

Skills Development; the key to South Africa's economic future

By Gizelle McIntyre

According to The Guardian, as of 29 December 2012 the unemployment rate in South Africa is a staggering minimum of 26%. While many believe that this is due to a lack of tertiary education, an argument could be made that having a piece of paper confirming a degree does not automatically translate to employment. That degree does not indicate any particular level of expertise or experience, merely the ability to learn from a book. Skills Development, however, indicates actual skill and therefore leads, more often than not, to employment.

There are innumerable advantages to Skills Development both for the employer developing its staff and the employees being developed. The employer receives immense return on investment as it now has better skilled staff working at a higher level of productivity; this means that the work is completed faster with less mistakes leading to a more profitable business. The employee that is being developed will take more pride in their work, having been made to feel important enough to invest in. Skills Development will also lead such employees to have a heightened level of job satisfaction and confidence in what they are doing.

While many believe that Skills Development puts the employer at risk of losing staff, there is much evidence to suggest the opposite. Someone who feels that their company is investing in them will often be extremely loyal to the company. If staff members leave once they are up-skilled, it is likely that they were planning on leaving even before the training started. In the meantime, whilst the employee is undergoing training, he/she is still working for the company and the company is therefore still benefitting from the training.

It is important, however, to ensure that the correct staff members are selected for the correct Skills Development courses. Prior to beginning training, an organisational needs or gap analysis should be conducted. This is often not done in cases where Skills Development is merely done for window dressing purposes; the company has budget for Skills Development, so it does it. This actually leads to wasted money and low return on investment because staff are sent on inappropriate training or on training which they have already completed, which may lead to staff feeling insignificant and even less job satisfaction. This, in turn, has a negative effect on the company as a whole.

Identifying staff that need Skills Development does not need to be an arduous process, but it does need to be a continuous one. It is important that managers are tasked with continuously identifying gaps in the company. This is not something that can be done once a year to fulfil a check-list; companies are organic. They grow, develop and change unceasingly, as do the staff working for them. Managers need to be trained to use the company's Performance Management System as an on-going tool to identify development opportunities, rather than as a bonus calculator.

While all staff equally deserve to be developed, it is not always within the company's means to develop all employees every year. In a situation where various staff members have been identified as requiring training, but there is a limited budget available, a strategic discussion needs to be held regarding how to proceed. There is no template to be followed here, but some guidelines are available to assist managers in selecting the best candidates for development.

Technical skills should always be prioritised; this usually relates to production which directly affects the company's profit margins. Secondly, there should be a focus on critical skills and scarce skills, and thirdly, on softer skills. However, it should be ensured that the question of where the company is headed is asked. For example, if the company wants to produce the best bricks in Johannesburg, then the people that make the bricks should be sent for training. However, if the company wants to have the most recognisable brand in the brick business, then the marketing staff should be sent for training.

What the South African economy needs is people who have true employment, not just a job. True employment is something that means something to that employee, his/her family and the country. To have true employment, people need to be passionate about what they do; but when skills shortages are rife, there can be no passion. Building Skills Development builds job knowledge, increasing performance and passion – this is an economical issue and one that could be the key to employment in South Africa.

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Boilerplate:

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