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SR. NO .	PARTICULAR	PAGE NO.	DOI NUMBER
1.	TRANSFORMING WORK FORCE PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH STRATEGIC TALENT MANAGEMENT IN THE CEMENT INDUSTRY Mukesh Kushwaha, Dr. Sarvesh Singh	1-15	10.5958/2278-4853.2026.00034.0

TRANSFORMING WORK FORCE PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH STRATEGIC TALENT MANAGEMENT IN THE CEMENT INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Cement manufacturing remains one of the more labour- and capital-heavy segments of the Indian infrastructure economy, and it is currently caught between two pressures that do not always pull in the same direction: plants are becoming more automated and data-driven, while the people who run them are, in many cases, still being managed with fairly traditional HR practices. This paper looks at how strategic talent management - taken here to include recruitment and workforce planning, learning and development, performance management, retention and succession planning - relates to workforce productivity in this sector. Because the paper is built entirely on secondary sources (peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and statistics from bodies such as IBEF, Statista and the Economic Survey), it does not claim to test new hypotheses; rather, it tries to pull together evidence that is otherwise scattered across different countries and journals into a single, cement-specific picture. The material reviewed suggests that talent development and retention practices are fairly consistently associated with better job performance and plant efficiency, that digital HR tools tend to help mainly by improving engagement rather than by replacing labour outright, and that talent shortages are already widespread - about 80% of surveyed cement firms report some form of talent gap, with roughly 17% saying it is affecting operations directly. A simple conceptual framework is proposed at the end, linking five talent practices to productivity through employee engagement and skill enhancement, along with some practical implications for managers and policymakers.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Talent Management, Workforce Productivity, Cement Industry, Employee Retention, Skill Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cement Industry is one of those industries that rarely gets much public attention, yet almost nothing in modern infrastructure gets built without it. India produced an estimated 453 million tones of cement in FY2025, against an installed capacity nearing 690 million tones, which keeps it in second place globally after China (Statista, 2025; CemNet, 2026). The sector is expected to keep growing at roughly 5% a year through 2030, by which point capacity could touch 850 million tones (IBEF, 2026). None of this growth, though, is happening in a vacuum - it is unfolding alongside a fairly significant change in what "working in a cement plant" actually means day to day.

Kilns, quality control, logistics and maintenance are all becoming more automated and more dependent on digital monitoring systems. Where a plant operator's job once revolved mostly around physical checks and manual adjustments, it increasingly involves reading dashboards, flagging anomalies flagged by predictive-maintenance software, and making judgment calls that used to sit with a supervisor a level or two above (SAP Community, 2017). At the same time, and perhaps not entirely coincidentally, industry surveys are reporting fairly widespread talent shortages - a large share of cement companies say they are struggling to find or keep people with the right skills, particularly in technical and leadership roles (Beaumont Bailey, 2025).

This is really the starting point for this paper: strategic talent management - broadly, the deliberate effort an organisation makes to attract, develop, deploy and hold on to the employees who matter most to its performance - looks like it should matter a great deal in a sector going through this kind of transition. The trouble is that most of the established talent-management literature was written with services, banking, IT or, at best, construction in mind (Sopiah, Kurniawan, Nora & Narmaditya, 2020; Shikweni, Schurink & Van Wyk, 2019); cement-specific research is comparatively thin on the ground and scattered across a handful of countries. This paper tries to bring some of that scattered evidence together and, from it, sketch out a reasonably coherent account of how talent practices connect to productivity outcomes in cement manufacturing specifically.

There is also a fairly practical reason why this question matters right now. Consolidation in the Indian cement industry has picked up pace in recent years - the top ten players alone have added around 140 million tones of capacity through acquisitions over the last five years, worth an estimated Rs. 89,000 crore (IBEF, 2026). Bringing together plants that previously ran under different management styles, pay structures and safety cultures is, in itself, a talent-management problem, quite apart from the day-to-day question of running any single plant efficiently. So the issue explored here is not purely academic; it sits fairly close to decisions that HR and plant managers in this industry are making already.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Talent Management: What the Term Actually Covers

"Talent management" gets used loosely enough in practice that it is worth being clear about what is meant by it here. Following fairly standard usage, it is treated as covering the connected set of HR activities - acquisition, development, deployment, performance management and retention - through which an organisation tries to make sure it has the right people, with the right capabilities, in the right roles, more or less when it needs them. Abiwu and Martins (2022) make the case that talent development in particular can act as a source of competitive advantage that is

genuinely hard for rivals to copy, especially in industries where the relevant technical expertise takes years to build and is expensive to replace on short notice. Setyawan and Nelson (2020), writing about the construction sector - which shares a good deal with cement in terms of being asset-heavy and technically demanding - report broadly similar findings: firms with more structured talent strategies tend to hold on to their skilled staff for longer, presumably because the cost of losing and replacing them is that much higher than in, say, a typical services business.

2.2 What the Cement-Specific Studies Actually Show

The evidence that speaks directly to cement manufacturing is not large, but it has grown noticeably over the last two or three years. A study of the Jordanian cement industry, for instance, found that electronic HR systems (E-HRM) were associated with meaningfully greater workforce agility, and that this effect ran mainly through employee engagement - in other words, the technology itself was not doing the work so much as the engagement it helped produce - with the strength of the effect also depending on how much digital innovation the firm had otherwise adopted (Alsakameh, Ali & Ali, 2024). A separate study using structural equation modelling on 188 cement-industry employees found that talent development, talent retention and a democratic leadership style each had a significant positive effect on job performance and satisfaction; interestingly, transformational leadership did not show the same effect, and job satisfaction turned out not to mediate the talent-performance relationship at all, which suggests these practices may be acting on performance fairly directly rather than through morale as such (Journal of Management: Small and Medium Enterprises, 2025).

A related piece of work looking at the Chandrapur cement cluster found that structured, properly measured training programmes led to real gains in both individual skill levels and plant-level efficiency - nothing especially surprising, perhaps, but useful confirmation that training investment does translate into something measurable on the shop floor (International Journal of Environmental Sciences, 2025). Trade commentary from the International Cement Review makes a related point in less formal terms: as plants digitise, mobile-enabled learning tools are increasingly being used to turn what used to be fairly manual, transaction-type jobs into something closer to knowledge work, where the employee is expected to interpret data and act on exceptions rather than just follow a fixed routine (SAP Community, 2017).

2.3 The Scale of the Talent Problem

Perhaps the most striking single data point in this whole area comes from a 2025 industry report based on interviews with more than 150 senior cement industry leaders: 80% of the organisations surveyed said they were already experiencing talent gaps, and 17% said these gaps were directly limiting what the plant could actually produce (Beaumont Bailey, 2025). The same report flags succession planning and leadership pipelines as particular weak points, along with a more general concern that cement, as an industry, is not seen by younger workers as an especially attractive place to build a career. This last point echoes older observations that heavy industries such as construction and cement tend to lag behind services in how developed their talent-management systems are (Shikweni, Schurink & Van Wyk, 2019).

2.4 Wider Evidence on HR Practices and Productivity

Stepping outside the cement literature specifically, there is a fairly long-standing body of work in strategic HRM connecting HR practices to firm-level performance more generally. Huselid's (1995) widely cited study of over 900 US firms found that so-called high-performance work

practices were associated with lower turnover and higher productivity and financial performance - a finding later supported, with some caveats, by Combs, Liu, Hall and Ketchen's (2006) meta-analysis. In a manufacturing setting closer to the one discussed here, Ichniowski, Shaw and Prennushi (1997) studied steel finishing lines in the United States and found that coordinated HR systems - not individual practices in isolation - had a substantially larger effect on productivity than any single intervention would suggest on its own. This is a point worth keeping in mind: it is quite possible that no single talent practice discussed in this paper matters as much on its own as the combination of several working together does.

2.5 Training, Retention and Productivity in Indian Manufacturing More Broadly

A number of India-focused studies, while not specific to cement, are relevant here because they cover much the same kind of physically demanding, plant-based work environment. Rohan and Madhumita (2012) found that training practices were reasonably strong predictors of perceived employee performance in both service and manufacturing organisations in India, though the effect size differed between the two. More recent work looking specifically at manufacturing firms has similarly found that structured, ongoing training - as opposed to one-off induction sessions - correlates with better job performance and, indirectly, with lower attrition (Sundararajan & Mohammed, 2026; Nair & Menon, 2019). On the retention side, a case study of Indian manufacturing organisations pointed to salary, supervisor relationships and growth opportunities as recurring drivers of attrition (VSRD International Journal of Business and Management Research, 2016), a pattern broadly consistent with what a separate empirical study on the same theme reported when it examined factors leading to employee retention across manufacturing firms in India (Empirical Study on Factors Leading to Employee Retention, 2020).

2.6 Automation and the Changing Skill Profile of Plant Work

It is worth returning, briefly, to a theme touched on in the introduction: the type of skill that cement plants now need is shifting, not just the quantity of skilled people required. As kiln operations, quality control and logistics become more automated, workers increasingly need to interpret dashboards and respond to system-flagged exceptions rather than simply carry out fixed manual tasks (SAP Community, 2017). This raises the skill bar for entry-level and mid-level roles at more or less the same time, which means talent strategy has to do two things simultaneously - bring in people who are already comfortable with digital tools, and reskill an existing workforce that, in many plants, has been doing the job the old way for a long time. The Beaumont Bailey (2025) report backs this up in a general sense, noting that the roles most at risk of shortage tend to be technical and digitally-oriented positions rather than the traditional manual ones.

2.7 Where the Research Gap Lies

Put together, the literature reviewed above does support a link between talent management practices and workforce outcomes, but a few gaps stand out. Cement-specific research is thin compared with sectors like banking, IT or even construction. What does exist is spread across quite different countries - Jordan, Indonesia, South Africa, India - with little attempt to bring the pieces into one framework specific to cement. And within the Indian context specifically, most of the retention and training literature is manufacturing-wide rather than cement-specific, so its applicability to cement plants has to be inferred rather than confirmed directly. This paper is an

attempt to close that gap, at least partially, by pulling the available secondary evidence into a single framework.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To examine, using secondary data, the current state of workforce and talent-related challenges facing the cement industry.

- To review existing literature on strategic talent management practices - acquisition, development, performance management, retention and succession planning - as they apply to capital-intensive manufacturing settings.
- To analyse how specific talent management practices relate to workforce productivity outcomes in the cement industry, drawing on both cement-specific and broader manufacturing evidence.
- To propose a conceptual framework connecting strategic talent management to workforce productivity through employee engagement and skill enhancement.
- To draw out managerial and policy implications relevant to cement organisations trying to strengthen productivity through their talent strategy.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive, qualitative study based entirely on secondary data. No survey, interview or experiment was conducted for this paper; every figure and finding reported below is drawn from, and attributed to, a previously published source.

4.1 Sources Used

Four broad categories of secondary sources were drawn on: peer-reviewed journal articles on talent management and workforce outcomes, both cement-specific and from adjacent manufacturing settings; industry and consulting reports, most notably the Beaumont Bailey (2025) Cement Industry Talent Crisis report; national statistics from sources such as India's Economic Survey, IBEF and Statista; and trade publications, including the International Cement Review.

4.2 How Sources Were Identified

Sources were located through structured keyword searches combining terms such as "talent management", "workforce productivity", "cement industry", "employee retention" and "training and development". Priority was given to material published between 2017 and 2026, on the reasoning that the industry has changed enough in that period - mainly through digitisation - that older evidence risks being somewhat dated; foundational conceptual papers in HRM were, however, included regardless of when they were published, since the underlying theory has not really been superseded.

4.3 Method of Analysis

The material collected was analysed through thematic synthesis: findings from separate, independent studies were grouped under recurring themes - recruitment and skill-matching, digital learning, retention, succession planning - to see where the evidence converged and where it did not. Numerical figures reported in the source material, such as production volumes or the percentage of firms reporting talent gaps, were tabulated and presented visually to make them

easier to follow, but no new statistical testing was carried out; this remains consistent with the secondary, non-empirical scope of the paper.

4.4 Why a Secondary-Data Approach

A secondary-data design was chosen mainly for practical reasons. It allows the paper to draw on evidence from several countries - India, Jordan, Indonesia, South Africa - which would be very difficult to replicate through a single primary survey within the scope of one paper. It also avoids duplicating work that is already done well elsewhere: macro-level statistics on production, capacity and employment are collected at scale by specialised bodies such as IBEF and Statista, and there is little value in trying to re-collect that kind of data independently.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Industry Scale and Context

India's cement production climbed from around 337 million tonnes in FY2019 to an estimated 453 million tonnes in FY2025 - a fairly steady recovery and expansion, driven largely by infrastructure-led demand (Statista, 2025; CemNet, 2026). Figure 1 shows this trend, compiled from Statista, IBEF and Economic Survey data.

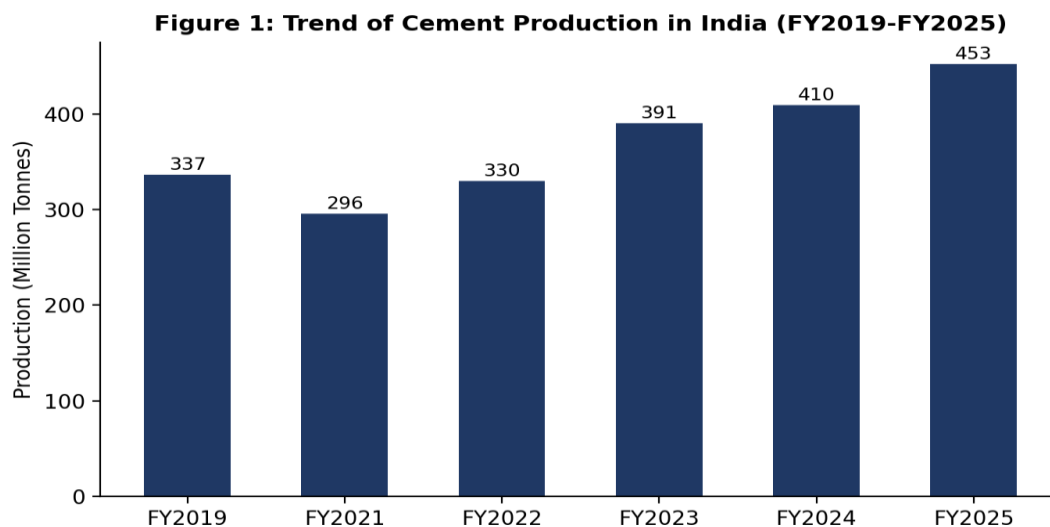


Figure 1. Trend of cement production in India, FY2019-FY2025 (compiled from Statista, 2025; IBEF, 2026; CemNet, 2026).

The sector today comprises roughly 160 large integrated plants, about 130 grinding units and 62 mini cement plants, and directly employs more than a million people, with Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh together accounting for a sizeable share of national output and employment (India Data Map, 2025-26; CemNet, 2026). Given a workforce of this size, even fairly small improvements in talent practices, applied consistently across plants, could plausibly add up to a meaningful aggregate productivity effect - though this paper stops short of quantifying that effect itself, since doing so would require primary data beyond its scope.

Demand growth is also being pulled along by specific infrastructure projects. The Mumbai-Ahmedabad Bullet Train corridor, for instance, is reported to consume around 20,000 cubic metres of cement a day and to be generating a substantial amount of additional employment

along the way (IBEF, 2026). Projects of this kind illustrate, in a fairly concrete way, how demand-side growth in this sector converts fairly directly into a need for more - and more skilled - workers, which brings the talent-gap question back into focus rather quickly.

5.2 Talent Gaps as Reported by Industry Leaders

As noted earlier, the Beaumont Bailey (2025) survey of over 150 senior cement industry leaders found that 80% of organisations were already dealing with some form of talent gap, and 17% said this gap was directly affecting their operational capacity. Figure 2 sets this out visually.

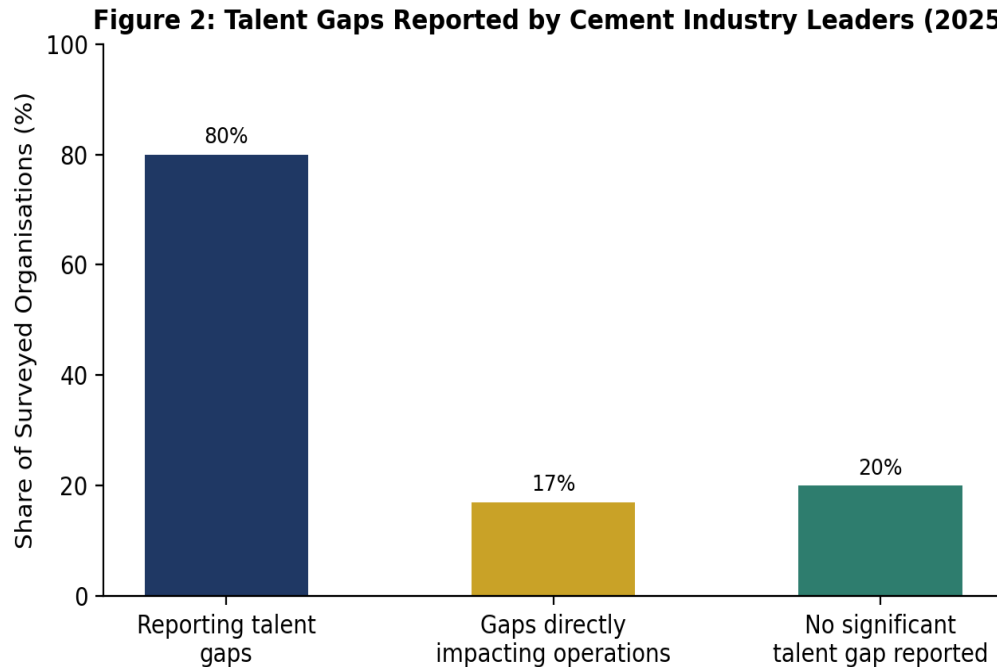


Figure 2. Talent gaps reported by cement industry leaders (Beaumont Bailey, 2025).

5.3 What the Literature Says, Organised by Theme

Table 1 summarises the main cement-specific studies reviewed in Section 2, organised by author, focus area and principal finding.

Author(s) & Year	Focus Area	Key Finding
Abiwu & Martins (2022)	Talent development & competitiveness	Talent development functions as a source of sustainable competitive advantage in resource-intensive industries.
Setyawan & Nelson (2020)	Talent management in construction/heavy industry	Structured talent strategies are linked with stronger retention in technically demanding, capital-intensive sectors.
Alsakarneh, Ali & Ali (2024)	E-HRM and workforce agility, cement industry (Jordan)	Electronic HRM improves workforce agility; the relationship is mediated by employee engagement and moderated by digital innovation.
Journal of Management: SMEs (2025)	Talent development, retention & leadership on job performance (cement industry)	Talent development, talent retention and democratic leadership raise job performance; job satisfaction did not mediate this relationship.
International Journal of Environmental Sciences (2025)	Training programmes and organisational efficiency (Chandrapur cement cluster)	Structured training raises both individual skill levels and plant-level efficiency.
Beaumont Bailey (2025)	Industry-wide talent crisis report	80% of surveyed cement organisations report talent gaps; 17% report a direct effect on operations.
Shikweni, Schurink & Van Wyk (2019)	Talent management in construction (South Africa)	Talent management practices remain comparatively underdeveloped in traditional heavy industries.

Table 1. Summary of reviewed literature on talent management in the cement and related heavy industries.

Table 2 goes a step further and maps specific talent management practices identified in the literature to the productivity mechanism through which each is reported to operate.

Talent Practice	Management	Productivity Mechanism	Illustrative Evidence	Secondary
Skill-based recruitment & workforce planning		Reduces skill-task mismatch on kiln, quality and maintenance lines	Beaumont Bailey (2025)	
Continuous / mobile-enabled learning		Converts manual operators into data-literate plant staff	SAP Community / International Cement Review (2017)	
Digital HR (E-HRM) systems		Improves workforce agility and responsiveness to demand shifts	Alsakarneh, Ali & Ali (2024)	
Structured succession planning		Reduces disruption caused by attrition of senior technical staff	Beaumont Bailey (2025)	
Retention-linked engagement programmes		Lowers attrition-driven productivity loss and re-training cost	Journal of Management: SMEs (2025)	

Table 2. Mapping of strategic talent management practices to workforce productivity mechanisms in the cement industry.

5.4 A Conceptual Framework

Bringing the themes above together, Figure 3 sets out a conceptual framework linking five talent management practices - acquisition, learning and development, performance management, retention and succession planning - to workforce productivity, with employee engagement and skill enhancement acting as the mechanism in between.

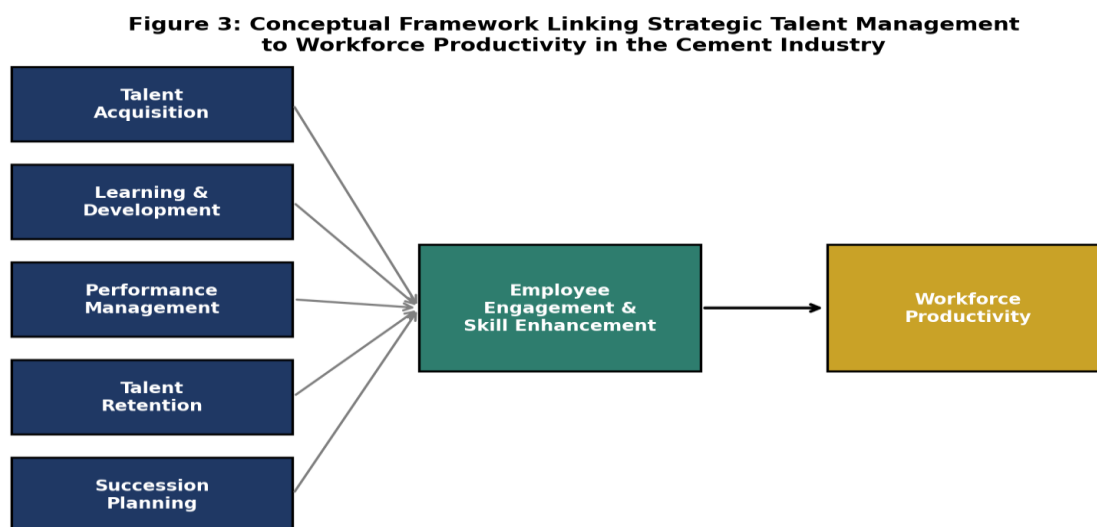


Figure 3. Conceptual framework linking strategic talent management to workforce productivity in the cement industry (author's synthesis based on reviewed literature).

This framework fits reasonably well with the pattern running through the studies reviewed: talent development and retention appear to relate fairly directly to performance outcomes (Journal of Management: SMEs, 2025), while digital HR practices seem to work mainly by strengthening engagement and agility rather than by affecting productivity on their own (Alsakarneh, Ali & Ali, 2024).

6. DISCUSSION

Taking a step back, the evidence gathered here points to at least three mechanisms through which strategic talent management appears to influence productivity in cement manufacturing. The first is fairly straightforward: better skill-matching at the recruitment stage, backed by ongoing technical training, reduces the risk created by plants becoming more automated and data-dependent (SAP Community, 2017; International Journal of Environmental Sciences, 2025). The second is a little less obvious - digital HR systems seem to help mainly by making employees more engaged, rather than by substituting for labour directly, which suggests that simply installing new HR software will not do much on its own unless it is paired with genuine change management (Alsakarneh, Ali & Ali, 2024). The third mechanism concerns retention and succession: cement plants depend heavily on tacit, plant-specific knowledge that walks out the door when an experienced employee leaves, and this is precisely the kind of loss that is costly and slow to replace - a concern the Beaumont Bailey (2025) figures make hard to ignore, given that four in five surveyed firms already report some talent gap.

One finding worth dwelling on a little longer is the Journal of Management: SMEs (2025) result that job satisfaction did not mediate the relationship between talent practices and job performance. That is somewhat counter to what a lot of HR literature would predict, and it is worth being cautious about over-interpreting a single study. But if it holds up, it would suggest that in cement - a physically demanding, safety-critical work environment - direct investment in skill development and retention may matter more for performance than general morale-boosting initiatives. Practically, this could mean HR budgets are better spent on tangible training and retention programmes than on broader engagement campaigns that are not tied to specific skills or career progression.

The scale of the numbers involved is also worth pausing on. With production running above 450 million tonnes a year and direct employment above a million in India alone (Statista, 2025; India Data Map, 2025-26), even a fairly modest improvement in talent practices, if applied consistently, could add up to something significant in aggregate - though again, this paper is not in a position to put an exact figure on that, given its secondary-data scope.

A further point that came up while reviewing the literature, though it does not appear in the cement-specific studies directly, concerns consolidation. The top ten Indian cement players have together acquired around 140 million tonnes of capacity over the last five years (IBEF, 2026), and each of those deals brings together workforces with different HR systems, pay structures and plant cultures. Talent management, in that context, is not just about steady-state productivity but also about how smoothly newly acquired capacity gets absorbed into a functioning, productive workforce - a dimension that the existing cement literature has not really addressed yet, and one that could reasonably extend the framework proposed in this paper.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to bring together secondary evidence - academic literature, industry reports and national statistics - on how strategic talent management relates to workforce productivity in the cement industry. What emerges, reasonably consistently across the sources reviewed, is that talent development, retention and digitally-enabled HR practices are associated with better job performance, greater workforce agility and higher organisational efficiency, even as the industry simultaneously deals with a talent shortage that is already fairly widespread and well documented. The conceptual framework proposed here - five talent practices feeding into productivity through engagement and skill enhancement - is offered as a reasonably grounded starting point for further work in a sector that is changing faster than its HR literature has, so far, managed to keep up with.

8. IMPLICATIONS

8.1 For Managers

- Cement companies would likely benefit from prioritising structured, continuous technical training over one-off induction programmes, particularly to help convert manual operators into staff comfortable working with automated, data-driven systems.
- Investment in digital HR systems should probably be paired with deliberate engagement efforts, since the evidence suggests the productivity benefit of digitalisation runs mainly through engagement rather than through the technology itself.
- Succession planning for technical and leadership roles deserves to be treated as a core risk-management function rather than an occasional HR exercise, given how many firms already report operationally significant talent gaps.

8.2 For Policy

- Given cement's role in infrastructure delivery and its position as a major direct employer, sector-specific skilling initiatives - aligned with existing programmes such as Skill India - could usefully be extended to cover the specific technical and digital competencies modern cement plants now require.
- Industry associations could support standardised, portable technical certifications, which would make it easier for workers to move between plants and regions without organisations having to re-train them from scratch each time.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Being a secondary-data study, this paper is limited by the scope and quality of the sources it draws on; it does not generate new primary evidence, and it cannot establish causality beyond what the original studies themselves claim. The cement-specific literature reviewed is also geographically scattered - India, Jordan, Indonesia, South Africa - which limits how confidently the findings can be generalised across different regulatory and cultural contexts. Some of the industry statistics used, particularly production and employment figures, are also subject to periodic revision by the reporting agencies, so readers should treat them as reasonably current estimates rather than fixed values.

Future work would do well to test the framework proposed here using primary, cement-specific data - plant-level productivity records or employee surveys, for instance - particularly to check

whether employee engagement and skill enhancement really do mediate the relationship in the way the framework suggests. Comparative studies across countries within the cement sector, and longitudinal research tracking how specific digital HR interventions affect productivity over time, would also help build a more solid evidence base in what remains a comparatively under-researched industry.

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