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19 December 2008

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SKILLS

Mind the gap

By Prakash Naidoo

Though SA continues to face a chronic skills shortage in a number of key areas, the lack of practical and hands-on experience among professionals, technicians and artisans may pose a far graver threat to the economy.

Experts say that though the quality of graduates produced by tertiary institutions is often not in question, a number of the top professions require at least five years of training and experience before taking on people for specific projects.

Compounding the problem, says independent policy expert Andrew Merrifield, is that many who are experienced were trained 10- 15 years ago, meaning there is also a skills gap in areas where technology has changed or improved.

It's a problem Sandra Burmeister, CEO of Landelahni Business Leaders, agrees is much more serious than the skills shortage itself. "We have found that there is a need for people to re skill at least every five years to stay current."

A Landelahni study of the private and public sectors finds that infrastructure development will be the hardest hit by the skills crisis.

Though SA's skills shortage has appeared more acute in recent years, analysts say it mirrors the international trend. The expected spend on infrastructure worldwide over the next 10 years is estimated at US\$20 trillion; SA is likely to spend R900bn over the next three to five years.

The number of people employed in infrastructure development doubled from 634 000 in 2001 to 1,2m in 2007, with about 44% of these employed on a permanent basis.

According to Burmeister, the shortage of skilled professionals and the fact that SA is competing with the rest of the world for these skills will prove to be a significant constraint on growth.

With a number of the world's developed economies - notably, the US - looking to increase infrastructure spending in the next year in an attempt to blunt the impact of the economic crisis, the problem is expected to get worse.

Merrifield says the problem in SA is more an experience gap than a skills shortage. He says that though SA may have a stock of 50 000- 80 000 built-environment professionals to draw from (construction experts like engineers, architects and so on), many do not have the experience or training to work on big infrastructure projects such as electricity, water, roads, ports, rail and airports.

"We might have the numbers, but the question is whether we have people with the right amount of skills and training," says Merrifield. " The skills crisis is not one of quantity, but rather of quality."

He concedes that SA faces a critical shortage of artisans, especially welders, but says the situation is manageable.

The Landelahni study found that the number of artisans tested across all trades increased from 15 000 in 1970 to 26 500 in 1986. Since then, however, the number tested has dropped to 9 041. The average cost of training an artisan is R120 000, says Burmeister.

With only 42% of artisans passing exams, this means that 120 000 will need to be trained over three years if SA is to meet government's target of training 50 000 artisans over the next four years.

This will cost a staggering R14,4bn, and when measured against the current 1% training levy, which generates a mere R6bn annually, the extent of the crisis is thrown into sharp



Sandra Burmeister - People need to re skill themselves

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relief.

Liza van Wyk, CEO of AstroTech, a training company that does work for big companies, says SA graduates are further handicapped because they often lack the skills not learnt from a degree course, such as communication, assertiveness and self-confidence.

"We are hearing more often that graduates, even before they can get training or experience, are finding the transition to the workplace to be much more difficult," says Van Wyk.

A lack of training and poor management has led to SA's productivity ratings plunging after a decade of sustained growth.

According to the World Competitiveness Scoreboard, last year SA fell from 38th to 50th out of 55 countries. This year it dropped to 53rd.

Van Wyk says SA also ranks last on infrastructure, Internet costs, health problems, availability of qualified engineers and life expectancy.

And its top rating last year - for the supply of electricity to industry - is likely to plummet in the next survey.



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