

## **DOES SKILLS DEVELOPMENT TRANSLATE INTO WORK READINESS?**

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PIVOTAL grant funding and the trend of most companies building graduate programme into their recruitment processes has increased awareness, but perhaps not understanding of or buy-in to, work readiness. The critical skills lacking in today's graduates costs South African business dearly, and leads to frustration experienced both by the business and by the new employee. The new employee often finds it difficult to fit into the work environment and thus is unable to perform optimally in their new role. The employers tend to expect graduates to be ready to hit the road running with their new jobs, while graduates expect employers to show them the ropes - which lead to an expectations gap that can clearly create work stress, disengagement, poor performance and tension.

It is unfortunate that many graduates have difficulty in finding employment after completing their studies. Although graduates typically have academic and technical skills, they often lack some basic skills, also referred to as employability, or work readiness skills (Raftopoulos, 2009).

Not only does South Africa have a staggering 34.9% (Stats SA) unemployment rate of 15 to 34 year olds, but it is found that potential new entrants to the labour market rarely have the necessary generic (and technical) skills to enter the labour market, let alone progress within it. There is growing demand for graduates to possess a diverse range of generic attributes and skills for work (Hager & Holland, 2006). A qualitative study by ACNielsen (2000) indicated that Australian employers value a range of personal attributes including enthusiasm, motivation, ambition, and personal presentation, which lie outside strict academic performance.

The SA Board of People Practices (SABPP): Learning and Development Committee (2015) investigated the concept of workplace readiness in order to develop a professional practice standard (PPS). It became evident that work readiness (and performance of new graduate entrants) is understood differently in different environments, but in general refers to generic skills and attributes articulated by employers as indicative of work readiness.

Furthermore, different terms are used to refer to the same or similar attributes within these organisations. For instance, 'generic skills' is used interchangeably with 'core skills', 'basic skills', 'transferable skills', and 'employability skills'. Similarly, different labels are used to

describe the notion of work readiness including 'work preparedness', 'graduate employability', 'transferable skills', 'internships', and 'generic attributes'.

Notwithstanding the confusion and semantics, focus must be placed on work readiness as a core element in the underemployment of graduates. The characteristics of a work ready individual can and will increase their employment opportunities and the employer's ability to grow their organisations with skilled, engaged people. In a country so focussed on higher education, we need to now also focus on the work readiness of these graduates!

Some research has been conducted to aid in profiling a work ready individual. In the *Caballero, et al (2011)* study, the following attributes were identified as the ten broad categories indicative of work readiness; motivation, maturity, personal growth/development, organisational awareness, technical focus, interpersonal orientation, attitudes to work, problem-solving, adaptability, and resilience. Factors of importance are; personal characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence, and social intelligence (Caballero, Walker, & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2011).

To summarise, a 'work ready' individual possesses an understanding of how organisations, the economy and the labour market function (the knowledge module); the foundational skills needed in order to be able to engage in work processes (employment readiness); and specific skills to perform allocated responsibilities (job readiness). In other words, the ability of this new employee to hit the ground running.

However, simply finding the work ready individual, and placing them in work readiness programmes is not enough. Line management needs to take real ownership of the process in order for any work readiness programmes to make a meaningful difference. Learning and Development is part and parcel of an overall strategy of performance improvement and thus as an overall facilitator of the specific aspects of a work readiness process, e.g. induction, orientation and on-boarding.

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References:

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Statistics SA <http://www.statssa.gov.za/>

*Boilerplate:*

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