

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The changes that were brought by transformation and administrative reform in South Africa challenged the black South Africans who were expected to take over the new administration of the country to address the inequality and imbalances caused by the apartheid government. These administrative changes and challenges need knowledgeable and skilful public servants who will ensure that global orders are well managed and proper administration and management of the country are achieved.

In order for public servants to achieve proper implementation of the tasks that are bestowed on them, it is important that they should possess skills and levels of competency that will make it easier for them to cope with the challenges they are facing. Thus skills development in the South African public service is extremely important. The article will address the need for skills development in the South African public service and further suggest solutions to solve skills shortage. It will also highlight problems that the South African public service faces when trying to address skills shortage.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000 former President Thabo Mbeki noted that government wanted to play a central, active and leading role in the process of ensuring that it was not left out of the information society. It also had to avoid technological cumulative slow down which has the ability to cause economic marginalisation. Within such a context it was deemed important to

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bring appropriate skills into the public service to urgently address the challenges. Skills development in the South African public service is seen as one of the major challenges towards improving living standards of the society but also a means to increase productivity levels to meet the social service demands in the country. Since poor skills development may put the value of human capital in serious jeopardy, it is important that more investment takes place in the skills and knowledge capital of the workforce through training.

Apartheid policies in respect of human resources development have left a legacy of a low skills base and gross inequalities in terms of skills development in South Africa. In order to address the injustice and imbalances of the past and normalise the situation, the South African government introduced various policies and legislation aimed at developing the skills of public servants, to encourage public servants to participate in the skills development programmes and improve the employment prospects of people who were previously disadvantaged by unfair discriminatory skills development policies which, generally, ignored the majority of the population.

The legislative framework and policies which the new democratic government introduced under the African National Congress (ANC) government do not seem to be adequate in dealing with the skills development problems in the South African public service. This article highlights the problems and origins of poor skills development in the South African public service and proffers simple and practical solutions in dealing with South Africa's skills development challenges.

CONCEPTUALISATION

Ambiguities and obscurities in this article will be cleared to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation in the discussion. Thus concepts such as *skills*, *competence*, *training* and *development* will be explained and clarified to promote a common understanding in the context of the article.

Skill

Harrison (1993:264) defines the concept skill as the process of enabling individuals to assume new roles and implement systems effectively in order to successfully achieve stated performance outcomes. It is also important to mention that the concept skill is frequently and correctly identified as an important area of knowledge that is mostly needed to be acquired to function effectively and efficiently in any task that is supposed to be executed and implemented. Robbins (1995:15) defines skill as the ability to demonstrate behaviour that is realistically related to the attainment of a performance goal.

Skill is further explained as a capability that can be transferred from one person to another, this means that skills are more concerned with the art of knowledge application. So an attempt to strengthen the capacity of the public servants should not only be on creating knowledge workers, but also on assisting the public servant to acquire the art of being able to apply knowledge towards the success of the institution (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999: 30).

According to Critten (1993: 51) there are four types of skills that should always be taken into account because they are typical to all jobs in both the private and public institutions. These types of skills as identified (Critten, 1993:51) include:

- *Task skill*: this type of skill is making up the technical components of all jobs in public and private institutions.
- *Task management skill*: this is the type of skill which is mostly needed for properly managing tasks and prioritising those tasks.
- *Contingency management skill*: it refers to the ability and capability to recognise and properly deal with any irregularities in the immediate working environment.
- *Job role environment skill*: this type of skill is mostly needed for a person to work well with others within the institutions and also for a person to cope well with specific environmental factors.

Meyer (1999: 81) argues that there are skill categories that can be valuable in properly determining management effectively and efficiently in any institution. These categories include conceptual, interpersonal and technical skills. Even though most of these skills are self-taught it is important that the government of the day encourages public servants to make time available to acquire these skills as they are vital for development and proper management and administration of a public institution.

Competence

Competence is widely used in the public service to express adequacy and having the necessary ability, capacity, skills and knowledge that would endow a person with the ability to properly execute the task and mandate assigned to him/her for the work (Cowie, 1998:234). In addition to that, competence can be understood as a reference for someone who is effective and efficient and possesses the complete ability to perform to a high standard. Hellreigel *et al.*, (1999:5) stress that competence is related to the ability and capacity of a person to perform a task through the integration of knowledge, skills and abilities which will lead to behaviour that is required to complete a task according to predetermined and desired levels of performance.

As stated in the *Public Service Regulations, 2001* [Government Notice (R1 of 2001)] competence can further be defined as the blend of knowledge, skills, behaviour and aptitude that a person applies in a work environment and that person's competence should always indicate the ability that can be properly used to meet the requirements of the job that person is tasked to perform. In the *Public Service Handbook* (2003 Chapter 5) eleven competencies are identified. Although most of them are directed towards the senior management service they are also equally critical to other public officials. These competencies include financial, project, and change management, service delivery innovation, problem solving, customer focus, honesty and integrity.

The concept competency denotes the ability of a person after obtaining the necessary or adequate qualification, specific skills and knowledge to properly perform allocated tasks. For the public servants to be competent the government of the day should develop sustainable,

simple and realistic means of fast-tracking skills development in the public service. This will not only assist the public servants to have skills, but will also assist the community because once public servants display skill and competency in discharging their tasks, this will have the effect of improving efficiency and effectiveness in terms of service delivery.

Training and Development

The concept training can be defined as a systematic process of changing behaviour and attitudes of functionaries or public servants into a desirable direction in order to increase goal achievement within the institutions (Mathekgá and Buccus, 2007: 11). Development is seen as a process within which individuals learn through experience to become more effective. Development is further aimed at utilising skills and knowledge that have been acquired through education and training (Van Dijk, 2003: 24). This buttresses the fact that training and development are *leverage for change*, as correctly averred in both the *White Paper on Public Service Training and Education*, 1998 [Notice 1428 of 1998] and *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery*, 1997 [Notice 1459 of 1997].

The training and development of public servants are extremely important because it plays a critical role in equipping public servants with the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies which are vital for them in the effort to deliver effective and efficient service. Proper training and development of public servants, through quality skill development practices, are important towards improving organisational performance and the capacity of employees to deliver high quality services to the public.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

The shortage of skills in the South African public service has the potential of causing serious problems in South Africa, especially considering that South Africa is a developmental state. The developmental agenda of the country will not succeed if the public servants lack the necessary skills to do their job. The only way to improve the competencies of the public servants and make them more effective and efficient in the role that they play on behalf of the citizens, is through skills development. The South African government has prioritised training and education as a means towards cultivating a competent and skilful public service. Evidence of this is the number of pieces of legislation and policy frameworks that the government has adopted to address the problem of skills shortage both within and without the South Africa public service.

The policy framework include, among others:

- *Skill development Act*, 1998 (Act 97 of 1998): this Act was passed to provide an institutional framework to devise and implement national, sector and workplace strategies to develop and improve skills of the South African workforce;
- *National Development Levies Act*, 1999 (Act 9 of 1999): it provide for the imposition of a skills development levy to finance the process of skills development;
- *National Skill Development Strategy*, 2005: the aim of this strategy is to contribute towards the sustainable development of skills growth and the development and equity

- of skills development institutions by aligning their work and resources to the skills needs for effective delivery of services;
- *White Paper on Public Service Training and Education, 1997*: the purpose hereof is to provide a policy framework to enable appropriate, adequate and accessible public service training and education which will meet current and future requirements of public servants, the public service and the general public;
 - *White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service, 1997*: the purpose of this document is to provide a framework that will facilitate the development of human resource practices which support effective and efficient public service;
 - *Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority, 2000*: its mission is the development of a co-ordinated framework for ensuring the provision of appropriate and adequate public service education and training which will be sufficient to meet current and future needs of the public service; and
 - *South African Qualification Authority Act, 1995* (Act 58 of 1995) provides ways of ensuring that training in South Africa is of a high quality and is able to address skills shortages.

In the context of the above legislative and policy framework, the government has tried to provide solutions to skill shortage in the South African public service. However, given the reality of poor, ineffective and inefficient service delivery that the country is experiencing, it is obvious that these strategic interventions to strengthen the capacity of the public servants have not yet borne fruits, at least not in the present moment. There is thus need for a fresh skills development solution for the South African public service.

SKILLS CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The problem of skills shortage in South Africa has its origins in the apartheid laws of the past. The challenges have a long history and are closely aligned to the socio-political events that have marked the past few decades in South Africa. The development and education policies of the apartheid regime were purposefully designed to confine Black South Africans to menial labour. The intensive skills development aimed at economic development and the creation of wealth were largely limited to the White minority. In addition White South Africans, who were privileged in the development of their skills, had greater employment prospects to the extent that the apartheid government was lulled into a false sense of security with respect to the country's long-term skills needs (Developing Quality Producing Quantity: 2006).

The apartheid regime had a negative impact on the skills development for Black Africans against their fellow Whites. The *Public Service Review Report, 2000* indicates that the proportion of the population in the public service for Black South African is 77% as compared to the 11% of Whites with 3% Asian and 9% Coloured. But as far as public service managerial positions are concerned Whites lead the pack with 61% against the 28% of Black South Africans. The diagram below clearly illustrates the distribution of

Table 1: Distribution of Public Service by Race and Skills in 1999

	African	Asian	Coloured	Whites	% of Over-all Public Service
Lower- Skilled	88	2	9	2	19%
Skilled	74	4	9	13	22%
Highly Skilled Production	66	4	9	21	55%
Highly Skilled Supervision	42	6	6	47	3%
Management	28	5	6	61	0%
Senior Management	47	7	9	37	0%
Proportion of Population	77	3	9	11	

Source: (PERSAL, December 1999)

the public servants in terms of race and skills in South Africa five years after the end of apartheid in 1994.

In their Skills Development Proposal (2007: 2) the Democratic Alliance (DA) argued that the manner in which South Africa's skills development system was developed shows a distinct ignorance of how the opportunities presented by the economy should be leveraged. They first argued that, in practice, the system assumes that employees rather than employers are qualified to identify the skills and these end up being completely unresponsive to the practical challenges. This is why it is important for critical questions to be asked before any training in skills development is conducted. Such questions include; What type of skills should be packaged? What type of training is required? What is the gap between the actual and the desired training and development?

Kroukamp (2002: 454) asserts that during the apartheid era the education and training policy has always been a hotly contested area of public policy with its methods and its racial discriminatory elements. He further reflects that during the apartheid regime the training system was developed around a number of apprenticeship training courses that were mainly aimed at equipping young white men to work within an industry. However, with the rapid technological changes, changes in the work organisation and the dramatic shift towards the global market, it has been proven that apprenticeship skills only are insufficient to withstand competition of the new world order. There is, therefore, a need for a fresh skills development approach within the South African public service. Another problem which is associated with skills development in the South African public service is the issue of political uncertainty in the country. Time was expended on the matter of the political transition of the early nineties with much emphasis put on addressing the political

situation in the country. Proper analysis of the expectation that post-apartheid economic growth would yield was extremely minimal and this caused a downturn in investment in skills development by employers (Rankhumise, 2008). In his arguments, Kroukamp (2002: 454) mentions that while many developed and developing countries were adapting to the global economy and strengthening their employees' capacity, South Africa lagged behind, constrained by its political problems which delayed it from paying more attention to the skills development of its workforce.

Shortage of skills and / or lack of skills development have a major impact on the filling of positions in the national and provincial departments. This has also led to a high vacancy rate in public institutions. Below is an example of national and provincial departments that have the highest vacancy rates due to the skills shortage and lack of skills development in the South African public service.

The high vacancy rate in provincial government departments, as reflected in table 2, are unacceptable because this causes inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the functioning of the departments and timely implementation of policies. This can also lead to poor public service delivery.

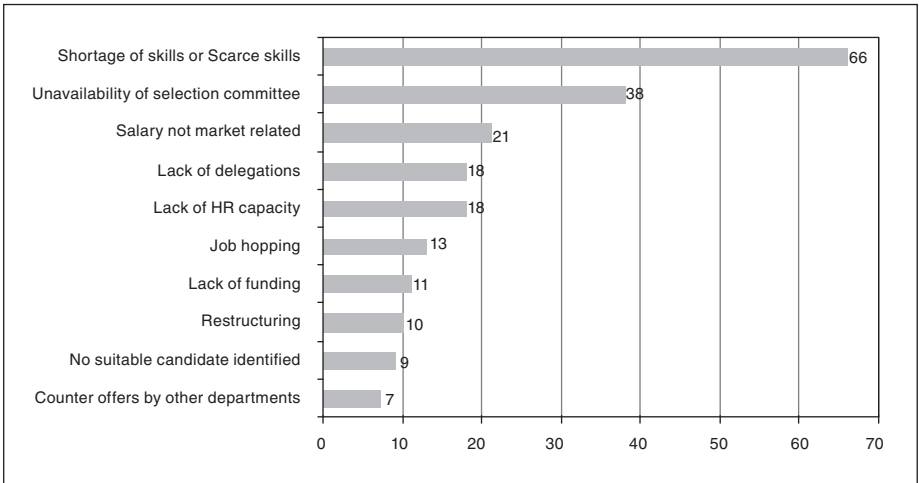
There are a number of reasons which are associated with this high vacancy rate in the provincial government departments. The diagram below clearly indicates and confirms

Table 2: Provincial Departments with the Highest Vacancy Rates in accordance with PERSAL Information

Province	Department	NO. of Posts on PERSAL	NO. of Posts vacant per PERSAL	PERSAL Vacancy rate
Eastern Cape	Provincial Treasury	609	466	76,5%
Limpopo	Safety & Security	297	222	74,7%
Northern Cape	Provincial Treasury	454	316	69,6%
Limpopo	Premier's Office	3 302	2256	68,3%
Northern Cape	Sports, Arts & Culture	580	391	67,4%
North West	Social Development	3 033	2 043	67,4%
North West	Sports, Arts & Culture	1 255	810	64,5%
KwaZulu Natal	Sports and Recreation	374	240	64,2%
Eastern Cape	Roads and Transport	8 483	5 125	60,4%
Mpumalanga	Economic Dev. & Planning	888	522	58,8%

Source: Public Service Commission, 2007:15

Table 3: Factors Impacting on the Filling of Posts



Source: Public Service Commission, 2007: 27

the argument that skills shortage and problems of skills development in the South African public service contribute towards the problems of service delivery, poor functioning and maladministration in the public service.

Most of the provincial departments' posts are vacant because nine departments indicated that there are no suitable candidates identified, meaning that there is no capable person for the positions available. This seems to highlight the issue of skills and competence. The matter of capacity is again highlighted as a factor leading to positions in national and provincial governments not being filled. This has been showed by 18 departments indicating that lack of capacity of human resources is one reason that led to positions not being filled.

Poor skills development in the South African public service contributes to poor service delivery as a result of inefficiency and ineffectiveness in government departments. An overwhelming 66 departments indicate that skills shortage and / or lack of skills in the South African public service has led to a high vacancy rate in government departments as well as being the major factor impacting on the inability to fill posts in the government departments (PSC, 2007: 28)

It is important that the government, the educational institutions and the private sector work together in ensuring that skills development in the public service is given serious attention so that service delivery activities can be executed effectively and efficiently.

SOLUTIONS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

Besides the skills development legislation that the new democratic government formulated to address the problems of the skills shortage in the South African public service, there were also plans which were solely developed to assist in terms of

solving the skills development. These plans include the introduction of *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiatives for South Africa* (AsgiSA) which is aimed at addressing matters pertaining to skills development and the efficiency of the state system; the introduction of the *Joint Initiative on Skills Acquisition* (JIPSA) which is aimed at ushering in a skills revolution by bringing government, business, labour and training institutions together to boost economic growth (Mbeki, 2006: 11) (cf. Kroukamp, 2007: 76).

In addition, the government has introduced the *National Skills Fund* which is to fund skills development through *Sector Education and Training Authorities* (SETAs), and the *Employment and Skills Development Lead Employers*, determined by the *National Skills Development Strategy* (NSDS). Recently, the government added another strategy to improve the skills of the public servants in the form of the *Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy* (PALAMA) which replaced *South African Management and Development Institute* (SAMDI). The aim of the Academy is to foster and co-ordinate the delivery of training in practical management skills.

Most of the government interventions on solving the skills development problem in South Africa seem to be poorly implemented. That is why there are still serious challenges of the lack of highly skilled officials whose ripple effect is poor service delivery. Table 4 illustrates that there was no rigorous skills development in public service post-apartheid because the country was busy with its political reconstruction.

According to Mokgoro (2000:7) the skills development mechanisms in the public service are important because they increase investment in education and training that will contribute to raising skills levels of the public sector. It improves employment prospects and also reduces unemployment as well as the high rate of vacancies, more especially

Table 4: Skills Level Breakdown of the Public Service in 1999 (%)

	EC	FS	GP	KZN	NW	NC	MP	LP	WC	NATIONALLY
Lower Skilled	19	26	22	19	20	22	23	26	19	14
Skilled	19	21	18	26	21	19	20	13	19	28
Highly Skilled Production	60	50	56	53	56	56	55	58	57	53
Highly Skilled Supervision	3	2	4	3	2	3	3	2	5	4
Management	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Senior Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

PERSAL, December 1999

in the government departments. Mokgoro (2000:8) correctly concludes that skills development mechanisms are vital as they assist in providing an environment which is conducive for growth and the development of the country.

Some of the practical, realistic and less complicated solutions for the problem of skills development in the South African public service that the government should consider implementing include:

- co-operation between government and educational institutions;
- national Experiential Learning;
- national Skills Development Programme; and
- tax rebates or exemption for skills development;

Co-operation between government and educational institutions

Training is not the only mechanism used to assist office-bearers to acquire the necessary competencies to successfully manage and administer public offices. It is just one of the many and varied mechanisms that should be used to cure maladministration and ensure the proper functioning of the public service. It is important that co-operation between government and higher educational institutions be promoted. Higher education training institutions have both the capacity and ability to assist government to develop the professional capacities of political office-bearers and public officials.

Kroukamp (2007:75) correctly argues that it is important that higher educational programmes should always address issues that deal with proper design and development of programmes and curricula which have the capacity to reflect the administrative needs of ongoing governmental activities as well as administrative reforms in the public service. This means the training that higher education institutions offer should not be what the government needs. Government department, more especially the Department of Education should always have an *indaba* with the higher education institutions so that the curriculum of higher education institutions should be developed in such a way that it can address the competency levels that are needed by government. This will also ensure that when the student graduates she / he will have the skills that are needed for a number of vacancies that are not filled in both national and provincial government departments. This idea is also supported by Kroukamp (2007:79) who argues that it is important that those who take the responsibility of providing competency, skills development and training in any higher education, for both prospective public servants as well as public office-bearers, should make sure that they adapt programmes which will play an important role in reflecting the demands and realities facing those who guide the public service now and in the future.

Co-operation between government and educational institutions should also be based on adequate funding for higher education institutions so that the institutions can function effectively. Furthermore, funding should be extended to students who are financially needy but academically deserving, to allow them to enrol at any higher education institution so that they can develop their skills to, ultimately, benefit the country as a whole. Moreover, co-operation should also be made for vacation work

in the various government departments for students who are about to complete their studies. This will assist such students to know what they should expect when they complete their studies. This should be done on the recommendation of the head of the department concerned in the respective higher education institution. Co-operation between government and higher education institutions should encourage continuous communication and working together, so that the skills, knowledge and competencies that educational institution offer, should be relevant to the needs of the South African public service.

National Experiential Learning

Promotion of national experiential learning is important because it contributes towards introducing prospective public servants on what to expect from the public office once they are qualified and employed. It is always a setback for any government department to employ a person who is fresh from the university without the necessary practical skills. This is because the person may still need extensive practical training in terms of what is expected of him / her to effectively and efficiently contribute towards the promotion of service delivery.

Currently government departments, both national and provincial, require a minimum of three years experience when they advertise any position. This leaves many graduates not being absorbed into the system because they do not have the required experience. Internships, as introduced by the government, are not very effective in providing the prospective public servants with the experience needed to perform in the public service as most of the internships are only based on small basic administrative functions which do not provide an intern with extensive knowledge on how a department functions and what the discrepancies are that the department faces as well as how they are going to be resolved (*Business Day*, 10 February 2008).

National experiential learning should be introduced as a solution for skills development for prospective public servants. This should be done in close co-operation between the educational institution and the government departments involved. The students (s) concerned go for practical training in the department involved regularly until completion of studies. For example, in Germany, students who demonstrate ability to contribute to the growth and development of the public service are given scholarships to study and are, on a semester basis, expected to serve as public servants each year until they complete their studies. After this they are interviewed and an intense selection process for the permanent placement in the public service (Kruger, 2008). This is important as it reduces the number of vacant posts in the departments and promotes continuity in terms of effective and efficient service delivery.

National Skills Development Programme

In any country there are areas within the state that need attention and special skills. That is why there is, what is known as the scarce skills development agenda in any country, more

especially those who are termed as developmental states. Without ignoring the general development of skills, the *National Skills Development Programme* should be introduced in the South African public service to ensure that scarce skills get the special attention they deserve. The scarce skills, as identified by a number of departments, and largely covered by, the *Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition* (JIPSA) include engineering, health profession, economic sciences, and Information Technology (PSC, 2007: 27). The introduction of national skills development planning should be used to promote training and development of scarce skills which are required to allow the country to increase its economic viability. This will also assist in creating and sustaining an environment that is conducive to developing the type of skills that are needed to enhance and promote the developmental agenda of the country.

The national skills development programme will have to put in place measures which will stimulate private sector investment in skills development and institute positive measures to maximise private sector absorption of skilled individuals to curb and combat the brain drain. Access to information and awareness of the skills development situation in the South African economy will have to be prioritised. Continuous in-service training should be encouraged and promoted so that public servants can be continuously equipped with the skills that will assist them to respond to the ever changing environment in their work place, and also for them to meet the new challenges brought by growing demands and administrative reforms.

Tax Rebates or Exemption for Skills Development

Although skills development is mainly the role of the government, private companies or organisations that assist in terms of training their employees and / or organisations that contribute financially to the skills development of any person in South Africa should be given some incentives for their noble contribution to skills development in the country. The most encouraging way could be by reduction tax. This can be done through the system of tax rebates. Most of the employers, especially in the private sector, do not want to contribute towards skills development but poach highly skilled people by offering them higher salaries which they can afford because they seldom invest in skills development training. Rankhumise (2008) argues that instead of government using a tax on employment as 'mechanisms' for national skills development, which, according to the *Public Service Commission Report on the Audit on the Vacancy Rates in both National and Provincial Departments 2007*, are not even bearing any positive results, the system of tax rebates or exemption for skills development should be utilised to compensate or reward those employers who are making efforts to improve skills development through financial contribution on training South African citizens.

There is no doubt that tax rebates or exemption will be an important incentive which will help to stimulate skills development by the private sector. Such an incentive will definitely be indispensable in making skills development an attractive prospect for the private sector and eventually contribute towards adequate skills development for the South African public service.

CONCLUSION

The acquisition of marketable skills and educational qualifications is arguably one of the best passports to opportunity for the individual in any free society. It is quite evident that prior to 1994, the majority of the South African population did not have much of a choice in how they would access skills training or what type of skills training they would like to pursue. The market was constricted in terms of the types of skills it could offer and who should benefit from those skills training. This is why South Africa is now experiencing the skills shortage in the public service. In terms of skills development in the South African public service, the state has the responsibility and role to play in ensuring skills development which will promote the effective and efficient functioning of the government in achieving growth and sustainable development. When implementing the suggested practical and realistic solutions for proper skills development in the South African public service, it is important that there should be quality monitoring and evaluations to assess if the solutions are bearing any positive results as far as its role in skills development is concerned. It is also important that if the solutions show that they are not capable in contributing towards skills development, they should be changed before they waste time and the resources of government.

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