

FROM INFORMALITY TO PROFESSIONALIZATION: THE ROLE OF HR SYSTEMS IN FAMILY BUSINESS CONTINUITY

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Abstract

The professionalization of human resource management systems in Indonesian SME family businesses faces a fundamental tension between the demands of modern management efficiency and the power of deep family logic. This study aims to uncover the specific mechanisms by which actors navigate these conflicting interests in the process of HRM formalization. A qualitative approach with a single case study design was applied to Abason, a consumer manufacturing company in the Central Java industrial area with fewer than 100 employees that is currently undergoing a second-generation transition. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with eight key informants, three months of participatory observation, and document analysis using triangulation and member checking validity strategies. The findings identified a model of 'personalized formalization': recruitment formalization operates through a 'dual-track' system that accommodates technical competence while maintaining the founder's internal pathway; the performance appraisal system produces 'family-oriented KPIs' that integrate quantitative targets with moral contributions; and succession planning takes place through informal mentorship that maintains founder control while building the capabilities of the second generation. The theoretical contribution lies in modifying the concept of Socioemotional Wealth by demonstrating the possibility of compatibility between the preservation of family values and the adaptation of modern systems in the context of Indonesian collectivism, rather than the binary trade-off assumed by Western literature. The practical implications emphasize the importance of 'formalization with a local face' and 'co-leadership' strategies for SME owners, while the policy implications indicate the need for mentoring programmed that are sensitive to the socio-emotional dynamics behind formal administrative requirements.

Keywords: *Human Resource Management; Family Business; Generational Transition; Personalized Formalization; Manufacturing SMEs.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023) reveals a striking irony: even though 99 per cent of businesses in Indonesia are family businesses, only 30 per cent survive into the second generation and 10 per cent reach the third generation (Wicaksono, 2026). Empirical study of family businesses in Greece identified that the intention of the next generation to take over the business does not necessarily guarantee a successful transition without adequate management system preparation (Stavrou-Costea, 1999). A survey by the Jakarta Consulting Group (2014) revealed that only 68 per cent of family businesses in Indonesia prepare successors, indicating that 32 per cent have no succession planning agenda (Paraditha et al., 2017). One of the most critical areas in this transition is the transformation of the human resource system from personalistic management to professional practices (Albert & Lazzari Dodeler, 2022). The tension between business rationality and family sentiment is the focus of observation in this study.

A manufacturing company in Central Java referred to as Abason for the purposes of this study is representative of this dilemma. Founded by an entrepreneur who started the business from his garage in 1998, the company has grown to become a major player in the local consumer products industry with fewer than 100 employees. Companies with 50-100 employees face intense pressure to professionalize because they are on the verge of formalizing their structures while maintaining family control (Dekker et al., 2013). The consumer products sector specifically faces high pressure for HRM formalization due to demands for product safety certification, international health standards, and access to modern retailer supply chains (Kaplinsky, 2018). Abason is currently in the second-generation transition phase, with the 68-year-old founder preparing for the operational takeover by his two children. The dynamics observed at Abason provide unique access to uncover the micro-mechanisms of professionalization in the context of Indonesian family businesses.

Several key phenomena mark the ongoing transformation process at Abason. The recruitment system, which was entirely dependent on family network recommendations, is beginning to be replaced by written job descriptions and competency-based selection. Literature on family business professionalization suggests that formalization of recruitment is often the first step towards modernizing human resource management, though founder resistance to external hiring remains common due to prioritization of trust and loyalty (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011). This resistance reflects the preservation of socioemotional wealth through personal control. Performance appraisal practices, which have been entirely subjective, are now under pressure to adopt objective indicators as the organization grows and faces external compliance requirements (Townley, 1997). The fundamental question that arises is how the formalization of human resource systems takes place in a context where family logic still dominates.

To understand these complex dynamics, this study adopts a qualitative approach with a single case study design. Case studies were chosen given the contextual nature of the phenomenon and the need for an in-depth understanding of the processes and meanings behind the observed practices. The researcher's presence for three months allowed for the revelation of hidden narratives that were not accessible through quantitative instruments, as criticized by Brundin & Hartel (2014), who found that quantitative surveys only captured 40 per cent of the variance in family business decisions. Prolonged engagement for a minimum of eight weeks was necessary to gain the founder's trust in revealing internal conflicts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews with eight key informants, participatory observation, and analysis of company documents. This combination of techniques is expected to capture the social complexity that occurs at the intersection of family and business interests.

Specifically, this study aims to describe and analyses the ongoing formalization process of the human resource system at Abason. This study also interprets how the actors within it navigate the conflicting interests between family logic and business logic. Furthermore, this study explores the specific mechanisms that enable or hinder professionalization in the Indonesian cultural context. The focus of the analysis covers three critical domains, namely the formalization of recruitment, performance appraisal systems, and second-generation succession planning. Thus, this study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of HRM transformation in family businesses that are undergoing transition.

The analysis in this study is guided by the Socioemotional Wealth theory (SEW) developed by Gómez-Mejía and colleagues (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011). This theory views family businesses not merely as economic entities but also as vehicles for fulfilling the emotional and identity needs of families. Empirical validation by Berrone et al. (2012) in an analysis of 1,237 Spanish family businesses shows that the priority of preserving SEW leads to a rejection of

strategic diversification that threatens family control. In Indonesia, the SEW dimension of 'family identity' has a predictive weight of 0.72 on resistance to management change, higher than the control dimension (Primadona et al., 2025). This theory explains why family business owners often make economically suboptimal decisions in order to maintain family control. In the context of Abason, this theory provides a framework for understanding the founder's resistance to formalization as an effort to preserve socioemotional wealth.

However, the application of the Socioemotional Wealth theory in the Indonesian context requires adjustments given the different cultural characteristics. Family values in Indonesian culture are not merely included in individual utility calculations but are the ontological foundation of the social order. Reina et al. (2022) found that the SEW concept must be modified with the dimension of 'family harmony,' which is not found in Western literature. Unlike in Western contexts, where individualism makes the tension between family and business more explicit, in the Indonesian context, these two logics often overlap. This research therefore does not merely apply Western theory but tests its relevance and possible modifications in the context of emerging markets.

The findings of this study are expected to make a dual contribution to the development of science and practice. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on family businesses, which is still dominated by studies in the North American and European contexts, with perspectives from Southeast Asia. Practically, this study provides insights for SME owners who are facing similar generational transitions regarding negotiation strategies between professionalization and the preservation of family values. In terms of policy, this research provides an empirical basis for formulating family SME assistance programmes that are sensitive to socio-emotional dynamics. By revealing the micro-mechanisms of HRM transformation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of family business sustainability in developing economies. This overall effort is expected to bridge the gap between the ideal of professional management and the complex reality of Indonesian family businesses.

2. METHOD

This research was conducted from the position of the researcher as an outsider who gradually gained access to the Abason family business through a university alumni network. Creswell & Creswell (2017) emphasizes that the position of the researcher in qualitative studies must be explicitly disclosed for transparency and validation of interpretation. Initial relationships were established through informal meetings that allowed the researcher to explain the academic objectives and guarantee the confidentiality of sensitive data. Informed consent was obtained from the founder and all key informants before data collection began.

This position allows for a balance between closeness to gain trust and distance to maintain objectivity in the analysis. The research subject is Abason, a consumer manufacturing company with fewer than 100 employees located in an industrial area in Central Java. Yin (2017) asserts that case selection in single case studies should be based on theoretical relevance and accessibility for in-depth observation. This company was chosen because it was in the midst of a second-generation transition the 68-year-old founder was preparing for the operational takeover by his two children and showed efforts to formalize HRM in the last five years. These characteristics made Abason a revelatory case that allowed for the observation of ongoing processes rather than historical reconstruction.

Eight key informants were interviewed in depth based on purposeful sampling criteria with maximum variation to reveal diverse perspectives. Patton (2014) explains that purposeful sampling in qualitative studies aims to obtain rich information from informative rather than statistically representative cases. The informants consisted of the founder as the central actor,

the two second-generation children with different management visions, three non-family managers who were agents of formalization, and two production line supervisors who represented the employees' voices. Inclusion criteria included a minimum of three years of employment at Abason and direct involvement in the HRM process undergoing transformation. This selection ensured that the data covered different power hierarchies and interests within the organization.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques that complemented each other for source and technique triangulation. Creswell & Poth (2017) recommend a combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis as the standard of rigor in qualitative case studies. Semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted 60-90 minutes per session, were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with a flexible protocol following the informants' narrative flow. Participatory observation was conducted for three months with twice-weekly visits to the office, attending regular meetings, and following the new employee recruitment process. Document analysis included historical organizational structures, draft job descriptions, and family meeting notes obtained with written permission.

The research location in a developing industrial area in Central Java provided the context of competitive pressure from similar companies and access to supporting infrastructure. Yin (2017) emphasizes that the geographical setting must be considered as part of the context influencing the phenomenon under study. The research duration allowed for observation of the complete cycle from annual planning to quarterly performance evaluation. Prolonged engagement over three months facilitated trust building with informants and access to sensitive data such as internal conflicts that arose in the second half of the study. This timeline also allowed for follow-up interviews with three informants to clarify initial findings.

Data validity is ensured through a systematic strategy of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln & Guba (1985) established these four criteria as standards of rigor in naturalistic qualitative research. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing the narratives of the founder, second generation, and non-family managers on critical themes to identify convergences and divergences. Member checking is conducted by returning transcripts and initial interpretations to three key informants for confirmation and correction of misunderstandings. Audit trails include complete documentation of the analytical decision-making process from field notes to coding matrices available for inspection and dependability audits.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

General Context and Dynamics

Abason started its consumer goods manufacturing business with an initial capital of two million rupiah. The company's journey reflects the classic narrative of Indonesian SMEs that grow based on individual perseverance, social networks, and market adaptation without complex formal management structures. By 2024, Abason had grown into a company with less than 100 employees, a 1,200-square-metre production facility, and distribution to four major provinces in Java. This growth has not been accompanied by a transformation of the human resource management system, which still relies on the founder's personal relationships with each employee. The ongoing transition to the second generation, with two children aged 35 and 32, is becoming a catalyst for professionalization.

The dynamics of the Abason family show a configuration of ownership and management commonly found in first-generation Indonesian family businesses. The parents hold 100 per cent of the shares, while their two children serve as Production Manager and Marketing Manager, respectively, without formal ownership. At Abason, this role conflict is reflected in the difference in vision expressed by the eldest child: *'Father is more about loyalty, I am more*

about skill sometimes Father likes employees because they are obedient, but I think that actually hinders progress.' This difference in vision is the background to every HRM formalization effort that takes place through negotiation and compromise.

Formalizing Recruitment: Between Trust and Competence

The recruitment system at Abason has undergone the most visible transformation in the last five years in line with the expansion of production capacity that requires skilled labor. The old tradition of relying entirely on recommendations from family networks, neighbors, or existing employees has begun to shift towards the demand for written job descriptions and a selection process based on technical competencies. Literature on family business professionalization suggests that formalization of recruitment is the earliest indicator of professionalization because it is directly related to the quality of human resource input (Dekker et al., 2013; Priutami et al., 2023). However, at Abason, this change did not occur revolutionarily but rather evolutionarily through a series of negotiations between the founder and the second generation. The eldest son pushed for the implementation of practical skills tests for technical positions, while the parents insisted on final approval based on personal impressions during interviews.

Field findings reveal the specific mechanisms of 'layered formalization' that occurred at Abason. Formal job descriptions have been created for all new positions since 2022, but the hiring process still involves 'Father's opinion' as an unwritten assessment factor. At Abason, this informal channel is justified by the founder with a logic of security, which he expressed in an interview: *'People I know have proven their loyalty, unlike outsiders who only look good on paper.'* This logic reflects the preservation of socioemotional wealth through personal control, which is considered safer than an abstract system (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011).

Resistance to purely external recruitment was most evident in the experience of recruiting a Finance Manager in 2023. The second generation proposed candidates from outside with professional accounting qualifications, but the parents rejected them and appointed existing employees from the administration department. This kind of decision economically suboptimal but maintaining family control is a manifestation of the priority of socio-emotional wealth over economic rationality (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011). However, at Abason, the second generation successfully negotiated a compromise that the eldest child described as an adaptive strategy: *'We can't clash directly, so we look for a middle ground people from within, but we upgrade their skills slowly.'* This mechanism demonstrates 'gradual professionalization' that does not challenge the founder's authority but enhances the organization's capabilities.

Performance Appraisal System: Negotiating Subjectivity

The performance appraisal domain at Abason presents the most explicit battle between business logic and family logic because it is directly related to the distribution of rewards and recognition. The old tradition that relied entirely on 'Father's assessment' subjective, holistic, and often based on seniority was confronted with the second generation's demand for a quantitative target-based KPI system. At Abason, the pressure for formalization came not only from within but also from the demand for ISO certification, which was a prerequisite for supply chains to modern retailers. This external-internal tension forced more complex negotiations than in the recruitment domain because it had implications for power structures and legitimacy within the organization (Ramadhani & Manafe, 2022).

The system that emerged after two years of negotiations can be described as 'KPIs with family face' formal quantitative indicators exist, but their implementation is aligned with local values. At Abason, every employee has quantitative production targets, but the end-of-year evaluation still involves consideration of 'moral contribution,' as explained by the founder: *'The numbers are important, but our employees need a sense of belonging and togetherness, you can't calculate that in Excel.'* This hybrid system allows the second generation to meet efficiency demands while the founder maintains assessment criteria in line with family values.

The consequence of this hybrid system is the emergence of two distinct categories of employees with different expectations and levels of loyalty. Long-term employees with an average of 7-12 years of service show high loyalty to the founder but resistance to quantitative targets. Conversely, new employees are more accepting of the KPI system but show lower emotional commitment. This dualism is a common trade-off in HRM transitions. A production supervisor with 10 years of service expressed a generational dilemma: *'We old-timers are confused, we used to work sincerely because we were valued by the boss, but now we have to meet targets and feel less appreciated.'* This polarization creates complex organizational dynamics in which the performance appraisal system becomes a battleground for generational identities.

Succession Planning: Mentorship and Legitimacy

Succession planning at Abason takes place in a format that is far from the standard professional model but is rich in symbolic and emotional meaning. There is no written succession plan, clear transition timeline, or objective criteria for full leadership takeover. However, at Abason, this lack of formalization is offset by the intensity of informal mentorship that has been ongoing since 2019 when the eldest son returned from his master's degree in management. The parents implemented a 'shadowing' pattern in which both children followed them in every strategic decision, even though they had no formal authority to make decisions.

This mentorship mechanism served a dual purpose: as a transfer of tacit knowledge about business operations and as a legitimizing ritual that strengthened the emotional bond between generations. At Abason, the eldest child describes this process as an experience that builds both dimensions simultaneously: *'I learned not only about the product, but also about how my father made people feel at home something that is not taught in any business school.'* This mentorship also serves as a control mechanism for the founder, which the youngest child acknowledges: *'We still need Dad's blessing for big decisions, but slowly we are getting used to thinking for ourselves.'* This duality of function reflects the complexity of socioemotional wealth in the context of transition.

The most critical challenge in Abason's succession planning is the dual legitimacy faced by the second generation: competence legitimacy from employees and emotional legitimacy from the founder. Senior employees often question the authority of the second generation, while the parents themselves show ambivalence. However, at Abason, the 'co-leadership' strategy since 2023 has enabled a gradual transfer without confrontation, which the parents describe as a compromise of wisdom: *'I am still the owner, but they are the ones running the business. I monitor them closely, and they learn closely as well.'* This division of roles provides space for the second generation to build an accountable track record.

Hybridization Mechanism: The 'Personalized Formalization' Model

Findings in all three domains reveal a common pattern that can be conceptualized as 'personalized formalization'. (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011) explain that family businesses often reject modern management practices that are perceived as threatening family control and identity. However, at Abason, this rejection is differential formalization is accepted at the surface structure level but filled with relational content. A non-family manager recruited in 2021 observed this process from an external perspective: *'On paper, everything is systematic, but if the boss says "no" even though the numbers add up, then it's still "no" but we understand, this is a family business.'*

The mechanism that enables personalized formalization to operate at Abason involves three key elements: generational negotiation, functional compromise, and integrative narrative. Generational negotiation particularly between the founder and the eldest son produces hybrid solutions that do not fully satisfy both parties but are functional enough for sustainable operations. Functional compromise is evident in the acceptance of formal structures with

implementation flexibility that allows for situational adaptation. Integrative narratives constructed jointly by the founder and the second generation present change not as a replacement of old ways but as an 'evolution for continuity.' Gomez-Mejia et al. (2011) assume a trade-off between SEW preservation and economic adaptation, but Abason's findings suggest the possibility of compatibility through mechanisms that maintain family symbols and rituals while adopting the instrumentality of modern systems. This model contributes to the literature by showing variations in the forms of professionalization in emerging markets that do not follow Western trajectories.

Contributions and Implications

This study makes a theoretical contribution by modifying the concept of Socioemotional Wealth in the Indonesian cultural context. While the original theory assumes that prioritizing SEW leads to resistance to change, Abason's findings show that SEW can enable change through the mechanism of personalized formalization. This contribution is in line with Reina et al. (2022) call for the contextualization of family business theory, which is still dominated by Western individualistic paradigms. In practical terms, this study suggests a gradual approach to transforming family SME HRM that avoids direct confrontation with the founder's authority. Instead of importing multinational HR systems in their entirety, business owners should develop 'localized formalization' that accommodates power dynamics and family values.

In terms of policy, these findings provide an empirical basis for designing family SME mentoring programmes that are sensitive to the socio-emotional context behind the demands of administrative formalization. Programmed that only emphasize the adoption of modern management systems without considering SEW resistance risk failure or resulting in empty implementation. The Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs and industry associations need to integrate 'generational negotiation' and 'transition management' modules into SME management training. The limitations of a single case study open up opportunities for further research with a comparative design between SMEs with different industry characteristics and generational stages. Longitudinal research that follows Abason for the next 5-10 years is also needed to test the sustainability of the personalized formalization model in the face of greater crises or external perturbations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the professionalization of HRM in Indonesian SME family businesses, as represented in the case of Abason, occurs as a process of negotiation and hybridization rather than a linear transition from informal to formal. Findings in three critical domains show consistent patterns: recruitment formalization operates through a 'dual-track' mechanism that maintains the founder's internal pathway; the performance appraisal system produces 'family-oriented KPIs' that integrate quantitative targets with moral contributions; and succession planning takes place through informal mentorship that maintains founder control while building the capabilities of the second generation. Collectively, these three mechanisms form a model of 'personalized formalization' in which modern management structures are interpreted through the lens of family values. This model answers the research question of how actors navigate the intersecting interests of family and business logic.

The main theoretical contribution lies in modifying the concept of Socioemotional Wealth in the Indonesian cultural context, which emphasizes collectivism and relational harmony. While the original theory assumes a trade-off between SEW preservation and economic adaptation, Abason's findings suggest the possibility of compatibility through mechanisms that maintain family symbols and rituals while adopting the instrumentality of modern systems. The concept of 'personalized formalization' enriches the literature by showing variations in the forms of professionalization in emerging markets that do not follow a linear trajectory from

personal to impersonal. This research therefore does not merely apply Western theory but proposes contextual modifications that have the potential to be validated in other Southeast Asian settings. This contribution indicates that universal management theory needs to be adapted to the ontological foundations of local social orders.

Practically, this research provides insights for SME owners facing similar generational transitions on effective negotiation strategies. Rather than importing multinational HR systems wholesale, which risks founder resistance and employee disorientation, business owners should develop 'localized formalization' that accommodates power dynamics and family values. The 'co-leadership' strategy observed at Abason, which involves a division of roles between the founder as a symbol of value continuity and the second generation as modern operational agents, provides a template for gradual power transfer without destructive confrontation. The importance of 'high-intensity informal mentorship' also shows that investing time in tacit knowledge transfer is more critical than formal succession plan documents. For HRM practitioners, these findings remind us that even in small organizations, resistance to formalization can be overcome through participatory mechanisms rather than top-down imposition.

In terms of policy, these findings provide an empirical basis for designing family SME mentoring programmes that are sensitive to the socio-emotional context behind the demands of administrative formalization. Programmes developed by the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs and industry associations need to integrate 'generational negotiation' and 'transition management' modules into the SME management training curriculum. HRM formalization incentive policies such as access to financing or certification should not only emphasize the adoption of structures but also flexibility in implementation that allows for contextual adaptation. This study also indicates the need to develop indicators of generational transition success that go beyond financial metrics to include the dimensions of family harmony and continuity of company values. This more holistic evaluation framework will help stakeholders identify family SMEs that are socially and emotionally healthy, not just administratively formal.

The limitations of a single case study open up opportunities for further research with a comparative design between SMEs with different industry characteristics, sizes, and generational stages to test the generalizability of the 'personalized formalization' model. Longitudinal research following Abason for the next 5-10 years is needed to test the sustainability of hybrid mechanisms in the face of crises or external perturbations such as regulatory changes or technological disruption. Cross-cultural comparative research between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines also has the potential to identify variations in 'personalized formalization' caused by differences in family value configurations in Southeast Asia. In addition, quantitative studies on large samples could operationalize the dimensions of 'personalized formalization' into valid and reliable measurement instruments. This overall research agenda contributes to a deeper understanding of the sustainability of family businesses in developing economies that emphasize collectivism and relationality.

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