

Firms must do share of training skilled staff

BY WORKPLACE STAFF

South Africa's dire shortage of artisans and skilled workers is being incrementally acknowledged by new initiatives on the part of government and its agencies.

"Meanwhile," according to Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahn Recruitment Group, "industry has shirked its responsibility for training and developing competent artisans and technicians".

"Companies have tended to step aside, believing that – by contributing a skills development levy to the Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas) – they were doing enough. Unfortunately, the disappointing performance of the Setas has left them high and dry."

In acknowledging the problem, government implemented its Jipsa (Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition) strategy, and the Department of Labour is planning to re-invigorate Indlela, the Institute for National Development of Learnerships, Employment and Labour Assessment at Olifantsfontein, to play a major role in the assessment, moderation, and training of artisans.

In 2007, Jipsa indicated that at least 12 500 artisans should be produced each year over the next four years to meet demand.

Of the Setas, the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Education and Training Authority (Merseta) has been doing relatively well, with 2 665 learnerships registered for 2007 / 2008.

However, this falls short of its target of 6 850. Across all Setas, only 8 959 (48%) of the learnership target of 18 879 has been met.

The graduation results paint an even bleaker picture. The Central Organisation for Trade Testing (Cott) and Indlela has, since 2000, registered an average pass rate of only 43%.

"Companies need to take joint responsibility with government for developing well-qualified, competent and experienced artisans," says Burmeister.

"There are some outstanding private-sector training initiatives, but not nearly enough.

"Although skills are in short supply, there is an available pool of artisans – boilermakers, fitters, turners toolmakers, mechanics – who are fully

qualified academically.

"And, if they are out there, we will find them! But many have no experience. And many of our clients say they have no time to train new recruits.

"This is particularly true in the case of the mines. Most of our clients insist on at least two years' underground experience.

"This is understandable in the face of increasingly tougher safety regulations. But it seems to be a case of looking for experience instead of competence.

"How can newly qualified artisans gain the skills if companies are unwilling to train them?"

It's a two-way process that demands a shift in mindset, Burmeister believes. It's the responsibility of the company to train during a skills shortage, and to

develop entry-level skills.

"One solution is to couple experienced people with less experienced recruits so as to create a pipeline for future development," she says.

"Another alternative is job sharing, with more highly skilled artisans handling the more complex tasks."

Employers can assist further by providing workplace opportunities to at least a proportion of young graduates on completion of their training.

For the candidate, temporary assignments are a good way of developing skills, and frequently provide a bridge to more permanent employment.

"We need to think smarter," says Burmeister.

