

Plugging South Africa's **skills gap**

South Africa has a wealth of talent to narrow the skills deficit, but identifying it is a major stumbling block.

By Joel Stransky

According to the ManpowerGroup's most recent annual Talent Shortage Survey, employers across the globe are facing the most acute skills shortage since the 2007 – 2008 recession. Of the more than 42,000 employers surveyed, 40% are experiencing difficulties in filling roles.

While rapidly changing skill requirements in the modern workplace is cited as a leading cause for this shortage in developed markets, South

Africa faces a far more complex problem due to a lack of adequate basic education, with many students currently enrolled in South Africa's tertiary institutions studying subjects that don't support the skill deficits that businesses are grappling with.

However, contrary to the popular view that there is a shortage of talent to plug the skills gap, I believe that the major challenge we face is rather an inability to adequately identify talent that can then be nurtured through development programmes.

Currently, the most prolific inhibitor to employability is work potential and experience, not a lack of talent. We therefore need to get more people into roles that impart the requisite skills needed to build careers, if sustainable employment is the aim.

In this regard, talent is an inherent trait, whereas skills can be acquired. Accordingly, by improving our ability to identify talented individuals who

possess faculties such as critical thinking, good judgement and decision-making, cognitive flexibility, and the ability to solve complex problems, then we greatly improve up-skilling outcomes when these individuals enter formal training programmes.

There is a great deal of individual difference in the traits possessed by people. Their unique combination of talents, such as cognitive learning abilities, basic skill sets, natural ability, and preferences dictate that their potential may lie in different areas. This makes testing and analysis vital to root out the right combination of talents for specific jobs.

In addition, you ideally want people to do something they know they have the potential to be good at, along with the ability to progressively learn and acquire more advanced skills in that regard. You also want to take into account an individual's preference for career path. If you achieve that, then the person's potential to succeed in a given job role will increase substantially, which dramatically improves their ability to earn an income and develop a long, successful career.

To help identify this potential and predict performance in specific job roles, there are now advanced technology-based solutions that combine AI and analytics. These systems can help potential employers understand the inherent potential in a prospective employee better than any other form of analysis or psychometric testing that has preceded it.

This reduces the potential for a mismatch between the company and the individual, be it their culture fit or an inability to perform the job, which delivers a better return on investment

with regard to skills development. It also assists individuals by giving them the best opportunity to find a sustainable career path as early as possible.

It's counterproductive, both for the individual and the company that employs them, to put someone on a career path that is inappropriate. In doing so, you set them up for failure, with potential repercussions that can reverberate throughout their careers. You need to give everyone the best possible chance at success in the job market, and do so as early as possible. This will ensure that every minute they spend in a job is leveraged to build the experience they need to become more employable and an asset to an organisation.

The final critical element in plugging the skills gap is the more prominent role that corporate South Africa needs to play in providing opportunities to develop identified talent. Unfortunately, the country finds itself in a situation where government is failing in its mandate to adequately educate the population and assist in creating job opportunities. It is therefore falling to businesses to put in place formal development and training programmes as well as platforms that will enable the transfer of skills. While this requires some investment and resources on their part, by having identified and assembled the right pool of talent, this approach will deliver an exponential return on investment, both for the company and South Africa as a whole. ■

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