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Skills shortage findings mystify

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The findings of recent research to quantify the ICT skills shortage in SA do not make sense, says the IT Association (ITA), even though it conducted the research.

The statement follows this weekend's seventh annual Presidential International Advisory Council (PIAC) meeting, where growing the country's e-skills, and perceived shortage thereof, topped the agenda.

ITA president Keith Anderson says its research showed SA only had a shortage of 2 753 skilled ICT professionals as at July.

This figure does not tally with the position held by many ICT stakeholders that SA has an acute skills shortage, he says. "We can't accept this data."

Anderson says the ITA surveyed 2 244 companies, drawn from ISETT SETA's database. This database represents 95 000 employees in the ICT sector, he says. Of these companies, 64 were large corporates, including Vodacom, Telkom, Cell C, GijimaAst and Bytes Technology Group, representing 59% of the ICT workforce.

If the figure of 2 753 vacancies over 2 244 companies is correct, it means the average ICT company only needs 1.2 specialists to be at full capacity.

Something fishy

Econometrix senior economist Tony Twine says the ITA findings are definitely questionable. Twine argues that most of the e-skills shortage would be in other sectors where core competencies do not relate to ICT, which means the ITA spoke to the wrong people. "The ICT sector is probably full up to the brim [with skills]."

Twine also argues that "the suspected [skills shortage] problem – and we only suspect that it is a problem – is that you would have a high number of companies that are very small, 10 people or less".

Twine says such companies are generally understaffed and each individual is doing the work of one to one-and-a-half people. This could have skewed the results of the research and reduced the stated number of additional heads needed.

Way forward

Anderson says all the individual ICT associations will meet today to discuss how to more accurately quantify the e-skills shortage. This includes the ITA, Computer Society of SA, South African Communications Forum and Electronic Industries Federation.

Communications minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri says government aims to develop 200 000 skilled ICT professionals while research on the skills shortage continues.

During the weekend's PIAC meeting, president Thabo Mbeki announced the creation of an E-skills Advisory Council. The council will oversee the quantifying of the shortage, co-ordinate the activities of existing skills initiatives, and develop more e-skills based on the need, he said.

Sandra Burmeister, CEO of recruitment agency Landelahni Business Leaders, welcomed the formation of this council. "Part of the reason it's been difficult to scope out the scale of the ICT skills shortage is that the sector is fragmented, with each sub-sector having different skills requirements and needs."

Burmeister notes that technology changes constantly, further making it difficult to keep abreast of industry needs.

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