

Practising in parallel

not the best practice

Education and training around HIV and AIDS are becoming buzz concepts in major corporate boardrooms around South Africa. Speak to many human resource or employee assistance managers about priorities for the coming years and there is little doubt HIV/AIDS will at least be on the agenda, if not at the top of the list.

Different companies have varying strategies for HIV/AIDS intervention within their particular environments. Some focus on awareness campaigns, including factual workshops or seminars and dispensing condoms; others go further and incorporate peer education and training, and aggressive prevention campaigns into their human resource and health and safety plans.

So what makes a good HIV/AIDS workplace intervention programme? One company that believes it has some answers to that question is the electricity utility Eskom, one of the five largest electricity supply companies in the world, and employer to over 37 500 people across South Africa.

In late 1999 Eskom's strategic initiatives around AIDS were highlighted in the HIV/AIDS Best Practice Series published by the Department of Health and the Department for International

Andrea Meeson and Tanya van Meelis explore how HIV/AIDS is being tackled at Eskom.

Development-southern Africa. The best practice series provides examples and guidelines for intervention and response to the growing problem of HIV/AIDS in the South African workplace.

The series highlights the work of a number of organisations. Taken at face value, the series suggests that positive initiatives are running in both the non-governmental (NGO) and corporate sectors with high rates of success.

In the case of Eskom, the company's successes have received international attention. The International Labour Organisation has commissioned a report on Eskom's HIV/AIDS programme, to assist other companies around the world to get workplace initiatives on HIV/AIDS up and running.

History

According to Boltshoko Makhooane, AIDS co-ordinator within the Employee Assistance Programme at Eskom, the

A joint project between SA Labour Bulletin and the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) and sponsored by ACILS

company's strategy has been developed over more than a decade: 'HIV/AIDS has been a strategic priority of human resource development at Eskom since the late 1980s. By 1989, almost 100% of staff had been exposed to some form of AIDS education.'

The company's commitment to education, surveillance, counselling and protection against discrimination was certainly apparent in policy documents at the time. However, controversial clauses on pre-employment testing and not hiring HIV-positive people were obvious contradictions that, in the eyes of the unions, made a mockery of Eskom's policy.

The company was forced to review its approach. It had spent R200 000 for 10 000 tests over three years and only 14 positive cases had been identified. Compulsory pre-employment testing was found to be 'self-defeating, costly and irrational'. The obvious discriminatory aspects of pre-employment testing were not cited, but the practice was formally dropped in 1993.

Not long afterward, Eskom commissioned a study to 'quantify the seriousness of the epidemic by estimating the number of employees that could be infected with HIV'.

AIDS specialist Dr Clive Evian carried out the study and on completion in 1995, estimated that Eskom employed almost 1 000 HIV-positive employees - 2,5% of its total workforce. The study concluded that by 2005 the company could expect 10 500 employees, or 26% of its total workforce to be infected with the virus.

These statistics, and Evian's predictions of how they would affect employees and levels of production within Eskom caught the attention of senior management. Personal pledges of commitment to addressing HIV came thick and fast from CEO on downward.

'Addressing the cost vs benefits of such commitment was the next task.

Implications for the Eskom Pension Fund and the various benefits and medical schemes were assessed. Predictions were that the overall direct cost to Eskom would reach '15% of payroll from 2005 onwards'. By the same year ill-health retirements would amount to 'almost 10% of the salary bill'. In 1998, 36% of people who took ill-health retirement took it because of HIV/AIDS.

Making AIDS a strategic priority and well-meaning pledges of support were no longer sufficient to address the growing problem. An education programme that would reach employees at all levels of Eskom's four business units was urgently needed. This involved reaching over 37 500 people working in environments ranging from upmarket office blocks to isolated construction camps around the country.

New study

At the same time, and with the blessing of unions and management, a follow-up surveillance study had to be undertaken to determine how serious the epidemic was within the organisation. More than 5 000 employees participated in the voluntary and anonymous study, which was the first of its kind to be conducted in South Africa.

Boitshoko Makhooane believes that this 'act in favour of the company's AIDS policy' is a clear indication that the variety of fears associated with HIV/AIDS are decreasing and more employees are committed to acknowledging and understanding the issues.

Moreover, according to Eskom's 1999 annual report on HIV/AIDS activities, 'the results (of the study) provided a baseline against which future progress could be measured as the overall results of the

study were lower than the figures initially projected in 1995 and also lower than the national AIDS statistics'.

Education programme

At the core of the education programme is peer education methodology. Makhooane says that the training and deployment of peer educators in all business units have also contributed to the success of the campaign at Eskom. 'More than 800 people have been trained as peer educators. Our campaign is now a very aggressive one and everyone from managers to employees at lower levels has benefited from the work that peer educators do. We have AIDS co-ordinators in every province and they meet every six weeks to discuss issues and to deal with any problems.'

Makhooane adds that peer educators do much of their work on company time. 'Up to 10% of their monthly work time can be devoted to education and training.'

She believes that the majority of people at Eskom are no longer in denial about HIV/AIDS. 'People are regularly exposed to information. The induction programme for managers, for example, includes workshops on HIV/AIDS covering strategic issues relating to company policy and general education about the virus.'

Makhooane also explains the more creative attempts that Eskom is making to dispense both condoms and positive AIDS messages to its employees. 'We are currently running a pilot project at one of our power plants using a juke box to dispense condoms to employees. Another project with Conlog - a manufacturer and supplier of electronics - involves selling standard electricity tokens that have an AIDS message printed on them.'

Gipa project

Eskom's attempts to bring the reality of HIV/AIDS into the lives of its employees

does not stop at condom distribution and educational workshops. The company has linked up with the United Nations AIDS programme (UNAIDS) to co-manage a project called Greater Involvement for People with AIDS (Gipa).

The Gipa project aims to employ people living with HIV/AIDS 'and place them in partner organisations to help drive home the reality of AIDS'. Eskom employs two Gipa fieldworkers, Musa Njoka and Martin Vosloo.

Vosloo is a former artisan turned community worker who has seen more than his share of the rough side of life. Diagnosed HIV-positive in 1991, Vosloo considered suicide but opted to put his life experience to good use. He has been a Gipa fieldworker at Eskom for more than 18 months.

Vosloo is passionate about his work with the company but is less enthusiastic about the achievements thus far. 'Look, I worked in construction for many years, so I know what the conditions are like for the average worker out there. It is a rough life and most people do not have access to basic education, let alone information about HIV/AIDS.'

I have spoken to 15 000 people since I began working for Eskom and the response has been, for the most part, excellent. There is of course the initial disbelief when I sit down and tell people I am HIV-positive. But I use examples of my own life and I find they can really relate to that.'

Vosloo recalls a meeting with a group of Eskom supervisors in Bloemfontein recently: 'I sat down with these people - all white and predominantly male supervisors - and I started to reminisce about going to watch the rugby. I would tell my wife that me and the boys were off to watch the rugby in Pretoria and meanwhile we were off to play a bit of

couch rugby at the brothel.

I could honestly see signs of recognition in many of their faces as I told that story - even the women could relate. Being open about my status and my lifestyle helped them to make the link, which they otherwise could continue to deny. It's all about getting them to realise how easily we can be exposed to HIV.

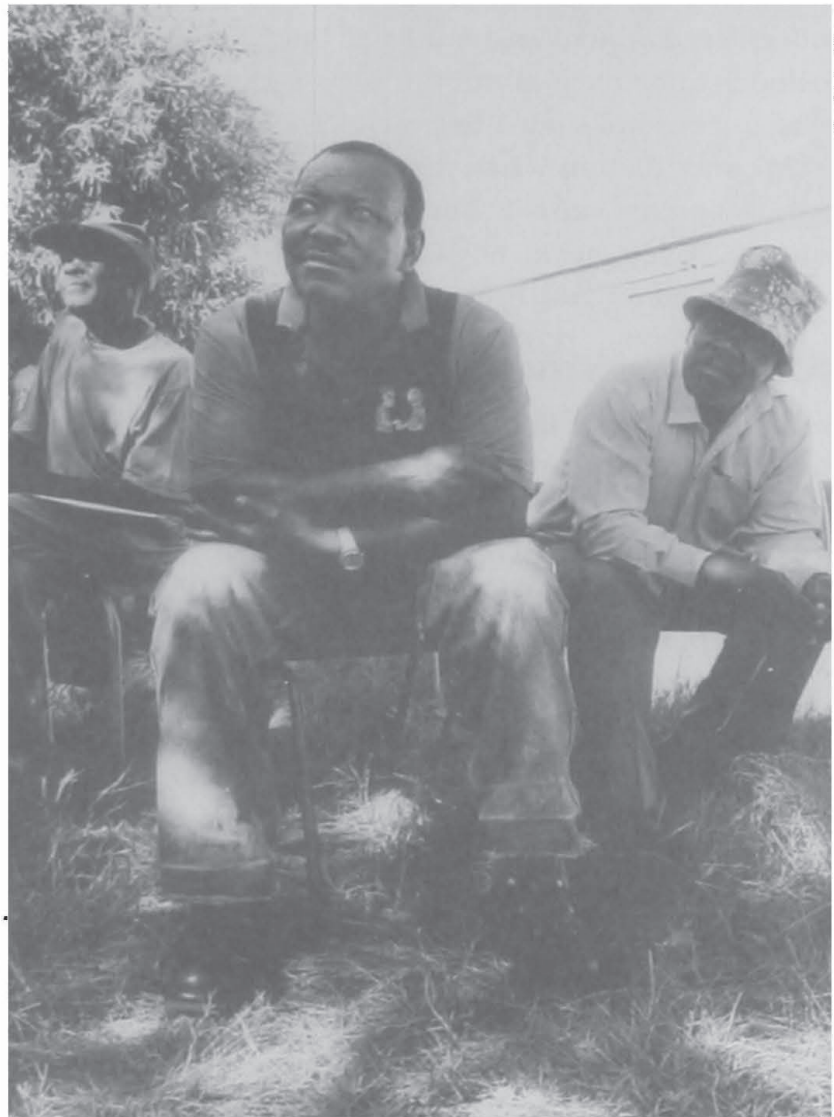
This was a positive session for Vosloo who often encounters bigotry, denial and blatant discrimination, particularly from white Eskom employees. 'White people in the main are the culprits when it comes to denial and discrimination,' says Vosloo.

Many of them still believe that AIDS is common only to black people: 'I have met white people in my work who make comments like, "they [blacks] wanted it so let them have it" or "there are too many blacks anyway so let them get AIDS and die".

I have encountered managers at many power stations who believe that they have the right to know the status of all their employees, regardless of the company policy which is quite clear on the issue of confidentiality.

These people associate HIV with all things bad and display such tunnel vision when it comes to confronting the realities of the disease.'

Among black Eskom workers the levels of acceptance are better says Vosloo. However, he can also recite a number of disturbing incidents that took place at



Pic: Cedric Nunn

Workers get information from peer educators.

meetings, including not being allowed to finish his talk because of antagonism.

Management's response to employees who have negative attitudes or discriminate in contravention of the stated company policy is decidedly vague. Boitshoko Makhooane says that there are still some people within the company who do not yet accept that HIV/AIDS is a reality.

'We do get the odd person with a negative attitude. In this case we would remind that person of the company policy and possibly get them to speak to a Gipa fieldworker in hopes of changing their attitude.'

The incidents of discrimination may be underplayed at management level, but Vosloo is quite clear about the consequences of such a response: 'There is a real contradiction when management supports policy verbally but not in practice. Policy means nothing if you are not prepared to back it up with action.'

NUM's assessment

Vosloo is not alone in his criticism. Some members of NUM, which is the majority union in Eskom, representing 15 000 workers, give less than glowing reports of management's response to discrimination and the epidemic as a whole.

Job Matsepe, a full-time NUM shopsteward complains that discrimination within Eskom is rife: 'I have declared a dispute with the company over the treatment of one of our members who is HIV-positive. She was booked off sick by the doctor and stayed at home. Eskom refused to accept the doctor's note and never paid her for three months.

'She was alone at home, sick, with no food because she wasn't paid. The most shocking part was that she was then asked to take ill-health retirement despite the fact that she never applied for such.'

Matsepe is adamant that the human resources department at Eskom needs to act more decisively and swiftly in cases of blatant discrimination: 'I've spoken to corporate to say we are experiencing problems. They are preaching to the world about what they are doing around HIV, but the problems continue. And these are the ones that we know about - what about the problems that people will not tell us about because they are afraid to disclose their status?'

Matsepe was even more critical of Eskom's peer education programmes: 'Eskom is lying when they say they are doing so much training. Peer educators

should be in all structures doing their work but many managers are resistant. We are aware of those big banquets at Megawatt Park where some people are exposed to education but those in real need are our members at the grassroots level. I am yet to see employees at lower bands at any workshop.'

Another shopsteward and a peer educator who wishes to remain anonymous spoke of the lack of management support: 'To get peer education in Eskom you really have to fight. Management is more concerned about production than the health of employees. The company expects you to do your duty, do your work, and peer education is voluntary. In my experience it is rare to be given company time to do peer education.'

Challenge

Encouraging a culture of openness and acceptance about HIV/AIDS in an environment where silence and denial still lurk menacingly in the background, is surely one of the biggest challenges in managing the epidemic in any environment.

The reams of policy documents and the millions of rands invested in aggressive workplace campaigns guarantee nothing if there is not a consistent and co-ordinated response by all stakeholders.

Eskom has been praised within the business community and by government over the past several years for taking the bull by the horns and setting the trend in AIDS workplace intervention and management.

It could be suggested that their position at the 'top of the heap' is in some ways a given, considering that until recently, the collective response of South African business to the epidemic has been narrow and slow to get off the ground.



Divisions between management and unions make managing HIV/AIDS more complex.

Conclusion

The obvious schisms between Eskom corporate and the unions on some of the most critical issues highlight the reality that progressive AIDS workplace management is a labour relations minefield.

Attempts to work together on an AIDS programme are made more difficult when the industrial relations climate in a company is fraught with tension, as is the case with Eskom as Matsepe explains: 'Our relationship with the company is not good. The company is still suing the union, saying we damaged property in our industrial action in 1998. We see Eskom trying to roll back union gains - for example, the position of a full-time shopsteward.

'We're starting right from the beginning again - and its like the wars that we fought in the 1980s. The relationship is so tense and its going to be very difficult to repair. The situation is so bad I don't know how we are even going to get

around a table to negotiate wages this year.'

Labour has thrown its weight behind the HIV/AIDS campaign in principle, yet experiences difficulty in translating that support into action due to what it sees as management's intransigence and indifference. It also encounters the age-old problem of capacity to reach its own membership with consistent and up-to-date information.

Corporate on the other hand is sailing ahead with its grand plans to counter the epidemic and is clearly taking an enormous amount of the credit for the success of the AIDS programme to date. It acknowledges the importance of union support on paper but in practice may work around labour rather than in partnership with it.

The lights may be on the AIDS programme at Eskom but not everyone is sitting in the same room. ★

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