

The Role of Innovative Work Behavior as a Mediator of the Effect of Hard Skill Training on the Sustainable Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of hard skill training on the performance of sustainable SMEs through the role of innovative work behavior. The population of this study was craft SME actors in Semarang Regency, with a saturated sample of 132 SME actors. Statistical data analysis was performed using the SPSS program. The results show that the hypothesis that hard skill training directly affects performance is rejected, but hard skill training affects innovative work behavior, which in turn affects performance. Based on the mediation test, it is proven that innovative work behavior can fully mediate the effect of innovative work behavior on SME performance. In other words, technical training effectively improves SME performance only through the formation of adaptive and creative innovative behavior. These results support SDG 4 (Quality education through technical skills training programs), SDG 9 (Innovation & Industry can encourage innovative behavior among MSME workers), and SDG 12, which is related to sustainable production and consumption. Future research should modify or add soft skills training variables as an effort to improve innovative behavior and sustainable MSME performance.

Keywords innovative work behavior, hard skill training, sustainable performance, small and medium enterprises.

1. Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) make an important contribution to supporting national economic growth, job creation, and poverty alleviation. According to data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023), MSMEs contribute more than 60% to Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorb around 97% of the total national workforce. Among the various MSME sectors, the traditional crafts or sub-sector is one of the local potentials that continues to be developed, especially in the Central Java region, including Semarang Regency. This regency is known as a center for the development of industries based on local wisdom, which has grown in line with the increasing public interest in natural crafts.

Amidst this growth, MSME players in the sector face serious challenges in maintaining the sustainability of their businesses, particularly in terms of product quality, innovation, and competitiveness in domestic and global markets. One of the main challenges faced is the low level of workforce competence, particularly in terms of technical skills (hard skills) that support efficient, hygienic, and standard-compliant production processes. The trade and tourism office, as the local government, regularly organizes hard skills (technical) training related to how to

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make good traditional crafts, but its impact on the sustainable performance of MSMEs is still not fully described in the context of academic research. According to (Barile et al., 2023), developing a training program is a continuous, planned, and systematic activity. It must be planned and systematic with clear company missions, goals, and strategic objectives, as well as strategic human resource planning outcomes, while still paying attention to training needs and organizational analysis. The content and material of the training must be relevant to the abilities of each individual according to their job. The training methods must also be adjusted so as not to deviate from the planned objectives. Previous studies have shown that one of the main weaknesses of MSMEs is the low quality of human resources (Sutrisno et al., 2023), particularly in terms of technical skills, so that hard skill training is relevant to address real problems in the field. According to RBV, resources (hard skills) need to be combined with capabilities (innovative behavior) to produce excellence (Holdford, 2018). This means that hard skills are an important foundation that enables workers to develop innovations in processes and products.

Hard skills training is directly related to the technical abilities of workers, such as production, processing, packaging, and quality standards. Without mastering these skills, MSMEs find it difficult to compete, let alone penetrate global markets that demand consistent product quality. On the other hand, an equally important challenge is how to encourage MSME players to continue to have innovative work behaviors in order to produce products that are increasingly competitive. Innovative work behaviors are an important element in promoting business sustainability, because through innovation, business actors can respond to market dynamics and take advantage of opportunities in a more adaptive manner (Li et al., 2025).

Based on data and trends in the development of MSMEs in the craft sector in Semarang Regency (2022–2025), the type of training most needed by MSME workers is predominantly *hard skills*, although *soft skills* are also important in supporting efforts to build MSME behavior that continuously hones adaptive and innovative behavior. In this context, hard skill training is expected not only to improve technical skills but also to shape innovative work behavior, which ultimately impacts the sustainable improvement of SME performance.

This phenomenon indicates an urgent need to empirically examine how hard skills training can influence the sustainable performance of MSMEs through the mediation of innovative work behavior. Previous studies have extensively discussed the influence of training on performance (Jalil et al., 2021) but few have integrated the aspect of innovative work behavior mediation, especially in the context of SMEs in the Indonesian sector. This is an important research gap that needs to be filled in order to provide practical and theoretical contributions to SME capacity building.

Although there are many studies examining the effect of training on improving employee or organizational performance in general, there is still limited research examining the mediation mechanism of innovative work behavior, particularly in the context of SMEs in the craft sector in Indonesia. Most previous studies only highlight the direct relationship between training and performance, without explaining how training can shape innovative work behavior that ultimately affects sustainable performance. Some of them, such as the research by (Jalil et al.,

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2021) related to training programs and performance, found that training had a positive impact on performance. In addition, most of the existing training programs are still technical and normative in nature, not touching on the behavioral or innovative mindset aspects of the workforce (Anugrah et al., 2024; Irianto, 2022; S. A. Sari & Ahmad, 2022). However, in the face of disruption and global competition, innovation has become one of the key factors for business sustainability. Therefore, empirical research that simultaneously integrates hard skills training, innovative work behavior, and sustainable performance is needed, especially for craft MSMEs that are unique in terms of their traditional nature and limited access to modern technology.

Previous research related to testing hard skills training on performance shows findings that hard skills training can directly improve organizational performance (Fitri et al., 2023), where the effectiveness of the training model determined by participants is considered highly relevant and appropriate to support their efforts, which can lead to improved performance. In contrast to the research (Kable et al., 2022; Pramono & Prahiawan, 2021), namely training does not have a positive and significant effect on employee performance.

Similarly, hard skill training programs can influence the development of innovative attitudes or behaviors, where training programs that develop skills (such as sorting and processing raw materials to meet quality standards, testing material quality, designing packaging, etc.) are considered very beneficial for MSME participants because they gain more knowledge and new experiences about unique craftsmanship. Other findings show that both technical and non-technical training have a positive effect on innovative work behavior (Sari & Amalia, 2022). On the other hand, related to the testing of innovative work behavior on MSME performance, it has been proven to have an influence (Utomo & Wartini, 2023). In contrast, the results of Wijaya (2023) research show that innovative work behavior is not proven to affect performance.

Previous research results prove that these findings cannot yet be concluded or are inconsistent due to differences in the predictor variables studied, the theories used have diverse orientations, and differences in the objects and characteristics of the samples. These findings provide an opportunity to empirically test the performance of MSMEs in the handicraft sector, particularly in Semarang Regency. In addition, the gap in the field is evident in that the Cooperative and Trade Office has not specifically encouraged the integration of technical training with the formation of innovative behavior in MSME empowerment programs. Most training programs are still normative in nature without paying attention to the aspects of work behavior and innovation (Sari et al., 2022). In fact, in a competitive business environment, innovation capabilities are one of the main determinants of MSME sustainability (Ardhiyansyah & Juniansyah, 2024). On the other hand, the failure of government programs to improve MSME skills is not only a matter of training content, but also due to incompatibility with MSME needs, lack of continuous assistance, the digital divide, low motivation among actors, and weak inter-agency synergy, meaning there is an overlap of training programs from ministries, regional agencies, or state-owned enterprises. Instead of complementing each other, the programs are repetitive with the same material. MSMEs become boring and the results are minimal.

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In the context of sustainable development, the results of hard skill training that improve innovative behavior and MSME performance can also be linked to a number of goals in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Therefore, it is important to conduct an empirical study on how hard skill training can contribute to the sustainability of MSMEs through the formation of innovative work behavior. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by empirically testing the effect of hard skill training on the performance of sustainable MSMEs and the mediating role of innovative work behavior.

The focus of the research is directed at MSME actors in the craft sector in the city of Semarang, given the great local potential as well as the challenges of human resource development faced in this sector. Using a quantitative approach and data processing through SPSS, it is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to the development of a more effective training model, not only to improve technical skills, but also to shape innovative work behavior and support business sustainability.

2. Literature Review

The Resource-Based View (RBV) is a strategic management theory that emphasizes the importance of an organization's internal resources as the main factor in achieving competitive advantage and sustainable performance. According to Barney (2011), organizational resources can be tangible or intangible assets, such as skills, competencies, knowledge, technology, and work culture. These resources will provide competitive advantage if they meet four main criteria: valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, known as the VRIN framework.

This theory emphasizes the importance of existing resources in the form of innovation, adaptation, and networks in creating value for consumers, which is the basis for building sustainable competitive advantage (Barney et al., 2011). *RBV* explains the ability of companies to utilize organizational resources to create healthy competition (Mailani et al., 2024). In the context of this study, the innovative capabilities possessed by individuals in MSMEs are strategic resources that will never diminish compared to other factors or productive capital. This is supported by the characteristics possessed by entrepreneurs, which enable them to create innovative behaviors that are very beneficial to MSMEs, ultimately impacting the improvement of sustainable MSME performance. This theoretical perspective emphasizes that internal resources, including human resource competencies and skills, are the main determinants of an organization's long-term success. Thus, investing in improving the quality of human resources through training programs can be seen as a form of strengthening the internal capacity of an organization (Barney et al., 2011).

In the context of MSMEs, hard skills training serves to improve the technical abilities of workers so that they can produce products with better quality standards and in accordance with regulations. These technical skills are key assets in maintaining business continuity, especially in the craft sector which requires compliance with product safety standards (Hlasny, 2023). However, according to the RBV perspective, technical skills alone are not sufficient to generate

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sustainable advantages. These resources must be integrated with unique capabilities such as innovative work behavior to make a significant contribution to organizational performance (Hughes et al., 2018).

Innovative work behavior, within the framework of RBV, can be viewed as a form of dynamic capability that enables organizations to adapt, create, and implement new ideas in response to market and technological changes (Hughes et al., 2018). This capability bridges the technical skills gained from training with the demands of business sustainability. In other words, hard skill training not only improves the technical knowledge of the workforce but can also encourage innovation through the application of these skills in the production, distribution, and development of new products.

Furthermore, according to Mailani et al. (2024), explaining the role of RBV, the sustainability of MSME performance is not only determined by access to external resources, but also how MSMEs manage, develop, and utilize their internal resources optimally. Hard skills training combined with innovative work behavior will create a combination of resources and capabilities that are difficult for competitors to imitate. This ultimately contributes to the achievement of sustainable MSME performance, in terms of productivity, product quality, and competitiveness in the market.

Hard Skills Training. Robbins & Judge (2019) define training as a planned effort to facilitate learning related to the knowledge, skills, and work behaviors that employees need in their jobs. Similarly, hard skills training is understood as a form of training that focuses on specific and measurable technical skills, such as machine operation skills, production expertise, software mastery, or specific work standards (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Meanwhile, according to (Noe, 2017), hard skills training emphasizes improving employees' abilities to perform specific job tasks that require technical expertise and can be measured. Thus, it improves technical knowledge, mastery of specific work skills, changes in work behavior, application of skills in real work, and achievement of better results. When these indicators are met, training participants not only become more technically skilled, but are also encouraged to try new ways of doing things, adapt to job demands, and create innovative ideas in the work process. Improving technical skills provides a strong foundation for the workforce to innovate, as they have the necessary competencies to experiment and make improvements. Meanwhile, the application of skills in real-world work ensures that innovation does not stop at ideas but is actually implemented in production or service activities, ultimately leading to more productive, efficient, high-quality, and sustainable organizational performance. According to (Noe, 2017) explains in more detail the measurement of training (including hard skills) using the training outcomes approach commonly used in HRM with indicators such as Reaction, which refers to how participants perceive and react to the material, methods, and relevance of hard skills training to the tasks performed. Learning, which means that employees gain new knowledge and technical skills that are truly understood and mastered by participants after participating in training. Behavior Transfer, which emphasizes real changes in work behavior after participating in training, not just knowledge gained in the classroom. Thus, an increase in technical knowledge, mastery of specific work skills, changes in work behavior, application of skills in real work, and

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the achievement of better results. When these indicators are met, training participants not only become more technically skilled, but are also encouraged to try new ways of doing things, adapt to job demands, and create innovative ideas in the work process. Improved technical skills provide a strong foundation for the workforce to innovate, as they have sufficient competence to experiment and make improvements. Meanwhile, the application of skills in real work ensures that innovation does not stop at ideas but is implemented in production and service activities, ultimately leading to more productive, efficient, high-quality, and sustainable organizational performance.

Innovative work behaviour. According to Hasibuan (2021), innovative work behavior is the attitude and actions of employees in creating, developing, and implementing new ideas that are useful for improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of work in an organization. This behavior arises as part of efforts to develop creativity that can provide added value to the organization. Similarly, Kmiecik (2020) defines innovative work behavior as the process of individuals generating new ideas, promoting them, and realizing them in work practices, thereby improving organizational performance and excellence. This definition emphasizes that innovative behavior does not stop at the creation of ideas, but also includes efforts to convince others and realize those ideas. According to De Jong & Den Hartog (2010) the success of innovative work behavior can be measured by Exploration, which is seeking new opportunities, needs, or problems; Generation, which is creating creative ideas or new solutions; Championing, which is supporting, promoting, and persuading others to accept ideas; and Implementation, which is applying ideas into real processes, products, or work methods.

MSME Performance. According to Octasylya et al. (2022), performance is the result achieved from work that has been carried out, in other words, it is the result of cooperation between members to achieve organizational goals, where the performance of a business can be divided into two parts: survival and development (number of employees, profits, and assets). Meanwhile, according to Fattah et al. (2025), SME performance is defined as the overall results of work carried out within a certain period and with established standards that can be used as consideration in making decisions for an entrepreneur in running their business. MSME performance is defined as all capabilities possessed to achieve predetermined goals, both financial and non-financial, through the effective and efficient utilization of available resources. The success of MSME performance is determined by various factors, both directly and indirectly. The success of MSME performance is financial, customer, process, learning, and growth (Ying-Yu et al., 2016).

3. Research Method

The object of this study is 132 craft SMEs in the Semarang Regency's cluster, using a saturated sample technique. The measurement of hard skills training according to (Noe, 2017) uses reactions, learning, and transfer of behavior or attitude. The variable of innovative work behavior is measured by idea exploration, idea generation, idea support, and idea implementation (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010) while MSME performance is measured by finance, customers, processes, and growth (Ying-Yu et al., 2016). Based on these

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measurements, the research model can be illustrated as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Concept Model



4. Finding and Discussion

Validity Test Results. Based on the validity test results of the 33 items of the instrument using the SPSS program, all significance values of the instrument were $< \text{sig } \alpha 0.05$, meaning that all instruments were declared valid for use as measuring tools. Meanwhile, the reliability test results were obtained with the Cronbach alpha value of the instrument > 0.6 , meaning that all instruments were declared reliable (consistent).

Hypothesis Test Results. The results of the partial hypothesis testing of the variables can be seen in Table 1 below

Table 1. Partial Test Results_1

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	63.601	7.804		8,150	.000
TOTX	.373	.218	.178	1,714	.090
TOTZ	.379	.146	.769	2,598	.011

a. Dependent Variable: TOTY

Based on the partial test results in Table 1, it can be explained that the significance value obtained from hardskill training is $0.090 > \text{sig } 0.05$, which means that hypothesis one, which states that hard skill training has a positive effect on MSME performance, is rejected. The rejection of this hypothesis explains that hard skills training, such as training the reactions or responses of MSME actors in creating new ideas/works, the willingness to learn and adapt to technology, and knowledge-sharing behavior, does not affect MSME performance. The results of this study are not in line with the research by (Kable et al., 2022; Pramono & Prahawan, 2021), where technical training does not have a positive and significant effect on performance. These findings do not support the RBV theory that improving the quality of human resources through training programs can be seen as a form of strengthening the internal capacity of the organization. The perspective of this theory emphasizes that internal resources, including

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the competencies and skills of human resources, are the main determinants of organizational success in the long term (Barney, 2011).

Meanwhile, for the second hypothesis testing, the significance value of innovative work behavior was obtained at $0.001 < 0.05$, meaning that the second hypothesis stating that innovative work behavior has a positive effect on MSME performance is accepted. The acceptance of this hypothesis can be explained by the fact that innovative work behavior, such as always exploring new potentials or ideas, being motivated to come up with new ideas or works, appreciating every challenge of change positively, and actively implementing ideas or works obtained from training, leads to performance achievements such as increased profits and income, increased sales turnover, and market opportunities. The results of this study are in line with the research by (Utomo & Wartini, 2023), which found that innovative work behaviour has a positive effect on performance. These findings also support the RBV theory's view that behaviour as a form of dynamic capability enables organizations to adapt, create, and implement new ideas in response to market and technological changes, leading to superior performance (Hughes et al., 2018).

The testing of hard skills (technical) training on innovative work behavior can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Partial Test Results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	20.943	4.965		4,218	.000
TOTX	.495	.142	.333	3,491	.001

a. Dependent Variable: TOTZ

Based on Table 2, it is explained that the sig value for hard skill training is $0.001 < 0.05$, which means that the third hypothesis stating that hard skill training has a positive effect on innovative work behavior is accepted. The acceptance of this hypothesis can be explained by the fact that hard skill training encourages people to take action or try to create new ideas or works, continuously learning new things to hone adaptation to technology and market demands, and continuing to be willing to share knowledge and experiences with the MSME community can build creative behaviors or attitudes such as being willing to explore new potentials or ideas, always being motivated to produce new ideas or works, appreciating every challenge positively, and actively implementing ideas or works obtained from the training results. The results of this study are in line with the research by (Sari & Amalia, 2022) which shows that hard skill training can build innovative attitudes or behaviors among MSME players. This finding also supports the RBV theory that hard skill training not only enhances the technical knowledge of workers but can also foster innovative attitudes through the application of these skills in production, distribution, or new product development processes. (Hughes et al., 2018).

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Based on the mediation test results in Table 1 and Table 2, it can be explained that the beta coefficient values obtained are:

$B_{xz} \times B_{zy} > B_{xy}$

$0.333 \times 0.769 (0.256) > 0.178$

Based on these calculations, it means that the fourth hypothesis, which states that innovative work behavior can mediate the effect of hard skills training on MSME performance, is accepted. The acceptance of this hypothesis can be explained by the fact that through innovative work attitudes (such as MSME actors striving to explore new ideas, strongly encouraging self-creativity, and being willing to promote new ideas for implementation), the implementation of hard skills training programs has a stronger impact on improving MSME performance. The results of this study support the RBV view that technical skills alone are not sufficient to produce sustainable advantages; rather, these resources must be integrated with unique capabilities such as innovative work behavior to make a significant contribution to organizational performance (Hughes et al., 2018).

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that hard skills (technical) training does not have a significant effect on the performance of MSMEs. However, hard skills training has a positive effect on the innovative work behavior of MSME actors. Innovative work behavior has been proven to play a mediating role that supports hard skills training in terms of performance. In other words, technical training effectively improves the performance of MSMEs only through the formation of adaptive and creative innovative behavior. Practical recommendations from this study suggest that local governments should integrate soft skills development, particularly those aimed at fostering an innovative mindset and behaviour, with technical training when implementing MSME training programs. Ongoing guidance and mentoring are needed to encourage the implementation of training outcomes in the field so that they have a real impact on MSME performance. In addition, synergy between training institutions must be strengthened to avoid program duplication and increase the effectiveness of MSME empowerment. This recommendation aims to support the improvement of MSME sustainability and competitiveness through an integrated training approach that balances technical skills and innovative behavior.

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