

Omni collaborates with SETAs to make online learning a reality

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Considering the current lockdown, there is understandably an impact on planned skills development initiatives; classroom training is restricted, but workplace skills planning is still due at the end of May, and BBBEE strategies and aligned budgets are rigorously being discussed around the board room table. Omni HR Consulting's head of operations Cindy Londt and compliance and risk manager Jasmine Sultan discuss the way forward and how the company is adapting.



Q: Heeding the pleas for post-schooling and workplace-based learning to continue, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) have collaborated positively with Skills Development Providers and Skills Development Levy-paying organisations. Please tell us a bit more about what these partnerships look like and how it affects companies like Omni HR Consulting's ability to provide training?

Cindy Londt: SETAs are engaging with business and providers to find solutions as to *how* we can collaborate to fast track online learning for new learner registrations and proactively looking for solutions with and for providers to aid learner completion through varied exit strategies and certification.

SETAs have inherently been closed-minded with respect to engagement around online and virtual learning. In my opinion, that was driven predominantly by access, digital readiness of stakeholders and various socio-economic factors. The current discussion and collaborative approach is extremely encouraging. We are moving forward towards approved e-learning and virtual learning framework and this will be critical in the weeks and months ahead if we want to have a positive impact on our economy as key role players in the skills development arena.

Omni has been working collaboratively with various SETAs for some time now to ensure that the momentum of e-learning as a legitimate and accredited form of skills development is not lost.

Q: How has the lockdown impacted your planned skills development initiatives?

CL: Three-fold:

- **The impact on learning:** We have had to delay any form of face-to-face classroom training that was planned over the lockdown period. We have, however, continued with coaching and learner support for learners through online methodologies to allow learners to continue working on their portfolios.
- **Financial impact:** The uncertainty of what the future holds has seen a significant drop in clients booking new training over this period. Without clarity on what we can expect post-lockdown in terms of the 'new normal', organisations are naturally reluctant to make decisions around skills development initiatives.
- **Excitement around the opportunities Covid-19 brings:** Sounds weird, I know, but bear with me for a moment. Omni has been engaging clients on the benefits of online learning and virtual classrooms aligned to the 4th industrial

revolution and the future world of work for some time now. Including topics related to augmented reality, automation, and AI; and how these will eventually impact education.

Whilst organisations generally see the benefits and love the advanced way of looking at learning, the barriers to technology and data is continually raised as a concern. If anything, Covid-19 has taught us that online learning is a real possibility and potentially part of our 'new normal'. More and more of our clients have engaged us over the past four weeks to support them in shifting their culture to one that is accepting of online learning. We have begun to co-create innovative and creative ways in which to expedite the culture shift to digital and the associated strategic implementation that will be required for our online solutions to support their skills development needs and strategies for sustainability.

Q: What do you foresee the long- and short-term effects of the lockdown will be on organisations' BBBEE strategies?

CL: Skills development as an element on the BBBEE scorecard requires that on the onset of the financial year, organisations had to strategise and evaluate their skills-development strategies, associated spend and the number of student/learners/interns that would need to be enrolled on categories A to G to meet their targets. With the fluctuation in their revenue, depending on the realised impact of Covid-19 on business, and potential retrenchments in the months to come, it will force organisations to re-evaluate their various skills-development strategies.

Having said this, BBBEE should not be a stand-alone strategy. It should be an integrated strategy linked to strategic drivers. Understanding the skills required for short-term turnaround and long-term sustainability is our collective ethical responsibility. Covid-19 will have far-reaching implications beyond lockdown. We need to build our future skills to enable people to be relevant, skilled and employable and that is bigger than linear short-term considerations.

Q: How will the lockdown affect the development of scarce and critical skills? Do you think the type of skills in demand might change?

CL: The impact is likely to be quite positive but will create lots of disruption for the SETA landscape in terms of re-framing what is currently considered scarce and critical skills. There are opportunities for entrepreneurs to challenge the status quo and to move with more agility in coming up with creative and innovative solutions to the challenges Covid-19. We will likely see an expediting of South Africa's growth curve into the 4th industrial revolution and the much-needed digital transformation strategies. The scarce and critical skills were already somewhat outdated and with the technology we are seeing come to the fore now, this means these will seriously need to be revised if we want to remain globally relevant and locally sustainable.

Q: There has surely been a significant increase in demand for e-learning facilities since the outbreak on Covid-19 and the lockdown. What do you think will happen once we finally go back to 'normal'?

CL: There will be a change and an increase in demand for e-learning facilities. We would need to take the time to frame, within the accredited learning landscape, what is compliant accredited e-learning. But here we will not have the privilege of months and years to formalise this learning framework. We will need to move with speed and agility as the demand increases. We will either be adapting, or we will be left behind. In many cases, organisations in the ETD landscape will be forced to adapt. Education at all levels in South Africa is critical to continue. And we need this for economic sustainability and to unlock future entrepreneurs who will aid economic stimulation.

Q: How difficult has it been to make the transition to fully-online operational?

Jasmine Sultan: Omni has a very clearly defined Digital Transformation Strategy (DTS) that has seen us transition to an e-learning platform that meets the SAQA, DHET and CHE guidelines and criteria for online learning, over the past 18 months.

We have been in a privileged position, as our DTS has allowed us to transition overnight. The impact has been marginal, with our biggest hurdle being supporting clients with learning culture adaptation to support online and virtual and to help learners with access to resources like data.

Q: In order to obtain approval from SETA to offer online learning and exit current learners, organisations are evaluated through a compliance checklist. What are the most difficult points to check off and how do you go about becoming compliant?

JS: The biggest barrier on the checklist is helping the SETA to understand how the e-learning is able to meet the requirements of the notional hours of learning – proving that learners have actually completed all the learning components and are suitably ready for assessment.

Omni has addressed this by ensuring our online content aligns directly to our face-to-face content that has already been accredited by the SETA. This means that the learning already meets the learning outcomes required of the qualification, it is just the learning methodology that has changed.

We have also built comprehensive learner-tracking and reporting mechanisms. This means that we can determine if learners have in fact completed the learning, and we can follow up with those that have not through coaching conversations before it impacts assessment decisions.

Learner-tracking and data integrity are key.

Q: Omni's vision to significantly positively impact on outcomes-based education in South Africa, led to digital transformation strategies that saw the launch of an e-learning platform. How did the organisation ensure that it met the quality and compliance parameters of the South African Qualifications Act (SAQA), Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Council for Higher Education (CHE)?

JS: Omni has a very skilled and credible quality assurance, risk and compliance team consisting of individuals with years of knowledge and experience spanning across all three sub-frameworks – Schooling, Post Schooling/Further Education and Training and Higher Education. The combination of academics and operational heads has ensured that we keep up to date with research and current developments within our industry, ensuring that we are able to consistently align to and drive industry standards.

Our aim is to be an active member of the educational and skills development value chain and support our compliance and regulatory bodies with excellence. Furthermore, we are actively involved in research and developing new bodies of knowledge (models, systems, processes) to ensure credibility and quality, thus playing an active role in our sector.

Q: Omni can offer online learning through their e-learning platform OmniStack and successfully exit learners. How do learners register and get started?

JS: Navigate to our Omni website at www.omnihrc.com – which provides insight into our business and people development solutions. Individuals can register online for our public courses; alternatively, make contact with one of our customer relationship consultants.

Omni's online course offering can be viewed at www.omnistackconnect.omnihrc.com.

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