

PASSPORT

Learning Equality

By Stacey Wagner

South Africa creates the workforce of today—and tomorrow.

Photo by Tony Stone Images

How often have you said to yourself, “If only I had a second chance, I’d do it differently”? Most people have wished for the chance to start over—to remake themselves—but few get that opportunity. In South Africa, however, people are getting that second chance.

Prior to 1990, apartheid created inequities that kept South Africa’s black population from participating fully in business and government, and from obtaining a proper education. Neither

desirable nor sustainable, apartheid fell apart by the early 1990s, ushering in a new era—one in which citizens were ready to address old grievances and equality was to become the norm in all aspects of life. Segregation was abolished, and access to jobs in business and government was made available to all South Africans. Opportunities opened up. Dreams, however, still went unrealized.

While the rejection of apartheid created many new opportunities, jobs

went unfilled due to a lack of skilled workers. The legacy of apartheid created a dearth of employable people. In addition, the requisite skills began to change, reflecting the new economy and its appetite for knowledge workers.

South Africa's businesses are now faced with a frustrating paradox: Business is taking off, but there are no workers to fill positions. Global access and competition are increasing, but businesses are losing talent to outside organizations. As a final blow, HIV is raging through South Africa's population, cutting lives short and making it difficult to find healthy workers.

South Africa now faces the daunting challenge of not only creating the work-

building blocks in creating a new South African workforce.

The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act is the leveling instrument, designed to pave over previous inequalities by preventing and prohibiting unfair discrimination and harassment, and promoting equality. This is, in part, designed to help all South Africans gain access to jobs. But what happens when workers are under-skilled?

The Skills Development Act was promulgated to increase investment in education and training, right historical wrongs regarding access and opportunities to learn, and encourage employers to use their workplaces as active learning

"The benefits [of that act for South Africa] involve remedying the skills backlogs of the past," explains Rob van der Schyff, technical training manager for South African Breweries, one of the country's major employers. "For companies, the benefits are an outcome-orientated, qualified workforce and the effective use of workforce development programs."

Many of South Africa's workers, unable to obtain an adequate formal education in the past, are now gaining recognition for their work experience under the National Qualifications Framework. An outgrowth of the labor movement of the 1970s, the NQF provides the means to help people learn continuously and develop skills that are portable so they can remain employable throughout their lives. The framework is a "set of principles and guidelines, by which records of learning achievement are registered to enable national recognition of acquired skills and knowledge, ensuring an integrated system that encourages lifelong learning." That means accumulated experiences, as well as academic qualifications, are included in all skill profiles. To help workers who have experience but little formal education, the Adult Basic Education and Training program was created. ABET enables semiliterate or illiterate workers to gain literacy. Once they've learned to read, workers can obtain a formally recognized qualification under the NQF and move up the career ladder.

Transforming a national education and training system is a gargantuan task and requires an enormous amount of money. The Skills Development Levies Act requires every employer to pay a skills levy in the amount of 0.5 percent of payroll in the first year and 1 percent every year thereafter. That levy is divided between the Sector Education and Training Authorities and the National Skills Fund. The National Skills Fund

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force of the future, but also the workforce of today. It must train and educate its current population while preparing its future workforce. South Africa is rising to that challenge by enacting legislation and creating programs to train its workforce while building a national framework for lifelong learning.

A combination of legislative acts has set the process in motion. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) was created to make the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) more effective in eradicating social and economic inequalities. In addition, the Skills Development Act (1998), the National Qualifications Framework (1995), and the Skills Development Levies Act (1999) all operate as

environments. To do that, an institutional and financial framework has been established that is made up of

- labor centers
- a skills-development, levy-grant scheme
- the National Skills Authority
- the National Skills Fund
- the Skills Development Planning Unit
- the Sector Education and Training Authorities.

The Skills Development Act also encourages partnerships between the public and private sectors of the economy to provide education and training in and for the workplace and to cooperate with the South African Qualifications Authority.

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advises the Education Minister on the national skills-development strategy, while the SETAs develop sector-skills plans within the national strategy. The South African Qualifications Authority is the standards-setting body that works in conjunction with the NQF to set sector skill qualifications. Companies that provide training to their employees are eligible for reimbursement of the levy.

As you might expect, those initiatives have implications for employers. Rina Oosthuizen, manager of HRD for Cape Gate in Gauteng, says, “The negative side about the Skills Development Levies Act is the additional costs for a company... [but] we [can now] train a workforce in a structured manner that will not only benefit the employee, but also the company and the bigger South Africa.”

“The Levies Act provides teeth,” says van der Schyff. “That legislation will be a win-win-win situation for [South Africa], companies, and individuals.”

The legislation also creates opportunities for trainers, believes Mantuka Maisela, Group Human Resources director at Murray & Roberts in Bedfordview. As the importance of lifelong learning grows, so will opportunities for training professionals who desire to help people gain the skills they need to remain employable throughout their working lives.

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