

Understanding Learnerships

Are learnerships really a new concept? Only to some degree. For decades, young people have entered the workplace through internships or apprenticeships. However, what really makes learnerships different is the context of government's skills development strategy.

The fundamental assumption behind the new strategy is that the formal education system will be unable to produce the kind of people needed to fast-track South Africa's development. Therefore, much of the responsibility for training the workforce has been shifted to the employers. Unlike in other first world countries, South Africa's strategy does not assume that the free market can be trusted to meet the country's needs. While offering a range of incentives, government has rather opted to tightly control skills development through a litany of regulations and a complex web of new institutions such as the various Skills Education & Training Authorities.

Knowing the private sector's resistance to government imposition, it is not surprising that business has been reluctant to come on board. Most companies thought that the amount of paperwork involved in claiming back the skills levy they had paid did not justify the effort required.

Over time, through the hard work of the SETAs and different industry bodies, the private sector's perception has gradually changed. Amongst the SETA's many programmes on offer, companies have become particularly interested in learnerships, which after all make good business sense.

Benefits

Black Economic Empowerment

Industry charters have been a major reason why companies have embarked on learnerships. With a strong emphasis on broad-based Black Economic Empowerment, companies can earn up to 30% of their score from skills development, which for some reduces the pressure of changing their ownership structure.

Financial Benefits

Government is also offering substantial **tax breaks**, R50 000 for signing up an unemployed learner and R 42 500 for signing up a current staff member. Additional grants for the training and management of learners can be as high as R 60 000. In other words, improving skills within a company pays handsomely.

Human Capital

As intended, learnerships can deepen and widen the pool of skilled people available to companies. As we have entered the information age and South Africa has become part of the global economy, having **well-trained employees** is a competitive pre-requisite.

Job Creations

Finally, if South African companies want to do business in a stable socio-economic environment, they will have to **make a contribution** to the creation of new jobs which is the number one development priority for the country. By giving new entrants a chance to get their first work experience, their prospect of finding long-term employment increases significantly.

Best Practices in HR

Most people look at learnerships as an initiative that has grown out of our unique social challenges. On second thoughts, however, it is easy to conclude that a learnership is nothing but a coherent programme of best global practices in human resource management. In other words, getting involved in learnerships is not an act of charity but sound human capital management.

Professional Bodies: Unlike artisans or lawyers who for centuries have been organised as self-regulated professions, most occupations are not well-structured. The introduction of Unit Standards has done a lot to improve the situation. Unit standards are a system of classifying the different competencies required for each profession. The process of developing these



Employment and Skills Development Lead Employer

Time and again, the Minister of Labour has heard from businesses that the learnership process is too cumbersome. In response to this, the Department of Labour decided to set up Employment and Skills Development Lead Employers (ESDLE's) to reduce the administrative burden for organisations wishing to take on learners.

Chosen from over 1000 organisations, i-Fundi was appointed as an ESDLE.

Anyone interested in taking on learners simply needs to call i-Fundi who will then manage the whole process from identifying the right learnerships, accessing the grant and tax breaks, selecting the learners and organising the training, to supporting the learner and conducting the final assessment.

i-Fundi's rigorous selection process ensures that companies only get learners with real talent. i-Fundi's training emphasises developing a customer-focused attitude and building practical skills so that learners are an asset to your organisation from the moment they arrive.

Anyone wishing to take on learners should contact i-Fundi at **0861 333 22 1** or **www.ifundi.co.za**



Unit Standards for the different occupations or learnerships has introduced a far greater degree of co-ordination and specialisation. They define ladders of competence against which people can progress in their careers. In case someone needs to be re-skilled, the previously acquired competencies can be taken forward to the next qualification. Apart from saving costs, it means that people become more mobile. People can redirect their careers more easily even if they have been retrenched. It all amounts to increased flexibility in the labour market and responsiveness of a country's economy.

Skills planning: Before an organisation decides what people to hire or what training to conduct it should conduct a skills audit. From the result of this audit, it will be able to develop a skills plan that outlines how an organisation will attain the necessary skills to achieve its strategic goals. Although a central part of the new National Skills Development Strategy, skills planning is not new, it has been a global best practice for a long time.

Recruitment: Once sufficient numbers of learners are certified, recruiters will no longer have to guess how competent an applicant is but they will be able to choose from candidates with nationally recognized certificates. Already now, they will be able to conduct competency-based interviews if they align their questionnaires with the Unit Standards. Since learnerships are aimed at giving previously disadvantaged individuals a first break in the workplace, companies will be able to strengthen their employment equity numbers and grow their internal pool of talent, which over the years has proven to be the best affirmative action strategy.

Training: Organisations have complained for a long time that they are unable to see how training in the classroom improves performance in the workplace. Unlike in the past, when training was delivered separate to operational realities, learnership curriculums are based on Unit Standards, which have been developed by industry experts. Most of the training actually occurs in the workplace. Both trainers and workplace supervisors work closely together to identify areas that can be strengthened through coaching or further training.

Performance management: Throughout a learnership, participants are constantly assessed either in the classroom or on the job to track the progress of the learner. These assessments are closely linked to a company's performance management. Based on the results of these reviews, personal development plans are formulated, which are aggregated into the training schedule of a company.

Quality management: Training providers undergo a rigorous and admittedly cumbersome accreditation process. Throughout the duration of a learnership, the relevant parties are expected to enforce strict quality management processes. Although many of the SETAs are still struggling to deliver, quality management processes are intended to ensure that any certificate issued can be trusted to be of the highest standard.

Critical success factors

Having implemented learnerships for the last two years several lessons have been learned. Critically, for a learnership programme to succeed, it is important to secure the **commitment of an organisation's leadership** and that of its line managers. Line managers will be most receptive to learners if the learners are not perceived to be an additional burden to the current workload, but rather a source of extra energy and skills. To achieve this, one requires a clear understanding of where extra staff is needed.

As obvious as it may seem, **choosing the right people**, be they learners, mentors, facilitators, or project co-ordinators is probably the single most important factor. This starts with selecting learners that have the basic entry-level qualification, but more importantly, learners who are ambitious, committed and appreciative of the learnership opportunity. We have seen from our experience that the greatest challenge lies in people accepting their inner power, believing in themselves and then having the will to succeed.

Both the facilitators and mentors need to have the capacity and passion to help learners realize their potential. Mentors and coaches need to understand how much attention a learner requires. Unfortunately, in some organizations, even a well-meaning mentor or coach is unable to perform his/her duty adequately – either due to the mentor's own workload, a culture that is not supportive of learning, a lack of suitable work for the learner or a shortage of equipment.

Training in the learnership context is a significant departure from the past approaches to training. It is no longer enough to just impart knowledge. A learner is only competent if s/he is able to prove that s/he can apply the new knowledge and skills in the workplace. This means that the learning material must not be based on theory alone, but actually show a learner how a job is performed. It further means that the **learning process extends into the workplace**. In other words it is not a once-off event, but a process whereby learning moves constantly back and forth between classroom and worksite.

Learnerships require a paradigm shift. Organizations need to realize that developing people requires an **investment that has a long-term payoff**. Supervisors will also have to change from seeing themselves as bosses, to becoming coaches that succeed and fail together with the people they lead.

A learnership is complete once a learner is declared competent. A qualified assessor with the necessary subject experience will collect the appropriate evidence to evaluate a learner's achievement. To do so, it is important that the necessary evidence is collected and documented throughout the learnership.

Reduce Administrative Burden

The implementation of learnerships entails many challenges. Having heard the complaints of employers who feel overwhelmed by the administrative burden attached to the management of learnerships, the Minister of Labour has created Employment, Skills and Development Agencies (ESDA) to make it as easy as possible for organisations to take on learners. A phone call is all it takes for an employer interested to take on a learner. From then on, ESDAs provide employers with a one-stop solution to help access grants, find the right candidates, conduct training, impart the necessary coaching skills to supervisors, assess the competency of the learners and finally facilitate their certification.

It is clear that all of those who participated over the last two years in the provision of learnerships have learned a lot. In the process, all have matured and increased their capacity to deliver. It might just be that if we look back in five years from now, we shall be able to say that learnerships have been one of the areas in which the country has made the greatest progress.

A Company's main contribution will be that it did what it was meant to do – conducting business, and in the process creating jobs and prosperity for all.

