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BUSINESS NEWS

Firms accused of being lazy

Posted Fri, 09 Oct 2009

The corporate sector is "lazy" and has given up its role in solving skills shortages, businessman Cyril Ramaphosa said on Thursday.

"The skills shortage that is talked about is really a way for the corporate sector to abdicate the problem," Ramaphosa told an audience in Sandton, Johannesburg.

"The private sector is too lazy in terms of the skills shortage in solving problems in their own interest."

Ramaphosa said the corporate sector expected government to provide the solutions, but it should rather train people in the skills it needs.

He called it an "excuse" he had been hearing for some time.

The former trade unionist recounted how in the 80s mines argued that they could not hire black engineers because none with skills existed. Further, it was not the task of miners to produce them.

Companies should provide skills training

"We then took the initiative to find 10 workers who were already in the system," said Ramaphosa.

The workers were sent to Cuban universities where they earned degrees in mining engineering.

"We sent them to Cuba and they (mining companies) couldn't be bothered to do the same thing at Wits," said Ramaphosa.

Companies should be willing to provide their own skills training because they would have a better understanding of their needs than government officials or universities.

"The corporate boardroom knows what they need more than the government. Even more so than the universities," he said.

Landelahni CEO Sandra Burmeister said she agreed skills development was a task for the private sector, something businesses were recognising.

"I think businesses recognise the need to take the responsibility for skills development in their own hands," said Burmeister.

A lack of growth

Landelahni conducts research into South African industries and skills shortages. Burmeister said skills investment in the mining and infrastructure sectors had been stagnant until recently, due to a lack of growth in those areas.

However, she added those two areas, along with telecommunications, were now above average in terms of skills development. This is, in part, a correction of past neglect.

Ramaphosa also criticised skills cultivation in South Africa as a whole.

He told an anecdote about how he had difficulty encouraging the training of black actuaries as the industry told him there were already enough in the profession.

"They said, 'What are we going to do with them?' " he recounted.

Ramaphosa argued that other countries did not worry about what to do with skilled people, they merely assumed a growing economy would need them.

Produce thousands of engineers

"Japan, China, the East Asian countries decided that they were going to take bold moves and produce thousands of engineers," he said.

"They produced them without thinking about what they are going to do. They produced them because any growing economy is going to need qualified people."

Burmeister said while skills development had improved, there was a danger of cutting back during the global economic downturn.

"I think it would detrimentally affect the gains we had made in the past three years," she said.

Ramaphosa was speaking at a fundraiser for the Enriched Management Studies Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The programme seeks to provide talented students from poor backgrounds with business education paid for by the private sector.

UKZN Foundation executive director Bruno van Dyk reminded the audience, many of whom were beneficiaries of the programme now earning corporate salaries, that pledge forms for donations were available.

Ramaphosa, not missing a beat, took the microphone and told the audience that one of their colleagues had committed to funding two students through UKZN.

"After you have been assisted, in the African tradition 'ubuntu', it is expected for you to give back — so sign the pledge form!" Ramaphosa said to laughter.

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