

UPSKILLING THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE – AND WHY IT’S NECESSARY

By Gizelle McIntyre, Director of The Institute of People Development (IPD)

Issued by Perfect Word Consulting (Pty) Ltd

Having grown up on a farm, surrounded by farmers who as a rule didn’t have any formal qualifications in farming, there is a deep understanding for the need to deal with the practical nature of the occupation. There are great qualifications in all sectors of agriculture, but a lot of people who have moved into the world of agriculture have done so purposefully, for the love of the land and the sense of meaning this occupation gives to the individual. While these farmers didn’t have the qualifications, they knew the intricacies of the land – they could tell you more scientific details about the effects certain bugs had on crops than most fully-fledged scientists – they just didn’t have a degree behind their name.

One would, however, be remiss to presume every person working in the Department of Agriculture is a farmer, horticulturist, or botanist. In fact, the operational workforce within the Department is more likely to be made up of Human Resources staff, accountants, managers, and administrative employees.

While conducting training at Limpopo’s Department of Agriculture in 2016, it became clear that although many of the staff members had the experience to maintain their positions or be promoted, their “paperwork” didn’t always reflect this. As a result, The Institute of People Development (IPD) embarked on a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) advisory campaign. The end goal was to enable the Department itself to build a RPL Policy, allowing it to RPL people into positions even if they did not have the formal qualifications required, rather focussing on their skills set and experience.

Retaining good people in government positions is not easy – and not acknowledging skills is often the catalyst to staff turnover. There are “sexier” places to work, so this begs the question, how do you keep and engage good people in the civil service? Research shows it’s not the salary or perks that make people find other career paths. So, what is it that is making exceptional people move into the private sector? Experience shows that it certainly is not a lack of skills. There are a lot of skills there – but they are either not acknowledged, or the employees are not engaged, so they leave seeking greener pastures. People need a sense of meaning and purpose, acknowledgement, autonomy and a sense of belonging to stay.

While identifying the skills that are needed is indeed the first step, this in itself isn’t enough. Experience shows that there is a deeper, underlying problem. Even if the correct skills are

recruited, how can they be kept in the employ of the Department? If people do not have their own sense of autonomy in their environment, they will not be satisfied. Bureaucracy takes any bright person and turns them dull; from a floodlight to a candle. Just identifying the skills needed is not enough; and this is indicative of any governmental department, not just the Department of Agriculture.

How can this be avoided? One solution is to create a career ladder or career path for the Department. When a plethora of skills sets and experience is available, recruitment structures need to shift from qualifications only, to considering experience and skills sets. If this is not done, all succession planning is completely out of sync.

In Limpopo, the skills that were most in demand were that of management. Putting a BSc Engineer into a management position, and assuming that because he has the degree he'll be able to manage a team is a mistake. In addition, the training departments themselves run through the Department of Public Service Training, and don't outsource. This raises concerns regarding degrees of separation.

Agricultural college lecturers are in the same position as any other college lecturer; they're either training from experience, but don't know how to impart knowledge, or they are academics who cannot apply their knowledge practically. For this reason, skills development in training practices is also required.

The only way to identify gaps effectively is to employ proper skills development facilitator functions. These must be at EXCO level. This function must place a focus on auditing the skills that are available, while planning for gaps; without a plan, it doesn't work. Once the gaps are identified, and the plan has been established, the gaps can be filled – through both training and skills-based recruitment.

To fill the coffers, the sexiness of agriculture must be sold. When new graduates or candidates come into the world of work, the Department of Agriculture shouldn't be a last resort job. It should be where people want to go. Then the Department will have the freedom of recruitment, rather than scraping the bottom of the barrel. The key here is to sell the Department of Agriculture more on career awareness and the broad scope of occupations available. There are limitless options, most of those employees working at the Department aren't actually farmers – but candidates aren't aware of the vast opportunities that exist within it.

- ENDS -

Boilerplate:

Founded in 1999, Workplace Skills Solutions t/a The Institute of People Development (IPD) strives to equip, prepare and certify practitioners to serve South Africa's skills development strategy and facilitate the transformation of education and training. Over the years, IPD has become the preferred people development partner to most state owned and private enterprises in Southern Africa. IPD has assisted over 500 public and private training providers across most sectors of the economy to achieve or maintain accreditation through consulting, training and providing published guidelines. For more information, please contact IPD at trainingenquiries@peopledev.co.za on (011) 315 2913 or visit www.peopledevelopment.co.za.