A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CANDIDATE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION

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PURPOSE: Improvement of hard and soft skills, job security and other employment considerations are influenced by the education and training of a candidate professional who is keen to register with a built environment statutory council in South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Purpose:
Improvement of hard and soft skills, job security and other employment considerations are influenced by the education and training of a candidate professional who is keen to register with a built environment statutory council in South Africa.

Methodology:
The study, which is reported upon in this paper qualitatively assessed how candidate built environment professionals perceive their work in relation to their quest for professional registration. The phenomenological study underpinning this paper used face-to-face interviews to interrogate the issues among purposively selected professionals who are working towards professional registration with statutory councils affiliated with the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) in South Africa.

Results:
The study shows that the majority of the interviewees agree that employers need to promote training programmes that would assists candidate professional in South Africa. The main reason for this assertion is centred on the need for candidate professionals align their training with the requirements of registration councils.

Value:
Candidate professions that participate in employer assisted training programmes would be more secured about future employment prospects in the industry.

Keywords:
Built Environment, Job Security, Professional Development, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, government projects are often used to redress past social separation and its effects. Through various agencies, the South African government has intervened in the training and mentorship of artisans in the construction industry[1]. This is not the case with professional development in the construction industry. The construction industry produces the built environment, which comprise all immovable assets in an economy. This suggests that consultants and contractors alone cannot eradicate the professional skills deficiency in South Africa construction industry. Thus state interventions that support the professional skills deficiency in South Africa construction industry could contribute to closing this gap. In developing countries, it is often assumed that the state can — and should — play a dominant role in the provision of training[2]. The research project that is presented in this paper addressed candidate professionals in consulting and construction firms regarding their perceptions about professional development, training and levels of job insecurity in the construction industry. The study attempts to surface issues that impact on professional development in the built environment professions. Thus, this paper addresses:

- What are the connections between job insecurity and the development of candidate professionals?

- How should employers assist candidate professionals working towards registration with relevant councils?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Job security is defined as an important employee perceptual factor in determining satisfaction and intentions to stay with a

company[3]. This suggests that perceptions and emotions of employees are involved in the determination of job security and, as such, are important in every work environment. In other words, the views and emotions that manifest themselves in employees can influence the state of job security perceived by an employee.

The extant literature suggests that construction organisations show poor commitment to the development of people due to the belief that it is a costly function[4]. The unique characteristics of the industry have implications for job security. As an illustration, when the overall business climate is buoyant, few workers are unemployed; productivity increases and not many firms go bust. At other times, however, business is not good, there are many unemployed workers, cutbacks in production occur and a significant number of firms are in receivership[5]. This clearly indicates that during times of wealth in the macro economy, job security is also at its peak. This is attributed to the fact that during this time, threats of unemployment are dormant, productivity is high and business is on the upswing. The reverse is also true that during times of the economic crunch, job security is also at its lowest due to cutbacks in production. This may eventually lead to an increase in the number of retrenchments, something which contributes to an increase in the unemployment rate of a country.

Job insecurity leads to a range of outcomes among employees. Anxiety and stress are notable among the outcomes[6]. When stress is caused by job insecurity, it can be suggested that employees may take a decision to leave the place of employment. Alavi et al.[7] further substantiates this by reporting that:

 "…..job insecurity, job dissatisfaction, and search for new job can be described as immediate attempts to avoid an insecure job setting."

Noble[3] further explains by referring to Maslow's theory that job security falls within the category of safety needs. According to van Zyl et al.[8], if the needs and goals are frustrated, this may have, "…a psychological impact on those affected…" If these needs are not satisfied, they may have psychological impacts.

These needs are also called deficiency needs because if these needs are not met people may not have the chance to develop themselves both physically and psychologically[9]. Therefore, an employee who feels constrained may inevitably find it difficult to perform optimally. In the context of job security, Noble[3] contends that a relationship between performance and job security exists. This implies that employees may not expend effort in the future if they perceive that the link between performance and rewards is not strongly correlated[9]. There is a positive correlation between job insecurity and expenditure on the labour market[10]. The more flexible a country is with minimum intermediate level of employment protection, the better the country may perform in the labour market. In other words, the public sector could implement policies that should address concerns related to job security in the labour market.

With such a policy, high levels of skills could be enhanced and promoted in order to shift the negative perception and fear caused by job insecurity. This combination must be supported by government spending in the labour market to ensure continuity and also ensure new entrants in the market can maintain a high level of job security. In a European Union (EU)-based study, a suggests that countries should invest an amount of approximately 4.5% of the GDP on an annual basis on the labour market[10]. This may be done so as to have an impact on a high unemployment rate, and increase the skills level of the labour force.

To encourage high level of skills in the labour market, human resource (HR) development interventions must be structured to yield the required training results. This can be done by using training that helps ensure that activities are aligned with the requirements. Another dimension of looking into the value chain is the life cycle for professional development. The development of professional skills is a chain of stages or phases. Each stage is dependent on the success of the previous stage. Ideally, employees should receive development interventions that are aligned to where they are in the life cycle. The cycle starts with basic education and moves to professional formation through higher education and the candidacy stage before professional practice is assured. Explanations concerning the cycle can be made through the HR development practice described shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Conception of human resource development

Function	Focus	Purpose
Education	Learning related to preparing the individual for a different but identified job.	Preparation of an individual for an identified job in the not - too distant future.
Training	Learning related to present job.	Improve performance on the present job for the individual.
Learning	Using practice or experience gained from education and training to develop the individual, team or organisation.	Ensuring or realising a relatively permanent change in behaviour. This can only be achieved if attention is paid to 'Transfer of the learning' to the actual workplace situation
Development	Learning related to the growth of the individual, related to either specific present or future job requirement.	General growth not related to any specific job. Source:[11]

If the life cycle for professional development is connected to the Nadler's table, it can be concluded that each type of function becomes more important than the other at different stages of the life cycle. To make a practical example: during the school stage (Grades 10 -12), education is the most important function en route to development. This is, however, a long way off

professional registration. After acquiring successful results from school, an individual is then enrolled in a higher education institution. Upon enrolment, the individual goes through a more focused education. This focus is based on the industry and the sphere of study within the particular industry. Graves and Epstein[12] describe this type of development as the self-

awareness necessary to transit from student into emerging professional. Some institutions use a combination of education and training (in-service training) for development at this initial stage. In some instances, depending on the profession, the training and the learning functions are used as medium for development. Here, the candidate is trained in all aspects pertaining to the discipline. At the end of the candidacy period, the individual should be registered with a relevant council. The most vital medium after the individual is registered is the development function. This is a continuous professional development (CPD) cycle until the individual retires. CPD is an umbrella term for post-qualification learning that enables professional and personal development[13]. However, CPD is available for qualified professionals and candidate professions.

RESEARCH

RESEARCH METHOD

The method chosen for conducting the qualitative study was through interviews in accordance with the phenomenological approach[14]. A phenomenological study like this one describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon[15]. This method allow researchers to focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon – difficulties in the candidacy phase of professional registration in the case of this particular study. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of prevalent essence. This description often consists of "what" they experienced and "how" the interpret their experiences[15]. Interviews were chosen as being appropriate for this study as this method allows for capturing and preserving of the soft human variables that are attached to the subjective nature of the topic[14]. The interview protocol comprise of 19 questions with the exception of demographic questions. The interview protocol was developed so as to ask the same questions regarding this research project throughout the rest of the interview exercise. This was done to ensure consistency in the trajectory of the interviews.

The interview protocol allowed open-ended questions, which were used for clarification and exploratory purposes[16]. The interview protocol contained semi-structured questions in order to probe the individual's viewpoint regarding subject matter. The reason behind the chosen form of data collection was to create a reciprocal two- way communication with the participating candidate professionals. The time expended for the actual interview was approximately 20 to 40 minutes per interview. This excludes the time expended on introduction and reassurance of confidentiality of the contents of the interview. Interviews were conducted with 14 participants. A typical sample size for interviews is from 5 to 25 individuals[17]. The interviews were tape- recorded and transcribed thereafter.

The sample was made up of interviewees who were under the employment of consultants, government entities and contractor organisations. Potential participants were registered as candidate professionals with different councils affiliated to the Council for the Built Environment (CBE). Of the 14 interviewees, five have recently exited the candidacy phase of their development and registered with ECSA as professional engineers. The nine candidate professionals that were still in the candidacy phase are affiliated to the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Professions (SACQSP), the South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP), the South African Council for Landscape Architectural Professions (SACLAP), and the South African Council for the Property Valuer Professions (SACPVP). The interviewees were contacted through email and the telephone. The registered interviewees recently registered with ECSA so they are well placed to reflect upon their candidacy phase experience. A follow-up telephone call was made to further discuss the background to the research interview with the participants. The participants were also reassured about the contents of the study and clarification of any questions that the participants had regarding the interview.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic Information

According to their gender, there were six female and eight male interviewees. Ten interviewees were classified as youth (below the age of 36). Nine of the participants in this age group were interviewed because they had less than ten years of experience in the industry and were still undergoing candidacy training. As mentioned earlier, five of the interviewees just exited the candidacy phase of their professional development. All participants qualified for professional registration. Nine of the interviewees had less than six years of industry experience, whereas five of them had been in the industry for over six years. All participants were affiliated to councils under the CBE. These councils include ECSA, SACQSP, SACPCMP, SACLAP, SACPVP, and the SACAP (South African Council for the Architectural Professions). The CBE is a statutory body established in terms of the CBE Act No. 43 of 2000.

THEME 1: Candidate professional training

To shed light on this theme, seven questions were asked. The first question asked the interviewees if they are satisfied with the investment that their employers have made with respect to their training and education. Nine interviewees responded in the affirmative with regard to this question, while three replied 'no', indicating that they are not satisfied with the organization's education and training investment. One interviewee was very impressed with the training that his organisation offered. Because he had the opportunity of furthering his studies, the organisation has given him the responsibility of training others in the firm. Half of the interviewees regard the training that their organisation offers as satisfactory. They believe that the training offered is organised in such a way that they can apply it in their day-to-day job routines. This training can also add value in such a way that it increases the candidate's prospects for professional registration and / or for collecting continuous development points for those that have already reached the stage for professional registration. Interviewee number 7 offers a very diplomatic response when he says, "*A piece of bread is better than nothing.*"

The second question of the theme elicited responses as to whether job-related training and education that the interviewees have been exposed to in the industry is structured for purposes of registration as a professional in the industry. In response to this enquiry, some of the interviewees noted that their employers do not offer structured programmes for job-related training. Interviewee number 4 stated that "*we have to search for our own training and development*". He further mentioned that "we always seek information from councils and associations and the internet." For the young aspiring candidate professionals, a structured training programme offers guaranteed exposure to all the areas of work experience as required by the relevant councils. This ensures that the respective mentors cover all the areas needed in foundational training in each discipline. The structured programme prompts the mentor or supervisor to leave no stone unturned regarding training during the candidacy period. The structured programme can also act as a basis on which HR can review the progress and the return of investment of the training programme and also make a decision on the introduction of an HR intervention. Interviewee number 1 responded by saying, "*You get trainees that are just idling and nobody looks after them. If HR had a clear training plan and*

knew exactly where to place the candidates in the organisation for training, then no candidate would be idle."

Nevertheless, 13 interviewees confirm that their employers sponsor their job-related training and education. This job-related training is deemed to be adequate by the respondents. The participants for interview 8 was satisfied with the job-related training and said that "we are exposed to everything." In general, the interviewees were satisfied with the status of training and education that is available where they were currently employed.

THEME 2: Job security
The majority of the respondents seem to understand the relationship between management goals in relation to training and education. The participant for interview number 4 gave his impression of these goals. The respondent answered, "*Yes I do understand management goals, and even though I'm not sure… ..I don't know where management stands on that aspect.*" This perhaps may be caused by the fact that management does not always cascade the vision to members of the organisation at an operational level, or perhaps it is a case of management not making the goals towards training and education a priority.

Participants for interview number 7 explained that "*They (management) are trying. It is better than nothing.*" The participant for interview number 1 suggested that management goals in the organisation are focused, "*… mostly (concentrate) on company performance more than training and education. There is no real link as such; I think they are looking more at the performance indicators of the company rather than training and education of a candidate who needs to register with a professional council*" This suggests that employers may, due to certain constraints, be ignorant of the training and education required for professional registration. This finding negates the perception that a strong professional technical skills base can be used as a competitive advantage.

When the interviewees were asked whether they could explain or describe how management training and education goals have impacted on employability in the sector, their replies were: interviewee number 3 explained that, "*I would say it helps in formally applying methods and formulas needed for work. Through training, interaction with project team members from different educational backgrounds and also networking with other professionals from different organisations is easier.*" The interviewee suggests that through proper training it is easier to be confident about one's input in the project arena. The interviewee also expressed the view that it is easier to build a network with other professionals from the larger built environment fraternity as this increases one's employability in the sector.

The participant for interview number 5 was among those who said that they did not understand that management goals could be related to training as mentioned earlier. In addition, the same interviewee says, "*…..before the training and my B-Tech, opportunities were very scarce and limited. With the B-Tech, I have secured a number of interviews in recent months.*" This suggests that management for this organisation is not explicit about training and development through company policies. This makes it difficult for the employees to map out their future prospects within the organisation.

Most of the interviewees agreed that there are structured training programmes introduced due to specific team requirements. This is to ensure that technical skills are complemented with other soft skills. The participant for interview 9 made a practical example for such programmes. The interviewee explained that, "*Currently we want to train people or ourselves on the issues of contracts. This is for the Joint Building Contracts Committee (JBCC) and the New Engineering Contract (NEC) group of contracts. As we have seen, the projects that we are running are not managed correctly within our department. There are groups that have started to undergo training, at the end we will all attend. We should know about this by now. We are involved in this industry but we cannot say what we knew (in terms of the laws, terms and references) five years ago still applies today as they keep on changing.*" This comment suggests that it is incorrect to just focus on rigid technical skills without paying attention to the complementary skills that will ensure that relevant laws are not contravened.

It is known that an architect should provide the team with a plan or design, the quantity surveyor with a bill of quantities, the project manager with the management tools and techniques for a project. Among the technical skills, poor contract management could lead to the complete halt of a project or even destroy the entire prospect of a project.

When the interviewees were asked to mention and describe formal HR processes used for closing existing skills gaps according to the structured training programme in their firm, these were the responses: the participant for interview 2 said that "*I know of the skills audit programme within the organisation that was adopted. HR along with qualified practitioners researched whether people are placed correctly in terms of their skills, competence and ability.*" The participant further said that, "*….but I have never heard of them taking any decision regarding what to do with their findings.*" The participant for interview 9 answered and said that "*The training that we undergo is initiated by ourselves as project managers, and there is no HR involvement during the identification process. Then we inform our senior to cater for such training during the budgeting process.*"

The argument is that there is no formal process for identifying skills gaps for most organisations. HR interventions are almost always tactical in nature, unplanned, have no structure that adds value and the outcomes or the return on investment is never measured. The participant for interview 2 opined that, "*Well, since I joined the organisation, I have attended a lot of training. As to how they fit into my being a project member, I have not necessarily seen the connection. We are just running to get training and there was no point where I was evaluated as to whether perhaps I am adding value to the project based on such training. The assumption is that I am good enough so far.*"

Ten of the interviewees affirm that there is a formal process where they hold regular reviews and adjustments to project-specific HR performance in their individual firms. In particular, the participant for interview 1 describes this process as, "*Mostly at project milestone when certain milestones are achieved, you go through the reviews and also look at HR needs of the projects, if there is a need to beef up you do that and if there is need to go out and get the external skills and expertise you do that. We do the milestone reviews and then HR is one of the areas we look at and also the performance of the human resources within the team.*"

THEME 3: Professional development
Most of the interviewees were of the opinion that their employers are familiar with all the laws surrounding required training and education in the construction industry. The participant for interview 4 added that, "*…..but I'm not really sure at what level they are in terms of knowledge of the subject area.*" How well is HR department familiar with the requirements for professional development? When HR is on a course for skills development what guides their training course, if not the professional development laws? The participant for interview 2 opined that "*To a certain extent, employers are knowledgeable, but what*

they know is neither the best of it nor the poorest." This suggests that HR knowledge of the project team regarding the laws for training and development are a grey area.

The participant for interview 1 suggested that, "…..if you don't know, you won't bother about this training and try to develop yourself, but if you know about these rules, obviously you will follow certain steps to make sure that you are equipped. And when you also compare yourself with your peers, you will always want to be a step ahead." If the individual does not know the training protocols required by the councils, then HR cannot take you through them through proper training. The participant for interview 2 suggests that, "They do expect us to practise a certain level of professionalism guided by our councils that we subscribe to, but as how to help us practise relevantly, they are not doing anything."

The participant for interview 3 strongly answered that the education deficit of HR regarding these laws, "… affects the employee in a manner that HR will not highlight or they cannot encourage the development of individuals in the construction sector because they are not aware of what we do in the construction sector term as achievement……. Just as long as the post is filled to them it's OK." Participants for interview 8 suggest that, "If they are aware of the laws then we get trained according to regulation or council or whoever needs to approve them. Chances of you getting derailed are lowered because they know…." If the knowledge that governs built environmental laws is not known, then HR and employees can never be sure of how to align them with the training requirements of the built environment councils. Employees as industry patriots must show interest in educating HR and management about the correct training protocol. With the correct training protocol, chances of differing are kept at a minimum.

Eleven of the interviewees regard their employers as receptive to training and education for a professional career. The participant for interview 7 suggests that their organisation, "…even goes to the extent of allowing us to leave as early as 1 pm, so we can go and study in the afternoon. The supervisor is aware."

The participant for interview 2 insists that, "They always say only if it is job-specific and related to what I am doing at the organisation. Any other management programme would not be approved. I have attended a few but I'm not satisfied…" More than half of the interviewees agreed that there are limited career progression opportunities in their organisations. Only six of the fourteen interviewees believe that the training and education opportunities that are available at their organisation are adequate for career advancement in the sector.

The participant for interview 2 responded thus, "If they improve to a level where they look at what you want to achieve professionally and not only delivering on what you are doing now, then it would meet the needs for professional development." Interviewee for interview 3 mentioned the point that HR goes beyond than just recruitment and filling posts. It is also about management of the development of that resource.

DISCUSSION

The challenges that are faced by candidate professionals, which also impinge on professional registration, were explored. The challenges include:

a)   The lack of support that can diminish job security;
b)   The imbalance between professional training and
         other forms of training required to excel
         as a professional, and

c)   The lack of programmes that support professional
         skills development.

The literature firstly tapped on the impasse called job insecurity. Job security is an impasse because it affects the individual's ability to progress[18]. Job insecurity affects the individual's psychological ability, negatively affects the individual's ability to perform his duties and negatively affects the growth of an organisation. This creates a problem for development.

Soft skills were identified by interviewees as project management skills, contract management skills, project monitoring and evaluation skills, project scheduling skills and courses on preparation for council board examinations. The participant for interview 2 stressed that he is confident with his ability to deliver on his duties, but would still require more training that is beyond the technical scope.

The findings show that technical abilities are not enough[19]. One also needs the ability to manage outputs, people, to know about the impact that a technical professional has on a contract. Furthermore, one also needs to be able to manage conflict in the workplace. All these are key attributes that ensure that the project is executed as expected. It is important to overcome the educational / training mismatch since such a mismatch has a negative influence on job satisfaction in the Architectural, Engineering and Construction (AEC) sector[20].

Findings from the study indicate that HR departments do make an effort to invest in training and development. The training programme offered by some employers, however, often not structured. A structured programme offers guaranteed exposure to all the areas of work experience as required by the relevant councils. This also ensures that respective mentors cover all the areas needed in foundational training in each discipline. The structured programme can also act as a basis on which employers can review the progress of the programme and also measure the return on investment of the training programme. If a training requirement is lacking (skills gaps that are apparent) from the programme, then an employer can quickly identify the need and make a decision on the introduction of an intervention to fill the skills gap[21].

It is apparent that the management of most organisations does offer these training programmes. It is perceived that the training programme that they offer adds value to job performances and company performance[22]. Knowledge and understanding of the importance of HR development on infrastructure project is adequate. However, HR techniques for identifying education and training requirements seem to be more biased towards technical skills. Findings from the literature review indicate that HR departments need to take a systematic approach in the planning for training and development[4]. In this way, practice based training required for soft skills can be catered for. Soft skills complement hard skills gained from tertiary education. Organizations undertaking a leadership development initiative have to look beyond simply evaluating training programmes since success depends not only on effective training but also on expert facilitation, contextual awareness, formal and informal support, real-world application, self-study, and self-awareness[23].

Management goals to aid job security through training and development were to some extent understood. The subject 'training and education' is one that forms a prerequisite in the relevant councils for a candidate's route towards professional registration. Lack of training also makes the candidate vulnerable to non-registration and, by extension, job insecurity. Training is essential in mastering the discipline through practice and also in the meticulous application of technical knowledge

gained through tertiary education. Upon mastering the discipline, it becomes easier for individuals to be confident about their role in a project team. It also becomes easier to build a network with other professionals within the built environment fraternity. This increases one's employability in the sector and thereby increases job security. It seems that there is a connection between a lack of professional development and job insecurity. The lack of training could be detrimental to a candidate professional with regard to professional registration. Management must be explicit about training and development and reflect such commitment in business strategic plans and creation of training policies and procedures. Without this undertaking, it makes it difficult for the employees to map out their future prospects within the organisation. Training programmes are integrated within the projects which focus more on technical skills. There are, however, other structured training programmes introduced due to specific team requirements which may focus on soft skills of leadership – empathy, compassion, etc. Most employers are familiar with the legislation that governs training and education for the built environment professions. If the knowledge of built environmental laws is not known, then HR and employees may never be sure of how to align them with the training requirements of CBE councils. Employees as industry patriots must show interest in educating HR and management about the correct training protocol.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research is an attempt to surface issues affecting candidate professionals in the built environment disciplines. The realisation of professional registration depends on post tertiary education exposure of candidate professionals. This research has flagged challenges that candidate professionals have to surmount in order to register as a professional that is licenced to practice in South African construction. One of the issues is that of job insecurity. This phenomenological study shows that job insecurity could be mitigated through structured skills development among candidate professionals. By analysing the life cycle of professional development, employers could administer programmes that would engender professional registration. In response to the questions posed in section of this paper, it can be argued that the connection between job insecurity and the development of candidate professions can be found in the nature of training and mentorship offered by employers. When candidate fail to partake in training programmes that could assist them with professional registration in their workplaces, the impasse of job insecurity tend to set into their minds. To subvert this scenario, employers should endeavour to promote training and development initiatives that can assist their employees to do the necessary work while aligning with the requirements of relevant councils.

Upon introduction of training interventions, employers could opt for a structured programme. Programmes may have the characteristic of a schedule of the training so as to administer training appropriate at differing stages or phases of the programme. Monitoring of the progress of this training intervention on a regular basis is important. Also, in order to create a feedback loop for lessons learnt, employers need to evaluate the outcomes of the training intervention so as to make adjustments to the training programme. The argument put forward in this paper is that it is important for employers to be conversant with the needs of candidate professionals in order to get optimum performance from them. The training of candidate professionals has to be tailored to the needs of the relevant professional council so as to ensure that registration and professional practice are attainable by the candidates. This would have positive effects on employees, the employers and the construction industry in general.

The findings illustrated in this research are however limited in the sense that only the perceptions of candidates and recent candidates were used to surface the emergent issues. It is therefore important for a further research to explore the perceptions of employers and mentors of candidate professionals in the built environment. More so, it will be a real service to the industry if a model for candidacy phase of professional registration can be evolved for use in the construction industry.

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