

HOW RPL EMPOWERS SOUTH AFRICAN BUSINESSES

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South Africa has come a long way since the first democratic elections in 1994, but in the field of education, many inequalities still remain. As the late Nelson Mandela once said, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. In order to achieve this, however, access to good, affordable education is essential – and perhaps this is where South Africa is missing the mark.

In the workplace, South African history features many disadvantages. These include the exclusion of many people from education and training (due to regulations governing institutions), the exclusion of certain population groups from employment opportunities, and so forth. To assist in the redress of these hindrances, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was instituted. Through RPL: skills and knowledge are validated; individuals are afforded a greater opportunity for broader development; access to jobs, career progression and salary grading increases are fostered; and employment equity is promoted. The problem with this approach, however, is that RPL is not a magic plaster or the quick fix everyone was hoping for.

What is RPL really? According to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA); “RPL is a process whereby people’s prior learning can be formally recognised in terms of registered qualifications and unit standards, regardless of where and how the learning was attained”. As such, RPL acknowledges that people never stop learning, whether it takes place formally at an educational institution, or whether it happens informally.

RPL is however much more than this; it can be used to recognise experience and informal learning in the workplace to structure and legitimise succession planning. It can be utilised to build portfolios for professional designations and can increase the flexibility of entrance into studies, and allow us to not redo what we have already been proven to be able to do, decreasing our financial and time outlay.

The RPL process entails identifying what a person knows and can do; matching the person’s knowledge, skills and experience to specific standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification; assessing the learning against those standards; and crediting the person for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past.

In practice, this means that an employee's non-traditional or non-formal experience and learning can be recognised along with their formal education. The RPL assessment of candidates for formal qualifications or programmes is done against the same unit standards and level outcomes of qualifications, using the same assessment criteria as implemented for full time learners. The result is that the value of certificates obtained through RPL are the same as those obtained through full time learning.

RPL offers employers various benefits. By fast tracking workers through the skills recognition process, employers enjoy a reduction in training costs and are more engaged as their skills are recognised. By accelerating learning in the workplace, down-time is reduced. Through the efficient identification of 'skills gaps', more focussed training is achieved. RPL has the potential to break down the traditional barriers to education and training, while avoiding duplication of learning, and promoting a positive learning culture.

The benefits for the learners/employees include the identification of gaps in knowledge, the recognition of non-formal learning towards a qualification, and saving time in achieving this qualification. The continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge through structured training helps employees to achieve a formal qualification which, in the long term, will improve their employment opportunities.

It is important to note that RPL is *not* a shortcut to a qualification. If the RPL process is not properly managed, the fairness of the qualification can be challenged. Unfortunately, for this reason and due to a lack of understanding, candidates are often stigmatised. They are seen as people who have not acquired their competence through the "normal" learning path, and are therefore perceived not to be equally competent.

Another RPL pitfall commonly noted in the workplace, is a lack of support for the employee while gathering evidence. RPL is not a simple process of matching evidence to outcomes. It can be complex, and the conditions under which RPL candidates have acquired their competence should shape the assessment process and tools. Although evidence of practical competence is usually easy to provide, strategies for proving foundational and reflexive competence must be built into the assessment design. The process is often misunderstood and not properly guided by a qualified RPL Advisor.

It is clear that RPL is beneficial to both the learner and his/her employer. Most of the work rests on the employee's shoulders – as a result, a supportive working environment is required, garnering commitment and motivation. Self-assessment and reflection make the process a

learning intervention and should be embedded within broader personal development path planning.

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Boilerplate:

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