

Reflections on 37 Years Membership Of the HR Professional Body



In the early 1980's I was working as the Group Personnel Administration Manager of what was then Anglo-Alpha Limited, a cement producing company (it is now, after several metamorphoses, Afrisam). The Personnel Executive of our company, Mike Burgess, was a leading figure in the profession and was, in fact, an early pioneer of our current labour law dispensation through his passionate belief in social justice in the workplace. Mike was on the board of the IPM and he and the rest of the board became interested in setting up a professional register for the then personnel management profession in South Africa. IPM had for many years run a Diploma programme (which I had qualified through in the late 1970's - it was a highly respected Matric plus 3 qualification), and the board recognised that it was desirable to separate the professional registration process from the educational qualification process - one should not be the supplier and the evaluator at the same time. Wilhelm Crous, the CEO of IPM at the time, was entrusted with setting up this new body in 1982, which I why I call him the male midwife of the SABPP! Wilhelm became the first Registrar of the new South African Board for Personnel Practice, taking on a dual role. The task of the new board in 1982 was firstly, to establish the criteria for the various registration levels and secondly, to encourage practitioners to undergo the registration process. At that time, there were few, if any, dedicated personnel management degree courses and hence many practitioners had qualifications of a widely varying nature. The initial set of registration categories contained only Practitioner (Generalist or Specialist); Technician; or Candidate.

As members of Mike Burgess' team, we were clearly targets for early registration - it was expected, if not downright compulsory! So I applied and on 9th July 1985, I received confirmation of my registration as a Practitioner, with the registration number 2009. It is clear that those early registration efforts were very successful.

Once the new body had become firmly established, Huma van Rensburg was appointed as the full time Registrar in 1989 and the 1990s became a period of expansion and consolidation. A major achievement

was the approval of the SABPP as an Education and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA). This was a unique achievement, as all the other ETQAs were part of the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA's). This ETQA could now accredit education and training providers offering Certificate and Diplomas in HR Management aligned with the National Qualifications Framework. This new line of service brought in significant income to the SABPP over the years.

The later 1980s and 1990s were a period of socio-political turmoil in our country, and also coincided with the evolution of modern HR management from the older personnel management paradigms. I think it is fair to say that SABPP became to some degree sidelined during this time and remained somewhat of a backwater, chugging along doing what it had always done. At some point, registration categories were changed and the higher categories of Chartered and Master Practitioner levels were introduced.

Recognition of Prior Learning was adopted, however, the process was onerous, to the extent that I found it easier to enroll for and complete a Master's degree, at a very late stage in my career, to qualify for an upgrade to MHRP than to undertake the RPL process! I was, however, ultimately grateful for this as it ignited an academic interest for me so that I then proceeded to complete a PhD, which then led to me joining Marius at the SABPP in charge of Research and Product Development.

The old order at SABPP changed, however, with the bold new direction taken by the incumbent Board in 2010 under the chairmanship of Elizabeth Dhlamini-Kumalo, epitomised by the appointment of Marius Meyer as the new CEO on the retirement of Huma van Rensburg in 2011. The SABPP, under new branding and with its new HR Voice strategy, embarked on an aggressive recruitment campaign, which has resulted in the registration of thousands of practitioners and a transformation of the membership base to fully represent the many faces of the HR profession in this country. Under Marius' energetic leadership, we developed and launched the HRM Standards and the related Audits, which have made history and brought widespread recognition across the world as well as at home.

One aspect of the SABPP which has remained constant for many years is the emphasis on ethics in the profession. An Ethics Committee, consisting of Elizabeth Dhlamini-Kumalo, Huma van Rensburg, Christine Botha (Chair), Ian Becker, Alexandra King, Mandisa Ndodana and Pauls Gibbons, had its kick-off meeting during August 2010. They were tasked with formulating and implementing a strategy to respond to a study conducted amongst SABPP mentors during 2008, which highlighted four primary areas affecting HR in South Africa:

Transformation, racism and other perceived unfair and inequitable practices around the implementation of employment equity legislation, such as undeserving candidates being appointed, promoted, rewarded and retained, sometimes with huge retention bonuses; the existence of 'silent policies' implemented to discriminate against certain candidates and overprotect incompetent candidates purely to achieve a desired statistical representation of race and gender;

Witnessing management decisions and instructions in violation of employee rights and based only on the employer's viability and profitability;

Differentiation in executive remuneration and reward practices, i.e. the protection of 'high-valued' employees, executive greed and unjustifiable ratio between top management and shop floor-level employees; and

Conduct of senior management relating to nepotism, abuse of position of power or receiving kick-backs and bribes.

Sadly, how little things have changed since then! Under the leadership of the Ethics Committee over the ensuing years, two publications were compiled with the latest, the 2015 Ethical Competence in HR Management, being still in print. Ethics workshops were designed and launched in 2014 and since then, thousands of practitioners have attended. Only the SABPP offers specific HR practice related ethics workshops in South Africa. Whilst workshops from other providers and professional bodies cover business ethics in general (including corporate governance), or professional ethics for psychologists or other related fields, the SABPP workshops are designed around the scope of HR practice and concentrate on the role of HR practitioners. The workshops are facilitated by seasoned professionals who can pass on knowledge and wisdom in dealing with the tricky issues that HR practitioners face daily.

The concept of ethics in the profession has expanded in recent years to consider the role of corporate governance, which interacts significantly with our professional ethics. While it may be possible to have in place good HR practices in an organisation, without ethical leadership and sound corporate governance, the potential positive outcomes of those HR practices will not be achieved. The 2022 review of the HRM Standards will focus extensively on the role of good governance and ethical leadership. Much has been achieved in the 40 years of life of the SABPP and it has emerged transformed and responsive to the challenging environment that we have today. I do, however, urge the Board and members to pay attention to the following important issues if we are to truly lead the profession in setting standards of practice:

We must ensure that the institution is capacitated with high level thought leaders and efficient implementers of programmes;

We must follow through on initiatives such as online Board examinations, Continuing Professional Development and the Candidate Programme;

We must play an active and visible role, with appropriate partners in other professional bodies, on important societal issues such as the protection of whistle blowers and prevention of violence in the workplace;

We must ensure that rigorous standards and quality assurance are applied in registration of professionals;

And finally, my well-known hobby horse, we must actively promote the unity of the HR profession in order to empower the profession to play a meaningful role as active citizens.

I encourage SABPP members to volunteer for the various committees and programmes that are in place. In so doing, they will benefit from leadership development, will gain a wider view of the profession and will learn from their peers. I have learned a lot from my association with the SABPP, and continue to learn every day. I thank all my professional colleagues who have helped me along the way during my long association with the SABPP and I wish them all the best in the future.