Steps to build a more inclusive, skilled workforce

The local technology skills shortage has been well documented over time, with recent statistics underscoring not only a dearth of technical expertise in South Africa, but also a concerning youth unemployment rate.

New figures from Statista show a staggering number of unemployed youth (15 to 24 years), reaching 60.7 percent in the second quarter of 2023. Statista further noted higher unemployment rates for women than men since the start of 2016, measured at almost 36 percent in the second quarter of 2023, as opposed to 30 percent respectively.

Charmaine Koffman, Head of Human Resources at Datacentrix

From a technology point of view, a report released earlier this year by SAP Africa, called 'Africa's Tech Skills Scarcity Revealed', disclosed that three-quarters of the South African, Kenyan and Nigerian organisations surveyed reported negative effects from a lack of technical skills; including struggling to meet client needs (46 percent), reduced capacity for innovation (53 percent), and losing customers to competitors (60 percent).

According to the report, a top skills challenge for African organisations is attracting skilled new recruits, although in South Africa the retention of experienced employees was first on the list. It further noted the most in-demand skills as being cybersecurity and data analytics (63 percent); developer and industry skills (49 percent); and digital transformation skills (48 percent).

Skills development and mentoring play an essential role

"It's true that we're facing many challenges in the local technology sector, but there are measures that private industry can – and should – put in place that can contribute to the alleviation of both unemployment and the lack of technology skills," explains Charmaine Koffman, Head of Human Resources at Datacentrix.

This initiative places an emphasis on cross-functional training, encouraging the outcome of multi-skilled individuals with experience across more than one specialised area of technology, as well as more business-focused capabilities.

“Datacentrix's stance on skills development is well entrenched and we have several initiatives to support this, including our graduate programme, which has been running for 18 years. This initiative places an emphasis on cross-functional training, encouraging the outcome of multi-skilled individuals with experience across more than one specialised area of technology, as well as more business-focused capabilities.

“Our graduate and learnership programmes have a strong focus on mentoring, as well as the development of personal skills such as work ethics, something that is a core value at Datacentrix. We're proud to have a high absorption rate of these learners and graduates at Datacentrix, as we want to be able to retain these talented young people.

“Mentoring plays a pivotal role in African skills development, regardless of industry, by providing the guidance, support and knowledge transfer needed to empower our workforce, as well as fostering innovation and bridging the gap between education and real-world industry requirements. Datacentrix actively encourages other local businesses to join us in mentoring local learners and graduates, further strengthening the foundation of skilled professionals across the continent,” she adds.

“Across the industry, we're currently seeing the continuous movement of resources, especially at entry level, rather than within mid or senior management. It's a highly competitive market, but we're also seeing that a number of organisations are putting forward above-market-rate offers that are simply not sustainable over time.”

Koffman cautions those individuals looking at new prospects to undergo their due diligence before accepting an offer that might well be too good to be true. “It's essential to remember that genuine career growth and job satisfaction often come from realistic and maintainable environments. Therefore, my advice would be for people to scrutinise job offers before accepting them – research the company thoroughly and seek guidance where necessary. Sometimes it's not just about finding a job; it's about building a meaningful and fulfilling career that aligns with your long-term goals and values.”

Closing the gender gap

Datacentrix recently instituted a bursary scheme with Wits University and has already seen two of its graduates join the workforce to start their formal workplace training. This is one of the areas, says Koffman, that the company is using to support gender diversity within the ICT sector.

“There is a serious need for local businesses to implement targeted recruitment strategies to address the gender diversity challenge. Datacentrix is working hard towards an optimistic 50/50 gender split by the end of next year. In addition, it is critical to attract more young women to embark on STEM careers, like ICT and engineering, as we need to improve this diversity moving forward.”

Koffman maintains that the key to inspiring more women to join the sector, as well as addressing the broader technology skills shortage in the longer term, is for organisations to nurture an interest in STEM careers at foundational level.

“We need to make an immense effort to turn around the pressing issue of the technology skills shortage, addressing this challenge at root level – earlier than grade 8 at school – to create a skilled workforce for the future. This will help to ensure that individuals from all backgrounds have access to educational and career opportunities in the technology sector, fostering a more inclusive skills pool.

“Datacentrix is committed to being part of this transformative journey, and we encourage other businesses to join us in this essential endeavour, building a brighter and more technologically advanced future for Africa,” she concludes.

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