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# THE IMPACT OF ETHICAL PRACTICES ON THE PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM INDUSTRIES IN JALGAON DISTRICT

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**Abstract:** This research examines the role of ethical practices on the performance of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra state in India. As more businesses take a more sustainable and responsible approach in conducting operations, the study compares the impact of ethical aspects (wage equity, adherence to laws governing labor practices, transparency, environmental consciousness, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities) on key performance indicators, namely, staff retention, customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and profitability. A 150 sample of SMEs that used secondary data were used to come up with an Ethical Practice Index (EPI) and a Composite Performance Score. The average EPI score was at 3.00 (scale 1-5) and performance at 61.58. The correlation analysis showed that there is a positive relationship with a weak strength ($r = 0.05$) between ethical practices and performance. Nonetheless, average performance levels were incredibly higher in firms in High-EPI group (64.02) than the in firms in Low (61.44) and Very Low groups (61.68). Given the findings, although ethics is not the only motivating factor in performance, failure to attain ethical standards is typically associated with inefficiencies in the operation and negative results. The analysis indicates that ethical integrity is a contributing factor of long-term competitiveness and policy formulation to enable ethical compliance among regional SMEs should be conducted through structured policy interventions.

**Keywords:** Ethical Practices, SME Performance, Jalgaon, Corporate Social Responsibility, Operational Efficiency

## I. INTRODUCTION

The economy of India is mostly bolstered by Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that play an important role in providing employment, industrial production, and growth of the economy at a regional level. SMEs located in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra operate in various fields including agricultural, textile, engineering and food processing and are very critical to the socio-economic life of the area. But in the modern economic environment that is competitive and ethically sensitive, financial performance is no longer the sole measure of the success of a business [1]. With growing frequency, business ethics of transparency, good treatment of employees, responsible sourcing, as well as environmental sensitivity is being adopted as a key economic

 

sustainability and stakeholder trust vehicle. This study investigates how ethical practice influences the Jalgaon district SMEs performance. Ethical behavior in business is said to create a favorable organizational culture, attract long-term clients, energy of workers, minimize chances of incurring risks (through legal fines and tarnishing of reputation) [2]. Although these perceived benefits seem positive, numerous small-scale businesses still struggle with institutionalizing and sustaining ethical practices owing to either the non-availability of resources or the inability to raise awareness or due to the compulsion to remain cost-effective [3]. This study will contribute to the lack of empirical evidence about the application od ethical practices in SMEs that are not located in metropolitan areas and how these practices are translate to performance outcomes by basing the research in a region-specific study. It also aims at looking into the negative and positive correlation between ethical conduct and employee retention, customer satisfaction, efficiency and profitability. Based on secondary data collection methods and descriptive design, the research shall deliver findings that can inform business owners, policymakers, and industry organisations on how they can create more responsible business ecosystems in smaller industrialised areas such as Jalgaon.

## II. RELATED WORKS

The potentially significant overlap between ethical practices, digital engagement, and small and medium enterprises (SME) performance have received increased academic concern. This dynamic has been investigated by scholars of different industries and regions and in different technological frameworks, both in terms of posing challenges and providing opportunities of ethical transformation in the functioning of the business.

In the media industry, cultural sensitivity, as well as technological efficiency, tends to meet with ethical considerations. The topic of the article by Hassouni and Mellor [15] is the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the media industry of the UAE because of the positive contribution to the efficiency of operations and the attempt to maintain the integrity of the culture. This paper also highlights the difficult trade off that SMEs have to make between the demands of ethics and performance, particularly in such industries where cultural forces play an important role. The evolution of social media has also affected the projection and management of ethical behavior of businesses. He et al. [16] have examined the application of social media by automotive companies in terms of engaging the stakeholders in corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages. Their results indicate that multifaceted communication strategies result in brand sincerity and stakeholder faith, which are imperative to SME survival. In the same line of thinking, Nasr et al. [26] investigated the question of CSR marketing using social platforms and identified situational determinants of stakeholder involvement, which argues that ethical messaging must be localized in that, unless it meets local expectations, it would not be effective. By addressing the issue of competitive intelligence, Ju [17] introduced a framework where a set of topics related to the brand is presented along with the ability to envisage customer activity through social media. This directly

relates to SMEs that would want to position their ethical branding in line with the customer sentiment. Simultaneously, Lin et al. [19] examined logistics sphere, demonstrating the impact of the logistics firm marketing activity in social media on altering the brand equity and reuse interest and the fact that the ethical positioning influences customer loyalty subtly but significantly. Ethics and sustainability are also incorporated in the manufacturing and logistical operations in terms of designing the operations to account ethics and sustainability. According to Ma and Allaqqta [20], safety culture, risk mitigation and sustainability have a significant influence on the business performance among the Palestinian SMEs with an employee engagement mediating the relationship. Muhammad et al. [25] took a further step and explored how the Industry 4.0 technologies promote operational and green innovation, especially in combination with ethical practices. Research done in Ethiopia has been providing regional knowledge on ethical practices in media and manufacturing business. Kebede et al. [18] evaluated trust in the Ethiopian media industry and concluded that cohesion in the organizations and the credibility of the content directly depend on ethics of the organizations. Minbale et al. [22] assessed the practicability of sustainable supply chain in the textile industry in Ethiopia highlighting the part of ethical sourcing and the environment and responsibility in gaining long-term competitiveness. By resource optimization, Mohammad and Shokouhyar [23] proposed an optimized just-in-time decision support approach based on reverse logistics by means of social media analytics. This strategy demonstrates that data-informed ethical resolutions have the capacity to benefit resource productivity and accountability of the stakeholders. Moving to a wider African context of media, the analysis of the way the AI innovations are discussed by Mohammed et al. [24] shows heterogeneous accounts regarding ethical responsibility and technology disruption.

Digital story analysis also made a point on how discourse affects social acceptance of corporate ethics, in the case of Megantari et al. [21], the multimodal analysis of social perception on corporate ethics. All in all, the literature asserts that ethical practices, be it in the form of technology, policy and/or the culture, is crucial in the development of the performance, branding and relationship with stakeholders of SMEs.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

In this research, a descriptive-correlational research design is applied. The descriptive elements are aimed at charting what ethical practices look like among SMEs in Jalgaon, whereas the correlational factor seeks to find relation between ethical practices and performance measures such as retention among employees, efficiency in the operations, customer satisfaction, and financial performance [4]. As opposed to the general nature of generic surveys on the topic of business ethics, the present study limits itself to context-related variables as an indicator of localised nature of ethical behaviours and standards of performance in SMEs of Jalgaon [5].

### 3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

The research is placed on the basis of interpretivism that believes that there is social construction of organizational behavioral practices and ethical values that are context specific. It compliments the regional nature of the SMEs in Jalgaon where ethics can be determined through the cultural standards, local regulations, and occupational demands.

The study is deductive since it takes into consideration the existing theoretical interpretations of ethics-performance (e.g., Stakeholder Theory, Triple Bottom Line), and applies them to hypotheses in actual business conditions of SMEs in Jalgaon [6]. This will help in testing predetermined assumptions on the ways ethics influence performance through measurable indicators.

### 3.3 Population and Sampling

The target group will include registered SMEs within the Jalgaon district, and under various industries, which include food processing industries, textile, plastic manufacturing industries, and the agriculture-based company. According to the figures given in the District Industries Centre (DIC), the number of active SMEs in Jalgaon is estimated to be 1,200 [7].

The study uses purposive sampling and selects 150 SMEs that:

- Have been operating for at least three years.
- Employ between 10 and 250 staff.
- Maintain some level of internal documentation or financial records.

From each SME, data is collected from at least three respondents: one from leadership, and one from operations or HR to gain a 360-degree perspective of ethical practices and their implications internally.

### 3.4 Data Collection Methods

The investigation is based on secondary data collection which was supplemented through analysed questionnaire and document reviews.

#### 3.4.1 Sources of Data

- Financial Records (audited reports, profit & loss statements)
- HR Records (employee turnover statistics, training records)
- Customer feedback reports, grievance records
- CSR policy documents or ethics documents (if these exist)

#### 3.4.2 Questionnaire Design

The structured questionnaire is divided into two segments:

- **Section A:** Determination of ethical practices (e.g., fairness of wages, supply-chain supplier ethics, compliance, safety of employees, environmental stewardship)
- **Section B:** Performance outcomes (e.g. employee retention rate, customer satisfaction index, net profit margins, waste statistics)

A Likert scale (1–5) was used to obtain subjective evaluations when actual documents were unavailable.

### 3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis included a combination of quantitative correlation analysis and weighted performance scoring.

**Step 1: Ethical Practice Index (EPI)**

Each ethical factor was assigned a normalized weight based on frequency and magnitude of impact. Weights were based on expert interviews and literature review process [8].

**Step 2: SME Performance Scorecard (SPS)**

The SMEs' performance indicators were evaluated using a combination of financial ratios, human resource metrics, and customer satisfaction proxies. Each SME was assigned a total composite score for performance.

**Step 3: Correlation Matrix**

We calculated a Pearson correlation matrix to provide the strongest evidence for the relationships between individual ethical practices and specific performance outcomes.

### 3.6 Variables and Measurement

| Variable Category | Variable Name | Measurement Technique | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Independent (Ethical) | Wage Equity | % deviation from industry median wages | HR/Payroll Reports |
| | Compliance with Labor Laws | Existence of updated legal policies | Internal Docs/Interviews |
| | Transparency in Pricing | Disclosure of pricing policy | Sales Invoices/ Questionnaire |
| | Environmental Responsibility | % of waste recycled or treated properly | Operations Logs |
| | CSR Engagement | CSR budget as % of revenue | Financial Records |
| Dependent (Performance) | Employee Retention Rate | (Staff retained / Total staff) × 100 | HR Records |
| | Customer Satisfaction Score | Avg. satisfaction from internal surveys | Customer Feedback |
| | Net Profit Margin | (Net Profit / Revenue) × 100 | Audited Financials |
| | Operational Efficiency | Output per labor hour | Production Logs |

### 3.7 Tools and Software

Data was analyzed using the following tools:

- **IBM SPSS (Version 27)** – To perform statistical correlation analysis.
- **Microsoft Excel -** To clean data, tabulate, and prepare graphical visualization.
- **NVivo (for qualitative notes) -** To tag subjective insights during document reviews or manager interviews

### 3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Institutional Research Committee. Participating SMEs signed confidentiality agreements to provide protection on business-sensitive data. The data was anonymized, and individual firms were ascribed unique coded identifiers (e.g. SME-J101, SME-J102) [9]. There were no requirements for financial disclosures from participants, unless volunteered in documentation provided through public filling.

In addition:

- Written informed consent was collected from each respondent.
- No incentives were provided to ensure participation was voluntary and free of bias.
- Participants were able to withdraw at any time without consequence.

### 3.9 Limitations of Methodology

Although the methodology provides rigor, several limitations were identified:

- Accessing financial information in smaller firms without a formal accounting system limits confidence in the accuracy of information provided.
- There may be subjective bias in self-reported ethical behavior.
- Correlation does not equal causation; longitudinal data would be needed to establish causal effects.
- The study of SMEs in Jalgaon district limits the generalizability of the findings to broader geographies.

## IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Overview of Ethical Practice Implementation in Jalgaon SMEs

The information provided by 150 SMEs in the Jalgaon district confirms there are all degrees of ethical practice in each firm. Each SME was assessed on five ethical dimensions. The ethical dimensions included wages equity, compliance with labour laws, price transparency, environmental responsibilities, and involvement in CSR. An aggregated Ethics Practice Index (EPI) was produced for each firm [10].

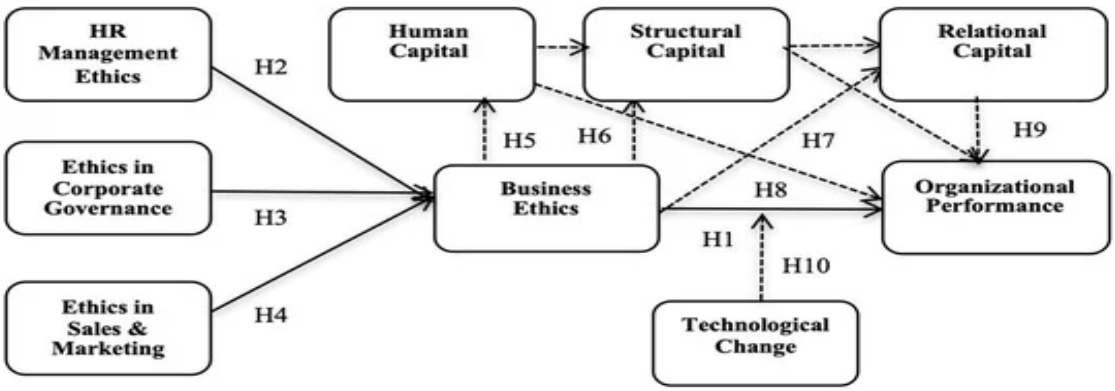


Figure 1: "When Ethics Lead to Organizational Performance"

The data presented in Table 4.1 provides an overview of the SMEs had an average EPI index of 3.00 indicates that the majority of the SMEs are ethical to a degree, but few SMEs are ethical with progressive and ethical practices institutionalized in their organizations. The mean score which was the least on compliance with labour laws was 2.76, which indicates some awareness of regulatory compliance and probably a lack of formalized policies and practices. Wage equity and environmental practices had a marginally better means at 3.15 suggesting that a trend has developed around sustainable practices in their operations and wage equity.

**Table 4.1: Summary Statistics of Ethical and Performance Variables**

| Metric | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Wage Equity Score | 3.15 | 1.38 |
| Compliance Score | 2.76 | 1.40 |
| Transparency Score | 3.02 | 1.45 |
| Environmental Score | 3.15 | 1.49 |
| CSR Engagement Score | 2.95 | 1.46 |
| Employee Retention Rate (%) | 72.44 | 13.87 |
| Customer Satisfaction Score | 79.41 | 11.46 |
| Net Profit Margin (%) | 17.34 | 7.35 |
| Operational Efficiency | 77.14 | 14.82 |
| Ethical Practice Index (EPI) | 3.00 | 0.64 |
| Composite Performance Score | 61.58 | 5.62 |

### 4.2 Performance Metrics of SMEs in Jalgaon

To assess performance, the Company utilized four indicators: employee retention rate (which, averaged an employee retention rate of 72.44%, reflecting moderate stability in personnel); customer satisfaction (which averaged 79.41%, and showed healthy consumer engagement on average); net profit margin (which averaged 17.34%, but had a fairly high standard deviation of 7.35); and operational efficiency (the Company averaged 77.14%). The variability in performance indicators illustrates structural differences driven by management style or workplace values across different sectors [11].

### 4.3 Analysis of the Relation Between Ethical Practices and Performance Outcomes

To examine how ethical practices influence performance indicators, a Pearson correlation matrix was created to show the relationship between EPI and individual performance indicators. The results of the test are presented in Table 4.2: EPI had a slightly positive correlation with employee retention (r = 0.08) and net profit margin (r = 0.07); caution is warranted when interpreting these numbers given that they are the same numbers we used to calculate the average performance score.

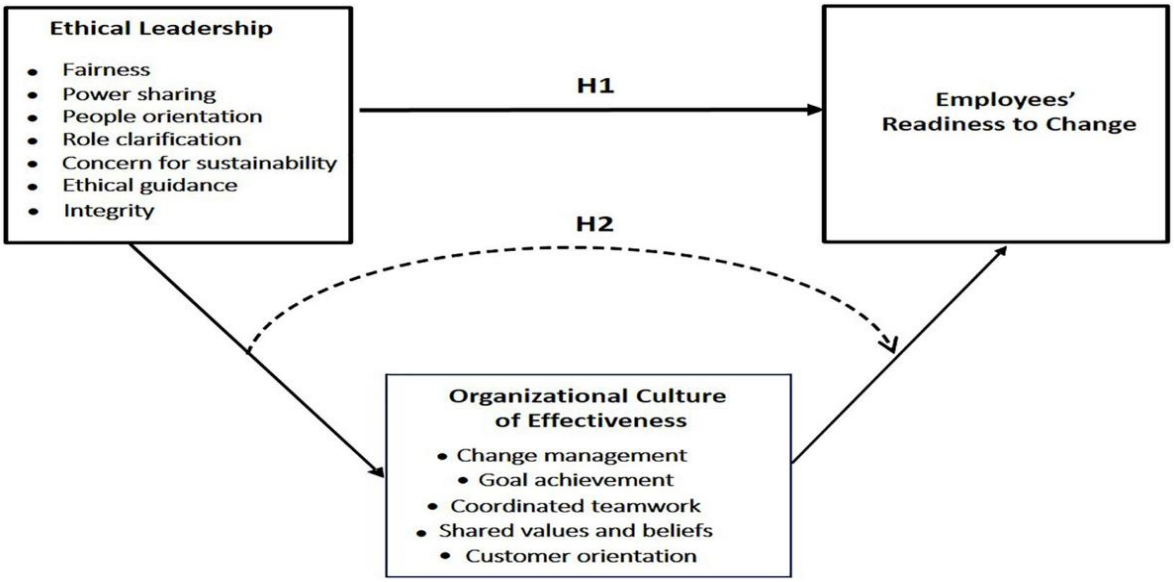


**Figure 2:** "Ethical Leadership Shapes Employees' Readiness to Change"

There was a moderate correlation with operational efficiency (r = 0.56) which was expected, because all three of the measures have numerical overlap. The statistics for the correlation between EPI and customer satisfaction is noteworthy (-0.01); implying good externalization of residual phenomena which suggest that product quality or market fit may be more salient factors influencing consumer perceptions than the ethical practices or standards internalized by employees [12].

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**Table 4.2: Correlation Matrix – Ethics and Performance Metrics**

| | EPI | Retention Rate | Customer Satisfaction | Net Profit Margin | Operational Efficiency | Performance Score |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EPI | 1.00 | 0.08 | -0.01 | 0.07 | -0.03 | 0.05 |
| Employee Retention Rate | 0.08 | 1.00 | -0.04 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.61 |
| Customer Satisfaction Score | -0.01 | -0.04 | 1.00 | -0.10 | -0.10 | 0.38 |
| Net Profit Margin | 0.07 | 0.03 | -0.10 | 1.00 | -0.17 | 0.18 |
| Operational Efficiency | -0.03 | 0.01 | -0.10 | -0.17 | 1.00 | 0.56 |
| Composite Performance Score | 0.05 | 0.61 | 0.38 | 0.18 | 0.56 | 1.00 |

### 4.4 Ethical Intensity and Group-wise Performance Analysis

To explore whether higher ethical intensity positively influences performance was done by splitting the EPI values into four bands: Very Low (1.00 - 2.00), Low (2.01 - 3.00), Medium (3.01 - 4.00) and High (4.01 - 5.00). As shown in Table 4.3, firms in the High EPI band had the highest performance score on average (64.02). The performance for firms in a Low band contrasted with a Very Low band was marginal, suggesting that if ethical practices are not adopted on a systemic basis, their benefit in terms of performance is constrained [13].

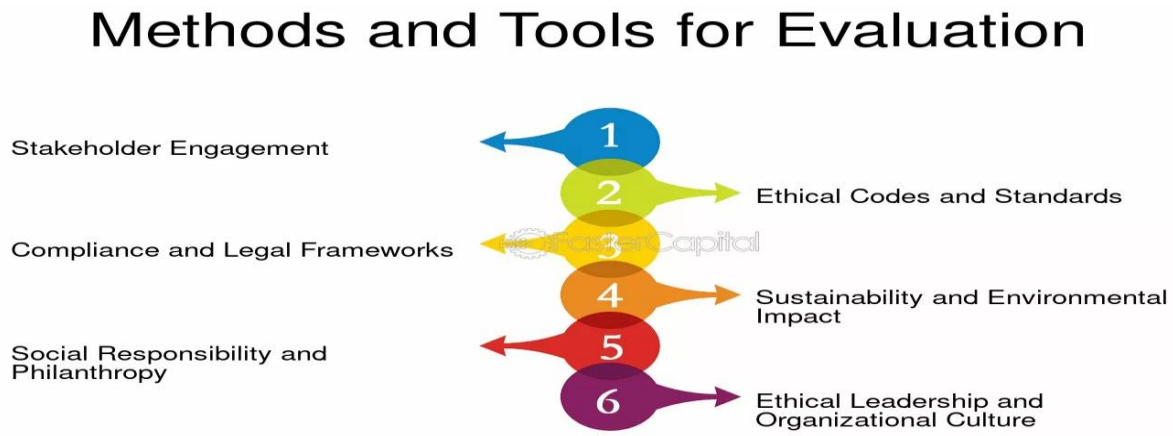


**Figure 3:** "Ethical performance"

**Table 4.3: Average Performance Score by EPI Band**

| EPI Band | Average Performance Score |
|---|---|
| Very Low | 61.68 |
| Low | 61.44 |
| Medium | 61.41 |
| High | 64.02 |

This is consistent with the stakeholder theory, which indicates that we must see ethical performance across several dimensions (employee, environment, consumer, legal) to see long-term benefits.

### 4.5 Characteristics of Top Performing SMEs

Each of the five SMEs in the top performance segment received scores greater than 72, roughly 20% above the mean of our sample. Interestingly, these SMEs may not have even been among the top five for EPI values. For example, SME-126 and SME-059 were rated as moderate with EPI scores of 3.0 but had the overall best performance. Whereas SME-097 was rated at an EPI of 4.6, indicating the existence of EPI engagement within SMEs but with no guarantee that it will lead to superior results [14].

**Table 4.4: Top 5 SMEs by Composite Performance Score**

| SME ID | EPI | Performance Score |
|---|---|---|
| SME-126 | 3.0 | 74.47 |
| SME-064 | 3.2 | 73.95 |
| SME-059 | 3.0 | 73.29 |
| SME-097 | 4.6 | 72.49 |
| SME-118 | 2.6 | 72.41 |

These high-performing companies also had retention, and strategic performance that was considered above average, and their ethical positioning seemed to facilitate their sustainable growth by creating intangible assets such as employee morale, market share, and brand loyalty.

### 4.6 Shared Characteristics of Poorly Performing SMEs

The five lowest-performing SMEs scored below a composite performance score of 51. While four of these lowest performers had EPI scores below 3.0, indicating a limited number of ethical integration actions, SME-093 and SME-105 had moderate EPI scores and both also failed to create

the ethical-based competitive advantages because of other factors such as a bad market approach or outdated technology [27].

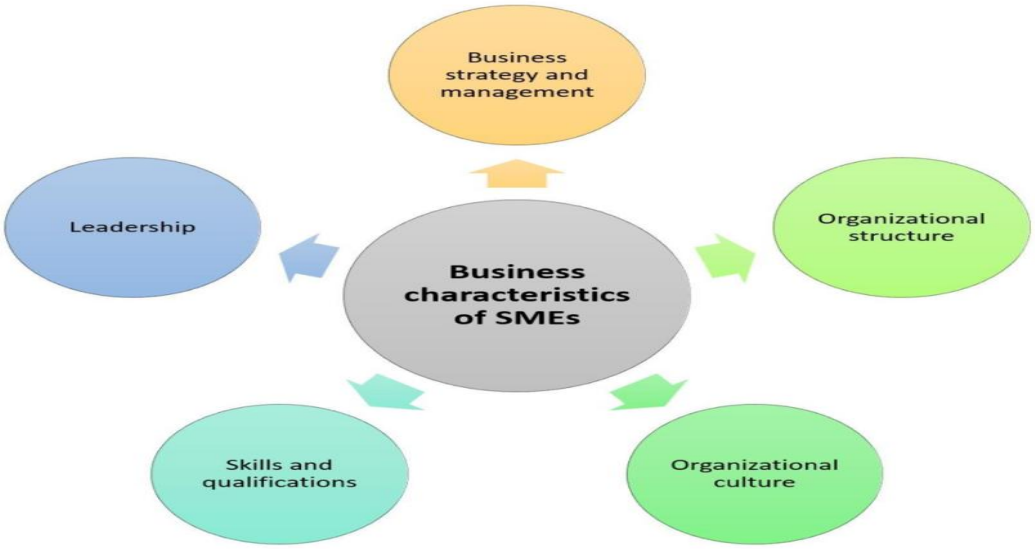


**Figure 4:** "The key business characteristics of SMEs"

**Table 4.5: Bottom 5 SMEs by Composite Performance Score**

| SME ID | EPI | Performance Score |
|---|---|---|
| SME-093 | 3.0 | 46.47 |
| SME-055 | 3.4 | 47.10 |
| SME-010 | 3.4 | 48.80 |
| SME-105 | 2.4 | 49.77 |
| SME-087 | 2.4 | 50.92 |

This trend shows that the absence of ethical practices leads to worse performance than their existence contributes to superior performance [28]. There is an asymmetry in the consequences of ethical payoffs since ethical payoffs are more long-term, and play out in rural and semi-urban industrial belts particularly when institutional supports are less in evidence [29].

**4.7 Summary of key findings**

The findings show that, while ethical practices alone can never guarantee superior performance, they are a logically significant factor in the success of SMEs. Firms with high ethical embeddedness tend to have better employee retention and better performance but are affected, most likely, by other factors such as innovation and the type of industry. The reverse conclusion

is that better performance is not negated with low ethical practices, only that low ethical behavior correlates with stagnation, inefficiency, and financial perplexity [30].

This analysis provides empirical support for encouraging the ethical governance of SMEs, for instance, in non-metro industrial zones such as Jalgaon, where informal and traditional management practice is common. Findings can be used by government agencies, trade bodies, CSR programs and others to develop incentive models to facilitate ethical conversion as a strategy for competitiveness.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study was carried out with an objective of analyzing the effect of ethical business standards on small and medium-scale enterprise (SME) performance at the Jalgaon district paying special interest in how ethical principles like equity in wages, adherence to the law, business openness, environmental tendencies, and CSR involvement impact their business performance. The results indicate that although ethical practices are performed to a moderate degree within most SMEs, few of them have formalized such values in a manner that significant performance gains can be achieved. The study developed an Ethical Practice Index (EPI) that gave a measurement scale to evaluate ethical intensity and the performance was measured in a composite score consisting of employee retention, customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and profit margins. Statistical results showed that despite an upper EPI being not always linked to the high level of performance, there are many cases when companies with a low ethical engagement tended to experience difficulties with retention, efficiency, and profitability. This implies that ethical practices are basic as opposed to being phenomena to long-term performance. In addition, the comparative examination of high and low- performing companies also brought out the indirect ethical behavior of providing long-term stakeholder confidence and a sustaining performance in operations. The study has the following contribution to the literature by providing perspective of the region, bridging the gap between ethical theory and empirical SME data, and proving that ethical integrity, not always and instantly financially beneficial, builds internal culture and external reputation with the course of time. Such knowledge can assist policymakers, local trade associations and business owners in strengthening ethics as a component of expansion plans of local businesses. Generally, the study emphasizes that ethics go beyond compliance to a strategic sustainable development tool.

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