

# Firms struggle with shortage of executives

It's a global trend and there's no quick fix, but grooming goes a long way, writes **Brendan Peacock**

DESPITE the commitment of the public and private sectors, there remains a shortage of executive candidates. But Sandra Burmeister, chief executive of Landelahni, says this is a global issue and not a failure of the National Skills Development Strategy.

"All businesses around the world are struggling with succession planning to replace the current leadership tier. There is a need to become more flexible and innovative, and new leaders require new attributes to manage such diversity.

"Increasing technological innovation and closer markets have contributed to executive mobility, which has meant companies are constantly losing their middle tier of management because they are in demand for development," says Burmeister.

"To date there has been a much bigger commitment to skills

development and fast-tracking from the public sector because companies are under pressure to cut costs and the business environment is tough.

"These skills tend to move on to the private sector, where they are snapped up quickly. Competent executives will always be working," she continues.

"However, the private sector does seem to be committed to achieving transformation goals in its business and strategic objectives." As an example, Burmeister points out that the mining sector, traditionally dominated by white males, has undergone changes due to company initiatives.

"There was a complete lack of skills in other groups, so it was impossible to head-hunt. This meant candidates with core competence needed to be found and then trained in the more





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## 'Companies are constantly losing their middle tier of management'

technical aspects of the industry. Some skills can be transferred, even if the industry is highly specialised."

Sarah Babb, a skills development consultant at The Skills Framework, says the main problem with human resource development is a lack of adequate data.

"Although many Setas have invested in sectoral skills needs analysis, to their credit, others rely on unreliable data from the Workplace Skills Plans. Perpetuating the use of tainted data, the Sector Skills Plans are collated and rolled up into national human resource development reports."

According to Burmeister, recruitment agencies hold a wealth of accurate data that could be used to improve national planning and help the National Skills Development Strategy succeed.

"It's just a matter of finding a way to feed this information into Jipsa [the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition]. Jipsa may know where skills are lacking, but accurate numbers will provide the basis for action and even international recruitment to get a balance of

skills," she says.

Skills development is already lagging behind economic growth, and this is likely to intensify as a result of the mega-projects planned before 2010.

Burmeister claims the answer lies in loosening legislation governing the temporary workforce.

"The legislation for all temporary workers, at high and low levels, is currently the same. The temporary workforce, based on levies paid to all Setas, is estimated to contribute R18-billion a year, and there are approximately 400 000 temporary workers at any given time. This sector has facilitated 10% of all learnerships in the last five years, so it seems sensible to recognise this sector in its own right.

"The temporary sector could potentially provide core skills and training as a transition process and make a significant contribution, because most temporary workers are school-leavers and graduates," says Burmeister.

"Tighter regulation of the temporary industry could ensure that employers offer proper benefits and comply with legislation."

