

Is the Skills Act **working for workers?**

*Debate on the effectiveness of the Skills Development Act (SDA) has focused mainly on Setas and learnerships with little attention given to the actual impact on workers on the shopfloor. The **Labour Bulletin** reveals the results of a survey conducted by **Bethuel Maserumule** and **Merryman Madikane** at 17 metal and engineering companies in the Ekurhuleni region (East Rand). It raises serious concerns as to whether workers are benefiting, whether capacity exists to drive a strategic vision around skills development and if government's focus on skills development is misplaced.*

The engineering industry has long survived on a cheap male migrant labour force housed in single-sex hostels on the reef. Most of the workers are today very old, with no, or low, levels of formal education. The workers have lots of experience and expertise from many years of performing a variety of technical jobs and many help induct and train artisans and apprentices. But lack of formal education and vocational training, and the accompanying qualifications, leave these workers without recognition of their skills and competencies and unable to gain promotion or seek career-path training.

These workers are trapped at the bottom of an industry grading system they accuse of still bearing the indelible marks of the racial discrimination and

job reservation of the past. Upward mobility for them is mainly about promotion to foreman or supervisor positions. Few reach the middle and top positions where white workers dominate.

The union's proposed 5-grade structure which seeks to end the injustices within the grading system and open up opportunities, is being seriously resisted by management, largely because of cost implications.

The SDA with its focus on vocational training, as well as related Adult Basic Education (ABE) programmes and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), could come in handy for workers. But the survey shows little is being done by employers in these areas, leaving workers to look to their union for leadership and guidance in pushing

employers to make substantial moves. Where gains have been made by workers they were the result of a strong shop steward push and strong organisation. Such cases are few, as most the shop stewards interviewed expressed serious lack of capacity to handle these issues on their own.

Survey results: training

The survey showed that:

- All companies run some form of training, the majority have skills development facilitators, 13 out of 17 have training committees.
- Most companies run mainly on-the-job and basic/generic training. They argue that it is vital to make workers perform better in their current jobs, and that training in advanced/critical skills is expensive.

labour market



Few of the companies interviewed train workers around advanced/critical skills.

- Shop stewards report a lot of discrimination in the running, recognising and rewarding of training. Whites get more opportunities than blacks and even get graded and paid higher than their black counterparts. This affects largely artisans. In this category blacks are either given low-level status (artisan aides) or are simply paid less compared to whites.
- The composition and operation of training committees need careful and focused attention. Some committees have management and shop stewards (normally from all unions), as well as representatives of administration staff and the highly skilled occupations. At one company

there is also special representation for women and disabled workers. In some situations this overloading of the committees leads to the non-union representatives ganging up with management against union representatives.

- The environment in the training committees is not conducive to proper engagement. The committees seem to be consultative forums, with management dominating. Most shop stewards' seem unable to drive deliberations thoroughly, even to the point of deadlock and mobilisation, if need be. It is only a few shop stewards' committees that appear competent and confident enough to influence training committees. One shop stewards group withdrew from the company training committee and is taking up training issues in

bilateral monthly meetings with management.

- Where training/skills and employment equity are combined in the same committee, as is now becoming the norm, there is sometimes no balanced handling of the two. Invariably skills issues end up receiving scanty focus.
- There are not many examples where training and skills issues are being linked to union processes of mandates and report-backs. Most shop stewards take part in discussions with management without proper discussions among themselves or with members. There is also the complaint that there is no adequate time for discussions with members. This leads to shop stewards accusing/suspecting each other of personalising training issues.
- Most shop stewards acknowledged that they have serious limitations in terms of capacity to engage management around training issues.

ABE

The survey found that:

- Only a few companies have ABE programmes – six out of 17 of the interviewed companies run programmes.
- Three of the six companies who have programmes, run them during working hours; two have split time arrangements – one hour during working time and one during workers' own time and one pays for after-working hours. One company runs it on a Saturday and pays overtime. Where the companies do not pay for the time after hours, attendance becomes a problem.
- There is strong reliance on external providers who could prove costly and this could affect the company's

decision as to whether to continue such programmes.

The success of ABE depends on, if:

- it happens during working hours
- the company pays for time outside working hours, where classes take place after work
- the shop stewards get involved in the design of the programme and the choice of the provider. Where shop stewards run the programme, they also succeed.
- ABE provides a clear link to promotion or promotion-oriented training
- ABE is targeted at specific workers there might be high success rates (in terms of participation and performance). The target is those workers eligible for promotions or promotion-oriented training.

RPL

The survey revealed the following in terms of RPL:

- RPL is applied only in a few companies. Only four out of the 17 companies interviewed have done assessments and redeployed workers accordingly.
- Where assessments have occurred, most companies used basic assessing methods like performance and experience, and not the complex and tedious criteria of unit standards. Only one company used unit standards.
- The rest of the companies which have not applied RPL report they are in the process of developing assessment criteria or training assessors. What is curious is the pace at which they move in setting

up the requisite infrastructure.

- Some companies expressed reluctance to use full-time employees for RPL assessments, even if such employees went through training. Such companies expressed preference for external assessors, ostensibly to avoid problems of favouritism or prejudice. External assessors come at a cost and may not know enough of the production processes to be able to do proper work. It is also possible that they may wish to perform their work in a manner that impresses management, while prejudicing workers, in an endeavour to win more contracts.
- Where shop stewards lead the push for workers to be assessed (using the basic method) and then be

What is needed to drive training?

- *There is need to push for and agree on a broad hierarchy of relevant skills.*

This will guide workplaces in determining the level of training workers are eligible for and identify the correct training to qualify for positions in those levels.

- *Elaborating the training to correspond with the set hierarchy (levels) of skills:* With the hierarchy of skills in place, the actual training (in the form of modules/steps) corresponding to each level in the hierarchy must be detailed. On completion of the set training, a worker will be deemed to have satisfied the requirements of that level.

- *Setting targets for training:* To ensure that adequate and proper training is done, targets must be set in the following areas: amount of training time/hours; numbers of

workers trained and targets around training that links with career-paths.

- *Apply RPL and ABET vigorously:* This will help to determine where workers are, in respect of accredited experience and ABET abilities, and assist decisions regarding where they could enter training.

- *Differentiated system of grants:* To enforce some discipline on employers, the Seta grants should be paid in relation to the training undertaken. Those who train less people or focus on informal and generic training must receive smaller grants.

- *Organisational issues regarding training:* Training problems are not only about what employers do or fail to do. There are also problems on the part of Numsa's shopfloor

organisation: Most shop stewards expressed inadequacies in their capacity to engage employers around training issues. Most have not been to any union training on the Act and related issues.

- *Contesting the operation of training committees:* Most committees are dominated by employers, and do not allow for effective engagement. Hence, capacity building amongst shop stewards must focus on empowering them to turn these committees into effective arenas for engagement around training.

There is also an issue of limited membership involvement around training at shopfloor level. Ways and experiences of turning training into a mobilising issue must be explored to activate shop stewards and members.

Advantages and disadvantages of RPL	
<p>Advantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers experience get recognised Enables workers to know where they are in respect of skills and options for training Enables workers to progress in their employment as their experience is recognised RPL raises productivity for those workers assessed and rewarded 	<p>Disadvantages/problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers refuse to sacrifice their Requires complex infrastructure Involves a long tedious procedure of assessment It is expensive to run if done by external assessors It is costly to pay workers after they go through the RPL process Use of internal assessors could cause conflict on the shopfloor due to either favouritism or prejudice (this is only a fear) There are no clear or direct productivity benefits of RPL RPLed workers discriminate against those not RPLed Some RPLed workers refuse to undergo training – they feel they can progress with more RPL RPL makes workers get interested in money, not training Few promotion opportunities emerge in companies, thus affecting the pace of RPL Difficult to have objective methods of assessing

upwardly regraded, this approach gives RPL an impetus and benefits most of the deserving workers. However, this approach will be taxing on shop stewards, who will be required to take up many individual worker cases, as each situation regarding skills/experience/performance is different. There can be no pass-one-pass-all.

- Shop stewards' efforts at one company led to a number of workers moving up to artisan manager positions (shift superintendent), given their proven accumulated skills, experience and performance. This case demonstrates the importance of shop stewards initiative on one hand and on the other the immense value of RPL to workers with accumulated experience/skill – especially its ability to upgrade workers.
- Pushing for shop stewards to train and be assessors looks attractive, though this review did not come across a concrete case of their performance as full-time assessors.

How to take RPL forward: RPL is certainly an important issue in this industry since the majority of the workers have accumulated vast skills through experience on the job. Since employers are doing very little and therefore cannot be trusted to drive RPL on their own, it is important that the union considers the following to ensure RPL is pursued:

The creation of a common pool of assessors, based within the Seta. The members of the pool will be well trained and could be better trusted regarding efficiency, objectivity and consistency in assessing workers. Also the pool will ensure the industry and its companies are able to afford the infrastructure required to do RPL properly.

The idea of shop stewards taking the lead and pressurising management to assess and reward workers accordingly. This approach focuses on engagement, using basic and not technical assessment methods

A lot of private companies are springing up to provide RPL related assessment services. These companies take advantage of the reluctance of

some employers to set up internal capacity for RPL. It is important to consider some monitoring of these companies; otherwise they will cause chaos with the quality of their work and methods. They should be required to register and disclose their methods and report to the Seta.

Conclusion

The picture emerging from the survey in the Ekurhuleni region suggests that the legal and institutional framework around training provide a good basis for engagement, but will not on their own ensure that the right things are done the right way. For example, the Act and the presence of Seta's have not helped workers in respect of RPL and ABE. Ultimately, it is going to be the responsibility of unions to ensure progress is achieved but this will depend on capacity and commitment.

Maserumule is with FES and Madikane is Numsa's regional education co-ordinator. This survey forms part of a review of Numsa's collective bargaining strategy