

LEARNER'S PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEARNERSHIPS

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between different biographical variables and the learner's perceptions on the role of mentors in a learnership programme. The study adopted and customised a normative instrument for assessing the mentorship role developed by Janse van Rensburg and Roodt, (2005). A convenience sample was used with 280 learners from different public service departments who were enrolled in four different learnerships. The Mentorship Questionnaire was administered and the questionnaire yielded positive results. The findings and their implications are discussed as well as the recommendations thereof.

INTRODUCTION

According to Coetzee (2002), many countries are paying increased attention to educating and training their people. In South Africa a "skills revolution" was initiated by the Department of Labour through the promulgation of the Skills Development Act No 97 of 1998 (SDA), and the Skills Levy Act of 1999. The National Skills development Strategy (NSDS) was subsequently developed with a mission that aims to "contribute to sustainable development of skills growth, development and equity of skills development institutions by aligning their work and resources to the skills needs for effective delivery and implementation" (Department of Labour, 2005). The endeavour of the NSDS poses a challenge to training managers, providers and others involved in training and development to consider national priority areas in skills development. The indicator thereof is for government and its social partners to assess the contribution of the NSDS institutions and resources to the nationally agreed strategies for growth, development and equity. This initiative was undertaken because of South Africa's high unemployment rate (Department of Labour, 2005).

According to Bisschoff and Govender (2004), managers, employees and training providers are faced with a challenge to address the areas of redress, capacity building and providing skills for a largely unskilled labour force. The challenge is for employers, employees and training providers to take responsibility for workplace training, and thereby contribute to improving the country's skills levels. Specifically, training providers are faced with the task of improving workplace skills rapidly and effectively according to national standards, and of complying with the SDA (Bisschoff & Govender, 2004).

Erasmus and Van Dyk (1999) point out that one of the objectives of the NSDS is to assist designated groups, including the new entrants, to participate in accredited work, integrated learning and work-based programmes to acquire critical skills to enter the labour market and self-employment. Learnership programmes were established in terms of the SDA, and used as vehicles to ensure quality training and to improve employment prospects of persons previously disadvantaged. In the next section learnerships will be outlined in more detail in line with the objective of this study which is mainly to investigate the perception of the learners on the role of mentor in a learnership program.

LEARNERSHIPS

According to Coetzee (2002:106), a learnership is defined as a learning program which consists of a “structured learning component and practical work experience component”. Learnerships combine theory and practice, and culminate in a qualification that is registered in the National Qualifications Framework (DoL,1998). A learnership is ‘a route to a nationally-recognised qualification that relates to an occupation and consists of a structured learning component and practical work experience” (De Jager, Hattingh, & Huster, 2002). According to Sacht, (2006), learnerships are new work-based education and training programmes where learners not only learn why things are done but also how they are done. A learnership thus consists of both structured learning and structured work experience. Learnerships were created to replace the old apprenticeship system. With the apprentice system, a learner would complete a formal training period, and then return to the employer, where he would work as an apprentice for a period not less than four years (skills development services 2006).

MENTORING

According to Janse Van Rensburg and Roodt, (2005), one of the constructs extensively defined and referred to is mentorship. References to the concept of mentorship go back to ancient Greek mythology (cf. April, 1979; Chao, 1997; Chao, Waltz. & Gardener, 1992; Clawson, 1980, 1985; Rogers, 1992).

Janse Van Rensburg and Roodt, (2005), indicate that the process of transferring knowledge to the learner by a mentor has two components, which is the “tacit and implicit knowledge”. The authors furthermore indicate that “tacit” knowledge can be shown, while the “implicit” knowledge comes with years of experience and the mentor can only demonstrate the knowledge (Janse Van Rensburg & Roodt, 2005; Meyer & Fourie, 2004), define mentoring as a process, involving a dynamic and reciprocal relationship in a work environment, whereby a more advanced and wise career incumbent assists a less experienced person to develop in some specified category. Regents (2004), further defines mentoring as a relationship between an individual with potential and an individual with expertise. The role of the mentor is to guide the professional development of the mentee. Knowledge, experience and organizational perspective are shared candidly within a context of mutual respect and trust.

A mentor is a wise and trusted advisor and helper to an inexperienced person (Pens State, 2006). Welsh (1991), further defines a mentor as a close, trusted, and experienced coun-

seller or guide. Furthermore, mentors guide, support and counsel youths as they navigate their way in the adult world. Mentoring is associated with a variety of activities, including role-modelling, job shadowing, providing personal, academic and career advice, and networking (Kram, 1985). Douglas and Mc Cauley (1999), define the developmental relationship in a mentorship as a relationship that motivates individuals to learn and grow through exposure to new opportunities and the provision support. Pleis and Feldhusen (1995) define mentors as adults who introduce students to ideas, theories, tools, activities, or careers in their own fields of expertise. They further argue that gifted children can benefit from relationships with adults who are successful in their areas of interest.

In the light of these definitions, it is concluded that in the mentoring process the selected, trained individuals provide guidance and advice which will help to develop the careers of the protégées or learners.

No evidence in the literature relating to the learner's perception on the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships could be found. A review of the current South African literature indicates that a considerable amount of work has been done on learnerships. However none of that work deals with the learner's perceptions of the role of the mentor. Equally, much work has been done in the field of mentorship, but none of it relates to the mentor as perceived by the learner in a learnership programme.

Research conducted by Bisschoff and Govender (2005) designed and recommended an effective internal management framework for training providers to improve skills development in the South African workplace. One challenge identified in their research is that 'learners take in knowledge but cannot apply' the learning on the job (Bisschoff & Govender, 2004). Therefore, 'learning must include practical training'. Key findings of this article concentrate more on how learnerships are managed. The recommendations from the study show that effective delivery of a learnership programme and its outcomes requires the involvement of the persons involved from the outset, clarity of roles, and a carefully structured and monitored process of implementation.

According to Ragins (2002), the theory regarding diversified mentoring relationships indicates that gender makes a difference in mentoring relationships, because the mentoring partners are members of groups that possess differing degrees of power within organizations. Thomas (1990) found that protégés in same-gender relationships reported receiving more psychosocial and career-development mentoring than did protégés in cross-gender mentoring relationships. Other research indicated that female protégés with female mentors were more likely to report that their mentors provided role modelling than were protégés in other gender combinations (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990).

In addition, protégés in same-gender relationships were more likely to engage in after work social activities with their mentors than those in cross-gender relationships. No differences were observed in the career-related mentoring provided. Koberg, Boss, and Goodman, (1998) also found that protégés involved in same-gender relationships reported receiving greater psychosocial mentoring than did those in cross-sex relationships.

According to Dolan and Zeiling (1994), female mentors may not be able to navigate the conditions that contribute to stress and burnout. Male mentors for women may actually add to rather than mediate worker stress. The authors concluded that cross gender mentoring can increase emotional exhaustion, and male mentors may not have the perspectives necessary to provide the support needed for female workers.

Sosik and Godshalk (2000), in a study of 200 mentoring pairs, reported that male mentors provided instrumental but not psychological help, even to male protégés, while female mentors provided psychological but not instrumental help. Furthermore, Scandura and Viator (1994) also concluded that female protégés received more psychological help from female mentors than from male mentors. The findings indicate that male mentors assisted with work-related issues, while female mentors helped with the psychological support.

In the light of the above discussion, similarities in participants' backgrounds promote satisfaction and more contact between the mentor and the protégé. However, Clutterbuck and Abbott (2003) favour differences rather than similarities because they believe more learning occurs in such relationships. Furthermore, most of the studies repeatedly revealed that a significantly high proportion of women with successful careers have received encouragement and support from mentors (Arnold & Davidson, 1990; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Ragins & Cotton, 1997). Ragins and Cotton (1996), suggest that greater mentor benefits in organisations can promote the development of female mentors and can avoid many of the barriers women face in developing cross-gender mentoring relationships.

Janse Van Rensburg and Roodt (2005) constructed a new instrument that, according to the study, can play a suitable role in identifying and developing prospective mentors. The results of their study indicated that the instrument has acceptable metric properties, as it succeeded in measuring the mentorship role construct in a reliable and consistent manner (Janse Van Rensburg & Roodt, 2005). Clutterbuck (2005) attempted to draw together the thinking on the nature and concept of mentor and mentee competence. He also suggested a framework of competencies to assist in guiding the development of mentoring relationships into acquiring those competencies.

In the light of these findings it is clear that the mentor plays a very important role in the development of capacity for the less experienced employees. Gender, amongst others has been identified as an important variable in matching a mentor and a protégé. On the other hand, several studies have revealed no differences regarding mentoring provided in same gender and cross-gender mentorships (Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

This review, firstly, indicates that most of the studies previously conducted focused more on the Private Sector and not in the Public Sector. Secondly, the literature focused more on employed people who have already accumulated years of experience, and hence on expectations and perceived challenges among the employed protégés and mentors. Researchers will have to examine this from the perspective of a learner contracted in a learnership. This gives grounds for this research, because the focus of this study is different from the others, and, in-

deed, unique in the field of Human Resource Management. The willingness of an individual to mentor others is an important variable in the mentor-protégé relationship, considering specifically gender amongst other biographical variables.

What, then, are learner's perceptions of the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships? More specifically, do learners differ regarding their perceptions on the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships? In the light of the above, the objective of this study will therefore be to investigate the learner's perception on the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships.

HYPOTHESIS

There is no statistically significant difference between certain biographical variables and learner's perception of the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships.

Rationale:

Based on the fact that no evidence in the relevant literature could be found to support the relationship between different biographical variables (e.g. gender, age, level of education, tenure, and language) and perceptions of protégés on the role of the mentor, the hypothesis is therefore stated in a non-directional way.

Five sub-hypotheses will therefore be postulated and discussed regarding the biographical variables of:

- (1.1) Gender,
- (1.2) Age group,
- (1.3) Highest level of education,
- (1.4) Previous work experience,
- (1.5) Mentor age.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

The following research design was decided upon to gain insight into the role of a mentor in the implementation of learner ships: Exploratory, quantitative research. This was to allow for the exploration of a new area (role of mentors in implementing learnerships) where the results can provide significant insight into a given situation (Wikipedia, 2005), while allowing for the testing of hypothesis and the generalisation of data to the population (Hopkins, 2005). Ex post facto research is aimed at the discovery of possible causes for behaviour (Watson, 2005). Primary and secondary data was used in this research (Culbert, 2005).

Survey research

The method of information collection was in a form of a questionnaire applied in the chosen organisation.

Sample

The sampling frame for the study consisted of 450 learners from public service departments enrolled in learnerships. The convenience sample of 450 learners yielded 280 records. A response rate of 61% was obtained and only fully completed records were used for data analysis.

Table 1: Completed questionnaire; gender obtained from the sample; age of the obtained sample; mentor age

	Frequency	Percent
COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE		
Completed	273	97,5
Not fully Completed	7	2,5
Total	280	100,0
GENDER		
Female	157	57,5
Male	110	40,3
Not specified	6	2,2
Total	273	100,0
AGE		
25 or Younger	77	28,2
26-30	133	48,7
31-40	63	23,1
Total	273	100,0
MENTOR AGE		
Less than 36	85	31,1
36 to 40	81	29,7
Older than 40	70	25,6
Total	236	86,4
Not specified		
System	37	13,6
Total	273	100,0

Table 1 reveals that of the 280 records, 273 (97,5%) were fully completed and therefore used for data analysis of this study. Seven records, (2,5 percent) were not completed, and therefore discarded. From Table 2 it is evident that 57,5% of the respondents were females, and 40,3% males. Six respondents did not indicate their gender.

Table 1 also portrays the age distribution of the learners. The age group that provided the largest response was 25 – 30 years (48,7 percent). This shows that the majority of the population in this study falls in this age category. This category is followed by learners younger than

25 years, with a response of 28,2 percent, while those between the ages of 31-40 showed a response of 23,1 percent.

In this study, learners were mentored by senior people in terms of age and experience in their respective departments. These senior employees agreed to share their information, advice and emotional support with the learners as their juniors (Owen, 1991). Table 1 further shows the ages of the mentors, where 29,7 % of the mentors were between 36-40, while 25,6% were above the age of 40. Only 31,1 % were below the age of 36.

Table 2: Background Information of the Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
RACE		
African	268	98,2
Coloured	3	1,1
Not specified	2	0,7
Total	273	100
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION		
Grade 12 or Lower	188	68,9
Post Matric Dip / Degree	81	29,7
Not specified	4	1,5
Total	273	100
HOME LANGUAGE		
Nguni(Zulu,Xhosa,Swati & Ndebele)	216	79,1
Sotho (Northern & Southern)	35	12,8
Tsonga	9	3,3
Venda	1	0,4
English	2	0,7
Afrikaans	1	0,4
Other	6	2,2
Not Specified	3	1,1
Total	273	100,0

Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents were Africans (98,2%) followed by 1,1 % of Coloureds. The majority of the respondents had an education level of Grade 12 or lower (68,9 %), while only 29,7% of the population had a post matriculation diploma, degree or post-graduate qualification. The home language of the respondents in this study is mainly from the Nguni group (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele) at 79,1 %, followed by Sotho 12,8%, Tsonga 3,3%, Venda 0,4%, English 0,7%, and Afrikaans 0,4%, while "other" is 2,2% (Note that a Tswana category was not included).

MEASURING INSTRUMENT

The study adopted and customised a normative instrument for assessing the mentorship role developed by Janse Van Rensburg and Roodt, (2005), Their study focused on “competent and experienced managers especially in the ranks of black managers”. The measuring instrument was used to identify and develop mentors. Analysis of their results on the Mentorships Role Questionnaire yielded a Cronbach Alpha of 0,9718, which indicated a highly acceptable reliability (Janse Van Rensburg & Roodt, (2005),

Considering the high reliability of the instrument, this study adopted the Mentorship Role Questionnaire (MRQ) to assess the role of the mentors in the implementation of Learnerships in the Public Sector. The instrument was customised to accommodate learners in the learnership programme. The biographical background was included, and the first three questions were based on the fact that the respondent had a mentor. Questions 1a and b considered the type of mentorship, question 2 the mentor phase in which the protégé currently finds himself/herself and Question 3 considered the mentor’s age. The rest of the questions were phrased in such a way that everybody could answer them whether they had a mentor or not. The MRQ has a five-point intensity scale. Questions 4 to 6 concerned the quality of the mentorship and the frequency of the interactions. The rest of the 29 items were based on the roles of a mentor.

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The MRQ consisted of 29 items. The first part of the questionnaire, Section A, focused mainly on the demographic information of the learners discussed above on the sample of participants. Section B focused on the role of the mentor, where questions 1(Q1) – 3 (Q3), which address the type of mentor, the phase and the age, were completed only by learners with mentors. The rest of the questions from Q4-Q29 were completed by all the learners, regardless of whether they had mentors or not.

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha = 0,926. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient of all the sections indicates that the scales have acceptable reliability, and can consistently measure the particular dimensions of the magnitude it is designed to measure. In other words, the measuring instrument is capable of consistently reflecting the same underlying constructs. Furthermore, it indicates a high degree of homogeneity between the MRQ items.

This instrument appears to have construct and face validity based on the item content.

Other available instruments

Noe (1988a) developed a questionnaire to assess the two categories of functions served by a mentor (career and psychosocial functions). He also examined their relationships to the quality of interaction in formal mentorship. Ragins and McFarlin (1990) further developed a 33-point mentor role instrument to measure mentor functioning. This instrument includes the nine mentor roles of Kram (1988), and developed a three-dimensional mentoring function questionnaire, namely career, role modelling and psychosocial functions. Two additional psychosocial-related roles were included in the instrument, namely parent and social interaction (Scandura & Katterberg, 1988).

Research Procedure

The MRQ was distributed to Mpumalanga province where learners were hosted for the learner-ship programme. Hard copies as well as an electronic version of the MRQ were forwarded for distribution to Mpumalanga Provincial co-ordinator and the Service Providers who conducted training for the learners. All instructions were clearly communicated and written out to ensure adherence to the ethical codes. Most of the learners completed the MRQ in their classes and some at the workplaces. Learners could respond anonymously, and all responses were treated with utmost confidentiality.

Statistical analysis

The responses of the completed questionnaires were forwarded to STATCON of University of Johannesburg which performed the statistical analysis. All the calculations were done by means of the SPSS Windows program of SPSS International.

RESULTS

Factor analysis is a specialised statistical technique that is particularly useful for investigating construct validity. The purpose of factor analysis is to help the researcher discover and identify the unities or dimensions, called factors, behind many measures. The MRQ was factor analysed according to the procedure suggested by Schepers (2004) in order to determine the factor structure of the instrument. According to Gregory (1996), reliability refers to consistency in measurement, which provides a measure to determine how repeatable the results are. Lill and Visser (1998) further emphasise the consistency with which an instrument measures over time and under different conditions. For the accuracy of an instrument to be interpretable; a test must be reliable (Kerlinger, 1992).

Reliability is important due to the fact that decisions cannot be based on results that cannot be repeated. The result of the reliability analysis is a reliability coefficient (r) where 0 indicates a completely unreliable test and 1 indicates a completely reliable test.

Table 3: Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0,926	26

Table 3 shows a Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of 0,926, which indicates that the MRQ is highly reliable, and it can consistently measure the role of mentors in the implementation of learnerships. This indicates that the instrument has a high level of homogeneity amongst the items used and is capable of consistently reflecting the same underlying constructs (Cortina, 1993).

In order to test sub-hypothesis 1.1 the t-test for equality of means is used to compare the means, as there are only two independent groups (male and female) present. The independent t-tests statistics for the gender and Mentors Role are reported in Table 4, and include Levene's test of homogeneity of variance.

Table 4: T-Test: Independent comparisons of the mean difference scores between gender and mentor's role

t-test for Equality of Means				
TT	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
-0,924	232,731	0,356	0,05536	0,05990

*Equal variances not assumed

The results indicate that the group means of male and female did not differ statistically significantly. The observed t-value obtained was 0,924 ($p = 0,356$). Sub-hypothesis 1.1 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

In order to test Hypothesis 1.2, the ANOVA was used to compare the means of the age categories, as there are more than two groups (three different Age Categories) present.

Table 5: Age: anova comparison of between-subject effects of different age groupings and mentor's role

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0,771	2	0,385	1,732	0,179
Within Groups	53,416	240	0,223		
Total	54,187	242			

Table 5 indicates a significance level of 0,179, greater than 0,05. This insignificance indicates that there is no significant difference between the mean scores within and between the groups (age). Sub-hypothesis 1.2 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

In order to test sub-hypothesis 1.3 the t-test for the highest level of education and Mentor's role was used. The independent t-tests statistics for the highest level of education and Mentor's role are reported in Table 6, and include Levene's test of homogeneity of variance.

Table 6: T-Tests: independent comparisons of the mean difference scores between highest levels of education

	Levene's Test For Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	000	0,999	-0,362	237	0,717	0,06635

As can be seen from Table 6 Levene's F-ratio does not differ statistically significantly for the dependent variable, indicating that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, that is, the variances are homogeneous. The homogeneity assumption has therefore been met for the dependent variable. The last four columns of Table 6 contain the t-test results of the dependent variable. The results indicate that the groups mean of male and female did not differ statistically significantly. The observed t-value obtained was 0,362($p = 0,717$). Sub-hypothesis 1.3 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

In order to test sub-hypothesis 1.4 the t-test for equality of means is used to compare the means, as there are only two independent groups (Less than one year; One or more) present. The independent t-tests statistics for the previous work experience and Mentors Role are reported in Table 7

Table 7: T-Test: independent comparisons of the mean difference scores between previous work experience and mentor's role

t-test for Equality of Means				
T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
0,519	209,642	0,605	0,03305	0,06373

*Equal variances not assumed

Table 7 contains the t-test results of the dependent variable. The results indicate that the group mean of less than one year or one or more years previous work experience did not differ statistically significantly. The observed t-value obtained was 0,519 ($p = 0,605$). Sub-hypothesis 1.4 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

In order to test Sub-hypothesis 1.5 the ANOVA was used to compare the means of the age categories, as there are more than two groups (three different Mentor Age Categories) present.

Table 8: Mentor age: anova comparison of between-subject effects of different age groupings and mentor's role

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0,481	2	0,240	1,084	0,340
Within Groups	45,905	207	0,222		
Total	46,385	209			

Table 8 depicts the results of the test between-subject effects regarding different Mentor Age categories and Mentor's Role. Table 8 further indicates a significance level of 0.340 which is greater than 0,05. This is insignificant, indicating that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of within and between the groups (mentor age). Sub-hypothesis 1.5 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

DISCUSSION

The principal aim of this study was to assess the relationship between different biographical variables and learner's perception on the role of the mentor during the implementation of learnerships. In the following section the results will be discussed.

The factor analysis yielded reliability statistics with a Cronbach Alpha of 0,926. This confirms the results of the study conducted by Janse Van Rensburg and Roodt (2005), which yielded a Cronbach alpha of 0,9718, where a high acceptable reliability was indicated.

Most of the learner responses scored between 4 and 5 which show positive results. Results on one of the items in this study further show two extreme responses where 33% of the learners strongly feel that mentors should not influence their own beliefs, while 32,2 % strongly feel that mentors should do so. These indicate that learners have different opinions in terms of their own beliefs and the mentor's influence.

The t-test for equality of means was used to compare the means of the two independent groups (male and female) present in this study. The t-test results of the dependent variable was analysed, and the results indicate that the group mean of male and female did not differ statistically significantly. The observed t-value obtained was 0,924 ($p = 0,356$). Sub-hypothesis 1.1 is therefore supported by empirical evidence. The results of this study differ with the theory of Ragins (2002) regarding diversified mentoring relationships, which indicates that gender makes a difference in mentoring relationships. This is because the mentoring partners are members of groups that possess differing degrees of power within organizations. Furthermore, in terms of race, Dreher and Cox (1996) demonstrated that protégés benefit most from white mentors specifically in the financial sector with salary advantages. However, this conclusion cannot be supported by the results of this study.

ANOVA was used to compare the means of the age categories, as there are more than two groups, and a significance level of 0,179, which is greater than 0,05, was found. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the mean scores within and between the groups in terms of age. Sub-hypothesis 1.2 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

The independent t-tests statistics for the highest level of education and Mentor's role give results that indicate that the group mean of male and female did not differ statistically significantly. The observed t-value obtained was 0,362 ($p = 0,717$). The results therefore confirm that there is no difference between highest levels of education with regard to the dependent variables. Sub-hypothesis 1.3 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

The t-test for equality of means was used to compare the means of the previous work experience of the learners as there are only two independent groups (less than one year, and One or more years). The results indicate that the mean score difference of 0,1882 was obtained ($M = 2,3973$, $SD = 0,42838$; $M = 2,3643$, $SD = 0,50095$). This therefore indicates that no differences between less than one year or one or more years of previous work experience with respect to the dependent variables were found. Sub-hypothesis 1.4 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

The ANOVA was also used to compare the means of the mentor age categories, as there are more than two groups (three different Mentor Age Categories). It can therefore be concluded that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of within and between the groups with regard to mentor age. Sub-hypothesis 1.5 is therefore supported by empirical evidence.

The main findings, based on the research results of the statistical analysis concluded that no statistically significant differences exist between learners regarding their perceptions on the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships.

However, the following limitations of this study should be considered:

The available knowledge as found in the literature was clearly not enough to predict or confirm the results. The limited use of the concept of learnerships in international research, and, as far as can be determined, the absence of any research on the topic in the South African environment, make this research stand out as being a cutting-edge knowledge in this domain.

On the biographic data, particularly language, Tswana was omitted, which limited most of the learners falling within this category from being identified.

A sample of convenience was used where 450 learners yielded 280 records. A response rate of 61% was obtained, which indicates that 39% of the 450 was not reached. This challenges the representativity of the sample, and thus limits the generalisation of results. This was an exploratory-descriptive study based on a sample from a specific population. The results should therefore be used with extreme caution. More studies are necessary to determine whether or not the present findings can be generalized to other populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The absence of any research in the South African environment with regard to learner's perception on the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships makes this research stand out as being a cutting-edge knowledge in this domain. This study was conducted only in Mpumalanga, and thus generalisation of results will be limited. An opportunity therefore exists for further research in other provinces, where other learnerships are implemented. The learners in this study were in their early years. An opportunity similarly to assess learners with many years of work experience, particularly the employed learners (in terms of section 18.1 of the SDA) in the workplace can be explored (DoI, 1998). In the light of the above, it is recommended that this study serve as a foundation for further investigation. It is therefore recommended that the study be conducted in other provinces where learnerships are implemented.

Furthermore, the mentor's perception of the role of protégés in the implementation of learnerships can also be investigated. In future, departmental employees, supervisors and manager's perception can also be explored to ensure a clear understanding and acceptance of the implementation of Learnerships.

Considering the responsibility and the major role played by the mentor, it is recommended that their contribution to skills development be aligned or linked to performance agreements. This will afford mentors an opportunity to be assessed and rewarded based on their performance. A binding agreement between a learner and a mentor can also serve as a contract and a guide in the implementation process which will also clarify their roles. Mentoring therefore ends up being an additional task to the existing key performance areas of the mentors. It is evident that if the systems respond to the member's needs, if individuals feel prepared to carry out their responsibilities and if the organisational rewards use the systems, then the members will embrace them (Kram, 1985). A mentor must therefore be willing to provide his or her services and have passion for skills development.

Furthermore, capacity-building of mentors is equally important for role clarification where mentors will understand what is expected of them in the implementation of learnerships. To ensure a high-quality mentoring process, both mentors and protégés should be trained to engage in mentoring relationships. Relationship building in mentoring depends on a sense of mutuality; a sense that both persons are gaining something of value from their time spent together.

14 Mentors and protégés value their time together because of mutual respect and regard for one another. They contribute to each other's sense of worth and dignity. Often the ability to add quality to the relationship relies on training sessions that help both the mentor and protégés learn how to enhance their relationship. This relates directly to the above-mentioned qualities and characteristics that a competent mentor should possess. Also considering the characteristics that an effective mentor should possess, which can be strengthened and be more emphasised in the capacity-building sessions where roles and responsibilities will be clearly outlined. This will also help to reduce some of the challenges facing the mentors in terms of their job security.

Protégés also need to be well inducted and socialised in terms of the do's and don'ts in the mentoring process, while continuously be given training. It is further recommended that all involved should meet regularly and have proceedings noted in the form of a report to document decisions taken. A protégé evaluation of the mentorship programme should be done on a monthly basis to ensure proper monitoring and evaluation of the programme. This will also assist in cases of intervention where such a need arises.

In conclusion, the present study opens up new research possibilities, such as studying the mentor's perception of the mentorship programme in the implementation of learnerships both in the public and the private sectors of the South African labour market. The testing of senior management's attitudes and level of acceptance of mentorship as a crucial factor in the learnership implementation should further be investigated.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on one of the burning people issues in South Africa, and contributes to more light with regard to the learner's perception on the role of the mentor in the implementation of learnerships.

In the light of the above, it is evident that the successful mentorship programme can motivate learners to perform better and be successful in their learning processes. A well-designed mentorship programme can assist learners to achieve more, and motivate them to learn and grow through practical exposure. Furthermore, developing, planning and implementing a mentorship programme are some of the most important decisions to be taken before implementation. The implementation of the mentorship programme will also ensure that the public service employees are equipped with the necessary abilities to cope with new demands, whilst creating an environment where they are free to practice and demonstrate their newly-learned abilities. Therefore, one can conclude that a mentor, who guides supports and counsels youths as they navigate their way in the adult world, will yield positive results, especially from a learner's point of view.

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