

Skills shortage and recent interventions

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IT WAS DISAPPOINTING to learn that SA's ICT ranking has fallen from 34th to 37th place out of 115 countries, according to the World Economic Forum, which reports that the inferior quality of maths and science, as well as the shortage of engineers and scientists, has pulled the country's score down.

Over the past few weeks there has been considerable focus on generating an environment conducive to job creation, economic growth and addressing the skills shortage - and rightfully so.

The announcement of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiatives programme for SA (Asgisa) and the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipsa) has generally been welcomed. The two programmes, which are interdependent, are aimed at putting in place mechanisms that will accelerate GDP growth to 6% between 2010 and 2014.

In addition to the R370bn funding for these initiatives, the government has announced that there are some 23 000 posts on the national critical skills list that may be filled by foreigners. Approximately 2 500 of these are in the IT sector, specifically in software and silicon and microchip development.

The news of foreign skills recruitment was met with mixed feelings. From an employer perspective it is great news, since it provides critical skills not available in the country. However there is the issue of the time it takes to get foreign nationals into the country, because of lengthy immigration and qualification verification processes.

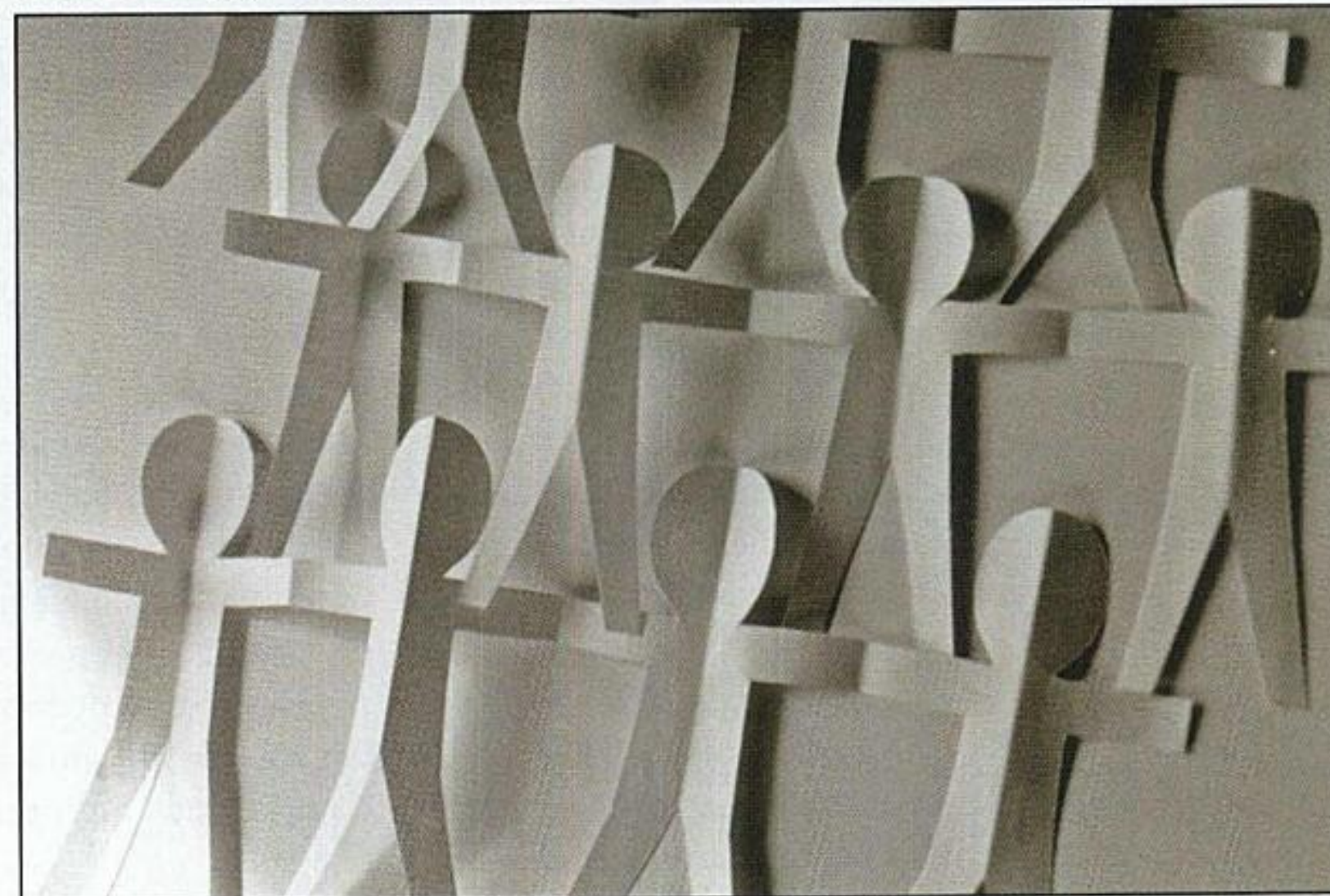
Professionals and employees, on the other hand, have voiced the view that we have sufficient skills in the country, but that many qualified people have been sidelined by employment equity policies.

The point being missed is that the purpose of getting foreign skills into the country is to address specific skills shortages, kick-start key projects that

will invariably create jobs for local professionals and technical staff, and ultimately ensure skills transfer for continuity and sustainability. This is not a permanent situation, but a critical interim measure.

Attraction and retention of critical skills

As a recruitment company, Landelahni comes across a variety of professionals, with a range of priorities, who are considering moving from one company to another, irrespective of location. These issues include mobility and flexibility, career growth and development, innovation and creativity, strategy and direction



of the company, and financial rewards, including incentives.

Young and up-and-coming professional and technical people, particularly those skilled in IT, want the flexibility of knowing that they can move to the 'next big thing'. They do not want to be tied down by conditions associated with permanent employment. They also want to know that they can move from one country to another with ease, in the interests of growth and development and to accelerate career growth.

They want to work for an organisation whose strategy and direction is groundbreaking and trendsetting. Many insist that they will only consider working for an IT or telecoms organisation that has achieved industry recognition, and is, for example, a Cisco Gold Member. They are after immediate financial

rewards and incentives, which are not packaged as retirement annuities and medical aid, etc.

Companies need to create an environment that can manage such aspirations. They must balance the immediate requirements of the job (attraction) through financial rewards and training and development, with medium to long-term aspirations (retention) through innovation, the right business strategy and career growth and mobility within the company.

On the other hand, the government needs to be flexible when it comes to non-permanent employment, and recognise that, due to the cyclical nature of the ICT industry, there may be a need for contract and project-related work on an indefinite basis.

Getting foreign skills in the country

As mentioned above, the average time it takes to get a foreign 'employee' into the country is between six and 11 months. Clearly this will

need to change if we are to meet the expectations of government's initiatives.

Announcements have been made that immigration laws are to be relaxed when it comes to posts on the national critical skills list, and that people will be allowed into the country without permanent employment as long as they can prove they are qualified and have at least five years' experience in the relevant field. This still needs to be tested.

Talking about qualifications - it has been recently announced that foreign qualification must now be verified and SAQA accredited. SAQA accreditation may again prolong the process.

It goes without saying that attracting South Africans abroad is more essential than focusing only on foreigners. Since 1997, Landelahni has been instrumental in bringing a

significant number of South Africans back to the country.

Achievement of employment equity initiatives

Employment equity initiatives are essential in transforming a still very much male-dominated ICT industry.

Companies should use the opportunity of bringing in foreign skills, not only to kick-start projects, but to also to empower, and transfer skills to, their local employees, especially those from the previously disadvantaged groups. Coaching and mentoring programmes should be a prerequisite whenever a foreigner is employed. This will enable the organisation to measure the progress of skills transfer, which is critical for continuity and sustainability.

We should also pay more attention to employment of women in the industry. It is common knowledge that women are less mobile than men. At certain periods in their lives, women tend to prefer to stay in one location for family reasons.

Our company receives a number of CVs from international candidates and 70% of these applicants are males in their twenties to late thirties.

We have noticed a trend over the past few months in recruitment advertisement that companies looking for international candidates formulate their advertisement so as to attract predominantly male respondents, sometimes being quite open about this.

Men are perceived to be less expensive to relocate because they usually do not come with a family, and are willing to travel and put in very long hours. It becomes clear that investing in the development, upskilling and empowerment of women gives the employer a better chance of retaining their skills, while at the same time supporting employment equity initiatives.

We can take our cue from the UK, which is implementing programmes to bring women into the ICT sector to address the imbalances in that country. It is starting to encourage ICT education and training at school level - something we do not do in SA.

The more companies market the sector, and offer bursaries and learnerships, the more we will see students taking up ICT studies. At the moment, academics are reporting a drop in the number of those studying for ICT degrees and many who do qualify do not study beyond graduate level, because they are eager to start earning. This results in a lack of research and development skills.