

More than just CERTIFICATION



SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA IS BECOMING A LOT MORE THAN JUST GOING ON COURSES TO GET THE RIGHT CERTIFICATES.

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A notorious radio ad during the dotcom boom claimed that after going on an MCSE training course, you could instantly “make lots of money”! It seems laughable in hindsight – only experience learned the hard way coupled with at least some training is rewarded by the market – but do we still have the same unconscious attitude towards training and skills development? Do companies treat it as a magic process to turn greenhorns into veterans or are they recognising that there’s a lot more to investing in their people?

For Ursula Fear, consultant at Deloitte & Touche, the practical aspect comes first.

“I’ve been working in the training industry for about ten years, while also looking at the vocational aspect, which is how to take knowledge and apply it in the workplace,” she says. “And that includes a lot of skills that aren’t necessarily formally taught. It’s all about application. Training is no longer what it used to be. You can’t do a three-day course and expect to get the benefit. It’s more about applying knowledge and measuring the results in the workplace.”

Then there are the so-called “soft skills”, the abilities that aren’t taught on

any course but that are essential to productivity and being an effective employee.

“Soft skills are a big issue,” says Chris Lamprecht, group executive of HR at Spescom. “We deal a lot in certifications for specific products and theoretical training but soft skills are often lacking: business skills, life skills and basic etiquette. One morning, we had staff presentations and half our staff didn’t pitch because they felt work pressures were more important. That’s a soft skill: I accepted an invitation to a meeting so, therefore, I will attend. I think everyone’s so focused on hard skills that they forget life skills. Business skills are just as important: when is a deal a good deal? When should you walk away? What’s the difference between a margin and markup? Those are things that people pick up along the way because they aren’t covered elsewhere.”

Premie Naicker, CEO for DST Global Solutions, agrees.

“We can be rational and intellectual about our thinking, but if we don’t incorporate emotional intelligence, we won’t get the results we’re looking for. It’s an integral part of doing business in general.”

Some companies have recognised the need for this kind of training and implemented it. Murray de Villiers, GM of shared services at SAS Institute, says that his company introduced soft skills training across the board, “up to and including the tea lady”.

“It was a three-month programme and we also expanded it to the families,” he says. “That created an ecosystem within which everyone could talk. The value we created was absolutely immense. People interacted more within the company, understood one another and the level of aggression went down when things went wrong. Just understanding how your own thinking works helps when you have a disagreement with someone. And finding out where your own blind spots are is very helpful. But you have to follow up – you can’t just have an intervention and forget about it.”

Enormous disjuncture

But the more ICT-specific aspects of training and skills development are rapidly evolving as well. Management consultant Peter de Klerk says that one of the big challenges is that there is an enormous disjuncture between what industry needs and wants, and what is taught by institutions.

“This is a huge problem,” he notes. “If I take the ICT sector, we’ve had a lot of convergence in technologies over the past couple of years. Whereas before we had experts in broadcasting, experts in telecoms and experts in IT, now we have to have generalists who understand them all. This is very different from how it was before. Very few institutions can cope with this and so companies are developing their own corporate skills and academies to attempt to improve the

ROUNDTABLE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Madelise Grobler,
Bytes People Solutions



Colette Atkinson,
Accord Learning
Solutions



Murray de Villiers,
SAS Institute



Ursula Fear,
Deloitte & Touche

situation. I think that money allocated to training is actually increasing on the whole because of this trend."

Madelise Grobler, MD of Bytes People Solutions, says that role confusion in the workplace hasn't helped.

"What the economy has done over the past two to three years has changed many organisations. Yesterday there were three workers, today there are two so the people who remain have to pick up the slack. There are lots of opportunities and a lot of companies are trying to do good things but because training isn't their core business, they can't sustain what they're doing. People think that early intervention – a quick service excellence course, for example – will make a difference. There are a lot of institutions putting money into the sector, but are they really making a difference?"

That's a good question. The ideal situation is for government programmes, tertiary institutions and private sector players

to work together. But that is easier said than done, notes Purni Sithole, executive head of BEE and CSI at Neotel.

"We have various programmes at government and private level but they're not synchronised. What happens is that we create professional learnership students, they move from one learnership to another. They get stipends from them so they use the learnerships as employment."

Denise Naidoo, consultant at Accenture, agrees that synchronisation would help.

"There needs to be a lot more collaboration between stakeholders – tertiary institutions, training vendors, government and corporates. They all need to be working towards the goal of building skills in the ICT sector. The other thing is that skills development, internships and learning programmes need to be built into the business planning. At Accenture, for example, we build in head counts so that interns become permanent staff after six months and it feeds into the talent development pipeline."

De Klerk is optimistic about the new skills framework for the ICT sector from government.

"In a developing country like ours, where so many things are not yet in place, needs change on a daily basis and we don't have frameworks like they have in developed countries. Coming out of the national con-

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ference will be a skills framework for the ICT sector and there’s never been a national one for the ICT sector. All sectors and all companies have participated in it.

“The question of placing people is a different need altogether. There, you have to have a lot more commitment from the companies concerned, and from the individuals at the companies. Unless you have mentorship and commitment at top level with people being prepared to be mentors, we’re never going to get anywhere.”

Your skills are complete, young apprentice

But mentorship and apprenticeships have changed too. Deloitte’s Fear says that it’s not enough today to have a mentor and a coach.

“Often we find that they are great on paper, but in reality, things are different. The world of work has become the most complex environment imaginable. We don’t even work eight to five anymore. It’s become this dynamic monster moving at a rapid rate. We have to be able to ensure that learning, development plans and structures will be able to accommodate this moving animal. It might not be the content necessarily, but how we manage it that’s important. There have been studies by higher education bodies in South Africa – one in 2007 and one in 2009 – that show that graduates lack the ability to find information, they don’t understand business, they can’t problem-solve and they aren’t flexible. Now these are all the first requirements of any job. Change is constant. Maybe soft skills is not the right term. It’s wider; the key is the ability to change, adapt and cope with constant change. We are going to continue to see skills gaps until we invest in these foundational skills.”

Colette Atkinson, GM of Adcorp Learning Solutions, says training and develop-



ment shouldn’t be divorced from the overarching human resources development strategy.

“When we say we need to uplift skills, we also need to ask: do we have the right job profile? Do we understand the skills and competencies we need? We place 8 000 to 10 000 learners per year into the Adcorp Group and there’s this constant jostle between what operations needs and what needs to happen from a people development perspective. A client needs a call centre agent, for instance, and they need one in two weeks. They have management coming down on them so they rush the assessment process and push through a person, assuming that training is a magic wand that will ensure bright and competent bunnies come out at the other end.”

Spescom’s Lamprecht says skills development also needs to be looked at in conjunction with retention, keeping people once trained.



“You have to combine your skills development with your retention strategy. You cannot divorce the two. Skills development is an integral part of retention. We have this discussion constantly with our business heads because we invest in people and then lose them to competing companies. It’s frustrating and it’s expensive because you feel like you’ve trained people for the opposition. That is why we’re incorporating it into a much bigger retention strategy. Skills development by itself is not retention strategy. People join great companies but they resign from bad managers. If you want to invest money in training, you should start with your line managers. They are the retention tools, they will determine whether Joe Bloggs will stay with a company or resign.”

The other problem is that training itself can be too structured to be adaptable. Naicker says she has experienced this.

“I come from a global organisation and each region is treated differently. South Africa is treated as the bottom of the earth and there’s not much understanding of the skills challenges we face here. The problem with the environment imposed on us is that it’s very structured and in a structured environment it’s so difficult to learn and be yourself. We need to be more flexible in the way we train.”