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Assessment of Knowledge Management Practices amongst Small and Medium Entrepreneurs in Fako Division, Cameroon

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Received: 13.04.2023 Accepted: 28.04.2023
Date of Publication: May, 2023

ABSTRACT

In developing countries, Small and Medium Entrepreneurs have proven to be catalyst for economic growth. Performance in entrepreneurial business pose concern because when these businesses perform better, there is a positive change in the economy where they operate. The main objective of this study was to assess knowledge management practices among small and medium entrepreneurs in Fako Division of Cameroon. This study was guided by the Knowledge based theory of the firm. Descriptive statistics and survey research design approach were used. The study focused on 184 registered entrepreneurial ventures in the division. Random sampling technique was used for the selection of respondents. A total of 678 respondents were chosen. It was discovered that the entrepreneurial businesses were operating under different levels of knowledge management practices. In this study, four major levels were identified and seen to affect performance of the businesses concerned. It was recommended that entrepreneurs should develop interest and pay close attention on upgrading their levels of knowledge, in order to find themselves amongst the 'Medium' and 'High' Levels of knowledge management practices. Hence, become more successful, grow and achieve sustainability goals. Conclusively, the study affirmed that, entrepreneurial ventures perform better when they adopt and efficiently use the Medium-High level of knowledge management practices.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial businesses, Knowledge, Knowledge Management, Knowledge creation, Knowledge acquisition, Knowledge retention, knowledge sharing, Performance, Small and Medium Entrepreneurs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge Management Practices, are essential routes or channels, through which knowledge can reach its end users and be effectively used to bring about an

improvement in a particular activity, enhance a decision as well as realize a specific goal, objective and vision. Knowledge is used in every sphere of life, by individuals and organizations. Therefore there is a need for various channels through which these

knowledge can be exploited (Jantz, 2001). The focal point is on knowledge exchange, which involves exchanges taking place amongst both tacit and explicit forms of knowledge and how these forms of knowledge are to be processed. The various practices that are examined in this study are; knowledge creation, knowledge acquisition, knowledge retention and knowledge sharing. Knowledge creation is a very dynamic and nonstop process, which grows with time, through continuous learning and gaining of more experience by sharing and interacting that takes place amongst groups, teams, departments and environment within an organization. Knowledge can also be created through conversion between tacit and explicit

knowledge (Ernst & Kim, 2002). This developed and performance increasingly improved and enhanced through the effective and efficient management of new knowledge (Merx-Chermin & Nijhof, 2005).

Knowledge acquisition refers to the getting hold of knowledge from books, sensors, experts, documents

conversion could be from Tacit to Tacit, Tacit to Explicit, Explicit to Explicit as well as Explicit to Tacit (Nonaka, 1994; Alwis, & Hartmann, 2008). Through the creation of knowledge, innovation is embraced in an organization, which invariably enhances organizational performance. Innovation can become successful and be achieved in an organization, if that organization is a learning one, encourages socialization, and employs various techniques and initiatives on creating new knowledge. Thus, new knowledge causes an organization to grow rapidly, faster and sustainably. This new knowledge created equally goes as far as bringing in innovative products and services (Cavusgil, Calantone, & Zhao, 2003). Entrepreneurial businesses can be fully

and computer files. The knowledge acquired may be precise to the problem domain or to the problem-solving procedures; it could be knowledge about business or knowledge about knowledge. This can also be called meta-knowledge, which describes information about how experts either use their

knowledge

accuracy,

to solve problems or about general problem solving procedures (Byrd, 1995). Thus, knowledge can be gathered from a variety of sources; flow diagrams, pictures, films, computer databases, books, maps, radio frequency identification, stories, songs, sensors or even observed behavior. These sources can be majorly categorized into documented and undocumented knowledge. Undocumented knowledge resides in the minds of individuals. In addition, knowledge can be gathered, by using one or several of the human senses and machines (like, cameras, intelligent agents, scanners, pattern matchers and sensors). Hence, Knowledge becomes difficult to acquire, due to the complexity of the multiplicity of sources and types of knowledge, this becomes one of the major challenges faced when acquiring knowledge. Knowledge can therefore be acquired through the following major sources; databases, internet and experts (Kim & Lee, 2010). Business performance becomes a reality where knowledge acquisition is encouraged and embraced. When knowledge is acquired, productivity is enhanced, incorrect decisions and results are identified, there is knowledge-base completeness,

validity and consistency, and the organization will be able to handle more complicated and complex problems (Singh, R. K., 2013).

Knowledge retention can mean continuity management (Beazley et al 2002). Knowledge retention can be defined as preserving and sustaining, not losing knowledge which exists in people's minds. This knowledge in people's minds, could be tacit (not easily documented) and knowing (experiential action which manifests in behavior), that is very essential to an organization's total functioning (Martins & Meyer, 2012). For Argote & Ingram (2000), knowledge retention engrosses the implant of knowledge in a repository, so that it can exhibit some persistence over time. Therefore knowledge retention can equally be seen as an act of developing an organization's memory ((DeLong, 2004). This fosters continuity in the organization, as knowledge is maintained and made available to both current and new employees in an organization. When knowledge retention is not valued or is taken for granted in an organization, that organization suffers from insufficient sharing and application of knowledge, which goes to further affect the performance and

growth of an

growth and

organization (Riege, 2005; O'Toole, 2011). Knowledge retention tends to be very significant in an organization, as it avoids persistent employee mobility and of course organizational knowledge loss (Levy, 2011). In this current world of business, it is realized that, employees who are highly mobile are skilled workers and being aware of their value. Knowledge retention is of utmost importance (Barnett, 2000). Thus, knowledge retention will continue to be an essential ingredient and a critical issue to all organizations, even in the years ahead (Liebowitz, 2009).

Knowledge sharing is an act of mobilizing knowledge in an organization (Gupta & Govindarajan 2000). There must be willingness for individuals to share knowledge, using sustainable knowledge sharing activities. Some researchers attest to the fact that, knowledge sharing activities can be sustained and promoted usually through some incentives offered in the organization (Cabrera & Cabrera 2002; Lindenberg, 2001). Thus, finding out which particular incentive/incentives that could increase the willingness of employees to share knowledge must be identified and developed for the

increased performance of the organization. It should be known that incentives could be either financial or non-financial (Huang, 2014). Non-financial incentives on the one hand, have proven to be far more important than financial incentives (Osterloh & Frey, 2000, Simon, 1991). It has been realized that since knowledge is power, and most individuals, being characterized with a self-interest seeking behavior, have made non-financial incentives more fulfilling in knowledge sharing. This has likewise brought out the limitations of financial incentives in promoting knowledge sharing (Laursen & Foss, 2003; Nickerson & Zenger, 2004).

Recently, organizational performance is confounded with ideas such as; effectiveness, productivity, earning capacity, efficiency, profitability, economy and competitiveness. Again, performance is not merely regarding the outcome, but rather focusing on the result in comparison between the objective and the outcome (Noye, 2002). By this, the availability of knowledge and the level of knowledge management practices being implemented in the organization, will determine the rate at which performance growth is achieved. Therefore, the level

of

It has been

implementation of these practices form the bedrock upon which consistent increase in performance lies.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The need for and the implementation of knowledge management practices (KMP) in any entrepreneurial venture is inevitable and inexhaustible. All organizational activities, actions, processes and procedures require knowledge to move forward. This knowledge could come from employees, organization's database, groups and even without. Therefore, to achieve business performance, knowledge should be identified, utilized and applied appropriately to get desired results (Jelena, Vesna & Mojea, 2012).

An understanding of the levels of knowledge management practices, will make entrepreneurs aware of how to structure their processes, to make sure that there is a consistent and systematic flow, from knowledge creation to the point of knowledge retention. This is because these knowledge management practices are interwoven and are of great importance to each other to maximize results (William, John & Peter, 2013).

realized from literature, that most organizations are more concerned with knowledge creation and sharing, while looking less on or avoiding knowledge acquisition and retention processes, which makes knowledge inadequate to perform effectively (William, John & Peter, 2013). Therefore, the negligence by entrepreneurs to fully incorporate the levels of knowledge management practices into their structure and system is one of the reasons for this study.

In addition, small and medium entrepreneurs are ignorant of the level of knowledge management practices they are operating upon. This ignorance limits their improvement and growth, as they unaware of which level they are currently on, which becomes adverse to performance. This therefore increases and brings the role of knowledge as a resource to create value and achieve competitive edge. An understanding on how these entrepreneurs can manage their level of knowledge management practices, people and organizational knowledge, will make them stand the chance of competing better in this new and complex business environment (St-Pierre et al, 2015). This knowledge will equally

improve

knowledge

their efficiency, effectiveness and innovation, thereby enhancing performance (Evangelista et al, 2010). Operating the right level of Knowledge management Practices will enhance tools for growth, survival and sustainable competitive edge.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nonaka and Konno (1998), suggest that, there exist a shift from one level to another, which occurs amongst the four basic Socialization, Externalization, Combination and Internalization processes (SECI). Thus, Socialization may refer to an activity with intra-level effects, internalization, as a medium through which organizational knowledge can be transformed to individual knowledge, externalization, as an approach to build group knowledge from individual knowledge and combination, being a process which permits organizations comprise a knowledge body from the knowledge owned by its different groups. It will be very essential to take a look at the different levels of the knowledge creation process (Individual Level, Group Level, Organizational Level and the Inter-Organizational Environmental Level. The individual level appears to be the basic element for

creation, while the other three levels are higher level knowledge creating systems), so we could understand how knowledge is being created.

Hylton (2002), found out that, a lot of organizations are faced with the challenge of getting the right knowledge. There are lots of mistakes done in the initial stages of knowledge management, which are; knowledge identification and knowledge creation. Organizations should go through the process of identifying the knowledge they want, either explicit or tacit (that is either from within the organization or from the heads of the employees) (Burrows, Drummond & Martinsons, 2005).

Roland (2006), conducted a study and indicated that a firm's performance largely depends on the firm's ability to incorporate and align knowledge into core competency based strategies and the value creation process. His findings showed that an organization can achieve and maintain high level performance, through developing efficient mechanisms for creating acquiring, transferring and integrating knowledge.

Omerzel (2010), conducted a study on the impact of knowledge management on SME growth and

profitability

organizational

A structural equation modeling study. This study was aimed at investigating the different determinants of knowledge management and how they affect a firm's performance, specifically profitability. Data were collected through questionnaires filled by 168 firms. This study proposed a model of knowledge management, made up of six dimensions which are; the use of knowledge, knowledge storage, knowledge acquisition at individual level, motivation, knowledge transfer and knowledge implementation and their impact on firm's profitability. And the findings showed that, all dimensions are interrelated to firm performance. Equally, the study revealed that knowledge management acts as a strong factor that enhances firm performance.

Abdel, Gawater and Mohamed, (2012), centered on the role of knowledge management in enhancing organizational performance. It was seen that all factors of knowledge management; knowledge creation, acquisition, retention and sharing have a significant impact on all measures of organizational performance. Therefore, there is a great correlation between knowledge management capabilities and

performance, which was revealed by the questionnaires distributed.

Jelena, Vesna and Mojea, (2012), proved that technology has evolved rapidly and there have been a lot of recent changes in the management of organizations, which has brought about new inventions in improving both business and performance. Their findings show that, knowledge management practices have been embraced in these recent times and are seen to be very essential in enhancing organizational performance. Knowledge management is about improving the process of knowledge creation, knowledge acquisition, knowledge retention as well as knowledge sharing. Improving the above processes aids in the increase and effectiveness of organizational performance (Kovacic, Bosity & Loncar, 2006).

In addition, Martins and Meyer (2012), suggest that, for an organization to remain competitive and to enhance the capacity of her employees to perform well, make accurate decisions and give solid solutions to problems, tacit knowledge has to be preserved. Thereby preventing knowledge loss. Hence, for an organization to stand the test of time

and be

showed that

successful in the knowledge economy, there should be a need to exhibit high abilities to retain organizational knowledge.

It is recognized that there are three major categories of knowledge retention strategies which are; short term (Reactive). Medium term (Containment) and Long term (Preventive), (Liebowitz, 2009) & DeLong, 2004).

Furthermore, Mohamed, Mehrdad, Salman and Noruzy, (2013), in their investigation on the influence of knowledge management practices on organizational performance in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Iran, discovered that, knowledge creation, knowledge acquisition, storage and implementation, which were variables of knowledge management, have serious bearing on organizational productivity and financial performance. While innovation, customer satisfaction, work relationships have a significant loading on organizational performance. This study was carried out based on responses from 282 senior managers, who were chosen randomly, using the simple random sampling method. Structural equation modeling was employed and the results

knowledge management practices had a direct influence on organizational performance. Knowledge management also means efforts put in place to explore both tacit and explicit knowledge of individuals, groups and organizations and to convert it in bits that are usable by managers and individuals in decision making process (Bhatti, & Qureshi, 2007).

IV. METHODOLOGY

The survey research design method was used, through the preparation of structured questionnaires. This study focused on 184 legally registered entrepreneurial ventures in Fako Division, Cameroon. The researcher also made use of the random selection technique of respondents. A total number of 678 copies of questionnaires were distributed; 552 copies of questionnaire were given to employees of the various entrepreneurial ventures in the Fako Division and 126 copies of questionnaire were given to the employers of the various entrepreneurial ventures. A total of 599 copies of questionnaires were properly completed and returned, thereby giving a response rate of 81.4 percent. According to Moser and Kalton (2017), the

result of a

Low

survey could be considered significant, if the response rate is not lower than 30 – 40%, which validates the response rate for this study to be considered adequate for the analysis. Results are presented using descriptive statistics; charts and percentages.

V. AN ANALYSIS OF THE LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AMONGST SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTREPRENEURS IN FAKO DIVISION, CAMEROON

The study examines the levels of knowledge management practices on the performance of Small and Medium Entrepreneurs in Fako Division Cameroon.

It has been realized that various levels were present in the implementation of knowledge management practices under study in the various businesses in Fako Division. According to the groupings extracted from the responses of the respondents, the level of knowledge management practices were divided into Four (4), ranging from "No knowledge management practices to High knowledge management practices".

knowledge management practices according to this study is defined by the use of two (2) items of knowledge creation as well as the other constructs, Medium refers to the use of three (3) knowledge creation variables and other variables of the other constructs and High is the use of four (4) variables of knowledge creation and other variables of the different constructs. Fig. 1, exposes that a majority of entrepreneurial activities under study fall under "High" with a report of 49.4%. This implies that most of the enterprises implemented all variables of knowledge creation, knowledge acquisition, knowledge retention and knowledge sharing to enhance their performance. Meanwhile, 3.0% of respondents attested to the fact that their enterprise does not implement knowledge management practices, hence they fall under the "No knowledge management practices" category (See Fig. 1). This becomes relevant, as it is supported by Gonzalez and Martins (2017), in their research titled 'Knowledge Management Process: a theoretical-conceptual research'. They brought forth the different levels of knowledge management practices, which they termed stages. From their findings, it shows that

these levels

the High

become dynamic and are enhanced as a result of some organizational features, like; length of company existence, experience and organizational norms/values.

category of the level of knowledge management practices, which means that the attribute of women being considered as pushful, hardworking and enthusiastic, has contributed to a rich source of knowledge. This is buttressed by Ernst & Kim, (2002). They found out that, gender characteristics typically affect the extent to which knowledge can be converted and shared from its tacit form to the explicit form.

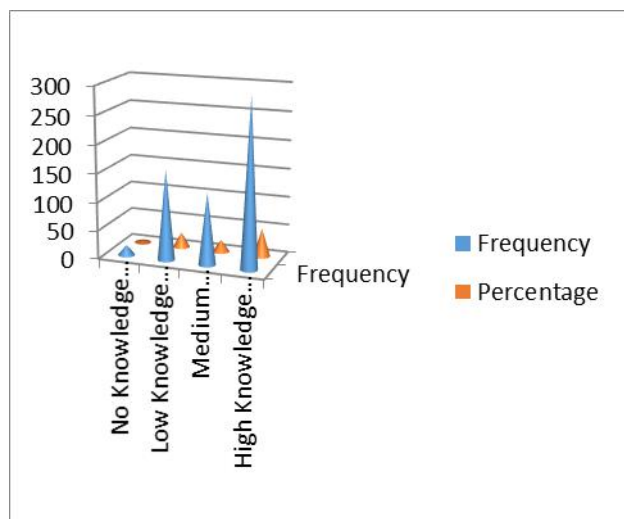


Figure 1: Level of Knowledge Management Practices amongst Small and Medium Entrepreneurs in Fako Division.

Source: Field Survey, 2021

i.) Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Gender

Also, Fig. 2, clearly illustrates the distribution of the level of knowledge management practices by gender.

This explains how gender differences equally affect the level of knowledge management practices implemented in a firm. According to Fig. 2, it is deduced that 3.4% of male and 2.9% of female do not create, acquire, retain and share knowledge, whereas 48.6% of male and 50.6% of female are in

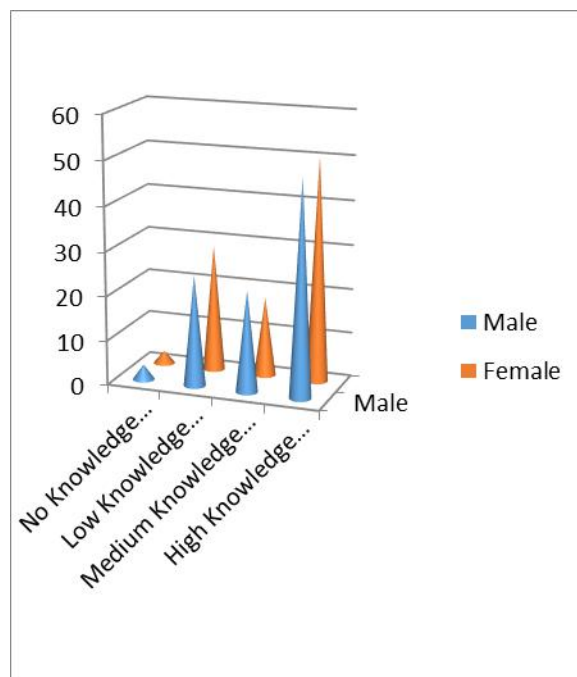


Figure 2: Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Gender

Source: Field Survey, 2021

ii.) Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Age

Fig. 3,

of incentives

illustrates the distribution of respondents' current level of knowledge management practices by age. Ages also act as a means through which knowledge can be accessed. That is, the older a person grows, it is expected for such a person to increase in knowledge and be more experienced in an organizational setting. From Fig. 3, it is seen that within the age group of ≤ 25 , medium knowledge management practices are implemented, representing 39.7%. This shows the agility of people within these age brackets and their reaction to knowledge management practices. Whereas, age groups of 36-40, 41-45 and 46-50, fall under the low category of knowledge management practices, revealing their inadequacies in properly creating, acquiring, retaining and sharing knowledge. Most times, people of these ages, have a lot of tacit knowledge, but find it difficult to transform them to explicit knowledge which can become more useful to the organization, rather than hoarding it. As such, they represent 0.6% and fall under the low level of knowledge implementation. Singh (2013), confirms this through his findings, where he discovered that people within age brackets of 36 to 50, require a lot

to be motivated, so as to trust and be willing to share knowledge and through the knowledge shared, others are able to acquire useful knowledge to move the firm forward.

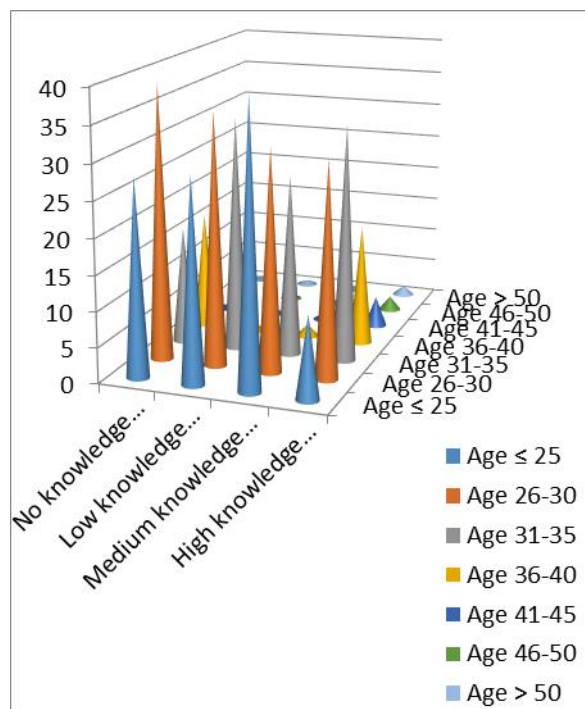


Figure 3: Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Age
Source: Field Survey, 2021

iii.) Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Educational Qualification

Fig. 4, reveals the distribution of respondents on the current level of knowledge management practices by educational qualification. This allows for the understanding of knowledge management practices and its implementation. The level of educational

soundness

iv.) Level of

affects the understanding knowledge management concepts and how it should be adopted and implemented. This is evident from Fig. 4, as majority of those in medium and High level of knowledge management practices comes from employees who are GCE Advanced level holders and first degree holders (graduates), representing 49.2% and 43.9% respectively. This finding is supported by Bhatt (2000), as he encourages employees to never stop learning. Continuous learning paves the way for more knowledge and discoveries of new strategies to actually implement the knowledge received.

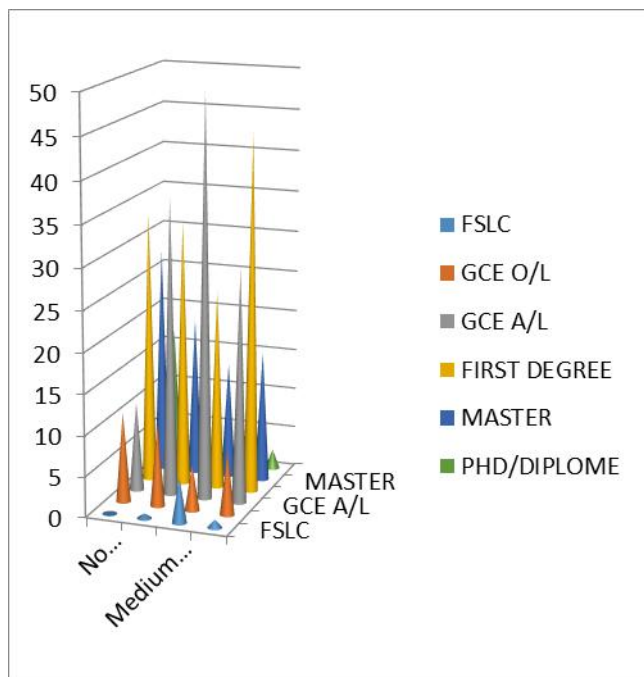


Figure 4: Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Educational Qualification
 Source: Field Survey, 2021

Knowledge Management Practices by Company Existence

It is further depicted from Fig. 5 that, the number of years of company existence is also likely to affect and or influence the level of knowledge management practices in such a company. This is because, a company which has existed for a long time, will definitely have more awareness about knowledge management and how it can be applied for efficiency than a newly established company. Also, a company that has been established for longer period, will be more conversant with the business environment and how the presence and implementation of knowledge management practices can positively enhance their performance. As a result of this, their current level of knowledge management practices is expected to be higher than younger firms. Fig. 5 reveals that, enterprises that existed for more than 5 years have a record of being in the level of both No knowledge management practices and High knowledge management practices. This means that there is the lowest and highest percentage from this same category. This implies that organizations that have existed for long, still have the tendency of neglecting

knowledge

v.) Level of

management practices and rejecting its adoption in their firms, whereas other firms of more than 5 years of existence are putting in efforts in adopting and implementing knowledge management practices. This therefore accounts for 1.1% for No knowledge management practices and 67.4% for High level of knowledge management practices. This is in line with the studies of Gonzalez and Martins (2017). They realized that the different levels of knowledge management can be made efficient through some features, with years of company existence as one of them.

Knowledge Management Practices by Employee Experience

From Fig. 6, it is seen that the number of years of employee experience equally affects the level of knowledge management practices implemented in the firm. Only 33.8% of employees of less than two years of experience reached the High level of adoption of knowledge management practices, meanwhile 10.4% of employees created, acquired, retained or shared. This is in contrast with employees who have more than five years of experience. With these employees, their level of acceptability of knowledge management practices will be high and attitude towards it positive. This explains why 65.6% of employees are able to fall within the High level category of implementation of knowledge management practices, while just 1.6% of employees remained in the No knowledge management practices level. Again, this is enforced by the finding of Bhatt (2000), where he deduced that, an employee who is more experienced tend to have value for continuous learning, and as such, handles knowledge management with more understanding and value

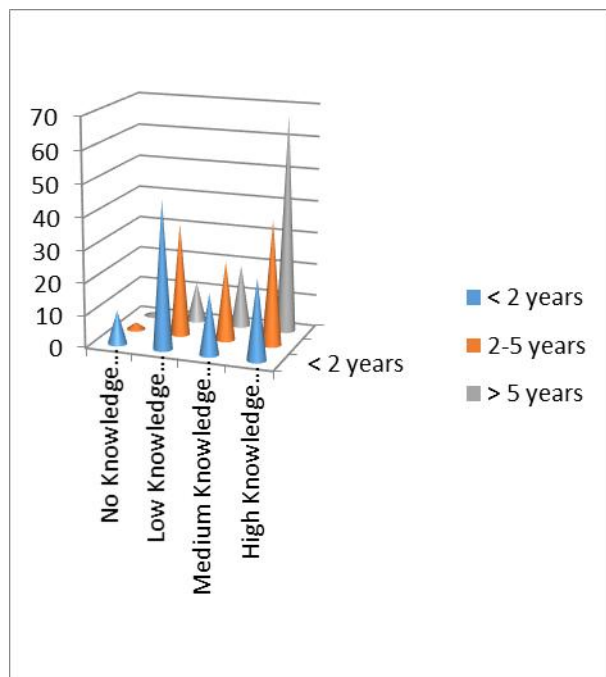


Figure 5: Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Company Existence
 Source: Field Survey, 2021

which tend

management

to make his attitude towards the acceptance of such practices positive.

practice. By implication, entrepreneurial ventures under the 'High knowledge management practices' will invariably record tremendous increase in performance.

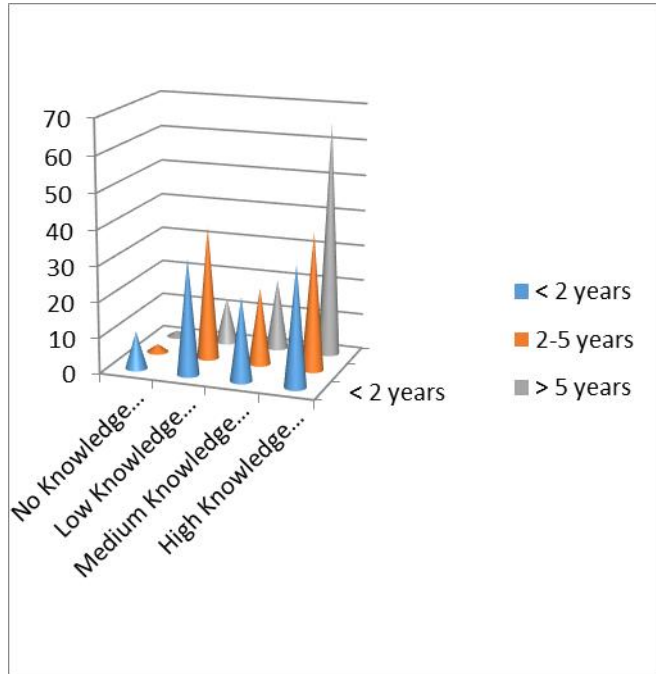


Figure 6: Level of Knowledge Management Practices by Company Existence
Source: Field Survey, 2021.

The study was able to identify four levels of knowledge management practices currently being practiced in SMEs in Fako Division. These levels ranged from No knowledge management practice to High knowledge management practices. And it was concluded from the statistics that SMEs with high level of knowledge management practices constituted 49.4% against 3.0% for No knowledge management practices, 26.5% for low level of practice, and 21.0% for medium level of knowledge

VI. POLICY IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATION

From this study, the following recommendation is made;

Findings revealed that when Small and Medium Entrepreneurs are exposed to knowledge, they tend to be better equipped and skilled, increase their productivity, enhance their performance and have competitive edge over their competitors. Thus, SMEs that find themselves under the 'No' and 'Low' levels of knowledge management practices, should take steps on improving and upgrading their attitudes and operations towards knowledge management practices, in order for them to grow, become successful and sustainable.

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