентное преимущество, организационная гибкость, интеграция стейкхолдеров, прозрачность решений, партисипативные системы.

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