

## Learnerships form a foundation for addressing youth unemployment in South Africa



The Statistics SA Quarterly Labour Force Survey for Q2 2021 paints a grim picture of the employment landscape in South Africa – the official unemployment rate is 34.4%. Most significant of all, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15 to 24 years stood at 64.4% and the unemployment rate for those aged 25-34 years was 42.9%. These are the age groups that should be contributing the most to an active and thriving economy, and if this issue is not addressed, there will be significant challenges for South Africa's economy in the future. It is vital to invest in the youth to ensure the growth of South Africa, and learnerships are one of the key ways corporates can get involved.

### **Back to basics - what is a learnership**

Learnerships are not to be confused with internships, as they are not the same thing. Internships are simply informal work experience programmes, which may or may not be paid. A learnership, on the other hand, is a formal, work-based qualification that incorporates both theory and practical elements in the training, which needs to be delivered by an accredited training partner.

Learners are paid during their learnership, enabling them to earn an income while also gaining vital NQF qualifications and workplace experience. For many, tertiary education is a luxury they cannot afford, and learnerships provide an avenue for further education and training.

### **Business benefits**

Learnerships not only give people the opportunity to gain experience and a qualification while earning an income, they also provide businesses with an excellent opportunity to train staff members from the ground up. This ensures that they are a good fit for the company, both in terms of experience as well as culture, which the standard three-month trial employment period cannot always do.

Investment into the youth, and in educating, training and mentoring them, makes sound business sense

from a future economy point of view. From a more immediate perspective, however, there are also tax incentives involved, which can offset the cost of the learnership, as well as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) skills development points that can be attained. Learnerships can also be offered to those already employed by a business to help them develop additional skills in line with business development goals.

### **The right partner is essential**

There are numerous different business sectors and thousands of learnership categories, including everything from sports management to manufacturing, wholesale to retail and administration.

Learnerships can also be sponsored by companies that have the funding and need the skills development points, but do not necessarily have the capacity to take on learners themselves. This is where the right training and skills development partner becomes a key part of the equation.

It is vital to have a partner that understands the sensitivities around learnerships, and is also skilled enough to connect them with the organisation's business model, to ensure the skills developed enhance overall business strategy. In addition, learnerships need to be registered with the relevant SITA, and since the programme is multi-faceted, the registration process can be onerous and admin intensive. An accredited training partner will handle the admin and can also provide candidates for learnerships, or host learners for businesses that may not have capacity but require the skills development points.

### **An opportunity for the future**

With the unemployment rate as high as it is, all avenues need to be explored, and learnerships are one area where a real, measurable difference can be made. Not only do they offer opportunity for youth to gain real-world experience, employment opportunities, along with skills and qualifications, they can also be used to upskill existing employees in various areas. Both avenues can be hugely beneficial for business. When learnerships are used in the right way, they are a win-win for everyone, boosting the economy while enhancing skills and increasing economic participation.