

Change Management in SMEs: A Systematic Literature Review

Le management du changement dans les PME : une revue systématique de la littérature

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Abstract

Organizational change is a major challenge for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the face of technological developments, market uncertainty, and competitive pressures. This study presents a systematic literature review of change management in SMEs covering the period 2015–2025. Based on 42 articles from Scopus and following a review process informed by PRISMA 2020, it analyzes the main factors, barriers, managerial practices, theoretical foundations, and methodological approaches related to change.

The findings highlight the importance of leadership, communication, employee participation, organizational capabilities, and contextual factors. They also reveal fragmentation in the literature and limited integration of human, managerial, and contextual dimensions. Accordingly, the study proposes an integrative conceptual framework and future research directions, with particular attention to Moroccan SMEs, which remain underexplored.

Keywords: Change management; SMEs; organizational change; leadership; employee resistance; organizational capabilities; systematic literature review.

Résumé

Le changement organisationnel constitue un défi majeur pour les petites et moyennes entreprises (PME), notamment face aux évolutions technologiques, à l'incertitude des marchés et aux pressions concurrentielles. Cette étude propose une revue systématique de la littérature sur le management du changement dans les PME, couvrant la période 2015–2025. À partir de 42 articles issus de Scopus et selon une démarche inspirée de PRISMA 2020, elle analyse les principaux facteurs, obstacles, pratiques managériales, fondements théoriques et approches méthodologiques liés au changement.

Les résultats soulignent l'importance du leadership, de la communication, de la participation des employés, des capacités organisationnelles et du contexte. Ils révèlent également une fragmentation de la littérature et une intégration limitée des dimensions humaines, managériales et contextuelles. L'étude propose ainsi un cadre conceptuel intégrateur et des perspectives de recherche, en accordant une attention particulière aux PME marocaines, encore peu étudiées.

Mots-clés : Management du changement ; PME ; changement organisationnel ; leadership ; résistance des employés ; capacités organisationnelles ; revue systématique de la littérature.

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a central role in contemporary economies through their contribution to employment, economic activity, innovation, and territorial development. Their relatively flexible structures may facilitate decision-making and adaptation to changes in their environment. However, SMEs also face specific constraints related to limited financial and human resources, managerial capabilities, organizational capacities, and strong dependence on owner-managers. These characteristics can significantly influence their ability to initiate, implement, and sustain organizational change.

The increasing pace of technological development, digital transformation, changing customer expectations, intensified competition, and the emergence of new business models have made organizational adaptation increasingly important for SMEs. In this context, change management represents a critical dimension of SME management. It extends beyond the adoption of new technologies or modifications to organizational structures and encompasses managerial practices, employee behaviors, work processes, organizational culture, capabilities, and the ability of firms to support their members throughout periods of transition. Organizational change should therefore be understood as a multidimensional process involving human, organizational, managerial, technological, and environmental factors.

Change management is particularly complex in SMEs. On the one hand, close relationships between managers and employees, flexible structures, and relatively short decision-making processes may facilitate organizational adaptation. On the other hand, limited resources, employee resistance, insufficient managerial capabilities, centralized decision-making, and strong dependence on the owner-manager may constrain the implementation of significant changes. Understanding the conditions under which change is initiated, implemented, and sustained therefore represents an important issue in SME research.

Over the past decade, research on change management in SMEs has developed across several research streams. Existing studies have examined leadership, employee resistance, organizational capabilities, innovation, digital transformation, organizational culture, managerial practices, and organizational performance. However, these contributions remain dispersed across different theoretical and empirical perspectives. Some studies focus on specific determinants of change, whereas others examine organizational change within particular contexts, such as digital transformation, innovation, or technology adoption. This fragmentation makes it difficult to obtain an integrated understanding of how change management has been conceptualized and investigated specifically in SMEs.

Previous literature reviews have contributed to understanding different aspects of organizational change, SME management, digital transformation, innovation, and related organizational processes. However, they do not necessarily provide an integrated assessment of the different dimensions through which change management has been examined in SMEs. In particular, internal and external drivers of change, barriers and sources of resistance, the role of leadership and managerial practices, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and research gaps have rarely been considered jointly within a single analytical framework. This fragmentation highlights the need for a systematic review specifically focused on change management in SMEs.

Research problem and positioning of the review

Against this background, the central problem addressed by this review is the fragmentation of scientific knowledge on change management in SMEs. Although a growing body of research has examined different aspects of organizational change, there remains a need to understand how these contributions collectively explain the drivers, barriers, managerial practices, theoretical foundations, and methodological approaches associated with change processes in SMEs.

Accordingly, the central research problem can be formulated as follows:

How has the scientific literature published between 2015 and 2025 conceptualized and investigated change management in SMEs, what factors, barriers, and managerial practices have been identified, which theoretical and methodological approaches have been adopted, and what gaps remain in this field of research?

This positioning distinguishes the present review from studies that focus on a single dimension of organizational change or on a particular transformation context. Rather than examining change management exclusively through the lens of leadership, digital transformation, innovation, resistance, or organizational performance, the review brings these complementary dimensions together within a specific SME context.

Objective and scientific contribution

The general objective of this review is to systematically structure and synthesize the scientific literature on change management in SMEs over the period 2015–2025, with particular attention to the main research themes, factors influencing change processes, barriers and sources of resistance, leadership and managerial practices, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and research gaps.

The contribution of this work is articulated around three complementary dimensions.

First, the review provides a structured mapping of the research field by identifying and classifying the main themes through which change management in SMEs has been investigated. Second, it develops an integrated synthesis of the factors and mechanisms associated with organizational change, bringing together internal and external drivers, barriers and sources of resistance, and the role of leadership and managerial practices.

Third, the review provides a critical assessment of the development of the field by examining the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches adopted in previous studies and by identifying underexplored areas and research gaps. This synthesis provides a basis for developing a more structured research agenda on change management in SMEs.

Rationale for the 2015–2025 period

The review covers the period 2015–2025 in order to provide a recent yet sufficiently broad temporal perspective on the development of research on change management in SMEs. This ten-year period captures contemporary developments associated with technological change, digital transformation, innovation, changing competitive environments, new organizational practices, and evolving business models, while maintaining a sufficiently coherent period for identifying and comparing research trends.

The starting point of 2015 was selected to focus the review on contemporary research addressing organizational and technological transformations that increasingly shape the conditions under which SMEs manage change. The year 2025 represents the upper boundary of the review in order to include publications corresponding to the most recent complete year of the selected period.

The choice of this period therefore seeks to balance contemporary relevance and sufficient temporal depth, allowing the review to identify both dominant research themes and developments in the field over time.

Rationale for the use of Scopus

To construct the scientific corpus, Scopus was selected as the sole bibliographic database. This choice is primarily methodological. Scopus provides broad multidisciplinary coverage and standardized bibliographic information, facilitating the identification, screening, classification, and analysis of scientific publications according to consistent criteria.

The use of a single database also supports a coherent and reproducible search strategy and facilitates the management of the review corpus throughout the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. In this context, Scopus was considered appropriate and

sufficiently comprehensive for the specific scope and objectives of the review, rather than being regarded as a complete representation of the entire scientific literature.

This choice nevertheless has limitations. Studies indexed exclusively in other databases, such as Web of Science or specialized disciplinary databases, may not be captured. This limitation is acknowledged and suggests an opportunity for future reviews to combine several bibliographic databases in order to broaden the coverage of the evidence base.

Research objectives and questions

To translate the central research problem into an operational analytical framework, the general objective is divided into six specific objectives corresponding directly to six research questions.

RQ1: What are the main themes associated with change management in SMEs between 2015 and 2025?

RQ2: What internal and external factors influence change processes within SMEs?

RQ3: What are the main obstacles and sources of resistance to change identified in SMEs?

RQ4: What role do leadership and managerial practices play in the success of change processes?

RQ5: What theories and research methods are used in the literature on change management in SMEs?

RQ6: What are the main gaps in the literature, and what directions can be proposed for future research?

1. Conceptual Framework

1.1 Change Management

Change management refers to the set of processes, practices, and mechanisms through which an organization prepares for, implements, and sustains organizational transformations. It is not limited to the adoption of new structures, technologies, practices, or strategic orientations, but also encompasses the human, managerial, and organizational conditions required to implement these transformations. Organizational change can therefore be viewed as a multidimensional process involving organizational adaptation, managerial action, employee behavior, organizational capabilities, and changes in the external environment.

In SMEs, change management has particular characteristics related to their organizational structures and resources. These firms often operate with more limited financial and human resources, relatively informal structures, more centralized decision-making processes, and close relationships between managers and employees. These characteristics may facilitate rapid

adaptation while also increasing the importance of leadership, communication, employee participation, organizational flexibility, and the development of the skills required for change. From a theoretical perspective, organizational change has been examined through several complementary approaches. In our review, Lewin's (1947) model constitutes the main process-oriented theoretical reference, while Kotter's (1996) model and Hiatt's (2006) ADKAR model are mobilized as complementary perspectives. Bernoux's (2007) sociological approach further complements this framework by incorporating the social and relational dimensions of organizational change.

Lewin's (1947) model conceptualizes change through three stages: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Its main contribution to our review lies in its ability to conceptualize change as a process involving a preparation phase, an implementation phase, and a stabilization phase. It therefore provides the main process-oriented analytical lens for understanding the different stages of change identified in the literature.

Kotter's (1996) model complements this approach by placing particular emphasis on the managerial and strategic dimensions of change. It highlights the creation of a sense of urgency, the development of a vision, the mobilization of organizational actors, communication, employee involvement, and the institutionalization of new practices. In our review, this perspective is particularly useful for analyzing studies addressing leadership, managerial support, communication, organizational culture, and employee mobilization.

The ADKAR model developed by Hiatt (2006) provides an individual and behavioral perspective on change. It is based on five dimensions: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. This approach enables our review to examine how the literature addresses employee awareness, motivation, knowledge, skills, behavioral adaptation, and resistance to change.

Finally, Bernoux's (2007) sociological approach incorporates the social and relational dimension of organizational change. For Bernoux, change is not simply a technical or managerial process; it also involves learning and the transformation of relationships between organizational actors. As he states: "a continuous process to be managed by the responsible individual, involving a dual learning process for the people concerned: learning new ways of doing things and performing their work, as well as learning new relationships and new ways of cooperating." (Bernoux, 2007, p. 15)

This perspective highlights the importance of learning, cooperation, interaction, and relationships among organizational actors. It is therefore particularly useful for analyzing

studies dealing with employee participation, resistance, communication, organizational learning, and the social conditions of change.

These approaches are therefore not considered competing models in our systematic review. Rather, they are used as complementary theoretical perspectives. Lewin provides the main process-oriented reference, Kotter addresses the managerial and strategic dimension, ADKAR provides an individual and behavioral perspective, while Bernoux incorporates the social and relational dimension. This complementarity makes it possible to examine change management at multiple levels rather than reducing the phenomenon to a single dimension.

On this basis, the theoretical framework is not used to formulate or test causal hypotheses, but to structure the systematic analysis of the 42 articles selected in our review. Each article is examined according to the different dimensions addressed in the literature, including the nature and drivers of change, leadership and managerial support, communication, employee participation and resistance, skills and learning, organizational capabilities and resources, organizational culture, technological transformation, and change outcomes.

The theoretical framework also contributes to structuring the research questions of our review. It enables us to examine four main dimensions: how change management is conceptualized in SMEs; which organizational, managerial, human, technological, and environmental factors are associated with change; how change is implemented and sustained; and what theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps remain in the existing literature.

Thus, the conceptual framework provides a link between the theoretical foundations and the systematic analysis of the literature. Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR, complemented by Bernoux's approach, are not presented merely as classical models of change management, but as analytical lenses for organizing, comparing, and interpreting the findings of the 42 studies included in our review. This positioning makes it possible to identify theoretical convergences and divergences, the dimensions of change management that receive the greatest attention in the SME literature, and those that remain insufficiently explored.

1.2. Conceptualization of SMEs

Attempts to define SMEs traditionally distinguish between two types of identification criteria, according to Bouzid (1997) in his work *SMEs and Development Strategy in Morocco*.

A. Quantitative and qualitative criteria

On the one hand, quantitative criteria are numerous and concern the different elements constituting the firm's activity. These include the number of employees, turnover, share capital, value added, and geographical location.

On the other hand, qualitative criteria are used not only to complement the quantitative criteria but also to provide an understanding of the firm's internal structure, organization, and management practices.

1.3. Definition of SMEs in the European Union

The official definition of SMEs in the European Union is established by European Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC of 6 May 2003.

This recommendation defines the criteria used to classify an enterprise as an SME based on its number of employees and financial thresholds, namely turnover and/or balance-sheet total.

More specifically, the recommendation states that:

- An SME is an enterprise employing fewer than 250 people.
- It must also have an annual turnover not exceeding €50 million, or an annual balance-sheet total not exceeding €43 million.

1.4. Definition of SMEs in the United States

In 1954, the Small Business Administration (SBA) defined a small business as an enterprise employing fewer than 500 employees, although this threshold may reach 1,500 employees in the manufacturing sector.

Annual turnover thresholds also vary according to the sector, including approximately \$50 million in services, \$13.5 million in trade, and \$17 million in construction, according to the classification used.

1.5. Definition of SMEs in Morocco

According to Law No. 53-00 establishing the Moroccan Charter for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, an SME is an independent enterprise managed directly by its owners, with annual pre-tax turnover not exceeding MAD 75 million, or an annual balance-sheet total below MAD 50 million.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) design to identify, evaluate, and synthesize scientific research on change management and organizational change in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The review followed a structured and transparent procedure comprising the identification of relevant publications, screening, eligibility assessment, quality appraisal, data extraction, and synthesis of the selected studies.

The literature search was conducted exclusively using the Scopus database on October 2, 2026. Scopus was selected because of its broad multidisciplinary coverage and the availability of standardized bibliographic information, which facilitates the identification, screening, classification, and analysis of scientific publications. Its use was considered appropriate for the specific scope and objectives of this review, while acknowledging that relying on a single database may limit the coverage of relevant studies indexed elsewhere.

The search was restricted to publications published between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2025. The initial search yielded 177 records, which were subsequently screened and assessed according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following the screening, eligibility assessment, and quality appraisal processes, 42 articles met the established criteria and were retained for the final systematic review.

The main characteristics of the search strategy are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Preliminary Selection Criteria

Criterion	Selection
Database	Scopus
Period	From January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2025
Subject areas	Business, Management and Accounting; Economics, Econometrics and Finance
Document type	Articles
Language	English
Search equation	((("change management" OR "organizational change" OR "organisational change") AND ("SME" OR "SMEs" OR "small and medium-sized enterprises" OR "small and medium enterprises")))

Source : Authors

As The search strategy was constructed around two core concepts: change management/organizational change and small and medium-sized enterprises. For the first concept, the search included the terms “*change management*,” “*organizational change*,” and “*organisational change*.” The inclusion of both American and British spelling was intended to capture differences in terminology across the international literature.

For the second concept, the search included “*SME*,” “*SMEs*,” “*small and medium-sized enterprises*,” and “*small and medium enterprises*.” Synonymous terms were combined using the Boolean operator OR, while the two main concepts were connected using AND.

The complete search equation applied in Scopus was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“change management” OR “organizational change” OR “organisational change”) AND (“SME” OR “SMEs” OR “small and medium-sized enterprises” OR “small and medium enterprises”))

The search was conducted in the TITLE-ABS-KEY fields, which include the publication title, abstract, and author keywords. This approach was adopted to ensure that the retrieved publications had a substantive textual connection with the two central concepts of the review.

The search was limited to articles published between 2015 and 2025, written in English, and classified within the subject areas of Business, Management and Accounting and Economics, Econometrics and Finance. Only documents classified as research articles were considered.

The initial search produced 177 records. The records were then subjected to a structured selection process based on predefined eligibility criteria.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance, consistency, and reproducibility of the review, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before the screening process.

Studies were included when they met all of the following criteria:

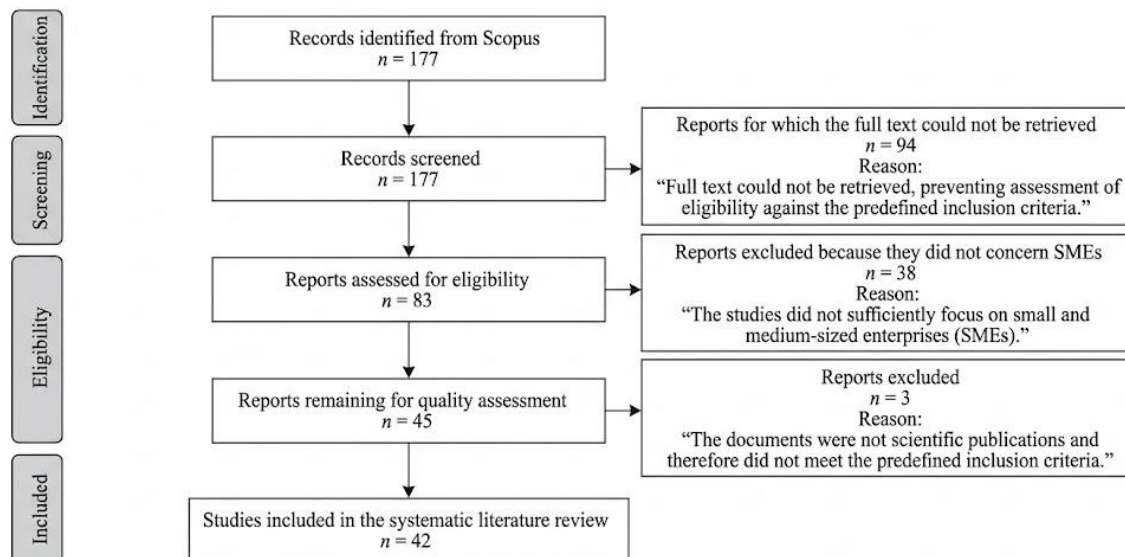
- The publication was indexed in the Scopus database.
- The publication was published between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2025.
- The publication was classified as a research article.
- The article was written in English.
- The study addressed change management, organizational change, or organizational transformation as a substantive research topic.
- The study focused on, or provided substantive evidence concerning, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- The article demonstrated sufficient relevance to the research objectives and research questions of the systematic review.

Publications were excluded when they met one or more of the following conditions:

- they were published outside the 2015–2025 period;
- they were not research articles;
- they were not written in English;
- they did not concern SMEs;
- they did not substantively address change management, organizational change, or related transformation processes;
- they were insufficiently related to the research questions of the review;
- they did not provide sufficient information to support the subsequent analysis.
- the full text could not be retrieved, preventing assessment of eligibility against the predefined inclusion criteria.

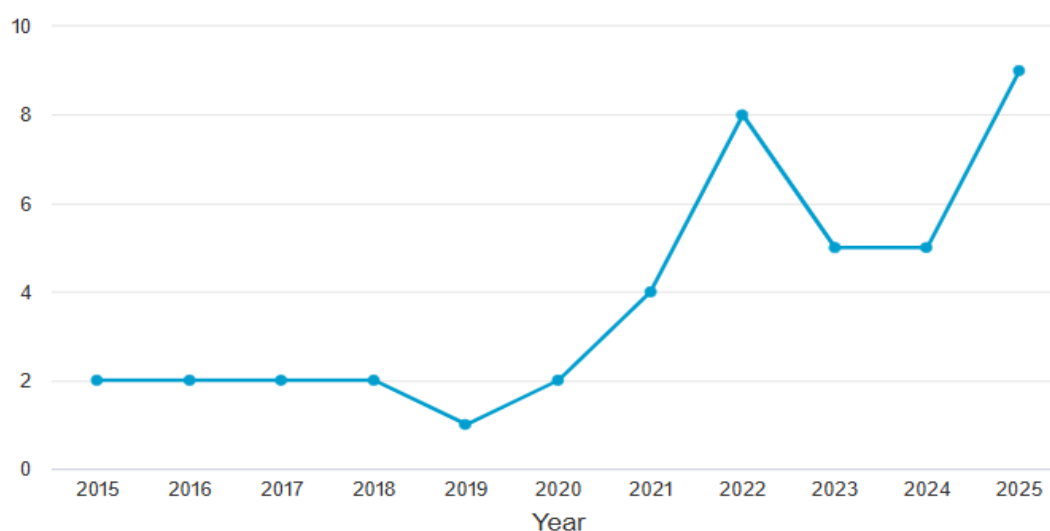
These criteria were applied progressively throughout the screening and eligibility assessment stages.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Following the screening and eligibility assessment, a total of 42 scientific articles were retained for the systematic literature review. To provide an overview of the temporal development of research in this field, the selected studies were subsequently classified according to their year of publication. Figure 2 presents the annual distribution of the 42 articles published between 2015 and 2025.

Figure 2. Annual Distribution of the Selected Studies (2015–2025)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Scopus database.

The distribution of the selected studies by publication year provides an indication of the evolution of academic interest in change management and organizational transformation within SMEs. The number of publications varies across the period considered, with some years showing a higher concentration of studies than others. This temporal distribution helps identify periods of increasing research attention and provides a preliminary indication of the development of the topic over time.

3. Literature Review on Change Management in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

3.1 Change Management in SMEs: A Multidimensional Perspective

Change management has become an increasingly important issue for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in an environment characterized by technological disruption, changing customer expectations, increasing competitive pressure, environmental challenges, and organizational transformation. Unlike large organizations, SMEs generally operate with more limited financial and human resources, less formalized structures, and a high degree of dependence on owner-managers. These characteristics can both facilitate and constrain the implementation of organizational change.

The analysis of the 42 studies examined in this review indicates that change management in SMEs is a multidimensional phenomenon involving managerial, human, organizational, technological, and environmental dimensions. The literature does not consider organizational change merely as the implementation of a new technology or the modification of existing procedures. Rather, it increasingly views change as a process involving changes in organizational structures, employee competencies, managerial practices, organizational culture, and strategic orientations.

The literature also reveals an evolution in research priorities. Earlier studies focused mainly on organizational transformation, leadership, employee involvement, communication, and sustainability-related change. More recent studies have increasingly addressed digital transformation, Industry, data analytics, cloud technologies, and digital capabilities. This evolution reflects the growing importance of digitalization in the transformation processes of SMEs.

Overall, the literature suggests that successful change requires SMEs to combine strategic vision, managerial commitment, employee involvement, appropriate resources, and organizational capabilities.

3.2 The Role of Leadership in Managing Change

Leadership emerges as one of the most consistent factors influencing organizational change in SMEs. This importance can be explained by the organizational characteristics of SMEs, where decision-making is frequently concentrated around the owner-manager or senior management team. The leader therefore plays a central role in initiating change, communicating its objectives, mobilizing employees, allocating resources, and ensuring the sustainability of the transformation.

The work of Hatak, Floh, and Zauner (2015), for example, shows that, in the process of sustainable transformation among Austrian wine SMEs, the owner-manager's attitude constitutes a key determinant during the "unfreezing" phase of change. This importance is reflected in the strong commitment of owner-managers to sustainability and to the transformation process undertaken by their businesses. As the authors state, "*All the business owners interviewed were highly committed to sustainability and the change process their businesses had undergone.*"¹ Such managerial commitment also plays an important role in the

¹ Hatak, I., Floh, A., & Zauner, A. (2015). *Working on the green side: Sustainable entrepreneurship in the Austrian wine industry*. Journal of Cleaner Production, P20

consolidation of change through the leader's continuous support and the integration of new strategic orientations into the organization.

Similarly, Chad (2015), examining corporate rebranding in a non-profit SME, shows that successful change was associated with a thorough analysis of the situation, a well-developed implementation plan, and early employee buy-in. The author highlights the importance of adopting a change management perspective, noting that *"The paper introduced the use of a change management perspective via a discourse transformation framework into examination of corporate rebranding and was found to generate valuable employee insights perhaps not available when examining rebranding from more traditional perspectives."*² This finding suggests that leadership effectiveness is not limited to decision-making; it also involves understanding employees' perspectives and creating the organizational and human conditions necessary for successful change.

More recent studies reinforce this perspective. Dorogaia (2023) emphasizes the role of leadership in Industry transformations, while Otting, Masjutin, and Maier (2021) show that digitalization itself is changing the requirements placed on SME leaders. Leaders increasingly need strategic orientation, agility, transparent communication, and change-management capabilities.

Mladenova (2024) also highlights the importance of management support, flexibility, and a risk-tolerant organizational culture in SMEs undergoing digital transformation. In particular, the study emphasizes that *"This study's results demonstrate that SMEs that maintain transformational leadership practices, enough flexibility in their organisational structure, a culture that tolerates risk-taking, and the necessary level of digital skills across the departments also score higher on digital business intensity."*³ This finding suggests that transformational leadership should not be considered in isolation, but rather as part of a broader organizational configuration involving structural flexibility, risk-taking culture, and employees' digital skills. Therefore, the literature broadly converges on the proposition that leadership is a key enabler of organizational change in SMEs. However, studies differ in how leadership is conceptualized. Some focus on managerial support, others on transformational leadership, digital leadership, strategic alignment, or the leader's ability to mobilize employees.

² Paul A. Chad. (2015). Utilising a change management perspective to examine the implementation of corporate rebranding in a non-profit SME. *Journal of Brand Management*, 22 (7), 569-587.P32

³ Mladenova I., Vladimirov Z. 2025. Harizanova O. Digital transformation, organisational capabilities, and SME performance - size matters. *Eastern Journal of European Studies*. VOLUME 16, ISSUE 1.P17

3.3 Employee Resistance and the Human Dimension of Change

A second major theme emerging from the literature is employee resistance to organizational change. Change can generate uncertainty, anxiety, fear of new technologies, loss of established routines, and concerns about job security or increased work complexity.

Mendy (2020), based on qualitative research in four SMEs, demonstrates that organizational change can generate employee anxiety, resistance, and disengagement. The study emphasizes the importance of dialogue, communication, and recognition of employees' concerns in facilitating change acceptance. In this regard, Mendy (2020) argues that *"what is more beneficial in the longer term is for HR policies and practices to be more dialogic and engaging in socially constructing and using collective knowledge to facilitate greater successes during change."*⁴ This finding highlights that employee involvement and dialogue are important mechanisms for reducing resistance and facilitating the successful implementation of organizational change.

Karacsony et al. (2023), using data from 215 employees in Hungarian SMEs, similarly show that employee attitudes toward organizational change differ across organizational contexts and that managerial involvement is associated with the quality of change implementation.

Psychogios et al. (2019) provide an additional perspective by demonstrating the importance of managerial feedback. Their findings indicate that informal feedback mechanisms may be more effective than formal mechanisms in SMEs. Feedback oriented toward benefits and confidence can facilitate change, whereas overly formal approaches may increase confusion or resistance. Resistance should therefore not necessarily be interpreted simply as an undesirable employee reaction. It may also reveal weaknesses in the change process, such as insufficient communication, inadequate training, limited employee participation, lack of trust, or uncertainty regarding the expected benefits of the transformation.

The literature consequently suggests that employee resistance is both a potential barrier to change and an indicator of the quality of change management practices.

⁴ Mendy, J. (2020), "Staff preferences in four SMEs experiencing organizational change", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 33 No. 2, p15

3.4. Communication, Employee Participation, and Change Acceptance

Communication and employee participation constitute another recurring dimension in the literature. Organizational change is more likely to be accepted when employees understand its rationale, perceive its benefits, and have opportunities to participate in its implementation.

Chad (2015) demonstrates that early employee buy-in and continuous involvement contributed significantly to the successful implementation of corporate rebranding in an SME. Similarly, Mendy (2020) emphasizes the importance of dialogue and employee recognition during organizational transformation.

Psychogios et al. (2019) further show that informal communication and feedback mechanisms can be particularly valuable in SMEs. This finding is consistent with the relatively informal organizational structures and close interpersonal relationships commonly found in small firms. As the authors emphasize, “these three aspects of feedback help to ensure internal collaboration among managers and employees”⁵. Informal feedback can therefore facilitate interaction, knowledge sharing, and mutual understanding between managers and employees, thereby supporting the implementation of organizational change in SMEs.

Employee participation is also emphasized by Diana et al. (2017), who identify employee empowerment, senior management support, communication, and organizational culture as important conditions for the adoption of environmental technologies.

Taken together, these studies suggest that change should not be understood exclusively as a top-down managerial process. Instead, employee involvement represents an important mechanism through which managerial intentions are translated into organizational change.

3.5 Resources, Skills, and Organizational Change Capability

The ability of SMEs to implement change also depends heavily on their internal resources and capabilities. Compared with large organizations, SMEs often face stronger constraints in terms of financial resources, specialized employees, technological infrastructure, and managerial expertise.

Justy et al. (2023), based on interviews with French SMEs, show that external pressures such as competition, market changes, and the COVID-19 crisis can stimulate data analytics adoption.

⁵ Psychogios et al., 2019, "From feeding-back to feeding-forward: managerial feedback as a trigger of change in SMEs", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, Vol. 26 No1.P19

However, internal factors such as organizational strategy, employee skills, and organizational culture can constitute significant barriers.

Walker and Lee (2025) similarly demonstrate that entrepreneurial resources and decision-making logic contribute to organizational change readiness among SMEs. These findings indicate that willingness to change is insufficient if the organization lacks the capabilities required to implement that change. As the authors emphasize, *“resources alone are insufficient; what creates outcomes is the way an entrepreneur manages their resources”*⁶. This suggests that SMEs' readiness for change depends not only on the availability of resources but also on the entrepreneur's ability to effectively mobilize and manage them through appropriate decision-making processes.

Mladenova, Vladimirov, and Harizanova (2025) further demonstrate the importance of transformational leadership, flexibility, risk-tolerant culture, and digital skills in explaining differences in SME performance during digital transformation.

Consequently, successful change depends not only on the willingness to change, but also on the organizational capacity to change.

3.6 Digital Transformation as a Contemporary Form of Organizational Change

Digital transformation has become one of the most important contexts in which change management is currently examined. The reviewed studies demonstrate that digital transformation affects not only technologies but also organizational structures, work processes, employee roles, competencies, and managerial practices.

Cervinka and Novak (2022) show that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation processes in some Czech SMEs. However, this acceleration was also associated with employee-related challenges, including reduced motivation and employee turnover. As the authors emphasize, *“As with all processes of change, job attrition occurred, loss of motivation and resignation had risen”*⁷. This finding highlights that, although crisis situations can accelerate digital transformation, they may simultaneously generate significant human

⁶ Walker and Lee, 2025, "Entrepreneurial resources, decision-making logic and organisational change readiness: enhancing SME sustainability in New Zealand", *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 15 No. 5, p15

⁷ Cervinka & Novak, 2022, "The influence of COVID-19 pandemic on digital transformation process and strategic management in SMEs in the Czech Republic", *Scientific Papers of the University of Pardubice, Series D: Faculty of Economics and Administration*, Vol. 30 No. 2, p7

challenges that organizations need to address through appropriate change management practices.

Trabert, Doerr, and Lehmann (2023) highlight the organizational and technical capability gaps faced by SMEs during digital servitization. Their findings emphasize the importance of employee understanding of data, stakeholder networking, and adaptation of organizational and technical procedures.

Cimini et al. (2021), examining Italian manufacturing SMEs, demonstrate that Industry 4.0 technologies generate changes in work profiles and increase the importance of non-technical competencies. The authors therefore argue implicitly for the joint consideration of technological and organizational dimensions.

Ghobakhloo and Iranmanesh (2021) similarly identify change management and strategic digitalization planning as important determinants of digital transformation success in manufacturing SMEs.

These findings indicate that digital transformation should be understood as an organizational change process rather than merely a technological investment.

3.7. Organizational Change, Innovation, and Sustainability

The literature reviewed also demonstrates that change management extends beyond digital transformation. SMEs face organizational changes associated with sustainability, circular economy, innovation, process improvement, environmental technologies, and strategic repositioning.

Wiesner, Chadee, and Best (2018) identify a set of change-management actions that support environmental sustainability in SMEs. Their findings demonstrate that sustainable transformation requires managerial, cultural, and organizational interventions.

Arranz, Arroyabe, and Fernandez de Arroyabe (2024), examining a large sample of European SMEs, demonstrate that internal barriers to the transition toward a circular economy evolve throughout the transformation process. Resource and feasibility constraints are particularly important, highlighting the need for gradual organizational adaptation. As the authors emphasize, *"SMEs can advance if they are adept at transforming these barriers from deterrents to challenges, enabling them to transition from intention to full implementation."*⁸ This finding

⁸ Arranz, C.F.A. et al. (2024), "Organisational transformation toward circular economy in SMEs. The effect of internal barriers", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 456,P9

suggests that the successful implementation of circular economy practices depends not only on overcoming resource and feasibility constraints, but also on the ability of SMEs to progressively transform these barriers into opportunities for organizational change.

Azzolini et al. (2025), using experimental evidence from 190 European SMEs, show that structured innovation interventions can improve participants' understanding and implementation capabilities. However, these interventions do not necessarily produce immediate changes in attitudes or intentions.

These studies reinforce the view that change management is not associated with one specific type of transformation. Rather, it represents a general organizational capability that can be applied to different forms of strategic, technological, environmental, and organizational change.

3.8 Comparative Analysis of the Literature

The comparison of the 42 studies reveals several major areas of convergence and divergence.

Dimension	Main findings	Areas of convergence	Main limitations
Leadership	Leaders initiate, support, communicate, and consolidate organizational change.	Strong convergence regarding the importance of leadership.	Limited quantitative evidence on the magnitude of leadership effects.
Employee resistance	Resistance is associated with uncertainty, fear, lack of trust, insufficient skills, and attachment to existing practices.	Resistance is consistently identified as a potential barrier.	Often treated as an isolated obstacle rather than as part of an integrated causal model.
Communication	Transparent and informal communication facilitates change acceptance.	Strong agreement across qualitative studies.	Limited statistical assessment of its direct effect.
Employee participation	Employee involvement facilitates acceptance and implementation.	Consistent evidence across several case studies.	Mechanisms linking participation to resistance reduction remain underexplored.
Skills and resources	Digital, managerial, and organizational capabilities influence change readiness.	Increasingly important in recent studies.	Often examined specifically in digital transformation contexts.
Organizational culture	Flexible, innovative, and risk-tolerant cultures facilitate transformation.	Positive relationship generally supported.	Frequently treated as a secondary rather than central variable.
Technology	Digital technologies are major drivers of contemporary organizational transformation.	Strong convergence in recent studies.	Risk of reducing organizational change to technological adoption.

Performance	Transformation, innovation, and digitalization can improve organizational performance.	Positive relationship appears in several studies.	The direct relationship between change-management practices and SME performance remains insufficiently established.
External environment	Competition, crises, regulation, and technological changes can trigger organizational transformation.	External pressures are widely recognized.	Interactions between external pressures and internal capabilities remain insufficiently investigated.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

3.9 Critical Analysis of the Existing Literature

Despite the increasing number of studies on organizational change in SMEs, several limitations can be identified.

3.9.1 Fragmentation of the Research Field

The first limitation is the fragmentation of existing research. Studies frequently focus on one specific dimension of change, such as leadership, employee resistance, digital transformation, organizational culture, innovation, or sustainability.

Although this specialization provides detailed knowledge of individual mechanisms, it makes it difficult to understand how these factors interact during the overall change process.

A more integrated perspective is therefore necessary to explain how managerial factors, employee reactions, organizational capabilities, and transformation outcomes interact.

3.9.2 Predominance of Qualitative Research

A second limitation concerns the methodological profile of the literature. A substantial proportion of the reviewed studies relies on qualitative case studies, semi-structured interviews, observations, or small samples.

These approaches provide rich insights into the complexity of organizational change, but their findings are often context-specific and difficult to generalize.

Quantitative approaches using larger samples and multivariate statistical techniques remain comparatively less developed. This creates an opportunity to empirically test the relationships proposed by the qualitative literature.

3.9.3 Limited Integration of Leadership and Employee Resistance

One of the key gaps identified in the existing literature relates to the interplay between leadership and employee resistance to change.

Previous research has generally established that effective leadership can facilitate the implementation of organizational change, while employee resistance may hinder or slow down the change process. However, relatively limited attention has been given to the question of whether effective leadership can actively reduce employee resistance and, in turn, contribute to the successful implementation of organizational transformation.

This constitutes an important theoretical gap. Leadership may not affect organizational transformation solely through a direct relationship. Rather, its influence may also be indirect, operating through employees' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors toward change. Understanding this relationship could therefore provide a more comprehensive explanation of how leadership contributes to the success of organizational transformation.

3.9.4 Excessive Focus on Digital Transformation

The increasing attention given to digital transformation represents another limitation. Although digital transformation is currently a major driver of organizational change, focusing exclusively on digitalization risks narrowing the theoretical understanding of change management.

The evidence from sustainability, circular economy, innovation, rebranding, process improvement, and organizational restructuring demonstrates that SMEs face multiple forms of transformation.

Change management should therefore be conceptualized as a broader organizational capability rather than merely as a mechanism for implementing digital technologies.

3.9.5 Limited Evidence from Emerging Economies

Another important limitation concerns the geographical distribution of research. The reviewed studies cover several European and Asian countries as well as other international contexts, but research specifically examining SMEs in Morocco remains limited.

The Moroccan context deserves particular attention because institutional conditions, organizational structures, resource constraints, managerial practices, and cultural characteristics may influence how SMEs experience and manage organizational transformation.

Consequently, findings generated in European or Asian contexts cannot automatically be generalized to Moroccan SMEs.

3.9.6 Insufficient Integration of Change Management and Organizational Performance

Finally, although several studies associate digital transformation, innovation, and organizational change with improved performance, the direct mechanisms linking change-management practices to organizational performance remain insufficiently established.

This suggests the need to move beyond the question of whether SMEs change and examine how the management of change contributes to successful transformation and, ultimately, organizational performance.

4. Research Gap

The comparative and critical analysis therefore identifies a central research gap.

Existing studies provide strong evidence that leadership influences organizational transformation and that employee resistance can hinder change. However, these two dimensions are frequently investigated separately. There is insufficient empirical evidence concerning the mechanism through which leadership influences employee resistance and, subsequently, the success of organizational transformation.

Furthermore, most existing studies focus on specific transformation contexts, particularly digital transformation, while relatively few studies develop an integrated model combining managerial, human, organizational, and performance dimensions.

Finally, empirical evidence concerning these relationships in Moroccan SMEs remains limited. This study therefore proposes an integrated perspective in which leadership represents a key organizational enabler, employee resistance represents an important barrier, and successful transformation represents an intermediate outcome leading to improved organizational performance.

5. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the synthesis of the 42 articles included in this systematic literature review, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework to explain the main factors and mechanisms involved in change management in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The reviewed literature highlights the importance of leadership, employee resistance, communication, participation, organizational capabilities, and contextual conditions in shaping the implementation of organizational change. However, these dimensions are often examined separately, limiting the development of an integrated understanding of change management in SMEs.

The proposed framework places leadership at the center of the change management process. In SMEs, leaders, particularly owner-managers, frequently play a direct role in initiating change, communicating its objectives, mobilizing available resources, and supporting employees throughout implementation. Leadership practices can therefore facilitate change by strengthening communication, encouraging employee participation, and creating conditions that support acceptance of organizational transformation.

Employee resistance represents a second central dimension of the framework. Resistance may arise from uncertainty, fear of change, limited trust, inadequate competencies, or insufficient employee involvement. Rather than considering resistance solely as an individual obstacle, the framework recognizes it as a phenomenon that may also reflect weaknesses in communication, managerial support, or the implementation process. Leadership practices that promote dialogue, participation, and support may help address these difficulties and facilitate the implementation of change.

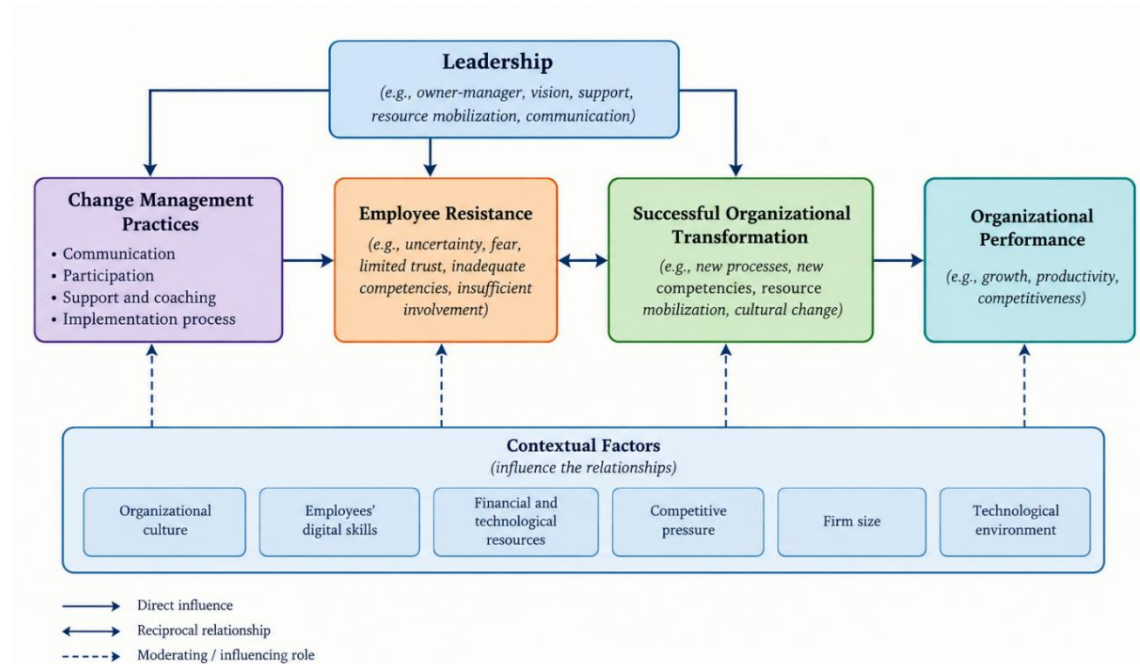
The framework further considers successful organizational transformation as an intermediate outcome of the change management process. The effectiveness of organizational change depends not only on managerial decisions but also on how employees respond to change and how the organization mobilizes its resources, competencies, and capabilities. Successful transformation may subsequently contribute to improved organizational performance. Nevertheless, the relationship between change management and performance should be examined carefully, since the reviewed literature does not establish a single, universally applicable causal mechanism linking these dimensions.

Finally, the proposed framework incorporates contextual factors that may influence the relationships between leadership, employee resistance, and organizational transformation. These factors include organizational culture, employees' digital skills, financial and technological resources, competitive pressure, firm size, and the technological environment. Their inclusion reflects the specific characteristics of SMEs, where resource constraints, managerial centralization, and limited specialized competencies may shape the conditions under which change is initiated and implemented.

Overall, the proposed framework adopts an integrated socio-organizational perspective on change management. It moves beyond a purely technological interpretation of organizational transformation by considering the interaction between managerial practices, employee responses, organizational resources, and contextual conditions. The framework is derived from the literature reviewed and should therefore be understood as a conceptual proposition rather

than an empirically validated model. Future empirical research, particularly in Moroccan SMEs, could examine the relationships proposed and assess how they vary across organizational and environmental contexts.

Figure 3. Proposed Conceptual Framework for Change Management in SMEs



Source: authors elaboration based on the systematic review

Conclusion

The literature reviewed demonstrates that organizational change in SMEs is a complex and multidimensional process. Successful transformation depends on the interaction between leadership, employee attitudes, communication, participation, organizational culture, resources, competencies, technology, and environmental pressures.

Among these dimensions, leadership and employee resistance appear particularly important. Effective leadership can provide strategic direction, communicate the need for change, mobilize employees, and create favorable conditions for transformation. Conversely, employee resistance can slow implementation, reduce engagement, and undermine transformation outcomes.

However, the existing literature remains fragmented and is characterized by a significant proportion of qualitative studies and context-specific analyses. The interaction between leadership and employee resistance remains insufficiently examined, particularly through quantitative models. Moreover, empirical evidence from Moroccan SMEs is still limited.

These gaps justify an empirical investigation of the relationship between leadership, employee resistance, digital transformation, and organizational performance in Moroccan SMEs. Such an approach can contribute to both the theoretical literature on change management and the practical understanding of how SME managers can successfully implement organizational and digital transformation.

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