

# Need for training to ease skills shortage

Development a neglected area, writes Jennigay Coetzer

SKILLS development is a vital element of empowerment in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, which goes through phases where specific skills are required and then there is a lull until the next wave.

The cyclical nature of the industry is due to influences such as technology obsolescence and changing business requirements and trends, and has led to an ongoing skills shortage locally and globally, says Becky Mosehle, MD of Landelahni Professional and Technical Appointments.

For instance, IT staff reductions after the dotcom crash, Y2K and the fall in IT shares resulted in less career opportunities and the industry lost some career appeal, says Mosehle.

"So there were less young people developing IT skills and even less black people coming through."

She says the economic upturn and the need to hire black economic empowerment candidates have made the shrinking IT skills pool even more apparent.

The industry is now trying to address this with learnerships and other skills-development initiatives, but everyone is still fighting for the same small pool of skilled black IT candidates, says Mosehle.

She says many organisations are not doing enough to equip their IT staff to move into senior-level positions. This is often because IT managers are reluctant to pull top people off projects to develop skills that will only benefit the company in two to three years time. So the tendency is to leave them at the same level and throw big salaries at them, which is often not enough.

"IT people need to be

developed to engender loyal staff and retain them," she says.

Thoko Mokgosi-Mwantembe, CEO of HP SA, says a lot still needs to be done to bring women into the technical side of IT and not just into marketing and public relations.

She says young girls need to be encouraged to study science and engineering so they can become part of the technical IT skills pool.

"There has been some progress and more companies are seeking female graduates, but the numbers are not substantial."

She says companies should be sponsoring science and maths students at high-school level then sponsoring them to study engineering and taking them into their organisations as interns once they have graduated. But most companies tend to approach graduates when they are in their second or third year, which is too late because by then they will have already chosen a career path, probably outside IT.

Mokgosi-Mwantembe says she has been through the mill of being a female coming up through the ranks.

"I got through the pain of studying and continually learning, developing my skills, soaking up knowledge from others and keeping up to speed with bigger industry trends to anticipate what customers need tomorrow."

She says as part of its broad-based black economic empowerment strategy HP is taking in 18 interns this year, and a significant percentage will be female.

Dot Field, chief communications officer for Vodacom Group, says women have shied away from studying male-orientated subjects such as engineering.

"Our technicians are required to have an engineering qualification in order to understand, build and maintain a cellular network."

Field says the company is implementing development initiatives to advance its female employees and bring more female technicians into the industry. It has recently invested R10m in a three-year graduate programme to entice females that have a technical degree to work in the telecommunications sector.

Ten graduates are participating in the programme, which starts with the fundamentals of mobile telecommunications and technical communications courses, she says.

Participants will learn about switching, service development, operational support services, network quality control, customer care and network planning and optimisation, she says.

They will then gain work experience in divisions that specialise in the field in which they have shown most promise, says Field.

"A mentor will be allocated to each participant to guide them and work with them to bring out their best strengths and talents."

They will also be put through Telkom's next-generation network professional training programme, and will have the opportunity to gain overseas telecommunications experience, says Field.

Participants will receive remuneration during their training and the aim is eventually to offer permanent employment to those who graduate from the programme successfully, she says.

Last year Vodacom set aside a total of R2m for employee development and training, says Field.

