

Article Category: Human Resources

SKILLS TRAINING IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

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South Africa stands on the brink of a new era with regards to training. The country is in a transitional phase of change from the old system of apprenticeship training to the new system of learnerships.

INTRODUCTION

The main emphasis of this article is to inform the general contracting fraternity in South Africa about the changes in the training systems and the introduction of the Skills Development Act. The purpose is twofold: Firstly, to elicit discussion and stimulate debate amongst contractors in the Construction Industry and secondly to gather comments and viewpoints from stakeholders.

Recent discussions with representatives from Industry indicated that there is not complete clarity on the new education system and its implications. One of the concerns is that in past decades, when the apprenticeship system was operational, apprentices would, after a specified period of time, become skilled artisans and become masters of their trades. This resulted in excellent quality workmanship that is evident in many of South Africa's architecturally and aesthetically pleasing buildings. Will this trend continue?

In dealing with training issues some of the common questions often asked by the contractors are:

- Where have all the apprentices gone?
- Why are there no more opportunities for the training of apprentices?
- Does the present system of training apprentices substantiate the needs of the relevant industries?
- Where do persons go to learn a specific trade?

These questions seem to be very pertinent to the present general trend in all sectors, noticeably so in the Building Industry in South Africa.

This article unfolds as follows:

The New South Africa and Education Acts

It is often heard at conferences, seminars and through the general media in South Africa that the people of a country are regarded as the most important asset. Yet statistics show that an insufficient amount of money is spent on training people in comparison to developed countries. (Wienand G,1991, p.7).

According to Van Rooyen (1991, p. 11), a skilled workforce is absolutely critical for the economic advancement of any country and therefore a formal training system is essential if the desired level of skills for any occupation is to be achieved within a specified period.

In 1994 the International Community witnessed the birth of a new democracy in South Africa. At the same time, because education became demographically representative and with the idea of education for all people, this new beginning brought about many new challenges for the country to face, in looking for better ways of improving education and training systems.

This was brought about by the ever-demanding competitive global environment, and was influenced by social, geographical, political, technological and economical conditions.

To survive in such a demanding environment, the country needed to implement changes in an effort towards more substantial and beneficial service delivery for the people of the country.

Since being democratically elected in 1994, the government in South Africa has set a new vision to revitalise training programmes in order to uplift the skills profile of South Africa's workforce. The proposed changes in training systems have often been spoken about in recent years and stated by the Minister of Public Works on television. This renewal strategy will bring a new approach to the foreground. The new coherent education and training system attempts to integrate theory and practice. This approach has been constituted under the South African Qualifications Authority Act (SAQA) and the Skills Development Act (SDA). The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) set out the levels of qualifications, the types of qualifications and their credits. This framework guides the development of qualifications.

An Exposition of Skills Training in South Africa

When we pause for a moment and analyse what the basic aim of apprentice training is, the following citation comes to mind:

" The aim of training is understood to be the enabling of a person in attaining and mastering all the skills required for a productive career in one of the trade disciplines " (Van Rooyen A.S. 1988, p. 11).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, micro as well as macro factors necessitated paradigm shifts in areas of training and development globally and especially in South Africa.

The historical background of apprenticeship training in South Africa, indicates that the first act of importance to manpower training originated as far back as 1850. Since then apprenticeships have continued throughout the decades. It appears that the system of apprenticeship training prior to the SAQA system no longer complied with the human resource needs of industry and that it should be replaced by a more appropriate system. (Van Rooyen A.S., 1988, p. 3). So the question is asked; Which, system would render the best results?

In 1992 The Department of Manpower appointed a Task Team to conduct research and develop a new national training strategy. Agreement was then reached for a new integrated framework resulting in the establishment of the South African Qualifications Act No. 58 of 1995. The aim of the South African Qualifications

Authority (SAQA), is to ensure the development and implementation of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which contributes to the full development of each learner and also for the social and economic development of the nation. (South African Qualifications Authority Manual, 1998, p.5).

Emanating from this, the Department of Labour, through the National Training Board (NTB), embarked upon a number of initiatives. These initiatives included the restructuring of the past apprenticeship system and the formulation of a new initiative, which led to the formation of learnerships and practical on site programmes as stipulated in the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998 (SDA).

The purposes of the new Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998 are to:

- “ increase the levels of investment in education and training;
- encourage employers to participate in training persons;
- encourage workers to participate in learnerships;
- improve employment prospects of previously disadvantaged persons;
- ensure the quality of education and training;
- assist employees in finding work; and
- provide and regulate employment services. ”

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Macro Economic Policy (MEP) and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), were put into place to inter alia raise the level of skills in the South African labour market, and to align education and training more strategically with the needs of the labour market. Furthermore, the Skills Development Act (SDA) and the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995 (SAQA Act), as well as supporting policies were made with the aim of replacing apprenticeships with learnerships.

(Gillham. A., 2001, p.15) states that learnerships are partly similar to the traditional apprenticeship system. One of the differences is that learnerships are intended to prepare candidates for any occupation and not only for traditional blue collar positions. The aims for improving the training system in South Africa are listed hereunder:

- Learnerships are intended to serve broader social and economic objectives;
- Learnerships and the new learnership system are central to the implementation of the Skills Development Act (SDA);
- Learnerships are the process/mechanisms for achieving a set of transformations, which include;
 - Addressing problematic features of the South African labour market by aligning education and training programme initiatives more closely with market needs.
 - Building a relationship between structured learning and structured work experience that will equip learners with the confidence required by the labour market. (Gillham. A., 2001. p.16)

The following section focuses on skills training requirements for the Building Industry.

Pertinent Information for the Contracting Fraternity

Having recently had discussions with various contracting firms, it was found that many employers are not sure how the Skills Development Act will affect their

businesses legally, operationally and financially and what will be required of them regarding the new concept of learnerships, finances to be paid, levies to be collected, administration requirements, as well as skills and facilitation programmes

According to Adrienne Bird, (Chief Director: Employment Skills) of the National Department of Labour, the learnership system is a flexible and cost effective way of increasing the skills pool that will ultimately lead to productivity improvements for employers. Furthermore, arising from the promulgation of the Skills Development Act, (97 of 1998) and together with the South African Qualifications Authority Act (No. 58 of 1995), Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA) were established (for each sector of industry in South Africa) to provide a framework for implementing the new proposed national training system in the country.

In particular, the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA), has been established specifically to look after the training interests of the building and construction industry.

The functions of the CETA are to:

- develop a sector skills plan;
- implement their sector skills plan by:
 - ❑ establishing learnerships;
 - ❑ approving workplace skill plans;
 - ❑ allocating grants to employers, education and training providers and workers; and
 - ❑ monitor education and training in the industry.
- Promote learnerships by:
 - ❑ identifying workplaces for practical work training;
 - ❑ development and support of learning materials;
 - ❑ improving the facilitation of learning; and
 - ❑ arranging learnership agreements;
- Registering learnership agreements;
- Be accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority as an Education and Training Quality Assurer (ETQA)

The following are the functions of the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA):

- collect and disburse levies;
- register and approve Work Place Skills Plans (WPSP's);
- develop Sector Skills plan (SSP);
- quality assure sector training;
- keep a database of learners; and
- advise on training and careers (Skills Development Act 1998. pp. 8, 14,16)

In the past funding for apprenticeships was obtained from levies contributed by the employers of the construction industry. According to the Funding Regulations 2001, the new dispensation requires that the CETA allocate grants to the employers as stipulated below. Employers are required to pay a monthly levy to the CETA which will be reimbursed to the employer upon the successful completion of training. **It is crucial** for employers to submit their claims to the CETA, once their staff have attended and completed training programmes.

Employers might claim the following grants:

Mandatory grants:

- A workplace skills grant; (15% of levies paid by employer)
- A workplace skills implementation grant; (50% of levies paid by employer for 2001-2, 45% of levies paid by employer for 2003-3)

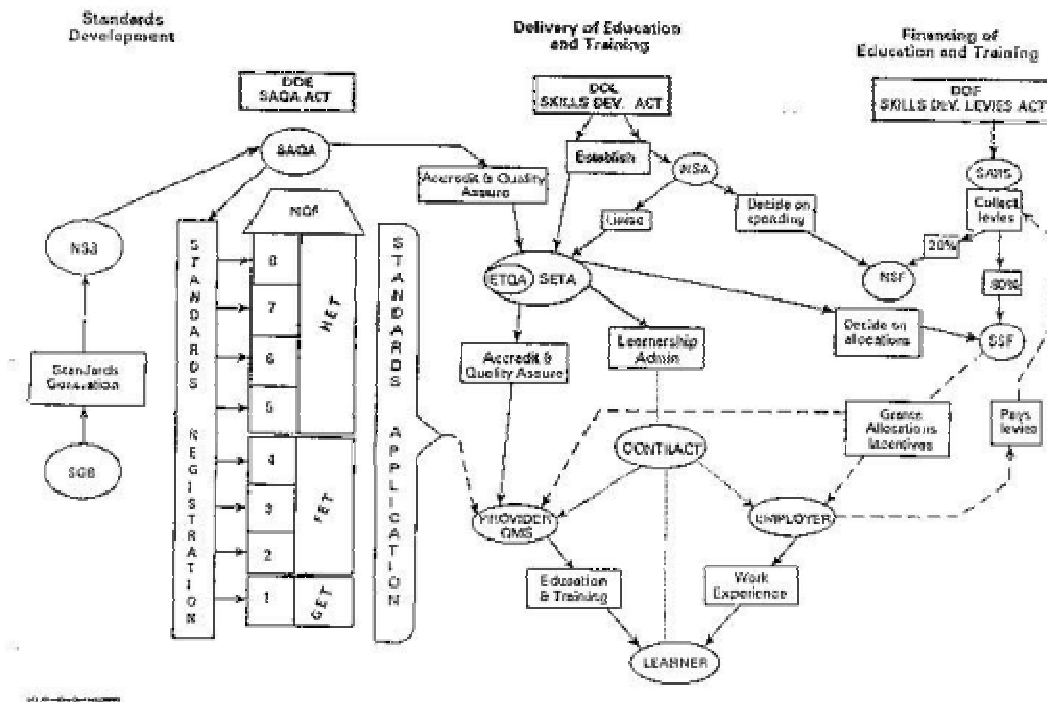
Discretionary grants:

- a grant towards the costs of learnerships and learner allowances;
- a grant towards the costs of the skills programme;
- a grant towards the costs of providing apprenticeship training; and
- a grant towards a programme, project or research activity that helps the relevant CETA to implement it's sector skills plan.

Further details are obtainable from the CETA website at www.skills@ceta.org.za

It is therefore evident from the above mentioned that the financial implications for contractors will be large. It would be advisable for contractors to initiate and get their sector skills plans in place, start training their employees and claim back what is financially due to them. As stated by Angela Gillham (2001, p.15), the new Funding Regulations set out the manner in which learnerships for new occupations may be developed, registered and become eligible for grants. One of the discretionary grants that a SETA may make, is for the registration and implementation of learnerships.

To explain how the new system of Education and Training will take place, a flow diagram (**DIAGRAM 1**) is Illustrated below. (Courtesy of CETA/BITB). See (**TABLE 1**) for Glossary of abbreviations



Source: CETA (Eastern Cape)

The diagram (**DIAGRAM 1**) is divided into three areas, namely:

- standards development;
- delivery of education and training;
- financing of education and training.

The Department of Education that established SAQA has instituted the framework for the development and registration of qualifications and standards of programmes at various levels. These levels are defined in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

According to the Skills Development Act, the second component of the diagram illustrates the route to be taken in the delivery of education and training for learners.

Lastly, according to the Skills Development Levies Act, the diagram indicates the structure of financial implementation. It is crucial that contractors become conversant with the financial requirements of the new Acts. It appears that the third component is the most important and employers should familiarize themselves with the financial system.

CONCLUSION

The promulgation of the new acts and their requirements may at first sound confusing and irrelevant to the management of construction companies. The management of firms will therefore experience teething problems initially and this will entail a huge undertaking by top management to contact the relevant authorities, to investigate the requirements, so as to fully understand and apply the necessities of the newly established acts. The CETA could be consulted and information could be obtained on the SAQA website at www.saga.org.za

It is trusted that this new dispensation is as effective in training learners to the point of becoming skilled artisans and masters of their trade, as was the case in the previous dispensation. It remains to be seen if the outcomes of the proposed learnerships training scheme will produce the desired results to improve quality within the building and construction industries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A pro-active rather than a reactive approach will be needed by all members of the industry to be able to achieve positive results in the implementation of this new training system. Towards this end the following recommendations seem appropriate:

- Management of construction companies must acquaint themselves with the new acts and understand the requirements thereof.
- Contractors must ensure that their workplace skills plans are put in place.
- It is essential that contractors send their employees for training.
- Due to financial implications it is necessary that employers take advantage and claim back the full monetary amounts legally due to them.
- The presenting of seminars, conferences and general information sessions regarding the learnerships, CETA, subsidies, levies and facilitation fees by the appropriate CETA, will play an important role in achieving the objectives of the new acts.

- The dissemination of comprehensible information nationally will play a crucial part in distinguishing between success or failure, or attaining positive or negative results.
- Furthermore, the information gained from the appropriate sources should be accurate so as to ensure the smooth operation and implementation of the proposed training system.
- It will be equally important from the CETA perspective, to ensure that sufficient and accurate information be disseminated to the relevant parties in the construction companies.

TABLE 1; GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

BITB	- Building Industries Training Board
CETA	- Construction Education and Training Authority
DOE	- Department of Education
DOE	- Department of Finances
DOL	- Department of Labour
ETQA	- Education and Training Quality Assurer
FET	- Further Education and Training
GET	- General education and Training
HET	- Higher Education and Training
MEP	- Macro Economic Policy
NSB	- National Standards Body
NQF	- National Qualifications Framework
NSF	- National Skills Fund
RDP	- Reconstruction and Development Programme
SAQA	- South African Qualifications Authority
SARS	- South African Revenue Services
SDA	- Skills Development Act
SETA	- Sector Education and Training authority
SGB	- Standards Generating Body

SSF - Sector Skills Facilitator

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