

## **Skills levels and the benefit of Learning and Development in government**

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Skills and service levels in government are common topics of discussion. But are these often negative discussions justified? Do government officials have the required skills to fulfill on their job descriptions and provide acceptable service delivery? The Limpopo textbook debacle, however, is a clear example of governmental ineffectiveness.

Poor service delivery is not just a South African problem, but a global phenomenon. There is no doubt that governance of a country and service delivery to constituents is multifaceted and multilayered. In the South African public sector, there are many pockets of excellence despite a continued overall reduction in skills and service levels. Government is aware of this skills deficit and has shown its support through increasing learning and development budgets. It has a renewed focus on higher education and the expansion thereof to the whole population of South Africa. Adult education received attention and in his 2012/13 Budget Vote Speech, Minister Blade Nzimande announced that an amount of R499 million will be allocated for teaching development in order to assist in improving graduate outputs.

Government also acknowledges that private training providers are important to provide learning and development and will contribute towards improving the South African economy. It invested resources in promoting that training and trainer development is at the highest quality in order to ensure optimum transfer of skill. Spend on education will grow from R207 billion in 2012/13 to R236 billion in 2014/15.

The South African Revenue Service (SARS) is one such pocket of excellence in government with extensive Learning and Development (L&D) budgets. It has been shown that there is a direct correlation between L&D spend and operational excellence in organisations. It has to be kept in mind, however, that there are various learning styles and training methodologies toward optimum learning delivery. There are also many new technologies and tools that can be used in the delivery of learning and development and it is important for government and solution providers to stay abreast of such developments in the L&D space in order to maintain a competitive edge. Such new technologies have to accommodate learners and trainers with different thinking and learning styles and needs and such flexibility could be expensive.

Changes occur rapidly in technology. No sooner had government become aware of e-Learning solutions and the world is moving on to mobile phone solutions (m-Learning). In order to avoid a decline in skills transfer, training budgets will have to increase. According to the 2013 National Budget, national departments will receive and apportionment of 47.6% and provinces will be allocated 43.5%, mainly for education, health and social welfare. This shows insight into the importance of up-skilling employees and general education. It is sound governance to invest generously in L&D as government is the largest employer in the country. When government employees are up-skilled and exit to the private sector with superior qualifications, those positions will be opened up to unemployed people to fill them and thus improve the quality of life for South Africans in general.

When applying the Learning and Development budgets, procurement decisions have to be made on the quality of supply and cutting edge technology. Core skills to be developed are; management training, with a focus on people and productivity, and leadership, with a focus on ethics and integrity. A move to management development in the human resource development space is required. This will lead to a more strategic application and spend of L&D budgets. When employees are sent on courses because there is budget available and no change is affected in the workplace funds are wasted. Learners should be held accountable and should bring about change after training in order for L&D budgets to have an impact. Management development programmes should bring about recognition of what should be learnt in the context of crucial skill requirements while honing in on contextual skills development to fill gaps that directly affect performance and motivation.

Successful learning and development relies on learner selection – the right people must be chosen for the right courses at the right time. The terms of participation must be agreed to in advance and learners, management and the organisation have to be held accountable for return on investment. Finally, learner support is of crucial importance and must be adequately provided.

When facilitators and assessors are trained and can effectively teach and assess employees, the upward spiral created will ensure efficiency, productivity, effectiveness and motivation with a result that government services will gain a good reputation and the general population will be more inclined to pay their taxes. It all boils down to good, sound Learning and Development practices.

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*Boilerplate:*

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