

Upskilling youth with practical skills is essential to fighting unemployment

By [Melanie Riches](#)

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South Africa's youth are entering a daunting job market, where slow economic growth has meant businesses are struggling more than ever to absorb each new wave of entrants into the workforce. According to Stats SA, the country's unemployment rate rose to 32,9% in the first quarter of 2023. Youth unemployment is even more concerning, with 63% of 15-24 year-olds out of work. These statistics highlight the urgent need for comprehensive action.



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While addressing these macro-economic challenges requires a sustained effort from both businesses and government in the long term, there are actions that businesses can take today to upskill young people and empower them with work experience that will better their chances of standing out in an oversaturated labour market.

Apprenticeships can help bridge the school to work gap

An apprenticeship offers ambitious youth on-the-job training and valuable work experience, strengthening their skills. Apprenticeships can often overlook the essential soft skills that young professionals need to thrive in their careers. The transition from graduate to professional can be challenging, and entering the workforce as a fresh graduate can be intimidating.

Many young people who have gone through apprenticeships credit these for helping them adapt to the working world and jumpstart their careers with a goal-driven mindset. Apprenticeships not only refine technical skills but also guide young individuals in professionalizing themselves and expanding their knowledge.



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Learnership programmes should aim to emphasise diverse competencies such as communication, teamwork and problem solving. Companies can achieve this by offering training sessions and networking events aimed at imparting practical and valuable knowledge that promotes holistic professional development.

Use apprenticeships to promote gender equity

While promoting gender equity should be a priority for all businesses, this is especially important for male-dominated industries. To achieve this, young women need to be given equal opportunities to gain entry-level experience, advance their careers and ultimately take on leadership roles, just like their male counterparts. This should also be across business units or segments.

In the manufacturing industry, young women are increasingly showing an interest in areas such as environmental health, safety management, electrical/power engineering, operations engineering, human resources, finance, accounting, supply chain management, informational technology and technical sales. Businesses should prioritise creating opportunities for the diverse range of interests and ambitions of young women entering the workforce.



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A company's commitment to empowering women should be reflected in their leadership, throughout various levels of the organisation. This includes several female team leaders who serve as role models for aspiring female employees. Ensuring your business is reflective of the diverse range of talent you are looking to attract and empower is a sure-fire way to help apprentices see the possibilities for career advancement that potentially await them within your business and the wider industry.

If you can, go big!

While many businesses in South Africa may struggle to provide apprentices with additional enrichment experiences, those that can should not skimp on providing young professionals with memorable work opportunities that go beyond their expectations. This is especially pertinent for multinational companies that have a global footprint. Collaborating with overseas teams, and even having the opportunity to visit operations abroad, can be transformational for a young professional.

A true highlight for any apprentice is the opportunity to visit and collaborate with their equally talented young colleagues from operations across the world.

We cannot solely rely on the government for solutions – it is a shared task. Offering a professionally robust and inclusive

apprenticeship programme is one way businesses can play their part in helping to alleviate unemployment. Even if a business cannot absorb all of its apprentices, these young professionals leave the programme with skills, experience, and a growth mindset that will enable them to stand out as they continue their professional journey.

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