

Coping with Labour Shortages

The problem of labour shortages is now a global experience which occupies the attention of governments and trade unions. Both of these have a vested interest in maintaining high employment levels. In speaking to the issue of labour shortages, it is not uncommon to have generalizations made about it. The fact of the matter is that an acute labour shortage is generally identified within an employment sector. It may be that this occurs in sectors which required high and/or low-level skilled workers.

The agriculture sector which once attracted a high number of low-level skilled workers has since seen a graduation of persons from working in this sector. The use of various forms of technologies including irrigations systems, ploughs and mechanical harvesters have made a difference in eliminating the need for an abundance of labour in the sector. This situation has been replicated in the manufacturing and construction sectors, and consequently have contributed to the growing unemployment problem. The possibility of these workers being absorbed in other sectors where there is a demand for labour, may be constrained by the fact that they do not have the transferable skills and competencies.

This brings us to reflect on the reasons for labour shortages. Recognizing the limitations of the skills development of the people, is evident that the workforce can benefit from having trained and experience individuals, who by virtue of these qualities become more employable. Employers can contribute to this by ensuring that their members of staff are trained and retrained. This gives the employer the comfort of knowing that the staff could respond to the new and emerging technologies which may be introduced in the workplace.

The facts are that there is an ageing workforce which lacks the technological skills but with the shift in the retirement age many are working longer. This is stacked against the fact that younger persons are selective about their choice of employment and this adds to the labour shortage problem. Their perception of working in some sectors or industries, based on their education and training, does not match with their preferred career choice. Also, a factor in this equation is the terms and conditions of service, remuneration and benefits which are sometimes not attractive to young workers. These observations are supported by the European Commission Report: European Migration Network (EMN) 2015. "Shortages occur on the labour market when demand for a particular type of labour exceeds the available supply at prevailing pay and working conditions of employment. Shortages emerge as a result of the lack of workers available or interest in accepting a job at the current conditions (labour shortages) and the lack of workers with the relevant skills (skill shortages)."

Labour shortages however acute, mean that a plan of action is required if a meaningful solution is to be found to the problem. As is invariably the case, highly skilled workers and seasonal

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workers are targeted for third world countries. In attracting workers from these countries, the best approach would be to have a national labour migration policy that specifically addresses labour market needs. The policy should direct attention to the required skills. In this era, the intention should be to attract persons with ITC's skills. Additionally, the policy should pay attention to both demographic and economic matters. It would be best if the approach is taken where governments enter into bilateral agreements. This is important for the purpose of protecting workers from possible exploitation.

There are solutions to labour shortages, which in summary, have to start with labour market planning. The Identifying of human resource/man power needs, and constant training and retraining of staff is part of the solution to the trending problem. The next step in the process should be the review of recruitment practices, with the focus to be broadened beyond a knowledge base to include skills, competencies and capacity.

Employers may wish to take a closer look at how they contribute to the stagnation of the employment sector, and undertake to review their policies and practices, including those of improved wages, salaries, benefits and other conditions of work.