Job Specialization as a Driver of Employee Productivity: Evidence from Potong Ayam Abah MSME, Medan

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Abstract: This study explores how job specialization contributes to more structured work activities and improved productivity in a micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) operating in poultry processing, "Potong Ayam Abah," located in Medan, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving the owner and eight employees who directly handle production and customer service. The findings show that clear task partitioning strengthens role clarity, reduces process delays, stabilizes service flow, and supports quality consistency. However, specialization may also increase dependency on key workers and raise bottleneck risks when absences occur. Therefore, limited cross-training and task rotation are recommended as a flexibility mechanism without eliminating core expertise. The study contributes practical guidance for MSME seeking efficiency while maintaining operational resilience.

Keywords: Employee Activity, Job Specialization, MSME, Productivity, Flexibility

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana spesialisasi kerja berkontribusi terhadap keteraturan aktivitas kerja dan peningkatan produktivitas pada UMKM pengolahan ayam "Potong Ayam Abah" di Kota Medan. Penelitian menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi dengan melibatkan pemilik dan delapan karyawan yang terlibat langsung dalam proses produksi serta pelayanan pelanggan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembagian tugas yang jelas meningkatkan kejelasan peran, mengurangi keterlambatan proses, menstabilkan alur layanan, dan menjaga konsistensi kualitas. Namun, spesialisasi juga berpotensi menimbulkan ketergantungan pada pekerja kunci dan memunculkan bottleneck ketika terjadi ketidakhadiran karyawan. Karena itu, cross-training terbatas dan rotasi tugas disarankan sebagai strategi fleksibilitas tanpa menghilangkan keahlian inti. Penelitian ini memberikan implikasi praktis bagi UMKM untuk meningkatkan efisiensi sekaligus menjaga ketahanan operasional.

Kata Kunci: Aktivitas Karyawan, Spesialisasi Pekerjaan, UMKM, Produktivitas, Fleksibilitas

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) play a strategic role in supporting Indonesia's national economy, serving as major employment providers and drivers of local economic development. In this context, improving employee productivity is crucial for business sustainability. Lubis & Salsabila (2024) highlight that MSME contribute significantly to Indonesia's economic growth; however, many still face challenges related to labor efficiency and consistency in service delivery.

One key strategy to improve operational efficiency in MSME settings is job specialization. This approach involves dividing tasks according to individual expertise to streamline workflows, increase accuracy, and maintain consistent output quality (Dewi et al., 2022). Ardani & Firdaus (2024) further argue that structured training and accumulated experience strengthen employees' technical competence, enabling them to perform specific roles more effectively within the production chain. Similarly, Ismail et al. (2024) found that assigning workers based on their competencies improves operational efficiency and reduces task duplication.

Nevertheless, recent studies have also highlighted the potential limitations of rigid specialization, which may hinder adaptability and innovation within small business settings (Peña et al., 2023; Sekhar & Patwardhan, 2023). In highly dynamic MSME contexts, balancing specialization and work flexibility is essential to maintain stable productivity. A recent study by Eng et al. (2025) demonstrated that integrating specialization with cross-training can foster operational resilience and support innovation in small enterprises.

Most previous research in Indonesia has emphasized industrial or medium-scale enterprises, while studies examining the implementation of job specialization in micro-scale service sectors remain limited. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by analyzing how job specialization affects employee activity and productivity at Potong Ayam Abah, an MSME in Medan City that relies heavily on manual processes and individual skill. Theoretically, this study enriches the human resource management literature in the MSME context by exploring how work division interacts with flexibility to shape productivity outcomes. Practically, it offers actionable recommendations for MSME owners and managers to apply adaptive specialization strategies supported by cross-training and work rotation mechanisms, so operational efficiency can be maintained while workforce agility is preserved amid fluctuating customer demand.

In terms of conceptual grounding, job specialization is a foundational principle within classical management theory that emphasizes dividing work according to individual competence and skill. Hasibuan et al. (2024) explain that allocating work based on expertise tends to increase efficiency because employees can master specific tasks through repetition and focused training, thereby improving precision and consistency. However, in modern organizational settings, job specialization is not merely viewed as task division; it is also understood as a strategy for skill development and motivation. Employees who deepen expertise in a particular field often show higher performance, confidence, and job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey et al., 2007). At the same time, overly rigid specialization may trigger monotony and stagnation, which can reduce creativity and engagement. For this reason, organizations need to balance specialization with job rotation and continuous learning opportunities to sustain growth and prevent burnout (Adilla & Budiono, 2022; Widyaningsih et al., 2025).

Recent research further suggests that cross-training within MSME strengthens workforce adaptability. Surya et al. (2021) through a multi-country study, found that combining specialization with cross-training improved micro-enterprise productivity by up to 25%, particularly in labor-intensive sectors. This indicates that effective specialization should be treated as dynamic rather than static—maintaining technical efficiency while simultaneously enabling flexibility in human resources.

Employee work activity, as another core construct, encompasses the physical, mental, and social actions individuals perform to accomplish organizational goals. Zadow et al. (2023) argue that a clear duty structure and a supportive work environment encourage productive employee behavior. Conversely, unclear role distribution or weak supervision can lead to redundant tasks and declining efficiency. From an organizational behavior perspective, employee activity can function as a direct indicator of productivity, because systematic management of work activities helps employees use time effectively, reduce errors, and maintain workflow consistency. Zatika et al. (2025) emphasize that well-defined task allocation and adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs) strengthen discipline and teamwork among MSME employees. In MSME settings, work activities are also shaped by social proximity and informal relationships, which makes structured work systems even more important to ensure tasks remain organized and performance standards are consistently achieved.

Employee productivity refers to workers' ability to produce optimal output while using available resources efficiently (Yusuf et al., 2023). Productivity is influenced by multiple factors, including technical skills, motivation, experience, and the work environment. While traditional views define productivity through an input–output ratio, more recent perspectives also consider innovation capacity, collaboration, and adaptability as critical determinants (Zelenyuk, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Empirically, many studies have shown a positive relationship between job specialization and productivity. Agniya & Salim (2023) found that structured work design enhances knowledge productivity by allowing employees to deepen technical expertise through repetitive practice.

Ardani & Firdaus (2024) similarly reported that hierarchical training and role specialization can significantly improve operational performance in food service industries. Mlekus et al. (2022) stressed that specialization's positive impact on productivity is strongest when paired with cross-training and task rotation, enabling small enterprises to sustain productivity even during employee absences or demand fluctuations. For MSME such as Potong Ayam Abah, adaptive specialization may therefore be a practical approach to maintaining consistent output while building employee versatility and operational resilience.

Overall, the three constructs—job specialization, employee work activity, and employee productivity—are closely interconnected. Job specialization shapes how employee activities are structured, while efficient and well-managed activities contribute directly to higher productivity. In MSME environments where resources are limited and operational demands fluctuate, the balance between efficiency (supported by specialization) and adaptability (strengthened through cross-training and rotation) becomes essential. Thus, effective human resource management in small enterprises should integrate structured specialization systems with learning-oriented flexibility, not only to sustain performance consistency but also to support long-term sustainability through continuous skill development and operational resilience.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth how job specialization contributes to employee work activity and productivity at Potong Ayam Abah, an MSME located in Medan City. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables a detailed understanding of behavioral dynamics, work processes, and contextual realities within a small-scale enterprise where manual labor remains dominant.

Case study research is particularly suitable for investigating complex social phenomena in their real-life settings, allowing researchers to capture the holistic interplay of processes, perceptions, and interactions (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Nguyen & Tull, 2022). Therefore, this design is used to examine how job specialization is implemented in daily operations and how it relates to performance outcomes, particularly employee activity patterns and productivity

Research Subjects and Location

The subjects of this study include the owner and eight employees directly involved in the production and customer service processes. The research site, *Potong Ayam Abah* MSME, is located in Medan Area District, Medan City, North Sumatra. The site was purposefully selected (*purposive sampling*) because this MSME has consistently applied task specialization based on individual expertise, providing a suitable environment to analyze the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation.

1. In-depth interviews were conducted with the owner and all employees using a semi-structured interview guide to gather detailed and context-specific information about their experiences and perceptions of job specialization.
2. Direct observation allowed the researcher to monitor workflow patterns, task division, and coordination during the production process in real time.
3. Documentation included field notes, photographs, work schedules, and internal records related to task distribution and employee performance.

The use of multiple data sources ensured data richness and contextual accuracy, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following four main stages:

1. Data reduction, which involved selecting and focusing only on relevant information that aligned with the research objectives.
2. Coding and theme development, where recurring patterns and concepts were identified and categorized into key themes.
3. Inter-theme analysis, examining the relationship between job specialization practices and employee productivity indicators.

4. Conclusion drawing, where findings were interpreted in light of existing theories and prior research.

This process was conducted iteratively to ensure a deep and coherent understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure data credibility, triangulation of sources and methods was applied by comparing results obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Additionally, member checking was performed by sharing interpreted findings with the participants to verify their accuracy and authenticity. These steps align with the validity principles in qualitative research, emphasizing the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Wang et al., 2024). Through this procedure, the study aims to produce a trustworthy and comprehensive description of how job specialization influences employee activity and productivity within an MSME context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the implementation of job specialization at Potong Ayam Abah MSME and analyzes its relationship with employee activity and productivity. Data were obtained from direct observations and in-depth interviews with the owner and eight active employees involved in daily operations. The thematic analysis identified five main themes: (1) work division structure, (2) task placement based on ability, (3) operational efficiency, (4) impact on product quality, and (5) challenges in implementation.

Work Division Structure and Activity Patterns

The work division at Potong Ayam Abah MSME reflects a mature form of specialization. Employees are divided into distinct roles cutting, cleaning, trimming, and packaging according to their expertise. This system promotes coordination, prevents overlapping tasks, and increases workflow efficiency.

This finding aligns with Zatika et al. (2025), who emphasized that clearly defined roles and standardized operating procedures strengthen discipline and efficiency in MSME. The structured division of labor at Potong Ayam Abah enables the owner to maintain consistent output and monitor daily production performance.

However, despite this structure, the business also adopts flexibility during high-demand periods by allowing employees to handle the entire process for a single customer (one operator–one client system). This adaptive task allocation supports faster customer service and prevents bottlenecks. The approach exemplifies what Phillips et al. (2019) and Brozović et al., (2025) describe as adaptive specialization, which combines efficiency with flexibility in small enterprises.

Task Placement and Person–Job Fit

Task assignment in this MSME is based on employee experience and technical ability. Skilled workers are assigned to core cutting activities that require precision, while newer employees are

placed in preparatory or supporting roles such as cleaning and packaging. This system follows the person–job fit principle which emphasizes alignment between individual competencies and job demands. Proper placement enhances motivation, reduces mistakes, and fosters a sense of role ownership. Similar findings were reported by Sartika et al. (2024), who found that appropriate job placement directly contributes to higher work engagement and productivity.

Moreover, repetitive practice allows employees to develop specialized mastery through a learning-by-doing process. Over time, they achieve higher precision and work speed, reinforcing Agniya & Salim (2023) conclusion that structured job design enhances knowledge productivity by enabling skill accumulation. In this way, specialization acts as both a learning and performance mechanism.

Operational Efficiency and Work Motivation

Job specialization directly improves operational efficiency. With clearly defined roles, employees complete their tasks without waiting for others, reducing downtime in the production cycle. Observations revealed that the team could process approximately 200 chickens per day a 30% increase compared to previous, non-specialized workflows.

Psychologically, specialization also enhances motivation. Employees feel more confident and valued when performing tasks aligned with their expertise, which fosters commitment and job satisfaction. This supports the person-environment fit model, which posits that harmony between individual abilities and work environments enhances motivation and engagement (Wang et al., 2024).

This finding is consistent with Elgin & Elveren (2021) who found that specialization improves both work balance and task accuracy. At Potong Ayam Abah, the alignment of job structure and individual capability leads to reduced fatigue, smoother coordination, and higher morale among workers.

Impact on Product Quality and Productivity

The most visible effect of specialization is the improvement in product quality and consistency. Skilled workers ensure uniform chicken cuts that meet customer expectations for cleanliness and precision. According to Hasibuan et al. (2024) division of labor based on expertise not only increases productivity but also enhances quality by enabling deeper technical mastery.

Interviews revealed that the error rate in cutting declined significantly after specialization was implemented. The productivity increase was not limited to quantity but also reflected greater effectiveness in meeting customer needs. During peak hours, each employee could serve 10–15 customers daily, with shorter waiting times. This supports the dual productivity concept which highlights the simultaneous achievement of operational efficiency and service quality (Hofmeister et al., 2023).

Challenges and Adaptation in Implementing Job Specialization

Despite its benefits, specialization also introduces challenges. The most critical issue is dependency on key employees with specific technical expertise. When skilled workers are absent, operations slow down due to limited role substitutability. This is consistent with (Peña et al., 2023)

who found that highly specialized systems are prone to bottlenecks during workforce absences. To reduce this risk, Potong Ayam Abah MSME implemented cross-training (multi-skilling) so employees can perform more than one role when needed. Evidence from SME contexts indicates that multi-skilling supports functional flexibility and helps maintain operational stability under fluctuating labor availability (Yasir et al., 2023).

Another challenge emerges during peak-demand periods: increased mental workload, which can undermine precision and sustained attention. Experimental findings using NASA-TLX show that higher workload levels are associated with significant declines in task accuracy, indicating potential quality risks when cognitive demands surge (Yang et al., 2024). Related research also reinforces that added cognitive demands increase cognitive load and may negatively affect performance (Gorsek et al., 2025). To address this, the MSME applies task rotation—particularly rotating lighter tasks—to preserve concentration, reduce fatigue, and sustain output. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that job/task rotation is linked to improved occupational health outcomes while also supporting workforce flexibility (Mlekus & Maier, 2021).

Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Implications

Overall, job specialization at Potong Ayam Abah MSME has improved efficiency, productivity, and service quality. The system's success is rooted in structured role clarity, employee expertise, and adaptive flexibility. However, sustainable implementation requires a dynamic approach integrating cross-training, rotation, and continuous evaluation.

These findings align with the adaptive specialization framework proposed by Wang et al. (2024) that emphasizes balancing efficiency with human resource agility. The study demonstrates that specialization, when applied contextually, can enhance both technical performance and organizational resilience in MSME. Therefore, effective job specialization in small enterprises is not a static task division mechanism, but an integrated learning system that builds competence, ensures quality, and supports business sustainability amid fluctuating labor and market conditions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, job specialization at Potong Ayam Abah MSME has proven to be an effective strategy for improving employee activity, productivity, and service consistency through clear task allocation and skills-based work design. The arrangement helps work run more smoothly, supports faster output during busy periods, and maintains more consistent quality because each worker understands their primary responsibilities and performance standards. However, sustainability depends on keeping specialization flexible. The main risks are dependency on key workers and rising mental workload when demand increases, which can reduce focus and precision if not managed. This means specialization should be treated as a managed system that requires role coverage planning and workload control so operations remain stable when absences or demand shocks occur.

Therefore, it is recommended that MSME integrate structured specialization with continuous cross training and task rotation. This approach reduces disruption when skilled workers are unavailable, supports skill diversity, and protects accuracy by managing fatigue. Future agendas can focus on tracking long term productivity and error rates, measuring workload trends during peak

cycles, and testing whether simple standard work procedures and routine skills mapping improve resilience as the business grows.

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