Quality artisan training and the QCTO system

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COMMENT

I am one of those who believe that practical skills have been neglected and undervalued for far too long, not only in South Africa but also across the globe.

Artisans in industry, although highly trained, skilled and essential to the economy, are seldom 'hailed' as pillars of society. Neither do they always enjoy employment security, because the project work they do is cyclical and very sensitive to swings in the economy. Across the world, teaching and nursing are seen as more respectable than plumbing or welding, but are they better paid? I don't think so.

Changing young people's attitudes towards skills-based technical careers or occupational qualifications remains a huge problem in South Africa. This must begin in schools at a young age, with learners engaging in more practical and technical activities such as those specified in the Revised National Curriculum Statements grades R-9 for South African Schools. Here though, it is the quality of the teacher/pupil interaction that needs attention so that young learners emerge from the system with a positive and realistic experience of practical work. The boring, irrelevant and theoretical technology classroom needs to become an exciting, meaningful and practical one.

For school leavers, however, it is the prospect of real, well-paid jobs attached to career paths and high-status qualifications that is likely to attract them.

In the past, artisan training was always directly associated with on-the-job training, with every apprentice being allocated to the care and tutorage of a skilled and experienced journeyman, who would already have an official apprenticeship qualification in his trade or craft from a relevant guild – and these journeyman certainly had status.

The direct link between a skilled artisan and an apprentice has long been lost, and, in South Africa, apprenticeship programmes themselves were in serious decline following the tepid reception and widely varying quality of unit standards-based Learnership programmes.

But we now see a very welcome attempt to revitalise and modernise apprenticeships under the QCTO (Quality Council for Trades and Occupations). The Southern African Institute of Welding (SAIW), through its training specialist, Etienne Nell, has been part of developing new three-year QCTO artisan training programmes, which now include a new SAQA-registered apprenticeship for Welders.

Called a dual system apprenticeship, the key principal, according to Nell is that industry needs to take charge by appointing its own apprentices. This is "a full-blown apprenticeship … which will combine technical education and simulated practical training at the SAIW with authentic work experience in a fabricator's workshop," says Nell.

In order to link training more tightly to industrial needs, the biggest number of hours, 2 200, is reserved for workplace modules (WMs), which are interspersed with training-school-based knowledge (KMs) and practical modules (PMs). Most importantly, however, the practical modules are scheduled by the apprentice's employer, via a memorandum of understanding with the training provider, so that every apprentice can be gainfully employed immediately on completing each four- to six-week module at the welding school. In this way, real work experience and formal training become interactive, making training more relevant to the trainee and more useful to the employer.

"Right from the start, companies that employ apprentices benefit via very cost-effective labour rates with additional benefits including: SETA training grants; SARS Tax incentives; B-BBEE score-card points and social responsibility credentials," says Nell.

Nell has done some cost calculations to highlight the real and opportunity costs of training an artisan. Given a total cost for the three year programme of around R510 000 per artisan, of which nearly a third is wages, Nell calculates that the SETA Grant (R165 000), the SARS Allowance (R40 000) and the SARS Employer Training Initiative (R18 000) reduce this total to R287 000. The SAIW Foundation is currently also offering a further R75 000 incentive per apprentice, which reduces the real cost to R212 000.

But Nell argues further that the apprentice's productivity while training not only makes this cost disappear, but it also reflects as profit from the investment. "If, for the last 18 months of the programme, we assume that an apprentice is 65% productive but is being paid 32% of his full salary, the employer will be saving the equivalent of R327 000 compared to an artisan that is 100% productive," argues Nell. This turns a cost, albeit a justifiable one, into a R115 000 benefit.

SAIW, through the SAIW Foundation, will commit R1.5-million over two years to subsidise 20 welding apprentices on its QCTO pilot training programme. But it needs buy-in from industry partners willing to recruit apprentices and put them to work on their factory floors.

It is sure to be worthwhile, in the short term and the long term. And it may also result in a restoration of the deserved status in society of people with practical skills. ❑