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Competitividad empresarial y bienestar de los empleados, una dualidad necesaria en Pymes de Ameca, Jalisco

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Abstract

From the perspective of entrepreneurs, this study analyzes the challenges and opportunities to consolidate business competitiveness in SMEs in Ameca, Jalisco, which establishes them as agents of change in a socioeconomically stagnant territory, based on the well-being of employees as a possible competitive advantage. With a qualitative methodology based on interviews and phenomenological analysis, the results allow identifying the main limitations, among which human talent management, financing and issues related to the environment stand out. It also identifies the need for universities or research centers to be links between the business sector and human talent in order to contribute to the understanding of perspectives.

Keywords: business competitiveness, competitive advantage, employee welfare, SMEs.

Resumen

Desde la perspectiva de los empresarios, este estudio analiza los desafíos y oportunidades para consolidar la competitividad empresarial en Pymes de Ameca, Jalisco, que las establezca como agentes de cambio en un territorio estancado socioeconómicamente, con base en el bienestar de los empleados como posible ventaja competitiva. Con una metodología cualitativa basada en entrevistas y análisis fenomenológico, los resultados permiten identificar las principales limitantes, entre las que destaca la gestión del talento humano, la financiación y cuestiones relacionadas con el entorno. Se identifica, además, la necesidad de que Universidades o centros de investigación sean vínculos entre el sector empresarial y el talento humano para coadyuvar en el entendimiento de perspectivas.

Palabras clave: competitividad empresarial, ventaja competitiva, bienestar de los empleados, pymes.

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Introduction

In today's economy, where companies face increasing and more specialized competition, how can companies in peripheral, rural or semi-rural territories not only prosper economically, but also be agents of change for the well-being of the region and its inhabitants?

If we understand business competitiveness as the capacity of companies to perform better than their competitors, and to generate and maintain growth and development within their environment (Samán et al., 2022), it is an essential element for business success for several reasons: it opens opportunities to new markets, increasing or diversifying supply; it fosters the ability to adapt to changes in the environment and the innovative development of products or services; in addition to providing the company with greater prestige, which is reflected in strengthening customer loyalty or increasing it (Díaz et al., 2021).

In turn, the success of companies through competitiveness has a positive impact on the economy of the region in which they are located. This dynamic is established, above all, from a greater generation of decent employment, an increase in GDP, the attraction of investments, the promotion of innovation, collaboration and alliance with other agents, such as universities or pro-business platforms. Elements that, inherently, can contribute to an improvement in the quality of life (Ibarra et al., 2023), and that consider competitiveness as a key factor for the success of companies and as an engine that drives growth, innovation and territorial welfare.

Territorial well-being is part of territorial development and comprises several dimensions, among which economic development stands out. However, the well-being of the territory is not limited to economic growth but depends on creating a space where people can live fully, with access to opportunities, social cohesion and quality of life (Yáñez and Albacete, 2020). In this sense, companies generate employment options, whose income, if decent, can contribute to reducing poverty. However, can they go further?

It is through business competitiveness that a key interconnection is generated between companies and territorial welfare-development. Not only through social responsibility, which is one of the most frequent forms (Lara and Sanchez, 2021), but also with a focus on labor welfare. Employee welfare is a competitive advantage for the company that coincides with the requirements of business competitiveness (Patlán, 2021), and, in extension, will be a key element for the inherent benefits that must accompany the indicators of socioeconomic development in a territory.

An engaged workforce contributes to greater productivity and efficiency that generates favorable results for the company, from the impulse to innovation through creativity and greater critical thinking

of employees, and with an improvement in customer satisfaction (Díaz et al., 2021). Likewise, the well-being of employees extends to their personal, family and social life, which contributes to the strengthening of communities. In other words, companies that prioritize the well-being of their employees will be in a better position to achieve success and contribute to a better future for all. However, this is not always achieved.

In Mexico, business competitiveness is consolidating more slowly than desirable, occupying 37th place among 43 countries evaluated (IMEF, 2021). This shows that there are structural conditions in the different national territories that do not favor competitiveness, while formality, management skills and innovation, among others, continue to be challenges for national companies (Ibarra et al., 2023). This panorama is highly challenging, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are trying to establish themselves in the business ecosystems of peripheral territories, with economic networks that are linked in rural or semi-rural contexts.

Ameca, Jalisco, the research study area, is a municipality of 62,000 inhabitants, located 80 kilometers from Guadalajara. The economic profile of the place shows strengths in agriculture, livestock and services, however, at present the socioeconomic indicators show a municipality with signs of stagnation. Its labor supply is scarce and not very diverse, with 5,674 insured jobs and a downward trend for the last five years.

Sixty-seven percent of the employed population earns less than two minimum wages, moderate poverty is at 31.5% and multidimensional poverty is at another 35.4% of the population. This situation has reinforced the high level of migration in the municipality, the second highest in the region, which is reflected in the fact that 19.11% of local households receive remittances from the United States (IIEG, 2023).

In this territorial context, small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the majority in the municipality (of the 3,174 economic units, only four employ more than 250 people), are trying to consolidate themselves. Thus, the study aims to analyze the factors that favor and limit business competitiveness from the perspective of local SME entrepreneurs, facilitating the identification of strategies that promote them as agents of change for the territory based on the consolidation of their companies through the competitive advantage of human talent management, which in turn translates into the welfare of employees. In the following pages, a literature review on the subject is presented, followed by a description of the methodology used in the case studies and, finally, an analysis of the results with their corresponding discussion.

Literature review

Research in this regard suggests that there is a significant link between business competitiveness and well-being, both at the organizational level, that is, relative to employees, and at the local territory level (Huggins and Thompson, 2012). Employee well-being has been established as a crucial factor in maintaining a competitive advantage in the global marketplace, and it is social responsibility initiatives that have been targeted for programs that can improve employee well-being and organizational competitiveness (Dežmar, 2015). While human resource management plays a crucial role in the success of organizations, the business climate that focuses on doing more with less creates significant challenges for companies in prioritizing employee well-being (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). In this section, we explore the factors that incentivize business competitiveness, as well as those that constrain it, to finally identify links between employee well-being, territory and business competitiveness.

In this sense, it is appropriate to consider that business competitiveness is a complex process that can be encouraged and limited by factors that occur in the same territorial context; it is a process that organizations can learn to build. As mentioned by Almanza et al. (2022), this learning may be easier for consolidated companies, with human and technological resources that are at the forefront, however, for SMEs the process is largely more complex, since achieving competitiveness and, above all, sustaining this standard, will depend on several internal and external factors that must be considered. Some of them may be the key competitive advantage for the desired sustainability.

Factors for business competitiveness

Today, globalization has imposed a highly demanding dynamic in various areas of life; in this sense, business competitiveness has become established as a necessity and a key element for the successful development of organizations, both individually and as a whole that represents a specific sector and is also essential for the development of entire regions. Regarding the factors that are determinants of business competitiveness, Molina and Sanchez (2016) find that, in the case of Latin American small and medium-sized enterprises, the most frequent factors are innovation, financing, strategy and globalization, environment, technology and research/development and, finally, human capital.

According to ECLAC reports, business competitiveness in Latin America is defined through several factors at the micro and macro levels, the main determinants being constant innovation in the company, the productivity of its operations, the quality of the service or product offered, the emphasis placed on personnel development, the implementation of technology in processes and research and development activities, in addition to proper management in the financial areas that avoids

complications in this regard (Molina and Sanchez, 2016). What the studies give greater relevance to, however, are the factors of innovation and human capital.

Innovation is considered one of the key factors of competitiveness and is demonstrated by the fact that the most innovative countries tend to occupy the most privileged positions in competitiveness indexes (Varga, 2023). In turn, innovation is based as a necessity in the face of unforeseen events that may affect companies, as was the case of the COVID-19 emergency, during which, according to García et al. (2021), innovative actions in Latin American companies were decisive in solving the problem which, although it was a global issue, revealed many of the territorial conditions present in the region.

Innovation can also be related to human capital management, as globalization constantly transforms organizational dynamics, and achieving an up-to-date understanding of the impact it has on companies is crucial for business success. For business owners or managers, or for human resources managers, managing an increasingly diverse and critical workforce is a major challenge, but it can also be an area of opportunity, as equity, inclusion and employee well-being are values that, while important in their own right, become drivers of innovation and growth (Olayele, 2022). In this sense, companies that foster a culture with these focused axes open themselves to an unprecedented creative potential by taking advantage of the different perspectives and experiences of their employees, either to generate ideas for intrapreneurship or to develop products or services in order to reach new customers (Aranibar, 2022).

When studying management models based on business competitiveness, and under the premises of complexity and organizational change, Ramírez (2023) gives great relevance to the need to invest in intellectual capital through knowledge management that serves to increase the levels of productivity, competitiveness and the general capacity of the entire organization. The author emphasizes that the competitiveness of organizations can be enhanced when they integrate the innovation factor in the personnel qualification processes, in the creation of new work dynamics, and in the updating of organizational management styles.

However, sustaining these benefits related to human capital management, which are profitable benefits both for the company and globally, depends, to a large extent, on the basis provided by a monetary incentive, a salary that is fair and satisfies the needs of workers. Of course, the amount of salary is not an exclusive choice of employers or their preferences, however, to advocate for greater competitiveness in this regard is to do so for the benefit of an increase in the welfare of their employees, which, ultimately, represents an increase in their capabilities (Eraso and Salazar, 2022).

Once the rights and needs of workers are satisfied, there is a more solid basis for increasing their weighting. Pérez et al. (2021) establish human talent as a key factor for business competitiveness, surpassing even the influence of the management and administrative functions. In addition, they emphasize that the company's human capital, as an internal factor of the organization, is more important than external factors in the consolidation of business success. In this context, assertive communication in the relationship between employers-managers and employees is an essential tool in organizations, as it boosts competitiveness while promoting a balance of opportunities and rights for staff, without discrimination (Lesmes et al., 2020).

It can be seen that, in order to establish business competitiveness in an organization with sufficient strength to achieve a competitive advantage, various factors have an influence, among which innovation and human capital, on which this review has focused, stand out. These two elements are based on education, which enables the proper implementation of innovative actions and approaches, as well as the management of human talent. With this in mind, according to Barrichello et al. (2020), organizations that assume a proactive role in promoting education, both within the business system and in collaboration and alliance with other agents, such as universities or platforms to support the entrepreneurial-business sector, have a greater chance of success.

In addition to the two mentioned above, business competitiveness is influenced by a wide range of factors, all of which converge in specific spaces, in territories. At the macro level, elements such as economic stability, investment in research and development, attraction to foreign investment or trade openness are determinants of business success (Boikova et al., 2021). On the other hand, apart from external factors, there are others at the micro level, since companies must focus on developing intangible assets. In this regard, the quality and motivation of human resources are key to boosting efficiency, aspects that, according to Díaz et al. (2021), can be achieved through the effective leadership of owners and managers.

Limiting factors and territory

In this context, the territory plays a significant role as a scenario in which macro and micro factors come together, which can be observed at three levels, the first related to the variables of stability, openness and access to markets and regulations; the second about regional infrastructure in communications, education, services; and third the individual competitiveness of companies (Ek and Morales, 2020). In this regard, companies that operate in a territory with a favorable environment, with access to qualified human talent, with the support of public policies that encourage innovation and collaboration between different public and private agents, will have a better chance of achieving

the desired competitive advantage. This, as mentioned, is important for companies and also for the territory itself, since local communities find in competitiveness a factor to take advantage of endogenous resources and encourage development (Florea et al., 2017).

In the same line, the factors that limit business competitiveness can be divided into those that are controllable by the company, such as strategy, technology, products, training, costs, research and alliances; those that depend on external agents, government or others, such as the economic environment, taxes, base wages, policies, tariffs and regulations; and those that are difficult to control, such as international prices, the demand situation or the impact of the environment (Rojas et al., 2000).

The conditions imposed by the territory influence the economic development of the region, and this extends to other spheres that have an impact on the well-being of those involved, entrepreneurs and employees. The encounter of productive factors, such as a skilled workforce, greater access to technology, public goods or facing lower levels of corruption, better governance in relation to the public and private, are necessary conditions for economic benefits in organizations, but they are also essential for social development, which highlights the dual need to achieve it (Pérez et al., 2021).

In view of this, the outlook in Latin America is challenging, since it depends to a large extent on the actions of local governments, which must enhance the strengths of their territories, as mentioned by Silva (2005), who suggests that the development of a territorial culture that fosters collaboration, innovation and entrepreneurship can help to address the problem, while public policies improve the competitive capabilities of the territories. However, according to the author, there are territories whose conditions make it difficult for them to face these challenges adequately.

The constraints to the competitiveness of SMEs in peripheral territories tend to focus on economic factors, such as the cost of the necessary machinery or equipment, marketing activities and training. Other factors can be added to this, such as a low rate of development in the country or region, currency devaluation or inflation, which reduces purchasing power and decreases investment margins (Eraso and Salazar, 2022). In this sense, it is logical that the existence of so many negative factors, many of them uncontrollable, reduces the chances of competitiveness, however, a company that manages to be innovative in this territorial context, increases its chances of success significantly (Lewandowska, 2021).

To conclude this section, emphasis is placed on the need for entrepreneurs to consolidate a proactive role in facing the challenges that the territory presents to their organizations. This initiative would not only be beneficial for the companies but would also promote territorial development by strengthening

a fundamental element such as the population. To achieve this, it has been proposed to focus on the welfare of employees, which extends to their families and community, while encouraging efficiency and creativity that strengthens business competitiveness; a strategy that would address two of the main problems afflicting the sector: weaknesses in the training of human talent and deficiencies in business management (Ortega and Villalba, 2021).

Methodology

In order to understand entrepreneurs' perspectives on employee well-being and its relationship with business competitiveness in a peripheral territorial context, a qualitative methodology encompassing six local case studies is proposed. This approach becomes a valuable tool that allows obtaining in-depth information on the subject, allows going beyond the figures and delves into the experiences and perceptions of the participants and, on the other hand, provides the possibility of explaining the complexities of the subject in ways that are not commonly taken up in quantitative methods (Molano et al., 2021). The information obtained from this approach can be useful for identifying and developing practical strategies to consolidate labor welfare as a competitive advantage for SMEs in the region.

With the intention of developing a methodological design that would allow a triangulation of information, the phases of the study consisted, firstly, of a literature review on the topic, which was developed in the previous sections. Secondly, a documentary review of the study site to learn about the characteristics of its entrepreneurial ecosystem, which was instrumental in identifying potential participants. Thirdly, field work was carried out using observation techniques and semi-structured interviews, which were subsequently codified by means of phenomenological analysis for the elaboration of the results.

Interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs in Ameca, Jalisco to deepen their experience and expectations for the future in their companies, all of them small or medium-sized, in relation to the key factors that the literature review points out about business competitiveness: innovation and human capital (Molina and Sanchez, 2016). In addition, the conversations were able to cover the necessary topics to obtain a holistic view of the problem.

The selection of the participants was made at the discretion of the researcher, resulting in cases that offer a diverse panorama in which each entrepreneur narrates experiences in their companies, and through their voices it is possible to understand some factors that impact the well-being of employees, from the perspective of those who have the responsibility to guarantee it. These are six local entrepreneurs, whose organizations (SMEs) belong to the agricultural, livestock and service sectors.

This diversity shows the complexity of elements necessary for labor welfare and its implementation as a competitive advantage and with a favorable impact on the territory.

For the analysis of the interviews, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was adopted. Described by Duque and Aristizábal (2019), it provides an adequate framework to understand the implications of the experiences lived by the participants, in recommended samples smaller than 12 subjects. Once the information was collected in the interviews, the analysis, performed using atlas.ti software, consists of:

- Coding of the text with concepts that influence well-being at work.
- Identification of the most frequently occurring codes.
- Analysis of frequent codes in relation to theoretical propositions.
- Grouping recurring themes into categories that can relate them to each other.
- Writing up the results using the compilation of the previous step.

Results

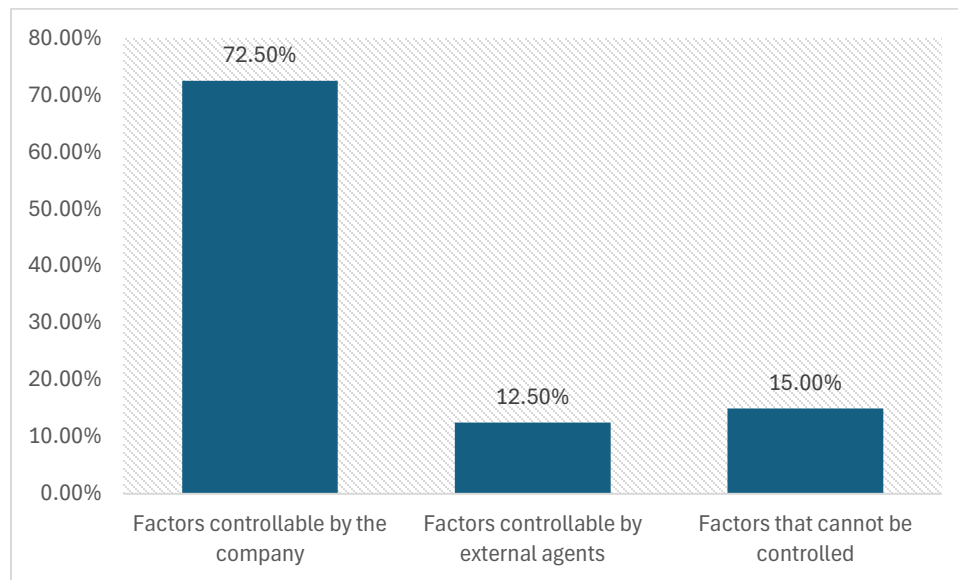
The results show the perspective of the interviewed entrepreneurs, what is most relevant to them in the daily life of their organizations and in the prospects for the future, with the search for business competitiveness as a common thread. This, in turn, makes it possible to observe how the well-being of employees is integrated into the panorama and how it can become a competitive advantage that has a positive impact on small and medium-sized companies.

When analyzing the topics that recurred most frequently during the interviews and categorizing them according to their possible control, as suggested in the literature review (Rojas et al., 2000), illustrated in Table 1, it can be seen that, for the entrepreneurs, the key factors for business competitiveness are mostly of an internal nature. These include strategy, alliances, business and human talent management, as well as increased formalization, the consolidation of an organizational culture and the adaptation of the company to environmental changes.

Less influential in their expressions are those factors that are beyond the control of the organizations themselves, issues that depend on macroeconomic factors or that are subject to the influence of external agents. These factors may transcend the borders of the territory, even of the country, such as economic crises, emergencies of all kinds or competition from multinationals, or they may be controlled by focused agents, such as local policies and regulations, or other problems related to their performance.

Table 1

Frequency of competitiveness factors grouped together

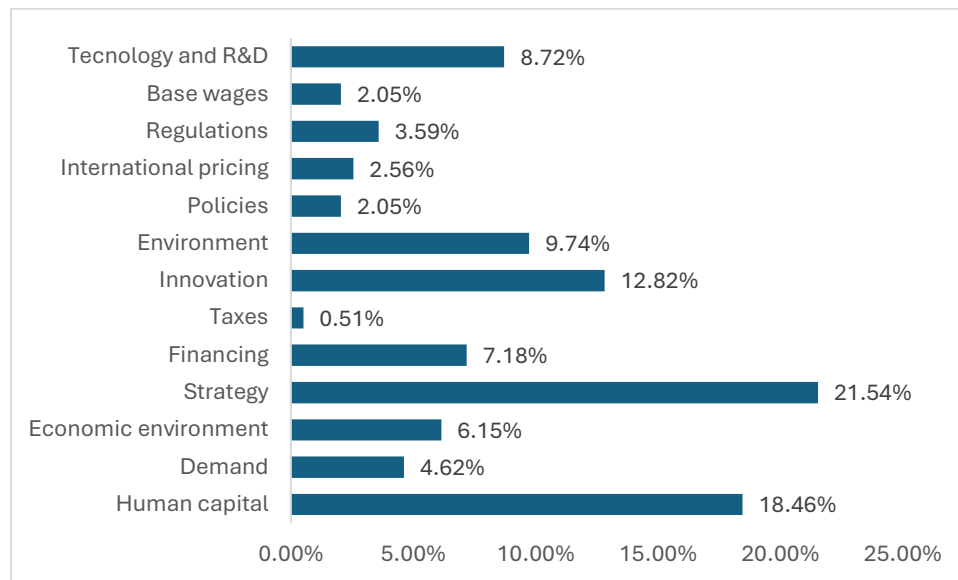


Source: own elaboration

This overview through the most recurrent factors shows that local SME entrepreneurs are aware of their ability to generate strategies that make their organizations more competitive in an environment that, although not the most favorable, allows, through proactivity, to develop ventures and achieve a level of formality that consolidates business success and sustainability with the support of cooperation platforms and networks available for their sector and for the region (Barrichello et al., 2020).

On the other hand, although the factors beyond the company's control had a lower level of recurrence, the interviewees pointed out that these events significantly affect the organizations and their relationship with the personnel, as happened during the COVID-19 health emergency, which in the words of an entrepreneur of the service sector, “was one of the most difficult moments, because our sector was one of the most vulnerable and hardest hit, we were practically without activity for about ten months. That meant laying off part of the personnel that was there at that time... but sustaining income, sustaining infrastructure, warehouses, etc., was a complicated issue”.

However, when analyzing the most frequent issues by individual, in Table 2, strategy, human capital and innovation stand out. These elements reflect the need for formal action plans, trained and committed work teams, and a long-term vision that takes advantage of the opportunities that arise (García et al., 2021).

Table 2*Recurrence of themes per individual*

Source: own elaboration

When talking about strategy, which is the roadmap to walk towards the achievement of the objectives set and compete in the market, crises can be a starting point for its formalization in small and medium enterprises that are forced to initiate changes to adapt to the environment through the redesign of processes (Araujo, 2021). “After the pandemic we have done several reengineering and we continue reinventing ourselves, and that has involved improving our operational processes, logistics, and everything has been based on understanding the needs of the customer, the market, and the environment itself, and we have had no choice but to adapt”.

In the same vein, a small cattle-raising company has managed, not without difficulty, to overcome a critical moment that put its continuity at risk, consolidating a strategy that emphasizes the work team and its contribution from its different positions: “it has been very difficult to start raising everything little by little, it is still not one hundred percent, but it is complicated to open doors again, to get resources, to get people's confidence back (...) to restructure, to plan, if necessary from the bottom again, to change everything, to modify, and to place people in the right positions”.

With respect to human capital management, the interviewees agree that this is one of the greatest challenges for the future: “the greatest challenge is that there are no personnel that is committed to a company... therefore, there are no commitments, now most of the young people want to meet a schedule, but they do not want commitments, so for us this is the heaviest thing”. Another interviewee

alludes to the generational difference as a cause of this clash of perspectives: “currently it is the worker, yes, the new generations do not respond as one used to (...) you cannot scold them because they leave, and if there are no workers there is no company, so I would like there to be a little more understanding between the generations”.

This situation, they point out, affects efficiency and productivity: “the most important challenge we face today is the training of human resources, having qualified human resources to take us to the next level of demand that the customer is already demanding”. And in this sense, it is necessary to deepen in the ways in which employees are trained or prepared, an aspect that many SMEs suffer from lacking formality (López et al., 2021): “there is that person who helps me with all the general administration, and is in charge, somehow, of taking care of all these aspects, of introducing the new prospects or people that are joining” (López et al., 2021).

To compensate for the absence of a systematization of protocols in this regard, SMEs place significant value on the leadership of the manager or owner (Sumba, 2022). In this sense, the relationship that they establish with their employees is vital for the achievement of objectives and labor welfare, and the leadership style influences it: “I think it is a very open leadership, very open, very listening, observing, and making decisions that benefit not only the personal part, but that achieve benefits for all of us who compose or are working”; another participant adds how this important component is usually learned informally: “my dad was also like that with his staff, he was nice, noble... well noble I don't know, but charismatic, right? He tried to have empathy with them in order to manage things well”.

In general, the entrepreneurs interviewed expressed their willingness to improve the working conditions of their personnel: “to give our employees better benefits (...) it is good for everyone, and now we are looking at giving them another benefit, which is life insurance. It is very beneficial for a worker to have life insurance, we have already had two deaths of young single people in accidents, and they left, if anything, the social security pension”. To achieve this, they are aware of the need to innovate in every sense to remain competitive in the market: “forming a company is definitely not easy, but to establish it in Ameca I think it has been a little more complex, but it has also been very satisfactory, because many of the services we offer have been innovation, and have been spearheaded in our municipality, and I think that is what has kept us in force, and that has kept the people or the client prefer us”.

In this sense, the main limitations to innovate and achieve the desired benefits for all those involved lie, from the perspective of those interviewed, in the environment established by the territory: “one

limitation has been the limited infrastructure that Ameca has to be able to develop projects of greater impact. The local economy (...) is up to expectations, but not enough to be able to pay for much of what the client demands”. Added to this are the financial difficulties to face investments in technology that encourage efficiency and competitiveness: “the main problems are related to capital. Implies investment and the need to acquire knowledge about this technology (...) everything generates costs, and it is what has been more complicated, but sooner or later it will have its benefit”.

Although the remaining factors, such as regulations, wages and local policies, were not the most frequently mentioned, they are also decisive for the future of companies and should be taken into account in possible strategies; others, such as the safety of the environment, also have a significant influence. However, observing what most captures the attention of employers is significant in order to find the most appropriate ways to integrate employee welfare into the core of the search for business competitiveness.

Finally, it is important to mention that the frequency in which respondents expressed their desire to be agents of change for the territory would correspond to 3% if included in the list of individual factors. This figure is not one of the highest, but it exceeds other relevant factors, which is significant in establishing that there is a willingness on the part of entrepreneurs to include this aspect in formal strategies that have an impact on the future vision and organizational culture of the companies. This opens the door for universities in peripheral territories to function as links between the business sector and employees, finding strategies to develop business competitiveness within the framework of employee welfare (Vera et al., 2020).

Conclusions

The answer to how SMEs can be agents of change for their region, in this case, a territory with signs of stagnation and few opportunities for its population, is found, as expressed by the interviewees, in the search for business competitiveness based on greater formalization, assertive management of human talent and constant innovation in processes, services and technology, with the aim of achieving economic growth that allows a generalized benefit in a systematic way. The main challenges to be solved are the limitations to financing or those related to the structural conditions of the territory and, not least, to the understanding that can be had with the workers.

This implies that, in order for companies to become agents of change that strive to provide not only a salary, but also wellbeing to their employees, it is necessary to have an environment that allows this scenario through an advantageous environment, in which there is the necessary human capital, an adequate economic structure and laws and incentives that favor competition, in addition to platforms

or research centers, such as universities, that work to find joint strategies with the private sector (Ek and Morales, 2020). This ideal scenario, however, is difficult to achieve in the short and medium term in various territories; therefore, it is necessary to find alternative strategies in this regard.

In this sense, although it may seem too much to ask that a small or medium-sized company that is trying to consolidate itself be integrated into simultaneous strategies to ensure the general welfare of the territory, even through its employees, it is a reality that there are territories in which SMEs employ the vast majority of the population, as is the case presented in this study and, therefore, it is important to address the ways in which the economic growth of organizations can be linked to the welfare of employees, which can be translated into benefits for their families and, in general, welfare networks can be generated.

The study uses a small sample to illustrate a dynamic that is repeated in the SMEs of the territory and other similar ones, as it coincides with what is described in the literature on the subject. However, it is necessary to overcome the limitations and make approximations from a quantitative perspective that increases the scale and puts exact and measurable figures. It will also be essential to consider the employees' point of view as the other side of what is expressed by the employers, in search of the understanding that will be vital for all those involved. Finally, it would be opportune to review the strategies that have been applied in the territory or elsewhere, identify their origin and analyze the results obtained and their benefits for the population and the companies.

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