

Seizing global opportunities - training South Africans for success in mature international markets



South Africa's unemployment crisis is a national tragedy. Stats SA in the final Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for 2024 confirmed the scale of the challenge - too many are seeking work and finding only frustration. But what if this crisis could be rebranded as an opportunity? What if there's a way to equip jobless South Africans with the skills they need to build real careers, even if it means setting them up to look for overseas opportunities first? The world needs trained workers and skilled professionals, particularly in the food production, hospitality and customer service industries.

Training South Africans to meet those needs would be life changing and the impact of training programmes tailored for international employers would be invaluable. Our people could gain global experience, earn competitive wages and develop much-needed expertise, which they'll bring home with them and put to work strengthening South African industries. It's a win-win situation, that much is undeniable. The only thing that remains is figuring out how to make it happen faster - how to effectively turn local training into launchpads for global careers.

Setting the scene - breaking down the figures

South Africa's official unemployment rate saw a slight dip to 31.9% in Q4 2024, according to Stats SA. While this shows a small increase in employment and a decrease in the number of unemployed, it masks a concerning trend: a rise in discouraged work-seekers by 160 000 (up by 5,0%). This suggests that many have given up hope of finding employment, a worrying indicator of the depth of the problem. Furthermore, youth unemployment, while showing a marginal improvement to 44.6%, remains high,

indicating the continued vulnerability of young people in the labour market.

The big picture here? Millions of people, especially young people, cannot find jobs. This is partly because businesses, both international and South African, aren't investing enough in the country. Factors like complicated regulations make it hard to do business here and companies often look elsewhere, discouraged from expansion and investment by the amount of red tape involved in dealing with South Africa. For our youth, 337 158 matrics qualified recently for university admission but there are only 202 000 places at campuses around the country. This shows that we have people willing to work and willing to learn; however, a shortage of opportunities prevents them from doing so.

Rebranding to find a new horizon of opportunity

On the other hand, there is an urgent need for skilled workers in places like Europe and America. They've got aging populations and not enough young people to fill the vacancies. Plus, even though still highly-qualified, a lot of people aren't interested in some of the more basic, but still important, jobs – like business administrative work or skilled trades. Even call centres in the UK cannot retain staff, despite competitive pay and lucrative benefits. Simply put, these just aren't jobs that people over there want to do, and that leaves a gap for South Africans to fill.

So, how do we help South Africans to seize these life-changing global opportunities? This is where targeted training comes in, with the potential to address our unemployment crisis from a fresh angle. We're already seeing interest from overseas companies looking to hire, and now our job is to bridge the gap by equipping people with the skills they need to take them overseas to more mature markets. It's about training people to meet international standards so they can confidently take on 12-month contracts abroad.

Preparing for global work and strengthening local industries

Consider this analogy: Just as South Africans frequently relocate within the country for employment opportunities, so they too could seek work internationally. Instead of a move from Mpumalanga to Cape Town, for example, it now becomes possible to make a move from Mpumalanga to London. The pay is competitive, the experience is incredible, and when these individuals return, their employability has increased.

South Africa's technical and occupational skills training is already at a high standard, often aligned with curricula such as Australia and New Zealand. But to take it to the next level, training must also focus on workplace traits like adaptability, cultural awareness, and a strong work ethic. Focusing on the EQ side of training is as important as skills, as work culture in places like America can be very different, with the expectation for a high level of commitment and performance. So, by focusing on incorporating these key areas into our local training programmes, we can equip South Africans to ensure success in global work environments.

When South Africans return home after working abroad, they bring valuable experience and expertise

that can significantly benefit local industries. They gain exposure to best practices, particularly in areas like customer service and operational efficiency, often experiencing a higher standard than what is typical in South Africa. This exposure allows them to identify areas for improvement and implement new strategies upon their return. Furthermore, the international experience broadens their perspective on business in general, giving individuals a more global outlook. It is this enhanced skillset and mindset that will make them highly sought-after employees, increasing their chances of securing better jobs and with the possibility of driving innovation within their respective industries.

Moving from unemployment to opportunity

The bottom line is that training South Africans for jobs overseas isn't just about sending people away. Rather, it is a significant opportunity for national development. Think of it as a long-term investment. While these South Africans are out there, they are learning skills and gaining experience that will make them highly employable when they come back. They will bring fresh ideas, maybe even start their own businesses, and that will have a positive long term economic impact. Plus, the money they send home will benefit our economy immediately.

Of course, it would be preferable for this job creation to happen at home, but until then, this is an incredible way to give people much-needed opportunities that build a better future for South Africa. It's obvious: getting real-world, international work experience beats sitting at home without a job any day. This approach prioritises investment in our people, our nation's most valuable asset.