

The War for Skills: Top tips for how companies can win



Forty-five percent of CEOs in sub-Saharan Africa and 52% globally believe that skills shortages will impact their profitability over the next ten years. This is already being evidenced by South African businesses losing over R16 billion last year to replace lost skills due to higher than ever staff turnover. With this in mind, it is clear that the war for skills is now more critical than ever.

This is according to Sandra Botha, Global HR Auditor at Top Employers Institute, who notes that recruiting and replacing employees is more costly than retaining talent. “It is therefore essential for companies operating in the current economic climate to consider how they can reduce staff turnover, and this starts with people practices.”

“These, however, are constantly evolving, and what might have worked yesterday, may not work today, or in the future,” she explains. “As such, businesses will need to take ongoing industry trends and best practices into consideration to achieve the best results now and beyond.”

Train to retain

“In the post-pandemic world, employees have had a chance to reflect on what truly matters to them. Therefore, to attract, grow and retain the very best talent, employers need to now work more closely than ever with their people to personalise their everyday experiences at work, including learning and career development,” points out Botha. “While many organisations do offer a wide range of resources to help staff develop the competencies and skills needed for the future, personalisation ensures their successful uptake. Ideally, this should entail the provision of online self-managed resources as well as in-person

support. The balance between both resource types is proving to be the most effective and generates the best experiences.”

Among some of the world’s top ranked employers, 90% use personalised learning portals, 62% provide mentoring and coaching and 43% enlist the services of a career counsellor to ensure that all employees can receive personalised advice on their next career steps.

Illustrating this is Mvuyi Mntwapi at Unilever, which was named the Top Employer in Africa earlier this year. “We’re aiming to equip our employees with skills of the future and doing so by supporting them to proactively develop individualised Future-Fit Plans. This helps to guide employees on their career path as well as to identify and develop the skills they’ll need to succeed. This might involve enhancing their skills for their current role (upskilling), training to move to a different role within the company (reskilling) or preparing for careers and opportunities beyond our business.”

S/he explains that employees select the skills they wish to improve upon while the company facilitates this in a variety of ways including mentorship from leaders across the business, instructor-led training, and company-funded external certifications.

Listen and learn

“Business leaders must think simultaneously about long-term horizons while also analysing information and acting decisively in the short-term to thrive,” notes Botha. “This can be done by continuously listening to the internal and external environment to detect the skills needed now and in the future from a strategic perspective.”

“Now is the time to reset jobs by re-imagining the working landscape,” shares Mntwapi. This not only means imagining what the world of work might look like in 10 and 20 years but what we *want* it to look like which is why we involve our employees as part of our solutions from the outset, as opposed to seeing them as a problem to be solved.”

Botha says that when organisations employ active, intentional and continuous listening, this not only helps them ascertain whether they are on the right track in terms of developing the present and future skills they require, it also provides employees with direction for their professional development. “Yet only 44% of employers have an employee listening strategy in place.”

“Businesses need to understand that it is not sufficient to obtain feedback once a year through an employee engagement survey. Rather, they should be using clearly defined channels at specific intervals throughout the year to gather insights and feedback without over-burdening the team and avoiding survey fatigue,” she explains. “Additionally, people from all areas of the company should be included in these.”

“By providing staff with a variety of channels and opportunities to provide feedback, and acting on this input, they feel valued and that their opinion matters,” adds Botha. “This serves to not only increase productivity levels and overall engagement, but convert employees into company brand ambassadors,

advocating for the benefits of working for the organisation.”

The power of purpose

Unilever’s internal surveys have shown that the organisation’s commitment to purposeful business is a key factor in why high-performing people stay with the company.

“This is something we have seen amongst highly rated employers,” explains Botha. “Those firms wanting to not only retain but get the most out of their people must have their commitment to making a positive impact as the North Star guiding their people practices. And this ‘lived purpose’ must come straight from the heart of all of their employees, from the C-suite to more junior staff members. Nowadays, people want to be part of an organisation that aligns with their own personal views and purpose. They want to be able to make an emotional connection with their daily work.” She concludes by saying, “With the cost of doing business in South Africa skyrocketing, organisations will no longer be able to afford to lose billions as a result of skills losses. Therefore, ho