

How to fill SA's immediate skills gap

By [Marisa Jacobs](#)

18 Jan 2018

A new report compiled by expatriate solutions provider Xpatweb, titled [Critical Skills Survey Results 2017](#), confirms that local companies are hard pressed to find the right expertise to achieve their corporate goals. It is therefore to every business and professional body's benefit to engage with government to make work visa applications as easy as possible.



© lightwise – [123RF.com](#)

Simply stated, South Africa needs access to better skills to prosper and compete in the global market.

However, this is not a new revelation. The country's skills gap - the difference between the professional talents needed by employers and those available among the working public - has been widely discussed and reported on in the media for over a decade. Rather, the study serves as the springboard for a viable solution. The results were obtained from 86 respondents, many of whom represent South Africa's largest employers and international groups.

Recognising the problem

76.74% of those surveyed agreed that there is, in fact, a skills shortage in South Africa. The Critical Skills List published by the Department of Home Affairs contains a catalogue of the country's most needed competencies. These include the broad categories of business, economics and management; information communication and technology; engineering; health professions and related clinical science; life and earth sciences; professionals and associate professionals; trades; business process outsourcing; and academics and researchers. As can be seen, the demand ranges over a wide set of sectors.

Solving the skills problem will take hard work and starts with an honest appraisal of the constraints. The sooner we do this, the faster we can address it. The first admission we must make is that the gap exists now and a primary, immediate solution is required. Yes, formal learning and development programmes will produce a future, technically-competent national workforce - not just adequate but world-beating. Until that day dawns, we need a stopgap.

Learning takes too long

According to one study (Young, 2010), South Africa's universities and HEI's are not able to produce these critical skills fast enough. For example, Young estimated that creating 34,000 additional engineers, technologists, draughtspersons and technicians needed over a 2-year period would take roughly 100 years in terms of current educational capacity. Likewise,

learning and development programmes cannot scale to meet the immediate needs of the economy. Neither can businesses afford to wait, so an alternative solution is inevitably required.

75.29% of respondents in the Critical Skills Survey Results 2017 reported that they are better able to find scarce skills when they expand their search to include foreign nationals. This is a perfectly sensible solution - the right skills at the right level of expertise, available immediately to fill a skills gap that cannot otherwise be closed. This is supported by the fact that most of those interviewed asserted that the local market has been fully scouted for critical skills and found lacking.

Unfortunately, expatriates are seen by government and occupational stakeholders as a threat to the local workforce, taking jobs from South Africans. However, since the skillsets offered by foreign workers are evidently unavailable here, this couldn't be further from the truth. Even so, employers will need to evangelise several fundamental changes in thinking to promote their case.

First, expats are a resource, not a threat. Importing critical skills into the country is no different from importing any other essential factor of production.

Second, not only do they offer the competencies companies desire but also the opportunity to transfer their expertise to many local workers. As such, expatriates do not diminish employment opportunities for South Africans; instead, they create jobs by their very presence.

Third, the use of expats is temporary. They are simply a bridge between today's urgent business needs and tomorrow's acquired competencies. Rather than replace South African talent, they will hold the fort until the reinforcements arrive.

Making it happen

89.53% of those surveyed find the work visa process an obstacle to filling critical skills positions. The procedure is laborious and time consuming. However, not acquiring these vital talents will prove most costly in lost business opportunities and low competitive advantage.

The South African workforce of tomorrow will energise the economy. In the meantime, the country needs a concrete way to source the critical skills to compete globally. As our survey reveals, businesses believe that the acquisition of foreign skills is the only sensible response.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marisa Jacobs is the director - head of immigration and mobility at Xpatweb (a division of Tax Consulting SA).